

The End of the World? Or The Birth of a Better One?

Transcript of *The Examiner*-John West Memorial Lecture 2009

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Ladies and Gentlemen and Peter Cundall [applause] it is great to be here tonight and first of all I want to say a few things about the man we are honouring, the extraordinary John West. One of my great joys already has been to meet his biographer who is sitting down in the front row. She can't stand up and take a bow because she is currently in a wheelchair but I refer to Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff. You have done John West proud and it is an honour to meet you. I didn't realise that John West and I had so many things in common. It's true! He wrote under the name of Adams, 'John Adams', and in the future I'm going to reverse the honour and write under the name 'Phillip West'. He was a Congregational minister and my father, the Reverend Charles Adams, was one of those as well. He was associated with this newspaper and so was I – *The Examiner* ran my column for about a year. I think they dropped it because it made a lot of people cranky, and both of us – that is John West and I – also had an association with the Fairfax's; I wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald* for a while. When he moved to the mainland he lived at Woollahra which is where my second house is; so I'm astonished, I think we were probably joined at the hip as some stage in some supernatural way. I don't do speeches any more, I gave them up years ago; I just sit and talk and chat and think aloud and it's dangerous. Performing without a net, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, so if you get bored or irritated don't hesitate to leave.

My oldest surviving friend is Barry Owen Jones (much loved, I think, in Tasmania), who spends a lot of time down here looking after Port Arthur. Barry and I have done so many things together over the years. I helped him on his great crusade to end capital punishment in Australia. He helped me crank up the Australian Film Industry in the early 1970s; we fought at the same ramparts on a variety of issues from censorship to refugees. When I moved to the bush to a little place called Gundy, pretty much in the middle of nowhere, it took a while to get Barry to visit because Barry doesn't like landscape unless there are ruins in it. If it does have some – preferably of an ancient cathedral – it makes him terrifically happy, but if it is just trees or crap like that he doesn't get all that excited. Finally, I lured him up, and he was actually test driving a new relationship, so a very nice woman came with him and I have to say 20 years later they are still together. But this was their trial period; they were both on P plates and she'd given him a pair of those preposterous big running shoes, Adidas things, which on Barry looked as ludicrous as mouseketeer ears. I insist on taking him for a drive, so he hops in the front and we drive to the first gate and I stopped the four wheel drive and sat there and nothing happened and I said "Barry, it is customary on a farm to get out and open the gate and when I drive through you shut the gate", and he said "Ah, OK." So he gets out and approaches the gate, which was closed merely by a loop of wire, the cattle could open it, my little daughter could've opened it had she been around. It was the simplest open door gate thing in the universe. Barry approaches it with this immense brain and intellect and looks at it from about ten different views and he tugs at it and he obviously cannot work it out, so I'm sitting there and after a while I said "For Christ's sake Barry, open the bloody gate." He struggles with the wire for a while and finally, triumphantly, he opens the gate, I drive through and he closes the gate and he puts the loop of wire back on. I said "Barry, we have a

problem," he said "What's that?" I said "You're on the wrong side." Now, I mention this because despite this experience Barry, in my view, is one of the great Australian gate openers. He's opened the gate. He's a gate-keeper. He's discussed issues they didn't want to discuss. He's so far ahead of the game. I forget when he wrote *Sleepers, wake!*; it must have been 30 years ago.

Barry was what you might recall the Science Minister for the Silver Bodgie (Bob Hawke) so BOJ, which is what we called Barry Owen Jones, and Silver Bodgie didn't get on too well because I think Hawke was very irritated that people thought that Barry was cleverer than he was. Just to shut Barry up he let him establish a thing with the Orwellian title of the Commission for the Future. Barry asked me to be his founding chair so I said "What's it about, Barry?" He said "Well, to build bridges between the scientific communities and the wider community. To get them talking on the scientific and social issues and ethical issues in science and it's to look at all sorts of issues. For instance", he said, "what it's for is to get a discussion going on ageing, it will soon be possible to prolong the age of human beings by an order of magnitude and is that a good thing? Is it affordable? Might it simply prolong a pretty unhappy life for many people? That the sort of thing." I said "So, in a way you also want to make it so they can choose outcomes." He came up with a metaphor; we decided the Commission for the Future was to persuade people that the future was not an inevitability, it was not preordained, it wasn't like the Nullarbor Railway Line crossing Australia with a train coming towards you. It was more like a shunting yard, full of options, you pull levers, change directions. That was the mission.

At the first meeting, an extraordinary bloke – his name I've long forgotten – an English scientist who had been working building bombs, atomic bombs, turned up and he was seeking to expiate guilt by spending the rest of his life applying technology to disability. He made the point that blind people with the white cane tapping their way around are using exactly the same technology as they did in the Middle Ages. He wanted to come up with at a lot of low tech methods of making the lives better of people with disabilities. He said something at that very first meeting, an aphorism which absolutely astonished me, which is going to be the linking idea for what I say tonight. This is it! He said "Data isn't information, information isn't knowledge, and knowledge isn't wisdom." When I heard it I realised it was like Saint Joan hearing voices. I realised that this was a revelation to me. There were so many distinctions between those stages, those increments. So what I decided to do was to go and ask the cleverest people I could find in science what they thought were the issues we should be discussing. I wanted to get the data from them. I wanted to get information from them to see what should be turned into knowledge in the hope that it might produce at the end of the day some wisdom.

So, if you go to Canberra, you might notice the UFO landed within the parliamentary area. It's a huge domed building created by Buckminster Fuller and it houses the Australian Academy of Science and therein the great scientific brains of Australia. To celebrate the launching of the Commission for the Future, they had a dinner for me. Although it's a dome, it was a long table exactly like the last supper and I was plonked in the middle, which I found slightly embarrassing, with scientists ranged left and right and I said, "Gentlemen, I want to ask you a question which may be a boring question to you." I said, "How will the world end, with a bang or a whimper?" We're talking the early 1980s. Thinking about it flying over today I suddenly remembered the things that none of them mentioned; none of them raised the issue of population, for example. None of them raised the issue of supplying with food and water, this vast population. None of them discussed the problems or the threats which were starting even then to be apparent, of old and ancient diseases coming back, or new diseases becoming pandemic. This was about the time that what became known as AIDS (Acquired

Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was first surfacing. I remember writing columns about it before it had a name, but at that point none of those was mentioned. So the first bloke said, "The problem is the giant mouse." And there was much muttering about the giant mouse. I said "What's the giant mouse?" They were quite shocked that I didn't know. It turned out that somebody had created in their laboratory a very sizable mouse. And it was a precursor, if you like, to genetic manipulation. The scientist said "Think what this mouse means. It means that pretty soon we'll be able to create giant humans, they will be more intelligent, they will be disease resistant, they will live twice as long, and they will be fantastic specimens." And what we would have done is interfered so profoundly with evolution that it will render us ordinary humans redundant. He thought about it. "But some of us might be fortunate. They will keep a few of us on as household pets." So I jotted down "giant mouse".

The next bloke said "No, that's not the issue. He's sort of half right, but it's artificial intelligence." And he ran a similar argument. That what we were doing, or about to do, is to create a mega intellect, an artificial intellect on this planet which would be so amazing that once again we would be redundant, unnecessary and old fashioned. Once again a murmur of assent; all the scientists thought that was pretty good stuff. One by one they said their bit. Nuclear war was unremarkably dismissed, and they admitted a few cities would be knocked over and a few million people would die and that it wouldn't really upset the long term equilibrium of the planet.

Then a bloke sitting right at the end where I think Doubting Thomas sits in the original painting said "No, you are all wrong," he said "It's what I see in my lab every day on a dial. It's a dial that measures something that we call Green House Effect. It's a term from the 19th Century discovered by a, as I recall, Norwegian scientist." And he said "All around the world scientists are seeing the same thing. What it means is by 2050 the world will be uninhabitable." Never heard of it, and I have to say that it had the most galvanising effect on the scientists and all of them by the end of dinner on second thoughts said "Yes, that's it. That's the whopper." And that was 25 or 26 years ago, so I went back and I started getting people of the Commission to gather together the data which were being turned into information, which in scientific circles was becoming knowledge and we started running national and international discussions about this phenomenon. Since then it has gone through a whole lot of name changes. So after "Green House" it became "Global Warming", and then of course the Bush administration decided to hose it down and to call it "Climate Change" which sounds really quite nice and already the Obama administration is renaming it yet again as "Climate Disruption" which is probably closer to the truth.

We started having these discussions, national, international. It was one extraordinary day when, for the first time in Australia, we linked town halls right across the country, packed to the rafters with people, with international satellite links, (no-one had ever done this before) on which the faces of international scientists were beamed in, and we told this audience what the consensus was then, 25-26 years ago. The interesting thing, and I have never said this publicly before, but I say it in this context, was that that night I realised there were many people in the audience who wanted the worst case scenario. They were so angry with the world wherein they dwelt, they wanted it to be the final judge on rampant capitalism rather overlooking the fact that the problems was equally bad, if not worse within the Soviet Union and Soviet block, and when any scientist predicted that the oceans would only rise ten feet they were almost hissed off the stage; they wanted a huge, total inundation. They were also uninterested to hear that a lot of the problems weren't caused by the motor car but by termite mounds which were producing vast amounts of methane or by those pretty little rice paddies in Bali. But nonetheless, what happened that night, and I remember writing about it, was to some extent the birth of a new religion. That religion is still

insufficiently powerful to change anything. The wisdom still hasn't hit yet; the data, the information and knowledge, but not the wisdom.

On the other side of the coin, of course, we still have got these peculiar people who are climate change deniers, and I am sick of them. I just can't be bothered talking to them any more. It is an act of criminal folly to be a denialist given the dimension of the crisis. What's happened 25 years later around the world – there are millions and millions and millions of people who know the scale of it all, who recognise it and know it too well and agitate to change it. I live on a farm in the Upper Hunter and every night when I drive back to the farm I would drive through these immense coal fields that are being worked 24 hours a day. And half of NSW is now up for grabs to open more coal fields. Not one coal mine, no matter how sensitive the area in which it was being proposed or being dug, not one coal mine has ever been knocked back, and there are currently 1600 applications in NSW to extend or to open coal mines. Insanity! Insanity! And yet we are still doing it. Now, some of it we pump out locally, and I see it being pumped out of coal-fired power stations down the road, most of it is pumped out of course somewhere else, maybe in India or China, but it's our coal, and it's our responsibility. So I look at that with fascinated horror.

Now, I have got an old mate and his name is James Lovelock. James Lovelock, many of you know, came out with the dire hypothesis which holds that the world has to be seen as one living organism. Now he is no fool, and he inadvertently, accidentally, discovered the microwave oven when he was working on radar in the Second World War and it was his technology that proved there was a hole in the ozone layer. This bloke is regarded as a mega star in English science, but he is now in his early 90s. The thing I love about him is he keeps coming on my programme every couple of years and he says a wonderful thing; which you will like Peter, take note of this. He says that no matter how old you are today it's 90% likely that you will still be alive in two and a half years' time. Now isn't that great Peter, isn't that great? I cling to that. Now he takes a different view on Gaia; he thinks that climate change has so knocked the planet, so overwhelmingly thumped it, that it may never recover and it will certainly take a couple of hundred thousand years to do so. The state of play now. I brought him out to Australia last year, or the year before, on my lecture tour, he came on the programme, I said "How bad is it at the moment?" And gloom and doom is not enough for James; he wants to be gloomier and doomier, but he does so with good credentials. He said, "Well, at the moment my view is that millions of humans will be dead by 2050. We may be lucky to have some breeding pairs who can survive in a melted Arctic." Now that's pretty alarming. Let's imagine he's only half right.

I've got to tell you that every time they come on now, the members of the scientific community with the right to express a view, it's getting worse and worse, more and more apocalyptic. We know what the flow-on effects are going to be. We know for example for those Pacific Islands where we send refugees, or we did send refugees, under the Pacific Solution (gosh I miss John Howard). That those islands won't be there much longer and that already there are the beginnings of refugees from those islands. The sea rises at different levels, at different rates, in different parts of the world for reasons I don't begin to understand but they have already risen enough in some of the Pacific areas to upset the water. They haven't covered the islands. There is not necessarily much sign of that but they have upset the dynamics of the fresh water system. So the islands are becoming uninhabitable, so it's already beginning. We went berserk in this country over about 20,000 poor bastards trying get out of Iraq and Afghanistan; we treated them as criminals, I'm sure you might remember this small matter. What are we going to do when it's the entire population of Bangladesh? I mean we are living at a moment in history which is beyond belief the scale of the problem that faces us and we have a Federal Government, now, that still worries and

pussyfoots around and does far too little, far too late. Penny [Wong], who's a good hardworking lass, said to me at an airport when I was being cranky with her the other day "What do you want? Do you want something we can get through, or nothing?" I don't think that's the choice; I really don't. The reason I backed Kevin Rudd for the leadership, and I was the first journalist in Australia to do so. We conspired for years to get him that job despite the fact that he has very odd ideas on religion (he believes in it!). But I always thought Rudd was the only bloke who could knock Howard off. Part of the deal was that he would do the right thing on refugees if that arose again, and then he'd get stuck into climate change. So one's got to call in one's IOUs. So let's put climate change over there. We've had the data for years, the data became information, the information is solid knowledge and the knowledge is producing wisdom, but not in the political class. That's one of the reasons that Barry set up the Commission. Incidentally, governments think in electoral cycle terms. Their only concern is getting re-elected and anything that jeopardises that – forget it. So Barry wanted to set in train a thinking process so we can think about long term problems, one of them climate change. All those years and effort we put in at the Commission really achieved nothing. It achieved a much higher level of awareness and in terms of turning that into action, and at the end of the day action is all that matters, nothing. Not good enough.

There are so many wonderful things incidentally, but I'll come back to the optimistic side of it. The next thing is AIDS. I mentioned that before. I mentioned the fact that I had a lot of gay friends who were in the highest of high risk categories whose sexual conduct at the weekends – after being very distinguished academics, school teachers, graphic artists or film makers during the week – was, I knew, putting them into great danger. Because I was reading about this dreadful disease that was turning up at that stage in Los Angeles then in San Francisco, so all of a sudden it becomes obvious what the hell is going on and it is given a new name – AIDS – and how it worked; the modes of transmission were all known and understood pretty early on. It was 99% transmitted by receptive anal intercourse (sorry to be frank but that was what caused it.) The chances, I remember writing at the time, for a heterosexual in Australia getting AIDS was as remote as the death of Aeschylus. He was a bloke who was hit on the head by a tortoise that was flying over in an eagle's beak at the time and killed him. And yet the Australian Government ran a campaign called the Grim Reaper. Do you remember the Grim Reaper in which six or seven-year-old little girls, dear old ladies in their bowling costumes and almost everyone else in the community were seen as about to be skittled by this dread disease? I went ballistic because this was a huge fib. And guess what, the only mode of transmission that was never mentioned in any of the official documents produced at that time was receptive anal intercourse. Now, what was going on here? There's no time to discuss that. The point is we had the data, we had the information, we had the knowledge, but we didn't have a lot of wisdom. And now because we did not in fact say what was known about this disease, which admittedly changes its shape and dimension depending on which country you're in – AIDS in Africa is quite different in many ways from AIDS in Australia – what we have done is to allow 50 million people to become infected. We now have the world's worst pandemic and we knew about it. We knew about it in tons of time. We had the data, the information and the knowledge. Where the hell was the wisdom?

You can go on and on. Look at the Iraq War, well the data was dodgy of course because it was provided by people who were paid to lie up the chain. The information was completely spurious. The knowledge of the truth was hidden by the Bush administration and the lack of wisdom led to one of the most appalling wars in the modern era, and it's not over. Anyone who thinks for a moment that the rapid exit out of Iraq, which is going out of Afghanistan, that's a bit of a conjuring trick. Obama is trying to show America that he is still a tough guy and he is going to stay in

Afghanistan a while before they all pull out. We'll go to Afghanistan for the same reason. Not that anyone in their right mind believes that there is going to be a good outcome in Afghanistan. There has never been a victory of outside forces in Afghanistan in 2,000 years, and there never will be, basically. But the war in Iraq is a catastrophic abuse of that wonderful equation that was given to me at the first meeting.

But the classic which now everyone is obsessed with, and focuses on, is of course the Global Financial Catastrophe. Has there ever been an industry with more data than the international financial industry? The computer power they use for constant analysis of every iota of activity or information is beyond belief. The constant need for information for traders to use and manipulate. The first two things seem to be a lay down misere. The knowledge, everyone was pretty confident about the knowledge, and we had learnt from the last Great Depression, so it couldn't possibly happen again. So there was this great sense (I think) of outrageous over-confidence, but the wisdom, boy where was that? And we have to admit that the dynamic that led to the meltdown wasn't perpetrated entirely by George W Bush whom I don't miss at all; it was brought into being during the Clinton administration, so you had this continuity of deregulation and of letting the market go berserk. And despite all the warnings, despite the early warnings of say the S & L collapse, which I'm sure many of you remember. The savings collapse and loans collapse. Despite the Enron fiasco and all those other scandals that happened, nothing was done. No wisdom was applied to that situation. So what happens? This horrendous collapse, which I am pleased to hear hasn't hit Tasmania, yet. And it is important that this lecture be related to Tasmania. Well, I've got to tell you that climate change is related to Tasmania and so is the global financial catastrophe. Now once again I sit there in the studio at night thinking wouldn't it be lovely if we could just have some jokes now because here is another horror story about to be unveiled. The other night I had a very intense young Russian gentleman born in the Soviet and now living in America, who if you like, was the James Lovelock of the situation. He's basically saying, his message to Americans who have mortgages, is stop paying them, stay on in your house as a squatter, your legal rights probably will be better and the whole system hasn't even begun to crash and many, many people I know who are perhaps better credentialed than him, agree. George Monbiot, about whom many of you would probably read and know, has been warning about it, as have so many sane, sensible people for the last 20 years. This was a lay down misere, to see that it would happen.

It relates to another crisis which is peak oil and if all of these things are emerging they all interlock, they are all a part of the same issue. I'll get back to this idea of systems failure shortly. So, here are all these issues. The last time we had a problem like this was in the 1930s. It led directly to the death of 50 million people. There's no way Hitler would have got power in Germany had there not been the economic collapse, which seems to be about to happen again. So everyone, the Chinese, everyone's worried about the political instability that will come out of the economic disaster. Rudd's worrying about it. He and Malcolm Turnbull of course are jumping around worrying about it, but mainly because it's going to affect their own political careers. This is a simple truth, I think Kevin is a lovely bloke, much to be said for him, but his first concern is to stay in power and to be re-elected. Around the world you look at the compounding of these problems. All of a sudden there is an excuse not to do anything about climate change. And if anyone in this room imagines that there will be a lot of money, real money invested in alternative energy, in most countries they're kidding themselves. The one person who might do it is Obama. I'll come back to his notion of fundamental change shortly. So, I hate to use the cliché "the perfect storm" but boy do we have one, more than in any other moment in modern history, and probably in history, we are threatened on all sides by catastrophe and cataclysm. Now, the first thing that people do at times like this is that they either deny it, and we have had

denialists on climate change in office in Australia and in the United States, or they do what Al Gore warned against: they go from denial to despair, then they go from one hard point on the spectrum to total surrender on the other and they go out and buy a Hummer.

So there is a lot of that going around. There is a lot of “live, laugh and be happy for tomorrow we die”. The climate change issue will be put on the backburner. Thank God something is on the backburner with all the coal fired power stations, and it will have the focus on jobs, jobs, jobs. So you pile all these things up and they in turn relate to pandemics of illness. Because illness, like AIDS in Africa, comes out of poverty, and Africa is in incredible poverty and is because he isn't sitting at the rich man's table, it didn't enjoy the boom, nor did millions and millions of Americans. Here's an amazing thing: the most progressive US governor, it's amazing that I say this but it's true and everyone acknowledges it, is Swartzenegger. Swartzenegger did more, more quickly on climate than any other governor in the United States although he doesn't get the kudos from Gore that he might like when asked “Which government on earth was doing the best job?” Gore said “South Australia” and that made Premier Mike Rann pretty happy, but it's not enough in South Australia.

Anyway there's your dilemma, everything interacts, all our problems, pandemics and the whole lot, all come, and population; that's the one people don't discuss. It amazes me that it hardly ever gets a mention and yet when I wander around our region and I go to places like East Timor and the Solomon Islands, about 60% of the population is under 12. These are countries where there is no employment but there is effectively no economy apart from cutting down the few remaining trees and shipping them off to Europe or to Malaysia. So here is an issue where the great problem of population is not being addressed. I talked to Derek Sikua, or to whoever was the Prime Minister of the Solomon's that week, and they admit there is no programme. And yet the answer for that problem is the same answer as for AIDS in Africa, “It's a little rubber thing you put on your dick” to quote the Monty Python team; I wouldn't say anything as vulgar as that myself. And yet there is a terrible global consensus between the sophisticated theologians in the Vatican and the preposterously big ignorant fundamentalists in the Pentecostal movement in the United States. They've cut a deal on this so that one thing you can't do is proffer energetic advice on birth control let alone hand out these simple, cheap devices which stop the prevention and stop the spread of a whole variety of STDs, not simply AIDS, but also can help with the crisis in population. We all know the data, we all have the information and we have knowledge, but the wisdom in that case is catastrophic for sure.

So OK, we get to this point where the situation seems to be beyond redemption. What are we doing at the moment? What we are doing is propping up old ideas. The squillions that have been spent in Detroit on General Motors in particular. It is a madness to go back to that silly company which has got everything wrong for the last couple of generations and give them another trillion squillion dollars so they can lunge on. The only basis of the deal should be absolutely tough. It should be – if you want to keep making cars they have to be electric, they have to be hybrid, they have to be different and you are not allowed to produce mass- produced crap cars. Kevin says to the Coal Industry in Australia, “Sorry fellas, we are not going to subsidise you, that's over. If you are going to continue you are to pay for your own pollution and we are going to start pouring money, as Obama says he will, into alternative sources of energy”.

I was sitting with the librarian in the great library of Alexandria, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, as you know it's the world's most famous library in the ancient world and now the Egyptians have re-built it pretty much on the same site, a zappy modern

library. It has everything except books really, it is very digital and it looks like the Opera House. There is a bloke who runs it; he is a marvellous man and is also a world authority on water as well as on libraries. I met him in Sydney and he came on the programme, so I went back to see him and I said Egypt is already in spiralling problems. It is already a poor country, you could fire a cannon through the hotels of Cairo at the height of the season, no one is going. There are lots of reasons: the economic meltdown is the big one, and there is also the fact that the Gaza problem is occurring next door, lots of reasons for not going to Egypt.

Now we sat and looked at the world and he said "This is a wonderful time, this is the best of times not the worst of times. Don't you realise this is one of those moments in history when we are forced to re-think every basic assumption and to do it better?" And that's the simple truth of it, it won't work, the system is broken. If we simply prop the system up for another five, six or ten years, it will collapse again. We have to simultaneously attack the problem of population. Look, I know it isn't the population of India, or indeed China, that has caused the crisis in the global emissions. It's us, it's the Americans, but it is also painfully obvious that if the Chinese and the Indians fulfil their ambitions of living like us there'll be havoc. So population is now not a consideration in much of the lesser world. You're looking at ZPG [zero population growth]. But it's still a huge problem globally and in our region; that has to be addressed. You have got to work, not on letting the financial system off the hook, but to admit what is happening. To admit that it is incremental socialisation, the banks are being nationalised, that you can't go back to the free market model, that you have got to regulate the financial system, you've got to use wisdom. And if that means that across the world the rate of production, the rate of borrowings, the rate of life-styling improvement, if that's the word, slows down dramatically, so be it, because that is what has got to happen. It is systemic, we've got to tackle the system and we've got to do it brilliantly, we've got to do it best practice. The great thing is that at moments like this, ideas start everywhere.

I've got an old mate called Max Whisson. Max Whisson is a darling. I met him when he and I were conspiring to get the truth about AIDS out in Australia. He was running one of the major Red Cross Blood Banks. He knew that what I was saying was correct. He was giving me data and information for me to recycle and pointing out that AIDS was not going to be a major problem in Australia outside the gay community – for very good and simple reasons. We maintained that contact for years. And he invented a needle which jumped back into the syringe which prevented needle stick injuries and I was thrilled as my daughter, at the time, was working in ER at Mt Sinai Hospital in New York dealing with horror stories every night. I was always concerned that she was going to get a needle stick injury. So I was very pleased with this invention. Then he came back to me and said "What we have to do is build a canal from the ocean to inland cities that need water" and we cover them with this beautiful design he had made of a roof. (All our irrigation channels, incidentally, should be covered to prevent a massive loss of water through heat). He said all the way along there is a distillation process. At every point water comes out from channels on either side, which would be taken off and used. The big payoff is at the end of the canal when it arrives at its destination and then you turn it back to the ocean and he calls it the "Water Road". Terrific. No-one took it up. It seems to me Western Australia where he lives is a classic case. They did it with the famous pipeline up north. Then he came up with a better thing, he said "Do you know there is just as much water in the air as there is in the ocean?" I said "What are you talking about?" He said "The air's full of water. Have you seen an old refrigerator pouring water out under the condenser, have you seen the pool of water under your car in the garage? That's the water coming out of the air." He said "We could get it out of the air with windmills." So, I looked at some model works he'd done and it was incredibly elegant. He was

imagining. You could put a cluster of Max's windmills out in the middle of the Nullarbor and it would produce water out of the air. It is everywhere. It's over the Sahara as much as it is over the jungles of South East Asia, so wind would produce water. Pretty much everywhere you need it. I wrote about it, got him on the Inventors, I got more international inquiries about Max's invention than I'd ever seen in my life as a journalist. They came in from every nook and cranny on the planet. People instantly seeing that it was an idea they wanted to develop. To this date he has not received one cent of support from any Government in Australia. And it's just dying and he's getting on a bit. And I fear for the future.

As well as that every day I get a call from someone. Tim Flannery for example, told me about the geothermal experiment they're running in South Australia. Tim's invested in it. You know about it I'm sure, where you drill a hole down to the hot rocks and you produce essentially a steam engine. There is enough heat down there to run the world infrastructure forever. Certainly solar, wind, and on and on it goes. And there are certainly interesting ideas being developed in terms of finance. The microfinance communities who go into a poor country and give tiny loans, a few dollars to a woman in the village and she uses that money to build a small business and the success rate of the businesses and the very low rate of people who fail to repay the debt, is astonishing.

So this is a time for us to reach out and excel and exceed our aspirations. My only fear is that we were given a moment like this in our recent history and we let it pass. And that moment was the end of the Cold War. Many of you in this room grew up in the Cold War, as I did, dreading the future. Not watching the famous clock get closer to midnight. Seeing again and again near misses as various international crises teetered on the edge of catastrophe. Most famously the Cuban missile crisis, but that was one of at least half a dozen. So here we are, we have this terrible thirty or forty years of horror then suddenly, magically, it is over. Remember the wall came down and within minutes there was this great release of energy. I thought "this is it" a renaissance in the late 20th Century. There are billions of dollars that will now go into worthwhile projects instead of feeding the immense armies and the missile silos. We will stop hating and fearing each other and we will reach out and it will all be gorgeous. For about 10 minutes it was.

Then we replaced the reds under the bed with the Muslims. OK, the Islamist terrorists are a problem but let's look at it logically. There have been 30,000 deaths from terrorism in the last couple of decades. About 4,000 of those deaths were terrorist deaths in the Western world. Almost all the others were squabbles within countries between Islamic factions or Hindu and Muslim. The Tamils for example were the inventors of the suicide bomber. Almost all of those things are local squabbles and yet we allowed the world to be panicked into the "war against terror" and we allowed ourselves to be frightened into compliance as it suits a lot of people to have us afraid. It's the best way to manipulate anyone. So that opportunity was lost. That magic moment passed and we blew it. We mustn't blow this one. What we have to do at the same time is to find new forms of governance to go with it, because the other part of the "perfect storm" is the complete lack of faith for people at least in the Western world, and many other parts of the world, have for their Governments. In Australia you can get the entire membership of the Labor party and the Liberal party into this lecture hall. People who are passionate about politics are now often bypassing the political system and going into NGOs [non-government organisations] or into focus pressure groups; and that's how they're working and there are lots of lessons to be learnt from that. The point is that there is always hope, and there has to be. And I'm going to end with another aphorism that I absolutely love and it comes from Pablo Casals who was interviewed on his 80 something birthday in Madrid. Casals was a great cellist. He

was an old codger like me and others in this room tonight. He had a fairly gloomy view of the world around him and he was extrapolating with his worries into wider issues and then he fell silent and he said two sentences which don't seem to fit at all, and yet they fit perfectly. This is what he said: "The situation is hopeless. We must take the next step," and that is what I believe all of us should be thinking and feeling and trying to bring about now. The situations plural are hopeless, and we must take the next step, and we've got to do it better than it's ever been done before in human history.