Paul Collier's remarks in the launch of the edited volume State Fragility at the 2023 Australasian Aid Conference
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It's a privilege to be addressing a research conference, I spend quite a lot of my time in public policy, trying to persuade governments to do things that they don't want to do, but I think it will be a good idea. And that's quite frustrating; addressing a research conference like this is a very much more satisfying thing to do. I wish I could be with you. Now, I've got a few things to say, and the first is I want you to be pioneers of something that is starting to happen across the human sciences that is absolutely in its infancy. We need an integrated human sciences in which economics, anthropology, history, and political science all work together.

At the moment, we don't have that. I want to argue that the study of conflict is actually the best place to start because it is so obviously not the domain of any particular discipline within the human sciences. It certainly does not belong exclusively in economics; economic models use a nasty little creature called the economic man who is completely untrustworthy and who wouldn't do anything for anybody other than themselves. And it is a very poor description of human behaviour, which we now know. It doesn't belong exclusively in the domain of military studies; we know that in repeated and massive military operations in fragile states. And so that is not the way forward. And it doesn't belong exclusively in anthropology because intro cannot handle economic translation. And part of the cure for fragility is economic growth; economic growth that actually develops productive jobs. We know that history matters, but history isn't destiny. History matters, but you can escape it; you are not doomed by a bad history. Nought guaranteed a good future by a good history. We know finally that community matters, that unless you have community, really there is no new in a society to hold it together. But we've seen that just community, with a lot of blue, can turn absolutely vile. It can turn on other communities.

So, there is a big task ahead, and you, as a community of researchers, if you are not that already, what do you need to become? You need to join the forces of the economists, the military historians, the anthropologists and political scientists. Let me turn now to Nemat (Nemat Bizhan) and his work, his pioneering work, on state fragility. Nemat and his co-authors has produced series of case studies, and I think in the presence of state-of-the-art technology, case studies are really the safest technology we have ever got. I don't think we learn a lot from heavy econometrics. I do think we learn a lot from comparisons. Let me give you a few examples: One of the cases that Nemat and the authors of his studies consider is Afghanistan. And here is a lesson from the diaspora that Afghanistan became. I think the recipe, to the extent that there is a recipe for reducing conflict, is that we want to avoid arrogance in leaders. We want to listen to what local people say, and we want to avoid what I'm going to call moral impudence. We, in the high-income countries, think that our values are the only moral values that have any justification anywhere. And try and use our economic or military power to impose them on other societies, and I think in Afghanistan, we made all three of those mistakes.

Let me show you a book, a book called Fixing Failed States; pretty confident title, isn't it? And you see who it's by? It's by Ashraf Ghani. Who, no sooner had he published this, became the president of Afghanistan. So there he was, confidently asserting that he knew how to fix a fragile state like Afghanistan. Did he know? Did he? That image of him flying out of Kabul while expecting soldiers to carry on fighting on his behalf. That image did more damage to the credibility of the Western powers than any other I can think of in recent times. So, there was a leader who was widely overconfident, ‘I know how to fix fragile states’. And actually, not only did he not know, but he breached all sorts of rules about moral behaviour.

He didn't show courage, he wasn't prepared to die for his country, and nor the rest of the senior leaders in Afghanistan was an amazingly corrupt, scandal-ridden place. And the Western powers knived at that either looked away or poured money in that got vastly misused. So, learn from the lessons of Afghanistan, and let me turn to another comparison within the book. The book looks at two African settings with very obvious paring because the neighbours used to be, in colonial times, as one single country. And that is Rwanda and Burundi. And they both had appealing communal violence and then came out of that in the mid to late nineties and adopted different models. So Burundi got the UN model on how to improve a fragile state, and the UN model was elite--straight to democracy by having elections, multi-party elections, and we have a government which tries to reconcile all the parties. Well, Burundi, the subsequent history of Burundi could not be more catastrophic; with enormous amounts of communal violence, it is now the poorest country in the world. It's considerably poorer than when the UN model started, and if we compare that with Rwanda, by the mid to late 1990's, their per capita incomes were identical, and the per capita income in Rwanda tripled, at the same time as in Burundi it has fallen substantially. There is a spectacular divergence from the initial position that you could have pre-predicted that diversion.

The international community, though, knew what it was doing when it insisted on Western-style democracy and elections from the start. It went very badly wrong. We need to learn from that sort of failure. I'm not saying that rewards are perfect; far from it; there is no question that it is very much better than what happened in Burundi. So, we need to understand why Burundi failed and why Rwanda has been so remarkably successful in comparison. And then, finally, I want to turn to a failure right on your doorstep so that you can study. And that is Papua, New Guinea, PNG. Today, PNG is now classified as one of the lowest-income countries on earth by the World Bank. So, it's very poor. It is very conflict-ridden; it has a long history of conflict, quite a lot of aid is poured in, and quite a lot of pressure to adopt the norms of Western society, the thing I call moral imperialism; it really hasn't worked very well. PNG is an extraordinarily fragmented society; even today, there are over a thousand languages. Something that you wouldn't know much more accurately than I do. So I look at PNG from a distance, and I see intercommunal conflict and a lack of trust, and on the basis of that, a government on the national level, that really can't work very well. So, starting from there, what could be done better? Can we listen to the voices in PNG, move toward the situation where we pass agency to the people of PNG, and learn from our own failures? PNG itself is a fabulous laboratory for understanding outer works in healing divisions and what doesn't work. Not all the communities in PNG fight; some have learned how to build alliances, and others haven't. Use that variation, and learn from it. You have other laboratories on your doorstep. I do not know the Solomon Islands that well, but I do know that the elections in the Solomon Islands really haven't worked very well. Because prior concepts get in the way.

And so, finally, let me turn to what I think is my own little effort to take things forward; I've just finished a book called Left Behind, which will be coming out in America, Britain and Australia in June. Left Behind doesn't have all the analysis, but it's got a lot of questions. But it tries to offer a few steps forward and things that I have learned over the past ten years, things I have learned since writing the bottom billion. What is that narratives are really powerful vehicles for ideas; narratives matter, for better or for worse. It's narratives, not deductive models, not the sort of things you have in textbooks, which spread ideas, either for good or for ill. So, we need to understand how narratives work and how they differ in different situations. And why are some narratives so effective at bringing communities together? And others are so divisive that they accentuate conflict. So narratives are one thing we've learnt; the second thing is that uncertainty really, really matters. We live in an age with massive uncertainty, and anybody like Ashraf Ghani, who says I know how to fix a failed state, is flying in the face of unavoidable uncertainty. And the modesty to start by

saying you don't know, we can't know in these uncertain times what will be the best strategy for Afghanistan going forward, what will be the best strategy for PNG going forward, we can't know. Now that is a cry of despair, but it says, well, if you don't know, you need to learn rapidly. Try to find out how we can learn rapidly; well, we can run experiments in parallel and evolve agencies to other different communities; agency means money and power. And with the developed agency, let's see what works well and what works less well. So that we can learn from both successes and failures, the beam in our failures. So rapid learning is the second big thing that I emphasis in left behind. So, the final point is that moral norms matter, but moral norms really differ. They change gradually over time; they differ massively between communities; we should be very wary in asserting that my moral norms are now the eternal truth of the future; they are very unlikely to be, as any serious researcher of history can tell us. SP is getting to understand the differences in moral norms, how they spread, and how they change behaviour through narratives very often. These are the things I try and take a little bit further forward in left behind. I don't claim to have gotten very far; there's a vast quagmire of ignorance; it will take a full generation of young researchers to do it. It will leave my generation in the dust. Please be part of that movement, and if I turn to dust, thanks to your work, well done. Thank you