Making Democracy Fit For Purpose In The 21st Century

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BY TIM HOLLO

the green institute

U3A "Making Australia's Political System Fit for Purpose in the 21st Century"

Good morning folks, and thanks so much for coming along today to engage with what I hope will be both a challenging and uplifting conversation. I'm going to argue that our governing systems, here in Australia and around the world, are absolutely unfit for purpose in the 21st century. They have created a world of polycrisis, of multi systems collapse, and they themselves are collapsing under the pressure they have created.

And I'm also going to argue that the solutions are right here – us, ourselves, together – and that communities all around the globe are recognising this. Rather than succumbing to cynicism, or chasing the siren song of the far right, or clinging ever more tightly to a crumbling castle of sand, many amazing communities are treating the abject failure of the existing systems as a liberating opportunity to reinvent them, and simply getting on with it – cultivating new governing systems from the grassroots up, in the ashes of the old world.

This is essentially the thesis of my book, "Living Democracy: an ecological manifesto for the end of the world as we know it". But I'm extending that thinking today, and testing out some newer ideas with you, which I look forward to discussing.

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that we're having this conversation on stolen land, land that always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I pay my respects to First Nations elders of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples and many more, from whom I've learned a tremendous amount about democracy, decision-making, conflict management, and learning to live interdependently with each other and the natural world. Indigenous worldviews deeply inform my political philosophy, and I acknowledge the wisdom they accumulated over millennia of learning to live together well, and their generosity in sharing that wisdom with us, inviting us to re-embrace what our cultures have lost and forgotten, what they have, unforgivably, tried to erase.

If we wish to have a future on this land we now call Australia, we will have to not only confront the wrongs of colonisation, but actively, deliberately replace the systems – by which I mean the structures of power and the worldviews that underpin and buttress those structures, following Gramsci's formula – replace the systems that created it with new systems informed by First Nations wisdom.

Let me give you a very specific example, published just last week,[1] before I take you through a few other stories that will put flesh on the bones of these ideas.

Last June, a research team from the University of Adelaide asked 253 people about their attitudes to authority and social hierarchy, and their perceptions of justice in society. In other words, they were getting a handle on their worldviews as related to structures of power. In October, immediately after the referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament, they asked the same people how they voted, and how they responded to the referendum's failure.

[1] https://theconversation.com/it-wasnt-just-race-and-politics-that-motivated-voice-to-parliament-no-voters-heres-what-we-found-when-we-dug-deeper-228006

The researchers found that those who like a rigidly hierarchical society and believe in the exercise of authority – being willing to submit to authority themselves, and wanting to maintain it for others – were more likely to vote no, and be pleased with the no vote. This was a stronger predictor than age, gender, income, political orientation, etc.

So, as the researchers note, it wasn't racism *as such* that killed the referendum. But the worldviews of hierarchy and authority certainly underpin existing racist structures of power, and helped maintain those structures by rejecting the marginal structural change the Voice represented.

In Living Democracy, I propose a way of thinking about systems – structures and worldviews – based around ecology, ecological systems thinking. Where healthy ecological systems are characterised by diversity, interdependence, and impermanence, we have found ourselves stuck in a negative feedback loop that has created systems characterised by separation (hyper-individualism, disconnection from the natural world), domination (social hierarchies, coercion, anthropocentrism), and the pretence, the illusion of permanence (the idea that this is just the way it is, there is no alternative). This flows through into structures of power that are individualist, adversarial, exclusive, extractive, superficial, and stuck in a status quo bias that holds back change. That's bad at any time. In the 21st century, in the unstable and volatile world these systems have created, when we will need so much more connectivity, interdependence, quick and high quality feedback, ability and willingness to come together across difference, it's devastatingly unfit for purpose.

We need to recover and re-embrace ecological worldviews, and cultivate systems of power supported by that thinking.

And we need to do it fast. Because the thing about doing the opposite of what healthy ecosystems need is that you can only do it for so long before you trigger tipping points, cause cascading collapse. And, as I said at the start, it's my contention that we're already there. We're no longer speeding towards the cliff. We've gone over the edge. We're in freefall. Our only question is – how do we want to land?

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When Europeans first invaded the Northern Rivers area of NSW and decided to build in the bend of a wide river, the First Nations folks laughed and told them they might not want to settle there, right on a flood plain. The white folk ignored them, of course. Despite repeated floods, the town of Lismore grew quite large, and the residents put in various flood defences, trying to protect themselves from natural systems, trying to conquer them instead of respecting them and learning to live with them. When local councils in the region wanted to change planning laws to take into account climate projections, state government actually stepped in to over-ride them, insisting for example that Byron Shire Council couldn't restrict building on dunes, despite clear warnings of erosion and sea level rise.

In 2022, two massive floods hit Lismore in quick succession, causing absolute devastation. Government was missing in action. There was very little in the way of emergency services,

even the second time around, leaving community members to look after each other, using phone trees, excel spreadsheets and paper lists to track down and help neighbours, and tinnies chugging down flooded streets to rescue them from rooves and trees. The community has also driven clean-up and recovery, in particular with housing, where government failure and market failure go hand in glove.

Just as with the fires two years earlier down the coast here, far too many people are still unhoused, living in informal arrangements, squatting, living in condemned buildings or in caravans, supported by friends and community members because both government and market have failed them.

When we've needed quick response but flexibility, recognition of change and willingness to change with it, compassion and appreciation of our common, entangled humanity, community self-organising has stepped up, because government and market and failed us. Because of course.

These are cases where the systems of domination and separation and permanence have brought climate collapse, government collapse and market collapse together in single, emblematic events. But there are so many more examples of each.

Consider Robodebt.

What happens when you have a social security system based on a deeply embedded philosophy of socio-economic hierarchy – lifters and leaners, deserving and undeserving – and a punitive view of enforcement? It becomes your personal fault if you're struggling, and the government's job to punish you if you fail. Combine this with outsourcing of core services, and with stripped away accountability, both political and legal, for both ministers and public servants, and you get a draconian, and illegal, system that drove people to suicide.

What's worse, even after the whole disgusting episode is now on the public record, the refusal of the new, largely toothless National Anti Corruption Commission to take it on leaves open the possibility that something like it could quite easily happen again.

There is so much evidence that taking an approach closer to a universal basic income, simply giving humans what they need to survive and letting them choose, together, what to do, works better for everyone. But no, our system simply must exclude and coerce. It doesn't know how to do otherwise.

I could spend the whole day taking you through examples.

The PwC and other consultancies outsourcing bonanza. Held to account in the public arena. Still going on, thanks to financial power, personal connections, the strip-mining of the public service, and sheer bloody bad habits, the gravitational pull of the status quo.

Universities have been turned into factories churning out widgets of "job-ready" workers (who, ironically, are worse trained for employment because of it) instead of institutions of

learning and wisdom. Curricula are stripped back to basics. Research is mired in mindless bureaucracy. Costs are cut while prices are jacked up. The marketisation of education has been a massive failure every single way you look at it. Everyone knows it. Literally. Nobody actually thinks this system is good. Somehow, nothing actually changes.

Dare I mention housing? It's bloody obvious that turning the basic right to shelter into an investment vehicle for the wealthy has led us to absolute crisis. No government is willing to act to change it. We have endless conversations about reducing planning controls in order to increase supply, when the problem is the financial incentives around ownership, and the culture of social hierarchy and coercive power.

And I don't need to mention continuing to expand fossil fuels in a climate crisis, do I?

All these, I hasten to add, are unpopular. Governments aren't doing these things because the public wants them to. They are acting against the public will, against the public interest, against good advice from the community and civil society, in a mockery of democracy.

Government is in crisis. Not just this government. Or the previous. Not the Federal Government, or the ACT, or the US. Government. Having stripped out connection and interdependence and diversity and the possibility of change, both in its structures and worldviews, it has destroyed its own ability to get decent advice, through the public service or public consultation or parliament or the ballot box; it has become hopelessly adversarial, and made negotiation and deliberation dirty words; government as an institution has made itself scelerotic. Protest and lobbying work less and less. Electoral systems of all kinds are breaking under the strain of splintering votes. Our Westminster system simply doesn't know how to deal with shared power arrangements or the need for urgency. And in a world where trust and connection have been destroyed, misinformation and conspiracy theories thrive, intersecting, of course, with the collapse of education and media.

But it's not just government. And it's not just the intersection between government and capital, where questions of corruption and state capture linger in the shadows, on issues like climate and housing and media regulation.

How's that private sector, that conservatives have long trumpeted as more efficient than government?

I have one word for you: Qantas.

Should I go on? 9 Fairfax? Or how about iiNet? For 15 years, I got great service with iiNet. In the last few years, it's been unending disconnections, slow connections, poor service. Banking is so bad we had a Royal Commission. Do we need to talk about the supermarkets? All of the problems of government apply to corporations – feedback mechanisms are broken, so market signals don't work any better than democratic signals. Competition has led inexorably to homogenisation or monopoly, so diversity is gone. Bureaucracy, managerialism and status quo bias blind corporations to the need to change.

And it's not only big business. Who here's tried to get a decent tradie recently?

The promise of the liberal state has been that it will keep us safe. The promise of the capitalist market was shared prosperity. The promise of democracy was agency, that our voice will matter. Nobody believes any of that anymore, do they?

The brilliant social critic and tech writer, Cory Doctorow, has coined a wonderful word to describe what's going on: enshittification. He invented the term to describe the life cycle of tech platforms.

First, they're good to their users, because they need their users, they are there for their users. Then they get Venture Capital funding, and they abuse their users to make returns for VC. Then they get advertising, and the platform is redesigned to increase profits for advertisers. Of course, in doing so, they make the experience worse and worse for users, who get angry and turn away. So the platform no longer works for anyone.

Google is the prime example of this, for me. Possibly the best, most transformative invention of the century, google search no longer works. Infested with advertising and AI, it feeds you garbage, when it used to find anything you were looking for, accurately, within milliseconds.

AI, ironically, has very efficiently short-cut this process, and gone straight to shit without passing through the previous steps. We've trained machines to replicate the worst of ourselves, and now have a new, powerful technology that churns out racist, misogynist, mediocre pap at such high volumes that it's already feeding on its own vomit and becoming stupider by the minute. Even worse, instead of training machines to do the boring work none of us want to do, like our taxes, or making widgets, we're training them to do art and writing and critical thinking – the things it's *least* suited to; and the things we not only *want* to do, but desperately need to practice in order to be better societies.

Enshittification now applies across the board, in a world of institutions in crisis. Nothing works anymore. Just when we need it to work better than ever.

Welcome to the polycrisis. Welcome to multi system collapse.

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I want to pause the rant here and introduce you to a new concept. New unless you're an ecologist or a particular type of political scientist... or you've already read my book, where I follow a few others in drawing this powerful ecological concept into an understanding of politics and change.

The concept is panarchy, and it was conceived by a team of ecological scientists led by Lance Gunderson and CS Holling, working to develop a systemic understanding of the world, of the connections between phenomena, of the balance between stability and change, diversification and simplification.

The core of panarchy is the insight that everything in the world goes through the same four-stage cycle of change: growth, conservation, release, and reorganisation. Everything. Whether it's the cells in our bodies, or our bodies themselves, whether it's ecosystems or star systems or political systems, everything follows this cycle: growth, conservation in that form for a while, release or collapse or death, and reorganisation of its constituent elements into some other form.

And the cycles all interact with each other: small and fast cycles influence the make-up of the larger, slower ones; and larger, slower cycles influence the conditions under which the smaller and faster ones emerge and grow. And the feedbacks can create stability or they can generate transformation.

Growth, conservation, release and reorganisation.

You're born and grow to adulthood. You live your life. You die and your constituent parts return to the earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. If you had children, your DNA continues in another form, and the nutrients in your body feed the soil and are reorganised as new life grows.

Each cell in your body goes through the same cycle. Usually, it happens smoothly. Sometimes, however, a cancer cell appears. Its growth can disrupt the cycle of your whole body, possibly causing its sudden arrival at the release phase. But you were born into a larger cycle – perhaps that cycle was a community that organised itself in such a way that it developed sophisticated medical procedures that could treat the cancer, allowing your conservation phase to continue a while longer.

In the complex interaction between countless cycles, extraordinary things happen. It's how complexity develops from simplicity.

A cycle at one scale triggers a cycle at another scale to speed up or slow down, sometimes creating a positive feedback loop, sometimes a counterbalancing one. The interacting cycles can stabilise each other, or they can destabilise each other. As Gunderson and Holling put it, 'Those interactions are not only non-linear; they generate alternating stable states ... Variability in ecosystems is not merely an inconvenient characteristic of these productive, dynamic systems. It is essential for their maintenance.'

It's the balance between stability and instability that gives us healthy, generative, evolving, adaptive systems.

Your body needs a certain amount of stability to maintain its growth and conservation phases, but that stability depends on diversity – on other people and social structures, on food sources, clean air and water, healthy soils – and diversity only emerges through cycles of life and death and reorganisation smaller and larger than you. Just as we get stiff if we sit still for too long, too much stability – too long in the conservation stage – makes a system too rigid, which leads to release, often when an interlinked cycle changes. The mountain pygmy possum evolved over millennia to eat bogong moths in spring. As its habitat became poorer and more disconnected, that became a risky dependence. Moth goes; possum goes.

Mr Peabody set up a company to mine coal. As the market shifted, the company failed to diversify. The coal market starts to collapse; Peabody Coal goes bankrupt.

In collapse is the space for renewal. All of a sudden, there is scope for whatever else is growing to claim space. In a biodiverse environment, the removal of one species or destruction of one local ecological community will see a burst of growth of others, rapidly filling the gap. This can restabilise the larger cycles, although often with different characteristics that emerged through the localised collapse and renewal. Or the reorganisation can be far more dramatic.

In the complex interplay of cycles, there are thresholds and tipping points when gradual change within equilibrium suddenly tips a system into a new equilibrium. It's hard to predict when it will happen and what happens next, but it's clear that, especially in systems where there's less diversity, or less interconnection, forests can rapidly become grasslands, grasslands deserts, coral reefs wastelands. Equally, eroded farms can become biodiverse and productive havens, and reintroducing apex predators can bring back birdlife and restore riverbanks. The greater the diversity, the more interdependence, the more swiftly a new healthy balance can emerge.

So this is the lesson from panarchy: transformative change happens. It happens in every system at different scales all the time. It happens when systems become less diverse, more disconnected, less able to adjust to shocks. And the more cycles, small and large, fast and slow, line up when moving from release to reorganisation to growth, the greater the scope for transformation.

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And here we are back at multi system collapse. What have we learnt from panarchy about the moment we find ourselves in today?

We've learnt that systems ARE relationality. They are complex and adaptive, reliant on feedbacks at various scales, on interdependence and diversity. In our bodies, our environments, our governing and economic systems, we need diversity and interdependence, we need complexity. Personal behaviour is linked with political institutions is linked with worldviews in complex ways.

We've learnt that change is the only constant, and we have to learn to work with change, not try to hold it back, or cling to the status quo.

We've learnt that systems collapse when we oversimplify them. System collapse is, primarily, a phenomenon of disconnection, detachment, disruption of connections. Multi system collapse is disconnections across disconnections, where failures cascade from space to space, scale to scale. When we concrete over a floodplain and build homes; when we make emergency response "streamlined" and "efficient"; when we hand housing management to an investment market instead of relational allocation, when we close off feedback options for local, state and federal governments so they can't hear and learn from

what's going on, we oversimplify a whole lot of intersecting complex systems, with catastrophic results.

And we've learnt that, in collapse is the space for panarchic rearrangement. We've learnt that, if we cling too long to systems in collapse, if we try to force them into the shape we believe they should fit, we risk far worse collapse. We've learnt that, at a point of multi level collapse and rearrangement, what happens next depends on what's growing underneath, and what the conditions for growth are.

This is the point I really want to labour. Repair is not the answer. Clinging to the system that got us here will not help us. Neither, I hasten to add, will burning it down in anger! Scorched earth takes a lot longer to rewild than a damaged ecosystem, and leaves it open to far worse futures. Revolution, in other words, almost always leads to new forms of dysfunction.

We need to turn our attention towards cultivating the structures and worldviews of interdependence and diversity and impermanence. And we'll get there very soon, before we finish. But, as I said, I want to emphasise this point.

Before there is space to grow the new, we have to stop investing our trust in a system that has caused this, we have to withdraw our consent from the structures and worldviews that keep us stuck in the death loop. This is the FIRST step – to acknowledge we are over the cliff, why we are over the cliff, and that the only response now is to prepare the soft landing.

So, as we come to what a democracy fit for purpose in the 21st century does look like, I want to take one more good, hard look at why the current one is not.

It's perhaps a little late in the day to introduce this point, but I'm sure you all already understand it. Democracy comes from the Ancient Greek words *demos*, meaning people, and *kratos*, meaning power. All it means, really, is people power. A system where power is exercised by the people. But this raises a whole lot of new questions – who are the people? Who gets to take part, and to what extent? All adults? Adolescents? Citizens only, or also residents? Do we make access available equally to all, or more easily to certain people and types of people? Do we make decisions directly together, or through representatives? Do we make decisions in adversarial, argumentative ways, or through deliberation? Do we strive for majority rules, or consensus?

There are numerous forms of democracy. Electoralism is only one type of democracy. Well, it's actually numerous types, but the point is, competing for votes to a representative body, and acting within that in antagonistic ways, isn't the *only* way to do democracy.

It's useful, I think, to understand democracy, and politics, as peace and nonviolence scholar Erica Chenoweth articulates them, as forms of conflict management. The myriad of different democratic models, from Citizens' Assemblies to Executive Government drawn from parliaments, from municipal confederalism to centralised nationalism, from majoritarianism to multi-partite negotiation, are all different ways of managing conflict and making decisions, and the different models produce different outcomes.

Thinking back to my earlier rant about Lismore, about Robodebt, PwC, universities and housing and climate, I want to argue that what we currently have is a *particularly* poor form of conflict management which has created this polycrisis and cannot solve it, making it unfit for purpose in the 21st century.

It is a poor form of conflict management because it is based on worldviews of separation, domination and pretence of permanence, with structures that are exclusive, adversarial, extractive and fixed. Good conflict management is about coming together across difference, being willing to listen to and hear different points of view, being willing to be creative, open to changing your mind. It has to be based on worldviews of interdependence and diversity and impermanence, and it has to have structures that are inclusive and participatory, deliberative, regenerative and flexible.

Let's step this through, and look at some of the ways in which the anti-ecological structures and worldviews play out as poor forms of conflict management and decision-making, while more ecological worldviews and structures can be better, more effective forms of conflict management – more fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Separation makes itself felt in the individualism that runs through our representative politics, emphasised, of course, by capitalism. We're encouraged to always think of ourselves as individuals, and discouraged from recognising our collective power. The state is established as an entity separate from us – a distant bureaucratic and managerial entity with power over us, which we get to influence ever now and then, but *only* through our vote.

We are excluded from parliaments, from MPs' offices a lot of the time, certainly from Ministers', and from decision-making processes. "Consultation", more often than not, is so desultory that it seems designed to disempower and disenchant, discourage us from ever taking part again. Protest, of course, is a complete no no – attacked as illegitimate, labelled violent when it's not, made illegal more and more.

We are told that, if and when things go wrong, it's an individual fault. We can blame individuals like Scott Morrison or Anthony Albanese, or particular public servants hauled before Estimates or a Royal Commission, or particular corporate leaders like the CEO of Woollies or Elon Musk. We can even blame a class of people, like somehow expensive housing is immigrants' and overseas students' fault. But we can't blame the system itself. Or recognise that the system actually IS us, acting as a collective of individuals.

Part of this is a phenomenon I think of as supplicant politics, whereby we're convinced that the only path to change is to beg or demand it of those "in power", or possibly seeking to change the individuals in power, rather than to actually address the systems of power. Almost all political campaigning falls into the trap of supplicant politics – building power through organising, only to immediately abdicate it by asking "decision-makers" to change their minds, and shrugging when they don't, as we knew all along they wouldn't. There's a learned helplessness in this, acceding to decision-makers' power over us, even becoming party to the way the system invisiblises power – pretending that it's democratic, releasing a pressure valve just enough every now and then to avoid explosions. We get a little

dopamine hit every time anything not too terrible happens, keeping us begging for more. We celebrate tiny wins on the system's terms, despite knowing it's a sugar hit, not real joy.

I believe the way we reverse this, and cultivate a politics of interdependence, is through finding real, healthy joy together through connection with each other and the natural world. We can do that by developing agency in our own communities, through mutual aid, cooperative action and collective politics. Instead of disenfranchising "consultation", we can develop plans ourselves, together, organising in our communities, instead of thinking that the only way to make change is to get politicians to act. We get so much deep joy from this, whether it's through community renewable energy coops and microgrids or local urban agriculture or citizens' assemblies, which we'll return to very shortly.

But before we do, I do want to briefly note how our system enforces separation from nature, as well, most obviously through consistently "balancing" it with economic growth – an idea which is inherently nonsensical, and also always somehow seems to end up leaving nature at the bottom of the pile. Ideas like legal rights for nature, or for ecosystems, and instituting the crime of ecocide, are interesting ways to draw our interdependence with, and reliance on, the natural world, into our politics. Beyond this, there are fabulous ways being examined by people like Sydney Uni's Professor Danielle Celermajer to bring the natural world into decision-making more directly, through speakers for species, taking discussions outside, and other fascinating and beautiful innovations that can only improve conflict management, by adding depth and humility.

When separation and domination combine, you get a system that is designed around and enforces adversarialism. How do we think conflict management is likely to go when our processes essentially replicate mediaeval tournaments, combatants seeking to defeat their opponents. Compromise becomes a dirty word. Other parties are enemies to be destroyed.

Adversarialism means our political discourse is appalling. It's he-said-she-said, Monty Pythonesque "yes it is no it isn't" nonsense. Governments refusing to negotiate or listen to advice from civil society whine "they won't play with me, it's their fault". Protest is criminalised. Minor parties and independents are marginalised and misrepresented. The ridiculous meme of "making the perfect the enemy of the good" comes from this phenomenon. Nobody is trying for perfect. We're so far from perfect. But negotiating parties wanting to improve and influence legislation are told to get on board or get out of the way, and ridiculed for their efforts. How is that good conflict management or decision-making?

Unfortunately, for all political participants, this flows into interpersonal behaviours in really destructive ways. The worst, in my view, is how people prioritise "being correct" instead of trying to change minds and behaviour. We get this performativity of demonstrating how in line with your team you are, and part of that is in being as dismissive of the "other" team as possible. Sometimes that's silly. Sometimes it's deeply problematic. And political discourse, the mainstream media, and yes, social media too, make this worse. If you're a little worried about vaccinating your child (I'm not, to be clear), you're labelled a cooker, and it's easy to go down the rabbit hole and become a full-on anti-vaxxer. If you're confused about pronouns, you can be labelled a bigot and, too often in my observation, choose to become

one. Slight disagreements become full-blown political wars. The worst in my recent experience, as a left-wing Jew, has been how people who largely agree on concerns end up calling each other antisemites or genocide apologists or self-hating Jews or...

Instead of opening paths for people to understand our perspective, with patience and compassion, to encourage them to join our work, we make enemies of potential allies. This is the case across the spectrum – left, right and the middle.

We desperately need to rebuild the skills to come together across difference – skills that have been deliberately erased over recent generations. We need to learn to understand our entanglement, our shared, common humanity. We need to learn skills of deliberation, and we need to create space for deliberation in our politics, through well-facilitated processes at all levels. That brings us back to Citizens' Assemblies, of course, as a model for conflict management and decision-making based on recognising and prioritising interdependence and diversity. These, and other similar models of participatory, deliberative democracy, don't just reverse the exclusion of representative democracy, they also reverse adversarialism, by pitching everyone in the room as active participants in finding a creative path forward together. They are about listening to each other, learning from each other, seeking to understand others' viewpoints, and working out how to find paths that satisfy as many as possible. It's the opposite of winning by defeating an opponent.

Citizens' Assemblies can be formal processes established by governments to advise them, and we should encourage that, of course. It helps shift structures of power away from the automatically adversarial. But we can also DIY them, starting them in and for our local communities, giving people the experience of a different way of doing democracy.

Another brilliant new approach on this front is something called "deep canvassing", which has been demonstrated in recent years in America as the so far only proven organising tool to get Trump voters to shift their vote. Instead of doorknocking with a script geared towards spruiking a party or candidate or policy, deep canvassing leads with positively-framed, open questions geared to building connection between people at a deep level, and opening a path for them to recognise interdependence – questions like "Can you tell me about a time someone showed you compassion when you really needed it?" or "Who do you have in your community who you can rely on?"

This approach is based on deradicalisation techniques, and sophisticated ways to address misinformation and conspiracy theories. The point being that the evidence clearly shows misinformation is driven by disconnection, by the atomisation of society, the destruction of trust and faith in each other. It's not about facts or logic, and you can't combat it through fact checks, or arguing over information. We are so separated now that we're on effectively different planes of reality! The only path to bringing people out of conspiracism or disinfo spirals is by forging new connections, being willing to listen, creating space for them to find their own way back to interdependence with us on this plane of reality.

Finally, permanence and impermanence – the mythology of Thatcher's "there is no alternative" and Bismarck's "politics is the art of the possible" are deliberately designed to make it impossible to imagine a different world, to shut you down as at best a dreamer and

at worst a dangerous radical if you dare to do so. And we all believe it, to certain degrees. It's incredibly persuasive, and deeply embedded in our worldviews. It effects the way we work, through supplicant politics: operating within the system sees us become part of it, captured by it, persuaded by its power and its inevitability. We begin to replicate its problems, even when we think we're responding to them or fighting against them. We begin to believe that only the system can deliver real change, that large and swift change can only happen top-down, when logic shows that doesn't work, and never really has.

One of the big challenges of a politics of impermanence, as articulated particularly powerfully by philosopher / activists Joanna Macy and Bayo Akomolafe, is to let go of control, of goals and KPIs, to "hurry up and slow down", to trust to "emergence" – that if we establish the context for the world we want to emerge, it can and will do so. Part of that is to avoid trap of feeling like we need to define every aspect of the world that comes next, as those embedded in the "politics of the possible" insist we have to do.

We don't need to explain every bit of how our new system might work – in fact we can't, and we mustn't try. We have principles – inclusion of all voices in their wonderful diversity, deliberative processes that are creative and generative, flexibility and willingness to change as the world changes around us. We have certain structures, like cooperatives and assemblies, bottom-up confederalism where decision-making rests with communities and connections are made to share ideas and coordinate, rather than to centralise and control top-down. But the exact structures need to emerge from communities ourselves as we go.

This, in closing, brings us back to panarchy. At moments of multi system collapse, what happens next depends on what's growing, and what the conditions for growth are.

So, our job becomes to plant the seeds of the new world, to tend them with care, to cultivate healthy soils for them to grow in, while weeding the ground by withdrawing our consent from the old, destructive ways.

This is, for me, a prefigurative politics, proving that a different world is possible by living it into being ourselves, community by community. It's a pragmatic politics of grounded, material imaginaries, where change is led by behaviour itself. We don't try to change people's minds to make them change their behaviour. We create the spaces in which people can change their behaviour, and the ideas and worldviews will follow.

It's a politics of transformative incrementalism where, instead of seeking to change the entire global political system incrementally, we seek to transform our space, our community, utterly, and connect with others doing the same in their communities.

And it's being done. My book has examples from Wangaratta to Kurdistan, Barcelona to London to right here in Canberra. And, to bring us full circle, I'm excited to be working with community groups in Lismore who are building on the community response to the floods, and the failure of government and market, to bring people together in Citizens' Assemblies and community planning sessions, enabling and inspiring sharing groups, housing cooperative options, community renewable energy, local food systems, and more. Underpinned by worldviews of interdependence and diversity, collectively designing

systems of participation and deliberation, they're working to cultivate linkages with other communities around Australia and the world taking agency together. They're working with government where appropriate, and influencing government to devolve power to them, and change the ways they make decisions. But, at heart, they're just getting on with the job of living the new world into being as the old crumbles.

That, to me, is what it means to make democracy fit for purpose in the 21st century.