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FODI: THE IN-BETWEEN

EPISODE 02: Sam Mostyn & Peter Singer

TRANSCRIPT

The In-Between theme music

Sam Mostyn If we miss this moment, I think Australia could actually find itself, as Donald Horne described in that 'lucky country' analysis, as having run out of luck, totally. And that worries me, for my daughter, for the generations that she'll be part of and for all of us.

Peter Singer And yet again, the other group that is left out of the conversation is those who are going to exist in the future. Just as we talk about having advisory councils or a third house of parliament to represent indigenous voices, for instance, I think it would also be important to have people who are representing future generations.

Danielle Harvey: Welcome to The-In Between, an audio project by the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, presented by the Ethics Centre. I'm Festival Director, Danielle Harvey.

This podcast was produced on Gadigal land. We pay respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all First Nations people listening.

The past couple of years have shown what we are capable of in times of crisis.

We have felt the importance of relationships and community stronger than ever, and worked in solidarity to keep each other safe.

But have the systems that govern us acted from these same values? And can we imagine extending this care to the generations who don't yet exist, but who will inherit what we leave behind?

Today, we sit between Peter Singer and Sam Mostyn.

Peter Singer is a philosopher and professor of bioethics whose influential work on animal liberation, effective altruism and ethical eating has changed the way we see the world. Since 2021, he has been a founding co-editor of the Journal of Controversial Ideas.

Sam Mostyn is a businesswoman and sustainability adviser creating inclusive culture in business, sport, the arts and policy, particularly in harnessing collective action in response to climate change. She is currently President of Chief Executive Women, chairs Citi Australia and serves on the Mirvac board.

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This conversation was recorded in November 2021, and is moderated by FODI Co-Curator and Director of the Centre for Ideas at UNSW Sydney, Ann Mossop.

Theme music out

Ann Mossop I'm speaking to you from my home office, where it feels like I've been trapped for many months at this point in the pandemic. I'm speaking from Gadigal Land and I would like to acknowledge the Elders past and present of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. Sam, tell us where you're sitting?

Sam Mostyn Thanks Ann. I'm really delighted to be part of this conversation, and I'm also on Gadigal land here in Sydney and would like to pay my respects to Elders past and present. And I think acknowledge that this conversation will probably be informed, at least for some of the perspectives I'd like to offer from the notion of the inclusion of First Nations philosophies and voices. And they're often not heard in this kind of discussion and certainly the wrestling that's going on in Australia with a reckoning around our constitution. So I think it's very important that we do acknowledge that the incredible history of this country is not incorporated in our constitution yet.

Ann Mossop Peter, tell us where you are?

Peter Singer I'm at Princeton University, which is on the land of the Lenape people. I hope that's the right way to pronounce it. And I must admit, I don't know a whole lot about them as I'm a relatively recent immigrant here, I suppose. But obviously, like you, I pay my respects to them. Their dispossession goes back a couple centuries more than that of the indigenous Gadigal people, whose land you are on.

Ann Mossop So I want to start this conversation by thinking about whether we're at the end of an era. I want us to think a little bit about the moment in which we find ourselves because we're poised at a point where the full reality of climate change is in front of us. We're at a moment where we have the knowledge of what is happening. The message is clear, but with some notable exceptions, the action to do something about it is not yet happening. So, can I ask each of you to talk a little bit about how you see this moment? Peter?

Peter Singer So there are many things going on. I don't see this in just one dimension, I think. Obviously speaking right now, just after the meeting at the conference in Glasgow about climate change. I think this moment is a critical moment in terms of acting to mitigate the worst effects of climate change. It's obviously too late to prevent anthropocentric climate change having deleterious effects. But how serious those effects are, and to what extent they affect future generations for centuries to come is still definitely in our hands. And I think that that's absolutely critical. There are, of course, a lot of other issues that we're concerned about now. The pandemic is certainly not over, we're still grappling with that. And I think the most important thing there is to try to reduce the risks of further pandemics.

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Ann Mossop Sam, how do you see this moment in relation to that point where we have knowledge and a sense of what we should do but are not yet, certainly in Australia and in other Western countries, we're not yet acting enough?

Sam Mostyn Well, like, like Peter, I think we've arrived at a time that has so many components to it and they are all interconnected. I think we're also at a stage where we've seen, certainly where Peter is in the US, the last year or so of the Black Lives Matter campaign. Not so much a campaign, a call for centrality of the issues of race and exclusion. The MeToo movement, alongside that, there's lots we could talk about where we've arrived with a lot of exclusion of women. However, we talk about the way in which the world is sort of sorted and who had advantages and misused those and how that has impacted others. We've seen that, I guess, playing out profoundly with the various leaders and activists speeches in Glasgow, most recently. Making the point about, you know, there is an obligation on those that have polluted most and have prospered most, so-called, that have wreaked devastation on those communities and countries who are least able to do the heavy lifting on decarbonising.

And, so I think we arrive at a time where I do feel like there's something happening. But my experience of this moment is that as a citizen and someone sitting in different parts of the Australian system, particularly, is that we're about to miss this moment of change that could actually define a better Australia, because of the nature of our polity and the degradation of our democracy in the way politics and citizens engage with that politics is playing out right now. And I think about, why it would not be the case? That when faced with the pandemic where we acted so quickly, throwing - in this country - billions and, around the world, trillions of dollars into economic recovery, into the discovery and pursuit of vaccinations. And all the work that was done, at speed, to solve a problem. We kind of refused to apply the same principle of speed to the issue of climate change. We keep putting it off into the 2050 zone. Whereas everything we're being told about the need to act is as grave and as important as it was with solving the issue of the pandemic. To our economic sustainability, the inclusion of all voices about what would make a good society and a plea for inclusion in the political and policy process. That's just not being heard, at least right now.

From a womens' perspective, I think we felt completely disengaged, and that we often don't belong in the conversation about what good policy making could be. And whilst we've heard politicians and so-called leaders go over the top with their gratitude for the carers that got us through COVID. In this country, we have failed to actually value care. And if we do care about each other and we care about our communities and we care about how we treat our elderly, our young, those that need disability support, (laughter in voice) our teachers, anyone who's in the act of caring. We're not talking about that in a generous way about the future. But if we miss this moment, I think Australia could actually find itself - as Donald Horne described in that 'lucky country' analysis - of having run out of luck, totally. And that worries me for my daughter, for the generations that she'll be part of and for all of us.

Ann Mossop Peter, as someone as an Australian who spends part of a year here every year, what's your response to that view of this critical moment that we might be missing? And how does that extend globally? Because I think there's potentially a readiness on the part of citizens to do something that is not matched by the ability of national governments to mobilise

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around these incredibly important global issues.

Peter Singer Yes, I think that it is important to keep a global focus, and from that perspective, you'd have to say that both Australia and the United States are fortunate. You know, that they are still lucky countries to a large extent. Because we, in the pandemic, for example, although certainly we had a lot of hardship and tragically a lot of people's lives were ended prematurely and other people became ill. And there certainly was great stress and there was concern about the lockdowns. But it didn't result in widespread starvation. It didn't result in more people sinking into extreme poverty by the World Bank standards, which is roughly \$2 a day, I would say, in Australian dollars, maybe \$2.50 per day. But that did happen globally, whereas we'd had a steady decline in extreme poverty over the past 25 years that was reversed during the pandemic, it went up again. I think the World Bank says something like perhaps an extra 97 million people fell into extreme poverty. That's almost four times Australia's population. And to me, that's another issue. We want equality of people independently of where they're from, or their cultural or ethnic background.

But, the way in which that is having its worst effect is that the global level where we have so many people who are far less well off. You know, 800 million people in extreme poverty are predominantly non-white people and those by other standards, not by extreme poverty, but just those who are in poverty, the same is true. So I think we really need to think about that question of how we can try to produce a more just world. How we can in particular try to help those who are really at the bottom who are worst off, which seems to me to be a priority. And it's for that reason that I founded The Life You Can Save to try to direct people to the organisations that are doing the most to help those in extreme poverty. And yet again, the other group that is left out of the conversation is those who are going to exist in the future. (Sam yup) They have even less voice, if you like. I'm not, of course, denying that it's unjust that some minorities and women have less voice than they should have in Australia and in the United States. But that's not an absolute cut off. Obviously, many women and many minorities are influential in various ways. But we can't hear from future generations. We can only have people who are standing up for them and saying it's wrong to ignore their interests. Just as we talk about having advisory councils or a third house of parliament to represent indigenous voices, for instance, I think it would also be important to have people who are representing future generations.

Peter Singer I think it's really interesting the values of many of the generation that is moving towards leadership in the corporate sector. And I think many of them are no longer finding that they are only concerned with making money and with maximising returns for shareholders. But they want to do something more worthwhile with their lives. They want to have values that they can identify with, that they can be proud of, that they can pass on to their children. And for that, they want to be able to say this organisation that I'm working for is standing for certain values. And I do see that as a sign of hope. Ann, you started off saying you're talking about egoism, the self pursuit of self-interest with our generation. I don't see it as significantly worse than other generations. I see it as a different environment, certainly opportunities to make vast sums of money that perhaps didn't exist before. But I also see people wanting to live lives that are meaningful for them, but that give them fulfilment and that can be done in terms of, am I living my life in such a way that I can say I've contributed to making the world a better place?

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Now, Sam correctly said that the government still doesn't seem to get this, and perhaps the government doesn't get it because we need a more enlightened electorate that thinks about these larger issues. And unfortunately, the appeal to narrow interests and to some of the worst sides of human nature still seems to garner votes. We've seen that in many different countries. We certainly saw it during the Trump era, which I hope is permanently over, but nobody can be sure. We see it in some of the European autocracies that have undermined democracy, for example, in Hungary and Poland that have appealed to instincts of 'keep out the foreigners, keep out the refugees', and they have been quite successful electorally. So it's really important somehow that we can combat this, that we can not yield to the politicians who appeal to the worst instincts in our nature and then obtain office and power to shut what the government does.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Sam Mostyn Peter, can I ask you a question given where you were based at the moment? You know, President Biden and Vice President Harris clearly have set out a stall that says that they care about these issues as leaders of the US and as global citizens. And as I think about President Biden's State of the Union, where he put children and families at the centre of an economic recovery. And then most recently, they have both issued their statement on gender equality and equity that places women and girls as a central part of recovery and even identifies women as essential parts of climate response and scientific endeavours for the future. From this distance, it looks as if, despite that great intent and those big set pieces that set out that kind of ambition that actually the American public has not been entranced by that or that it was still captured by these more sectoral interests or personal interest. Is that the way it feels with you there? Or is there something we can take from it that those kinds of set pieces can move a country to actually want to be better and the citizens to follow?

Peter Singer I think they think they can move a country and I think they can be a rallying call. So, the elections recently held, which were only a small part of the country. Elections in- for governor in Virginia and New Jersey, the Democrats did poorly in those elections. They lost the governorship of Virginia, which was a state that Biden had carried by quite a wide margin. And they only very narrowly won here in New Jersey, which has been a solidly Democratic state for quite a long time. But now, since those elections, they have got the big infrastructure bill passed that had already been passed through the Senate and was just passed by the House. So that is now law. And so there will be a huge amount of spending on repairing America's very rundown infrastructure and it is rundown, they still need to get the other part of the bill to sort of "build back better", basically, which is more the social side of things. Trying to extend health care coverage, which is something that the United States lags badly on.

So, if they can get something like that through, it may be that as those benefits start to come through, that Americans will notice that they actually are better off. That Trump talked a lot about doing something about infrastructure, but never actually did anything at all. So it may be that the Democrats will start to pick up again, and things will look more hopeful. I certainly hope they will. And just a short remark about gender in the United States. I think you could

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say that the two of the three most powerful people in politics in the United States at the moment are women. Kamala Harris as Vice President and Nancy Pelosi, who did a wonderful job again in getting this infrastructure bill through and getting enough Democrats to support it with a little bit of Republican support. So that's obviously important for the image of women that you have really can-do women who are playing these powerful, important roles in American politics.

Ann Mossop If we go back to that discussion a little bit more, Sam, you mentioned at the beginning of the conversation the significance of the MeToo movement. And, if we look back on a period of time, progress for women has often had this quality of stop start. That there will be something amazing that happens. There'll be resistance to it, then it goes in cycles. And that a sense of constant progression is sometimes hard to find. How do you see where we are now, Sam, in that kind of sense of progress to and fro. There's been a lot of grassroots anger from women in Australia. Now give me some of your trademark optimism about this, (Sam chuckles) about how things might unfold in the future.

Sam Mostyn Yeah. Yes Ann. And I will be optimistic, even though I think we've come out of a really gloomy year for women in this country. So what I say is, I started the year very optimistically when we had the four Australians of the year, the four of them were women for the first time. So the Australian of the Year Grace Tame. The Elder of the Year, the Young Person of the Year and the Community Person of the Year, all women. And they represented to me a visual palette of women across our economy, from young women fighting about sexual harassment and sexual assault, to fighting for menstruation justice, to a woman fighting for the rights of migrant women and resettlement and dealing with domestic violence. And an Indigenous leader leading the way on both language and walking together for a better future drawing on our past. And I looked at that, just the imagery of those four women. And I thought, we're going to be OK, like, look, there is a national set of symbols that say, we've got- and they're not just women. These are diverse, migrant, Indigenous, young. And of course, we've seen so much of that great moment pulled apart. Because Grace Tame herself as the Australian of the Year has used that platform to really call out the insidious issues of sexual violence and harassment and joined by Brittany Higgins. How could we ever have a time where the parliament of our country could almost cover up allegations of sexual assault within the ministerial wing of our government. Those kinds of things, and they've both been tenacious and they've shown courage. I think from Peter's perspective, they do tap into both their own generation, but a future generation that must be better.

But what I think women generally in this country have felt is a realisation that so much of our ability to recover has been on the backs of women stepping up into those caring roles again. The home schooling responsibilities, managing, working from home and family and everything that has gone with that. And if you look at the data that's come through successively during the year, about what that's doing to our family life, our potential to actually compete globally in the industries that will define the future, we have seriously wasted that resource of women and girls. For a country that rates number one on the World Economic Forum's list of education for women, we're number one. We've held that position the entire time that WEF has been measuring it. This year, we fell to 70th in the world for women's economic participation and progress. So that delta of a resource and a group of 52 percent of our population, many of whom would like to do more and want to work and earn and avoid the catastrophe of entering the class of the fastest growing of the poor in our

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country, which is women over 70. I think we've got a moment this post-COVID to say we can't go on like this anymore. So I'm optimistic, but there's a lot of work to be done.

Peter Singer I certainly hope you're right about that. I totally agree that it's a tragedy for women themselves who are not able to get to positions of influence. But it's a greater tragedy even for the entire country and ultimately perhaps for the world, because I do think that women are more likely to think in a long term way and in a broad way, rather than in terms of those narrowly economic self-interests. I was not aware that we ranked 70 in terms of women's participation in the economy. That is truly disgraceful. And I hope that you're right that more women will vote for women. And also that in the corporate sector, of course, (Sam yup) people will be more aware of the value of having women CEOs who have done, I know, excellent work in some companies.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Ann Mossop So just a final reflection from both of you about a lost opportunity or something that we really need to grasp if we are to move on to create a more just future?

Peter Singer Well, clearly, we missed the opportunity to distribute the vaccines against COVID 19 in an equitable way. You know, there's just been a- the affluent countries have protected themselves when they get the vaccines they've had over supplies. People are getting booster shots now. Yet there are many countries in the world where one or two per cent only has been vaccinated. I think the average in developing countries is around three percent. So this would have been an opportunity not only to show that we care about others, that we are regarding this as a world global problem rather than an American or an Australian problem, but also really to protect ourselves. Because if the virus is going to keep circulating in other parts of the world because people are not vaccinated, then new variants are going to develop. And there's a reasonably high probability, I would have thought, that one of those variants will evade the vaccines and we'll be back to where we were before. So this was both mean and short sighted. It really would have been good to show that we cared about everybody equally.

Sam Mostyn I agree with Peter about the vaccine rollout, and we saw that just here in Australia that despite promises made that the most vulnerable would be at the front of our thoughts on vaccination. In fact, we had remote and even inner city Indigenous communities that were catastrophically left out of the plan. And if you go back away, I think Australia missed a moment to be a leader in climate response. We are the petri dish of the impacts of climate change. We have the smartest scientists and designers of the responses to climate action, and we have steadfastly allowed ideology, and big business interests to stop that. We could have actually guaranteed a future for the country on all sorts of levels had we embraced the notion of being a leader at that time.

And for all of that, I think we're missing a moment that we learnt through COVID. That when we were put under pressure with the pandemic, we learnt to care about each other again and we felt like we belonged in some way, even as devastating as it was there was, there was a

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sense of belonging. And if we don't harness where people feel like they belong in the community and our collective action, we will miss a significant moment. And to Peter's opening points, we have a future set of generations to take into account. In the early days of corporate responsibility, there was the idea that at any table you would reserve a seat, an empty chair for future generations. And you would always look for that chair to say, 'Have we done enough to protect those that aren't yet with us?' We have to think multi-generationally. So, this is that moment. And if we don't grasp it, I think it will be- we'll look back and reflect very poorly on our collective ability to be the best humans we could be.

Peter Singer That's true, absolutely.

Ann Mossop Thank you so much. That's been so great to talk to you. That was a great conversation. Peter, you can go off for the rest of your evening to sleep. Sam, great to have you in the conversation. There's a lot more to talk about. So hopefully one day, it will either be over a meal in the same city or on a stage at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas maybe one day.

Theme music in

Sam Mostyn And Peter, it's an absolute honour just to be in the conversation with you. Having watched you and learned from you throughout all the things you've done. I feel very humbled to actually be able to have this conversation together.

Peter Singer Thank you so much. I really appreciate that. Thank you. I very much enjoyed being part of the conversation with you too. And as I said, I've learnt some things from you that I did not know, including that disgraceful economic participation by women, indicating.

Sam Mostyn It's awful. It really is. We can send you the documents.

Ann Mossop We can put the optimism now so we can go full terrible statistics. Laughs.

Peter Singer Do you send it to me and my... *[fade out]*

Danielle Harvey: Thank you to Sam Mostyn, Peter Singer and Ann Mossop. Accompanying this episode is a short response in sound. It features music made from recordings of the electromagnetic field absorbed by a common houseplant, and the voices of anonymous Festival of Dangerous Ideas listeners recording their hopes and fears for the future. In our next episode, we sit between Tyson Yunkaporta and Lee Vinsel for a conversation about the apocalypse, and whether we can maintain and repair our damaged planet. The In-Between is an audio project by the Festival of Dangerous Ideas. If you've enjoyed what you've heard, tell your friends, rate and review us online or subscribe for the next episode.

The Festival of Dangerous Ideas will make its return to Sydney in 2022, on the 17th and 18th of September. Sign up for program announcements at festivalofdangerousideas.com. That's



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