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

Communities in Control Conference
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**Adjudicator:
The Honourable Joan Kirner
Former Premier of Victoria**

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I'm very pleased to be chairing the debate. But before I start what I wanted to do was just say thank you to all the organisers of the Communities in Control conference, all the people working out the back – Rhonda, Joe, Denis, all the people. Because I just think as I watch and listen to this parade of people, sharing their knowledge with us, I don't know that I ever go to a conference which is more knowledge packed and more interactive. So could we put our hands together for the organisers.

Now, as you know, I'm a very fair chairperson. I don't let my views get in the way at all, and I stick to the rules. Each speaker speaks for 10 minutes and then the two leaders of the debate have the right of reply for five minutes.

I just want to say a few other things before I introduce our debaters today. The first thing is I've been sitting there for part of this conference feeling really as though we've got a great opportunity. I just feel the world has turned on its axis just a little bit, and that we can keep propelling it towards social inclusion if we unite the power in this conference, and it is considerable power, if we unite the power in this conference and keep tilting the axis towards social inclusion.

This is something I haven't felt for something like 20 years. How many other people feel that there's just a chance, that we just might be...? Yeah that's how I feel. I felt like that when I was very much younger, coming into the early 1970s. How many of you weren't alive then? I hope a lot of you weren't alive then otherwise we oldies are capturing the day.

But I just feel that that chance is there. And that what we need to do is go out from this conference and exercise our power to change, not just with good intentions. And that's why I was so glad of the moving of that motion following up Pat Turner's great address – the connection and understanding that power really can come from this number of people joining together.

And it's also serendipity, which is something I'm not really used to, that last night I was reading a book that I'd ordered from the New Internationalist. It's called *The Great Neighbourhood Book*. How many of you have read it? Not too many. Well I recommend it. It's not the first book I'm going to recommend today. It's a do-it-yourself guide to place

making, neighbourhood building. It's by a Canadian guy called Jay Walljasper and it's available from New Society Publishers.

It starts off with a series of recommendations, as many books do. And one of them is from Jim Hightower, who's the author of a wonderful book called *Thieves in High Places*, a great name. And he says, and I think this sums up many of the people at this conference, that we're often told that regular people have no power anymore. But when they get together with their neighbours to work on important issues in their own backyard anything is possible.

Jay regales us with stories of folks all over the country who have rolled up their sleeves to make big changes in their neighbourhood and the world. So read on, get riled up, roll up your sleeves and take power. I hope that's the effect of this conference.

And it's the topic, is it not, of this debate. Whether you feel all downhearted and depressed about global issues and you can't do anything because global issues are pressing down on you and *they'll* decide – you know, those people over there, *they*.

They is a copout, isn't it really? *They'll decide* is really a cop out. Mind you, I'd probably be feeling a lot younger and healthier if I hadn't kept saying, "*They* is a cop out," and attacking them. But never mind.

But talking about what we can do is a step towards progress. Now, that doesn't mean to say that from time to time I don't just put my head in my hands and think, "What do you do?" Despite all our good intentions, what do you do?

And then I see someone like Pat Turner speak with such passion and I think, "Well how dare I put my head in my hands and think what do you do, that it's all hopeless."

Because if you've got the passion, you can have the power. And I can see in this room people I've known for some 30 years who have maintained the passion. If you maintain the passion for equity you can retain or regain the power.

Now, you probably won't be surprised to think that I think that this debate is two sides of the coin. One side of the coin is global, the other side of the coin is local. For me, both sides of the coin are important.

So what a terrible chair – to actually come to a compromise before we've had the debate! But I figure I mightn't get a word in later so Denis said I could do it now.

The second point that I want to make is that I am hopeful, because I also think that for the first time in ages federally the Government is listening – the Government is not necessarily doing all that we would like it to do, but I just feel it is listening.

Maybe it's because I'm lucky enough to know that people like Jenny Macklin and Tanya Plibersek live in their own communities and work in their own communities. Maybe it's that, that's a special privilege that I have because I've known them for years.

But I always feel more comfortable when I know that people who represent me are actually experiencing some of the things that I've experienced as a community activist. So that's one thing.

The second thing is I feel the language has changed a bit. I was in the intensive care unit at Epworth when the Prime Minister made the apology. I was lying there in ICU and there was no television and I knew that the next morning the apology was going to be on and I wouldn't be there. But at least I had to see it.

Now you're not exactly the most powerful person when you're lying there in ICU. (Marvellous nursing I must say. Absolutely fabulous.) But there I was thinking, "How do I achieve this? How do I break the rules, get a television set into ICU and be allowed to watch it?"

So what did I do? What I usually do, what I'm sure all you would have done in past and current lives. I asked. I summed up the various people around me and I looked at the most promising doctor. And now that I'm about to be 70 it wasn't the one who was most promising in looks, it was the one who looked most promising in sympathy.

And so I said to him, “Joe...” because I’d already discovered his first name, and he knew mine. Why shouldn’t I know his? I said to him, “Joe, do you want to watch the apology?” He said, “Oh yeah, I’d love to but I’m on duty.” And I said, “Well, do you ever have a television set in ICU?” And he said, “Not very often.” I said, “Who makes the decisions around here?” He said, “I suppose I do.” I said, “That’s terrific Joe. How long would it take?”

So anyway, we got the television set. I’m forever in his debt. Well, I probably am anyway, he’s a medical person.

Of course, the TV had to be strategically placed because I couldn’t get out of bed. It was down the end of my bed and fortunately the two people in beds next to me were happy to watch it and their nurses were too – it’s one to one in ICU. And Joe watched it as well of course.

I was sitting there riveted. And then I looked up. Almost every nurse in the ward had deserted her patient and come to watch. And everyone was standing there with tears flowing down their face. I thought, “I wouldn’t have believed this would happen six months ago, the language of respect wasn’t there.”

And that’s what it’s about – respect for everyone as an equal, with equal human rights and equal entitlements which we took away and now we’ve only taken the first step to returning them. Not giving them back, returning them.

So you can even have power messages when you’re in ICU. And it’s not because I was the former Premier that I got that TV. Well it might have been a little bit, but it was because I had the courage to ask. And anyway I wasn’t much of a threat lying there flat on my back.

So for me this debate could be the bringing together of two important points of view, the global point of view – what is it made up of? Is it made up of people up there making decisions? What can it be made up of? A group of communities, the linking of people in power, in their kind of power, linking with our kind of power to create a greater power.

See, I’ve always had a very strange view of power. As a mum in the early days I had to bake cakes for the mothers’ club fête. I see power as

a bit like baking a cake. You bake a cake and there it is, all nicely baked, the family waiting to eat it. Some people have the view that if you take a slice of that cake and hand it to someone the actual amount of cake gets smaller.

My view is you cut the cake a bit smaller and you share it. And if you know those people are there, then you put more ingredients into the cake because you've got more people sharing and you make a bigger cake. And that's what we can do if we put global and local together.