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4 ways to resist climate change deniers

Climate change deniers now hold the highest political office in the world, and Australia's political leadership is no better. Experts at a recent lecture in Sydney shared four ways to resist climate change denial.

By Vaidehi Shah

Friday 10 February 2017

WE HAVE ... CLIMATE CHANGE IS 99.5 ... CERTAIN.
NOT 100%, AS WE PREVIOUSLY STATED.
AHA! I KNEW IT!
Consensus
nsensus

Michael E Mann speaks at a lecture titled 'The Madhouse Effect: Climate change denial in the age of Trump' at the University of Sydney. Image: Eco-Business

Political leaders in the United States and Australia may downplay or even outright deny that climate change is a real and urgent threat. But there is plenty that individuals can do to fight these false narratives and bring down carbon emissions, said climate scientists and academics at an event in Sydney on Wednesday.

Speaking at a lecture at the University of Sydney, American scientist Michael E Mann told the 545-strong audience that there is no end to climate change denial in sight, but there are nevertheless many ways to secure wins on clean technology, climate policy, and raising awareness about the issue.

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Mann, who is distinguished professor of atmospheric science at Pennsylvania State University and the author of a new book titled 'The Madhouse Effect: Climate change denial in the age of Trump' said that while it is impossible to be 100 per cent certain about climate science, "there is as much consensus about climate change as there is about gravity".

Nevertheless, political leaders continue to drag their feet on climate change, a prime example being US President Donald Trump's crackdown on climate scientists and threats to withdraw the country from the Paris Agreement. Signed in December 2015 in the French capital, this was the world's first universal agreement to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

In Australia too, the ruling Coalition government is a staunch supporter of fossil fuels. Most recently, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull appointed former coal lobbyist Sid Marris as his climate and energy advisor while the country's treasurer Scott Morrison brought a lump of coal into a parliamentary session to make a case for the central role that 'clean coal' should play in Australia's energy future.

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The fossil fuel industry is to blame for funding much of the political reluctance on climate action and propagating arguments that seek to undermine climate science, said speakers.

As Mann put it: "It's not just by chance that climate change denial is particularly widespread in countries that have an entrenched fossil fuel industry." In addition to directly funding politicians, the industry also spends heavily on supporting scientific research that spreads climate disinformation.

"As long as there are fossil fuels to burn, we will likely see industry-funded climate change denial," he added.

But there is an urgent need to counter these narratives. Climate science suggests that the world has already emitted enough carbon dioxide to lock in 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming above pre industrial levels, Mann pointed out. The world needs to cap temperature rise at 2 degrees Celsius to avoid the worst impacts of global warming.

"There is still time to make the changes necessary to avoid crossing into truly dangerous and irreversible climate change—but not a whole lot of it," he said.

Here are four suggestions from Mann and fellow speaker Sydney University professor of environmental politics David Schlosberg on how to defeat climate deniers and win the climate fight.

Respect the science

Climate denial has not gained as strong a foothold in the Australian public eye as it has in the United States, and this is because of a "deep-seated Australian respect for the common good, for science, and for knowledge-based policy and expertise," said Schlosberg, who is also co-director of the university's Sydney Environment Institute.

This is evident in the vocal opposition to the Australian government's attempts to fire some 350 climate scientists from its Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) or to spend A$4 million on setting up a research centre headed by Danish climate contrarian Bjorn Lomborg in the country. The government eventually backtracked on both plans.

"The Australian public can use this culture and respect for science to resist the "bullshit" of industry-led climate denial and support efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change in a fair and just manner, said Schlosberg.

Mann shared that in a bid to underscore the importance of fact-based policymaking, scientists in the US will be marching in Washington DC on Earth Day, April 22 similar protests will also take place in Australia on the same day.

> **For me, the sabotage of the renewables industry in Australia—one of the most promising industries on the planet—is nothing less than treasonous.**
>
> *David Schlosberg, professor of environmental politics, University of Sydney*

Protest works

One of the main reasons that fossil fuel interests are able to influence policies despite public opposition is because their vast resources allow them to exert direct control over politicians, noted Schlosberg.

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But he added that as recent events in the US have shown, protest can be an effective tool to counter industry influence and urge policymakers to make decisions that are in the best interests of the public instead of lobbyists.

"It's not just going out in the streets, but also people calling their congressional offices and speaking directly to policymakers is working," said Schlosberg. "It is important to keep the pressure up," he said.

Ignore federal inaction

Federal governments in both the US and Australia may be climate laggards, but states, cities, and consumers are moving quickly to scale up solutions such as renewable energy, noted speakers.

In the US, for example, Mann shared that Jerry Brown, governor of California — the world's sixth biggest economy — has rolled out aggressive climate action measures including a cap-and-trade scheme for carbon emissions, as well as goals to get half of its electricity from renewable sources and cut emissions to 40 per cent below 1990 levels by 2030.

"In the absence of leadership at the national level, we are seeing group-up leadership," said Mann. "There is every reason to believe that we will make substantial progress in the years ahead and transition towards renewable energy."

Schlosberg, meanwhile, described the Australian government's attitude towards the renewable energy sector as "hell-bent on destruction". This was likely a reference to measures such as the government's 2015 decision to reduce its target for renewable energy adoption from 41,000 GWh to 33,000 GWh and a debate in 2016 over whether to scrap A$1.3 billion in funding from the Australian Renewable Energy Agency - a proposal that was ultimately not adopted.

"For me, the sabotage of the renewables industry in Australia—one of the most promising industries on the planet—is nothing less than treasonous," said Schlosberg.

Nevertheless, household investment in rooftop solar is increasing, and the sector is growing, said Schlosberg. The country has the highest proportion of households with rooftop solar in the world; in 2014, the country invested about A$4.4 billion in clean energy, about A$2.8 billion of which was households installing rooftop solar panels. States such as the Australian Capital Territory have also set their own targets to use 100 per cent renewable energy by 2020.

"As hard as the government resists, this industry will be the innovator and job creator of the future," said Schlosberg.

> **People might not accept climate change is real, but that does not mean they can't be brought on board anyway.**
>
> *Michael E Mann, distinguished professor of atmospheric science, Pennsylvania State University*

Reframe the debate

One way to overcome ideological opposition to climate change is to reframe the conversation in more conducive ways, said Mann. Citing poll statistics that show that the number of Americans who support a nationwide shift to renewable energy is much greater than those who believe climate change is real, Mann explained: "If you frame the issue positively, it cuts past a lot of the potential contentiousness'.

Focusing on solutions rather than problems can serve as a side-door to discuss climate change with skeptics, said Mann. "People might not accept climate change is real, but that does not mean they can't be brought on board anyway."

Another way to widen the net of climate advocates is to focus on the consequences and opportunities in areas such as health, food security and the economy, said speakers.

For example, Schlosberg noted that one of the key reasons that the Chinese government has taken such an aggressive approach to expanding renewable energy investment and adoption is because of the debilitating air pollution that coal-fired power plants generate, regularly causing air quality levels in many Chinese cities to exceed hazardous levels.

And when people insist that developing countries have the right to grow their economies using fossil fuels because rich countries have historically done the same thing, focusing on the economic and health benefits of clean energy alternatives can help to counter this argument, he added.

Mann added that focusing on the national security and economic implications of climate change can also help to convince the unconverted.

Last September for instance, 25 US military and security experts warned that the government needed to pay more attention to climate change due to its potential to fuel conflicts globally. Leading economists have also noted that the cost of taking action to fight climate change right now is much lower than footing the bill for impacts such as disrupted company operations and supply chains or cleaning up the aftermath of extreme weather events, shared Mann.

"You don't have to care about nature, biodiversity or polar bears," said Mann. "If you care about food, water, national security or the economy, you ought to care about climate change."

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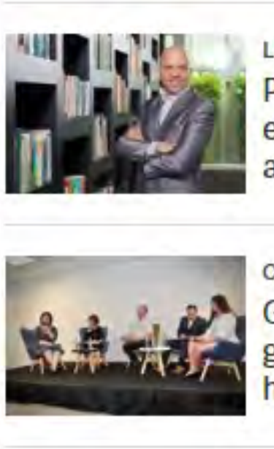
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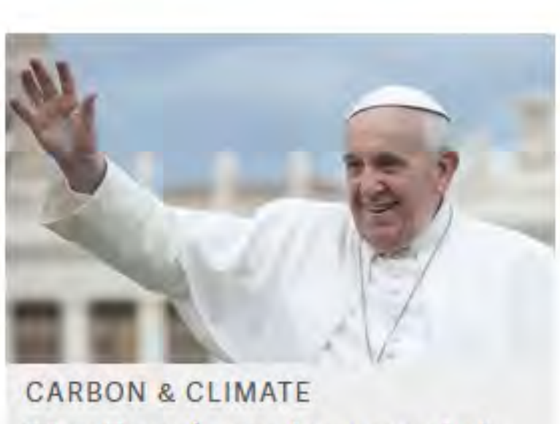
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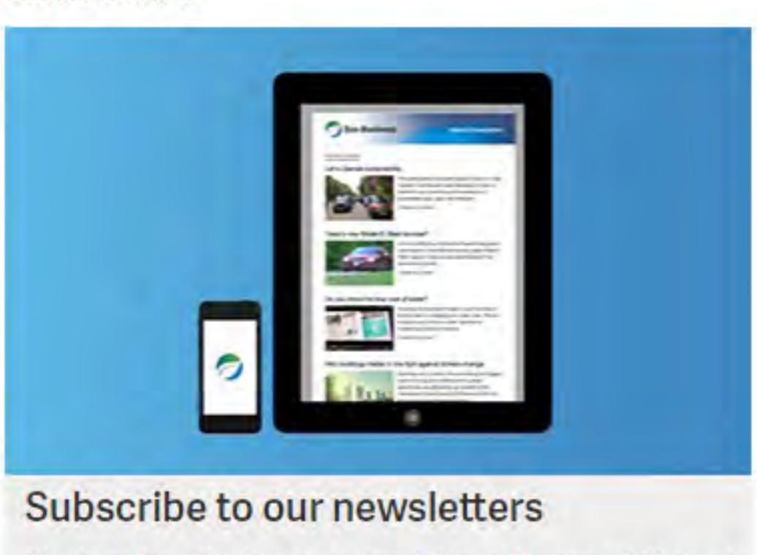
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