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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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You've listened to our opponents and they've tried to muddy the waters by focusing on issues that are irrelevant to the main purpose of the debate.

They think local action is great... Of course so do I – my day job is all about the importance of local action on the local scene. Kindergarten Parents Victoria – get it.

But let's get back to the real issue here – which is, is the resolution we are debating true? And our message to you is yes, it is true. Of course it is true. In the face of the enormity of global threats local action is a waste of time. Think about it for a minute – think about this: why are we debating this topic now? Because, as Jenny has outlined, the global threats facing us are enormous. And well-targeted *political* action is what is urgently required to deal with them. Local action may make you feel better, it may even do some good, but it isn't enough. Not nearly enough.

Our philosophy is that global threats demand political action, frequently global political action.

Let me expand on an example close to home – oil prices. This is a hot topic, with media polls demanding Rudd “do something” – but as Jon Faine asked yesterday – “What?”

People are turning to local action – riding their bikes, public transport, electric cars, and the Federal Government is pitching in with fuel watch. But what makes a real difference to fuel prices? Global threats.

Every time George Bush threatens to invade Iran, globally fuel prices soar. Fuel watch isn't going to do much about that. The Federal Government admits as much. It's calling for global *political action* on what it nominates along with rising food prices as the most significant challenge facing *the global economy*.

In yesterday's *Age* newspaper [16/6/08] Kevin Rudd wants “the blow torch” applied to OPEC to force the world's top oil producers to boost output – political action. And it seems Saudi Arabia is thinking about boosting output by some absurd amount but guess what – even local action by the Saudis will have minimal impact on petrol pump prices in

Australia. What else might help? A new president in the US to help cool down the Middle East crisis – that might help – go Obama!

But we also need to get very serious, because as my colleague has eloquently described to you when we are talking about global threats, political action is necessary to ensure human survival in very many cases.

Our health is central to the ability to live and to thrive so I want to focus on the need for political action on health. We can make Australia a fairer, healthier place for all Australians. That would be a good thing, but it is not enough. Children would continue to die across the world of preventable health conditions like diarrhoea and malaria. In addition, diseases like tuberculosis are on the rise again – in large part due to continued inability to afford complete treatment of tuberculosis amongst marginalised populations.

As the World Health Assembly President Scheel said in 1951 “*The world cannot remain half healthy and half sick and still maintain its economic, moral and spiritual equilibrium.*” Like organisations from the World Health Organisation to the Rockefeller Foundation, our team argues that we need political action to produce global equity in health.

I’m not even going to start on the 418 billion people across the world infected with hepatitis, and the despair expressed in BIOMEDICINE [9/6/07] that the unrecognised importance, danger, and costs of hepatitis in the 21st Century cannot be understated or underestimated.

Let's put local action on the scales and weigh it up against some of these threats. Will local action really ensure people around the globe survive and thrive in the face of these things? Unless it's also well targeted political action – no it won't.

These are issues of human survival and of social justice that we cannot ignore. And in the face of the desperate need and knowledge that local action is not enough, in these circumstances local action alone may well be immoral.

HIV/AIDS is yet another continuing global problem that demands urgent political solutions. Developing an HIV vaccine is described by many in the field as one of the world's most urgent global scientific priorities. There are 33 million people living with HIV, up from around 8 million in

1990. The numbers continue to grow. But of the millions of people in immediate need of life-saving AIDS drugs; less than 30% are receiving the drugs. Behind these numbers are millions of personal tragedies – many of those infected are young mothers – they and their countries have to decide do we save the mothers or save the child? Usually they try to save the child so mothers only get the drugs while they're pregnant – once the child is born the mother dies. It means 12 million African children are AIDS orphans, half a million children are born with HIV each year. It is tearing apart the basic fabric of society in many developing countries.

So in addition to human survival we are also talking about global equity. Global political action is desperately needed to make the world a healthier and more equitable place. That's why the World Health Organisation slogan is *Better Health for All*.

And if the unfairness and immorality of failure to act globally to help those less able to help themselves is not sufficiently persuasive, let me make it more concrete for you. If global threats are not attacked where they arise they grow and threaten us all. TB, for example, is not only an immediate health emergency for affected populations – the people living and dying with these illnesses in other countries. Their inability to afford complete treatment is leading to growing rates of drug resistant TB in the Western world as well. TB is also back in Australia, where it is increasingly unresponsive to the barrage of heavy duty antibiotics we have available. So drug resistant TB will and is spreading in Australia and simply trying to treat infected individuals or even communities that are here is really putting our heads in the sand.

Global health problems are threats to us too not only in health terms. The rise in diseases like TB and hepatitis, along with the ongoing scourge of diseases like HIVAIDS, also represent broader risks. Like other global inequities in health not only do they decimate families but they undermine economic productivity because the labour force is sick. They feed a vicious circle of poverty and social alienation that can foster violence, helping ultimately to destabilise whole countries, threatening us all.

That's the nature of global threats. If you don't act on them *where they arise*, global threats represent serious risks to us all. As the World Health Organisation argued in 1951, on top of all the other arguments,

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it's a matter of global equilibrium. It's the interconnectedness of global threats that means acting locally is not enough. We live in a global village and we have to deal with global threats by acting not just globally but by completely rethinking the nature of action – urgently. The world has to become a healthier and fairer place for all its citizens, increasing security for all people and improving the chances of those worst off.

So what can make a difference? International sanctions, increased international aid, reform of international patenting laws to ensure the drugs are actually affordable in poor countries – all of these things help. And well-targeted action in cyber space is one of the ways to go.

So if you really want to make a difference in the face of these enormous global threats, make sure it's well-targeted political action and do some of it in cyberspace – go to the avert website and make a difference to an aids orphan today.

Thank you.

References

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