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How Political Studies can save the world (providing we can get out of our own way)

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I would like to begin by acknowledging and celebrating the traditional owners on whose lands and airwaves we are meeting today, and extend my respect to elders past and present. I am speaking to you from the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, here in Canberra.

Thank you, Dr Holt for your welcome and acknowledgement of country. Thank you, Professor Downton, Vice-Chancellor and President, and Professor Möllering, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts for Macquarie University's generous support of the APSA conference this year. Routledge is a key partner of APSA and your support is vital to the health of our journal so thank you too. To the local organising committee and support staff, headed up by Dr Sung-Young Kim, I would like to acknowledge the extraordinary resilience and commitment you have shown throughout this year to finding ways to adapting to changing circumstances and organising a conference that is accessible and affordable for all our colleagues. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr Lei Yu, APSA's administrator, for making everything we do possible.

It is a great privilege to be able to address the Association, to be afforded a platform to speak, and to do so freely, without constraint. I am conscious that this is a privilege not available to academics in many parts of the world. So, I hope not to waste it.

I have been in the audience for a number of these addresses and thanks to the APSA website I have also been able to go back and review the approaches different Presidents have taken to this address. Some have chosen to speak about a particular aspect of their research, or pedagogy, others about issues in our discipline. But evident throughout these addresses is a concern with why political studies matters. In this address, my address, I want to engage directly with this concern, and to take it further, to suggest that political studies can save the world. I can imagine a full spectrum of responses from members – ranging from this is fanciful attention-seeking nonsense, to that's not our job, to well of course, what else is it for?

In my efforts to persuade you of my position I will cover the following:

- Why this and why now?
- Why Political Studies?
- How can Political Studies save the world?
- What are we already doing?

- What else can we do, as scholars, and APSA members?

My interest in this subject comes from my own experience of encountering political studies. This was during the industrial conflict that marked 1970s Britain, and my efforts to understand the connection between my home having no electricity for periods at a time, and the upset of my parents, and the striking images and strident voices that came through the TV and radio – when the electricity was back on. I didn't really know what was going on, but I had a sense that it was important (that it being power, who has it and how they used it), and that I wanted to know more about it. Other things that marked my particular interest included my being Welsh in a period when our rugby team might be winning but our identity was being debated and debased in the politics of devolution, and where whole communities could be destroyed so as to provide resources for the English, my being working class at a time when educational opportunities came with material support, and my being female, at a time when women were taking on political leadership in many and varied ways from Margaret Thatcher to the women of Greenham Common. So, I came to political studies with a recognition that politics could change the world, and that some people believed it could save the world.

I'd now like to fast forward to 2018 and the IPSA conference in Brisbane where I witnessed something I have never seen before in an academic conference and will likely never see again, an academic receiving a standing ovation from a packed auditorium at the Brisbane Convention Centre, before they had said a word. The academic in question was Professor Cynthia Enloe, a feminist political scholar who has made significant contributions to the field of feminist international relations, including delineating how women's emotional and physical labor has been used to support many governments' war-waging policies — *and* how diverse women have tried to resist these efforts.

Her keynote lecture was both inspiring and challenging, theoretically rich and practically applicable, deeply connected to contemporary concerns and optimistic in her critique.

I recount this experience because it captures for me the necessity and possibility of political studies as a vibrant evolving discipline, and a means of changing and yes saving the world. And because Cynthia Enloe characterises the kind of scholar who I would argue, contributes to saving the world. These characteristics are noted in the citations she received for the International Studies Association's Susan Strange award in 2007,

'a person whose singular intellect, assertiveness and insight most challenge conventional wisdom and organizational complacency in the international studies community'

And for the Susan B. Northcutt Award presented annually by the Women's Caucus for International Studies of the ISA,

'to recognize a person who actively works toward recruiting and advancing women and other minorities in the profession and whose spirit is inclusive, generous and conscientious'.

I will return to these characteristics later. But first I want to turn to the issue of why consider saving the world at this point in time.

### Why this, why now?

My response is quite simple, we have an opportunity. COVID-19 brought 'business as usual' to a halt, and its disruptive impact looks likely to be with us for a while. What happens next depends on what future is envisaged, the degree of ambition inherent in that future, and crucially, who envisages it? There is the potential that we will return to a version of 'business as usual' albeit in a rather different settlement, But there is also the possibility that we might envisage a very different future. Crucial here are our capacity for imagining alternatives, and their translation into guides for future action.

And it's not as if we don't have reason to take advantage of this opportunity – multiple reasons in fact, though I will restrict myself to four that I hope will demonstrate my case.

- *Anthropogenic climate change*

On August 9, 2021 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report detailed scientists are observing changes in the Earth's climate in every region and across the whole climate system. According to the Report '[m]any of the changes observed in the climate are unprecedented in thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years, and some of the changes already set in motion—such as continued sea level rise—are irreversible over hundreds to thousands of years' (IPCC, 2021).

- *Structural inequalities and discrimination*

In 2015 the OECD reported that income inequality was at a tipping point and that urgent action needed to be taken to address the adverse impacts that would result (OECD, 2015). From the vantage point of 2021 it is not evident that things have changed much, although some major economies' rush to offer financial assistance to individuals and businesses in the first wave of COVID, provided some indication of what could be done to lessen the hardship of the worst off (at least in Australia).

Other manifestations of structural inequality and discrimination that were evident pre COVID but we appeared reluctant to pay attention to include: sexual violence at home, at work, and in war/conflict, the devastating impact of racism on 'black lives', and the persistent failure of governments to acknowledge the inequity of policing and justice systems. In Australia it was reported that Aboriginal people were more than six times as likely to die in police custody and 10 times as likely to die in prison custody than non-Indigenous people, because of the disproportionate rates of incarceration (Guardian, 2021).

- *Speech*

Who has a voice, who gets heard and listened to, and what can be spoken are core questions in the operation of governance and public administration. In the digital age these questions are complicated by the growth in the number and range of platforms available to people to 'speak', the impact on speech of digital rather than physical encounter and exchange, and the extent to which we are ever in contact with people who don't share our views. Complicating this further is the presence of misinformation and disinformation as prevalent sources of 'news'.

- *Global realignments*

We are in the midst of important geo-political realignments that are a source of uncertainty for many of us. The rise of China, and the decline of the US underlie much of this discussion, with specific questions emerging in different parts of the world, for example the fate of middle powers like Australia, particularly in the context of the redirection of policy towards the 'Indo-Pacific', what that means for the Asia- Pacific region. The recent announcement of the AUSUK Alliance suggests a significant orientation of Australian defence and foreign policy orientation towards US (against China). This raises important questions for Australia's role in the region and its relationships with other powers, but it also raises significant concerns about Australia's decision-making and its accountability to its citizens.

We need new and/or different ideas of the future to help guide our action in all these areas. But how do we do this? Is it possible to enable imagination among people whose circumstances are such that they have no time or space to exercise their imagination and/or are so disillusioned with, or inured, to the organisation of the present that any other way of doing things seems futile? And how do we enlist those for whom the present has worked out very well and so have no particular interest in doing things differently, particularly if it makes their lives less comfortable? It is here that academics come in, and more specifically Political Studies academics.

Why us?

Why us, Academics? Well, we do appear to be well if not best placed to interrogate, analyse, understand, and explain these issues. Our work embraces theory, empirical assessment, ideas, critique, evaluation. We test ourselves against standards of method, of argument, or critique, of alternative ideas. We have an obligation to take account of the past (the experience and development of our disciplines, and our own histories). And we educate generation after generation of students – at all levels. It's our space.

### Why us, Political Studies academics?

We study the constitution and exercise of power within and between countries, interests, groups, and individuals. We explore the role of political ideas, ideologies, institutions, policies, processes, and behaviour. We understand how people are influenced and how political messages are communicated effectively. We are methodologically diverse, and epistemically promiscuous in that we have connections with multiple other disciplines: economics, psychology, media and communication, philosophy, history, law. And we teach all of this. It really is our space. And the economists have been doing the heavy lifting for far too long.

### How can Political Studies save the world?

I am going to propose three linked ways in which Political Studies can contribute to saving the world:

- Investing in imagination
- Focusing on content in context
- Developing our conduct

- *Investing in imagination*

One way of doing this, perhaps the only way in such a critical time, is to commit ourselves to utopian thinking. Why utopian? Well, as I have written elsewhere it unshackles us from the here and now, liberating us to think differently without the constraints of detail and questions of how. It refuels hope in the possibility of radical change, and can be facilitated by drawing on the power of creative thinkers of all kinds, who are adept at showing us different versions of ourselves for good or ill. Utopian thinking is also inherently political—one person's utopia is another's dystopia—and the working out of difference is an essential part of building a new imaginary (Sullivan, 2021).

Now I am aware that this is a contested concept and is unpalatable for many, either because of its own antecedents or applications. And those of you who were inclined to think I was engaging in fanciful nonsense at the beginning of this address may be doubly convinced of that now. But even if

utopia is too far a step, then perhaps we can agree on the value of feeding our imaginations so that replete they may reveal to us new ideas and ways of viewing the world.

For those for whom utopia's elusiveness is a limiting factor, another possibility is eutopia, defined as a place of well-being as a practical aspiration. This offers a more bounded scope for the imagination, but has been influential, including in the establishment of a new grouping of European universities, whose vision is to 'build the university of the future':

'EUTOPIA is a challenge-led, student-centred, place-based, inclusive alliance of entrepreneurial, change focused universities'. <https://eutopia-university.eu/vision/> -

- *Focusing on content in context*

Now I would like to return to the four substantive issues I identified earlier as evidence that the world does need to be saved, and point to the contributions that political studies has made and is making.

- *Anthropogenic climate change*

In 2004 Professor Robyn Eckersley published 'The Green State', a much and rightly celebrated book that argued that 'the state is still the preeminent political institution for addressing environmental problems' and explored 'what it might take to create a green democratic state'. Eckersley's aim was "to navigate between undisciplined political imagination and pessimistic resignation to the status quo." – an almost perfect summation of how to navigate utopia and eutopia (Eckersley, 2004).

- *Structural inequality and discrimination*

Here are three very different examples of scholarship that combines critique with a powerful sense of future possibilities.

In 2019 A/Professor Sana Nakata and Professor Sarah Maddison established the Indigenous Settler Relations Collaboration at Melbourne University - a multi-disciplinary research unit devoted to exploring the challenges that lie at the heart of relations between Indigenous and settler Australians with the aim of 'creating more just relationships'.

<https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/indigenous-settler-relations-collaboration>

In 2012 Professor Jacquie True's book *The Political Economy of Violence against Women* enhanced our understanding of the political economy of violence against women globally,

focusing on the gender dimensions of violent extremism and terrorism in order to prevent violence, and analysing how to make peace processes more gender-sensitive in order to promote women's equal participation in post-conflict societies (True, 2012).

In 2011 Professor Siobhan O'Sullivan's book *Animals, Equality and Democracy*, offered important insights into how our democracy is marred by our treatment of animals emphasising the inconsistencies in treatment meted out to animals that are beyond our view and assessing them in the context of justice and transparency (O'Sullivan, 2011).

- Speech

Here are two examples of scholars undertaking careful, nuanced work that allows us to see clearly the relationship between speech and the online world: Professor Kath Gelber's work on freedom of speech, including the harms of hate speech in an online environment, and Professor Andrea Carson's work on misinformation in online media.

- Global realignments

In the rush to appraise and re-appraise geo-political realignments we may rely on approaches and tools that are inappropriate. Professor Evelyn Goh's work highlights this powerfully and presents a direct challenge to political studies, that '[a]s US hegemony is diluted, the discipline of IR must increasingly account for other parts of the world...The problem of US bias and the wider issue of insularity is accentuated by the growing distance between IR scholarship as expressed in top journal publications and "real-world" puzzles and empirical reality—and by ongoing changes in how governments provide state support and funding for IR research and training' (Goh, 2019, p. 402).

This question of the insufficiency of existing disciplinary frameworks was also posed by Professor Linda Botterill in her Presidential Address. Her focus was the neglect of 'the Australian' in Australian political studies. Making a claim for 'scholarly patriotism' she insisted she was 'not arguing a form of Australian exceptionalism, but rather making the point that understanding our own political and policy processes can contribute to broader theoretical debates in our discipline but is also intrinsically worthwhile in its own right' (Botterill, 2015).

Goh and Botterill's contributions led me to the question, how can we save the world if we don't know ourselves? By this I mean the importance of understanding, analysing, and explaining our context, as well as drawing connections theoretically and empirically with others'. Let me be clear, I am not arguing for insularity, either in terms of what and where we study, but also the diversity of our

scholars. But I am suggesting that we could and should pay more attention to our own neighbourhood, and less attention to impressing what is possibly the most gated academic community, US political science. Again, let me be clear I am not proposing that we stop engaging globally, but rather that we ask questions about the value afforded particular kinds of engagement. Of course, there is segue here into a particular debate about university rankings and A\* journal publications. I recognise that the political economy of global academia is conditioned to function in a particular way, and that academic reputations not to mention vice-chancellors' salaries are at stake. But I also wonder whether we are now reaping the consequences of the Faustian pact we academics made with the market.

And this of course is a debate that exercises but a small portion of political studies academics in Australia, and indeed in most countries. Often neglected or excluded from these debates are the particularities of rural and regional Australia, and the importance of developing research and education programs that speak to the concerns of those students, while also connecting them into wider debates and ideas. Here too is the vital work of indigenous scholars developing their own approaches to political studies in Australia and beyond, such as that of A/Professor Sara Motta. These are areas where political studies can really contribute to saving the world. If that is we can maintain the presence of political studies in those institutions.

To return to the four issues above, as a public policy scholar with a particular interest in the relationships between the governors and the governed, I am necessarily drawn back to the task of working out how to get from where we are to where we want to be, assessing the magnitude and nature of the resources needed to support that effort and highlighting factors that could inhibit or encourage progress.

For me the most difficult part of the challenge facing us concerns our institutions—political, governmental, media and commercial. In democratic systems (and even undemocratic ones), public trust is essential for the system to function effectively. As is all too evident from annual trust surveys (for example, [Edelman's](#)), we, the public, don't trust any of these institutions that much anymore. There are, of course, many reasons for this, but at the heart of it are matters of transparency, accountability and ethical conduct. The three work together and are applicable in all areas of public life, but are of critical importance in democracies. Australia's performance at all levels of government is presently less than it should be. The dominance of sectional interests over policymaking, the singularity of media ownership and influence, and the lack of control over political donations have combined to diminish the performance of our institutions to the point that our next generation of



citizens has demonstrated some ambivalence towards democracy over other forms of government (Lowy, 2019).

But there is hope even here. In *Mending Democracy: Democratic Repair in Disconnected Times* – Carolyn Hendriks, Selen Ercan and John Boswell show how strengthening connections in weak parts of the democratic system can restore our threadbare democracy. This happens via incremental, small-scale, everyday work, that is a world away from the bearpit of Parliament, but could over time repair it (Hendriks et al, 2020).

- Developing our conduct

Saving the world is not for the faint-hearted, it demands a great deal from us in terms of developing our expertise in research, education, and engagement. But here too, are examples of the kinds of expertise required.

In research one of our great strengths in Political Studies is the rich array of methods we have to work with. Some of us are methodologically agnostic, others have a passionate commitment to a particular approach or stance. On occasion we spend time engaging in verbal combat, contesting appeals to 'gold standard' approaches and the hierarchy this implies. But in general we seem to be able to accommodate each other. This is important as saving the world will require multiple tools.

Another area of strength is our capacity for research collaboration with scholars from other disciplines. In part this is because we already have a foot in many of these disciplinary camps as we traverse political sociology, political economy, political philosophy etc. This may not of course make us the easiest to collaborate with. But research collaboration is likely to be essential in our world saving endeavours – and as Jenny Lewis pointed out in her Presidential Address, it can generate important benefits, provided we observe three key rules,

'First, we need to resist when collaboration is being too narrowly defined and create new models that are more appropriate for us. Second, we should more often take the initiative on interdisciplinary research, rather than responding to requests from others. Third, we should think about how we teach political science and train the next generation in PhD programmes, and look to other nations for models that might be helpful (Lewis, 2017, p13).

Building on Goh's argument above for being able to account for other parts of the world in our research approaches, it is essential that we continue to interrogate theory, method, and ways of

knowing to ensure that we are properly equipped to meet the challenges we face. Professor Sara Bice and Dr. Avery Poole offered a step in this direction in their collection 'Public Policy in the 'Asian' Century', that sought to shift focus from a 'west to the rest' perspective still evident in much political studies scholarship (Bice et al, 2018).

In education we are also now mostly alert to the importance of interrogating our own curriculum and framing of the subjects we teach. Recognising that the resources we draw on are not neutral but containers and carriers of values and assumptions that need to be acknowledged and that we need to secure a variety of resources in order to more fully address the questions we are asking. Sana Nakata and Sarah Maddison approach this directly, as Sarah explained in her Presidential Address,

'As a discipline, political science must move beyond the study of settler institutions as though they are either neutral or benign, and begin instead to engage more comprehensively and rigorously with the colonial implications of these institutions in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in the relations between Indigenous peoples and the state that they delineate and sustain (Nakata and Maddison 2019: 409)'.

Professor Catherine Althaus has also made important strides in this direction in her work with the Australian New Zealand School of Government. She specialises in working with First Peoples communities across Canada, Australia, Aotearoa-New Zealand and South Africa focusing on the leadership contributions of Indigenous public servants and opportunities to learn from and enact Indigenous ways of knowing and being in policymaking.

In engagement Political Studies has also developed its conduct in important ways. This is principally in the shift from one way communication or knowledge transfer, to more collaborative ways of generating new knowledge. In some cases, this is about developing a stronger sense of connection between the university and its local community – the Sydney Policy Lab is one example of this. In others it is improving the flow of research between public servants and academics. The relationship between the Australian Journal of Public Administration and the Institute for Public Administration Australia is a long-standing example, while the new editors of the Australian Journal of Political Science are promoting the value of authors combining research excellence with accessible communication.

There is more that we can do – engaging with schools, with not-for-profit organisations, with corporates, and of course with the media. This raises another important question, about the time

available to us to engage in these ways. This is a legitimate issue and one I will return to below. But there is another issue that I want to deal with here, and that is the question of 'impact', and in particular the way we have constructed 'the impact binary' as a way of framing the conversation. By the impact binary I mean the way questions of impact quickly dissolve into demarcations about – pure research vs applied research, ideas-based vs demand led, independent vs co-produced. This is often accompanied by claims about the 'impact agenda' being the thin end of the wedge to compromise academic autonomy and possibly academic freedom. I recognise these concerns, it is not my intent to minimise the ideological agendas that may lie behind the impetus for impact, especially when it is code for commercialisation, and reducing public funding for universities. But what we risk in these impact debates is debating on the terms set by others, or accepting the premise of the question, which is that we are not already and necessarily engaged in impact, probably of the most impactful kind, which is the education of future generations. That's impact, right there.

#### **What else can we do? Consider our own conduct.**

Can we save the world if we don't save ourselves? By this I mean paying attention to the core conditions of entry and service in our profession - workloads, training, promotion and progression. This is not particular to Political Studies I know, but nonetheless it should be a concern for us, particularly those of us senior in the academy. We have a number of role models who are widely recognised for their excellence in supporting and developing young academics, including Professor Ariadne Vromen, and Professor Janine O'Flynn. The challenges associated with being an academic have been exacerbated by COVID and we know already that they are more severe for some colleagues than others. We are now getting data that shows that women are submitting to journals at much lower levels than pre-COVID, while rates for men have not changed, and in some cases have increased.

There are opportunities here for us to take a number of positive steps to improve the conditions and opportunities for women and Indigenous scholars. This includes positive action on recruitment, and additional support for indigenous scholars who are in the academy and often bearing the burden of multiple roles in their university.

This may also be a good time to think about refashioning our workload allocation models so that we build in engagement as a serious activity.

#### **What can we do as an association?**

We need to continue to advocate for the importance and presence of political studies in all Aus. universities and indeed all levels of education. Some of this is targeted work focused on universities and indeed Government. But it is also work that needs to be done with the public at large. One example of this is our collaboration with the Academy of Social Sciences, on their 'Social Science is Everywhere' Campaign, as well as continuing to contribute to Social Sciences Week.

We could also consider scholarships for groups/areas of work that are at risk. APSA has funds it could invest for this purpose, and we will be beginning a conversation about that with the membership.

## Conclusion

What I have hoped to do in this address is to make the case for Political Studies as integral to the resolution of challenges that are putting our world at risk, and for suggesting ways we might enhance our capacity for doing so, drawing on a range of examples. The eagle-eyed and eared among you will have noticed that my examples consist of female scholars, all of whom I would argue exhibit the characteristics attributed to Cynthia Enloe –

'singular intellect, assertiveness and insight challenge conventional wisdom and organizational complacency'

'actively works toward recruiting and advancing women and other minorities in the profession and whose spirit is inclusive, generous and conscientious'.

I'd like to conclude by paying tribute to Professor Marian Simms who died suddenly earlier this year and is much missed. Marian was another female scholar who embodied the above characteristics, who combined a keen interest in traditional political studies concerns including party politics and elections, with a powerful imagination and determination to recast political studies as a place for women and indigenous scholars. Marian made a huge contribution to the life and health of political studies in Australia and New Zealand in research, education, and engagement, and paved the way for many of the scholars I have cited here.

For those of you still of the view that it is not the job of political studies to save the world, well that's a valid point. But based on this account, imagine what we could do if we decided it was. Thank you.

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