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How a climate change sceptic politician changed their mind

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Abstract

This is a story of how an Australian in a position of power changed their mind about climate change, in response to deliberations of a panel of scientists broadcast on television. The politician then put on record their thought processes in changing mind, sparking public response. The unexpectedly positive outcomes of a speech to parliament and role of social media in shaping action are explored. Given Australia contributes disproportionately to greenhouse gas emissions, this story of science and political communication and has global value in climate change research.

Keywords

Environmental communication; Participation and science governance; Science and policy-making

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Introduction

In effective science communication, people engage with new information to change their understanding. Inherent in deliberative democracy is the possibility of individuals changing their position on an issue in response to persuasive communication [Dryzek, 2002]. However, for issues such as climate change, openness to changing understanding depends on socio-political conditions not facts alone [Kahan, 2012]. This is a case study of how a person in a position of power changed their mind about climate change in response to deliberations, then used their position to put on record their thought processes in changing mind. Record of a speech from South Australian Parliament documented the politician's thought processes before and after the change. This generated further dialogue in public and private spheres. This political communication indicated that the deliberative quality of a panel discussion among scientists made the reality of climate change compelling for someone who was until then a climate sceptic. The range of arguments and scientific evidence presented by the panel of diverse scientists within the consensus of climate change [van der Linden et al., 2015] persuaded the politician.

Following the speech, more detail about the circumstances that led to change emerged through civil communications among citizens, scientists, media and political actors. Some of this dialogue happened face-to-face and some in social media, which was unusually positive. Here we shed further light on the circumstances and dialogues that led an elected representative to publicly state they had been wrong about climate change, acknowledging for the first time the need for action. Further public dialogue in response, such as deliberations about causes and the need for more such stories of change, are included with the explicit intention of this paper being a form of participatory action research [Stokols, 2006]. The authors were embedded in these events and dialogues and intend this artefact of documentation and reflection to support further deliberations and changes. These ‘reflections from the field’ may enable further stories and action to emerge, making this work part of iterative deliberations about responding to climate change.

A weekly deliberative forum on Australian television

An elected member of the South Australian Legislative Council, John Darley, told his staff the morning after a show was broadcast that a panel of scientists had changed his mind about climate change. The show was a special science edition of an Australian Broadcasting Corporation [Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019] weekly deliberative program called Q&A, which has been described as an ‘adventure in democracy’ [Ames, 2016]. The show typically features a panel involving politicians, though science specials have also occurred in previous years [Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2016]. The scientists involved in the 2019 panel were Brian Cox, Martin Van Kranendonk, Emma Johnston, David Karoly and Kirsten Banks, listed in order of speaking time in the program [Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019].

The program involves panel deliberations in response to questions from citizens across Australia embedded throughout, either live from the studio audience or pre-recorded. Perceptions of the deliberative democratic value of audience questions on Q&A depends on the political engagement of whom is asked [Eslick, 2016]. The potential for mass media to contribute to quality deliberations has been argued by earlier researchers [Kim, Wyatt and Katz, 1999].

Social media deliberations about the program are incorporated into the broadcast through use of the #qanda Twitter hashtag. In contrast to the television program, the #qanda dialogues are unframed and unmoderated — however a curated selection of these appear onscreen during the episode, becoming part of the program and associated dialogues. Twitter dialogues associated with Q&A have been the focus of research [Dragiewicz and Burgess, 2016]. As part of generating this case study, tweets regarding the politician’s subsequent speech to parliament were analysed [Calyx and Low, 2019]; social media analysis is beyond the scope of this short commentary but the role of Twitter as a deliberative forum in this case is notable.

A story of deliberative impact

On 18 June 2019, the morning after the broadcast, staff were surprised to hear the politician now believed in climate change, given previous unproductive conversations about climate change in the office. For more than a decade of the

politician's elected service, he had dismissed evidence presented by staff in favour of information presented by constituents who were climate change sceptics. For example, discussions with farmers who questioned why methane emissions of cows were now being blamed for climate change as farming was ongoing. Staff involved in these discussions had degrees in behavioural science and environmental science respectively, so were well equipped to navigate these conversations, which had nonetheless been unproductive.

The show had a positive and lasting impact. The politician spoke about it over the following days with staff, who eagerly provided information reinforcing this new receptivity to the science of climate change, now absorbed. Framed through a deliberative democracy lens, it was plural representations of climate science and climate futures voiced by scientists from different disciplines, including the scientists' divergent values and aspirations for action [Castree et al., 2014] that the politician found compelling in changing his mind. The role of 'everyday people' asking questions within the show contributed to impact, particularly one citing an influential Australian climate sceptic acknowledged then rebutted by the panel. The diverse expertise of scientists on the show, framed as a science special not as a climate change debate, was reflected in discussions on other topics including astronomy and plastics in the ocean.

In days following, the authors — a science communication researcher and political staffer — met informally for coffee and discussed overlapping interests. The staffer mentioned that the politician changed their mind about climate change after watching Q&A, leading the researcher to suggest that this could be an opportunity to share a story of change, of interest to researchers in science communication and social change. The value of contributing to the public sphere led the staffer to raise internally an opportunity for the politician to discuss their change of mind in public, on record and available for researchers to cite [Habermas, 1991].

The researcher sought permission to tweet the news that an anonymous politician had changed their mind in response to watching Q&A, to share with one of the panellists was in her network. A positive social media response to this from the panellist contributed to face-to-face deliberations among the politician and staff, supporting deliberations about declaring this change of mind in parliament [Calyx and Low, 2019].

This culminated in a speech to parliament as the subject of a Matter of Interest [Calyx and Low, 2019]. A draft speech prepared by the politician's staff was deliberated about and updated. The environmental science-qualified staffer drafted text regarding climate change and the behavioural science-qualified staffer added words strongly emphasising the attitudinal change, with the politician contributing information about his initial resistance to the idea of climate change and his experiences. Upon initial review of the draft, the politician was hesitant to make such bold statements about his previous views, however was persuaded by staff that the community would benefit if he were able to deliver it with the stronger message about his change of position. The speech on 3 July in South Australian Parliament [2019] ensued and generated positive reactions from other politicians, not recorded in Hansard as interjections. This was the beginning of a surprisingly positive response.

Social media dialogue revealed further details about change

The positivity and strength of reaction was unexpected. In response to the interest from the Q&A panellist on Twitter [Calyx and Low, 2019], the politician responded to the thread on 3 July with a link to the parliamentary speech [South Australian Parliament, 2019]. A grateful response from the panellist was the first of a flood of positive social media feedback. This drew attention from organizations such as the Climate Council [2019], who published a media release about the speech. Beyond social media, positive emails, letters and calls came from constituents, offering congratulations and stories of how the speech affected them, expressing emotions such as hope and intentions to share the speech with relatives. Several advocacy organizations sought meetings to take dialogue and collaborative learning further.

Local radio stations picked up the story [Calyx and Low, 2019], with a Climate Council representative interviewed to accompany audio of the speech. Twitter became a forum of interdisciplinary dialogue [Castree et al., 2014] in which decision-makers, scientists and advocates communicated about the value of honesty and changing mind in response to new understanding. Emphasis on Q&A as the catalyst for change was countered with the hashtag #ittakesavillage, with which the politician credited staff who had been presenting climate change science for years [Calyx and Low, 2019]. To paraphrase a proverb the politician used in publicly discussing the change, his staff had led him to water, but the Q&A panel made him drink.

Who had power in framing deliberations and changing mind?

While the deliberations of the scientists on the panel were crucial to the change publicly discussed by the politician, political staffers were not the only ones contributing behind the scenes. It was the producers and researchers of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation [2019] Q&A program who framed [Blue and Dale, 2016] the deliberative panel, approaching and confirming the scientists who formed the panel, as well as curating the questions presented by citizens to the panel [Eslick, 2016].

The politician was in a better position than most to make such a public declaration, given he was not aligned to either major Australian party and is in the twilight of his career. Research indicates that partisanship shapes perceptions of climate change [Schuldt and Roh, 2014; Hornsey et al., 2016] and contributes to polarization [Zhou, 2016]; were this politician representing a party position rather than independent, this public declaration of changing position may have been less likely.

While the female political staffers were unable to persuade the politician about climate change, a panel of scientists in which men spoke more than two thirds of the time [Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019] proved influential. Given research demonstrating that women experience more negative online interactions [Megarry, 2014] and that gender influences online responses [Chen et al., 2018], the male politician was in a position of being more likely to receive positive responses to his change of mind than women in the same position, with less fear of repercussions. Even so, the overwhelming positivity of online comments was a surprise to all involved in reviewing it.

Intergenerational differences between the politician and his staffers are worthy of note, particularly given differences in intergenerational impacts of climate change [Gardiner, 2006] and in the context of overwhelming public support for the

politician's change of mind. Being an elected member is a position of power, as is being of an older generation typically wielding greater political power than younger Australians [Martin, 2012]. While climate change was being measured once the political staffers were born, the politician had lived half his life in the era before climate change science became public knowledge [Sawyer, 1972]. Research indicates that older men are more likely to be climate sceptics [Tranter and Booth, 2015], suggesting generation and gender may have been related to the different positions of the politician and his staff.

Conclusion

These reflections from the fields of politics and science communication illustrate aspects of the current state of public deliberations about responding to climate change in Australia. Included in the broadcast was discussion about how Australia contributes disproportionately to greenhouse gas emissions, demonstrating the global value of work towards change in Australian politics and society. We hope that documenting this story of how a sceptic politician changed their mind and the overwhelmingly positive response of stating so in public will inspire further change. Readers of this participatory action research are invited to contribute to iterative, deliberative processes of responding to climate change through their own practice.

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