When I was first approached to be part of the research group meeting on which this edited collection is based, I knew about the impact austerity measures had on the most vulnerable in society. However, the meeting brought home to me more fully the implications of austerity for different types of debt and debtors and the practical and academic importance of research into the complexity of the issue. Now, as the full financial extent of the State’s response to COVID19 becomes evident, it is even more important to appreciate and address the issues raised by the research group meeting, in particular the relationship between government debt and personal debt. The experience of the financial crisis was that government debt undertaken to meet the crisis was transformed, in important respects, into personal debt, debt which in many ways fell more heavily on those least able to bear the burden.

The research group meeting was held in May 2019 at St John’s College in the University of Cambridge. There were at least two valuable features of the format. One was that participants came from all parts of the United Kingdom and further afield, which is reflected in the chapters in this volume. The spread of representation from different parts of Britain was especially important since the impact of austerity has been experienced unevenly, and felt particularly strongly in places like the Midlands and the North. Another valuable feature of the meeting was that the academic panels were complemented with ‘insight from practice’ sessions, creating the opportunity for valuable discussions between academics and those working on the ground with individuals directly impacted by debt and austerity. We benefited from the frontline experiences of representatives from Citizens Advice, foodbanks, debt advisors, credit unions and welfare rights activists. These experiences often correlated with the academic research, but at times provided important insights into the practical aspects of the more theoretical consideration of debt and austerity.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the organisers produced such a cutting edge and novel collection of essays. A number of features set this book apart and make it such a valuable contribution. First and foremost, it is a truly interdisciplinary work – with contributions from academics specialising not only in law, but also geography, social policy, international political economy, consumer protection, personal debt and finance, sociology and anthropology. It brings home to lawyers like myself that austerity and debt regulation are not just legal issues, but economic and social issues as well.
Secondly, whilst the collection is grounded in Britain and its history of debt and austerity, several contributions draw on international experiences and lessons. Various chapters have a comparative approach, with a range of countries covered including Ireland, Australia, the United States of America and Sweden. Finally, the valuable ‘insight from a practice’ focus of the research group has continued: there are highly relevant and insightful chapters written by non-academics. Further, the academic contributors have engaged with the discussion, and included these perspectives in their individual chapters.

The collection has two parts, the first outlining the nature of the problem and the debt eco-system. The discussion highlights how the character of low-income debt has changed radically over the last decade, as structural inequality is exacerbated by changes in redistribution policy, the legal system, and the level and scope of the welfare system. This section explores how these phenomena are uneven and unequal through the lens of gender, class, and place. The chapters explore the complex nature of the relationship between debt and austerity measures, highlighting how the reduction of the social safety net, the restructuring of the welfare system, and the dearth of legal aid have led to an increased use, often harmful, of debt by low-income individuals. Debt is a complex and multifaceted issue, and this section also explores the multiple components of the current challenges in understanding debt. It examines the problems and structure of the “debt industry” – debt defaults and debt management, the rise of consumer bankruptcy, and the mis-selling of Individual Voluntary Arrangements in response to the increasing amount of problem debt.

On the basis of this first section, a reader would be forgiven for thinking that the outlook is bleak, even before the current COVID19 crisis. Britain is experiencing extreme debt problems at the same time as austerity measures have increased poverty levels and inequality. However, the second section of the collection goes on to provide the reader with some hope in proposing a variety of potential solutions for the challenges raised earlier in the volume. This includes strengthening consumer protection mechanisms, utilising the powerful regulatory tool of an affordability assessment to combat exploitative lending, creating private and not-for-profit partnerships for the supply of credit to those most vulnerable, addressing the harmful but pervasive poverty premium, radical debt forgiveness for personal loans, and finally recognising the role of the social safety net and an adequate social minimum for all in society.
This is an invaluable collection and will be of great interest to those in academia, public policy and the third sector. The editors and contributing authors are to be commended for their hard work in bringing the collection to fruition. The current crisis underlines their prescience in focusing in the way they have on such an important topic.

Sir Ross Cranston
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