

Rethinking us: Civil society, civility, climate change and the great unravelling *

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The question of doubt

I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I spend quite a bit of my time hanging around cafes. I live in a small regional town in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, an 'alternative' place that boasts – if that's the right word – 29 coffee outlets. Mad isn't it?

Even crazier is that a significant chunk of my rapidly diminishing pension – definitely not New Start, but certainly more than those on precarious incomes – goes toward this daily bourgeoisie indulgence. But hey, life's too short, right? Maybe it is.

Which brings me to what I do whilst in these watering holes, apart from wondering why on earth I drink coffee as I can't stand the taste. Luckily, I've got a fairly reliable coterie of friends I can rely on for the occasional chinwag. They're invariably smart, well read, thoughtful people who err on the side of caution when it comes to just about anything. Some even talk up the virtues of reason and rationality, like some crusty nineteenth century philosophers. Others are occasional contrarians who nonetheless concede ground when joyful opposition is swept aside by tsunamic evidence. Overall, it all makes for very convivial conversations, even with the part-time contrarians.

Some of these fellow café dwellers seem to have been influenced by the promptings of English metaphysical poet, John Donne, who in his wisdom, urged us to doubt, but to doubt wisely. That's what makes my friends so eminently wise, I suppose – they're apt to weigh things up, and not to leap to conclusions.

Beings unwise

Sadly, Donne's advice has not been heeded down under, or in many other parts of the world for that matter. Unwise sceptics are everywhere it seems, but are heavily over-represented among our political elites and media hacks. The intellectual summersaults involved, for example, in avoiding the fact that climate change may have something to do with the bushfires are breathtaking. Take the errant deputy PM Michael McCormack who, among

other stupefying things, blamed the fires on exploding horse manure, while the ever-florid Barnaby Joyce points to the heavens or insists that, "There's just the oscillation of the seasons. There's a change in the magnetic field of the sun" (cited in Fitzsimons 2019). Not to be outdone, the equally challenged Craig Kelly recently told British TV hosts that there's no link between climate change and the fire-generating drought, while Gerard Renick, another in the band of flat earth right wingers, not long ago accused the Bureau of Meteorology of massaging temperature data as part of a "global warming agenda" (cited in SBS News 2019).

You might also recall PM Scott Morrison not so long ago taunting the opposition leader in federal parliament with a lump of coal, and before him, former PM Tony Abbott who said climate change was "absolute crap" (cited in Bickers 2019). And so it goes on – and on.

Such views are as absurd as they are ridiculous, but why miss an opportunity of showing the world how out of touch our so-called political leaders have become. Never before has the gulf between what most citizens want and the ideological zealotry of our political elites been so pronounced, prompting some in the commentariat to talk about a crisis of legitimacy.

Tricks and tensions

But even the most rabid climate sceptics are beginning to buckle, having seen public sentiment shifting in the polls, and on the streets (see Karp 2020; IPSOS 2020). That's why, suddenly, we're hearing public declarations that climate change is "real" – which is a bit like sticking one's tongue into an ice cream and discovering its cold – along with promises of an "evolving" policy response (Molloy 2020). More and more political leaders are falling over themselves to assume the mantle of leadership when it comes to climate action, declaring that Australia, a leading coal and gas exporter, is ahead of the pack when it comes to "meeting and beating" our emissions reduction targets and, lo and behold, that there's more to come – all highly questionable claims, as noted by the Climate Council (2020).

How on earth do Morrison et al. get away with this? Well, in part because our lettuce leaf media allow them to, and because spin and obfuscation have worked – they're the stock-in-trade of our toolled-up pollies. They've become adept at spinning their way out of most awkward situations through a range of what sociologists like to refer to as 'discursive devices' (read lying and deceiving).

Despite growing demands for action and full-frontal evidence of climate chaos, media interviewers appear incapable of dismantling the great wall of political propaganda. In the case of the Murdoch stable of TV news shows and newspapers (the latter which accounts for 66 percent of Australia's major newspapers) there is little or no attempt to dismantle the government's pro-coal agenda, and climate denialism is the stock-in-trade of NewsCorp reports (Walton 2020).

Although perhaps more 'balanced' in its reportage, the ABC has its own self-imposed limits. The much-vaunted new kid on the ABC block, former Sky News anchor, David Speers, and old hack, Michael Rowland, showed how ineffectual journalists are in making political leaders truly accountable.

While they fuss about Morrison's holiday in Hawaii and whether the Coalition government might raise its modest emissions targets in the wake of the fires, Speers and Rowland failed to hammer home that Australia's GHG emissions are rising, that we are the world's leading gas and coal exporters, that fossil fuel companies donate substantial sums to the Coalition's election campaign, that we have the highest rate of per capita GHG emissions in the world, that we have the lowest emissions targets among OECD countries, that our exports are rarely factored into the government's emissions calculations, and that fossil fuel companies continue to emit GHGs without significant penalty. They also failed to nail the point that the government's policies put our own population at great risk, thereby abandoning the most sacred of government responsibilities – to protect its own citizens.

The same interviewers further failed to contrast Australia's weak climate action policies with those of other countries like Germany or nearer to home, New Zealand (which earlier this year forged a bipartisan agreement to decarbonise its economy by 2050). Equally concerning was their reluctance to highlight the hypocrisy of those political leaders who have expressed their sympathy with the victims of the bushfires, while at the same time giving a green light to more coal mines, gas fields and land clearing – both NSW and Queensland are among the world's worst (Martin 2019).

At this point you might be thinking that if Speers and Rowland were to lean too hard on the Coalition climate

sceptics then the ABC might as well kiss goodbye to its funding. They'd be right to be nervous. After all, the young Libs have already called for the ABC's privatisation. But there's this thing called journalistic integrity, or at the very least, a determination to get at, dare I say, the truth. Maybe it's time to get Kerry O'Brien out of cryogenic storage?

It's not only the ABC, of course, that's struggling with the fallout from the bushfires. Commercial radio, TV stations and most newspapers seem at a loss as to how to address the politics around the climate/ecological crisis. Many continue to insist that there's still a climate change 'debate' and that we have time to turn things around. On the other hand, they occasionally cite scientists who point out that we've already gone beyond tipping points and that feedback loops and multiplier effects are accelerating an already exponential process. No media outlet seems willing to admit that planetary extinction is a real possibility. They don't go there. It's too heavy – one of many taboos when it comes to the climate emergency. It's a bit like the issue of economic growth: any journalist worth his or her salt knows that this is unsustainable in a planet with finite resources, but no-one dares suggest an alternative way of organising life – just imagine the reaction if they did!

Integrity

By the same token, few if any journalists have the courage or intellectual wherewithal to suggest a direct link between the climate/ecological crisis and industrial capitalism – the more than occasional articles in the *Australian Guardian* and *The Saturday Paper* being notable exceptions. They're hesitant to do so for fear of being put in the same ideological camp as leftist wreckers like Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein and the Extinction Rebellion movement. So, the system that has spawned this unprecedented existential crisis remains a non-subject, its architects, purveyors and supporters happily free from critical scrutiny.

And yet, fissures are appearing both in government and corporate quarters. The Business Council of Australia has come under fire from corporate chiefs for its vapid response to the climate emergency, while the Mineral Council (itself a member of the BCA) has faced criticism for supporting the fossil fuel industry (Powell and Johnson 2020). We've also witnessed ructions in the Murdoch empire, with its newspaper editors coming under attack from ex-prime ministers and competing news outlets for allowing the denialist agenda to ventilate through its pages.

Meanwhile, the Morrison government is scrambling to present itself as relevant to the crisis by throwing much-needed money to traumatised communities, and funding the tourist industry to market Australia as "open

for business". At the same time, of course, the very same government is funding new gas fields in NSW, supporting the Adani mine in the Galilee Basin, mine developments in the Hunter Valley, refurbishing existing coal-fired plants, and threatening to build a new mine in North Queensland (Chambers and Brown 2020).

The great unravelling

Given what we're facing in terms of the climate/ecological crisis, the delays, obstruction and wilful ignorance that have characterised governments around the world, including Australia, have led us to the point of collapse. What the science is clearly telling us is that greenhouse emissions are still rising, that CO₂ concentrations are at record levels, that the oceans are warming rapidly (93% of global warming is absorbed by the oceans), that the polar ice sheets are melting, that land temperatures are rising, that flooding and inundation are becoming more frequent and extreme, and that more destructive storms, cyclones and wildfires await us.

Add to this the collapse of ecosystems and plant and animal species extinction and we have our threat to organised human existence. Many climate scientists argue that we have already punched through tipping points and that we have entered a post-anthropotechnic era in which climatic events have a logic of their own, beyond our control.

The wicked problems and "dark knowledge" of which Catherine Ingram (2019) and others speak is upon us. I have heard others argue, rightly in my view, that the global environmental justice movement, for all its considerable, brave and principled efforts has lost the war against planetary destruction. The great "awakening"/"turning", although in full swing, will not bring about the fundamental global changes necessary to get us out of this mess in the required time frame. We are, says social scientist Jean Renouf, facing the "great unravelling" (Renouf 2020).

Environmental and social justice activists have for decades called for systems change, sometimes forgetting that the system of which they speak – late/corporate/neoliberal capitalism – is not simply economic or driven by a simple dominant ideology. Over the course of 250 years or more this racialised, complex, adaptive system has, through a variety of means, fostered a process of what David Harvey (2009) describes as "accumulation through dispossession", the current manifestation of which, as Thomas Piketty (2014) observes, is entrenched economic inequality and the breakdown of liberal democracy.

Despite all our attempts to reform or revolutionise this system, it hasn't always been clear who or what we, as progressives, are rebelling against, and we've often had a very simplistic understanding about how this system

works. We've also struggled, as Naomi Klein points out, to go beyond protests, to unite amidst our differences, and to triage points of vulnerability in the system.

Rebuilding civil society and civility

So, what should we now do? I haven't got any ready answers, but there are some early thoughts. For those of us committed to social and political activism and regenerative practices, none of what I've said should dissuade any of us from proceeding along this path. In fact, what should always motivate us is the sense that we are doing, or trying to do, the right moral and ethical thing within our frameworks of understanding. But I also think that at this juncture we need to respond to what is unfolding by seeking to build more effective, collaborate, supportive, kind and sharing communities and neighbourhoods that can form the backbone of a rejuvenated and powerful civil society as a counter to neoliberal hegemony.

Why? Because one of the most destructive outcomes of neoliberal capitalism has been to create cultures of disconnection: from ourselves, each other and nature (Monbiot 2017, Mackay 2019, Hari 2018). Reinvesting in each other and the world around us, building social capital, investing in social infrastructure, will serve us well as we seek to respond to what is before us. Those on the edges of our economy and society – communities and groups most impacted by the climate emergency – will need to feel included in this civil movement.

When I've aired such views to friends and colleagues, I'm often told that I've given up, sunken into despair or that I'm a nihilist – or all three. I ask my critics about how should we respond to this mess? I get the usual recitations of hope and determination – and calls for the toppling of the system – that seem strangely at odds with what's happening around us. There are reasons for this – it's not simply about cognitive dissonance. Something deep within us wants to believe that all is not lost, that life will go on, that safety and security will continue in the midst of chaos and darkness.

Yet we may have reached a moment in our existence when we need different stories and conversations that will enable us to face up to the future. Questions about where we live, how we live, and in what way, will come to the fore. Our sense of who we are, what others mean to us, and the values that underpin our lives will determine how we respond. I believe that in the midst of what has already occurred and is about to occur there is an opportunity to not only attend to what should be some of the fundamental rights of life – water, food, shelter – but also to reinvigorate our sense of community and civility. Had we all lived this way, and had we greater respect for Country, as Indigenous peoples always have, then we wouldn't be here. But sadly, we are.

Afterword

Shortly after completing this article, I got an email from someone responding to a piece I had written elsewhere. The said person railed against me for having a “social work” response to the climate emergency rather than doing the difficult work of helping to topple the capitalist system. While I have never advocated abandoning radical opposition to corporate capitalism and have long supported alternative systems and programs, I am reminded of eminent English historian, E. P. Thompson who, having announced his intention to leave his office to support the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, noted that if there was no world to live in then there would be no class struggle, or any struggle, to participate in.

I feel a bit the same way about the climate emergency, and in this instance, we’re ultimately facing just as much of a threat. We can topple the banking system, upend fossil fuel companies and roll governments but that will not prevent what is unfolding. Last ditch technical solutions that will remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere look unlikely to succeed and may indeed cause additional problems. What’s in the atmosphere will stay there for a long while yet. It’s locked in. All the signs are that the required global transformations are unlikely to eventuate in the required timescale. Such knowledge invites contemplation about life, mortality and that cliched question of how then should we live in such times.

The old, fixed oppositional stories and free-floating hope narratives seem less relevant by the day.

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