Acknowledgments

I owe a debt of gratitude to the University of Auckland for providing me with research and study leave during 2020 that allowed me to work on parts of this book. During the first few months of that year I visited Harvard Kennedy School, where I taught a course in decision-making. It goes without saying that my stay at Harvard was a tremendously stimulating experience, even though I was forced to return home to New Zealand earlier than planned due to the closure of Harvard's campus during the Covid-19 pandemic. I am deeply indebted to Iris Bohnet, Academic Dean at Harvard Kennedy School for inviting me to visit and teach. I am also grateful to Suzanne Cooper and Laura Medeiros for making this visit possible.

My interactions at the Kennedy School (both with students and others) forced me to think more deeply about policy implications of some of the ideas I was teaching about. It is not that I was not interested in policy but, as an academic, I often cherish ideas for their intellectual appeal without necessarily worrying about their applicability. Consequently, while teaching, I tend to focus on teaching the science and typically leave it to the students to think of potential applications to their own careers or walks of life. However, at the Kennedy School I was often asked about explicit applications. This made me start to look at things differently. To a large extent, the seed of this book was planted when one of the students, Jeff Jones (actually Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Jones, an Army Reserve Judge Advocate General) asked me to devote a lecture to decision-making in pandemics. The result was an article I published in the popular media, which led to robust discussion both in the classroom and in the public sphere.¹ That article set in motion a series of subsequent articles in the popular media and associated media interviews that helped crystallize the ideas contained in this book.

I doubt I would have written this book had I not become part of the loose group of New Zealand academics known as Covid Plan B.² My thanks to all of the members of the group but particularly Michael

Jackson, Mark Blackham, Grant Morris and, of course, the guiding light of the group and the tireless warrior Simon Thornley. I also learned an incredible amount from the presenters at a symposium on Covid-19 organized by Covid Plan B in August 2020. They include Jay Bhattacharya, Byram Bridle, Carlo Caduff, Sunetra Gupta, David Katz, Grant Morris, Ben Smith and Simon Thornley.

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My wife, Dr Indira Basu, has always been the first reader and critic of my draft manuscripts, but for this book she has also often had to explain to me the science behind Covid-19, in particular, and infectious disease transmission, in general. Indira, together with my two daughters, Ishannita and Ananrita, have served as a captive audience as I harangued them often and at length about my ideas and arguments. However, by constantly questioning me, they have contributed immensely to shaping my thinking on various matters.

Eva Gottschalk at the Kennedy School and Yaxiong (Sherry) Li at Auckland helped with a number of charts for the book. Jamie Martini-Tibbs and Helen Cai provided excellent research assistance. Jessie Zhang did an outstanding job of proof-reading the manuscript and correcting mistakes. Isha and Ana also often pitched in with help on charts and tables, usually without demanding any financial compensation in return.

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It is neither easy nor probably prudent to write about decision-making in a pandemic while in the midst of that same pandemic. As researchers, we typically wait for a while so that we have adequate data that allows us to draw conclusions. This is generally a good idea but it also precludes us from saying much to influence decision-making contemporaneously. I have come to realize in recent times that often it is important to bring our knowledge and expertise to bear on topical issues; not because we are necessarily right, but because we can often provide an alternative perspective, which may, once in a while, have some salutary effect on policy-making. In general, it is a good thing when academics contribute to the marketplace of ideas rather than leaving the public intellectual sphere for cranks and charlatans.

In writing this book, I have been scrupulous about being factual and accurate, but I make no claims to being correct about everything. I may well be wrong on multiple fronts and I am absolutely sure that reasonable people will find much to disagree with and counter-arguments to offer. My hope is to provide an alternative perspective, ask questions that may not have been asked and, in doing so, provide some insights that can influence our thinking and policy-making not only in this pandemic but for future pandemics, recessions, and other economic and social disasters. My aim is to make both policy-makers and members of the public look at this issue from a different perspective. I would consider my venture a success if after finishing this book many people state that while they continue to disagree with me, they found the arguments interesting and thought-provoking. My father who passed away recently loved to quote Voltaire. These are words supposedly spoken by Voltaire about Jean-Jacques Rousseau since Voltaire and Rousseau seldom saw eye to eye on most issues: "I may

not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

A quick point about the frequent use of notes. Every time I have quoted a particular event, comment or media report, I have provided the appropriate citation to show that I did not make it up. If you feel comfortable taking my word for it, then you are most welcome to ignore these notes so as to not break up your reading by going back and forth between notes and the main text. These are included in the Bibliography as well. When it came to reporting on research studies, I have not resorted to notes or saying, for example, “Kahneman and Tversky (1979)”. This would make the writing too academic and I wanted to avoid that. Also, in many instances, I am summarizing multiple studies by groups of researchers. As far as practicable I have noted the researchers involved to give readers a flavor of who is doing this type of work. All studies referred to are included in the Bibliography for those who may wish to pursue them further. The relevant studies should be readily identifiable.

If you do find useful some of the ideas and concepts discussed in this book, and you want to delve a little deeper into these topics, then I have another book, *Behavioural Economics and Experiments*, that provides more detailed analysis on some of these topics. I started work on this current book soon after completing work on that book. I wrote this book in part because, as I worked on *Behavioural Economics and Experiments*, it became clear to me that many of the concepts I was discussing there had evident implications for decision-making during Covid-19. It seemed important to me to write another book to highlight how cognitive biases played a pronounced role in decision-making during the pandemic. Given the close proximity of the two books, in this book I have reused a few examples and anecdotes from *Behavioural Economics and Experiments*, such as the story about Steven Colbert in Chapter 2 on gut feelings, but the degree of overlap is very small. I have also referred to various other books that would be useful reading. A very selective list includes Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s *Nudge*, Gerd Gigerenzer’s *Gut Feelings and Risk Savvy*, Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink* and Dan Ariely’s *Predictably Irrational*. These are all included in the Bibliography at the end.

In conclusion, as we say in all our academic papers, all errors are my responsibility. Feel free to look at my other books and writings

on <https://ananishchaudhuri.com> and if you feel you have counter-arguments or if you wish to point out errors and omissions, then feel free to email me. However, I do get a large volume of mail and so I cannot guarantee a response, though I try.

Ananish Chaudhuri
Auckland, New Zealand
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NOTES

1. Chaudhuri, A. (2020). 'A different perspective on the Covid-19 pandemic'. *Newsroom*, 8 April. Auckland, New Zealand. <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/2020/04/08/1119994/a-different-perspective-on-covid-19>.
2. www.covidplanb.co.nz.

For

Simon Thornley

and fellow contrarians

*Mark Blackham, Michael Jackson, Grant Morris, Grant Schofield
and Gerhard Sundborn*

Le sens commun n'est pas si commun.
(Common sense is not so common.)

François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire),
writer, historian and philosopher
21 November 1694–30 May 1778