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| **Ideas and Society Program: In Conversation with George Marshall** |
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| **Jane Long** |
| Hello everyone, my name is Jane Long, I'm Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor at La Trobe University and it's my pleasure to open proceedings tonight. Before we begin I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we're gathered this evening and pay my respects to their elders past and present. On behalf of La Trobe University and its compelling Ideas and Society Program Series I'd like to welcome you warmly to its first event for 2015 here at the Wheeler Centre. I'd also like to thank Emeritus Professor Robert Manne for his continued involvement with this important series as its convenor and for his participation this evening - and indeed to this evening's theme.Alarmists, deniers, frauds, cranks, conspiracy theorists, astroturfers, cultists, fossil fuel P R shrills, group thinking true believers, pseudo scientists, angry old while men, global cabal of socialists, confident idiots, prophets of doom - all they were comments from just one single article in the conversation about ocean heat levels. Visceral negative reactions to scientific research are not unique to climate change, nor are they particularly new. In 1848 Ignaz Semmelweis was laughed out of the medical fraternity for publishing research to suggest that surgeons should wash their hands between procedures. Since then the Theory of Evolution, the dangers of smoking, the efficacy of vaccinations among many other things, have seen issues of relatively little controversy among scientists, explode into grand public debates with warring sides drawn along political and religious lines, not necessarily scientific ones. In the face of such steadfast opposition, those who recognise the seriousness of climate change may despair at this lack of acceptance by the broader community and the alarming potential to derail any program aimed at combatting global warming. George Marshall has been described variously by his reviewers as intelligent, clear eyed and even as deliciously nutty – that was *The Independent*. He's been engaged in the environmental movement for 25 years and comes to us from The Climate Outreach and Information Network in Oxford – of which he is the founder (that's the network, not the city). He's been brought to Australia on this occasion by the Sustainable Living Festival and Psychology for a Safe Climate whom we are pleased to acknowledge tonight. Most importantly George Marshall is the author of *Don't Even Think About It*: *Are our Brains Wired to Ignored Climate Science?*  This book doesn't present the science behind climate change, we've seen that before and it seems it's not had the effect we might hope for, rather George Marshall's book is about our psychological response to climate change, one that might result in us denying it or even when we do accept the science, doing nothing to stop it. Are these tendencies inescapable, making meaningful collective action on climate change impossible? Here's hoping the answer is no.It's my pleasure then, to introduce George Marshall in discussion with Robert Manne to shed some light on these questions, so please join me in welcoming them both here this evening. |
| **Professor Robert Manne** |
| Thank you very much Jane for the introduction, thank you all for coming, it's great to see the audience here and thank you George for agreeing to do this event. I want to say just one minute's worth of things. The format of tonight's event is a conversation between George and myself followed by time, I hope plenty of time, where you can ask your questions. I read George Marshall's I think wonderfully titled book *Don't Even Think About It,* not long after it was published and was at once convinced that it was one of the most significant books that dealt with the problem of contemporary western societies and climate change.Marshall is concerned with what seems to me the overwhelming question of our era. Our unwillingness to take action in the face of the most catastrophic situation human civilisation has ever faced. I want to quote two things from others that are in George's book which I think give an understanding of the heart of his thesis. George begins his book with a statement from the US Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter who was informed by an eye witness in 1942 about the extermination of Jews in Belzec Extermination Camp. Frankfurter commented "I must be frank, I am unable to believe him. I did not say this man is lying, I said I am unable to believe him. There is a difference." The second quote is the last line of Elizabeth Kolbert's - *Field Notes From A Catastrophe.* I quote: "It may seem impossible to imagine, that a technologically advanced society could choose in essence to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing." George Marshall's book is in my opinion, one of the most sophisticated attempts thus far to try to explain why we are unable to believe what we know and therefore why we are watching passively in a kind of dream, as our civilisation allows its foundations to be destroyed. So it's not a small thing from my point of view that I say that this is one of the most significant books because it seems to me... |
| **George Marshall** |
| So no pressure… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| So no pressure, but it seems to me I have become obsessed by this question as many people have and given that, as soon as I knew you were coming out to Australia which I found out from Carol Ride I was extremely keen that you take part in this conversation and I have questions, but we can go in whatever direction the conversation takes us. It seems to me you lead us gently and quite subtly into the central theme of your book with an interesting observation which is highly relevant to Australia during the summer. And the observation is that namely, at times of weather induced disasters - floods, fires, hurricanes, people are particularly unwilling to talk about the connection of these events to climate change and actually Adam Bandt who's here, our Federal Member for Melbourne knows this well, are sometimes very hostile to those who draw the connection to those, at least in Australia. So can I begin with that question, which I think does take to this unwillingness to see things, could you say a little bit about why you think, and why you really begin with this strange response to catastrophes of weather? |
| **George Marshall** |
| Well I didn't want to, it is important in the book, but the book was not written as a kind of manifesto or polemic which says here's my theory and here's the evidence. I actually wanted to lead people onto a journey into it because it's an exploration. I can't say I know the answers. I know the questions. I keep coming back to that formulation. The question is, why is there, why are we so evidently failing to deal with the size and the scale of the threat? And then I guess there are different ways of coming at this and I hope in a way to stimulate the question and to get other people and other disciplines, especially a multidisciplinary approach to finding the answers. It did occur to me and it has been occurring to me because my organisation has been doing workshops all around Britain around flooding, that, and in my own community which has had some extreme flooding. We've had recording breaking rainfall, not this winter but the previous winter. Again I could see with my own eyes, in conversations with people and not talking about climate change. And as maybe we'll touch on a little later, but there's a silence. You try and raise the issue of climate change, it's something people don't want to talk about, it's considered inappropriate. It's actually in parallel to; I remember that there was a …. that after the Sandy Hook shootings in the US, President Obama's official spokesperson stood up and he was challenged by a question from somebody from the media saying "Well what does this say about gun control?" He said: "Well I don't think it's appropriate at a time like this to talk about gun control?" And the question is of course, well if it's not appropriate to talk about it then when is it appropriate? And similarly with extreme weather events, well if we can't talk about extreme weather events when we've had a recording breaking, off-the-scale weather event, such as for example you've had in Australia, where you've had to create a whole new coloured bar for your weather charts because it's gone so high. When is it appropriate? If it's not happening it's very quick to pass on with that very quickly to weather changes. When we're in it, we've got the problem with climate change of course it does not have the salience and the immediacy which generates our attention, so when it passes we just recover, pull ourselves up and move on. So, the assumption always was that, yes it was hard theoretically to get people interested in climate change, but when the really big impacts would start hitting us again and again then people would wake up. I've spoken to many scientists who've said this, Sir Crispin Tickell is the lead British Ambassador to the United Nations, advisor to Margaret Thatcher said this very clearly. I said "Sir Crispin when are we going to wake out of this?" He got Margaret Thatcher interested in climate change, one of his great achievements. He said, "Oh I'm absolutely certain when we get record breaking extreme weather that is the point where people wake up." So I went to… when I was in America I went and I visited Bastrop. Bastrop is a small town in mid Texas where a third of the town burnt down in wildfires. These wildfires were off the scale in Texan experience. They were by an order of magnitude, ten times more damaging in terms of their total impact of any previous wildfire in Texan history. During the most extreme drought ever experienced in that part of Texas ever recorded, I'm not saying of course that it's never happened but never recorded, so right off the scale, and I did a number of interviews in the area and I asked people… I asked people about how they were doing. It's always good to start with where people are and they said "We're so proud of our community. We really came together. We've got a great community. We really supported each other." And then I say, "So climate change, can you tell me when you had the last conversation you've had about climate change?" "Oh, we haven't talked about climate change." Some people say they don't believe in it. I spoke to the editor of the local newspaper and I said "Are you going to talk about climate change in regard to it?" And she said "Oh well we would if it affected us here in Bastrop County, but we're just a small local newspaper." And I said "well your State Climatologist - Nielson-Gammon, he seems to think there might be a connection," and she said "Oh well, that's all very conjectural." And I said "With all respect, since when have newspapers refused to cover something because there's an interesting debate to be had?" Or what had happened was it had been written off and I got a clear sense of this when I, of course that's the heartland of Republican Texas. But when I went to New Jersey which is the heartland of Democrats; working class Democrats who as a group are very inclined to believe in climate change and I went up and down the New Jersey coast which had been devastated. This was five months after Hurricane Sandy and the beaches were still flattened and same thing, asked people – tell me…It's a very interesting question – not tell me what you think about climate change, but tell me about the last conversation you had about climate change, is much more revealing. No-body could remember the last conversation they'd had on climate change. Five months after their homes had been smashed apart by this. And it was clear that once again what had happened was that people would accept the connection privately but publicly a narrative had taken over that in the world of competing narratives, the narrative of optimistic hope and rebuilding, of new opportunities, of how people had come together, had come to dominate. So once again, not that it was considered inappropriate, but of course it wasn't what people wanted to talk about. So there's this problem with climate change, but it keeps sliding off. I always feel it's like it's in our blind spot. You know we know our blind spot is there because our finger disappears as it goes around the side of our head. We know that, but we manage to patch it over. So we know there's something there but we can't actually see it and I feel like that with climate change. We kind of know it's there. It's on the edge of a conversation. It's just out of sight. It's just over there, but somehow it always seems to get papered over. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| One of the things I've noticed, and you mentioned it, I was very pleased you mentioned it in the book, is that climate change is a conversation stopper. I don't know how many people here will be those that are convinced that climate change is a problem. Why do you think that's the case? You say that often you find, if you go in a train and you raise the subject, people look away. Or someone pretends you haven't said it. Or they go off to get a sandwich at the canteen. Or… ?  |
| **George Marshall** |
| Well I'm wondering if those of you in the audience ever find or feel this? Every interaction we have is a social negotiation. Every interaction we have is, both what we're saying but it's also a signal to us which comes back from wider society about what is considered an appropriate response or the bounds of what we are allowed to talk about. Sometimes we get our knuckles rapped. "Don't talk about that". It's very marked and I thought this was what's very interesting that in societies which are having major human rights abuses that there are the limited and marked bounds of attention, of what can and cannot be said and publicly acknowledged. Stanley Cohen who sadly died recently, was a sociologist working at the London School of Economics who more than anyone in an excellent book *States of Denial*, studied the bounds of attention of what could or could not be said for example in South American countries where they'd been disappearances, he came from South Africa himself under conditions of Apartheid. And what was interesting talking with Stanley and he later on expanded on this and wrote specifically on it, that these are directly mirrored with climate change. That whole societies can enter into an agreed contract that certain things are outside the bounds of what can be talked about, that people can know where those rules and boundaries lie without even having to have it spelt out to them. But of course you do know because if you go and you try and talk about climate change with people, often the conversation will just unerringly just swerve off in an opposite direction or just be suddenly dropped. I have a friend Mayer Hillman who tells a nice story which I mentioned in the book, of where he was at a dinner party where they were rich professionals and they were all talking about where they'd gone on holiday, they were retired professionals and he couldn't stand it any longer because he's a climate change activist. He said: "How can you talk in this way about, about flying around the world to visit your children in Australia?" Which might not sound like a big deal to you but of course these people come from Britain. "How can you talk about that, don't you realise what that flying is doing to the world that they're going to inhabit?" The conversation was totally dead and then one of the women at the dinner table says; "My word, what a lovely spinach tart". Mayer loves telling this storey, he calls it the Spinach Tart Syndrome, "What a lovely spinach tart", and they talk for ten minutes about the spinach tart. "Well it's so fresh, isn't it, did you grown this yourself? Is this organic spinach? You must give me the recipe, the pastry is so flaky." They go into this whole flaky pastry conversation then they change the subject, it moves on. It's this thing where you hit the buffers of the bounds of acceptable conversation. One of the people I spoke to in the course of the book, the most interesting insights I mean this is one of the things on climate change is, it's one of those things where if you come at it straight on you don't get the right answers. You have to kind of come at it at an angle, at a tangent, and the most interesting conversations were consistently with people who didn't work on climate change. So Stanley Cohen, Eviatar Zerubavel, who is the world's expert on Socially Constructed Silence, which is specifically what he works on at Rutgers University said that; "There are socially negotiated bounds of non-conversation and that non-conversation is as real and tangible as conversation, it's just you don't know it's there, but the reason you know it's there is because people cannot explain why it's not there." And I think that’s exactly what happens with climate change. So we have a socially constructed non-conversation on climate change, this is what I say to my colleagues who want to start the conversation, "It's not as simple as saying well, people don't talk about it, people are very actively not talking about it." And that means that I think, just as other social rights campaigns have had to struggle to break the silence, I think with climate change we have to say that our primary objective is to recognise, to name and then to break that silence. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| If I can take up from that point, the question of climate change is both similar to questions of human rights and how silences had to be broken, so the conversations about those rights would begin and then become, as it were, the major position of a society and in our own lifetimes we've seen that happen. In terms with race and gender and sexuality, but it's also, I think in your book it's clear that climate change is that but something else as well. And your book is sub-titled *How Our Brains Are Hardwired to Ignore Climate Change.*  And you're interested in the evolutionary biology and I take it, apart from the discussion of socially constructed silence, one of the major claims of the book is that human beings are as it were, through their evolution ill-equipped to deal with climate change. So I wonder if you could start there and then I might ask some questions about that. But could you say something about the sub-title of your book, *How Our Brains Are Hardwired to Ignore Climate Change*, in a way they're not hardwired to ignore race? |
| **George Marshall** |
| No, well I think what we could say is that our brains are wired to both pay attention to and to ignore things. I think one of the things that is interesting is kind of the cutting edge for Cognitive Psychology is actually the understanding of how our brains dis-attend. How we come to ignore things. That there are some things which through evolutionary experience which we know we have to pay attention to, things which have immediate salience - they're here, they're now, there's an immediate threat. We have to be very alert to social rules, I guess it's not as if what I've said about silence is separate, I mean its part and parcel of the wiring of attention or dis-attention. We are acutely wired for these social signals because our lives depend on being part and parcel of our in-group and recognising potential threats from people around us and from outside. So everything we say and do, all of our interactions contain these extremely complex negotiations and signals, so we have certain things which have primacy for us which we clearly pay attention to. We also have to be very actively dis-attending things or we will go frankly mad. We have to have a capacity to not pay attention to things and the problem for climate change is that it hits on both scores. First of all; it does not have those key issues of salience which bring it to the fore and demand immediate attention, and certainly not in proportion to the scale of the threat. So if you open the newspapers now for example they are all full of Islamic States or for recent shootings which happened in Copenhagen, these things are of marginal importance to the safety of the Australian people. I mean we could argue about it if you like, but in terms, compared with climate change - minimal importance. And yet they are going to utterly dominate the news agenda and people's attention because they have compelling narratives with enemies containing intending to harm. But climate change also has the capacity for us to ignore it, to push it onto one side again, because it is something which seems over the horizon. You know, it's a bit like filling in my tax form, as I suggest in the book, it also has an uncanny similarity and a parallel in a way to our own mortality. It's something that we sort of know is there, but we're warned about which has potentially catastrophic impacts on our sense of identity and we yet we can just keep it just at arm's length, just slightly over the edge.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I want to come to the analogy with death later, but it seems to me that might be, not be a conversation stopper, but an event stopper. |
| **George Marshall** |
| We might have hit one of those bounds of socially negotiated silence. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I mean, one of the things I liked about your book is that it's what I would call well-tempered and extremely agreeable and a non-aggressive book and very respectful. It seems to me that you, in your kind of Pilgrims Progress encountered in the way of trying to discover as much as you could about society's reaction to climate change. But one of the facts about being well-tempered is that you don't argue with people where I think the argument is implicit. I think there is an argument in the book, some people have taken the same view as you do about evolutionary biology and politics and they say we need, if we're going to get anywhere with climate change the movement needs enemies. You are very scathing of those people who believe; implicitly scathing, about those people who believe in the need for enemy narratives. But one of the people you were friendly with and you admire, Bill McKibben says that's exactly what the movement needs. He thinks there is an enemy and the enemy is the fossil fuel corporation and the movement needs to behave as if it exists, because according to evolutionary biology the kinds of things that human beings do react to is the sense of a threat and an enemy. Could you discuss…? |
| **George Marshall** |
| Well the thing you're describing there as a kind of friendliness or open-mindedness could also be considered a form of ambivalence on my part, I've an uncertainty about how we progress with this very tricky challenge. We have historically, when we have come across very, very challenging and thorny problems relied on the fact that they contain enemies with intention. Or they have, if not an enemy an external force, something which is external to ourselves which we have to defend ourselves against but especially enemies with intent, it's very powerful for us. Our entire moral structure is based around intentionality. It's critical for us to understand things, so here we have a problem of immensely diffused moral responsibility actually without clear intention. You know you're Prime Minister, Mr Abbott does not intend to burn up the world when he says "he thinks that climate change is absolute crap." That's not his intention, of course you could say that having been presented with the facts it's a kind of intention of negligence but there's no intention there. There is no intention by oil companies to cause harm they're doing their business, but there is also a complexity there which is where we can put the blame on certain people but it does not get away from the fact that, as I'm sitting there on the tarmac looking out of my window of a plane before coming here; of my own free choice at the invitation of people like yourself, I notice that it is Shell Oil that is filling the fuselage of my plane with oil. You know Shell did not force me onto that plane and force me to come to Australia I willingly chose to do that. Therefore, for me to go out and say; "Shell is the enemy, Shell, I blame Shell," is a little disingenuous to put it mildly. And the answer is I'm not sure how we resolve this, how we find a new formulation which recognises; maybe we could hear something from the audience, which recognises multiple responsibilities whilst nonetheless, I'm sure we can do it, but we also have to find a narrative that is so compelling that it can beat through those layers of dis-attention and say we have to pay attention to this. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But, can I push you a little bit on that? It seems to me another way of looking at your book is, I take it once you would have, without ambivalence, described yourself as an environmentalist? And I take it the book in a way, is a challenge to the Environmentalist Movement on this issue? Is that fair as a general…? |
| **George Marshall** |
| No question at all, I think we need to be constantly examining what we do, and one of the qualities of climate change as an issue is that it takes on the shape and form of the narratives which you apply to it. So one of the key conclusions of the book is that, climate change does not exist as a set of scientific facts; I realise scientists don't like to talk about facts, but as a set of scientific research or evidence or arguments, but it appears for us as socially constructed narratives that are shared between people. So if we… I'm sorry I've lost my thought, remind me of the point, it's been a long day. Oh Yes I'm so sorry… the critique of the movement is but of course, if you shape it in a certain shape and form that becomes, that becomes climate change and we have to be constantly challenging ourselves and re-examining the way we tell this story. That first of all we are telling it in a way which it is useful and moves us forward but also recognising that when we tell it a certain way to our audience and our constituency, we shape it in a way which then repels and pushes people away who don't share our idea. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Your basic argument there is, because the general community, society, has come to regard climate change as an environment issue and to some extent as a left wing issue. That itself acts as a way of pushing support and closing eyes as to what the problem is. Is that…? What can be done about that? |
| **George Marshall** |
| Well let's just say, if you go back to this undoubted psychological reality that we are constantly scanning for these social signals, which identify whether something is relevant to us or not relevant, important, whether it's life threatening, whether it pertains to our in-group or our out-group, that everything we say on an issue contains these messages and therefore, one of the things which pushes people away, or let's say, doesn't push them away, gives them the permission to disregard - because let's remember people are seeking permission to disregard this issue. It is challenging, it creates anxiety, it creates stress, there's lots of reasons why people don't want to do it, so that they can take hold of those signals and say that's not my thing I don't share those values, that belongs to them; that group over there. So as part of a negotiation which is going on here, is people actually trying to create those barriers and say - no that's yours over there. So within the environmental movement, we have done a fantastic job in taking hold of this issue and moving forward on it when no-body else wanted to touch it. I want to be very clear, I am proud of being an environmentalist and part of a movement. The danger of us doing that though, is to some extent we have made it so utterly our own, that we have created kind of cultural boundaries and definitions about what climate change is that pushes other people away. A few years ago for example; I did a piece of research, just a very simple piece of looking at the ownership of climate change by people outside the environmental community, and I just did a very simple thing which was a word search. A word search of how many times climate change was mentioned on the web site. Obviously environmental organisations all over, Amnesty International not once, so THE leading generator of conflict and potential human rights abuse; we can think of many ways, didn't mention it once. Trade Unions weren't mentioning it once. Refugee organisations weren't mentioning it once. I asked them, I did a series of detailed interviews with them saying, what's going on here? And they said; well it's this environmental thing, we're not quite sure how to deal with it, it's outside our bounds of what we do. And I realised that what had happened, it had become defined as an environmental issue which gave them the permission and the grounds for cutting off, which is a disaster. So let's remember, I mean… fortunately this situation has changed now there is much more engagement, but it is not just conservatives who are blocking themselves off. Lots of people say they don't take on the issue and part of the reason for that, is that as environmentalists, we have made it an environmental issue, we demand action on this, the environment is very important. We splatter our language all over it, as I say in the book, the iconography, if you go out on the street; I don't know what it's like in Australia, but in Britain you go out in the street and you say, "Tell me what do you associate with climate change?" I can guarantee nine people out of ten will say - Polar Bears, Penguins, why? Why do these things appear? Because they've been placed there as part of a visual language created by the environmental movements around this issue. And you could go, "Well that's appropriate enough isn't it?" No it isn't, it's got no relevance to people's lives their expectations, their views of the future, it appears there because we want to create the iconography of bears around it. No human rights campaign has a bear in there. Nor would they if they owned this issue in the same way. So, there is this thing that the danger is that the advocates have to be very, very careful that they don't take such exclusive issue of it that they become the issue and they shape the narrative in a way which forbids other people to take ownership. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I didn't quite grasp from the book the way out. Given that the driving force in most western societies for the issue are the environmentalist movements, and that you see as a difficulty, I think rightly that others see it can, as it were, constrict the significance of the movement or seeing it as just another environmental issue, what's the way out?  |
| **George Marshall** |
| I absolutely want to see very strong and vibrant active environmental campaigns and myself I come from a background of radical grassroots environmentalism and I utterly support that. It was Australia actually. It was in Australia 25 no, 27 years ago now, I came to Australia and I became involved with the radical grassroots environmental movement here in a forest campaign in Australia. And it utterly inspired me, it changed my life. There's a way of especially, activism can transform people in a way, it's what I say about things like the marches, you know, I was fortunate I was in New York on a book tour when a big march came through in New York and the effect of the march is, I think less policy or political, it's good to have people on the streets, I think that is a part of major political change, but I think the real changes is the transformation of the people on it. For many people I spoke to, that's the first time they'd ever been on a major march and for them it was hugely thrilling. That sense of belonging and identity so I want to see all of that. But I think we also need to recognise that where there are major gaps; this area of non-conversation, where there is something that is not happening, we have to prioritise initiating and encouraging that. So we know for example, there are large bounds of our society in which climate change is not a conversation that can be had. We know that right across conservatives, right across the English speaking world, that climate change is a taboo subject or it's one which is actively negated or opposed, but I think the absolute priority therefore has to be, sure let's keep the environmental thing happening; but for me personally, I mean I can't tell other people what to do, but for me personally, my priority is to try and find ways of supporting and engendering a conversation in places which are not my natural homeland. For example with conservatives, identifying and supporting new communicators and speakers, I think that's another thing which is very important. It is very, VERY important for people to believe and to hold in something. That they see it coming from people who they know and trust, but is part of a signal of whether you accept something. It is vitally important therefore for conservatives that they are hearing the message from other conservatives, or farmers from farmers, or Catholics from The Pope – great news, I'm so glad that Pope Francis is coming through on this because this is brilliant. But he's only really be going to be good for speaking to the Catholics, you know. For people, I mean I'm delighted he's doing it but he's a moral figurehead for them, so each constituency has its own communicators and we need a much, much broader conversation, I think part of that is in reality to say: "Climate change is an environmental issue for environmentalists, and it's a human rights issue for human rights organisations and it’s a trades union/labour rights issue for trades unions and so on." So we have to break…. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And a religious issue for Catholics… |
| **George Marshall** |
| Absolutely, it is utterly a religious issue and indeed of course, this is very exciting they're been big big changes happening in the last few years for people of faith, they're starting to really take hold of this idea. But it's a moral challenge of the threat to God's creation and that is not something that pertains necessarily to: it's stronger in some churches than in others, but I was fascinated when I did the book of interviewing Evangelical Christians of Christian Churches in the Southern US who actually get this. And when they do it and take hold of it, it appears as something entirely different, or somebody else I spoke to works for Conserve America which is a Catholic, a conservative Catholic organisation which talks about climate change as being the single greatest threat to the unborn child. I'm thinking; 'Wow this is extraordinary', and they have reshaped climate change in terms of their own language of rights of the unborn child, well I have to say "Great, why not, that's their values." It takes the shape and form of the people who talk about it. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| One of the other really big general themes of the book I think, is your scepticism about the place of reason or rationality in the solution to the climate change problem. One of the points you make is that people tend to take their views, not from scientists and what the scientists are saying but from their peers and the people they trust, even from the television personalities who they have learned to respect and trust. Another point you make is that, human beings have a brain which is complex and you simplify it down to part of it is rational the other part is emotional. There are many parts of the book in which you're pushing against the idea; which is very common I think, that the reason the evidence supplied by scientists will, through the rational part of people's brains convince them of the problem. And another thing you say which is connected as well is that, people kind of understand climate change but they don't feel it, I think all of these are pushing in the area of a scepticism about the sovereignty about reason and rationality in this area. Can you speak to that, I've got to cut corners, because our time is limited? |
| **George Marshall** |
| I understand. So one of the ironies is that we now have a great deal of very clear evidence, you know I don't have to go and do much research, although there is plenty of research. I can just go out in the street now and I can find people who are very well educated, very intelligent thoughtful people who may very well have a high level of understanding of science, who will absolutely adamantly refuse to accept the scientific evidence of climate change. And invariably I can show you that they will have a set of values or politics which leads them in their direction, so that evidence is very clearly there. And almost the proof that evidence and scientific evidence and rational argument does not shift things is that researchers have been saying this to scientists now for 10 – 15 years, and yet scientists continue to believe that the way you communicate climate change to people is through the information. In other words, when you present people, even when we have the evidence but the information itself doesn't work, scientists are as much beholden to their world view; is that information and scientific data is a means to change, as activists might be to their view that political action is the way. We are all locked into our own ways of thinking. And I don't think that it shows a lack of rationality, I think it shows our social complexity, that we have a world view that shapes the world around us and enables us to navigate ever, ever increasing challenges and so on. In communication circles we call it the, Information Deficit Model, the assumption that the problem with climate change is that people don't have enough information therefore, we need to keep giving them more and more and more reports. Now don't get me wrong, we do need continued, stringent, scientific challenge, we need constantly to be increasing our understanding of this issue and the work the scientists do is extremely important on that. But we also need to understand that scientific information of itself is not what leads to understanding of climate change. What creates socially held conviction, conviction - not just being the point of knowing something and accepting it, but the point of being personally convinced of it as a transformative process which is socially formed and that's not un-rational, it is a different form of rationality. Our socialisation is itself a rational process that is part of what makes us humans and how we navigate the world.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Can I speak personally? And it's actually, there's a connection also with Naomi Klein who says very late in the piece, that she has come to understand the problem of climate change, how it for her changes everything, or for us it should change everything. I actually read a book; you say in your *Don't Even Think About It,* that books and documentaries are not, for most people, the way they come to… and I sort of agree with you. In my own case it was reading, as it happened, Tim Flannery's - *Weather Makers* on a very hot day in summer about 8 or 9 years, and I suddenly thought (if I can speak in technical language – shit), this really matters. This matters, if he's right and mainly he was citing scientific papers and summarising them in his very writerly way. I don't think there was any other way I could gain the conviction, a term I'd like to talk about later, in climate change without it being clear to me that the people I trusted in the area, the climate scientists were onto something. So I'm a bit… in a way I don't see how the conviction can easily arise unless one is convinced of, as it were, the authority and sovereignty of the scientists. |
| **George Marshall** |
| Absolutely, but let me point out to you what's interesting, if we kind of take apart the experience that you're talking about there, if you don't mind me doing it? |
| **Robert Manne** |
| No. |
| **George Marshall** |
| You've already described and modelled something for us which was not a rational process, it was a combination; let's make it clear. When we talk about different ways that the brain processes information and this is not conjectural, this is established right down to a level of neural imaging, we know that the brain has different ways of dealing with information. That it has a rational component, sometimes it's called System 1, you can call it Rational Analytic Reasoning, we have an emotional side which is sometimes called Affective Reasoning and this is very well understood Cognitive Psychology now. What you've just described to me is a combination of the two. But there is the negotiation which goes on between the two, and on the one hand there is the rational side which comes in with some very clear information and data, but there is an emotional component. It's a hot day, therefore you have a sense of salience because you are feeling something through your own skin, you are reading something from a communicator, you're not reading a report with a graph in it, it is a communicator. It is therefore, the intermediary of the fact that there is a narrative with a communicator you trust and communicator's trust is absolutely critical for this, and it was obviously a moment in your life when you were open to receive this information and what you've described there is also a form of epiphany. And we need to recognise where people do not simply read a report and suddenly 'get' climate change, they go through a personal journey which takes them to that point. And actually Tim Flannery's book is interesting, it was a personal epiphany for the Premier of British Columbia in Canada. But he went on holiday and he read Tim Flannery's book; may for all I know be the single greatest achievement of Tim Flannery's book, but this man goes on holiday, reads this book comes back and says "We've got to do something," and imposes I think, the world's first Carbon Tax there and then. And he's a conservative and because he's a conservative he gets it straight through in British Columbia, which I think is extraordinary. So this moment of epiphany, of personal change, that is powerful too. I'm not saying whether this stuff is rational or not rational, what I'm saying is there is a negotiation between facts, figures and data, we need that, the intermediary of communicators and narratives and then the point where we go through a personal journey of change. So as we get these extreme weather events coming in again and again and again, each one of those provides for us the opportunity of personal epiphany, of personal conviction in saying, 'Right, now I get it.' |
| **Robert Manne** |
| There's a lot in your book about as it were, the psychology as well as these larger forces, but the Psychology of Denial, I think it's Daniel Kahneman is that right, who you talk to and you give a very evocative description of your conversation with him. And it ends with him saying: "Look I'm really sorry George to have to say this, but I don't believe because of essentially, human selfishness that people are going to be willing to put up with a regime of sacrifice, I'm sorry." |
| **George Marshall** |
| He was very nice about it too, he sort of takes my hand and says; "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry" I said it's no skin off my nose Professor Kahneman; he says "I'm so sorry." Daniel Kahneman is the outstanding figure in this field, he is Nobel Laureate in Cognitive Psychology, Nobel Laureate actually for *The Effect of our Internal Biases on Decision Making in the Economics Field*, so he got the Noble Prize in Economics. For everything I've talked about, his argument is we cannot deal with climate change because it is not here, it is not now, it involves costs which we are unwilling to face up to because we're cost averse, but what is worse, what he said; "The worse combination which is it requires us to take up, to face short term costs which are certain short terms costs in the interests of POSSIBLY avoiding uncertain long term costs." And he says: "If you take these three combinations; certain - uncertain, cost - reward and long - short term it does not get worse than that." So he's saying this, but what is also interesting, with a great deal of respect to the Professor, of course why wouldn't I offer him respect because he's an outstanding figure and a brilliant man, he's a Cognitive Psychologist, so he is coming at this from the position: and I challenged him with, that may be of course, a bias, there may be a Cognitive Psychologist Bias operating here and he laughed and said of course there might be. Because what is interesting ….. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| He didn't change his view at that point? |
| **George Marshall** |
| No exactly, because he's coming at it fair enough from his point of view, but if you go to somebody else who's coming at it from the point of Sociology or from the point of view of Narrative Theory, people will have different takes on it. I think what is interesting if I might say about his argument, is that it is not as if climate change is a problem in the future, it is because we have generated a narrative which chooses to place it there. It is not as though climate change necessarily involves a cost it is because in the interests of self-distancing, we create a narrative where we generate major costs or we generate uncertainty. You know of course, George Bush famously saying that; "Climate change was uncertain, was too uncertain to take action on." Unlike of course weapons of mass destruction in Iraq which was clear we had absolute certainty and we could go in and deal with that….. But those things are not dissimilar if you compare them, which is of saying in both of these cases people generated the narrative which served the interest that they wanted. So these variables, what we are even cleverer, talk about rationality, we are even cleverer that we have a rationality and we know about the biases, we actively bring the biases into play in order to avoid the decision we want to make. We make it harder, we make it less certain, we make it in the future and then we go, well we do this all our lives don't we – well I can't talk about that, that's just too difficult. Whereas we generate an artificial degree about certainty and confidence with something we do want to do, which is say, to go into Iraq, so that is what gives me the hope that he doesn't have, which is the hope that, if we recognise that there is this intermediary role of these socially constructed narratives, we can say "well actually, if we can have people persuaded that there is, that this is here, it is now, it is real but that it offers us opportunities as well as costs, that this is something that can really speak to our values, that we can really deal with this, then there's no reason why we can't.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Can I say something about that slightly challenging, not challenging but slightly dis-agreeing? |
| **George Marshall** |
| Good, I hope so. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| It seems to me, one of the things that is said, and it's true that climate change is already with us, and there are many examples of that every month in one part of the world or another. Why I'm personally so disturbed about what's happening is that the future is not really now, I think human beings could learn to live with the kinds of things that we're now seeing. Even though they're terrible things, the floodings, and the… what I read in Tim Flannery but also then in a hundred other places after that, is what a 4 degree world might be like. Which is not the kinds of things we're now seeing, which I think most people could kind of live with, they could live with that if the alternative is economic revolution. And you have a very good phrase for this and I can't recall it now, but an Unfortunate Time Line, or a … can you remember your own phrase? Anyhow a very good phrase which I have in my notes but I'm not going to look for… |
| **George Marshall** |
| Ha ha, I hope you're all following this. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But in a way it's an intellectual matter rather than a felt matter, you have to kind of accept that we are bequeathing to children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, a world which is unlike this one, which is hostile to the conditions of civilised life. Really 55 degree heatwaves, not 44 as we have in Melbourne. You know what I'm getting at. Isn't that a really big problem that we have to imagine the future, not just think that we're already there. |
| **George Marshall** |
| We have to make huge changes in who we are and how we live in the basis of anticipation, which we can do because we're smart, but nonetheless, anticipation based on the trust that we have in the people who are telling us. It's a tall order. The point is however, that trust has to be reinforced at every single level, so not just the trust of a scientist, every single person around us we trust, has to be pushing in the same direction, that's what vitally important. And yes you're right about the 4 degree world. It's actually bizarre, there are so many things that haven't been studied which I'd love to see studied, and one thing I would love to know is, I'd love somebody to do some proper research on how climate scientists are coping with the information they hold. Because in private, conversations with climate scientists, they are deeply, deeply worried about it. But it's also very interesting how they manage to keep that separate and 4 degrees is one of the things I talk about in that every climate scientists I speak to will now will admit privately, that they think we are heading for 4 degrees plus. And 4 degrees is atrocious, it's interesting in the book I don't even talk about climate change and what it means, but you don't have to look very far to find out what 4 degrees means. And they're deeply concerned and yet they somehow manage to separate these things out. The thing I would say, which is why the general questions I'm asking about how do we understand and cope with the information we have or the aberrant avoidance defence strategies we adopt for it, we have to understand that to understand what is going to happen if we do hit 4 degrees. Because my concern is that if we're doing such a lousy job of dealing with what we already have, or the information we have now, there is no guarantee of whether we're going to snap out of this in an easy way. You know there is a lot of very, very distorted and perverse reactions from kind of anxiety and stress that might come down the line with this, so what I say is when people go; "Well maybe this is too late, or what happens if we don't win?" I say, anything we do is about putting in place the tram lines (which is a nice phrase for Melbourne), the tram lines for how we're going to cope as this reality comes down the line. So even if we don't do a good job with mitigation and holding this whole juggernaut back, at least we're trying to put in place, a way of thinking about it which will allow us to cope with it better and in a more realistic way. The danger is that we start going into all kinds of avoidance, denial and I'm deeply concerned about scapegoating as a reaction to this, but one very understandable and human reaction is a kind of anxiety and stress and responsibility about what we've done to the world, is we'll just go and beat someone up. Which is less face it and I don't need to even cite a single example of this, let's face it is what we've done repeatedly in history. So let's try and get it right this time and that means that therefore, everything we're doing now needs to be preparing for the not just the physical, climatic reality of climate change, but also the psychological reality of it.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| By the way the phrase that I liked was an 'unengaging timeline', I thought that was very nicely put. An interesting point you made as well, and I'd like to talk about the religious theme in the book, perhaps as the final major thing we talk about before taking questions. But you say at some point, "There is in this, no innocent bystander as there often is," in social causes, questions, in other words we all, to some extent share the shame and guilt of taking advantage of a fossil fuel civilisation. I know you agonise about travelling by airplane yourself... |
| **George Marshall** |
| It wasn't much of an agony, it was great. What I did was create a bunch of self-serving narratives to make me be able to fulfil my vision of myself as a non-hypocritical person, which I then put as a little p.s. on my email. So people writing to me now they get an email back saying; 'P.S. I took it very seriously the responsibility of…' I mean, did I – hell I mean great. The answer is I try to - *hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue,* isn't that ….  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But something about 'no innocent bystander', if you could explain that idea a little bit. |
| **George Marshall** |
| Well, the bystander is very important, we're constantly thinking about whether we should get involved or not, and being a bystander is one of the issues where we see… well let's go back to the issue that Stanley Cohen is talking about, Human Rights Abuses for example. We look at what's happening and we're trying to make the qualified decision about whether we should recognise that something is happening or not. What we're doing is we're looking at the other people around us to see if they're sending a social signal about how we should respond or not. What is appropriate, what is necessary for us to be part of a group but also of course, we don't want to get involved, with the nature of what is often called the 'Bystander Effect', which is when people actively try and stand back. With climate change we are all, in various ways, we are moral beings; morality remember being based around the notion of intentionality, so we are trying to avoid the re-infection of intention. We're trying to keep that at arm's length. We're bystanders, we're trying to step back from an issue that we're already morally culpable for we're trying to look into it. We are therefore, (I'm sorry there's a lot of ideas in this,) entering into a contract with people around ourselves whereby we are agreeing that we will be collective bystanders to this, so we're not going to step forward and do things because then we have the social permission to stand back, but we also have a position to say that; 'no-body else was doing anything'. However, it is very hard to do that once I know, as I do know, that coming here put 10 – 12 tonnes of carbon dioxide or to be honest, carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere. So one of the things which happens on this is that, you know… – let's go back to the primordial Bible Story of the Garden of Eden, the point where you take the apple from the tree of knowledge is the point where you accept something and therefore the sensible thing is not to go near it. Once people accept the knowledge of their own moral responsibility, they are therefore put into a quandary that to continue is an act of intention; to continue with what they know. I think a lot of people, this is one of the reasons people do not want the conversations, they do not want to be handed that apple. I do not want to know, do not tell me about this, and people get very angry, they say; 'don't blame me.' What they're actively doing, they're actively defending themselves against the moral challenge which they know will bring with it the intentionality. Of course however, once you accept that moral challenge, then what you do is you have to then get into some very complex self-serving narratives about, well; I'm somehow different or I'm exceptional or somehow my missions don't count. It becomes extremely challenging. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| The most unexpected part of the book is towards the end where you think the Environmental Movement has to learn from religious communities of faith. Perhaps as my penultimate question, could I ask you to say why you think, and how the climate change movement can learn from communities of faith? Why they have to? |
| **George Marshall** |
| Well the first thing to say is I am surprised by how well this argument has gone down and that Ian Plimer hasn't so far kind of like confronted me and I feel that this is bit of a ticking bomb. But if you sail into this and you even try to put climate change and religion together in the same space, you are asking for it, so I'm up for the fight. Ian if you're here I'll take you on, because people who oppose action on climate change consistently argue that climate change is the new religion. Of course Scientists for 500 years have been very actively dividing their cultural boundary between themselves and religion, understandably and that's very important for scientific method. So therefore we have almost become allergic to the suggestion there might be a connection of any kind between climate change and religion. I'm trying to break that open, I'm trying to say that it is not whether climate change is, or can, or should ever be, like a religion, but I am suggesting that religions help to explain something of how we as humans, come to terms with things which are complex, ambiguous, set in the future, uncertain and require us to make sacrifices. Which is of course, what we face with climate change. So some of the most interesting conversations I had were with thoughtful Christians, especially Christian Evangelicals about what we're getting right or wrong in terms with how we come to terms with climate change. And I'm interested in Evangelicals, because Evangelicals are not coming from an established church, they're coming from an extremely competitive and experimental church especially in America. You're going out there and you're fighting in the psychological cultural marketplace for followers, so therefore, you are out there trying to find whatever messages, the ways of approaching people, engaging and involving people that really work. But you can go a step further back from that and say actually, the world's five leading religions, or maybe we can add a few more, but the religions which at present are the world, are the success stories of the hundreds of thousands of religions which over the years have gone through the earth. And you have to ask; "Why are these the ones which have gained people's attention and support?" Of course adherents of religions would say, 'because they contain the true faith', well they can't all… So clearly there is something that they have in common and they do have qualities in common, so these are things that therefore under conditions of uncertainty and sacrifice can hold human attention. So all I'm saying is maybe there are things there that can be learned. Talking about Evangelicals, I was very influenced by leading Evangelical, Joel Hunter in Southern US who gets climate change but who has also built the tenth largest church in America in Florida. So this is like a super entrepreneur in the world of Evangelical, kind of, I don't want to call it capitalism, but sort of going out there and making things happen; movement building let's say. I asked him just for a string of ideas, I said: "Give me a kind of One on One, 101 on what we're doing right and wrong?" And I think the thing which came to the fore, was this idea that above all else, for him he understands that belief in things does not come as a single event, it's what I touched on earlier Robert. It comes as a process whereby you hear something, you forget about it, you go away. You hear something again, you think about it, you get invited to something, you go along, then you go away, you forget about it. You come back, you have an epiphany, something changes in your life, you're ready to have this thing come into you and then that's when he's there for you. But more than that, recognising that that is not the end to it, that you still have to make a personal commitment, but that commitment never ends, but you deviate, you come and you go. Sometimes you accept and sometimes you find it hard to believe and you let go. Because in the world of climate change we just assume that you just somehow; it's like osmosis you've got this report and it kind of enters through your fingertips, and then it's like, well I'm a rational being I get it now. Of course it doesn't work like that. We go through moments of doubt, I go through them all the time. Doubt because I want to doubt, I want to reject this thing, and also I desperately need to, I think a lot of people also, we're there so what they do within religious groups, they understand and accept, but doubt is part and parcel of belief and we have to recognise and respect it. That's why I don't want to condemn. We have this tendency of saying: 'people who we call deniers, which I don't think is helpful, that somehow people who don't accept climate change are somehow fools or dupes.' No they're not, they're just people who are unconvinced and therefore they're on the process, we're all on the process and I might add on that, when I do a lot of communications trainings, which is the main part of what I do, not writing books, when I try and get people to try and understand that, I say; the most critical thing you can do is to present to people your own personal process of the conviction that you have now, so that they understand that it's not an overnight thing. Because one of the things which is important for religions is this idea that you go out there and you share the process by which you came to a belief and the affect it's had on you. So you say, look I used not to believe, I didn't accept this stuff it's hard for me, it's taken me a long while, just as you did actually Robert, just as you said, you know I was reading this book and it really changed me. That’s interesting because that is modelling for people, the process by which they will come to a similar level of understanding. I think a little humanity would also understand, but in our brains we have this competition between the rational and the information that we know we should take on board, and the reality that we know we're complex emotional beings and it takes us a while to come to terms with things we find challenging.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Wonderfully eloquent. I want there to be time for questions. So the microphones are beginning to move so if you put your hand up they'll reach you. Yes. |
| **Audience member** |
| Hi thanks for that, it was really interesting. Talking about people's own process, I just read Naomi Kline's book which for me was really powerful in terms of understanding the urgency of the issue. But something she talks about is the fact that, for a long time people like to think we can stop climate change and we can kind of keep the systems we have now where we're pursuing this infinite growth, and we can keep extracting and keep growing our economies and keep benefiting from that lifestyle, but she's saying we can't have both and for it to be stopped, the people and the companies who profit from that current system will have to lose something. So she's got more of an ideological bent I guess, than you do and it seemed to me that she was saying; this is a political issue, this is threatening to our current system and we have to stop pretending it's not threatening. So I am just wondering how you engage with those ideas, because she's very much in the camp of fossil fuel companies who are actively lobbying governments for them to not pursue environmental policies that could help with zero emissions etc. You know we have to realise they are part of the problem, we can't just pretend they're not, so I'm just wondering, it sounds like you think we should depoliticise and make it unthreatening? |
| **George Marshall** |
| No, what I would say is, the opposite, I'd say the opposite, I like very much what she's doing because she's doing exactly what I'm saying. She is shaping climate change within a set of values which is speaking to the values of the group that she's speaking to. In many ways, to be honest, I belong to as well, I agree with a lot of what she is saying and her analysis and she's shaping it in terms which may help to make sense of the very complex and intangible issue and I'm not disagreeing with what she says in terms of political reality. However, where I might differ in some ways with what she's saying is, I do not think we can generate the kind of level of change we need through the divisive politics of saying: "right we're just simply going to be like some kind of left-wing vanguardism, or what we're going to do is kind of pump up our radical movement so strongly, that we can take on these citadels of power. I think we need to recognise that we need to have levels of engagement which go much much wider. So whilst on the one hand I entirely welcome the analysis and I think it's really important, on the other hand I recognise we need a separate and parallel analysis which is speaking to a different set of values. I think it is a mistake nonetheless to assume; and there is a generalisation on the left that conservatives are all somehow some group and they're all the same but they're all just like free-market capitalists. I think we fail to recognise that amongst conservatives there is a lot of ambivalence and a lot of internal critique about these large scale corporations and about globalisations as well. So I think there's plenty there to recognise that there can be conservative narratives which speak to deeper senses of responsibility and place and identity in the things we love that should be there. It's not all or nothing. So I guess I'm saying that; her contribution, which of course is very important, it's that she's shaping climate change in terms of a narrative, which is a compelling narrative. I think it is important but not sufficient, I think that there is a time we need to have a radical narrative of people on the right saying; 'we need to actively defend what is precious to us in the interests of defending ourselves against climate change.' That defence need not necessarily be the defence of the corporations either if that makes sense.  |
| **Audience member** |
| Thanks for your talk, I want to come back to the initial question Robert asked about extreme events and public response. We had an event here in 2009, extreme fires, where the fire rating on Black Saturday was 190 on a scale that goes from 0 - 100, which was clearly a climate related event. And there was a complete lack of public ideas, leadership in the narrative after that event, to the extent that the State Government, a Labour Government, had a Royal Commission that excluded climate change as a point of reference. There's one example of the non-narratives that you talk about and even our climate advocates did not want us to talk about it because it might be seen as insensitive to make those links. So we had a complete silence about the worst climate event this state has ever seen and I can only put it down to a lack of public ideas leadership from people who I think should do better. And as Robert mentioned 18 months ago we had extreme out of season fires in New South Wales and Adam Bandt, our local member, actually got up and said Tony Abbott is failing to protect the Australian people and people will die as a consequence. All hell broke loose on him for two days, but then some Fairfax Journalists, some of the firefighting authorities who really had the wind up them and then our scientists came out and in a week the narrative had changed. And Adam actually won that debate from what I saw, because of his public ideas, leadership and courage, but I think for most of our public intellectual debate contestants there is a lack of courage, I'm sorry to put it like that, where people just are intimidated and don't want to say what's going on. |
| **George Marshall** |
| Thank you, I don't even want to add to that I'll just take that as a statement, but thank you. |
|  |
| **Audience member** |
| The point of people not wanting to talk about it, it's interesting to note that the Catholic Church is using that idea of thinking ahead for your children as a way of people to think ahead. I wonder have you had discussions with the insurance industry in relation to the previous comments and what did they mention in climate change? |
| **George Marshall** |
| I haven't personally, but back certainly about 15 years ago, just before the turn of the millennium there was a lot of very interesting work, this work was particularly I think lead by Greenpeace on engaging the insurance industry, and the hope was that the insurance industry surely would be looking ahead with an interest in future impacts. And they are, I mean the insurance industry entirely accept the existence of climate change and are alert to these long term threats. Incidentally, I should say so are defence analysts, so military analysts, so is the Pentagon. In fact, there is no military analyst in the world who aren't looking forward to climate change… when I say looking forward to… well actually again I make reference to Naomi in terms of shock doctrine. I think there is a feeling of that as well, but there is a feeling that they are looking forward to it, which is an opening opportunity for new arms sales and conflict. But the answer is yes, they are but I'm afraid it is part of the way that things get distorted, is that they simply respond, they adapt. They do not see it as part of their own responsibility to shift the current situation, but they see it as a chance therefore, very simply where they adjust their premiums. As we know they adjust the terms of the home insurance they offer, so yep… The answer to that is No, I haven't spoken to them but; I am disturbed by the capacity of people to know about climate change without accepting the moral imperative to take action. I'm very disturbed by that and I'm disturbed by the capacity of some very intelligent, thoughtful, knowledgeable and descent, I believe fundamentally descent people in the oil industry for example, not to recognise the moral complexity of their position. But then again I recognise that that's what I talk about in the book, the nature of humanity, that's what we do is we seek to defend our own moral self.  |
| **Audience member** |
| I've got a question, it potentially sounds trite, and it's not meant to at all. I keep wondering why we can't use incredibly good marketing and advertising to, I mean you can market anything. The Liberal party are a very good example of that, although they are not doing so well now. You know there is so much crap that can be marketed and if you turn the best marketing and advertising brains to this. Wouldn't there be a way to somehow make the behaviours that we're looking for from people, sexy? Things that people would want to do. You can mass market so much, why can't we mass market this? |
| **George Marshall** |
| Well thank you and I don't think it is trite, I think it is a very interesting question, I think there is a lot that can be taken from the world of commercial marketing. I have been talking for a long time now with commercial marketers of the ideas they might bring to it, of course our conversations are pro bono, because I don't have anything to pay them which is the first thing to point out, which is that the intellectual property and creativity of a marketing industry is locked behind a firewall or a paywall of what you're able to pay for. So paying people to consume less and to burn less is not generally speaking a well-funded area. But I actually also point out that there are some fundamental differences with marketing which I realise, talking to these people, that if you're selling a product your primary concern is to engage where people want to buy that product as fully as possible. So what you do is you take the niche audience of the people you want to go for and you say; "you're the people I'm speaking to, buy my product," you don't care if other people hate it. We have a product in Britain which is Marmite, which is the sibling of your equally disgusting Vegemite, which actually makes me retch if I even smell it, but you know what, me selling that is fine in the attitudes of the marketers who have this campaign saying; Love it – or Hate it, and they encourage people to post up on websites - I love It or I Hate It. There is a website where you can tell how much you hate Marmite, they don't care because if the people who love it, love it they will even love it more and they'll buy it. We have a problem with climate change which is exactly the point I said before, which is within the individual groups we can do that, we can speak to individual groups. When you go wider, which is what you do with a marketing campaign after all, when you go after National Advertising you have to find a way of speaking across boundaries, you cannot afford to alienate people. The British Government ran an advertisement which was so loathed on climate change, that the first time it was shown it had two hundred complaints for next morning with the Advertising Standards Authority and it got pulled. That is what happens when marketers are let loose on something on which people feel very strongly, so we've got this challenge which is; how do we speak to all the different components of our vast society which speak to their values? But also how do we find marketing messages which speak across it? And indeed marketers can give us advice about that, like is there are a set of identities and values which we can all work together on but we agree despite all of our huge differences, our politics and our attitudes, what we have in common? And the answer is yes we do and that is actually where we need to find the identity, but also to recognise that actually people might decide whether to buy a jar of some kind of 'scraped out, beer vac yeast product' on the basis of an advert, but they do not decide to change their life, to change their attitudes. They do that on the basis of what their friends and their family and the people around them say and a whole lot of different triggers, so yes we can have the marketers but we know very clearly it is the personal interactions between people that shift what they do. |
| **Audience member** |
| Hi, thanks very much George and Robert for the conversation. Just referring back to your mentioning of the rational and the emotional brain that we have and I guess talking about that, sort of instinctive response, and I've got two children and I will do whatever it takes to protect them. They're in my field of proximity, I'm connected to them, I'm connected to the people in my neighbourhood, how do I extend that notion of proximity of danger and threat to the entire human population and indeed into the entire biosphere that we all rely on? How do we change that kind of human evolutionary response, that primitive brain to react in that way? |
| **Robert Mann** |
| It's a simple question. |
| **George Marshall** |
| Thanks, I needed a quick short one, just so that I could get there. Look, the answer on that is I don't have to know the answer to that one, because I think that the important thing is I'm glad you're asking the question that, maybe what the book can try and do it can try and stimulate us to find new ways of coming at climate change. And as I said this is an issue which is a big, lobby, amorphous, it is a shape shifting issue, it takes on the shapes of the questions that are asked of it so let's find new questions and new ways of asking it, and I think what you have there is the right question. What I would say which I think is an interesting thing, I think it's a good example of showing how these cultural bias's work, for you and indeed for me and for any of us who have children; that is a hugely motivating issue. However if you look across the entire populations, it hasn't been done in Australia but across the rest of the English speaking world, there have been surveys which look at how people care about climate change and the simple fact is that people who have children are LESS inclined to be concerned about climate change, or talk about climate change, than people without children, even allowing for all the variations of education or for age or for class etc.. So now that's counter-intuitive, but if you think about it, no it isn’t entirely, what it means is that people who care passionately about climate change are passionately concerned on behalf of their children. People who are not concerned about climate change are even LESS inclined if they have children and the fact is the things about having children which make us create a certain distance, because we hope for the very best for them, we have an optimism bias towards the future, we want the very best for them. So this is an example of how, I would suggest, how you personally shift things around is, you go forward and you communicate that, for you as a father this is a powerful thing and your conviction therefore becomes something which shapes the views, it is a signal which goes out to the people around you. And please go out and do that with people who are sceptical about climate change and say; "Well I read this book and it says climate change isn't happening, well for me personally, I've seen enough and on behalf of my children I'm doing something," that's powerful. But I don't think we can take that message and transplant it wider, it has to be something there that's a very personal thing, it comes from the person. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| This is the last question. |
| **Audience member.** |
| I'm just wondering if you can share some insight on people's different reactions, when they learn about climate change. So I'm a young person and I suppose for my whole life I have been engrossed in climate change and as soon as I learned about it, say at 15 I have been dedicated and felt a huge sense of responsibility but also guilt, to do something and if I'm not doing something I feel really bad about it and why do I feel this way but a lot of other people in the world don't feel any sense of responsibility? |
| **George Marshall** |
| You feel that because there is a line up at the moment between, you are who you are, your world experience, your world view, your personal politics where your psychology is constructed and the information as it is coming at you. In other words, there is a match between the two, something has happened there, which in a way I'm sorry you're feeling guilty about it, but I'm delighted in a way it has happened to you which has helped you to accept and take on the information in the way it's currently presented to you. So that is why the book is called: *Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change:* but the proof that the book is wrong is that people like yourself and I guess, I imagine all of us in this room, or almost all of us in this room and I guess large numbers of people in the population are deeply concerned about climate change. So we get it, and the reason we get it is because there is a nice match between who we are and how we perceive the issue to be. But it is not climate change that we're responding to it's the socially constructed narrative, so the challenge is how do we try and achieve that with other groups of people who are not like us. Such for climate change is coming at them at a shape and form that allows them to make that match. But I'd say something else as well, how can we find a way of shaping it amongst ourselves so we do not feel that guilt and responsibility, because guilt is not a great motivator we have to find ways of shaping this which give people a sense of optimism, power, opportunity, something positive because that again is one of the reasons why, maybe it is that people who can handle climate change, and maybe more able to take on board the guilt of personal responsibility and that intention. Well that's not going to be a winning argument. We need to find a way that climate change can be communicated to people, that doesn't require that from them. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| We have to end there, I think we've all been privileged to hear someone who is, as I said earlier, well-tempered, eloquent, sober, highly intelligent and optimistic. He's forgotten to mention this, he's written a great book called *Don't Even Think About It*, which is on sale at the back of the room. |
| **George Marshall** |
| I'm happy to scribble in it, anything you like. |
| **Robert Manne,** |
| Which George will sign, but I'd personally like to thank you very much indeed for a wonderful evening. |
| [applause] |
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