
Book Reviews

H J Steiner and P Alston, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

This human rights text rates as a considerable academic achievement. Its 1245 pages traverse a wealth of political, legal and philosophical resources. The contents have been carefully organised by the experienced authors into 16 chapters and 6 parts, which cover the fundamental issues in contemporary human rights law. A degree of consistency amongst the parts is maintained by the division of topics into discussion of relevant concepts, institutions and processes, history, and case studies. I found this mode of organisation both logical and easy to utilise. The rich variety of primary and secondary evidence in each chapter is complemented by a series of thoughtful questions and useful comments for the reader which assist in providing a context for the extracts. Questions range from general academic "teasers" and those which test comprehension and critical evaluative skills to those which demand reflective observation and the application of international human rights standards to contemporary human rights situations worldwide. Examples of the last type include particularly challenging questions on the breach of international human rights norms concerning housing in the Dominican Republic, and the human rights situation in Iraq in the 1990s.

If I were to rank the strengths of this text I should begin with its holistic approach to human rights and its critical spirit of inquiry. It appears to be designed deliberately to encourage students to think deeply, systematically and critically about human rights in a national as well as an international context. This is a quality which I believe is essential to the effective

study of this area, and one which is muted in other available texts for Australian students. The text also benefits from a joint authorship which reveals international co-operation between authors from different jurisdictions: Professor Steiner is Director of the Law School Human Rights Program at Harvard University and Professor Alston holds posts at universities in Italy and Australia. The structure and content of the text has clearly been informed by the empirical experience of the authors in teaching human rights law over an extended period and this has resulted in what I judge to be a "student friendly" text with a truly international "flavour".

A second key area of strength lies in the richness and range of the resources gathered. In particular, the considerable number of United Nations documents, memoranda and reports should be noted. Some of these are obscure and might not otherwise be available to Australian undergraduates. In addition, the text contains relevant extracts from numerous journal articles by academic authors which provide a valuable complement to primary evidence and facilitate informed evaluation of it by students. I was very impressed with the wealth of bibliographical detail available in this text, not just in the Bibliography proper, or the annex on citations, but in the careful compilation of additional reading at the close of each chapter. These lists provide an important entree to research in the area for introductory students. The annexure of documents is a sound inclusion and avoids the problem of prescribing two textbooks for purchase by students.

If I have any reservations regarding this text they are of minor significance to its overall value. I noted some glaring typographical errors in the early chapters, particularly in materials extracted from academic journals. At a practical level I found it very bulky to use and I wonder whether students will be ardent about carrying a 1.75 kg source book to class each week. In some chapters, knowledge of complex jurisprudential concepts are assumed (for example on page 298 the notion of a "Hohfeldian legal right" is used as a contrast to other types of rights and duties). The concepts may be familiar to later year students with some background in jurisprudence, but less experienced students may require assistance with the more theoretical chapters. The scholarly and educational aims of the authors have been outlined in a lengthy preface and in my judgment they have achieved these objectives with distinction. I am keen to prescribe this text to test my intuitive feeling that it will enable students to acquire both a broad and deep understanding of human rights law and challenge undergraduates to explore legal issues from an international perspective.

Katherine Lindsay