

Centre for Ethical Leadership dinner address

From Little Things ...

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Ormond College, Melbourne University

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Thank you for the introduction Peter. It is a real pleasure to be asked to come into this space to meet with people who have invested in thinking, working and planning around ethics and leadership.

But before I share my own reflections, I would like to start by acknowledging country and paying my respects to the Wurundjeri traditional custodians of this land that we meet on tonight. Long before these stones stood on this place, long before these hallways rang with the voices of young and old seeking and exchanging knowledge, this place knew a different way. The lands of the Kulin nations were never ceded. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I have thought deeply on what I could offer you tonight, what I can usefully reflect on about ethical and moral leadership.

We live in strange times.

The news from morning to night screams of conflict, insecurity, polarisation, and political and moral bankruptcy.

We are challenged daily to hold steady in the face of storms that batter us repeatedly - from political scandals to fierce talk of cold and hot wars; from news of human rights abuses to live footage from bomb sites; to actual storms and natural disasters made all the worse by climate change contributed to by human consumerism.

You could be led to think that we should just bunker down, holding on for grim life, and watch it all unfold.

Except we can't.

I am firmly of the belief that any human made problem has a solution that human genius - and some hard graft - can find.

Because we are genius. We are more clever than we know or are led to believe. And here in Australia especially, many of us have privileges unimaginable in most other places in the world. Those of us with this luck have more power to make a difference - to think creatively and to accept challenges.

However, ethical leadership is not only possible through traditionally recognised power roles – government, bureaucracy or top corporate positions. Just this morning [a new study](#) revealed that the top 95% of senior leaders in Australia have Anglo-Celtic or European backgrounds. This is not representative of leadership in many sectors of society however,

and I have seen some of the most inspiring leadership from individuals who would be considered by many as greatly marginalised.

Aboriginal women leaders in particular have led serious resistance to nuclear projects across Australia in recent decades – I think here of people like Yvonne Margarula from the [Mirarr People](#) in the Northern Territory or the [Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta](#) women elders who stood strong in their law, having experienced the impacts of nuclear testing, dispossession through uranium mining and military projects, and successfully resisted a nuclear waste dump in South Australia. I think too of the late [Yami Lester](#), a man who lost his eyesight following the British nuclear tests in the 1950s but never lost his vision for a world free from nuclear weapons. His daughters [Rose and Karina Lester](#) have been key ICAN voices internationally, keeping clear the vision for victims assistance and the voices of survivor communities central to all of our work. The same applies with [Aunty Sue Coleman-Haseldine](#), who as a small child was exposed to the nuclear testing, and as an adult has travelled the world to draw out the understandings of the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. I think too of the marginalised whistleblowers on the British nuclear testing in this country, such as [Avon Hudson](#), a brave man still fighting for the rights of nuclear veterans, even now in his 80s. I think of the women and men from across the Pacific that ICAN Australia worked closely with in the negotiations of the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, raising the voices of small island states exposed through nuclear weapons tests over 50 years. I think of the incredible patience and generosity of these women and men, who do not often hold positions of power in terms of politics or bureaucracy but who hold true to their positions within their culture and communities, leading through education and advocacy. Many of these people make great personal sacrifices, few will ever profit from their work, but all stand in their convictions and see a connection to future generations.

Many of you work hard in your businesses and organisations day to day, no doubt. At times I'm sure you find yourselves – as we all do - floundering with ethical dilemmas, that small niggling doubt or that 3am worry in your mind about that certain something.

For me and for many, many people who work on ICAN across the globe, that niggling worry is Nuclear Armageddon.

I know - that's all very 1980s right? But actually - sadly - it's not.

Right now, there are about [15,000 nuclear weapons](#) in the world owned by just nine nations. Two of those nations - the US and Russia - possess the vast majority of them. Any one of those bombs is far more powerful than the first dropped on Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Every one of those bombs takes funding, science and political will from real issues of human need and security.

These weapons are devoid of utility or any ethical purpose. They are such instruments of terror in their capacity for destruction that they overshadow basic human logic for self preservation.

For over 70 years they have held the world in their thrall - being touted as a “necessary evil”, the ultimate sword of Damocles dangling over us all, an instrument of deterrence that is in fact an instrument of oppression.

I like to remind people that these weapons are pointed at you. At your family. At everything you love in the world. From the places your mind wanders to when you day dream of escape, to the place where you wake each morning, or lay to rest of a night. Certain figures with uncertain fingers hovering above buttons of disputable size like to hold all of our futures in precarious balance. These weapons threaten all of our lives. So feel free to take it personally. I have.

When [we began ICAN in the mid 2000s](#) it wasn't out of the blue, a one-off lightning bulb moment where we thought we'd have a go. We were not a ragtag bunch of dreamers. All of us involved in the genesis of ICAN were long term advocates of a nuclear free world, working from various angles on issues of nuclear disarmament, nuclear free futures and environmental and human rights responsibilities. It was not a new conversation but one sounded out through decades and across the world. Despite the claims of others now, we were anything but naive. We knew well from close work, decades of experience, how hard it would be to begin a new approach to nuclear disarmament.

People have asked us often in the last six months how and why this campaign came about. For many people it seems like such an intractable issue, so entrenched, one of the worlds greatest wicked problems. How and why we - a small group of Australian activists, doctors, environmentalists, and others, felt we had the ability - even the right – no less, the duty - to speak up and act?

In turn, I wonder how anyone can think that this is not their business.

We began ICAN here in Melbourne just down the road. We started out with a clear purpose - to re-engage at every level of society with a vision for a nuclear weapons free world.

At our very first official Board meeting here in Melbourne early in 2006, having secured the funding for the campaign, but before the campaign was officially launched, the minutes opened with this quote attributed to US President Franklin D Roosevelt;

“Do Something. If it works, do more of it. If it doesn't, try something else.”

This was the reality of how we began ICAN. We did not know for certain if it would work, but we knew we would. We wanted to reignite a global conversation around a simple idea - we started from the challenge - can you imagine a world free of nuclear weapons?

Now sometimes we were told flat out, with no holds barred - no, I can't imagine a world free of nuclear weapons. My reply to this was usually, give me an hour, I will convince you.

But more often than not, when putting this question to classrooms, lecture halls, corporate offices, funders, politicians, diplomats, activists and religious, quite simply, time and again, I

would watch a certain light come on in people's eyes. Perhaps it is a light of recognition, maybe a spark of hope.

We built our campaign on four key elements: Humour, Horror, Hope and Humanity.

Humour is essential to breaking down wicked problems. It stimulates and captivates people's minds (as any PR firm will tell you) but also breaks through fear and inertia.

Horror is a necessary element too, because unless you understand the true horror of the problem, there is no imperative to care or to act.

Hope though is key – by challenging people with the simple question “can you imagine a world free of nuclear weapons” we were asking them to consider what that would look like, what that money would be spent on, how the security of the world would shift, how diplomacy and collaboration would be reengaged over threats and retaliation.

But later, we found the final element – and this is the one that struck home. Humanity. The ICAN campaign reengaged with the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, seeking story and emphasising lived experience of those who had survived decades of nuclear use. Honouring those victims who did not survive. You can see this in the new treaty – recognising as it does the victims of nuclear use and testing. Recognising the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons on women and girls and on indigenous peoples. Recognising the necessity for environmental remediation and victims' assistance.

At the core of ICAN's work has been the push for a ban on nuclear weapons, informed and shaped by the knowledge that the humanitarian impacts of these weapons are simply unacceptable.

At the centre of this then, has been the remarkable and courageous voices of survivors of nuclear weapons use and testing. As I have outlined before, far from marginalised and powerless victims, these survivor voices are the most compelling advocates for the human story of the impact of these weapons - what happened to them must never happen to anyone, anywhere again.

We knew a game-changing breakthrough needed to come from the countries without the weapons. For too long the nuclear armed nations had held the world hostage to their own agenda. For many of those nations without nuclear weapons, there was despair and frustration about being indefinitely held under a nuclear threat by governments refusing to fulfil established disarmament commitments.

We were up against the harsh reality that none of the nuclear-armed countries were serious about fulfilling their binding obligation to disarm. In fact, they were doing the opposite.

Many of these countries were arguing that conditions were not right to disarm, and they were investing billions a year in modernising their nuclear arsenals, making them more accurate, deadly and “usable”.

ICAN recognised that governments without nuclear weapons cannot eliminate them, but we focussed on the reality that in an interconnected world, we could bring democracy to disarmament. By asserting the needs of global humanity, by making it the business of everyone, we worked to change the political dynamic in a fundamental way and prohibit these weapons under international law. And, alongside those brave governments around the world, that prohibition became a reality last year.

There are countless problems our world faces today. How to break free from nuclear weapons is just one of those, as compelling as it is. There are and will be countless problems we each face in our personal and work lives. It can be daunting. Like us, you will doubtless find plenty of voices to deride, to decry, to undermine your endeavours.

Ethical and moral leadership is no easily defined thing.

In my opinion, the key to dealing with ethical and moral leadership is to start. To start by really identifying the problem. To learn it again in new ways. To seek opinion and expertise fearlessly. To look for the aspirations of the supposedly naive and the cynicism of the pessimist both, to inform you of the perimeters of the problem. To be less desperate to find agreement as much as you are to have real discussion. To test the existing law, knowing that law is formed in reaction, so not to be limited to what is the now, but to build from it. To find a base within human expectation, the instinct to care for one another. To dream big.

Once you have identified your problem, examined it forensically and consulted broadly, the real ethical imperative is to act.

The power, responsibility and expectation to act is the missing link too often in our society. We can not be a by-stander to the injustice done to others. We can not abdicate our responsibilities, or ignore our place in the world or with our fellow human beings. We can not live separately from this earth. We are all diminished if we turn from action in the face of injustice. Morality and ethical leadership does not happen without considered action.

People will say it is too big, too hard, so entrenched – what can I do? My reply is simple. Something. We can all do something.

What that something is differs all the time and between people and places. You will know yourself what that something is better than most.

- For some it may be initiating a project in their workplaces on a topic relevant to the mission of their organisation.
- For some it may be a matter of supporting through funding an organisation like ICAN, enabling the work to continue.
- For some it may be painting an artwork, or composing a song.
- For some it may be giving a lecture, or writing an article.
- For some it may be changing a law, creating a safe space, identifying policy that needs changing.

The point is, we can all do something. And occasionally there are even rewards.

For most of us I think, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize was and remains a wonderful shock. It was awarded to ICAN for its a pivotal role in the historic UN treaty on the

prohibition of nuclear weapons. The treaty was adopted in July last year by an overwhelming vote of 122 to one. It opened for signature in September, and in the very first day 50 states signed it. We are steadily moving towards ratification and hope to see entry into force of this new international instrument in the next couple of years. ICAN was the driving civil society force behind the Treaty, working closely with governments to get it over the line.

The Nobel has been an incredible privilege for all who have worked with ICAN, and it is shared globally throughout our network of partners and activists in over 100 countries. Because we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, this honour is shared by generations of people who have stood up to end the threat of nuclear weapons.

And because there will be generations yet to come who will need to deal with the disarming of these weapons, the dismantling of the systems and mindsets that allowed them to exist and spread, and also to find solutions to the problems of radiological waste, this prize is for them - to look back on and hold in their minds the knowledge that humanity does value itself enough to work for a world free from nuclear weapons.

We have brought the medal to you tonight. This is one of 10 cast by the Nobel Committee to share amongst the key organisations who made ICAN possible. This medal has travelled already to Aboriginal elders who have stories of survival around nuclear testing and nuclear resistance. It has been held by a key military veteran exposed through nuclear testing and others working for a world free from nuclear weapons. It will travel to Canberra in coming months to help highlight the imperative for Australia to join the new Treaty. And it is here for you tonight to share that little gleam of excitement that we have in the privilege of this ultimate award.

But before I open for questions or share this around, let me emphasise again:

You've got this. That's why you are here. But if you have moments of doubt, listen to your own moral compass, often found in that 3am waking moment where the brain shakes you with the urgency of dilemmas. Don't lie there flip flopping with anxiety – take up your challenge, believe in your power to change, and go to it.