Podcast Transcript

Absolutely possible: how big problems have been solved around the world

Sharon Lee
Welcome to Brotherhood Talks.

Andrew Wear
Denmark is effectively showing us that you can decouple economic growth from energy consumption and carbon emissions. It is possible. It's absolutely possible, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Sharon Lee
Andrew Wear takes a positive approach to resolving tough policy questions in his new book, Solved, how other countries have cracked the world's biggest problems and we can too. He's a senior public policy advisor in Victoria and a fellow of the Institute of Public Administration Australia. His work is published in peer review journals, as well as in The Mandarin and The Guardian. He's speaking here with Professor Shelley Mallet, head of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence Research and Policy Centre and begins by explaining the impetus for his optimism.

Andrew Wear
I've got a real passion for public policy. I believe in the power of government and public policy to change lives and to make a difference. But obviously, I remember being in Readings book store down in St. Kilda one afternoon and standing in the politics section there looking at all the books. And almost every single book on that shelf was a book about the problems facing the world. It was the rise of inequality, racism, climate change, every single depressing topic you could possibly think of about how the world was going backwards and we should all be incredibly depressed. And then just an aisle or two over, you look in the self-help section or the business section and you see there – and really, those books are all framed with the right attitude and a positive spirit. There are things we can do to change the future.

And I thought, "Wouldn't it be great if we could get that spirit of optimism and the power and inspiration to change the future and bring that to some of the big challenges that the world was facing?" And I knew – and I had a bit of an insight into the fact that if you look around the world, a number of countries are successfully dealing with the things that we're trying to deal with. And I thought, "Let's tell those stories. Let's give people a bit of inspiration, a bit of reason for optimism so that we can start some conversations in Australia and elsewhere around the world about just what might be possible."

Professor Shelley Mallet
Terrific. Look, it's a very wide-ranging book with a number of chapters. Can you just give us a little bit of a sense of the overall scope of the book before we get into some specific questions about specific issues?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. Well, I thought as a modest topic for my first book, I'd write a book about how to change – how to solve all the world's problems. And so it does encompass

everything – a broad range of topics from climate change to inequality, to gender inequality, to education, innovation, the minds of manufacturing, a range of topics from across the board. And broadly, what I've sought to do is start from the perspective of asking which countries are achieving the best outcomes in each one of those areas. Let's look at the data and see who's getting the best results. Once we know who's getting the best results, let's then go and find out what they're doing. What are they doing to get the best results that we could possibly take inspiration from?

And so I then cold called and approached a whole range of different people from those countries, experts, community leaders, policymakers, ordinary people to get perspectives about what's going on in those countries and what do they think is making the difference in those countries. And I had a whole series of fascinating conversations with some really generous and interesting people, and then backed that up with some academic research, some data analysis and really some – to try and weave through a narrative about what those countries are doing to make them a success and try and pull out what are the nuggets that we might possibly take inspiration from in a country like Australia.

Professor Shelley Mallet
Terrific. So I'd just like to ask you some questions about some of the specific chapters and there's one example of work in Norway and about how to reduce inequality and raise living standards in Norway. And I wonder if you could just give us an indication of what are some of the measures that they've put in place to achieve one of the most equitable income distributions across the globe. What have they done there?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. I think before we do that, I think it's worthwhile pointing out that a country like Norway not only has some of the greatest equality in the world, but it's also got the highest living standards. And if you look across a lot of those Nordic countries, they actually have some of the highest living standards in the world and, in fact, a lot of –I think what I said to do in the book is really to debunk some of the myths that we tell ourselves in public policy in Australia. Most of – for example, high taxes lead to lower economic growth, but actually, you look at it across the board. Of the 15 countries with the highest incomes in the world, 11 of them have a tax rate that's higher than the OECD average.

And I think what we see in a country like Norway is that a country with a social welfare system, a higher than usual tax rate and a network of support, which we'll go into, it's actually totally, completely and utterly compatible with economic growth and high living standards and high incomes. And I think they're not either ors. It's actually the reduction in the inequality has actually contributed to the economic growth. And one of the reasons for that is because by supporting and enabling the participation in the economy and in the labour market of everyone in society, it means the country is benefiting from the contributions of everyone. And so asking how can we get more people with disabilities, more women, more unemployed back into the labour market and working.

And the more participation you have in the labour market and in employment, the more people are paying taxes, the more people are contributing to economic growth,and that's actually been underpinning the success story in Norway and in a

whole range of other countries as well. But I think some other factors that actually go towards reducing inequality in Norway is – and some of these are not directly transferable, but more than 50% of workers in Norway are union members and 70% of workers in Norway are covered by collective agreements which specify wage flaws, which means that they're not statutory minimum wages. But effectively, their minimum wage for those in minimum wage type jobs is actually enough to lead a decent life on and to contribute to society in a meaningful way with a degree of security.

Obviously, when it comes to unemployment, there are some very significant things that are put in place. So for up to two years, a worker can receive up to 60% of their previous salary in unemployment benefits. They're supported with wage subsidies when they go back into the workforce, training programs, intensive wraparound services that help people re-enter the labour market. It's not punitive. It's actually about actually helping and encourage people to enter the labour market. And then I think like a lot of Nordic countries, the notion that participation is actually really a fundamentally good thing for economic growth, so helping and looking at policies that help women enter and remain in the workforce actually drives economic growth. And that means things like extended paid parental leave, reduced working hours. And I think that's one of my favourite policies that are actually in the book.

In Norway, the average working hours I think are 249 hours over – don't quote me on that, but it's actually about six and a half weeks less the average Norwegian works than the average Australian, six and a half weeks in total. So I mean that's made up of one week extra of annual leave. They have five weeks. But a lot of it's made up of limits on overtime. They have a standard 38 hour working week like us, but there are strict statutory limits on the amount of overtime that can be worked. And so the average Norwegian works from about 8:00am to 4:00pm every day and that extra time enables people to balance work and family better, to participate in society better and actually lead a healthier, more well adjusted life.

And one of the things that I think that flows from that – it's really, really interesting, and if you look at the data across all of the OECD – is that countries with fewer average working hours each year, where the average worker works less, have higher rates of labour productivity. And if you think about that, that makes intuitive sense. If you're stressed and tired and have to balance your personal life during work hours because that's the only time you've got, of course you are going to be less productive. But if you're well rested and you can balance your family life when you are at work, you're going to be more present and more productive and the data actually shows that in a country like Norway, where they work less, has higher productivity, and I could go on, but perhaps we should do the next question.

Professor Shelley Mallet
Well, I guess it begs the question about – we always site Scandinavian/Nordic countries as real examples of transformational policy reform, at least some of us do in the social policy landscape, and then many respond by saying it's just not – it doesn't translate to the Australian context. So I'm wondering why you included that focus in the book.

Andrew Wear
Yeah. And it will be very, very easy to write a book just about Scandinavia and many

have done that. And as you say, I think a lot of people are tired of hearing about the Scandinavian utopia and it's very easy to say that's just the Scandinavians. It doesn't work in an Anglo context, et cetera, et cetera. The book, for those who have seen it, doesn't do that. It includes a couple of chapters on Scandinavian countries, but there's chapters that focus on the UK, the US, a number of the east Asian countries to learn from and there are examples for us to take inspiration from all around the world. And, in fact, the – while the Nordic countries are doing great in a number of areas, there are actually – when it comes to educational outcomes or life expectancy outcomes, they're being outperformed by many of the east Asian countries.

When it comes to competitiveness and innovation, they're being outperformed by the UK – by the US I should say. The UK has lower crime rates, and so there are – we do need to genuinely look around the world and ask ourselves who is achieving the best outcomes in different policy domains and then take inspiration from that. Some of those examples will not translate readily to Australia or a country like Australia, and it's not really about picking out policies, as you said in your intro, and taking them from one country and just plonking them down in a country like Australia because that won't work. We've got a different political culture, different politics, different culture, different history, different institutions, but what it is about, it's about taking inspiration from what other countries are doing and what's possible.

It's about expanding the menu of policy options that we can actually talk about and discuss and imagine. If our imagination about what might be possible can be expanded, then we can have a richer conversation. And it also provokes us to confront head on some of our assumptions about policy and it helps us slay some of those sacred cows that we have as gospel in Australia; low taxes are better; a small government is better, all those sort of things. And if you see actually that countries like Norway and elsewhere where higher taxes, bigger government are actually achieving better economic development outcomes than some of the small government countries, then you have to ask yourself, "Perhaps there's something in there that we can actually use to question some of our assumptions in a country like Australia."

Professor Shelley Mallet
So you write that sharing the pie, which actually we have a campaign going here at the Brotherhood called Share the Pie, which is around economic security and raising the rate of new staff and, more broadly, social security reform, but you're right that sharing the pie is more important than just growing the pie. And so I'm just wondering what do you mean by this and can you give some of the examples from the work that you've done?

Andrew Wear
Well, I'm not actually sure that I said sharing the pie is more important than growing the pie. I think I might have said that sharing the pie is actually an important contributor to growing the pie. Once upon a time, 20 years ago, in policy debates, we had that dichotomy, didn't we? On the one hand, you could choose to grow the pie, or you could slice up the pie equally. And the debate was you can't do both. If you're going to have greater equality, you're sacrificing economic growth. It's funny; the actual data, the literature, the evidence from groups like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and the OECD, and now all of them, almost without exception, saying that inequality undermines economic growth. And I think that's almost uncontested now.

And so a lot of the policy choices that we used to think we had to make or the dilemmas that we had to face that almost flowed through into our ideological battles, they're actually no longer there, the choice between economic growth and inequality, the choice between carbon mitigation and economic growth. Again, that's another one where actually mitigating carbon actually contributes to economic growth. It's not a choice between one or the other. You look at Ross Garnaut's book on showing how Australia's actually going to benefit economically from mitigating carbon. And I think as the policies' understanding has improved, all of those dilemmas are actually being resolved. I'm not sure our politics has caught up with that, but I think it's important to remind people that actually reducing inequality contributes to economic growth, for example.

And the reason it does that is because if people – if we have too much inequality, it means that people are not investing enough in the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, and as a result, society fails to benefit from the productive capability of those kids who would otherwise grow up to do something just as incredible as any other kid. And I think if we fail to properly realise and invest in everyone in society, we're failing to benefit from the productive capability of those. And that's probably an economistway of talking about it, but what it really means is that if we support everyone, then everyone can contribute and as a result, as a society, we're all better. And that links to improved living standards and better outcomes.

Conny Lenneberg
I'm Conny Lenneberg, Executive Director of the National Social Justice Group, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence. I hope you're enjoying this episode of Brotherhood Talks. If you'd like to learn more about our work to find solutions to the complex challenges presented by poverty in our prosperous country, have a look at bsl.org.au.

Professor Shelley Mallet
So you make the important point that our politics is kind of, in particular, but also some of our public policies got caught in these binaries, these either or – inequality or economic growth. I'm wondering, having written the book and actually working in the public sector yourself, have you given some thought about how we might avoid those either-or traps in public policy, as well as in the political debate?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. It is a challenge, and I guess one of the reasons for writing the book is to contribute to debates and discussions exactly like this and I guess, importantly too, to provide the evidence base and the stories that enable people like you to go out and mount the arguments and have the conversations with some evidence behind it. And even the people in the room here today, if everyone went and talked to 10 people at their next dinner, that's a lot of people we've influenced. And actually, telling stories, I think is just as powerful as actually rather dry academic analysis, for example. And I think if we can take the discipline of the academic analysis, combine it with some stories that enable us to tell people the actually sort of impact and what might be possible, then we can actually inspire hope, optimism and change about what might be possible.

But I think one of the other themes coming through the book is trust. Trust is a really incredibly important part of achieving successful outcomes and that's where the Nordic countries do particularly well and the northern Europeans. And you look at a

country like Denmark with reducing carbon emissions and that's through long-term energy agreements that have involved the opposition, as well as the government, in those agreements so that it's actually got a degree of policy continuity through chambers of government. How we get there in a country like Australia – and there are some particular areas that are fraught, climate change being one of them. There are probably other areas though where there's probably more opportunity for constructive conversations. It really is up to our political leaders to listen to the best policy evidence and then work out a way of making the politics work so that we can actually progress this.

Professor Shelley Mallet
Yeah. So I'll get into a bit more of the content a bit, but can I just get you to expand a bit on this idea about trust because I think it's a really important issue for us all, and there's an erosion of trust? There's an erosion of trust, I guess, between our political class and our policy class. There's an erosion of trust between civil society and some other sectors within government and the political domain. So I'm just wondering, having written the book and thinking about how important trust is and rebuilding trust is, if you've got some further observations about that?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. So I haven't got all the answers for that because trust is fundamentally rooted in a culture and a society. It's not something that can be switched on and off by a policy prescription, but I do have some ideas that I think are particularly interesting for around the world. Denmark is interesting because they have effectively – everyone in Denmark, regardless of which political persuasion they're from, get their news from the same source. They've got one or two news companies that are pretty much in the centre and from a TV news point of view. And so everyone is having the arguments in the same market place. They're talking to each other. They're arguing with each other in the same space. Whereas in a country like Australia or the US where there's an increased fragmentation and polarization of media, it means we're not talking to each other.

We're talking to ourselves over here or over here and we're effectively not confronting head-on our differences and working out how to resolve that. Another area I look at is a country like Germany or any of those northern European countries with their approach to industrial relations, for example, and union membership being so high. And rather than conflict between workers and employers, there's actually collaboration between workers and employers and unions and together working out how to solve problems, how to improve competitiveness, how to lead to higher living standards, et cetera. And in a country like Germany, which has got statutory inclusion of workers on company boards, clearly, that's a policy.

It's not going to translate directly into Australia, but I think if you look back to the 80s in Australia when we had the prices and wages accord with the Hawke government and where we had industry, unions and government all around the table together, coming up with a collaboratively agreed solution to some of the economic challenges facing Australia, I wonder whether we couldn't try and tackle a problem like climate change in a similar way as bringing all the parties together and reaching a climate change accord of some description, rather than dealing with that through polarized yelling from different sides, so –

Professor Shelley Mallet
Okay. So I'd just like to take us to your chapter on Denmark, which is on how to farewell fossil fuels and you look at Denmark's advances towards net zero emissions. Can you run through their journey a bit and help us understand the key elements that they put in place to get there and underscoring those that you think are readily translatable to our context?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. It's interesting that Denmark, since 1990, has roughly halved its per capita carbon emissions, reduced by approximately 50%. Australia has reduced its carbon emissions over this – per capita carbon emissions over the same period by – I think it's approximately zero and it might – I think actually itmight have actually marginally increased. But Denmark shows us that it is possible to do it and that with the right policy settings, that we could do it too. It's a long story though and it goes back to the 1970s and the oil shock and the oil crisis when Denmark, at the time, was overly reliant on imported middle eastern oil, and decided that it didn't want to be put in that vulnerable position again, so it raised energy taxes. And then the oil crisis was over, and Denmark decided to keep its energy taxes high as a way of reducing energy consumption.

And high prices for energy have become the accepted norm in Denmark, very different to Australia, and that's not going to translate. But those high prices in turn then led to revenue – those taxes led to a revenue stream that was then able then to be applied to things like subsidies for wind. And Denmark has then subsequently gone on to invest enormous amounts in subsidizing the wind industry, and it's now grown so that just under half of all electricity consumption last year was produced by wind. And it's got a strong wind industry, so companies like Vestas, which are now manufacturing out of Geelong for the Victorian industry is now one of the biggest wind turbine manufacturers in the world.

And what Denmark's experience shows, I think, is that – although Denmark was operating in the context of the overall European union mission's trading regime, every expert I spoke to in Denmark told me that emissions trading regimes are good and we all need one, but they're always imperfect and there's always flaws in them. Regardless of whether you've got one or not, you still need to subsidize renewable energy, and so they will continue to do that. Except, from 2017 onwards, the auctions they've run for new renewable energy have actually been led to zero subsidy bits. So in other words, a company that puts up their hand and says, "I want to supply you with renewable energy, Denmark," I'm going to do that with no subsidy because actually, all I need is the wholesale price for electricity and that's actually going to be adequate.

So they've actually discovered now that the wind energy is now actually the cheapest form of energy that can be produced in Denmark. And I think we're beginning to see that in Australia too. They've also discovered that with a network of interconnectors with Norway, which likely has hydro power in Germany and then they're constructing another network interconnector into the UK, that with the right network infrastructure, they can maintain security and reliability of supply. Denmark's had the highest electricity reliability in Europe for the last couple of decades. And really, what that all leads us to know is that you can run a system of renewable only electricity without baseload power.

You don't need it if you manage your network properly with the various alternative sources of supply in a network context and it's not going to threaten your supply, but I think the other thing that's – that's sort of big electricity network level. Denmark's also done a lot of stuff at the local community level. So I spoke with a group from Samsø Island, a little farming community in Denmark, just under 4,000 people, and from an economic development – a local economic development perspective of community organising an engagement of farmers that actually very, very quickly, early decades ago, led to that community becoming carbon neutral and then surpassing it. And actually, every resident of that island now, I think, produces negative 3.7 times per annum per person.

And they did that by setting up a whole series of wind turbines which are owned by the community; by converting heating to biomass boilers in a communal setting, which then pipes all the heating to all the houses; electric cars. They've just converted their ferry that connects the island to the mainland to run on gas, which they're going to then produce gas from pig waste and all that sort of – it's quite incredibly what they're doing at a community level. But that wasn't about some vision of the values of climate change. For them, that was as a community saying, "How are we going to drive our economy? How are we going to provide jobs for our kids? How are we going to ensure that our community is viable into the future?"

And it's actually – it didn't rely on those farmers in that community having to get onboard with some sort of value prescription. It was actually about how do we collectively improve our community? And I think the same goes in Copenhagen. Copenhagen's got a net zero carbon emissions goal. It's already down to 2.5 times per person per annum, compared to Australia is about 16 times and it's about to do – it's about to open a biomass electricity generator again in Denmark, and it will purchase offsets to get to zero pretty soon. But much of what they've done in Copenhagen has not been about climate change. It's actually about creating a liveable city that actually people want to live in with bicycles and pedestrian use and mass transit and insulated house and all the things that are required to actually live a good life.

And it's the story you have to tell about – I think perhaps in Australia we talk too much about climate change as some sort of identity or value prescription that you have to adopt, and it polarizes people. You've either got to be – get onboard the climate change or off it sort of thing. But if it is about just creating a better society and a better life that we all want to live with all the good things, then it becomes a much easier story.

Professor Shelley Mallet
Yeah. So can you just say a little bit more about what you think the lessons from Denmark are for Australia?

Andrew Wear
Well, I think the lessons for Denmark is twofold. One is that there's a bipartisan consensus which – I don't know if it's a lesson for Australia. It's an aspiration for Australia, I suppose, rather than a lesson, so that every long-term energy agreement that's entered into is entered into by the opposition, as well as the government. So that if there's a change of government, electricity companies and others involved know that the policy settings are going to continue. That gives them the confidence, as business and investors, to invest large sums of money to invest in renewable energy

and the other infrastructure required because they know the policy settings are going to be there in future.

If you're an energy company and looking to invest a couple hundred million dollars and there's a risk that the policy settings are going to change in two years when there's an election, you're probably not going to invest. That policy uncertainty creates all sorts of issues. It's not good for business confidence whatsoever. So bipartisan approaches to policy development – when it comes to creating the regulatory framework in which people are making decisions – really, really critical. Someone else will have to figure out how do we get to that point in Australia, but I think that's really, really important. And I think the other thing is that in Denmark, climate change just really isn't an ideological – it's not an ideological debate. It's not within the cleaves up society in the middle that's – it's an accepted fact and everyone's onboard with it and doesn't compromise their economy.

Denmark's economy has grown faster than Australia since 1990. We've seen in Denmark that the economic growth has been remarkably strong. At the same time, overall energy use has declined. Overall carbon emissions have declined even more. Denmark has effectively shown us that you can decouple economic growth from energy consumption and carbon emissions. It is possible. It is absolutely possible, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Professor Shelley Mallet
I guess one of the things I took, which you wrapped from that chapter actually, was the community led component of this as well. I found that quite inspirational actually. That's a really important part of this story.

Andrew Wear
Yeah. Yeah, it is. I think when – government policy settings clearly matter a lot, but the government policy settings can then enable and empower local communities to take ownership over their own solutions, and for local leadership and community development practises, actually enable communities to create the sort of future they want for their own community which, often – and I'm sure that would be the case in Australia too – would involve a sustainable future with reduced carbon emissions, et cetera, and we see that in some instances. That [Samsø Island] example, up in Daylesford, they, for example, had the organizer out to Daylesford and they're taking inspiration from Hepburn Renew Power, I've forgot what they're called, but that sort of policy inspiration from around the world is actually flowing out from some of that Danish practise. It's quite interesting.

Professor Shelley Mallet
Okay. So we'll change gear to England, if that's okay?

Andrew Wear
Yeah, sure.

Professor Shelley Mallet
And so can you talk us through the progress that they've made in reducing violence because I was quite astounded by this story actually. I thought, "How did this pass me by?" Yeah.

Andrew Wear
Yeah. I was quite amazed too. I mean just setting this up for a little bit – I mean since the mid-1990s, violent crime in the UK has declined by approximately three quarters. The UK has the lowest homicide rate in the OECD, and you don't assume that. We have all sorts of perceptions. I just think trainspotting and smashingpint glasses in people's faces and – it's just the perception I have at which possible – but clearly, the data doesn't support that, and I wanted to find out why. And so I spoke with a couple of people, including an ex police chief and, would you believe, a facial surgeon, a maxillofacial surgeon who became an expert in criminology and violent crime. And it's a really fascinating story.

So a couple of things; one is that the police don't know about three quarters of all violent crime. So three quarters of all violent crime is not reported to the police. And that's because people think nothing will be done about it if they report it, that there's no evidence base. They might have been drunk when it happened, and they just basically don't report it. The police really are in the dark when it comes to most violent crime. If you want to get good data about violent crime, where do you go? You go to an accident and emergency ward in a hospital, and so that's where the best data is about violent crime. And this guy, Jonathan Shepherd who I spoke to, this surgeon, he discovered this really as part of his PhD research a couple of decades ago.

And then he went to essentially set up these collaborative networks of violence prevention networks, which involved the hospitals, the police and then local government who were the liquor licensing authorities essentially. And what they do is they get all the data from various different sources, from the hospitals, from police, from the survey data, and find out what are the trends, where are the hotspots, what's happening. And they can get violence data now down to the nearest street corner or the nearest building and find out where are the hotspots. And what they discovered is that violence increasingly – I mean inevitably concentrates in very, very particular locations. A large majority of violence actually occurs in highly concentrated locations.

It could be even a street corner or one building or one station forecourt at a train station. They can actually pinpoint it. And then once they've done that, they all then work together and ask, "What can we do to prevent this violence from occurring in the future," and that focus on prevention and intervening to stop violence occurring. And it might be they're improving street lighting or improving sight lines. In one instance, I found, for example, people were presenting at hospital having been hit over the head with old building rubble and building materials. And what they then discovered that it was all in the one location outside a nightclub, and that next door to that nightclub, there was a building site with a skip that had all the building materials in it.

And then what they worked out – and then the local council then changed the permit arrangements for that skip so that it had to have a lid and being closed so that people couldn't get those building materials anymore. And then they rolled out that same guidelines that if you're in a certain radius of a licensed venue, you couldn't have an open skip with building materials in it to stop providing people with access to planks of wood do donk people over the head with. And that type of focus on prevention is really, really powerful and collaboration.

Professor Shelley Mallet
And data.

Andrew Wear
And data, data is absolutely critical, yeah.

Professor Shelley Mallet
Yeah, because what I took from this story is – and some of the others actually – is that big and small data is really important and diverse sources of data to examine the multiple dimensions of a problem or an issue. Do you want to comment a bit more about that?

Andrew Wear
Yeah, it's absolutely critical. I mean I'll give one more example, if you want, from [Jonathan Shepperd]. He discovered, from his own work and research in the hospital and I think – I can't remember the percentage, but a big percentage of people presenting to hospital had glassing accidents. They'd been smashed in the face with a pint glass or trainspotting or something like that. And then he discovered that there was one particular type of pint glass called the nonic pint glass or something, which was causing almost all of the incidents. It was this pint glass with a little bulge in the top and that was causing almost all those glassing incidents. And he did a whole bunch of testing in a laboratory about the breaking points of different types of pint glasses and then worked with the Association of Pubs or whatever it's called in the UK to get the introduction of tempered glass pint glasses into a certain number of pubs in a randomized control trial.

And he got that done. He got some good data out of that randomized control trial that proved that that actually led to a reduction in glassing incidents and then persuaded the entire industry across all of the UK to introduce tempered glass pint glasses that reduced by tens of thousands, each year, the number of glassing incidents presenting to hospital. And I think the combination of data and prevention can lead to some quite incredible outcomes. And so now what the UK has done is rolled out these violence prevention partnerships essentially across the entire UK based on that Cardiff model where he was originally based.

Professor Shelley Mallet
So just thinking across the breadth of your research and as I said, there's so many chapters in this and stuff on gender inequality, et cetera, but what are your top policy prescriptions for Australia?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. So that's a big one. I've got some favourites. Firstly, I would look at the overall tax take in Australia. Australia's tax take at 27% of the GDP is below the OECD average. I really think we can just raise it by, not a lot, a couple of percentage points and it would give us enormous amounts of revenue.

Professor Shelley Mallet
That's a really difficult conversation to have in Australia.

Andrew Wear
I know it is. But when you look internationally how our tax take is remarkably low,

when you look at those who are achieving the best outcomes in the world that’s much higher than us, and they’ve got much stronger economic growth than us. So the arguments for a low tax rate, I think are weak and I think we can actually increase our tax rates marginally within the Australian political context, one or two percentage points. I think reducing working hours would be one policy change that we can do incrementally that would have enormous benefits in a whole range from wellbeing, from gender inequality to women’s participation in the workforce, to civil society participation, to a whole – to public health. I think reducing working hours, I think, is an incredible –

Professor Shelley Mallet
I was reading the book at 10:30 last night and I was thinking, "Yes, I want that one."

Andrew Wear
Yeah. And I think– I don’t know how you do that. I mean you just Jeremy Corbyn didn’t do so well taking that to the election in the UK, but I don’t see why we couldn’t move to five weeks annual leave. I just don’t see why that wouldn’t be possible. Why not? And so that’s one obviously, and it’s the biggie where you clearly need to do much better when it comes to climate change and carbon abatement and moving to electrify as much as possible in Australia with electricity produced by renewable sources is absolutely achievable, absolutely achievable and it just requires a little bit of concerted focus and effort. Clearly, we need to do that. And then I think our education, our schooling, our school education system is one area in which we are getting left behind by a long way.

Our outcomes are just – they’re getting worse. We’re falling further and further behind the countries that are achieving the best results in the world. The average 15-year-old is a year and a half behind the average 15-year-old in Singapore. I think we really need a concerted effort to do more in school education as well.

Professor Shelley Mallet
One of the things I took from the book – going back to the community led, and I guess we’ve been thinking about that a fair bit at the Brotherhood, historically as well as currently, is that sometimes we expect there to be top down policy prescription and perhaps we absolve ourselves as ordinary citizens from really creating the drive for policy reform. I wonder whether you might make a comment about that because that’s what I took from the book, in part, because I think that – for those of you – when you come to read the book, it’s a very conversational style with the people that you went to speak to, but you’re often taking us from a journey from community led reform right up into macro policy levers to drive reform in that. And I think that was a really novel thing to do actually and it’s something that we’re very interested in here at the Brotherhood. So do you want to comment a bit more on that?

Andrew Wear
Well, it is absolutely one of the themes that emerged. I didn’t intend it to emerge. It did emerge from the various conversations. Whether you look at the approaches to carbon mitigation in Denmark,or crime prevention in the UK, or approaches to innovation in cities in the US, none of those things really involved in any direct way national government. They involved communities or cities with civil society and business and community members all organizing themselves, and I think that’s really important and really powerful. I mean the examples that I gave in the US chapter, for

example, about driving innovation in some of the most innovative cities in the world, although there's some federal government policy settings that underpin everything, such as investment in R & D and other things, but most of those great examples are about cities themselves with local mayors and philanthropic groups and community organizations and businesses all working together collaboratively to make things happen in their community, in their city, and that goes for the case.

And that's in the Anglo countries, and it's completely transferable to Australia that type of approach. We should feel confident that we could, and we can make things happen ourselves in a city like Melbourne, in a city – or wherever we're from, with some local leadership and a collaborative approach to making things happen. There are examples from that all around the world. And that often flows up and influences public policy in turn. I mean the examples around crime prevention show that when you have a successful policy intervention at the local level, it often then gets transposed and moved nationally. I mean we even saw that here in Victoria, for example, with kindergarten, with 15 hours for four-year-old kindergarten. It started off as a Victorian led initiative that then rolled out nationally. Things that are locally driven can often flow out and we shouldn't underestimate the power of that.

Professor Shelley Mallet
So thank you. That's the end of my formal questioning of you, but I'd like to throw it open to the floor actually just to invite questions.

Victor Perton
Thank you. Victor Perton. Your brilliance is delivering stories of hope and optimism. And I think the data shows that Australia and New Zealand have become increasingly bleak countries. I think the Morgan Gallup poll just at Christmas showed pessimism at its highest ever and optimism at its lowest ever. And public policy is now distinguished by negativity and we've handed it over to royal commissions in which the entire narrative is negative. So Disney, Coke, the big global brands – so that people are yearning for stories of hope and optimism, and that's what every story in your book is a story of hope and optimism. How can we replicate that? You talked about each of us going and having a dinner party with 10 and telling those stories, but you've worked hard on this book.

You work in a department which is exemplified by a lot of bleakness and negativity. How do you and Shelley become more of the beacons of hope and optimism for this society?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. Well, I guess the act of writing this book is me stepping up and trying to make that contribution with the – so that I can move beyond getting my head down and bum up, getting the work done in my department and actually getting out, telling the stories of possibility and hope in the community. So I want to have a whole series of conversations like this with people and actually inspire hope so that we can have conversations about what is possible, what is achievable and why we should be optimistic about the future. There are great things about Australia too and I don't think we should be entirely bleak. We shouldn't be bleak about Australia's prospects. In most measures, we're doing pretty well, and in some measures, we're doing really well.

In fact, in the book, I argue that we are the most successful multicultural country in the world and with one in two of us with at least one overseas born parent, one in three of us born overseas. There's no country in the world, other than Luxembourg, that has similar data from the OECD. We should be incredibly proud of how successful we're doing at leveraging our fantastic immigrant population. And we've got great life expectancy. Our economic growth has been pretty good. There are all sorts of things we should be proud of, but then there's a whole host of areas in which we are not number one. We are actually falling a long way behind and we should aspire to be – we should ask ourselves what it takes to be – what would it take to be number one? What more do we need to do? And actually, not settle for second best. And I think by learning and dreaming about what might be possible, then we can at least have some of those conversations.

Audience member
You sort of touched on it in answer to some of the other questions, but I wanted to ask about politics because you said you were talking about policy, not politics. But the fundamental issue is really political. So how do we deal with those political issues?

Andrew Wear
Yeah. It's hard. It is hard. I guess what I really wanted to do with this book though was to demonstrate clearly, with evidence and with stories, what good policy looks like so I guess so that if the politicians want to leverage that, I've served it up on a platter for them. Also, if they want to argue that – argue something else, they really – we should be having an informed conversation about what good policy works – what good policy looks like, what works, what doesn't work. If politicians are arguing something and the evidence doesn't support it, it's up to all of us in the room to call them out and argue – and actually say, "Well, actually, the evidence says something else." And that's actually about us participating in debate and discussion and dialogue in the community and the more we can be informed and the more we can have stories to tell, hopefully the better our polity becomes as a result, but that's one I haven't quite sorted out yet.

Professor Shelley Mallet
Unfortunately, we've come to the end of our time, but we can take up these conversations over lunch. So I'd like you to join with me in thanking Andrew for an inspiring, hopeful conversation with us and long may it continue; one on one, round the dinner table, in the policy roundtables, on Twitter, wherever we find ourselves actually, Andrew, I hope that we can take inspiration from this kind of thinking and this sort of endeavour to invite us to be hopeful and think about solutions. So can we please thank Andrew.

[applause]

Sharon Lee
Professor Shelley Mallet, head of the Brotherhood of St Laurence Research and Policy Centre, in conversation with senior public policy advisor, Andrew Wear. They were discussing Andrew's new book, Solved, how other countries have cracked the world's biggest problems, and we can too. Check the Brotherhood Talks website for a link, bsl.org.au/brotherhoodtalks. You'll also find more episodes and transcripts. This talk took place in February 2020. Brotherhood Talks is a podcast by the Research and Policy Centre of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, working for an Australia free of

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