**The Ideas and Society Program presents a conversation with Bob Brown, Dennis Altman AM and Robert Manne**

Monday 26 August 2013

**Robert Manne**

Well, thank you all very much for coming to this Ideas and Society event. I need not say how pleased and honoured we are to have Bob Brown here. There will be a conversation with Bob and myself and Dennis Altman, but there will be time for questions at the end and someone will come with a microphone if you have questions, and we are going between now and a quarter to three, so we have fairly substantial time.

I'm going to do a very short introduction. I'm not going to repeat the achievements that were outlined so well in the ceremony giving ... conferring I think is the word ... a doctorate on Bob Brown but I do want to say a few words in introduction.

More than Bob being leader of the Greens for many years, and a courageous environmentalist, he’s done something which is very rare in a life, a nation’s politics, which is that he has founded a new party that has endured, is thriving, and has altered in ways that I think are very much to the good of the political landscape of this country. There are very few people that have achieved a thing like that and I think that will be one of the things for which he is most remembered.

As the leader of the Greens, he has always been uncompromising on matters of principle and eloquent about matters of principle, and unfailingly courageous. And yet, I think somewhat miraculously, he’s also managed to retain the respect even of his most hostile opponents, and I think through qualities of character that have always shone through, for me most importantly, his equanimity and his good humour. If I can just say something I haven’t prepared to say, I have an office next to the room where Bob was talking to the Greens on campus and a half hour or so ago, and what I heard was the rollicking laughter coming through the wall of my room as Bob was talking to the students about I know not what.

**Dennis Altman**

But you could guess.

**Robert Manne**

In short, it’s obvious that Bob Brown has been one of the most universally admired Australian politicians, indeed Australians of the past quarter century or more. But among those many Australians who share his vision, more than merely being admired, because I think the ovation for him earlier makes clear he’s really loved.

It’s wonderful to have him here today for this conversation and I'm going to turn over to Dennis to begin asking some questions.

**Dennis Altman**

Well, I'm going to begin with a very, very brief biographic overlap, because there is this ... I'm fascinated by the fact Bob that in the 1960s, I was studying at the University of Tasmania. It’s a terrible admission in front of you, but I was a hydro kid. My father worked for the enemy, although in the 1960’s they weren’t perceived quite like that, and you were studying in Sydney. You went from Sydney to the UK. I went from Tasmania to the US. I then ended up in Sydney at about the time that you moved to Tasmania. I think you moved to Tasmania in 1972, and I'm curious what brought you to Tasmania.

**Bob Brown**

Well, I'd read as a kid about the Tasmanian tiger, and so I wanted to track that down. And I'd also, more recently, in the month before, seen on black and white television, the controversy about Lake Pedder and while I couldn’t quite get a handle on it, I wanted to find out about it. I just innately had this wish to catch up with these people, who were defending this lake. And to my great reward ever since, I did just that. They were establishing this world-first Greens party on the 23rd of March in that year.

Well, I was working as a ship’s doctor, having come back from London by ship with the Shaw Savill line and they asked me to stay on for a bit, so I was Deputy Ship’s Doctor and we came to port in Lautoka in Fiji and I opened up the Australian Medical Journal and there was this job for Tasmania for three months so I took it, to cut a long story short, and drove down there, crossed on the ferry and sent my parents home a card saying, I'm home. I don’t know what they thought about that. And I've been there ever since.

And the Tasmanian tiger – I was sceptical about that, but I was involved ... by the next year I was walking right down into the callidendrous forest, the cathedral-like forest of the Tarkine Wilderness, looking for this ... well, the 7th of September, election day, is Endangered Species Day. And that’s for the reason that the last Tasmanian tiger died in the Hobart Zoo on that day in 1936, and there’s been no irrefutable evidence of its existence. It was shot to death by government fee, one pound a head, to extinction. And anyway, I had a great time looking for the Tasmanian tiger, and I loved the place and I loved the job, and so I'm also an honorary Tasmanian as a result.

**Dennis Altman**

You were in Launceston right?

**Bob Brown**

Yes.

**Dennis Altman**

As someone who grew up in Hobart, Bob and I could now spend the rest of the hour talking about that, but we won’t. But I want to move on because ...

**Bob Brown**

I should tell you that I rode my bicycle to ... I found this place at Liffey, 50 kilometres out under the mountains and I used to ride my bicycle in on Fridays, stay at the surgery over the weekend, sleep on the examination couch out the back, they’re hide, they’re narrow, they’re hard and there’s a long way if you fall off. And then back on the following Monday. And just one night I got a call at 11 o’clock at night from a distressed lady who said her son had pains and she worried that he had a burst appendix, so I got on my bike and rode up ... after rousting on her because he’d had the phone all day ... and here was a light in a doorway, with a man slumped against it and I went and saw him and he was quite clearly drunk. And I was a bit annoyed. I laid him on the floor and did an examination. It turned out his dad had died of a heart attack and he was really suffering anxiety and I said well, you’ll be okay mate. And he says, you know, you’re the besht bloody doctor in Launceston. I called all the other doctors and they didn’t come and I called you and you did come. And I was supposed to be across the road. And I had the wrong address. I then went across the road and saw the young fella with appendicitis and skipped him off to hospital.

**Dennis Altman**

I'm going to jump forward four years, to 1976. And in 1976 when you were already involved politically, you effectively came out. And I think I'm right that Bob is the first openly homosexual politician ever elected in Australia. Several other people had run for office, but they’d run with no real prospect of winning. Was that ... what led you to make that decision? Was it forced upon you? Was it a decision you made because you felt it had to be made at the time?

**Bob Brown**

No, it was a set of circumstances. I had this really troubled time of it. I sat at Canberra Hospital just two years earlier, right on the end of the point where the museum is now, on a chair, late at night, thinking I'll take a swim, because I knew I couldn’t get over to the other side and back. And fortunately, because I had a wonderful family, I decided I'd fly to London instead. And I tried all the treatments. They didn’t work, you know. Then I became ... there was a psychologist in London, I don’t know who he is, I'd love to catch up with him again, who I finally got to see. He said, why don’t you be who you are? Why don’t you be, you know, you’re homosexual, enjoy it. It took a long while for a Presbyterian to take that bullet, but I did. And by 1976 Dennis, this is six years later, I got asked to go down the Franklin River, still keeping this secret, by Paul Smith, a bearded forester, who couldn’t get anybody else silly enough to float down the river with him, and he knew it was threatened. So I'd agreed to go with them. And then, you know, as it was getting close, you know, a couple of blokes floating down the river, are going to talk the most personal things. That’s going to be important. So I decided I had to tell him before I went. And I did. Paul Smith was his name. And you know, I thought, this will be the end of this trip. And he laughed. And he said, oh Bob, well, I'm not. He had a wife and two great little kids. And he said, I can tell a good looking man – he was a trout fisherman – like I can tell a good looking trout. That’s all. And so it relieved the tension.

When I came back, Paul, who is a ... he now works in academia at the University of Tasmania actually, said, you’ve really got to tell people about it. But I don’t think he quite realised the penalty clause. I was also the first ... so at the end of that year there was an upper house enquiry into discrimination, largely discrimination against women, and I decided I'd say that I was gay, or homosexual as it was at the time. And so I did. The ramifications were quite startling, and I might be the first openly gay person to be elected to parliament. I'm also the first openly gay person to be serially not elected to parliament. And the campaign against me in the 1982 crucial election for the Franklin campaign was quite ferocious. Every letter box in Denison had a notice saying, Bob Brown wants your mandate. And then pretty nasty stuff. The posters went up, the epithets were out and my vote went whoom. So, it was very tough at the time, because my parents were coming down. I'd been to see my family and the campaigners, the great Melbourne newspaper, the *Truth*, ran the truth about me, front page, in the middle of the campaign.

But we all endured together. They were wonderful. The Wilderness Society folk were terrific. My family was, and we saved the Franklin River. So ...

**Dennis Altman**

And one of the great things that comes out of that story is that *Truth* is no longer with us, and you are. Well, I'm going to hand over ... I think Robert will now pick up ... we’re going to come back to some of this but Robert, you want to take up some political questions.

**Robert Manne**

I want to talk about the Greens. And I've got a number of political questions. Is that all right? You know, I know that you’re no longer the leader, but the questions are to do with more general things than the present situation.

The first is, I suppose what I would really like to hear in a sort of ... you say, or talk about ... is what you think in the very long term the mission of the Greens is in this country. What’s the purpose of the party?

**Bob Brown**

Well, I have said this before, but Don Chipp famously said, we have to keep the bastards honest. I think the Greens’ role is to replace them. And the great German Green, Petra Kelly, came out ... by the way she met Jack Mundey in Sydney, of Greens Ban fame and saw this connection between middle class Sydneyites who wanted to protect Kelly’s Bush and so on. And the Rocks. And this ex-Communist Red unionist, and there’s very good grounds for believing that that Greens Ban led to her taking back the word ‘Green’ because it now covered social as well as environmental components and that it was that interaction which led to Die Grünen in Germany and the appellation of Greens. I heard somebody the other day say, why don’t you get rid of that name? Well, like Labor you know, it’s a narrow name but it became expanded from that moment.

**Robert Manne**

That’s really interesting.

**Bob Brown**

And so she said, I remember Petra, her father worked on the Kennedy campaigns in the US. And she worked on campaigns for the Social Democrats, the equivalent of Labor in Germany, and she just said, well, you know, Bob, they put on their green spots in opposition and they shed them in government.

And aren’t we seeing that now, with Labor having totally lost its way on refugees? Whatever else this illegal deportment of people coming to our shores to poorer neighbours, is an absolutely sabotage of the whole role of Labor as a party of social conscience. And it’s not going to ... a young fellow came up at the book signing I had in town last night, and said, I'm joining the Labor Party and I'm going to change them from inside. And it’s very hard you know, because I think that’s a great way to go. But as I said to Peter Garrett, before he went to ... when he was trying to become a Greens senator, it’s the Little Red Riding Hood syndrome. You know, grandma party says come closer dearie and change me from inside ... And that’s the last that’s seen of you. Parties become entrenched, but in our society, the corporate sector, which is the de facto global ruler, and plutocracy, government by the rich, is ensconced. And I used to see this all the time in Canberra. The glass houses over the road aren’t for mothers’ groups or patch in the pants greenies, or even people worried about inter-generational equity – it’s the mining industry, it’s the Woolworths and Coles chains, and so on, and they’re in the parliament and they have this inordinate influence on the output. And that includes ... there’s the big test though, to the Greens. Are we going to ... will the Greens go the same direction, and become compromised by the sheer power of this lobbying industry which disproportionately represents the rich and not the poor. And you notice I haven’t mentioned Rupert Murdoch once.

**Robert Manne**

I promise you, I'm going to come to him.

Given the aspiration not to keep the bastards honest, but to replace at least one of them, you know, to become one of the two major parties, I translate that into in a technical way. It seems to me, and you can disagree if you want, but at the moment the Greens have a really solid support base and membership in the inner city, professional, often student sections of the society. Guy Rundle is beginning to call it a class – the class of intellectual workers. And I think that’s now entrenched and I think this election will show it again. But it seems to me obvious that if you are going to break out beyond that, there’s what you could call middle Australia, suburban Australia and also country Australia, where you have to develop a presence, and I just wondered if you agree with my analysis of where you are now, and if you have thoughts about how you make that break into the wider parts of society.

**Bob Brown**

It’s a good point Robert and I come from the bush, and so does Christine Milne by the way. And I was asked last night about why is there no leadership in Australia, and I said, oh yes there is. Christine’s the ... is an extraordinary integrity, you won’t find her abusing a make-up artist and you won’t find her saying that gay marriage is a fad or a passing fashion. She’s a terrific character. But the question about replacing, and where the Greens go to next – well, just one little indication of that was the great drought of the first decade of this century. And we went into ... we came into this century on three or four per cent, the Greens, and almost nothing, zero support, one per cent maybe in the bush. If you look at the polls now, the Greens are on twelve per cent in the cities and nine per cent in the bush, and the single biggest thing that made that happen was the ravage of climate change across this country and the recognition by rural people that it was only the Greens who were standing with them on that and wanting to act on that. And it’s coming again. Climate change is ... we can see at the moment the drought in China, the fires in Yosemite National Park – it’s coming again and as it does, this country is going to ... as J K Galbraith said, parliament almost exactly reflects the people who vote for it. There’s a lot of sniping at politicians but that’s because we vote for them, and 80% of people Saturday week from now are going to vote for mistreatment of refugees and illegal behaviour by Australia towards refugees. 80% are going to vote for wind back of the clean air package, which Christine Milne was central to devising, and 80% are going to vote for more logging in the Yarra Range. And the devolvement of what environmental protections we’ve got now back to the states, with all the consequences ... pre Whitlam environmental lack of law in Australia. We do it with our eyes wide open, and the question really behind all this, is are we intelligent enough, on a planet which can’t keep up with our deprivations, to re-organise ourselves at a national and international level, to a sustainable relationship with the planet, our fellow creatures, and coming generations. Or are we going to be post-catastrophe reformers? And I think if it’s left to the post-catastrophe reform, we won’t reform at all.

That said, I am an optimist about this and I don’t believe you can be optimist by just looking at things and saying, oh well, what can I do? It’s one of the reasons why I've had great pleasure in being a founder of the Greens and helping develop them, where we go to from here. You know, there’s worrying signs. I think the environment movement in Australia is at the flattest level it’s been for decades. And in the US. Why is this? Maybe it’s because we’re all so well-off, we are just so cushioned and comfortable, we are the richest people on the planet, and there’s a certain ... why the heck should we worry about anything, feeling, going on. I don’t know. Whatever it is, we’ve got some bumps in the road coming down the line and each of those bumps is going to make the Greens look like they knew what they were talking about.

**Dennis Altman**

Sorry I'm just going to interject for one sec. If 80% of the population are going to vote, as you say, against all the things that you outlined as most central, how can you retain that optimism?

**Bob Brown**

Well, I think you know, to a degree I'll offer the excuse that the messenger ... I am going to start talking about Rupert Murdoch ... has perverted the information base, which is central. You know, Ralph Nader came out to Australia in 1980 and went to a protest for the Franklin River in Launceston and echoed what Jefferson had said a couple of centuries before that, that information is the currency of democracy. And it is. But the currency now is counterfeit, and we do have newspapers, not newspapers, and I was coming up to Melbourne in the plane the day before yesterday and there was an *Australian* on the seat next to me, so I picked ...

**Robert Manne**

The newspaper?

**Bob Brown**

The *Australian* newspaper, sorry. And you know, I made the mistake of reading it. And I was very happy ... I had to use some psychology on myself to stay happy at the end of reading. This diatribe on ... not news, but diatribe, against this nation voting in a progressive ... voting for the light on the hill. That’s what it was. But we’re all educated, thoughtful ... the better information we’ve ever had before in our lives. And if that’s what we vote for, democracy says that’s what we get.

**Robert Manne**

Can I say something about that? As you will know, some people in the audience will know Bill McKibben, who is I think the most important activist in the area of climate change in the world now. Perhaps Al Gore. He came to Australia and I happened to ... I met him at an event which I was vaguely involved in. I asked him, because I'm always interested in what outsiders think about this country, and I said, what do you think of this country? He said, well, I think you have extremely good television (he meant the ABC) compared to America. He said, you have unbelievably bad newspapers. So in a way, what I wanted to ... you know, we talked to each other about the *Australian* when I was writing about it, and you were more than anyone a target for a long time. And famously they said they wanted to destroy the Greens ... the Greens should be destroyed at the ballot box. But I mean I suppose the big question I have here is what we do about it. About the Murdoch press. What do you think should ideally ...

**Bob Brown**

Well, I did move for media reform. I mean, everybody who’s got a profession in this place knows that you’ve got a set of laws. The doctor ... you know, I'm required, I was required to uphold the dignity and basically the interest of anybody that I was called upon to heal. The same with engineers, lawyers, teachers. But not journalists. And the one thing I thought we could get to, was implementing the Journalist’s Code of Ethics, drawn up by themselves, the Australian Journalists’ Code of Ethics. Which says among other things, you shall not invade the privacy of a grieving citizen. A simple thing. It’s broken almost every day of the week. And the response from the Murdoch media, and the Fairfax media, to even saying well, we should legislate that for professionals in journalism, the same as we legislate for everybody else, your own code of ethics, was extraordinary. And I had cartoons of myself dressed up in Gestapo uniform and burning books. In Tasmanian daily newspapers. It’s very, very concerning. We do not have the media which tells all the news that should be told. Opinion pages are a different thing. Editorial cons are a different thing. Editorial from front to back and a complacent population, and certainly a compliant body politic. And so again, we get what we vote for.

**Robert Manne**

I'm going to ask one more question and turn over to Dennis, who’s got some questions about gay rights and gay marriage and other things. But Bob, can I ask you ... both Dennis and I are very interested in politics and we’ve both been writing about Labor and the Greens and the relationship. You did something really interesting with the Gillard government, which is, sign a written agreement at the beginning of the government. I partly wondered whether you think it achieved something important, and probably more importantly, what do you think might be the long term relationship between your party and Labor. Not the long term, the medium term relationship.

**Bob Brown**

Well, the signing of the agreement just comes from political experience. It’s the norm in Europe. We have multi-party governments and oppositions. For example, Denmark. I don’t think they’ve had a single party government since the Second World War and it’s doing very well thank you. But the parties after an election, look at what the people ... how the people have configured them and they get together to form a government and an opposition. And they sign a legal document on it. And when we became, got to the balance of power in Tasmania in 1989, we proceeded to write a document and sign off on it in public. So the public ... and I'm also very aware that governments ... that what you get in the first six or twelve months of government is what you’re likely to get ever. So when Julia Gillard rang me on the night of the last election and said, I want to talk to you and I want to be on the front, I was amazed, I must say, about Julia, she’d been through, I would have thought purgatory, in the run to that election, but here she was saying, I want to be on the front foot, I want you to support us in government and I had to say to her, well, I'll go and talk to my party. And a couple of days later, Tony Abbott called up and said, I want to talk to you about government so I said, all right, well, absolutely. It’s our responsibility, being there in where people have voted for a balance of power, to go and see the two major parties. And when I went to see Tony Abbott, I had the same experience as Tony Windsor did. Instead of being ushered into a room with somebody there to shake hands and say, look, I want to discuss with you on an equal basis this important thing of forming the next government, he was sitting in a couch, with his feet on the coffee table, and I was ushered to sit opposite him, looking at the soles of his feet. And so I did. And I talked to him, and he said, I want to form government. I'll do anything except have a carbon tax.

So, we talked about that, but this extraordinary body language from the next Prime Minister, said, you know, I've been around long enough to take all that in stride, but you analyse that as well. We signed the document in the end with the then Gillard government because we rapidly advanced to an agreement on having a clean energy package. And the last thing I got onto that, and this was almost walking down the corridor, was a future referendum recognising indigenous people in the constitution, and local government. So these things evolved quite rapidly. And I kept talking with my colleagues all the way through this process. But if we got a balance of power again, the same process I think would be essential.

It’s interesting, Andrew Wilkie, from my home town of Hobart, says he won’t negotiate with anybody. Well, Andrew, if you’re in the balance of power, you go onto the floor of the parliament and you have to vote confidence or no confidence in one side or the other, and if you do that without gaining anything in terms of your own authority from the people who voted you into the parliament, I think you ... it’s just a lack of experience that you see. So, yes, we did sign the agreement, and we got a lot out of it, including such things as the parliamentary budgetary office, the very thing which the Abbott Opposition at the moment doesn’t want to put its costings before. The Greens have. We’ve had forty or fifty policies costed so far. Labor’s had twelve and the Liberals have had none.

So much for fringe-dwelling economics. It’s the Opposition that’s refusing to show its ... put its test before the umpire. But they’re getting the votes. That’s how it is.

**Dennis Altman**

I actually want to add one thing that I think that you got, that I think for me was tremendously important, which is, you got the first parliamentary debate as to why Australia was in Afghanistan and I can remember and I think you were there actually, a conversation I had with Adam Bandt before the 2010 election, in which we talked about that.

**Bob Brown**

That’s right.

**Dennis Altman**

And that to me was one of the great achievements in fact, that your party got.

**Bob Brown**

And that’s what a working parliamentarian has to do ... has to be picking up ideas from the community and yes, and because of that, it’s remiss in this country that we go to war without the authority of parliament. The Prime Minister does it. Even in the US, the President may declare a war in a state of emergency, but the Congress has to authenticate it.

Here, after ten years, after John Howard had joined ... and I've seen Malcolm Fraser today saying that he agreed with the invasion of Afghanistan to get al-Qaeda, but Howard rapidly changed it to, we’re going to democratise Afghanistan, with all sorts of ulterior motives for that, and here we are, so much later with a terrible situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but a debate in the parliament – we had the power to say to an incoming Prime Minister, we want a debate in the parliament, and she agreed to it. But so yes, it did become part of the agreement.

**Robert Manne**

Just one tiny question. But I take it that you general view or tactical position is when after an election you deal with the parties, the other parties and sometimes written agreements if that works out. Is there any thought in your mind, or did you ever think about something more, as it were, long term, in relationship to Labor? A red-green kind of understanding which was not just from election to election, but which would pull politics ...

**Bob Brown**

I would think about that Robert, but I don’t see any red. What I see is blue. And I'm being quite serious about that. It’s a Labor government that’s taken three million dollars out of tertiary education, taken money off single mothers, treating refugees ... you see, I think the time has passed. I did go into serious negotiations with Janet Powell, then leader of the Democrats in 1990, having proposed to Don Chipp a little earlier that this polyglot of Greens and Nuclear Disarmament Party and the Democrats get together to form one party and Don went through the roof. But a bit after that Janet came to Launceston and we discussed an amalgamation there. But then the Democrats changed leadership.

I think you do have to keep your door open, always, to that sort of discussion. But I would see from where I sit, amalgamation between the two old parties because they have greater likenesses than between the Greens and either of them because we’re a progressive party with a social justice democracy, international, inter-generational equity and environmental understrapping and I don’t see those things configuring with either of the major parties.

**Dennis Altman**

I want to do actually segue from the Afghanistan question to not immediately talk about gay marriage but talk about the rising international polarisation around homosexuality and a friend of mine, Masha Gessen, who may be known to some of you because she was in Australia last year and she wrote a very well known biography of Putin, is an open lesbian and has just had to leave Russia because she feels that under the legislation that has now been brought in in Russia and the threats that are going on on a daily basis, there’s a quite real possibility that her children will be taken away from her. So Masha has taken her children and moved to the United States. And I guess my question to you is, faced with that sort of very basic infringement of rights, which we have now seen in many parts of the world against people who either are homosexual, perceived to be homosexual, what can we effectively do in a country like Australia?

**Bob Brown**

Well, Russia and Putin, you know, there’s so much to talk about there in terms of just democratic rights and the crushing of any opponents, let alone this new thing, this prohibition on any literature going to any people under the age of 18 which advocates or talks about the rights of homosexual people, and the question though is, which of us have so much as sent an email or made a phone call to the Russian Embassy? Where such a ... and I include myself in that because I haven’t yet. It’s very much at the front of my mind. But we’re very much ... I remember sending things to the Russian Embassy about Solzhenitsyn way back. We’re very much by-standers and we think also, if we click something on a computer screen, we’ve done our job, and in fact we’ve just taken ourselves out of the role required of being activists, so I read the *Guardian Weekly* – anyone who gets the current of the *Guardian Weekly* and reads what it’s like for ... there’s a fifteen year lesbian girl in there who’s written a letter to maybe the woman you were just talking about, and ...

**Dennis Altman**

No, she’s somewhat older than fifteen.

**Bob Brown**

No, the letter writer, to her. And she’s given this letter of somebody who’s written about how her parents discriminate against her and they don’t know that she’s gay and so on. It’s an evolutionary thing, but I think that one of the best things we could all do, is, say to the Russian Embassy, we object to this and you’re doing the wrong thing and you’re putting Russia down, and so on. I think, what happens if Paul and I go to the Winter Olympics, and they’re very well aware that it’s now raised the issue. I don’t ... I love Olympics and athletics so I'm not in favour of boycotting them, but I am in favour of acting on them. And I don’t think I'd do any good at the Winter Olympics ... well past that. But you know, there’s a limit to what you can do. We can’t ... we’re not triage people. We can’t fix ... I mean, Syria’s such a compelling, heart-rending situation at the moment, and we can encourage our government to be involved in it, and talk about it, but it is very ... it needs international action. There’s lots of things we can change though and I think pressure on the Russian Embassy at the moment, if 200 people were to, each in the next few days, say we disagree with your new laws which are repressing homosexual rights in your country. That will be flagged back to Moscow.

**Dennis Altman**

But at what point would you support a boycott of Sochi? Because there are many people, and many Russian gay lesbian activists who are now calling for an international boycott of the Winter Olympics.

**Bob Brown**

Well the first thing to boycott is trade. If we’re going to do that, let’s stop selling uranium, or wheat, or whatever it might be, to Russia. You know, it’s so easy to pick on sports and the arts. They’re just simple, easy things to pick on. But I think if we as a nation really want to make a difference, let’s start looking at those real options which might hurt some of the oligarchs, who are running Russia at the moment. Don’t hold your breath.

**Dennis Altman**

But I will ask the question and I know Rob wants ... I will ask *a* question about gay marriage, which I know Rob wants me to ask, and the question really is, how far do you see Rudd’s apparent conversion to gay marriage as an issue and the fact that he’s now talking it up big while it still remains a quote conscious vote for his members? Is this a cynical ploy to undermine Greens support or do you think it represents a genuine shift by Rudd and a genuine attempt by Rudd to change Australian public policy?

**Bob Brown**

Well, I'm not in his brain. And I think it’s probably all of the above, but you know, equal marriage is coming in Australia. We’re way behind now. We’ve lost the lead in it, because people haven’t voted for it, basically, in big enough numbers. Yes, he’s moved to saying he ... we, Paul and I had got invited to dinner with Julia and Tim after I resigned from the Senate, so we had that dinner last July and I was talking small talk and Paul suddenly, across the table, said to Julia – why don’t you support equal marriage? And she was just as direct in private as in ... and she won’t mind me saying this in public, and saying, well, I just don’t support it. No reason, no great sophistication than that. And I just think, what a pity, because if Julia Gillard had supported equal marriage back at the last election, maybe we would have been rendered useless, because if they’d have won a couple of extra seats and had government in their own right, a failure by all the leaders of the major political parties to understand that the public has moved on, and this restraint, you know, from Cardinal Pell and others, which is inordinate. Equal marriage, what an extraordinarily easy thing. The public has changed its mind. The body politic is taking a while longer. All I know is that every Green in the parliament or who is likely to be in the parliament, supports equal marriage and Sarah Hanson-Young will have a bill in there post election to test the waters again very quickly.

By the way, euthanasia – where is that? I mean, there’s 80% of the public in Australia support euthanasia laws and has done since the end of the ‘80s, and it’s off the agenda. And it’s the one thing that I could not get Kevin Rudd to talk with me about formally, when he was Prime Minister and we had the balance of power in the Senate. For twelve months I was excommunicated and I had no idea – we had a good relationship but I just couldn’t get to see him.

**Robert Manne**

Do you know why?

**Bob Brown**

No. Except the night that he lost and Julia Gillard came in, the media ball was on in Canberra and I was sitting there with Paul and he was sitting next to me with his daughter and we made ... talked with each other, and he said, I must catch up with you in the next few days. But he knew, and meantime, his party was voting to oust him as leader.

I simply don’t know.

**Robert Manne**

It’s strange isn’t it?

**Bob Brown**

It’s very remiss.

**Robert Manne**

That in a way leads to a big topic I'd like to ask you a few questions about, which is climate change, which is the one that preoccupies me at the moment. Do you agree with the proposition that of all the issues facing the earth at the moment, human beings at the moment, climate change is the most important?

**Bob Brown**

Well, I don’t want to be cute about this, but I think it’s the collective human imagination that’s allowing it to happen. That’s the key problem that we must address. Having said that, climate change is, along with growth economics, and this population increase we’ve got, is about to manifestly change our lives and the lives of human beings who come after us, for millennia. And there’ll be a lot of regret about that. But again Machiavelli, who said six hundred years ago, if you want to change the world, get ready to be dropped on it from a great ... I'm paraphrasing ... my Italian’s not real good. You get ready to be dropped on from a great height by those who’ve got the power and the money. We’re seeing that play out at the moment. But the interesting thing, BHP say on this morning’s news thing, that they doubt that there’ll be any more investment in coal mining. But, you know, Australia, the world’s biggest coal exporter or we’re juggling with Indonesia at the moment, don’t need it, but it’s making money. And the great religion of the age and mark you, this is not well understood, Marx said that religion is the opiate of the masses, well, our opiate is materialism. And it is a religion. And you know, people are complete ... we, I'm a sucker for it myself. We are grabbed by the throat by this wealth and our ability to expend our wealth and deny what’s actually happening to this one little planet on which we, this great herd of mammals, continues to grow, is happening.

Even Dick Smith has now said, growth cannot be ... cannot continue. Growth and the extraction of resources. It’s illogical. It’s an absurdity, right in front of us. But the election will be won on whoever promises to accelerate it the most.

Now, how about that? For a highly educated, sophisticated, society in the year 2013. And climate change – yep, we’re going to ... that prediction that 90% loss of the food producing capacity of the Murray-Darling basin by the end of this century, well, who knows about that? Or cares?

So maybe the post-catastrophe option is coming. But you know, I think we should try the intelligence one first and we all have to think about that – pulling our belts in, and ultimately being global democrats. There’s no getting away from it. We all know ... have the same information base on this planet, we all are one community, we are connected by knowing what everybody else is doing, and we share a single destiny. And until we get to the recognition that it’s one person, one vote, one value, one planet – as I was saying earlier, we’re not going to get there and we as Australians, are a long way from that at the moment.

**Dennis Altman**

Bob, I think as we’re at La Trobe University, I should actually say that there are people within this university who do ... who are working on the Murray-Darling food basin, on the issues of food security, and I'm looking around the room – I think several of the people in this room will be able to talk to you afterwards about some of the very interesting research that’s going on here.

**Bob Brown**

And the question there about the impact of climate change on the Murray-Darling basin, there is only one answer to that though Dennis. And that’s to stop stacking greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

**Dennis Altman**

I would disagree with that ...

**Bob Brown**

Otherwise, all we’re going to be doing is researching triage, researching how to try to deal with a mass catastrophe, of our own making. And we all know that prevention is better than cure. We don’t have to go to medical school to know that. But I take my hat off to people who are looking at how we do work, to feed a horde of ten billion people later this century. But gee, we’re stacking the odds against ourself by inaction on climate change, which you quite rightly say is this huge issue, confronting us.

**Robert Manne**

If we can localise it to Australia and even to your role in government, or with the Gillard government, it seems to me there are major steps taken with carbon tax leading to the ETS and also with the ... perhaps as important, the clean energy target by 2020, big things. But ... and I imagine you share this but I'd like to hear ... in a way these things are dwarfed by Australia's mining, burning, and exporting of coal. And even if BHP Billiton says that they’re not going to develop Galilee coal field or they won’t be developed, I'm pleased, but it’s on the books ... and there are big Indian companies and Chinese companies working away. Do you think ever the Australians will be able to debate seriously the question of our relationship to coal?

**Bob Brown**

Young Australians are. I go to the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, they’re just fantastic. Wherever they have a meeting and I get to it, I come away just feeling wonderfully great because here’s an activist group of intelligent young people, simply with exuberance, expressing a plan for the future. And you know, we saw that report this week. We can be a hundred per cent renewable energy by 2030 if only we put our minds to it.

But the one ... I have been on the front page of the *Australian*, and the *Courier Mail*, and on the same day of the *Telegraph* and the *Courier Mail*, which was before the 2007 election when I lost my control for a moment and ventured to say that we should in the next period of government, look at phasing out coal exports. So a whole, half side on face on me, quelle horreur, on both those newspapers, with ‘This man is coming to take your job’. And it was syndicated to the *Courier Mail* from the *Telegraph*, without a by-line, and as a result the Mayor of Blackwater, out west of Rockhampton in the middle of the Surat Basin Coal mines, said come up ... rang me up and said, come up here if you dare say that. I said, all right, Mayor, I'll come up. He said I've got a Town Hall with 600 seats in it and 600 angry miners to fill it up. And I said, I'll come up and talk with you, this is democracy. Anyway, we drove out from Rockhampton, getting lots of supplies as we went, in a hire car, and a few staff, and when we got there, we were met both by a thunder storm, which helped break the drought, which was a good sign, but also by a hit squad of the Brisbane police, who had flown up specially for crowd control. And they insisted we drive down to the Town Hall and that the fellow driving the car, had back in to the back of the Town Hall, so that when the crowd surged forward to lynch me, we could rush off the stage out the back, get in the car and drive away.

So we went through ... my dad was a policeman and I've got lots of police ... and so we went through this process and I was very grateful for them. It turned out however, that the Mayors came and we spoke about climate change and they were all worried about it, and we spoke about renewable energy and the jobs and they were all interested in that, and we ended up having a great conversation. And I left, having listened to their concerns about the mining industry and the fact that the big corporations, if there’s a downturn, sack thousands of them, and there’ll be nothing in the press about that. These are human beings with families and houses and mortgages to pay, and worries about the future, and they don’t mind, they would like it if they could be given a job in an industry that they don’t feel threatens their kids’ future, and they know that the coal industry *does* threaten their kids’ future.

So there’s a lot of good ground, good prospective ground there. But until ... well the coal industry is on the skids. If anybody’s got shares, get rid of them. I'll do you a favour. It is on the skids, but not yet, and in the meantime, we’re digging this lethal material up from underground and giving it a once off burning and putting it into ... stacking the atmosphere.

**Robert Manne**

Just one final question about that and then maybe Dennis, if you have something, and then we’ll open up to questions. But it seems to me that the only sort of strategic political kind of move I've seen made in this area, apart from the ... raising the issue, has been the idea of divestment, which has emerged recently, the idea that the superannuation funds, universities, churches, anyone with money to invest, who has invested in fossil fuel corporations, should take it out and the model was the anti-apartheid movement. It’s grown quite big in the States, particularly with colleges or universities there. I just wondered if you’d thought about it, and what you think of it?

**Bob Brown**

And it’s like, well, it’s a good idea. But I don’t ... I wouldn’t bet on it, because the religion says, get the money where you can, and it overrides. We’re wealth-creating creatures. We’re hooked on making more money. It doesn’t matter how much we’ve got. We want more. And we’re hooked on it. And it gets to the point of absurdity, but on we go.

So I think it’s a really good idea, and you know, the reality is the groups you just mentioned, and all of us here, are concerned about this, and do want to act on it. It’s just that we’re galvanised into inaction because everybody else is not doing it and we’re community, societal beings. So I think, you know, that is one good option, but I repeat this – the Greens would phase out new coal mines, would stop any new coal fired power stations, we’ll be lucky to get ten or twelve per cent of the vote, Saturday week, because 90% of people are going to vote for more of those things. Simple as that. But we’re in a democracy and they’re going to vote against their grandkids. That’s what’s coming down the line. And it’s a debate we tend not to have, because it’s just a bit complicated and a bit worrying, but there you go. That’s a democracy. As Winston Churchill paraphrasing somebody in the twenties said, is the best better than whatever else is being tried? And it’s true. We have democracy or we have violence, and I'm in favour of democracy and in favour of accepting the vote of the people, trying to influence it, but accepting it. And we’re writing our own history as we go, and we’re going to write a big chapter in that history on Saturday week.

**Dennis Altman**

I don’t actually want to ask a final question because I think that was a very nice note to end the formal proceedings on and a very cleverly disguised pitch for everyone to go out and vote for Green candidates, which would of course be improper for me to take a position on, at this point.

I think Robert, we should let people in the audience have a go.

**Bob Brown**

Could we, just before we do, it might be just for three minutes, I could just show the film of the Tarkine, up here, because again, a vote for either of the big parties is a vote for this being Swiss cheese. This is the biggest rain forest in Australia, and I was there on Sunday, with fifteen greenies, standing, getting abused by the pro-mining brigade, but this is also being voted for on Saturday week.

... video ...

Sorry about the advertisement at the end. As I was about to say, I show this to lots of corporate Annual General Meetings and things and it’s never led to a donation, so it’s pretty harmless.

**Robert Manne**

Now it’s time for questions. If you indicate ... there are roving mikes so don’t start until one reaches you.

**Q:**

Thank you for that. Having just experienced a bit of a technology glitch, perhaps it’s appropriate to ask about technology and research. There’s always been a thread in the environmentalist movement that’s been very suspicious about technology, anything further than the bicycle is rather suspect. And of course there are lots of examples of high technology being very destructively used. But there’s also an argument that really our only hope on climate change is the much better battery and the algae that will chew up carbon and so on. Do you have some comments about the role of research and high tech developments in solving our problems.

**Bob Brown**

Totally crucial. And the *Herald Sun* will say, oh, you know, the Greens want everybody riding bicycles, and so quite a few of us do from time to time. But it’s the Greens who are saying, don’t cut tertiary education. Stop this cutting of funding to research in Australia, in my home state, into Antarctic research. We’re the only party that’s saying, don’t do that. And here’s the money from a mining super profits tax that’s going to fund not only not cutting it, but giving us the advantage that comes through technological and scientific innovation, which is where we have to go, for the rest of this century.

But again, you read the Murdoch press, and it’s just this slagging off and you know, it’s very dangerous stuff, but it’s compartmentalising and it’s totally untrue. If you want to see more research funding, then it’s the Greens who are alone in this move to this election, stand for that and say where they’ll get it from. And have had it costed by the parliamentary budget office. So yeah, you know, creativity and the joyride into the universe, is what we human beings have to aspire to. Everything’s hitched on that, and the big question as you implicitly raised there, is how do we handle the dangers of the technological prowess we get as we go along. And that’s where social innovation and development is very, very important and democracy’s basic to that.

**Q:**

Hi Bob. Thank you very much, and thank you a lot for your political contributions over the years. I did choose my woollens carefully.

I've got two quick questions. Could you remark, since you’ve joined the *Sea Shepherd*, on the general importance of activism nowadays, in the political landscape.

And, the other thing is about the Greens and their preferencing strategies. It seems that Labor politicians, just scrape over the electoral line with support from Green preferences and yet they turn around and mistreat them once in government. At what point will the Greens actually not preference Labor over Liberal.

**Bob Brown**

Well if I go to that last question. The Greens at the national meeting a couple of years ago, changed policies so that our starting point is open tickets, don’t distribute preferences, but it’s true that our preferences are going to Labor across the country, for the first time in Australian electoral history, and this goes back to my comment about the two big parties, earlier. Robert, for the first time in Australian electoral history, with Labor this time in one seat, Melbourne Ports, is directing preferences to the Liberals ahead of the Greens. Now that’s the sign of things to come. And as we become potentially more of a threat to the big parties, they’ll get together more. I would like to get rid of preferences and I tried very hard after the last election to do away with them. I think they’re very corrupting and I think everybody should vote, even in the Senate ticket, one to whatever, according to their own choices, but that’s not the way it is.

So yes, we’ll get done in by the preference machines, and that’s the very reason why the big parties want to hang to them. And then for example, in Sarah Hanson-Young – this great courageous, young woman, who stood for decency and legality in the treatment of asylum seekers, has fellow Senator Nick Xenophon directing preferences to the Liberals ahead of her, and it’s likely to knock her out and put another Liberal in and brings Tony Abbott one seat closer to controlling both houses of parliament. So I'll be going over to Adelaide again in the next couple of weeks to help out as best I can.

**Robert Manne**

Why is he doing that?

**Bob Brown**

Well, Nick won’t say that but I think he’s got the Haradene complex. He sees that knocking her out and putting another Liberal in brings him closer to having a balance of power in which he can exercise largesse for South Australia. And I don’t know what else can be the motivation.

But thanks for asking the question about *Sea Shepherd*. I'm the Chair of the Board. I forgot to look at the stipend first and I found that there was nothing there. But a secret. I went out to see off Sydney not too long ago, to meet Paul Watson who’s out on a boat beyond the territorial waters of Australia because this great environmentalist, who has decided to uphold international law, and stop the Japanese whaling fleet from illegally putting grenade-tipped harpoons into the spines of our whales in an international whale sanctuary, cannot land anywhere in the world, because the Japanese arrest warrant will soon have in jail and perhaps in solitary confinement in Japan and that includes Australia. And nothing’s happening. And I'm going to Seattle where a slap writ from Japan has closed down effectively *Sea Shepherd* US to be part of the defence of a court action there in November.

But, *Sea Shepherd*’s now ... we’re building this international base of action if you like at Williamstown. It’s a fabulous place to be. We have to raise $4 million to get that fleet down there again this year, because the International Court of Justice case which the current government did and this came under Kevin Rudd – did take in the world court, in the International Court of Justice, if it does rule against the Japanese illegal whaling, then will they abide by it? And if they don’t, where is the envirionmental police to do anything about it? It doesn’t exist. That brings *Sea Shepherd* in. A bit of the Bow Street Runners. And we’ll be down there to defy their destruction of these great mammals in the coming summer. So I couldn’t be doing this if I was in the Senate, and I'm ... they’re great people and I invite everybody here, there’ll be an open day in November, but if you’re down Williamstown way, call in and see the *Sea Shepherd* ships there and the great work and those fabulous people who give up their money, their income, their carnivore ways, because you’ve got to be a vegan. I don’t know how I'll get on to one of these ships, but they’re just terrific citizens of the planet. And Paul Watson, one of the great environmentalists of our age, is persona non grata out there in the ocean and I think of him a lot. And I'm very pleased to be temporarily fulfilling his role.

**Q:**

Hi Bob. I'm so glad you actually showed the Tarkine video because actually my question’s around that. And politics in Tasmania, more broadly. As you know, and if people aren’t aware, it’s a very topsy turvy world, Tasmanian politics, particularly when it comes to environmental issues. I'm a soy latte sipping goat cheese-eating mainlander, as they like to call us. And I get involved in these things from a distance, watching Scott Jordan’s Save the Tarkine campaign and so on. And I get involved in some forums. And no matter what sort of logical argument you can put together for – do not mine the Tarkine, it always comes back to (as) abuse, but (b) the issue of jobs. And jobs in Tasmania ... has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, is an issue for them, and it’s something that I, you know, don’t have an answer for. I'm just wondering though, is ... they always say, you know, this is where all the jobs will be. It will be in the mines, it will be just like it was with the forestry movement and everything like that. You can’t talk sense into them. So, is there something that the Greens could be doing or are they doing something down there that I'm not aware of? But it’s not just about saving the Tarkine, or saving the forests, and so on, it’s also about creating jobs. And is this as Robert was saying, a way of expanding the Greens’ influence? Is this a way that you could start doing something practical down there and start looking at jobs and what other alternatives there are to mining, and try and get something happening on the ground.

**Bob Brown**

Well, it’s absolutely central to it – environment, education, employment, economics – you have to cover the lot if you’re going to have any success with any environmental movement, and the jobs things, Paul Howes from the Labor Party came down and organised with the Minister for the Environment, also the New South Wales right, a protest about the protection of the Tarkine, and it’s rampant. But unfortunately the mines are not going to create the jobs that tourism and hospitality does in Tasmania. And that’s increasing. It’s 35,000 jobs and going up. Forestry, which has just got $360 million from the Federal government’s one thousand jobs and going down, mining temporarily has a few thousand jobs, but put them together and they don’t match tourism and hospitality. But there’s still a very strong ethic there, that mining, that this is a real job. Tourism and hospitality isn’t a real job. And until the new industry stands up for itself, it will get done in by the power of the old industry which is the mining industry, every time.

So, by the way, ladies and gentlemen, there will be a meeting at the Storey Hall in Swanston Street on Thursday night. I'll be at that with Tim Flannery and the great scientist David Lindenmayer, to talk about extinction. Thursday night, six o’clock, or 6.30. And the parallel case of Leadbeater’s possum and the serial destruction of the forest just to the north of this great city, which is destroying the habitat and therefore the potential for existence in the wild of Victoria’s own state emblem, so everybody’s welcome to that, because the parallel’s again with the Tarkine situation are very, very strong.

**Q:**

I'm sorry to disappoint you Bob, but I'll actually be voting above the line for the first time in my life this election, and the reason is largely because of the disturbing and also confusing proliferation of these micro far right parties, so the Australia First Party, Rise Up Australia, One Nation, the Shooters and Fishers – I can’t even sort of remember them all, and to sort of figure out which of them needs to go last is just frankly beyond me. And I was wondering, possibly this is just my youth speaking, but it seems to me that this is kind of new in Australian politics and I was wondering if you could comment on that and these parties and why we’re seeing them now.

**Bob Brown**

It is a fix. It’s using the preferential system to advantage conservative politics and there’s no doubt that the proliferation and it’s very deliberated, Mr Drury in New South Wales, which is a master at this and this table cloth sized voting tickets for the Upper House of New South Wales until they moved electoral laws to stop it, we’re now seeing it occur in the Senate. And very strange. You know, the Wikileaks thing that happened, putting preferences before the Greens to campaign for information to be disseminated. To the National Party ahead of the Greens in Western Australia and to the Shooters ahead of the Greens in New South Wales.

So, yeah, but you know, I like the advice of people putting their preferences where they want to, and you can download, go to the Australian Electoral Office – you can download the Senate ticket for example, and spend a night working out how you’re going to go. I always like to start with last, and work up. But you haven’t got Eric Abetz in your state, so I don’t ...

[laughter]

However, if you want to vote above the line, do so. But you’ve really got to be aware, for example, how many Labor voters in Melbourne Ports, the Lower House ticket there, are going to recognise if they just follow the tickets, they’ll be preferencing Tony Abbott ahead of Ann Birrell, the Greens candidate. And you know, Liberal voters – and I'll tell you a secret, that’s where I began life, over in that territory, Country Party, have to consider whether the planet matters and whether such things as defunding of tertiary education and the refugee policy we’re seeing come from both parties, is not something that should weigh up in the vote coming up. We’re in this grand democracy, where everybody’s vote is equal. And I go back to J K Galbraith – we’re doing this with our eyes wide open. And when we wake up on September the 8th, we’ll know that that vote is the result of the earnest consideration of 15 million Australian voters, and that will reflect those 15 million Australian voters almost exactly in what comes of that. So, you know, here we go.

**Robert Manne**

We have to conclude. I'd like to do my own advertisement. A group of students are holding a seminar in this hall next Tuesday at 2 o’clock till 3, with the Greens Senator Richard Di Natale and the head of the Australia Institute, Richard Dennis, conducting a conversation about issues to do with contemporary politics, economics and so on. So I would particularly, students here, invite you very strongly to come along if you can, and I would like to thank Dennis very much for participating in the conversation here today and I'd like you all to express our delight at this great Australian who’s been with us today.

 [applause]