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Climate Change and the New Work Order

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by Dr Frances Flanagan

The Iain McCalman Lecture celebrates SEI co-founder and former co-director Iain McCalman's generous and compassionate spirit, and his dedication to fostering and pioneering multidisciplinary environmental research. The lectures aim to highlight the work of early to mid-career researchers working across disciplinary boundaries to impact both scholarship and public discourse.

The research, events and operations of the Sydney Environment Institute take place at the University of Sydney, on the Gadigal lands of the Eora Nation. We pay our deepest respects to Indigenous elders, caretakers and custodians past, present and emerging, here in Eora and beyond.

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This essay is about the environment and work. It is about why we so often imagine these matters to be separate, and how they might be better woven together, in both our imaginations and our politics. And it is about how taking the long view on work can help us, even when time is short.

My argument, put simply, is that we cannot achieve a sustainable society, one that exists within safe planetary limits, without reconfiguring the way we organise and value work; and that such a change would, in turn, make work more interesting and secure, and our society more equal.

Public conversations about the environment frequently begin with stories of awakenings and epiphanies. I would like to begin by sharing mine. It took place on the carpet of my primary school classroom on the outskirts of Perth one hot afternoon in 1989. I don't remember the name of our teacher, but he was memorable for his large moustache and lessons on 'bush survival skills' (his top tip was to carry around a packet of jelly crystals on bush walks for consumption straight from the packet in the event of getting lost).

That day, he wheeled in the 'audio visual' trolley, a magisterial beast, its industrial grey-metal frame housing a vast television, a stolid block of heavy grey plastic and glass, with dozens of cords snaking from the back. It's heavy entry into the room was heralded with squeaks as it rolled over the sand-flecked carpet, a portent of good tidings... We would not have to work at our desks for the post-lunch double social studies period. We would be allowed, instead, to watch tv.

In the semi-darkness that afternoon, I learned three new concepts for the first time: the greenhouse effect, depletions in the ozone layer, and peak oil. While I do not remember the documentary's title, but it included a graph I will never forget: a lime-green line, superimposed across

an image of the earth, charting the rise of global surface temperatures since 1960. The line went up and steadily up, fading into ominous red as it approached the 1980s. There was no violent up-tick at the end, like the 'hockey-stick graph' that would feature in An Inconvenient Truth seventeen years later. Nor did the line end in the splayed fronts of alternative 'shared socioeconomic pathways' like the IPCC report 28 years later. It nevertheless made a deep impression on me. It was clear, from that line, that we were all going to have to do something, very urgently, to get it to go back down again.

With an imagination fertilised by stories of Vietnam war protests and student uprisings in 1968, the Australian kids TV show 'Secret Valley' (in which plucky BMX-riding teenagers in a koala-filled valley battled greedy real estate developers) and the slogan to 'think global and act local', I did the thing that was obvious for a child to do in 1989: I started a local group within the school with a grandiose name. We were to be known as 'PEACE', an acronym for 'People for the Environment And Conservation Everywhere', and we had a concrete immediate objective: the elimination of the non-recyclable polystyrene cups from the school canteen that were being used to serve out chicken soup at lunchtime.

Now, if this was a different kind of talk, you would now hear me trace a narrative arc that goes like this: we came together and made demands, and despite initial setbacks we gained an understanding of the power of collective action. We came to realise that the cups were just the beginning, there was a whole food plastics industrial complex that was choking the land and the oceans. By learning the arts of speaking truth to power, and organising strategically, we realised we could change the world.

But this is not that kind of talk and besides, that is not what happened. Instead, the School Principal acknowledged our concerns, and said gently 'how else are we going to keep the drinks hot and safe?', we said we weren't sure. 'PEACE' dissolved soon after, our short- and long-term strategic aims unmet, and my nascent environmental consciousness was channelled elsewhere: into checking hairspray and deodorant cans for CFCs, not complaining too much during the school tree planting program, and applying sun screen and wearing broad-brimmed hats with renewed authority and vigour.

But this is not a simple tale of dissipated personal resolve. I did not lose interest in the global temperature line or stop thinking about it. Rather, I did what I was socialised to do. I 'grew up'.

Learning to 'grow up' in a world of progress

In 1990s Australia, this meant devoting attention to a different sort of line, one that was not written down or public, but rather in my own head: my private line of 'personal progress'. I had been raised in the slipstream of the postwar 'golden age', an indirect beneficiary of a set of educational, industrial relations and social security policies that had enabled my father, who had grown up in a poor family and left school without a high school certificate in the 1940s, to move into the middle class in the 1960s after half a lifetime spent working as a janitor and security guard.

Significant changes were underway in the Australian economy in those years, that were ushering in a new order that was quite different to the one that had so vertiginously elevated my dad's income and expectations. But what was

in my teenage head was a melange of beliefs from an earlier time: an awkward and undigested blend of Fordism, the Protestant Work Ethic, Keynesianism and second-wave feminism.

What seemed obvious to me – so obvious that it would never need saying – was the idea that hard work, delayed gratification and education were reliable fuel for an upward trajectory in life. That, upon obtaining the requisite good marks at school, and then university or TAFE, you had a ticket to do work that was simultaneously interesting, useful, entailed more complexity and responsibility as you got older, and earned enough to enable you to buy a house, have a family, and retire comfortably. Moreover, I took for granted that this was the deal that applied to everyone. It was not a special offering made to a chosen few with superabundant talent or energy. But to citizens. To all of us.

Unlike the global temperature line, the determinants of this 'personal progress' line felt wholly within my control. They nestled comfortably in the fabric of my everyday life and day-to-day conversation. The line was there, inchoately, in conversations about things like what uni subjects to choose, what essay topics, what jobs to apply for, where to live. Yet, as the 1990s flipped into the millennium, the 'so what are you going to do next?' conversation took on a more anxious edge. It became gradually clear that the pursuit of

1) socially useful, 2) interesting and 3) reasonably paid work was not so much a singular endeavour, but rather a competitive and strategic puzzle. You couldn't have all three, or rather, for women, four, since the question of how to fit in children was an additional matter that we alone had to consider.

Tribes began to quietly coalesce around different strategic approaches to the dilemma. Those fortunate enough to be buoyed with parental wealth seemed to have an easier run, not only at achieving two, three or more of the prized quartet, but in taking risks to get them, backed by a sense of entitlement and the knowledge that their family would bail them out if needed.

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working bodies or who did not conform in terms of sexuality, gender or in other ways, the task was harder. Our horizons were shorter, and the rules which seemed so self-evident at high school had the habit of melting and morphing without explanation every time we tried to play within them.

As I was navigating these questions, that other line, the global temperature one, did not disappear from my consciousness. Indeed, as I learned more about our environmental predicament, it weighed heavier on me. As I came to know of the 8.3 billion tonnes of plastics that coat the land, water and internal organs of everyone in this room; the 56% of major aquifers in the world that are being drawn down faster than they can be replenished; soil degradation wrought by industrial agriculture, that so severe that, by some estimates, England has just 60 harvests left, my worry about that line, and the vast entanglement of tipping points and feedback loops that sat behind it, grew more intense.

But, if I am honest, it occupied a different universe to that ‘personal progress’ line. It existed in the realm of wise consumer choices rather than work. It was the line I had in mind when trying to decide whether to ride my bike rather than drive, in assisting me to remember to take my reusable bag rather than use a plastic one, in encouraging me to buy a ‘Keepcup’.

It was a line that related to stuff and its management. Superego, rather than ego. Things I was supposed to say no to rather than the grand, existential puzzle of what to say yes to. Conversations about the climbing red line and what it meant were awkward to have with friends. They did not seem to last for very long. Here, I want to think about two kinds of lines and their relationship, and how we might bring them together. But first, let us ask, why do they seem so separate?

Four narratives

There are many answers to that question. One cluster of them lies in the ways we presently talk about work and its future, and they are the ones I want to speak about now. We can observe a number of distinct genres in the way we talk about work.

First, is the ‘just transitions’ narrative. This is a compelling response to the specious argument that ‘you can have jobs or the environment but not both’. It observes that 24 million jobs worldwide will be created by 2030 by virtue of renewable industries, comfortably eclipsing the more than the 6 million jobs predicted to be lost from the cessation of fossil fuels. It argues, quite rightly, that it is crucial that workers currently in the latter group be offered fair support to transition into these new industries or into other work. But it generally frames the ‘transition’ we

face as a relatively narrow one, something like the flicking of a switch from one energy system to another, and it concerns the justice of conditions for the relatively small fragment of the workforce that is directly concerned.

I think of the ‘just transitions’ narrative as the ‘we can shift to renewable energy and not much will have to change, therefore don’t worry’ narrative.

Second is the ‘digital disruption’ story of the future of work. This narrative foretells unimaginably vast changes to present configurations of work. Automation and digital technology are breaking down jobs into tasks, replacing many of them with machines. A tone of gleeful inevitability commonly accompanies this narrative, paired with an insistence that technological change has invariably led to a ‘net jobs gain’ in the past, and will do so again. As long as young workers do not fall into the trap of pursuing old-fashioned forms of rigid credentialization and training, invest in ‘21st century skills’, and no one holds back on investment in technology, it will be ok. I think of this as the ‘everything will change, don’t worry, but you have to be FLEXIBLE’ narrative.

Thirdly, a more pessimistic narrative of work may be found among the heralds of the ‘precariat’. For the first time in history, they argue, we have a generation who, despite high levels of educational attainment, are forced to work in ‘careerless jobs’, with no ladders of mobility to climb. These people have, to use Guy Standing’s chilling phrase, no ‘shadow of the future’ in their working lives. They are detached from any positive occupational identity or sense that what they say or do today will make any difference to their fate tomorrow. They are the new dangerous class: frustrated, insecure, indebted and stressed, ripe for seduction by the politics of xenophobia, populism and nostalgia. I think of this as the ‘everything has and will continue to change, and you should, definitely, panic’ narrative.

And fourthly, there is a story that is more pessimistic still (if that were possible), in which panic gives way to elegy and lamentation. Most commonly associated with the writer Paul Kingsnorth and the ‘Dark Mountain’ project, this narrative suggests that humans have created an ‘all-consuming global industrial system’ which is ‘effectively unstoppable, that will

simply ‘run on and on until it runs out.’ At its base is a set of toxic myths, ‘the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, the myth of our separation from ‘nature’. All that can be done is to challenge these with counter-stories and privately pursue lives and work that sit outside industrial systems. All political and policy process are fatally contaminated. I think of this as the ‘catastrophe is in the DNA of modernity, withdraw, mourn, and try to do no harm’ narrative.

So, four quite different narratives: just transitions, digital disruption, the precariat and dark mountain. They share, however, a few common logics. The first is determinism. Each (with the exception of just transitions) carry the sense that, we humans have little agency in the question of how work is organised and valued, and that instead it is some other force, unchallengeable by us, that will set the terms of our future, be it technology, neoliberalism, or industrial capitalism.

What each has in common, too, is the implicit dismissal of work as a viable stage upon which we might collectively struggle for a better system. Indeed, these narratives carry little optimism that any alternate social order will ever be possible at all. Now, if we historians know nothing else, it is to be sceptical of determinist forces, and absolute endings to historical periods. And it probably won’t surprise you to hear that I think that these assumptions are premature. If we are inclined to look, there are signs all around us of an appetite for alternative social orders. We can see it in the streets full of school children on strike for the climate; in the burgeoning Green New Deal movement in the US; in the non-GDP measures of progress that are coming to be embraced by national governments; the in the language of ‘circular economies’ starting to be heard in business and government all over the world.

Just as it is premature, I think, to give up on the possibility of such a new social order, so too I think it is hasty to abandon work as a political site from which to fight for it. For there is crucial link that is perhaps very obvious (but is rarely made explicit) in the idea of ‘sustainability’ that is at the heart of modern environmentalism, and work, and it is this: that the process of ‘sustaining’ requires human labour.

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Valuing labour

It means more than simply saying 'no' to damaging acts of consumption, it also means saying 'yes' to the human activities that are positively necessary for the repair, renewal and regeneration of our soils, our oceans, our cities, our critical human systems and our human bodies. It means looking on such work as more than just an afterthought or 'non-core' aspect to the 'real' business of production. It means viewing it, and treating it, as utterly elemental. That work of stewardship and renewal is obviously not new. It has been at the core of every ancient human society in history. It is happening, night and day, in Australia now. What is historically variable (and most significant for our purposes) is not its presence, but rather its value, and the economic, social and cultural frameworks that we offer to support its performance. And here, I'd like to share some snapshots from around the country of how we, in Australia, currently organise this work.

In Perth there is a carer who works in a residential care home who thinks that no one should ever die alone. There is no funding for palliative care supplies at her work, and so she runs a raffle to enable her buy what she needs, like moisturiser to use on the lips of people in the last days of life, when they can't make their mouths wet any more. Most days she works more than an hour without pay. She has never been paid more than the Award for 43 years, despite the additional qualifications she has acquired with her own time and money. The time she gets to shower and toilet each person she cares for is approximately 6 minutes.

In Arnhem Land there is a Kuninjku man on an outstation who used to burn his country according to customary practice. His burning meant that the hot fires that feed off uncropped grass were less common, and eased the destructive pressure on native species exerted by feral cats, cane toads, pigs, cattle and other animals. His work was part of a sustainable hybrid economy that comprised traditional hunting and fishing, arts and crafts, and access to state transfer payments. Since 2015, government policy changes mean that he must now engage in 'work-like activity' (which does not include caring for country) for 25 hours a week, on an hourly rate of \$11.60, well below minimum wages and without standard industrial

protections. He has no time for burning now, and the Kuninjku hybrid economy has all but disappeared.

In Brisbane there is a woman who loves to care for and teach young children, whose wage is so low that she cannot afford to have children of her own.

In Hobart there was a security guard who worked in the state's court complex whose name was known by every employee and regular user of the building. She had a low quiet voice that is capable of soothing the most intimidating of offenders. She offered support to domestic violence victims. Solace to the parents of young offenders. One day, after 21 years of work, a man in Melbourne working for the service multinational who had taken over the contract, who had never met her or visited the court complex, decided to turn her position into a casual one. She could not pay her mortgage on such uncertain wages, and was forced to leave.

In Perth there was an engineering graduate who wanted to work in renewable energy manufacturing. Despite top marks, he was unable to get a secure job in that field. Others in his cohort found jobs in oil, coal and gas industries, earning, on average, \$180 000 a year.

In rural NSW there is a regenerative farmer who knows how to read the landscape. He measures his success by the levels of animal health, species diversity, and nutrient and water cycling on his property. The soils on his farm are healthy and resilient, but to get them that way he had to painstakingly 'un-learn' everything he was taught about best practice industrial farming over two decades.

In Sydney there is a home carer who buys toilet-cleaner for her elderly clients on the sly. She isn't paid to discuss cases with her colleagues or mentor or train less experienced staff or to get any peer support. Instead, she and her colleagues meet in the one place where there is space, air-conditioning, and easy parking: McDonalds. Her manager has told her not to get too close to her clients. She goes to their funerals anyway.

In Adelaide there is a junior humanities academic who gave birth to a human being. She is devoted to her discipline and the maintenance of an inter-generational conversation about the world through teaching and writing. For years she worked as a casual, taking more than her allocated

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45 minutes per student per term to give careful feedback and teach as well as she could, while doing research in her own time in the hope of securing a permanent job. With a child to care for, she could no longer afford to work for free, and has left the sector.

These stories are all true. They are all based on the lives of real people, many of whom I met in the course of my work at United Voice. Each of these people do work that is the opposite of what anthropologist David Graeber has called 'bullshit jobs.' They bestow, daily, the thing that Simone Weil described as 'the rarest and purest form of generosity', namely, attention. These are people who strive to do things that need to be done; to perform the work that is essential to maintaining our mutual home.

Their work is environmental. I do not mean this in the narrow sense of being low-carbon emitting (although it is that). Nor in the sense that it boosts biodiversity (although some do that too). I say it because their work is centrally concerned with processes of human and non-human regeneration, and in particular with fostering social cohesion, trust, civility and a sense of order; of education and the passing on of learning about how to live wisely and within limits. No society can simultaneously exist within environmental limits and be a democracy that does not possess an abundance of these things.

Now, let's think about the conditions for the performance of this work. Their work is overwhelmingly performed against the odds. Their jobs lack pathways in and pathways up. Most are not 'held' within a secure career structure that enables them to reliably progress over time in seniority, nor are they paid adequately to

comfortably afford those social markers of 'life progress': a house and a family and a secure retirement. They are, rather, expected to 'trade off' the meaningfulness of their work for material security, status and self-development.

For many, their daily work is often frustrated and interrupted by management processes that are ill-suited to their labour. They must contend with rigid Taylorist grids, competitive frameworks, productivity metrics. Repertoires of control and efficiency that derived from industrial factory contexts that have been thrust into vocations that have, for millennia, followed the tempos and cyclical rhythms of human and environmental need rather than the dictates of the clock.

Many, if not most of these workers, live under the shadow of a glaring mis-match between the status of their work (in terms of pay and security) and the social value it creates. For we reward and support the stewards of renewal far less generously than we do the stewards of extraction and consumption.

It is not just that investment bankers, advertising executives, and accountants who advise the super-wealthy on tax minimisation schemes destroy 7 to 11 dollars of 'social value' for every dollar they contribute (although they do! according to the New Economics Foundation at least). It is that the 'personal progress lines' of people in these occupations start high and are set up to rise; while those of the maintainers are left flat. No element of this work order is necessary, or inevitable.

The point is not that these workers are victims. Far from it, most of those I

mentioned are actively organising and agitating in their workplaces and unions to make their conditions of work better. The point is rather that there is a deep perversity in our current order of work, which does not furnish the people who are doing the things most crucial to a flourishing planet and society with the means to flourish themselves.

As Australians, our obligations in responding to environmental crisis are particularly acute. We are one of the wealthiest and most technologically capable nations on the planet. We are among the most blessed with sources of renewable energy. We are also one of the highest per capita emitters in the world. In the tiny, 12 year window we have left to make rapid, co-ordinated and decisive cuts to our emission levels, the Australian government projects our emissions to rise, rather than fall. By 5.4% by 2030.

To put our current priorities in clear focus, the IMF has calculated that Australia spends 1.96% of its GDP on fossil fuel subsidies. That is almost four times the approximately 0.5% of GDP we spend on early childhood education and care. In other words, for every public dollar we spend building a future for our youngest citizens, we spend nearly four dismantling that future.

There are powerful historical and geographical dynamics that have had led to those damning numbers. Our nation was one of several to follow a 'settler capitalist' trajectory, premised on the brutal displacement and destruction of Indigenous lifeways. In a sparsely populated continent, colonists relied heavily on extractivist pastoral, and mining practices, which became the dominant elements of an undiversified, British-export-centric, economy. With colonisation, too, came the importation of highly gendered conception of public and private life, that consigned work of social reproduction to women and systematically excluded it from the formal economic sphere.

Learning from our history

But just as Australia's history can be blamed for our present inertia, so too, I think, it contains remarkable sources of inspiration for how we might meet the challenges we face now.

We can learn from the religious, cultural and kinship structures that enabled

Indigenous peoples to live on and tend to the land, sustainably, for millennia, and to pass on of knowledge of how to care for country through the generations.

We can learn from the ideas that underpinned the creation of some of our key national institutions at Federation. The philosophy that underwrote the Conciliation and Arbitration system, for instance, was predicated on a set of principled arguments for working out where competitive markets belong and where they do not. It rested on a notion that our economic systems should be in service to a higher purpose – the development of people as full moral and social beings – and it insisted that such development cannot meaningfully happen unless the industrial relationship is regulated, and there is an active fostering and nurturance of the commons. In the early 20th century, that meant building public parks, public transport, infrastructure, art galleries and public libraries. Today, we might add the creation of institutions devoted to the repair and protection of living seas, wetlands, ecosystems, rivers, soils, as well as digital infrastructure.

We can learn from the expansive ideas about what work was for, and could be, that prevailed just one generation ago. In the mid-century, it was widely accepted that work was not simply a means to economic productivity and profit. It was also a source of self-realisation and development, a path to engagement with wider society, a basis for 'participation in the substance of life.' That idea doesn't die in the absence of a 40-hour a week, factory-based, one-job-per-career sort of paradigm. In fact, it is more relevant than today than ever.

We can learn, too, from that fact that have done this once already! One hundred years ago, the basic determinants of your working life – the things that had the greatest bearing on your occupation, salary, permission to work at all – were your gender and your race. Not your skill. Not your level of education. Not your capacity for hard work. Not even your class (although it goes without saying that Australia was a deeply class-divided society). Women and non-whites were explicitly excluded from the employment conditions and protections that were offered to white men. And it is worth remembering that, imperfect

and incomplete as the process was, we dismantled that system of formal discrimination in the final third of the twentieth century. We overhauled the fundamental elements of our work order.

It did not happen spontaneously: It required decades of pressure from communities, unions and civil society. And it did not happen all at once: it required decades of legal activity, changes to Awards and industrial relations legislation, new laws and statutory authorities. But it did happen. And it radically transformed the life chances of more than half the people in this room in ways that would have been unimaginable a century ago.

Finally, a sense of history can aid us in understanding why so many ostensibly powerful people seem to feel so powerless to do anything about our current crisis. Like many developed nations, Australia has embraced a passive conception of government, one that confines itself, as Mariana Mazzucato has recently observed, to doing little more than merely 'fixing' market mistakes, 'levelling the playing field' and getting out of the way. In obedience to this idea, we have consigned great swathes of the work of renewal, including the care of our eldest and youngest citizens, to the for-profit market, handing responsibility to firms who necessarily operate within a financialised system that mandates short-termism, risk-shifting, debt loading and lean labour costs. Such arrangements are not only unjust. They are the product of historical anachronism: they represent the misplaced application of ideas that were gestated in the context of the Cold War, in response to a centralising, statist, planning-obsessed Soviet enemy that no longer exists. They are institutional arrangements that come from another age, and are not the ones we need to deal with these warming, fragmented, and increasingly unequal times.

A new work order

Such times, I suggest, demand a new work order. An updated social contract for our warming world, that recognises anew that the purpose of our economy, and thus of work, is to facilitate the flourishing of our living systems. It is not to furnish markets, capital, GDP – or any of the human inventions we have devised as synecdoches for advancement – with raw material.

The renewed social contract I have in

mind is one that says that if you are doing useful work – and especially if you are doing the essential work of stewardship and renewal of our life-giving systems – you will be rewarded with the status, salary and self-development opportunities to enable you to fully develop your capabilities over your life course. You will not be left to knit together the elements of a full and flourishing career on your own.

It is an idea that is relevant to everyone. It spans manufacturing as well as service sectors. There is no such thing as a service-only economy. Manufactured goods will always play a part. But we have a choice, though, about how they are designed, how industries are organised and planned and whether the stuff that we make contributes to, or detracts from, the project of reducing carbon emissions and enriching biodiversity.

It also spans public and private sectors; men and women; migrants and non-migrants; young and old; professionally qualified people and those without formal credentials. Not only does the work of

maintenance and renewal encompasses all of these categories, we all benefit from it, whether we are doing paid work or not.

Now, in an earlier version of this essay, I tried to write a laundry list of policies that flow from this idea, and it was long enough to fill five lectures. So, I will spare you that. In the few words I have left, I will just highlight a few key points.

We can't think technocratically. The new work order cannot be implemented as a top-down project. It entails building upon and linking up the vast numbers of us already engaged in renewal and stewardship work or in education and training to do it – and the community organisations, unions, environmental groups that support them. [As a side note: the numbers of people doing this work is immense. Healthcare and Social Assistance is the largest and fastest growing industry of employment in Australia. The aged care workforce alone is projected to multiply 3 ½ times over by 2050].

There will be struggle. There are, after all, more than a few powerful stewards of



Image by Ciprian Boiciuc, via Unsplash

the old ‘take/make/consume/dispose’ order who will see no reason to simply surrender their status. We must start to see certain habits, practices and fields of expertise associated with short-termist, non-reciprocal corporate ‘extractivism’ as being akin to occupational ‘stranded assets’. Just as certain bodies of fossil fuel ores must simply be kept in the ground, so too, these ideas for how to run a society must simply stay in people’s heads.

Technology must be a servant, rather than a master. It is crucial to contest the idea that technology determines the value and organisation of work rather than us. And, in particular, that it is ‘gigs’ and ‘tasks’ that comprise the natural units of work, rather than relationships, careers and domains of knowledge and practice.

Now, it is essential that we are not nostalgic. Digital capabilities and networked orders must be at the heart of our repertoire in thinking about how to re-organise and value work. There aren’t any easy models here that we can take off the shelf. We need new digital systems that genuinely support workers, that enable them to act collectively as well as individually, and that enhance the creativity, autonomy and collaborative possibilities of work.

It can be hard to imagine what this might look like when our mental models are so shaped by extractivist, surveillance-based platforms like Uber on the one hand and voluntarist, crowd-sourcing sites like Wikipedia on the other, but I like to think about the possibilities arising from initiatives like the Atlas of Living Australia, a national, publicly-funded, free resource that brings together the stewards and students of biodiversity into a dynamic of co-creation, from university experts to citizen scientists to school children to community organisations. This is not mindless amoral ‘digital disruption’ but mindful and ethical digital construction, directed to forging a common foundation of knowledge to enable environmental repair.

We must re-examine, too, our assumptions about what counts as low and high skilled work in light of what we now know about the complex needs of human and environmental systems. These are currently stuck in a circular logic that ties status to levels of pay and credentialisation and ‘bakes in’ the undervaluation of caring and relational

work.

Just because a sector of work has been low-status and highly fragmented for a long time does not mean it isn’t possible for it be remade. For tasks to be ‘re-bundled’ and put together in a way that makes the jobs better. This is precisely what has happened in the Netherlands with social care through a neighbourhood-based care model known as Buurtzorg. That project has seen a low-status, low-pay sector was transformed to become one in which work was higher skilled, more creative, better paid, more autonomous and rewarding (as well as incurring lower costs overall). The reason is because it was reconfigured around the imperative to nurture relationships rather than execute tasks as quickly as possible.

And, finally, we must move fast. As the American writer Alex Steffan has succinctly put it, ‘winning too slowly is the same thing as losing’.

A new work order will not displace existing environmental imperatives. We must rightly continue to insist on a rapid and deep transition to renewable energy, reduced pollution and consumption, and the eradication of fossil fuel interests from politics. But it will augment them in crucial ways, that enable people to weave the great work of social transformation that falls to us into the shape of their everyday lives.

My generation will be the last to have a climate epiphany. My daughters are growing up always knowing that their world is careering toward a destructive path. They know it. In the same sort of way I grew up knowing about the First World War. And thinking (with indecent arrogance) that if, somehow, I had been there, I would have never been involved in something so silly and pointless.

My hope is that, by the time my children grow up they will see as grotesque the fact that we – knowing about climate change – once paid our brightest young people handsomely for coming up with ingenious ways of flinging people and objects around the planet as frictionlessly and profitably as possible, while at the same time practically impeding the work of those engaged in renewal and repair of the world.

They will look on that as unimaginable and horrific as the militarist logic that saw 57 000 British casualties on the first day

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— Frances Flanagan

of the Somme, but insisted that young men wake up and go over the top to be slaughtered again the next day. Of course, like any parent, I hope their little lines of personal progress rise. I hope they find occupations that are useful, interesting and that nourish and nurture the people and places around them. But as every parent knows, I can’t do that for them.

What I can do, and what all of us can do, is fight for a system that doesn’t press impossible dilemmas on their slim shoulders. We can remake our work order, into one that does not insist that they choose between work that renews the world and work that is materially secure.

We can create a system that offers them a stake in a deep and expansive environmental politics that isn’t just about what they do or don’t buy but yokes together their private lines of progress, with that other great line that determines and marks our collective fate. We can make an order of work that cuts with the grain of their ambitions, their loves and their talents and encourages them to weave these into a common social project.

One that they will fight for when we are all gone: the nurturance of life, and the flourishing of our common home.



Dr Frances Flanagan