Power to the People:
Creating change from the ground up

Communities in Control Conference
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Presentation by
Luke Hilakari (Victorian Trades Hall Council),
Rodney Croome (equality activist),
Katerina Gaita (Climate for Change),
Dr Sonja Hood (Community Hubs Australia),
Matthew Phillips (GetUp!)
Facilitated by
Brett de Hoedt (PR expert)
(Watch this as a video | Listen here)

About the presentation:

There's more than one way to win a spat and if you're working to create change in your community, you need to be adept at all of them. Politics is a competition of ideas, and the community sector can't shy away from that, it must be in the thick of it. Hear from weary veterans and charged-up crusaders on how to mobilise the grassroots and get them rallied and ready for the many battles ahead.

Brett de Hoedt:

Welcome to the afternoon session on day one of Communities In Control 2017. My name is Brett de Hoedt. It is a pleasure to be here. I'm going to facilitate the next hour of conversation aimed at enlightening you as to how to engage the population — the great unwashed out there — and create positive social change.

It's a joy to be here. I've been involved in every single Communities in Control conference since it began. It's an annual milestone. It's my North Star. I've told Kathy and Dennis many times over that there is nothing that will stop me being in here. And, indeed, I've been here when I was very, very ill. I've said no to high-paying corporate gigs to be here. I've postponed elective surgery to be here.

Which is why I was surprised last year when I received a long and halting voicemail from Dennis explaining that there would be no Communities In Control conference for 2016. This surprised me. But I said, look, let's make the most of it and let's meet for lunch perhaps and we can get together. Still nothing came back from Dennis. Days later, I got a text message saying, "No, don't turn up at our office. We're really busy. It's best that you're not here." I was confused. But isn't it just great to be all back here together again for 2017 for the first time in two years? Excuse me, Alan, I'm talking.

Alan:

There actually was a conference last year.

Brett de Hoedt:

There actually was a conference last year? Without me? Pop quiz. Who attended Communities In Control 2016? Get out!

Thank you. That extravagant gag was bought to you with the assistance of Alan Matic, ladies and gentlemen. Well, we are here, and I was shunned last year but I'm back. You know why? I'm desperate and it's showbiz.

So we're back. We have an hour to talk about creating change, about getting people involved from the grassroots up — because people, allegedly, have the power. Five panellists join me on stage. After I briefly introduce them, I'm going to throw some questions at them, and you too will ask your questions and share your wisdom.

Rodney Croome has been an advocate for LGBTI equality for almost 30 years. He has a small cult following, located at table four. He led the successful campaign to decriminalise homosexuality in Tasmania, which was utterly remarkable because that was a different era in terms of our social milieu — almost a different age. He was the founder and until last year national director of Australian Marriage Equality. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2003, and was Tasmanian Australian of the Year in 2015.

One thing I know about marriage equality is we need a plebiscite before we have it. Ladies and gentlemen, if you're in favour of marriage equality, raise your hands and say "aye". Motion carried! Now we can all get on with business. I do that on behalf of two gay male friends. One's a caterer and one's a civil celebrant.

Dr Sonja Hood is CEO of Community Hubs Australia. In my words, not Sonja's, Community Hubs Australia creates hubs, gatherings of women who are socially, culturally, or economically isolated. Those hubs take place in schools across Australia where good things happen — job skills, life skills, social connections. Sonja's worked in the US, UK and Australia, always one step ahead of the law.

I'm currently developing a website for Community Hubs Australia. I don't usually swear in presentations, but I'll have to make an exception here. At the first meeting, I said, "Sonja, this is terrific. You're taking the opportunity to really up your digital communications game. Big opportunity." She said, "I know, Brett. This is very important. Don't F it up." So with those eloquent words ringing in my ears, we've set forth on an exciting collaboration. I'm not making that up.

Luke Hilakari is Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, working with some of the workers in our economy at the lower end of the socio-economic scale under the banner of We Are Union. He's had some pretty high profile media success with some hashtag-based campaigns, and physical actions, and appearances in parliament that upset Malcolm Turnbull's day. Afterwards, Luke, I believe you'll be leading a wildcat action and taking half the conference-goers out of the room. Thank you very much.

Katerina Gaita is the founder and CEO of Climate for Change, sometimes known as C4C. That is so modern. Honestly, I can barely get my head around it. It's a non-profit, where some staff are even volunteer driven.

Their flagship campaign is Conversations for Change, which are conversations a couple of hours long that take place in people's home — a bit like Tupperware sales but without the plastic.

The idea is to have a "transformative conversation" face to face, human to human, house by house. We'll see how well this model works. And by the way, the standards that Katerina places on those two-hour meetings in people's homes are pretty high. If all attendees at the party don't flush their car keys down the toilet and walk home, it's declared a failure. I like that.

Matthew Phillips has been described as a seasoned campaigner. Who described you as seasoned? It makes you seem old and burnt out. But you're fresh and hungry, are you not? He's the Human Rights Coordinator at GetUp! You know all those emails that are in your inbox unread? They're from him.

That's such an easy gag, Matthew; I apologise. But it got a laugh, so I'll be using it again.

He's leading the No Business in Abuse campaign which targets corporate involvement in mandatory detention, because it's very lucrative for some corporations out there. Corporations we've probably all dealt with, today, in one way or another. He's also a bit of a hashtag activist with the #LetThemStay, which aims to prevent the deportation to Nauru of asylum seekers. I haven't used that hashtag. I'm more of a #IStandWithSchapelle or #OneDirectionIMissYou. I think I speak on behalf of all of us here. Ladies and gentlemen, please make our five panellists very welcome.

All right, five brains, real campaigners. They have made change happen. They're very happy to take your questions. Don't be shy, and don't make the classic mistake of leaving your chance for the last minute. It'll come, and it'll go. Let me throw one to the panel — anyone and everyone, in for your chop.

It’s easy to categorise this era as one of great self-interest and narcissism and selfies and consumerism. Is there actually an appetite among real people — not the people in this room (bunch of lefties) — to get involved and create social change?

Sonja Hood:

Absolutely. There's a huge appetite for change and a huge appetite for change on the ground. We work with migrant and refugee women and preschool children. We’ll have 70 sites by the end of the year, in three different states. Our latest hubs are opening in Ipswich — Pauline Hanson heartland — and we've been greeted there like the second coming. People are genuinely pleased to welcome refugee and migrant women, to help them learn English, to help them understand our school system, to help get their kids school ready, and to help them with volunteering or job pathways or whatever they want. I’m constantly amazed by the generosity of people with their time and with their goodwill.

Brett de Hoedt:

Because to make those hubs happen, you need the support of schools and policymakers. So you've got to persuade people that there's a need for it.

Sonja Hood:

Absolutely. So we sit in state and Catholic primary schools in three different states. We're funded by philanthropy, by the Federal Government, by state governments. Nobody in their right mind would have started up a system like this, with that much bureaucracy. But it works, because at the ground level there are people who understand the needs of their community. They can connect services with people in their

communities. And if you move all of the bureaucracy and nonsense out of the way, people can generally get things done.

And when you're in a community, the default reaction to new arrivals is generally to welcome them, not to hate them. That doesn't play well in media, but it plays very well in the community.

Katerina Gaita:

I would agree, from our experience, that there's definitely an appetite to get involved in many levels of campaigns. I want to draw on some research. Can I have a show of hands. Who's familiar with the Common Cause work? Not that many. Okay, I'll explain. At least 30 years ago there was research done on people's values across about 60 different countries and cultures. Overwhelmingly, it found that over 70% of people are motivated by intrinsic or unselfish values.

Interestingly enough, that research was repeated last year (or the year before) and 74% of people are still motivated by those values, across many, many countries and many, many cultures. Overwhelmingly, the majority of people do care, and they care about making the world a better place. We are generally motivated by the same things.

Interestingly, that research also showed that 78% of people believe that most *other* people are selfish, and this actually creates a huge problem. Because there's a phenomenon called pluralistic ignorance (a terribly ugly name) which is the idea that people all think one thing but think everybody else thinks the other thing, and so don't act on or stand up for the thing that they believe in.

You might have seen that yourself if you hear a racist or a sexist joke at a party. Instead of standing up and protesting against it, you think, "Oh, everybody else is laughing, nobody else is objecting, so it must be me

who's misunderstood the joke." And everybody else is having the same thought, so nobody stands up.

The research shows that when people think that other people aren't motivated, when they think that other people are selfish, they don't get involved as much. Pluralistic ignorance creates this cycle where we don't do the things we want to do and we don't believe in as many things. I think one of the lessons of that research is to be one of the first people to stand up and do something, to *let people know that they're wrong about their assumptions*. The research also shows that as soon as people are shown that their worst assumptions aren't true, that breaks the cycle.

The other part of that research says that while we might be predisposed to key values — unselfish values — we can be primed at any one moment to act with selfish values. It's not as some people have *these* values and some people have *those* values. We all actually have the whole gamut. I can be motivated by power and status and wealth. I'm not generally predisposed to do that, but if I go to a shopping mall with lots of sale messages I can be motivated that way. Equally, perhaps Donald Trump could be motivated to act more selflessly if he went for a long walk in nature (though that might be a bit of a stretch).

Different contexts can prime different values. In our society, at the moment, we have a lot of marketing messages, which means that even though we might be generally predisposed to be selfless in our behaviour we're constantly being primed the other way. It's also really important in our work to try and counter that — not to be sucked into the idea that we have to talk only to those selfish values.

Brett de Hoedt:

Katerina, I don't think Donald Trump *has* experienced nature. Even *walking* is beyond him.

Katerina Gaita:

That might be a bit hopeful.

Brett de Hoedt:

I know research exists about our common values and being very positive — although there's also a lot of evidence that people act very differently in their day-to-day behaviour than the way they say they do when responding to surveys.

Matt, I want to ask you a question. GetUp! has run many campaigns on many issues and you've got the data to see what people are actually interested in, what they actually respond to. We don't necessarily triage issues — deal with the most important and urgent first, and so on and so forth. Anyone working with animals knows that you might get a bonus degree of involvement from the community, just because you're dealing with animals. What sort of issues inspire people to get involved?

Matthew Phillips:

There are a couple of aspects to that. In some ways, it's the way that we frame and message a particular campaign. I recently read a quote by a cognitive linguist who works on messaging and framing. I'm paraphrasing, but the main point was that the current global crisis in human rights is in part because human rights advocates have failed to convincingly provide a values-based argument for why human rights are important.

Sometimes we get hung up on talking through technicalities. We're preoccupied with engaging in the kind of discourse that we understand amongst each other, but we fail to communicate what we mean, urgently and compellingly, to the public. In part, that question can be answered through the way that we communicate our campaigns, communicate our *values*, in a way that enlists people in support.

Another thing is that, at least in Australia, issues seem to arrange themselves through the way that politics operates, in a way that means that some of them will be hot for a period and others not. It's always something to bear in mind, when our opponents are pushing a particular line, to consider how to engage with that in a way that doesn't politicise the debate to a point that's beyond achieving a good outcome.

When something becomes highly politicised, both sides can sometimes run a narrative that becomes, in the end, unhelpful. When we're looking at the politics of the way that these issues play out, sometimes we need to be more *disruptive* in the way that we shape the terms of the debate, rather than operating within the sphere that's been allocated to us.

Brett de Hoedt:

By disruptive, what do you mean? More bold? More forthright? More confrontational?

Matthew Phillips:

Yeah. I think being more bold is one way to go about it. I've had most experience in the refugee and asylum seeker space. In the last 15 years we've seen the policies and the debate around people seeking asylum, people seeking safety, become more and more toxic.

One thing that we did when looking at that very issue was to say, well, the policies are based on four things. Majority public support — a lack of public opposition in serious numbers to those policies. Bipartisan political support for those policy abuses. Corporate engagement and complicity in that system. Then the fourth leg of the chair, if you like, was the permissions by the PNG and Nauruan governments to keep the camps open.

Rather than trying to change the discourse — how we talk in the public space about people seeking asylum — in the first instance we just targeted the most vulnerable leg of that chair, corporate engagement. What they did with *No Business in Abuse* was to make having your business activities associated with those camps toxic. To this day, there's no company willing to take on the contract on Manus or Nauru due to the reputational, financial and legal risk.

What that did was disruptive, in that it changed the nature of the debate. Because the government now is faced with a problem — they've got no-one to run those camps, so something has to shift. And that's opened up opportunities to have a discussion based more on shifting people's hearts and minds.

Rodney Croome:

I'd like to pick up on that in terms of the marriage equality debate, which is a good example of what you're talking about. Those forces in Australia that want to stop marriage equality from happening try very hard to muddy the waters — to distract attention away from the key issues of equality, of people's aspirations to have the same opportunities in life as everyone else — and to make it about conflict; to make it about Margaret Court and whether she deserves to have an arena named after her or not. Which isn't the issue.

Too often groups that oppose the reform, knowing that they've lost the debate on whether two guys should be able to get hitched or not, will take the public debate down these paths: What about the children, or religious freedom, or respecting aging tennis stars? That's why it's so important to (to use your word) *disrupt* that by doing our best to bring it back to the personal; back to what will, as you said, Matthew, engage people's hearts and minds.

Because we know that when there's politicisation of the issue, when there are these heated distractions, people turn off. LGBTI people become frustrated. Their families become disillusioned about whether we can actually achieve this reform. And middle Australia goes, "It's too hard." We always in our work have to bring it back to who's affected and why it matters to them — to remind people that it's an urgent reform, particularly for those elderly same-sex partners who want to marry before they die.

I know it's a bit of a cliché when people say, "Oh, personal stories make the difference," but in my experience, over 30 years, I've found those personal stories are crucial.

In the case of marriage equality — where, to begin with, there were many people didn't quite understand what the reform was, and now where there are a few people stridently trying to stop it, personal stories have a really, really important role to play. As activists, as advocates, we have to make space in all the heated debates for those people to come through and talk quietly about why this matters to them.

I was in Geelong two weeks ago. There's been a bit of a debate down on the Surf Coast about the council raising rainbow flags (another heated debate that's a bit of a distraction).

But at the forum that I spoke at, there were people from Geelong who had really important stories to tell about why this reform mattered to them. How they'd been to visit their local MP, Sarah Henderson, a Liberal. How they changed her mind. And how they hoped, again, to push her further towards supporting a free vote in the Liberal Party.

I could see that story changing the narrative and giving people the hope that they needed. Giving them a path forward. Which on a reform like marriage equality — which the majority of people support but which still isn't happening — is very important for maintaining engagement and giving people a sense that there's a way forward.

Luke Hilakari:

I might just follow in with Rod and Matt's point. Starting with Matt's point. He spoke about the Common Cause research; people need to look it up and check out that work. But one of their key takeaways is that facts and science convince people of nothing. If that was the case, we would not have a debate about climate change. It would just be done. We would not have a debate about Gonski in education funding. It would just be done. What changes people's minds is where Rod was strongly heading towards: It's about storytelling.

Storytelling needs great narrative arcs. You need good guys, and you need bad guys, and you need victims. You need a vision — a hope — if people are to head in your direction. At Trades Hall, we do a lot of campaigning. We want to campaign from a place of authenticity. So if we want to have a conversation in the community about healthcare, it won't be me going out there talking about healthcare, it'll be a nurse. If you think about the debate about healthcare, who would trust about what's going on in your local hospital — a nurse or a politician? I know who everyone trusts. It's the nurse.

So having a nurse from the local Frankston Hospital hitting homes at Frankston, having conversations at the door, is really, really important. It changes people's minds and it changes people's votes.

The personal story counts, whether it's your own story or a story of your occupation - firefighters talking about emergency services, say, or doctors doing the same thing, teachers talking about education. You have that opportunity too. You come from these amazing community organisations, and you'll be trusted absolutely on the areas in which you do your work and give advice.

That's the place you need to come from. Don't come from the domain of facts and science, because you won't convince a soul. Tell the personal story of the people you're working with.

Audience member:

How do you convince non-believers that climate change exists and that we're affecting our environment?

Katerina Gaita:

This is one we get a lot. Our work really is trying to help people who do understand climate change and the changes that are needed, people who are committed to those changes, to have better conversations with the friends and family in their networks about that — to get them on board, so that we have the social climate that we need for the changes we need from the people (mainly people in government) who can deliver it. As soon as people hear that, they think "How can I convince those deniers?" But the reality is that polling shows that true deniers only make up about 7% of the population. Unfortunately, a lot of them are in powerful positions.

Social diffusion theory — I don't know if you're familiar with it — describes how change passes through society. It starts with a small group of people who we call innovators. They come up with an idea. They're the guineapigs who try it out. If that succeeds, the next group of people see it and they take it on. They're called the early adopters, the trendsetters.

They're the ones who really get something going. When enough of them have taken it on board and talked to people so that they know about it, the next group of people, called the early majority, take it on. They're the critical mass that you need for any change.

What that tells us about changing anything, whether it's society or your school, is that the people we need to engage are not the deniers. The people we really need to engage are the majority of the population, who would say, "Yes, climate change is real. It's serious. We should be doing more. Australia should play a leading role. Even at some cost." Most people in Australia would answer yes to all of those question on a questionnaire. They love renewable energy.

But if you gave them another survey that said, "What do you care about? What do you worry about? What do you think about? What do you talk about? What do you *vote* on?" then climate change just isn't up there. In terms of climate change, they're the people that we need to engage. We have to convince them of the need for the action that we're proposing.

I did once have a really interesting conversation with a denier, largely by accident. To cut a very long story short, the best tool we have is to listen and understand those people and ask them questions. If you can do that, it's amazing where the conversation can go and how what can often seem like a barricade can disperse.

But that's another topic that we might cover if we had more time. As it is, my answer to you would be “Don’t worry too much about trying to convince those people.” I don't often try to convince deniers. We want to convince people who have different ideas from us, but the people we actually need to get on board are the people who are almost already there and just need to be convinced how serious and how urgent this issue is, what needs to be done about it at a large scale, and how they can play a part. We’ve found that the biggest thing turning people off action on climate change is just that they can't see how they can play a role. If you can paint that picture for them, and give them a vision, and show where they fit into that, they'll want to get on board. So those are the tools I would use in your school. I’m also happy to chat with you afterwards.

Brett de Hoedt:

I'll throw a question to the panel. We say that politicians and policymakers are poll driven. In fact, we downgrade them for being so poll driven. Yet there are some issues out there, big, fat ones — I'm thinking of physician-assisted dying or voluntary euthanasia, marriage equality, maybe even overpopulation — where there’s quite overwhelming significant long-term public support for one direction, and yet policies and politicians still do not move in that direction. What gives? Rod, I'm particularly interested in your view on this.

Rodney Croome:

Well, on marriage equality, they are giving — slowly. We've seen a slow buildup in the number of supporters in the federal parliament over the last few years. That buildup corresponds to increases in popular opinion, although with a long lag time, to the point now where there's a majority in both houses.

If the Liberal Party allowed its members to vote in favour, it would pass tomorrow. That is the block. That is why it doesn't happen. We can see that there has been progress, and the progress has been largely because of the personal storytelling that we've emphasised so much today.

When I look at those countries that have achieved marriage equality already through legislative action (and not just through having a bill of rights) the crucial element they had that we lack is leadership at the top. Malcolm Turnbull supports marriage equality, of course, but he obviously doesn't think it's important enough for him to take a risk on. Julia Gillard was the same — it's not a partisan thing. We've always lacked strong, courageous leadership at the top.

That's meant that we've just had to work stronger from below. When historians look back on the marriage equality campaign, they'll see it was almost entirely a bottom-up campaign. Even if we achieve marriage equality in this term of government, it'll be because there are backbenchers in all of the parties with the goodwill and the courage to work together to get legislation through. It's not impossible. I think it can happen. But when it does it'll be because of those backbenchers who work together to achieve the reform.

I've been in situations before where that's happened. Tasmania was the last state to decriminalise homosexuality. That was actually achieved under a Liberal government, in the state least likely to succeed on gay rights, because people worked across the parties together to achieve reform. I've seen it happen before and I'm hopeful it will happen again.

Luke Hilakari:

Brett, polls are not enough to convince a politician to do anything. Especially a single poll.

Politicians are primarily interested, I suppose, in remaining a politician — no one's surprised by that — and then in remaining in government. So when you think about an individual poll, it's not enough. They worry, "Will that issue move enough votes to flip their seat?" If it does, then you've got a poll you could worry about. But they're also interested in internal solidarity and advancement via internal party ramifications, so it's multilayered. Let's say the majority of Australians support the death penalty. That's not going to change votes, because there's not enough heat behind it to actually flip any one seat.

Katerina Gaita:

I was going to say something similar — that just because something is supported by the majority, that's not enough unless that majority is actually prepared to vote on that in the end. There are different reasons for that on different issues, and different solutions. A lot of it is about strategy, too.

On climate change, I think it's a bit more complex. The vast majority of people say that they want stronger action on climate change, and yet we're not seeing it from our politicians.

What really got me into the work I do, in fact, was watching the carbon tax debate unfold. When the carbon tax was first proposed 60% of people actually supported it, believe it or not. Throughout that debate, the majority of people still believed that climate change was real, serious, and urgent, and felt that we should do something about it. And yet that clearly became a very toxic issue. Even though they believed that we should be doing something about climate change, people seemed to vote against it.

I remember hearing often at that time, "I believe we should be doing something about climate change, just not *that*."

And the reality is that if we want to fix climate change, we're going to have to make changes that are not going to be comfortable for people. They're going to cost money. They're going to be disruptive.

Brett de Hoedt:

Katerina, that interests me because I work in social marketing. Everyone talks about the power of stories. I have a limited faith in stories, I must be frank. I know that's counter to your views and experience. But stories are all great until the suggested remedy hurts *me*. In terms of school choice, more people on the bloody roads slowing me down, paying more for electricity (although I've just spent $88 on a quick dinner at blah-blah-blah) stories are great, but gee, there are a lot of other factors in the mix, aren't there? Like status and comfort and cost and convenience. And sir, you have a question from the floor.

Audience member:

I do. Dean Beck from Joy 94.9. I'd like to know how you deal with dissent within the ranks or people becoming apathetic. Rodney, marriage equality has gone from one umbrella organisation to three or four; Luke, you've had to deal with all sorts of drama in the trade union area —

Luke Hilakari:

What are you talking about?

Brett de Hoedt:

One big happy family.

Audience member:

Katerina, I don't know whether you've ever planted trees in the wrong spot or something like that, but how do you deal with dissent within your ranks and keep your own people on board?

Luke Hilakari:

Oh good, I'll start. We're a broad church, right. Unions are democratic organisations, and their leadership is voted on by the rank and file. But from time to time, we've had a few bad apples. It wasn't the media or a royal commission that expelled them. That was us. We got rid of our own. We're the ones who exposed it.

We have to keep up this high standard, because it's our members who pay this money. Each and every week, the cleaners at Moonee Valley — I used to organise here — the cleaners, the security guards and the hospitality people are paying $12 to the union. They're on some of the lowest wages, and they're doing that to improve their working lives. So if anyone falsely takes a dollar, or doesn't do a bargain that improves their working life, we need to crush them. That's what we go about and do.

That might seem obvious — but on the other end of the scale, people talk about the CFMEU. I can see a great rank and file CFMEU member, Lisa, over there. If you're working on a construction site, and you know that that every ten days a worker will be killed on a construction site, which union do you want looking after your son or daughter? I'll tell you; the CFMEU. That's why their membership numbers on construction sites are through the roof.

Brett de Hoedt:

Luke, I've got to ask. I'm going to ask you a very tough question.

Luke Hilakari:

How tough?

Brett de Hoedt:

The CFMEU are the union that's total control over building sites for a very long time, and yet that's still happening. Isn't that an argument to say, "Hey, CFMEU, you need to be doing something very, very differently?"

Luke Hilakari:

When we talk about disruption, you'll see disruption from time to time on building sites. That's appropriate, because the laws aren't right. *We don't control the laws.* That's a huge problem. When I can be fined thousands and thousands of dollars for not producing a piece of paperwork to give 24 hours to walk onto a site when I know something is about to collapse, what am I going to do? Am I going to file that piece of paperwork? Or if your kids were working on that site, would you want me to get on that site quick smart and get it fixed?

So we make those tough decisions. We get penalised by the law. We then have to pay the fines. And yet the companies that do this stuff get away pretty much scot free. We've seen in the media recently a conversation about breaking the law; well, sometimes the law is wrong.

If this was a football match, we'd change the rules to make sure that the game gets played fairly. Well, we need to have that bigger conversation in Australia too.

Brett de Hoedt:

Pop quiz. We're in a pretty progressive, leftie, community-orientated room. Who here is a member of a union? Hands up.

OK, hands up if you *could* be a member of a union but *aren't* a member of that union. Just a snap poll. Hands up high. Don't worry, they can't ...

Luke Hilakari:

I've got all your faces. I've recorded it <laughing>. You can't be part of the wildcat strike. You won't be covered.

Brett de Hoedt:

You won't be walking with a banner down the high street.

There's a question from the floor there. Sonja, I want to talk about the issue of "does size matter" in a moment. Madam.

Audience member:

Hello. My name is Michelle and this question is for Rod. I'm a marriage celebrant. At recent professional development session, 50% of the room were opposed to performing same-sex marriages, which shocked me. How will we address this once it does pass?

Rodney Croome:

That surprises me too. That was professional development for celebrants?

Brett de Hoedt:

A broad cross selection of celebrants? Or were they all from South Australia?

Audience member:

It was in Grafton, a small country town in northern New South Wales, and I don't know whether that has any bearing on it. It might. But it really did surprise me. When we do our training to become celebrants, we discuss discrimination and learn that we cannot be seen to be discriminatory. When these people were speaking in this way, it concerned me greatly.

Then the other part of me thought, well, if I was in a same-sex relationship I wouldn't want that particular person marrying me anyway. But they'd have to ring that celebrant and talk to them to find that out, being crushed all over again. It just concerns me.

Rodney Croome:

There has been quite a discussion about that issue recently, particularly when the government put forward legislation for marriage equality last year. That law gave celebrants an exemption from antidiscrimination laws if they don't want to perform same-sex marriages, but only same-sex marriages. We objected to that because it was clearly discriminatory.

I think a compromise that is being discussed now is the possibility of allowing celebrants who have religious values that mean they don't want to be marrying same-sex couples to nominate themselves for a new category, religious celebrants. In that category they can perform religious ceremonies, but anyone who remains as a civil celebrant will be governed by anti-discrimination law.

Brett de Hoedt:

That does allow right wing conservatives to say the gay lobby wants to force celebrants to marry gay people. Again, doesn't that become just another distraction?

Rodney Croome:

Yes, it is potentially a distraction. They often make that claim. But the response, I suppose, is — and when I say, I'm basing this on surveys that have been done in the LGBTI community — that overwhelmingly LGBTI people say we don't want trade-offs in return for marriage equality. We don't want holes punched in anti-discrimination law for civil celebrants or bakers or florists or whomever who currently are governed by those laws so that they can turn us away.

Now of course, no one wants to be married by someone who doesn't want to marry them. But as soon as we start punching holes in anti-discrimination law to allow marriage equality to get through, where does it end? Particularly if those holes are punched in the name of religious conscience. We've seen, in the United States, these kinds of religious freedom laws already beginning to be applied beyond the LGBTI community to interracial couples. I think we should be proud of our antidiscrimination regime in Australia and try and keep that solid.

If it's okay, can I just quickly respond to that point about divisions that was raised before? There are now several different groups campaigning for marriage equality. That's of course because last year the government put forward the idea of a plebiscite, and different people had different views on whether we should go down that path. I've been involved in this stuff for 30 years, and I've seen what deep, deep damage is caused within minority communities by fratricide (or sororicide, not to be sexist about it). I certainly would not want to see that happen again.

I'm glad that in the marriage equality movement, even though people are taking different paths, we tend to work together and respect each other's work. I think actually that's a good example of how people in communities can pursue different strategies, and take different actions, but still work relatively well together.

I don't know anyone in our community who would want to begin some kind of civil war, particularly at this critical time. That's not what it's about. It's about ensuring that we get to marriage equality having explored every possible option, every possible strategy.

Audience member:

It's something Rodney touched on briefly. I was wondering how much of an impact the media makes on these progressive issues. They're giving and equal voice, equal air time, to, say, the 6% of climate change deniers, or the minority of people who disagree with same sex marriage. Are they actually hindering progress in their efforts to give equal voice to all different sides of the issue?

Rodney Croome:

From my point of view as an advocate, there's two things to consider there. Firstly, yes, the other side will always have their voice heard. That's inevitable. So who should be the person speaking on our side, if you like? Wherever I can, I try and make sure that it's people who have a closer, intimate, personal connection to the issue who can talk about why it matters to them, so it's not just some advocate who belongs to an organisation but rather someone with a personal story.

It's also really important that we consider the role of *local* media in this debate.

Some of the most important people in the marriage equality debate in Australia are people whose names you wouldn't know and you will never know because they're working at a local level.

I'll mention Geelong again, because that's where I was most recently. There's a woman down there, Sharon Faulkner, who has been instrumental in getting local politicians across the line, getting local businesses up in support of marriage equality, and getting the Geelong Advertiser to adopt an editorial policy in favour of marriage equality. Her work has moved that community to a new place.

That's what really matters in this debate. A slanging match on *The Project* between Margaret Court and Waleed Aly isn't necessarily going to change anything., but people like Sharon are changing things in local media. I do my best to try and focus on that local media because of its importance.

Luke Hilakari:

I think you're worried about the proportion argument, and believe that coverage should be appropriately weighted. It isn't, but it should be. But the media matters less and less. The number one new source for people under the age of 30 is social media, either through Facebook and Twitter. GetUp! here will have a mailing list — I don't know, what is it now, one point something million?

Matthew Phillips:

One point one.

Luke Hilakari:

Yeah, 1.1 million. We've got 1.6 million members.

Change.org, I think — we hate them, don't ever use them, we'll talk about that later if you like, one-on-one — has another 1.3 million. We can talk directly to our members in an unfiltered conversation and get them to take action. Why would I want to always go through the media and have someone interpret the words I want to say and then put a spin on it and then have a counterpoint view?

You've all got membership lists. How you use them, how you value them, how you avoid spamming them — that's super-important in engaging your volunteers to make change.

Katerina Gaita:

It's true, the media is a key element, and that's frustrating, but the social diffusion theory that I talked about earlier also talks about how change passes through that curve.

It tells us that although people hear information in the mass media, and now social media, and in campaigns, a lot of that information just sits somewhere in our heads.

It's not until we have a conversation with someone that we know and we trust, that we process that information and we decide are we going to take it seriously, believe it. How are we going to respond to it? What are we going to do about it? So that's why it is so important for all of us who care about all of our issues to learn how to have those better conversations with the people who trust us about the issues we care about and get them on board.

Brett de Hoedt:

Hands up anyone who's changed an opinion on something of significance in the last 12 months?

They're hard to change. I actually think that even most of the people with their hands up are lying. Sometimes campaigners do believe that people's opinions can be changed through various means and methodologies based on science or based on messaging. But gee whiz, I know, selfishly — maybe I'm the only one in the room — I've kind of got my set of opinions. It's a suite. It's an ensemble. It's one of a kind. Occasionally, I may change something. I don't know if it's because of a conversation with a friend or a media report or a social media tweet.

Audience member:

I want to ask Matthew how we can genuinely change the narrative around refugees and asylum seekers. The focus is, rightly, on Nauru and Manus Island, but there are thousands of people on bridging visas living in our communities who are really in dire straits. People working in the community, in humanitarian settlement services, in other support services, all have to deal with the desperation of people on a daily basis. So how do we change that? We march in the streets, but that does nothing, really. How do we genuinely shift the community in terms of having a more humane approach to people in our society?

Matthew Phillips:

Thank you for that question. I think it's really timely. Just last week, Peter Dutton has gone on a rampage, targeting those 7500 people who are currently living in our community, seeking safety in Australia, but who have been prevented for up to five years from applying for asylum or protection in Australia. Many of them weren't allowed to even apply for a visa until late last year.

Peter Dutton has now announced an arbitrary deadline whereby those people need to fill out by 1 October very complex forms that require legal assistance, with an impossible burden on the overloaded legal centres that are providing this advice pro bono. And if they don't fulfil those requirement by 1 October, the government is threatening to deport them back to harm and to cut off their access to any kind of support services in the community. So it's a timely question.

We've launched a campaign called "Fair Process", which in the first instance looks to get the government to shift that date — it's arbitrary and it's cruel — and then to get them to put in place a fair process for people seeking safety in Australia.

For us, it goes back to telling stories. The government's been very clever in the way that it talks about offshore detention in terms that have sought to prevent us even seeing the people that its policies impact. These people have been in Australia for five years. Their children go to our schools. They work in our businesses. They study in our universities. They have lives here, and they are part of our community. There's something to be said for working with those people in whatever way they can to talk about what Australia means to them — to talk about their attachment to our community.

I really do believe that the majority of Australians wouldn't tolerate that treatment of people if they felt a basic human connection with them. I think the government's put in place all sorts of crafty ways to avoid us establishing that human connection. That's the challenge ahead of us in the next few months — to tell the story of those people in a way that Australians from all parts of our community can relate to them. Because I really don't think that they would stand by and let the government put in place such an unfair process if that was the case.

Sonja Hood:

It's a really important question. That the government does a tremendously good job of narrowing the entire migration debate down to one extremely important but relatively narrow issue, with the result that a whole gamut of people is demonised and we don't really have much comeback on that.

The vast majority of migrants living in our community now are here on a temporary basis. They're either here as temporary workers or as international students, they've got very few rights, and they're significantly exploited in our community. We're also slowly starting to demonise some of them through our media and through our conversations. They're terribly important to our economy for all kinds of reasons. Most of our kids wouldn't be able to go to university without the fees that international students are bringing in. It's now Victoria's second biggest export.

Matthew Phillips:

Biggest.

Sonja Hood:

Biggest. Really important. But we're not interested in the other side of the coin. I would say go back to some of those grassroots stories, those grassroots ways of interacting with people, whether it's through a community hub, or through your local welcome dinner, or through something that's going on in your community and that changes what the face of migration is. When you sit down and have a conversation with somebody that makes the face of migration a real personal interaction, not just a story, not just something that we did up for a PR agency online, and it will change the way everybody feels about this.

The other thing, since I've got the microphone, is that not everything is about government. Marriage equality is about government, yes, but not everything is regulatory. Sometimes it's up to us to make a change in the way we behave or the way we do things, whether it's climate change or whether it's extending a hand of welcome to somebody.

We can bypass an awful lot of that political process if we stop being so hung up on what they're saying about each other. Because that's all they're talking about. They're talking about each other. They're not talking about us half the time. Leave the airspace to the issues that really do need regulatory change. But the rest of us, I think, in the meantime, could be just getting on with the change in our communities.

Audience member:

I just wanted to float that all this morning, as far as I can remember, we haven't yet mentioned the other level of government, the grassroots level of government. It's really important that in all of these conversations we remember that the government that's closest to the people is local government. That's often where the power and the energy of community is, where the choices that community wants to be making as a whole come from. Can you reflect a little maybe on what local government has to contribute to your particular fields?

Rodney Croome:

Local government has played a critical role in marriage equality debate, with now 50 or 60 municipalities and cities across Australia having passed motions in support. The debates on those motions have often sparked debates in those local communities that wouldn't otherwise have happened. Because they're not capital cities, they're not the places where people think those kinds of decisions are usually made, but suddenly it's an important local issue. It's about inclusion in the local community.

So yeah, that's been absolutely crucial. We hear a lot about companies that support marriage equality, etcetera, but when historians look back, they'll look at local government as being one of the drivers of the debate.

Brett de Hoedt:

Panel, what is the next big issue that's going to inspire mass action and great disruption? Is there a group in the community that just hasn't found its campaigning mojo out there?

Luke Hilakari:

Treaty. That will be the next big campaign. The report came out from the Heart of the Nation; treaty is going to be a massive campaign. I worry it's going to be a divisional campaign. Marriage equality is still going to be a huge campaign. That's not going away. Secure employment for workers; the casualisation that you and your kids are facing is unbelievable. Great Barrier Reef — and then, last one, I'd say, in ten, 15, 20 years' time: Republic.

Matthew Phillips:

I'd add to that that when you look at Australian society, there's well over 25% of the population that don't speak English as their first language at home. That group of people is largely ignored by our politicians. Those communities are based across marginal seats all across the country, so I think there will be a consolidation and an activation of those groups.

Brett de Hoedt:

I also suspect some of those groups are much more conservative than the progressive left likes to acknowledge on a lot of social issues.

Matthew Phillips:

Perhaps. But not when they feel like their rights are under attack. What we've seen during the latest attempt at attacking 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act* has been a real consolidation amongst those communities. The recent citizenship changes that have been announced have had widespread rejection by multicultural communities in Australia. The government, and political parties in general, can't just continue to treat these communities as political footballs.

Rodney Croome:

In terms of the LGBTI issues, human rights for transgender people is definitely a coming issue. It's already here in terms of debates about transgender young people in schools. But most of the countries that have moved on marriage equality have found that that's the issue that breaks out after — that that's the issue that really excites people's imagination.

More broadly, a human rights act or human rights charter. There's movement in Tasmania and Queensland and, I think, soon in WA for state-based acts or charters. I would expect to see movement nationally, as well. That's a coming issue.

Katerina Gaita:

I don't know if these will be campaigns, but I think they need to be. Actually, they're really crucial to all of our campaigns and all of our issues.

They're related. I wanted to read something that someone posted in my feed on Facebook just the other day.

> *I was at a panel discussion tonight on the alt-right with four amazing writers. Gender was brought up, great points were made. It was a valuable discussion to have. Race was brought up; great points were made and it was a valuable discussion. The same was true when sexuality was discussed. So far, we're doing well. Class wasn't mentioned once by the moderator or the panellists. A lone question from the audience brought it up. Only one panellist responded. They shut it down immediately and implied that it was almost racist to bring it up. Apparently, discussions about class aren't possibly without bringing up whiteness.*

I'm not necessarily endorsing all of this, but I think it's a really interesting thing that, more and more, when I talk to friends who are interested in a whole range of issues, when I hear their stories about what they're campaigning on and what the barriers are, so many issues come up that all seem to go back to neoliberalism. That's the issue that's issue that is bringing up this big class divide playing itself out in our partisan politics. We have to get better at understanding how that issue has come about.

Neoliberalism is not something that just happened. It's been a very conscious project since the 1940s, when the Mont Pelerin Society was first established. I'm only just getting my head around it. But I think we really have to start thinking.

George Monbiot has written a really interesting article about neoliberalism being an invisible hand. When communism was a force, people knew what communism was and they could talk about it and discuss it and fight against it if they wanted to.

But most people wouldn't even know what neoliberalism means. I don't think I fully understand it. But it’s at play in all of our issues and it's something we have to understand, we have to name, and we have to fight against.

Brett de Hoedt:

Ladies and gentlemen, with time against us, please thank our panellists, Rodney Croome, Sonja Hood, Luke Hilakari, Katerina Gaita and Matthew Phillips.

ENDS