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# **The Great Debate: In the Face of the Enormity of Global Threats, Local Action is a Waste of Time**

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For the Affirmative:

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I do need to start with a warning and I'll return to this later. You, the audience, are the jury and our beloved former Premier is the adjudicator. So Meredith and I really need a fair trial here.

Therefore you need to understand the performance indicators right from the start. Rhonda told us to be funny and to be helpful, she has also given us the impossible position of persuading 1500 of you that local action is a waste of time.

80% of you come from grassroots organisations, and we're told you've all gone to a lot of trouble to come to a conference called Communities in Control.

Well, we would like you to take control. Take control of your heart as well as your head and give us a fair go. The warning is we know we're the underdog and we're asking you for objective judgements, and there will be more on that later.

The current coalition of global challenges has been described as a perfect storm – global warming, growing food and water shortages, growing threats of pandemics, more unstable states acquiring nuclear weapons, and the rise of terrorism.

And now we're told the Gulf Stream is cooling and may stop flowing completely. Last time this happened the world entered an ice age that lasted thousands of years.

So, if we're all headed for one of the nastiest levels of Dante's Inferno – remember Dante's hell with nine levels of horrible fates? One of them you are buried in ice up to your lower eyelashes. Imagine that, just staring out at the ice age all around you! – so if we're all going to be starving, sick and frozen stiff, what on earth is the point of global action?

You can't wash your kids' footy clothes when you've got cholera or malaria from a global pandemic. There's no need to do the dishes if there's a global famine obviously. There's not a lot of point of having your legs waxed, your eyebrows plucked or even having a Brazilian if the ice age means there's no beach.

There's absolutely no doubt that local action, particularly housework and personal grooming, are a total waste of time.

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Local action like harvesting your veggie scraps, composting your veggie scraps, harvesting your shower water, even downsizing from I'm sure all of you have Range Rovers to a new made in Australia hybrid Camry is worse than a waste of time. It's actually going to make you all feel better, in fact make you feel quite virtuous, and make not a whit of difference to the impending global catastrophe facing our children.

Just take China. With over 1.3 billion people, we all know that China is the world's largest and most populous country. One in every five people on the planet lives in China.

China builds a new city the size of Australia every year, but only 1% of the country's 560 million city dwellers breathe air considered safe by the European Union.

And of course China's problem is the world's problem. Sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide from China's coal fired power plants falls as acid rain on South Korea and Japan, and much of the particular pollution over the west coast of America comes from China.

By the end of this year China will overtake the US as the world's leading producer of greenhouse gases.

And I haven't even started on India. India will be the world's most populous country by 2030 and is also growing at historically unprecedented rates with similar environmental challenges for the globe.

So what's the use of local action here in Melbourne, Australia or even more useless in Koroi? We could close down Australia tomorrow and make 1.8% of difference to global emissions.

And what about world food shortages, ladies and gentlemen? One in six countries in the world now face food shortages because of a severe drought that will become semi-permanent under climate change.

The World Bank believes that 33 countries are in danger of being destabilised by food price inflation. And UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon says that higher food prices are wiping out progress towards reducing poverty and will harm global security.

The President of the World Bank says that food inflation could push 100 million people back into poverty, obliterating the gains of a decade of economic growth. More than 800 million people still go hungry at night. Even in India, where the green revolution made some of its biggest strides, 50% of children in rural areas are malnourished.

At the other end of the scale, the second richest country on earth, Japan, is now experiencing food shortages that saw Tokyo run out of butter this year. A 130% rise in the global cost of wheat in the past year, caused partly by surging demand from China and India, is threatening Japanese food supplies.

In April, the Japanese government discovered it had exhausted its \$2.37 billion budget for wheat two months before the end of the financial year. It was forced to call on \$541 million worth of reserves to ensure it could continue to feed the Japanese nation.

Japanese food experts said this was the first time the government has had to take such drastic action since the War – that's nearly 60 years ago.

But with not even 21 million people in Australia, barely 3% of the world's population, it's hardly even worth us giving up our quest to be world leaders in obesity and binge drinking. Why shouldn't we live on cakes and alcopops and drive our four wheel drives till the lights go out on planet Earth?

Let me share with you a personal case study on what a total waste of time local action really is. In the mid-1980s when Rhonda Galbally ran the Commission for the Future and I worked there, the Commission ran a visionary project on climate change. Our colleagues made a film, together with CSIRO scientists, that was every bit as powerful as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Our film won a UN environment award and we all thought the world would start to change. The Commission for the Future employed someone to work on carbon trading, some weird economist concept that no normal person had heard of in 1987.

The logic of the film and the logic of carbon trading was unarguable. But no-one was listening. Local action, and this was Australian local action

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not local local action, was a total waste of time. Actually, local action is often much worse than a waste of time. It is positively dangerous.

Sidney Jones is a colleague of mine who lives in Indonesia, works for the International Crisis Group and is the world expert on Jemaah Islamiyah. Remember JI? They're the guys responsible for the Bali bombing, the attacks on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta and the Hilton Hotel bombing.

Sidney Jones describes how JI are so much more than a terrorist network. It's a local social network, sort of like the Country Women's Association. The children attend schools together, the mothers shop and cook and chat together, the families play together.

So taking out the leaders of JI, as Indonesia has successfully done in recent times, leaves behind a robust community association, well set up to produce a new generation of terrorists – local action at its most productive. They might even be picking up a few tips from the Our Community website I thought.

Similarly, in India, where I've been focusing in the last few years, local action so often stops development that would improve sanitation, public health and standards of living. In the interests of preserving the status quo, local action is precisely why India lags so far behind China in bringing its people out of poverty.

And before I leave India and China and security, what about what might be the biggest global challenge facing us all – running out of water. The scientists tell us we're now in a permanent state of demand for water outstripping supply. This is no cyclical drought scenario.

The US now sees water as a national security issue. China is putting in a giant pipeline to divert water from the Tibetan Himalayas so they can make sunglasses, toys and microwave ovens for the world.

India has 24 million water bores right now. I go back to my earlier point, what is the use of me pouring my shower on my veggies?

What is local action anyway? I don't even understand what it is anymore. I used to believe 'think global, act local'. But globalisation is happening

so fast I don't even know how to define local. The people I work with work with communities of colleagues all over the world.

So this is an example of 21<sup>st</sup> Century local action, us working together online with our colleagues. What about cyberspace? There are 1.6 million people using the World Wide Web already. And what about Barak Obama raising \$300 million for his campaign, with 80% raised online?

Ladies and Gentlemen, all this goes to prove that ourcommunity.com.au is the virtual place to be. You don't see anyone under 30 without a full-on Facebook or MySpace presence. We all need to recognise the power of the cyber world and get in there to make a real difference to the only issues that really count: human survival and global equity.