

HOW TO TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE IN A WAY THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

‘The antidote to climate anxiety is action.
Make your first action reading this book.’ OSHER GÜNSBERG

REBECCA HUNTLEY

FEAR

Or do wildfires change
minds and votes?

In preparation for the Climate Reality training I bought a stack of books about climate change, among them American columnist David Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth*. It sat between Bruno Latour's *Down to Earth* and Edward O. Wilson's *Half-Earth* on my bedside table for the entirety of 2019. I was, in truth, scared to read it. I thought I would become overwhelmed with anxiety and fear if I did and it would affect my ability to put all my energy into my climate change work. A friend of mine had tried to read it and got about a third of the way through. 'More like The Uncontrollable Sob,' she told me. Somewhere in the middle of the year I opened it up and reviewed the contents. Chapter titles include 'Heat death', 'Hunger', 'Drowning', 'Wildfire', 'Dying oceans', 'Unbreathable air' and 'Economic collapse'. I turned to the first page and the first line. 'It is worse, much worse, than you think.'¹ I slammed the book shut. I needed to be a lot calmer and a lot stronger to keep going.

And yet I found myself finally reading the book during the Australian summer that saw unprecedented bushfires rage through most of the country, destroying hundreds of homes, killing 33 people and more than a billion animals. Armed forces were required to evacuate thousands of people, the biggest peacetime evacuation in our history. An astonishing 6 million hectares (15 million acres) of land burned up after the fires started in September 2019. Each evening before bed I would read in Wallace-Wells' book about a near future of millions of climate-related deaths, where large swathes of the earth are deserted, where countless major cities lie underwater, and where human life that does exist is grim and chaotic. In the morning I would wake to watch new details of devastation in towns I had visited for holidays and for work. My social media feed was full of images posted by friends of burnt-out houses belonging to friends and relatives. Over the months between November and January, the smoke from the fires blew into Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, making the sun red and the air thick. Ash floated onto ocean beaches and in waterways.

Reading the book throughout this catastrophe provoked some wild dreams. I dreamt emus had invaded the house. I didn't want to evict them because I knew they would die of thirst and heat if I did. But they were angry and kept trying to peck at my daughters with their lethal beaks. I had to defend the girls with a broom. Reading it also induced some serious moments of depression and inertia, as I lay in bed contemplating the scale of the horror the author describes. *The Uninhabitable Earth* may be the perfect example of what Stoknes describes as

‘collapse porn’ (just a tip, whatever you do, don’t google this term).² It’s the kind of writing about climate change that seems to revel in all the details of the worst possible scenario. This sort of storytelling can bring about ‘apocalypse fatigue’ even in already concerned citizens like me.

In fairness to Wallace-Wells, his depiction of the near future is based on both scientific evidence and evidence of what is already happening today. I collect as many possible good news stories as I can about how we have the tools and technology to do something about climate change. But his book remains on my shelf as a reminder of what’s at stake, what could easily happen if we continue on our current course.

As I mentioned earlier in the book, the bad news coming out of the natural science community about the progression of climate change is couched in academic language and so the full force of its impact on our way of life is often lost on the lay person. Scientists under pressure and scrutiny about their research are loath to speak in emotionally charged terms lest they invite more ridicule and aggression.

The aim of books like *The Uninhabitable Earth* is to paint a picture that’s horrifying—the author wants us to *freak out*—as a necessary precursor to both accepting responsibility and doing something about it. Interestingly, Wallace-Wells describes himself as an optimist. He argues that given humans have shown themselves capable of changing the very atmosphere of a whole

planet in such a short period of time, it's possible we may conjure new solutions, not to wholly reverse those effects, but to create a liveable environment rather than an apocalyptic one.³

Fear—like guilt—can work to keep me focused on climate activism. Fear is honest. Fear is more than justifiable. But is it effective? Does it help persuade people that climate change is indeed a crisis that requires our immediate response?

It's worth noting that our climate and extreme weather events like storms, droughts and floods have always provoked wonder and fear among human beings. British academic Mike Hulme writes that for much of human history, weather was 'beyond human understanding or control' and so appeared to mere mortals as 'the territory within which both divine and satanic influences were at work'.⁴ Religions, both ancient and modern, have often viewed weather as a manifestation of the supreme deity's (or deities') approval or disapproval, with natural elements—fire, water, air—as weapons of the gods, to be used to punish or reward human behaviour.⁵ Jupiter's thunderbolt, Poseidon's storms and floods, the great flood in the Old Testament that only the devout Noah, his family and menagerie survived. 'We love our climate,' writes Hulme, 'and yet we fear it.'⁶ This might be particularly the case in Australia, where we have a climate of extremes across a vast continent.

This longstanding, deep relationship between fear and the weather should mean it's relatively easy to make people fear climate change. But that's not actually the case. Anyone with a basic understanding of how humans respond to threat and risk

will point out that climate change poses a unique challenge. In order for a human to feel fear, we have to observe and register a threat, such as the sight of a predator or a situation that we recognise as dangerous to property, life and limb. That will then activate our ‘fight or flight’ response. While survey after survey shows that people around the world describe climate change as a serious threat demanding immediate action, we often don’t behave as if this is the case. Climate change feels nebulous, and as such it fails to push all those critical evolutionary and cognitive buttons in our brains that are there to make us spring into action, to protect us against harm. As Stoknes points out:

The climate crisis . . . is about abstract, imperceptible and gradual changes in weather trends from decade to decade. It is anonymous and not personified. It is beyond anyone’s control and reach. It is rarely talked about at social events at the in-group level. It has a complex indirect impact on primarily far-off strangers, not us and our group. It is old and yesterday’s news. Finally, there is no real enemy. If there is an enemy, it is none other than ourselves.⁷

Furthermore, he argues that the very fact that climate change is caused by CO₂, a colourless, odourless gas, makes this threat seem even more intangible.⁸ Compare the build-up of CO₂ in the atmosphere with something like damage to the ozone layer of the earth, which dominated environmental concerns in the 1980s. The so-called ‘hole’ in the ozone (it’s more accurate to

describe it as depletion) was being caused mainly by human use of CFC gases in products like aerosol cans.

As Nathaniel Rich points out, ‘the ozone hole alarmed the public because, though it was no more visible than global warming, ordinary people could be made to see it’.⁹ I was in my late teens and early twenties when discussions about the ozone layer were at their apex. I can recall looking up into the sky on a regular basis, imagining a tear in the protective layers around the earth, letting radiation in like a weapon being used by some invading extraterrestrial force. It was easy to ditch the underarm deodorant spray as a result.

And so, as Rich writes, ‘An abstract, atmospheric problem had been reduced to the size of the human imagination . . . been made just small enough, and just large enough, to break through.’¹⁰ There was international cooperation to ban CFCs, and now the ozone layer does not face the kind of dangerous depletion it did a few decades ago.

Of course, if you care to look around you there are tangible, personal, imminent manifestations of the rapid build-up of CO₂ everywhere. Not just in sea level rises but in the form of extreme and unprecedented weather events. But you have to make the connection—that it’s climate change created by humans driving these changes—to see the events as threats rather than just Mother Nature doing her thing.

Evolutionary psychology gives us some real insight into why it’s hard to generate the necessary levels of fear about climate change to get people to respond ‘rationally’ to the threat.

Evolutionary psychology posits that human beings have evolved via natural selection over millennia in particular ways to survive in their surroundings. Our ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers and nomads and for thousands of years in small bands of twenty to 150 people. This way of life shaped what is described as the ‘old mind’ or ‘ancient brain’, ruled by ‘ancestral forces’: self-interest, status, social imitation, short-termism and risk vividness.¹¹

It’s easy to see how self-interest and short-termism being hardwired into the way we think can create challenges for a human response to something like climate change. But for the purposes of this chapter, let’s concentrate on risk vividness. There are a lot of fancy academic definitions of ‘risk vividness’ but it boils down to this. If it’s in my face, I’ll be concerned about it. If not, *meh*. Anything that undermines that sense of the risk being real and imminent makes us less concerned.

What’s more, as we saw in the early chapters of the book, humans evaluate the world around them with a mix of reason and emotion. Very few of us take a highly rational approach to the assessment of danger and risk. Stoknes puts it this way: ‘psychologically, risks are feelings, not numbers’.¹² And there are different forces driving these feelings about risk.

First of all, as the evolutionary psychologists would point out, due to the ancestral forces of self-interest and ‘risk vividness’, we feel personal risks more than general or anonymous ones.

Second, apart perhaps from viral pandemics, we’re generally less afraid of risks that are natural than those that are artificial or human-made. For example, people tend to be more afraid of

radiation from low-level nuclear waste than from a few hours at the beach without sunscreen, even though the latter can be far more damaging. We also focus more on ‘spectacular but rare risks’ like a terrorist attack than on common ones like being killed in a car accident.¹³ Related to this, we tend to focus more on risks that are being talked about in our social circles, by our leaders and the media rather than those that are less talked about, even if they’re more objectively credible. So if it’s in the public spotlight, we register it more as a real threat.¹⁴

Finally, we all have different attitudes to the notion of risk and therefore we respond differently to threats. There are risk-takers and there are those who are risk-averse. All kinds of psychological, social and cultural forces shape risk-averse and risk-taking personas. In my own research I’ve found that the people who are most blasé about the risks posed by climate change are young men. I recall in one project I was conducting about attitudes to climate change, the young men in the groups seemed entirely nonplussed about the prospect of environmental and social collapse. One of them remarked, ‘If we’re headed for a *Mad Max*-style society, well me and my friends are going to be okay. We’re physically strong and we drive like crazy people.’ On top of this, the fact that we have now had bad news about climate change for about three decades means, for some, the novelty has worn off, dampening their perception of risk. ‘It hasn’t killed us yet. Habituation has set in.’¹⁵

Some researchers have pointed out that the way we receive information about climate change has increased this distancing

effect as well as made it less personally relevant. This has reduced the sense of threat and created further obstacles to generating the necessary level of fear. For example, for many, many years the pre-eminent image of climate change was the emaciated polar bear on a shrinking icefloe. It still manages to appear today in news reports about the impacts of global warming. Is it heart-breaking? Yes. Is it relatable? Unlikely (unless you study polar bears for a living).

Writing on how images of extreme weather symbolise human responses to climate change, British academics Brigitte Nerlich and Rusi Jaspal showed that media reporting can increase the distancing effect, making climate change feel less relevant and imminent.¹⁶ They analysed the images the media chose to accompany reporting of the 2011 IPCC draft report on extreme weather and climate change adaptation. They found different kinds or groupings of images, but a common one was landscapes representing a deteriorating earth but devoid of humans. The absence of human beings in this context works to potentially increase our sense of distance between us and the environment, making the threat of environmental degradation seem less intense.

When humans were depicted, Nerlich and Jaspal found that people in the developing world were presented very differently from people in affluent countries. People in Bangladesh, for example, were presented as just 'getting on with life' in the face of catastrophic weather events associated with climate change. There was no sense of despair, of life grinding to a halt, but rather that this disruption had become part of their daily routine.

This has the potential to make people in affluent countries feel both as if climate change will only really impact people in other parts of the world and (even worse) that they will be able to cope because their living standards are so low anyway. In contrast to this group of images were those featuring people in affluent countries, where the focus was on devastation and loss—such as people crying in each other's arms as they survey the wreckage of a house destroyed by floods or wildfire.

The authors concluded that the images depicting climate change upon the release of the IPCC report emphasised fear, helplessness and vulnerability, which could be perceived as more passive than active emotions, and disconnected from activities associated with 'engagement and responsibility'.

But surely, once the extreme weather events and sea level rises increase, as predicted by the scientists, attitudes and actions will shift dramatically rather than incrementally. As I scanned the media, social and otherwise, during the Great Australian Summer of Smoke, the consensus seemed to be that given this was such an unprecedented event, it would amount to a tipping point in terms of attitudes to climate change, translating a general worry into a deep and persistent understanding that this was a national crisis and pressing emergency. Part of me wanted to believe this was true, but the social researcher in me was hesitant.

I knew that the research on whether extreme or unusual weather increases people's concern about climate change is decidedly mixed. A 2014 study by researchers from Columbia University found that ups and downs in the weather did in fact

prompt concern about climate change.¹⁷ However, perhaps due to the emphasis on ‘warming’ as an obvious sign of climate change, while unusually high temperatures tended to make people more convinced and concerned, during unusually cold periods, people’s views went in the opposite direction. (That’s why, all things considered, climate change is a better descriptor of what’s happening than global warming, as it lends more emphasis to the transformation of weather patterns, including extreme winters.)

In my own work with Australians I’ve seen the same kind of response as the Columbia researchers documented. Weather events and hot summers bring climate change into everyday conversations around water coolers and dinner tables. And then the focus wanes as the weather gets cooler and a new ‘crisis’ emerges to attract media and political attention, such as an economic downturn, a pandemic or a terrorist attack.¹⁸

Similar research has found that temperature rises don’t necessarily drive climate concern as much as people assume it might. Academics Parrish Bergquist (formerly at MIT and now at Yale) and Christopher Warshaw (from George Washington University) reviewed data on climate change opinions over the period 1999–2017 to see if public concern correlated with temperature rises.¹⁹ They found that higher temperatures did lead to greater concern. Specifically, a 1 degree Celsius increase in temperature led to an increase of approximately 1 per cent in the share of people worrying a ‘great deal or fair amount’ about climate change.²⁰ While the relationship between warming and concern

persisted even in the face of growing political polarisation, the problem of course is that the increase over this period was small. The two academics concluded that ‘a warming climate is unlikely to yield a public consensus about climate change’.²¹

Our belief in and concern about climate change may rise and fall with the barometer and increase over time as more and more ‘once in a lifetime’ storms, fires and floods occur, but given the pace thus far of climate driving public worry, we can’t just rely on that. Over time as well, these extreme weather events might become more familiar, more expected and then less and less effective as ‘teachable moments’ about climate change. Wildfires will become the new normal. Or, as Nathaniel Rich summarises it, ‘disasters alone will not revolutionize public opinion in the remaining time allotted to us’.²²

All this doesn’t mean we should completely shelve fear as a useful emotion when it comes to talking about climate change. Activating fear has been an important part of campaigns to promote positive social behaviour for generations, particularly in areas like public health and safety. But can the kinds of psychological barriers I’ve described when it comes to fear and climate change be circumvented? Can fear work only to make people stop doing something rather than inspire broader social awareness and action?

The researchers who study fear appeals and effects are at odds about whether the benefits of using fear appeals outweigh the risks. Reviewing the literature on the effectiveness of fear appeals generally, the consensus seems to be that fear on its own won’t do

it. Simple fear appeals won't have lasting effects because people become desensitised to them if they're used too much—they need to be ramped up in order to overcome this and can then become too extreme, even laughable, to be credible. In addition, using fear can undermine the listener's trust in the messenger, and that can have unintended effects like denial.

In a study involving both a survey and interviews with young people living in Norwich, British academics Saffron O'Neill and Sophie Nicholson-Cole found that while fearful images of climate change can capture people's attention, they are ineffective in motivating personal engagement.²³ They left people feeling powerless, overwhelmed and fatalistic. Instead, they recommended using non-threatening imagery that connects to the everyday concerns of individuals.

Simple fear appeals may not even be effective with people who are already alarmed about climate change. In their research with Danish and Swedish climate activists, academics Jochen Kleres and Åsa Wettergren found that fear motivated action by raising awareness of the threat of climate catastrophe.²⁴ (As one of the activists put it, 'threat is a precondition to get up from the couch'.) But importantly, the potential downside of fear—namely, that it can paralyse people and make them despair—had to be mediated by hope that they could make a difference, particularly as part of a broad movement of people. Hope fuels action, and collective action in turn generates hope and helps reduce fear.

You can't talk about fear and climate change without addressing the elephant in the room: death, namely our own.

The work of Canadian academic Sarah Wolfe and Israeli academic Amit Tubi explores how our predictable response to our own mortality—feelings about our own inevitable death—shapes our responses to climate change. They wonder whether our slow response to environmental crises can in part be explained by this concept of ‘mortality awareness’:

Like death, [climate change] is a threat that will affect everyone on the planet. Yet it is also unique because climate change is simultaneously personal and social, local and global, immediate and future, chronic and acute, known and unknowable.²⁵

They found that the typical psychological defences against mortality awareness, such as denial, distraction and rationalisation, are at play when people are confronted with messages about climate change. The result could be an increase in apathy, resistance and doubt about the nature of the threat.

They also found, however, that if you made people who were already concerned about the environment more aware of their own mortality, it could actually increase their desire to act in order to leave behind a legacy for future generations. The authors describe this legacy as a ‘hero project’, which may include anything from throwing yourself into charity work, to seeking fame or becoming a model parent. (You might say this book is my ‘hero project’.) In other words, making people aware of their own mortality when talking about climate change can

make them shut down or power up, depending on how they already feel about environmental issues and their own inevitable non-existence.

From my own perspective, as someone already alarmed about climate change, thinking about it does more than make me fear my own death. Since contemplating death in my teens as a precocious young woman fond of the Cure and reading Kafka (yes, I had a black beret), I have found a way to soothe my fears by thinking less about my own non-existence and more about the legacy, if only temporary, of my brief existence on earth: my love for my children, family and friends; my professional contribution to social research and the environmental movement. I know that even though it's difficult to contemplate, my death makes way for the next generation and the generation after that. But climate change threatens all this, and with it the kind of thinking that soothes my own mortality awareness. In thinking about climate change I am thinking not just about my death but the death of everything that comes after me.

Fear is a hard emotion to sustain day after day. The fight or flight impulse is hardwired into us, priming us for immediate action but only meant to be used occasionally to save our own lives. If activated regularly, the chemicals it releases can do significant physical and psychological damage. This is why people like Tony Leiserowitz tell me 'worry' is a more productive emotion, because it doesn't hijack our cognitive abilities as much as fear does. 'Fear is not a great predictor of policy support for climate action. Worry is.'

And we know the citizens of the earth are worried about climate change. Research shows that we're now at a point where the majority of people in the majority of countries believe climate change is real and poses a real threat to future security. In 2018 a 26-nation survey conducted by Pew Research found that thirteen of these countries named climate change as the top international threat.

If only the leaders of every country would take our worries seriously.

Worry is better than fear. If we want to use fear when we communicate about climate change, we should try to combine it with positive emotions like hope, generated through collective action. Following on from this, I wonder if something like humour could work well in combination with fear when it comes to communicating about climate change, particularly with avoidant and jaded people. Like a spoonful of sugar? There are countless adages around—in everything from the Bible to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *The Lion King*—about the therapeutic value of laughing in the face of danger. Maybe being funny when talking about climate could confound preconceptions about environmentalists as killjoys and wet blankets.

I first started thinking about the role of humour at the beginning of writing this book, when I had the chance to interview acclaimed scientist and Australian of the Year Professor Tim Flannery, one of our most outspoken and best known climate action advocates.

I asked him what he thought about the role of fear in climate change communication, and his response surprised me.

Fear and anxiety are inherent in the message. The situation is scary but there are ways to mask it. There are ways we can alleviate people's anxiety while still delivering this scary message. There used to be the character of the jolly hangman in the days of capital punishment. I try to be a jolly hangman.

Talk about comic relief.

It turns out that Flannery's comment about the soothing role of humour when delivering unpalatable climate change messages is something researchers have actually looked at, especially in the United States. That research has shown there's a role for jokes, especially with certain audiences. For example, political satire (think late shows, sketch comedy, The Onion) has been shown to be effective with younger audiences who have low levels of interest in politics, making them more aware of global warming and more certain that it's happening.

Researchers at Cornell University conducted a survey of young adults, testing their responses to three videos about climate change: one that involved fear, another humour, and another that was purely informational or neutral. They found that the fear and humour appeals were equally effective in terms of promoting environmental activism.²⁶ Another study from the University of Colorado found that climate comedy increased awareness and engagement, as well as willingness to find new ways to solve the

problems posed by a warming planet. The researchers concluded that the disarming and subversive power of comedy could help open up different thinking on an issue that can feel overwhelming and negative.²⁷

Theatre maker David Finnigan doesn't need academic studies to be convinced that fear and humour can be a powerful combination when it comes to talking about climate change. Born in Canberra, the son of a CSIRO micrometeorologist, David is the author of plays entitled *Kill Climate Deniers* and the more recent *You're Safe Til 2024*. In his work, he interviews climate scientists about what's happening and might happen to the earth if CO₂ levels keep rising, then brings that to the stage with music, slide shows, monologues and some quirky dancing. 'I spend my whole practice trying to come up with funny, clever methods to talk about the things I'm scared of,' he told me.

His aim in writing these plays is not necessarily to achieve any particular effect in the audience or provoke any particular response—hope, fear, anger and so on (although that always happens). His motivation is to write about phenomena that fascinate and delight him, and as a topic climate change provides ample fodder for inspiration. He comes up with some pretty confronting and hilarious metaphors for what we're doing to the planet. For example, he has a section in *You're Safe Til 2024* about 'snarge' (you can google the derivation of that one). That's what's left of a bird after it collides in mid-air with a plane. Every day, numerous samples of this substance are scraped off the surface of planes and sent for DNA testing to help work out

what kinds of birds are being ‘snarged’. We don’t mean to kill the birds (hey, we’re just going on a work trip or on holiday) but we’re killing them nonetheless. ‘We aren’t bad people but we kill things without meaning to,’ David told me.

David’s play *You’re Safe Til 2024* is an iterative performance, a series of standalone pieces he writes and will perform over a six-year period, culminating in a day-long performance in 2024. From his home base, now in the United Kingdom, I asked David about his perspective on the role of fear in talking about climate. ‘I’m scared obviously, but we’re in it now and have been in it our whole lives. Fear is a big part of talking about climate change, but I don’t live in fear.’ What about the role of fear and humour? Do they play off against each other, making the fearful message more or less palatable?

I can feel like future generations will be laughing at us and angry at us because we had the tools to fix it but we couldn’t get it together. Humour in the context of talking about climate change is so beautifully inappropriate.

There are legitimate feelings you’re allowed to feel around climate, like anger and grief, but humour . . . well, it’s like sniggering at a funeral. But that’s a very human reaction.

There are moments you can’t help it, the ridiculousness of it all, the incredible stupidity of what we’re doing right now can really hit you.

A fast-paced play about climate change that combines dark humour with even darker facts about the changing climate

means David's audiences react in unpredictable ways, very much dependent on their own emotional state at the time.

The director of *Kill Climate Deniers* told the cast before the first performance, 'Remember, with this play don't wait for a laugh because there's never going to be a predictable laugh with this show. Some people will laugh at some bits, other people at others.' And that's what happened, all of the gags had their moment, but none consistently got a laugh. It was the same with *You're Safe Til 2024*. Some people giggled at something and the others were dead silent. And afterwards people would come up and say, 'That was so depressing and bleak.' Other people, 'That was so hopeful.' Everyone has their own experience, relating to it differently, depending on where they're at.

After speaking to David, and thinking about the furious mirth of future generations he referred to, I wondered if there was a word for angry laughter. After some time googling, I came across a syndrome called the pseudobulbar affect, or PBA, sometimes referred to as emotional incontinence. It occurs when you can't help laughing uncontrollably when you should be angry (or sad). Well, laughter is one manifestation of it. The other is uncontrollable crying.

While I was putting the finishing touches on this book, WWF Australia commissioned me to do some research on Australian attitudes to the devastating summer fires. By mid-February the flames were out across the country, but the rebuilding—and reflection—had begun. There were a few surveys around showing that the fires had not only impacted large segments of the population in some way but also increased concern about climate change and the desire for governments to act.²⁸ At a conference I attended in Melbourne in the middle of February, a Climate Emergency Summit, many of the delegates were saying the fires had been a ‘tipping point’ in public attitudes about climate change.²⁹ Surely the extent and ferocity of the event meant that those who were disengaged, dismissive or cautious would start to take notice.

WWF commissioned me to go back to interview all the people who had been part of focus groups we’d conducted the year before looking at the issues of climate change and renewable energy. We had a pretty good understanding of how these people felt about climate change, and they tended to range from the generally concerned to the dismissive. What we found in the interviews was sobering. While a handful of people felt that the fires had made climate change feel more personal and closer, and made them more eager for better government policy, it was clear these people were already ‘with the program’.

The rest, even those who believed climate change was happening, more often blamed arson and lack of back-burning. ‘The fires don’t even fall in the same category as climate change because it was mainly man-made out of stupidity, not due to

climate change in the Atlantic or icebergs melting.’ There was a palpable resentment of anyone trying to make a link between the hot weather and drought and climate change: ‘I always feel they’re just trying to push climate change into the news, they’re using the bushfires or the drought or floods to help their cause. I don’t think it’s just that. There has to be other things as well. I feel like they’re using people and their circumstances to push their agenda.’ Instead, they tended to blame not only governments but ‘environmentalists’ for ‘stopping back-burning’ in fire-prone areas. ‘I don’t have any proof, but I think it’s arsonists in the Rural Fire Service. Also the greenies need to back off and let them back-burn.’

All the fires seemed to do was make the concerned more concerned, the disengaged more helpless, and the dismissive and the cautious more reluctant to see the links. (They were, however, unanimous in their view that Australia should be moving faster to renewables and that governments should be driving this move.) People could disagree endlessly on why these fires had happened at the same time as they could furiously agree on the main solutions to reducing emissions.

We can’t hope for a tipping point, for the bad weather to deliver a ‘light-bulb’ moment for the whole population. The cognitive barriers won’t be washed away by floodwaters or burned away by bushfires. But the solutions, well, everyone can agree on those, even when we don’t completely understand the science behind a solar panel.

There are those who argue that fear is a spent force when it comes to convincing the cautious and undecided about the urgency of climate action. They contend that many of us have ‘apocalypse fatigue’, that we’re so overly familiar with fictional stories about the end of the world on TV, movies and in novels that the notion they might all offer accurate predictions of the near future seems as far-fetched as Daenerys Targaryen swooping down on one of her dragons to carry away the family dog.

I have seen this incredulity about the apocalyptic proportions of climate change play out in my own research, with dismissive and cautious participants reflecting on all the times we were supposed to fear the end of the world via, say, nuclear war or the Y2K bug. (At press time, the jury was still out on COVID-19.) But if the research to date is any fair measure, fear has its part to play, if only in combination with other emotional appeals to hope, humour and collective action.

There is one group of people I want to see absolutely terrified all the time. That’s the politicians across the globe who have dragged their feet on climate action. I don’t want them just to fear climate change. I want them to fear the wrath of the citizens who trusted them to serve and protect.

I want them to fear us.