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Renewing democracy in a time of environmental crisis

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I want to start by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands upon which the University of Melbourne is built here in Parkville, the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples, and pay respects to their elders past and present.

In this institution of great scholarship and teaching, the unique knowledge systems of Aboriginal people are being slowly, belatedly recognised. Their contribution both to a deeper understanding of our environment and how it is changing but also their role as critically important leaders in the climate change cause cannot be underestimated. It is my hope that the establishment of the Voice, ideally enshrined in the Constitution, to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations peoples will improve the environmental decision making by the Federal Government. Such improvement is sorely needed when we look around the country and see the many places where Aboriginal people are fighting governments and companies for better protection of their ancestral lands from the impacts of climate change, land clearing and mining.

My task this evening is to make sense of a situation that many of us must find bewildering.

That there is now widespread public acceptance in Australia of the reality of climate change and the need for governments to respond.

That we see daily reports that the long-predicted impacts of climate change have arrived in the form of record breaking summers, extreme weather events and sea level rises, and with it disruption to every aspect of our way of life, our food systems as well as our natural and built environments.

Flying fruit bats fall from the sky in Campbelltown. Millions of perch and cod die in the Murray Basin. The Tuesday before last, not one drop of rain fell on Australian soil and New South Wales faced its first ever catastrophic fire event. The fires continue to burn. These are the kinds of events usually reserved for sections of the Old Testament.

And yet rising concern about climate change and the environment in the social research has occurred simultaneously with the electorate voting for political parties with (how can we put it?) recalcitrant policies on the environment and with significant groups of climate deniers in their ranks.

It's almost as if the people who answer the surveys aren't the same people who vote in elections.

The Research

Let's start then to get to the bottom of this apparent dissonance between what people say they want and how they vote, particularly in an election many commentators (myself included) thought would be 'the climate election'.

There are many reliable surveys around documenting the rising level of concern in the electorate about climate change. The Australian Electoral Survey coming out of the Australian National University showed that from 2010 to 2013 belief that climate change poses a serious threat flat-lined and then increased sharply from 52 per cent to 62 per cent from 2013 to 2016. Other surveys by companies such as Essential and Ipsos have found the trajectory of concern about climate continuing to trend upwards since 2016.

However, it was results from the Lowy Institute poll released a few months prior to the election that seemed to point towards the kind of escalating concern that might bring about a political shift, akin to what happened in the 2007 election of Labor under Kevin Rudd. That Lowy poll showed 59 per cent of Australians (up five points since the year before) agreed that 'global warming is a serious and

pressing problem' about which 'we should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs'. A strong majority of Australians (84 per cent, up three points from the previous year's survey) agreed that 'the government should focus on renewables, even if this means we may need to invest more in infrastructure to make the system more reliable'. Only 14 per cent believed 'the government should focus on traditional energy sources such as coal and gas, even if this means the environment may suffer to some extent'. The Australia Institute's Climate of the Nation study, conducted after the election, found similar levels of rising concern with 81 percent of us agreeing that climate change will result in more droughts and flooding (up from 78 per cent from 2018) and 78 per cent that it will lead to water shortages in our cities (up from 72 per cent in 2018). Roy Morgan released data just a few weeks ago showing environmental issues are seen as the biggest problem facing Australia, up 17 per cent since June.

These surveys, while helpful in a general sense, only get us part way towards a deeper understanding of sentiment in the community on climate. They are of limited usefulness when thinking about two important issues: how to tailor campaign messages effectively to people who are concerned about climate but disengaged from the political system and how to translate this general concern into electoral gains for political parties with strong climate change policies.

In order to get to this deeper understanding I want to look at two pieces of research I haven't had a chance to talk about publicly until now. The first is a quantitative analysis of the results of the last election commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund Australia (WWF). WWF commissioned myself and Emilio Ferrer of Sphere Consulting to look at attitudes to a transition to renewables specifically among Australians who didn't vote Labor or Green in the last election but remain concerned about environmental issues. Understanding what happened in the election with a serious look at the data was an important pre-requisite to the qualitative phase of this research, especially given the plethora of 'hot takes' circulating about why Labor lost.

I need to explain the exact methodology for this analysis, and it's a little involved so stay with me on the detail, because that's where the devil resides! It involved looking at what the last census data tells us about every electorate in Australia in terms of its demographics. Is it an electorate with more or less children per household, higher or lower incomes, higher or lower education rates than the national average? Of course we looked at location as well, state and territory as well as classifying each electorate as inner, outer suburban, regional and rural. We then classified every candidate in the 2019 and 2016 federal elections into two groups: 'pro-environment', comprising candidates who supported climate change policies which are an improvement to those of the Coalition and 'other', comprising Coalition candidates and other candidates who supported climate change politics similar or worse than those of the Coalition. Furthermore, the pro-environment group was further classified into three further groups: the Greens, the Labor Party and other pro-environment minor parties.

We analysed the swing between 2016 and 2019 in each electorate applying this classification of political parties – pro-environment and other. We found that at the 2019 election, pro-environment candidates obtained a little over 48 per cent of the primary vote and the result was 1.6 per cent worse than in the 2016 election. The performance of the pro-environment vote was worse in marginal seats with a swing against it of 2.4 per cent. The lowest pro-environment vote was found in: Queensland, Western Australia and New South Wales where it obtained less than 50 per cent of the vote. Queensland, in particular, only had a pro-environment vote of just above 38 per cent. The pro-environment vote was, unsurprisingly, low in rural electorates and regional seats.

Furthermore, and more concerning for the Labor Party, the pro-environment vote was low in:

- poorer electorates
- electorates with older voters
- electorates with more children per household than average
- electorates with lower Year 10 completion rates
- electorates with lower tertiary education rates.

Now of course such an approach has its limitations. It is impossible from election data to conclude the reasoning behind why people vote, given it is determined by many factors. But for me this analysis helps to highlight the challenges those of us involved in climate change communication and advocacy face. Poorer Australians, young families, people living in rural and regional areas, Australians in a vulnerable position in the labour market, these are cohorts who are and will be hardest hit by climate impacts. This signals a failure to communicate the full extent and urgency of climate change to the people who should care about it the most.

The second piece of research worth looking into is the ABC's National Survey, Australia Talks. The national survey was conducted in June this year; 54 000 Australians (weighted to reflect demographics of the population according to census data) completed a survey containing 500 questions, with the content ranging from measuring attitudes to politics, health, education, and technology to behaviours around drugs and alcohol, sleep and commuting. It's revealed that One Nation voters are twice as likely as any other group of voters to agree with the statement 'I would prefer to spend time with animals rather than people.' But for me, the value of Australia Talks is that it allows us to understand how different groups of Australians are responding to the climate change message.

The most exciting finding from my point of view coming out of Australia Talks was that 72 per cent of respondents nominated climate change as the biggest issue facing them personally. *Personally*, I emphasise that. And they had a choice of 18 different issues to choose from. This was an extraordinary finding because one of the difficulties has been connecting the issue of climate change to people's lives; for many of us, it's been distant in time and space, something that will impact future generations or communities in low lying islands in the Pacific. The survey also asked about 26 specific issues and whether respondents considered each one a problem for Australia. Water and environment were at 89 per cent and 81 per cent respectively but behind household debt and cost of living at 90 per cent.

We are constantly told by political pundits that while voters say they are concerned about climate change, they narrow their scope of concern when they vote, with cost of living and debt trumping any eco-concerns at the ballot box. Of course life will get more expensive the less we do now about climate change, so there is an opportunity to connect cost of living – our standard of living and way of life – with climate change, but more on that later.

Australia Talks also asked participants the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements on climate; 60 per cent agreed that it was a serious problem requiring immediate action and 24 per cent that there is enough scientific evidence about climate change to require some action.

And Australia Talks shows there is very little community support for the notion that Australia should only act if the big polluters, China and the US, act first; there was 62 per cent strong agreement and 17 per cent agreement with the statement 'Australia has a responsibility to act even if other big polluting countries don't'.

As we saw in the WWF post-election analysis, there are demographic and ideological differences evident below these big majorities of concern reflected in the Australia Talks data. Where you live

matters – people in Queensland and the Northern Territory are more conservative on environmental issues. There are the usual age and education curves in the Australia Talks data evident in other surveys; the younger you are and the more educated, the more concerned and alarmed you are, the more supportive of immediate action. Interestingly there aren't significant differences in terms of income levels and support for certain environmental statements. And I was expecting to encounter some differences in terms of migrant status and ethnicity. The environment movement on the whole is not predominantly white but much of the prominent leadership is; the differences in attitudes between migrant and CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) communities on climate exists but they are not pronounced, at least in the Australia Talks data. This however should not prevent us from continuing to ensure that the leadership and membership of the climate change movement is as diverse as our population, especially given we know the impacts of climate change will not be felt (at least in the first instance) among wealthy white people living in the inner city.

The greatest divisions showing up in the Australia Talks data are, unsurprisingly political, with big gaps between left and right voters. Combined with location, you can see how hard it is to shift the political map to reflect the level of general concern on climate; if conservative leaning voters in states like Queensland and Western Australia, in regional areas of New South Wales continue to feel the way they do, it helps conservative governments with their recalcitrant policies remain in power, if only just.

And yet the data also shows that all voter groups, including Liberal/National and One Nation voters vastly prefer renewables (solar then wind) as the future energy source for this country. Support for more reliance on coal was in the single figures for all voter groups. The main difference of opinion? Miniscule support from left of centre voters for nuclear power and significant support from conservative voters.

The Value of Segmentation

What can we conclude then from these two pieces of research, from this dive underneath the general concern about climate change?

That age and education differences aside, the issue of climate change has become a battle of ideology, values and worldviews, something that has become more pronounced in the last decade. Knowing what we know about human beings, our psychological and evolutionary makeup, there is no evidence that these divisions are going to be broken down by more scientific evidence or just the passage of time. Not that we have much time to spare.

And we should be careful assuming that, as climate change becomes worse, these divisions will start to collapse. As American journalist Nathaniel Rich writes “disasters alone will not revolutionise public opinion in the remaining time allotted to us” (Rich, 2019, p. 203). In addition, he also points out, “it no longer seems rational to assume that humanity, encountering an existential threat, will behave rationally” (Rich, 2019, p. 5). Instead, we need to better understand the irrational, ideological, psychological and cultural ways people respond to climate change. A segmented approach to sentiment and behaviour is one way to do this.

I was lucky enough to spend some time with researchers at the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication in June this year. The Program grew out of a ground-breaking conference on ‘Americans and Climate Change’ convened in 2005 in Aspen and since then has conducted countless scientific studies on public opinion and behaviour around climate. It's lead by social scientists with

a passionate interest in the natural world and resides within the renowned Yale School of Forestry. Much of what they do at the Yale Program is informed by their Six Americas study, a segmentation first conducted in 2009.

The survey measures the public's climate change beliefs, attitudes, risk perceptions, motivations, values, policy preferences, behaviours including voting patterns and media consumption, and underlying barriers to action. The result of the survey work was six different citizen groupings or segments, varying in size and well differentiated in terms of their attitudes to climate change and their views about action.

At one end of the spectrum, we have The Alarmed (18 per cent), fully convinced of the reality and seriousness of climate change and already taking individual, consumer, and political action to address it.

That's basically us here in this room. Or so I assume.

The largest segment is The Concerned (33 per cent), who are also convinced that the globe is warming and that it is a serious problem but have not yet engaged with the issue personally including not always voting for political parties with strong climate policies.

The three other groups: The Cautious (19 per cent), The Disengaged (12 per cent) and The Doubtful (11 per cent) represent different stages of understanding and acceptance of the problem, and none are actively involved.

And finally, The Dismissive (7 per cent) are very sure it is not happening and are actively involved as opponents of a national effort to reduce emissions. Some of them are in significant positions of power in industry, government and the media.

As someone who has spent 15 years listening to Australians talk about climate change specifically and the environment generally, this segmented approach coming out of Yale immediately made sense to me. The qualitative research I've done over time has revealed the extent to which attitudes to climate are informed not just by understanding and acceptance of the climate science but by world view, values, political identification, social and cultural conditioning and gender identity.

Contemplating the Six America's Study, I started to think about my climate change work – and indeed any reactions in focus groups and surveys to climate change messages – in reference to these segments. In doing so, the task for the climate change movement was taking shape in my mind.

We need to increase The Alarmed cohort no doubt, but we also need to develop and hone their skills of talking to others not of the same mindset. And we need to provide them ongoing social and emotional support as many of them – many of us – struggle with feelings of grief, dread and burning anger about what's happening to the planet and the response of many of our political leaders to the problem.

We need to shift more of The Concerned group – the largest cohort both in the United States and here in Australia – into the Alarmed group.

We need to find a way to convince The Cautious that urgent action is necessary. This often requires language that isn't fraught with tones of crisis and emergency because in my experience – as I will explain presently – it can backfire.

And we need to engage The Disengaged, probably the hardest task of all, not necessarily through the issue of climate change but by building their faith that our democratic institutions are capable and

our elected representatives willing to do something about it.

The Doubtful may well be bought along in attempts to convince the other groups, if not with the science and extent of the threat but with the solutions to the problem, namely the opportunity for Australia to become a renewable energy superpower.

And finally we need to drive The Dismissive group out of positions of power in our government, stop the flow of their donations into our political parties and find smarter ways to engage with them in the media including social media.

There is an Australian version of the Six Americas Study, which is worth discussing briefly now. Led by Donald W. Hine from the University of New England and colleagues from that institution and Griffith University, they took a similar approach to the Yale study and came up with five groups, similar in name and profile to the Yale study but without a Disengaged segment.

The Hine research was conducted in 2013, a long time ago given what's happened since then both politically and atmospherically. However, the Hine approach is highly valuable because it takes into account a much broader range of cognitive and emotional factors that underpin human responses to climate change threats. How 'close' do people feel to climate change effects? Do they see local manifestations or not? Do they feel an emotional connection to nature? How much do they trust climate change authorities or authorities in general? And how much self-reported feelings of shame, guilt, anger and fear condition them to respond in certain ways to the issue and remain open or closed to solutions?

These are now the questions I ask myself in the process of developing, conducting and analysing any research, qualitative or quantitative, on climate change.

The Problem with Urgency

Understanding and using this segmented approach to research on climate sentiment has allowed me to improve the quality of the work I do for environmental NGOs and networks that now make up the bulk of my clients.

I've spent a lot of time in the last 18 months in particular wondering about the efficacy of the language around climate change, around emergency, crisis and urgency. The facts of climate change and the need for rapid response merit these terms. To not use them, seems to be more than a sin of omission, but an outright lie to the public about the scale of the threat and what's at stake.

The notion of total war has been used as a concept to reflect the level of social change and collaboration needed to respond to climate change. In my *Quarterly Essay* earlier this year, I evoked this image myself:

The hard and urgent task of placing environmental concerns at the centre of our democratic project requires more than just new laws and better enforcement, more solar panels and less plastic bags. It requires a whole of society approach to addressing the climate crisis, the kind of mobilisation of people and communities, assets and resources, governments and infrastructure usually reserved for a world war.

Going back to our segments, those in The Alarmed group feel more than comfortable with this war footing message. The Dismissive – those we would normally describe as Deniers – are also strangely comfortable with this language, not because they agree with the position but because they believe,

and fear, that climate activists are agitating for a reorganisation of the power structures in our society via this complete mobilisation.

Both groups are more comfortable with conflict than the others.

Some in The Concerned group respond well to messages of urgency, others not so well.

But for those who are Disengaged and Cautious, I've seen how the language around crisis and urgency can turn them off and away from engagement with climate change and actually make them less concerned and more critical of attempts to address climate effects.

I observed this clearly in the second stage of the work I did for WWF on renewables and the transition away from coal, in a number of online focus groups with men and women in outer suburban Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. For those groups, we recruited people with lower levels of formal education, self-identified swinging voters who had not voted Greens or Labor in the 2019 election but described themselves as concerned or somewhat concerned about the environment. We wanted a mixture of Concerned, Disengaged, Cautious and Doubtful voters.

While there was a spectrum of attitudes to climate change, energy and politics, there were some common findings across all the groups. These men and women had a strong sense of national pride. They were patriotic and optimistic about this country. How good is Australia? Pretty good. Their cares and concerns were local and immediate – secure and well paid jobs, safe neighbourhoods, a good standard of living and happy, successful kids. Security was the big theme and participants saw signs that lack of respect was undermining social norms, threatening their sense of security. While there was a general acceptance of the climate science, they saw it more as a future threat and not immediate and not personal. And they rarely discussed climate change in their daily lives.

There was a strong belief that climate change was overplayed by the media and 'politicised'. They disliked aspects of the climate change discussion including its negative, gloom and doom tone, its remote and inaccessible language and the fact they felt guilty and depressed when listening to climate change messages. When confronted with the scientifically proven '10 year time line' for change, their reaction was explosive. Scare tactics. That can't be true. Where is the evidence? The more we tested messages that focussed on 10 year time frames and the connections between climate and catastrophic events, the more they pushed back.

When it came to energy, the preference was overwhelmingly for renewable energy over coal as long as affordability and reliability were part of the bargain. They believed that the transition to renewables would come but questioned how fast it should proceed.

We tested many messages around energy transition with this group and many of them fell flat, except one. A relentlessly positive message, solutions focussed about how clever Australians have come up with inventions like Wi-Fi and how we should be world leaders in renewable energy, allowing us to generate jobs and address rising cost of living pressures.

This research has made me think more and more about the Australians – probably spread across the Concerned, Disengaged and Cautious groups – that know change has to happen but are anxious about the shape, pace and negative outcomes of that change. They rightfully question whether our political and business leaders have the capacity or the desire to ensure that this transition to an economy built not on fossil fuels but renewables doesn't penalise already struggling groups in our society. Consider the following comments from one of the focus group participants, Jessie a school

teacher living in Melbourne's western suburbs:

Climate change is a real thing and a scary thought. ... [I] feel helpless about it at the moment. I recycle, don't use one-use plastic, bring my own coffee cup. What more can I do to make a real difference? ... I think the repetitive language of climate change makes people shut off a little. A sort of 'heard it before' thing. ... Relevancy is a big part. Am I personally affected in this moment or is it something I don't have to care about for a while? ... I understand the need to close the coal power plants environmentally but making sure we have measures in place to replace [our energy supplies] first might have been the smarter thing. ... I honestly don't know enough about it. Does [renewable energy] generate enough power to make a difference?

Jessie was full of genuine and open questions, not about climate science, but what we can do to address what she rightfully defines as a 'real and scary thought', a world transformed by climate change.

The lessons for me from this project with WWF in addition to all the work I have done thus far on climate change are those that are well understood by climate communicators around the world in theory but not always put into practice in every campaign. Be solutions focussed and positive, understand the values of the people you are trying to convince, do not fuel division and conflict, relate solutions to climate change to our sources of happiness and common concern and more importantly, never assume that what messages work for you will work for others.

These are just some of the principles for communicating on climate contained in the must read-book by George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About It*, published in 2014. Marshall is one of the leading experts on climate change communication globally. He argues that climate change contains "none of the clear signals that we require to mobilise our inbuilt sense of threat" (Marshall, 2014, p. 3) and that one of the limitations of a narrative built on the war metaphor or even those on crisis and emergency is that they can be overwhelmed by negativity, pessimism and conflict. He argues – and I agree – that the challenge is how to activate cooperative values rather than competitive values, stress what we have in common. Namely secure and well paid jobs, safe neighbourhoods, a good standard of living and healthy, successful kids. Security and happiness, whatever that might look like for different groups of people.

Restoring Faith in Government

Before I conclude, some important reflections on the importance of building our faith in government and democracy as part of the task of dealing with climate change. Both the Yale and Hine segmentations consider trust in government, trust in climate science and climate authorities to be vitally important when trying to understand why people respond to climate change messages the way they do. Denialists have cynically capitalised on people's growing distrust in institutions of all kinds, their contempt for politicians, in their campaign to undermine the climate science. Why should you trust government experts or professional politicians like Al Gore? They want to take away your ute and force you to drive expensive electric cars and eat overpriced vegan hamburgers all in the name of science which is uncertain.

Let me stress my sarcastic humour here is not directed at the people who drive the utes but the political and media elites on the far right who position themselves as champions of the 'common people' in public while undermining any government with policies that might actually benefit these constituencies. I do not join in with the post-election trolling of Queenslanders or the characterisation of people who resist climate messages as 'mean and stupid bogans'. I agree with

French philosopher Bruno Latour when he writes in his brilliant book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*:

Before accusing 'the people' of no longer believing in anything, one ought to measure the effect of that overwhelming betrayal on people's level of trust. Trust has been abandoned along the wayside. No attested knowledge can stand on its own, as we know very well. Facts remain robust only when they are supported by a common culture, by institutions that can be trusted, by a more or less decent public life, by more or less reliable media. (Latour, 2018, p. 23)

In my *Quarterly Essay* I explored the issue of trust in democracy and government, as part of a larger argument that the urgent social, economic and political issues facing us as a nation and concerning the electorate were acute enough to encourage Australians to vote for a wildly unpopular leader with a policy platform based on strong social democratic values with environmental issues at the centre.

Didn't that turn out well?

In my response to my own essay, written the weekend of the election result, I reflected on my errors of judgement. If I were to approach this essay again, I wrote, it would be focused almost entirely through the lens of public distrust of politics, because if there was one big message coming from this election result, it is that despite our voting record Australians are alienated from the system. Before anyone speculates on how people responded to Labor's policies, they first need to ask: were people listening much in the first place? There are signs they weren't. The high number of pre-poll votes, 4.7 million, was driven by our desire for convenience, but must also reflect that people had made up their minds before the campaign started. Not exactly the conditions for change. The conclusion I drew in my *Quarterly Essay* response was not that Australia is no longer progressive or no longer cares about equality or climate change or is becoming like America, or indeed that all social research lacks credibility. The conclusion is that the lack of trust the electorate have in politics has undermined their belief that structural reform – whether that be economic, social or environmental – is not something that can be delivered by the current crop of politicians running the show.

While rebuilding our faith in the political system is a long and arduous process, take heart; we in Australia are well positioned to do it. Support for compulsory voting remains strong despite peak cynicism and all the research continues to show that Australians favour a central role for government in our lives. In fact if our governments get their act together to deal effectively with climate change, this could do much to build trust in the community that they have our best interests at heart, in both the short and the long term. It could do much to help boost our flagging democratic spirits, particularly among the younger generation of voters who can only remember the revolving door of Prime Ministers, many of them undone over climate and energy policies.

Conclusion

I spoke earlier about the need to find ways to shift those in the large Concerned segment into The Alarmed cohort. I have an anecdote to share with you about how that can happen, not from any research report or academic study, but a moment from my own recent past.

On December 1 2018 I woke up, made myself a cup of coffee and turned on the TV. I switched straight to my favourite early morning news and current affairs show and I saw hundreds of teenagers skipping school and protesting in the streets about climate change. They were holding hand-made signs with slogans that spanned from the serious and angry to the humorous and profane. 'There are

no jobs on a dead planet.’ ‘Act now or swim later.’ ‘You’re burning our future.’ My favourite sign of the protest? ‘Why should we go to the school if you won’t listen to the educated?’

As I sat sipping my coffee, I thought to myself, “good on those kids telling the powers that be, the older generation, that they need to do more about climate change”. And then it hit me. At almost 50 years of age, I am part of that older generation, part of the generation in power, with the platform and a voice these young people don’t have. It was, at that moment, as if those teenagers, their signs both funny and dramatic, were speaking to me. Do something. And just then something shifted inside me, a sensation hard to describe and yet I can recall it now with clarity. It actually felt physical. Those truant teens were telling me to do something.

And so I am, at every level, in my work, in my life as a parent, consumer, citizen, in my decisions about energy, transport, food and superannuation.

Looking back on this moment, what’s obvious to me – and fascinating – is that watching these young protestors on the streets didn’t mean I suddenly believed the scientific consensus on climate change more than I did the day before. But it’s clear that environmental concern was not at the centre of my worldview. I had registered it rationally but not emotionally.

This transformative moment – the moment I tipped from concerned about climate change to genuinely alarmed about the threat – didn’t happen because I read an IPCC report or sat through a presentation from a climate scientist about CO2 levels. I reacted to a crowd of children holding up signs in the streets, girls who were only a few years older than my eldest daughter. Suddenly, it was personal.

That I can make a contribution to this movement, probably the most important in our history, is such a relief to me and helps me manage the angst that overwhelms me from time to time in the middle of the night, as I ponder how best to equip myself, my children, my community, our nation for the challenges already on our doorstep.

Now comes the inevitable and all important, call to action. For those of you in this room, your first task is to maintain your own enthusiasm and optimism – and your own mental health and wellbeing – as we move deeper into a climate change affected future.

You can protest, change the terms of your super fund, install solar panels, vote for parties with strong climate policies, but one of the most important things you can do is understand why people who aren’t like you feel the way they do about climate change. And learn to talk to them effectively. What we need are thousands, even millions, of everyday conversations about climate change. That will help enlarge the ranks of the concerned, engaged the disengaged and make the cautious more convinced of the need for action.

This will then expose those who dismiss both the science and the solutions, the denialists – who are today a minority, albeit a powerful one – as what they are. Out of step with the rest of us, determined to put our collective wellbeing, our way of life, at risk.

We must not let their voices be the loudest in the public arena.

We must create a chorus of different communities united in asking, indeed demanding, that we act now to preserve a liveable world and a viable future.

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For more information on Yale's Six America's Study see:

<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/about/projects/global-warmings-six-americas/>

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About MSSI

MSSI facilitates interdisciplinary sustainability research across faculties and centres at the University of Melbourne, and promotes research in a way that maximises engagement and impact. MSSI emphasises the contribution of the social sciences and humanities to understanding and addressing sustainability and resilience challenges.