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## From Coronavirus to Climate Literacy: lessons learned or welcome excuse when it comes to battling climate change?

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**ABSTRACT** Climate change is an incredibly important issue that has horrific long-term impacts if necessary lifestyle and policy changes are not made now. Despite the presence of significant scientific evidence of climate change for years, many politicians are still unable to admit that climate change is real, let alone create policies to better combat this crisis. In the Australian context in particular, it seemed that politicians would never be able to put their political ambition aside to do what is best for the community and the nation. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Australian politicians have put aside their political differences and created effective policies without being bogged down by unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. The pandemic has especially highlighted the benefits of unity, information and steadfast, consistent messaging. Australians have seen at first hand the immense power that communities, the political system and social institutions have when they are united. If this power is used to address climate change issues by advocating for climate literacy, much progress can be made.

Humans are social beings. It is ingrained within our psyches to build relationships with others. It is common for us to hug, kiss or shake hands. It is normal for us to go to a restaurant, a shopping centre, a movie theatre, a concert or a sporting event. We are also curious beings. We love to travel, explore and try new things. But one tiny virus that is invisible to the naked eye has stopped these practices around the world. We no longer hug or kiss loved ones. We no longer leave the house, unless to collect the bare necessities. We no longer travel overseas, or domestically for that matter. In this new world of ours, we stand 1.5 metres apart, we wear face masks, we sanitise every surface. In the space of a few short months, the whole world has changed. Everyone,

regardless of nation, race, religion, background or status – we are all united in our mission to battle the coronavirus pandemic.

At the same time, researchers are attempting to scavenge any information they can about the virus. Economists are trying to determine the financial impacts. Health practitioners are on the front line, fighting to the best of their abilities. Politicians are scrambling to determine what the best moves are for their nation. And top scientists around the world are racing to find a vaccine.

It is an amazing feat that we have accomplished – we have created a whole new paradox of a united distant world in such a short period of time. Education and steadfast, consistent messaging have been the key to battling this pandemic and creating this new paradox of ours. Political leaders around the world have taken the initiative and paved the necessary pathways to lockdown. We have all received practical and well-thought-out directives on important concepts like social distancing and hand washing. This messaging has been created, passed through the bureaucratic ranks and spread in the space of weeks – days even.

Around the world, the most successful responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been the ones that have been built on information and unity. Why hasn't the same ever been done about climate change? We have had concrete scientific evidence of climate change and its impact on human life for years. However, nations still cannot get past the bureaucratic, political and diplomatic red tape surrounding climate change to come to a solution together. Some nations are not even able to get their own politicians to agree that climate change is real and a major threat to our lives. It had already been scientifically proven that education and steadfast, consistent messaging are a fantastic way to create change, and this evidence has been proven again in a real-world context during this crisis. We need to begin doing what we should have done years ago – educating people about the horrific realities of climate change.

Climate literacy for everyone, and particularly for young people, is crucial in this day and age. As young people, we are often discounted and excluded from discussions around issues that affect us, as there are people who are unwilling to accept that some of us have the knowledge, passion and perspective to discuss these issues in a wider forum. Making climate literacy a priority and prerogative within our education systems will add a sense of legitimacy to the discussion, which, in turn, will give young people a better chance to participate in this public discourse, raise more awareness about the issue, and encourage people to unite in the pursuit of climate action.

Historically, in democratic nations, the government and the opposition are usually on opposite sides of the political spectrum, adverse to one another, attempting to sabotage each other's political ambitions. However, in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, most countries have chosen to take a bipartisan approach, and the only point of contention between the two is that the opposition is suggesting that the government should do more. In short, the government takes 10 steps forward and the opposition pushes them to take a few more.

Why can't that happen with the climate crisis as well? In many instances, it is impossible to think that politicians will determine their own stance regarding climate change, let alone two parties taking a bipartisan approach. This is why we need our politicians to be 'climate literate' as well, and be united in their approach to climate change.

It is fantastic that most politicians around the globe have sidelined their political ambitions and chosen to take necessary actions, such as raising awareness and helping their constituents with measures to contain this pandemic. During the pandemic, Australian politicians in particular have managed to create a nationwide united front – an achievement they are understandably proud of. However, it is frustrating to see the same politicians get trapped in an endless rut of political ambition, power play and just fundamental ignorance when it comes to important climate change discussions.

It has been seen in many different circumstances around the world that the only way to combat ignorance is through information. This information can be spread in many different ways: through social media campaigns, government directives and policy, further discussion within the media and, most importantly, education in schools.

We have seen in recent times the strength of social media and social media campaigns. They are even being used to battle the pandemic: messages like 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' are present on most social media platforms, reinforcing these government directives.

Government directives are also important as they give a sense of legitimacy to the discussion and also ensure that these topics are being included in general discussion and conversation. An example of this is the United Kingdom, where politicians have taken a bipartisan approach to climate change since 2015, and have acknowledged the very severe implications of it. This acknowledgement has meant that governments have been putting in lots of work to combat the issue, such as transitioning to renewable energy and reducing carbon emissions. The policy work being done in this area means that these discussions and concepts appear in the news and subsequently inform public discourse and awareness around the issue.

Despite the proof that these steps are effective in raising awareness and combatting crises around the world, they have not been happening – particularly in Australia. As many may have heard, over the summer (December–February), Australia was hit with the most vicious bushfire season in its history. At least 34 people were killed, ecosystems and wildlife were devastated, hundreds of millions of acres were burnt through, thousands were displaced, and at least AU\$4.4 billion worth of losses were incurred due to the impact on major industries like tourism. Even though the extent and length of the bushfire season was clearly scientifically linked to climate change, many Australian politicians refused to acknowledge that climate change is a very real threat. One politician even went so far as to state that he and his party are 'agnostic about climate change'.

The climate change issue has been historically divisive within Australian politics, to the point where we lost an opposition leader (Malcolm Turnbull in 2009) and two prime ministers (Kevin Rudd in 2010 and Malcolm Turnbull once again in 2019) because of environmental policy debates. We need to learn from our actions during the pandemic, a time when politicians are calling for Australians to work together and stand as a united front against the virus.

The coronavirus is a serious issue – but so is climate change. The only difference between the two is that the coronavirus is an issue that Australian politicians are ‘gnostic’ about, and are willing to accept, but climate change is an issue that they are agnostic about, and refuse to acknowledge.

We cannot ignore or forget the importance of taking climate action, nearly as much as we cannot ignore or forget about social distancing. The coronavirus is having huge impacts on economies, lives, livelihoods and social constructs – as does climate change. Last summer, Australia was hit with severe economic repercussions from the bushfires and, with the coronavirus pandemic, we are at the very edge of a cliff leading to severe economic depression. We literally cannot afford to remain agnostic about climate change, as it has a long-lasting and generational impact.

Considering last year’s early start to the bushfire season in September, we are only a few months away from the next. The Australian government has been, and still is, working very hard to save the lives and livelihoods of Australians during this pandemic, but there are also other pressing matters at hand that need to be dealt with to prevent further devastation and even more detrimental social and economic effects.

Refusing to acknowledge climate change and its very severe repercussions on our lives is the most backwards, un-Australian thing one can do. On the Australian coat of arms, there are an emu and a kangaroo, because these animals cannot move backwards. The founders of the Australian Federation chose these animals to be on our coat of arms because they wanted Australia, as a nation, to continue to make progress and move forwards.

But, above all, we need to ensure that future generations are ‘climate literate’. We cannot afford – economically, environmentally or ethically – to have future generations of politicians be ‘agnostic’ about climate change. Schools need to be teaching and leading discussions around climate change. What is it? How does it impact us? How does it impact the environment? What can we do to prevent it? There are so many questions we need to ask and learn the answers to. School, being the place where we spend most of the start of our lives, and the place where we learn most about the world, should be where we are actively introduced to the concept of climate change. It is also likely that children will bring these ideas and conversations home, thus sparking further community discussion about this issue. This community discussion is likely to be shared with the politicians who are representing their constituencies in parliament. As much as our politicians have a responsibility to act on climate change, we also have a certain civic responsibility to our communities, our nation and our future generations, so these discussions are very important ones

to have with our friends and family. However, it cannot happen until our political and bureaucratic systems work closely with communities to develop climate literacy and environmental awareness.

This pandemic has really highlighted that it is feasible for communities, the political system and social institutions to work together effectively. Once the pandemic is over, we need to make sure that we won't abandon this sense of unity when it comes to taking climate action, as it is just as important to be 'gnostic' about climate change as it is to be 'gnostic' about the coronavirus.

According to Thomas Henry Huxley, a British biologist, agnosticism simply means that one shall not say one believes in something one has no grounds or evidence to believe in. But there is so much information at our fingertips about climate change, and so much scientifically proven evidence that it is a real problem that has horrifying long-term effects. We need climate literacy for everyone, so that we can all play our part in taking climate action. After all, there is no vaccine to reverse climate change.

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