

Andrew Forrest calls on government to lead regional response against slavery



Andrew Forrest says slavery is a "horrific scourge against humanity". Philip Gostelow



by [Tess Ingram](#)

Andrew Forrest has called on the Australian government to consider legislation similar to the UK Modern Slavery Act to ensure Australian companies are held responsible for exploitation in their supply chains.

The billionaire businessman and philanthropist said Australia had the opportunity to lead the response to an issue deeply ingrained in the Australia Pacific region, which accounts for about two-thirds of the 45 million people in modern slavery globally.

"Critically, Australia's supply chains are largely through Asia," Mr Forrest said. "In this sense we are very exposed, and likely to suffer significant political and economic impact if slavery is found to be connected with our corporations or our government in any way.

"Australia could be the first country in the region to enact comprehensive legislation that ensures corporations are held to account for modern slavery in their supply chains, similar to the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015."

The UK act requires all companies with a turnover more than £36 million (\$58 million) to report on efforts to eliminate slavery and human trafficking from their supply chains.

Minister for Justice Michael Keenan said it was too early to determine the effectiveness of the UK act but he would ask his department to "actively monitor" its

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effectiveness over the next 12 months.

"While it is important to monitor international best practice, our response to this complex issue needs to be tailored to the Australian context," Mr Keenan said.

Mr Forrest's comments followed revelations that leading [global electronics and vehicle manufacturers could unwittingly be using batteries](#) that contain Congolese cobalt associated with human rights abuses or child labour.

In February, Australia's Rip Curl was forced to apologise after its clothing labelled "made in China" was found to be made in North Korean factories. The company blamed a subcontractor.

Catalyst Australia lead researcher Martijn Boersma, who was a member of a "supply chains working group" set up by Mr Keenan in 2014, said it was "naive" to assume Australian companies were not implicated in supply chain abuses. Catalyst released a report last month that also recommended similar laws.

'No response'

"These links are not as far-fetched as they sound and such laws to prevent them would have a significant impact from an Australian company perspective," Mr Boersma said.

Mr Boersma has [accused Mr Keenan of failing to respond](#) to the working group since it reported to the government in December 2015.

Mr Keenan said the government was considering the working group's recommendations and would respond in due course.

"Supply chain exploitation is a complex and multi-faceted issue and it is important that government carefully considers the report and recommendations," he said.

Mr Forrest said he believed the business sector would welcome the protection and assurance such legislation would provide.

A [2014 report published](#) by Mr Forrest's anti-slavery initiative, the Walk Free Foundation, revealed that when the Australian iron ore company he founded, Fortescue Metals Group, conducted a supply chain audit it discovered slavery.

He said ignorance was no longer an excuse for companies or governments.

"Every company and government can and must examine their supply chains and must change their ways if slavery is found," he said.

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