

## **Richard Miles – ‘It’s the End of the World As We Know It! Or Is It?’**

**Moderator:** Welcome to the podcast series of *Raising the Bar Sydney*. Raising the Bar in 2016 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into 20 bars across Sydney, all on one night.

In this podcast, you will hear Richard Miles’ talk: *It’s the End of the World as We Know It, Or Is It?* Please note the first sentence of Richard’s talk is missing from the recording. He begins: This story starts with my first cab right in Australia. In 2010 I was interviewed and accepted a lectureship at the University of Sydney without ever having set foot in the country.

**Richard Miles:** And I’ve never actually been there, okay? So eventually, the head of department said to me, you know, we think that before you start, you should really take a visit to Australia. So I thought, “Okay, that sounds like a really, really good idea.” So I arrived at Kingsford Smith Airport, got picked up by the taxi driver, and immediately loved it. We’d sort of come in, you know, a bit like these people now, you can see all the lovely red roofs and you can see all the water. You know, coming from horrible cold, grey, wintry Britain, it just seemed like paradise. You arrive, the sun’s out and there’s this friendly cabbie putting all my things in the cab, and we set off, and we’re going to Annandale. Annandale? Annandale. Anyway, in the inner west.

So I go and we have this sort of very breezy conversation. He does the usual thing, he says, “Great for kids. You know, it’s going to be fantastic for you. You’re going to love the life here.” All was going well until we got to about Moore Park, or what I now know is Moore Park, when I said, “What’s the sort of economy doing here?” okay, “What’s the sort of political situation?” And the mood darkened in our cab, okay. And actually at the same time, the skies were beginning to darken as well.

He goes ... and this is my ... “Oh mate,” he said, “mate,” he said, “It’s shocking.” And this is the first time I’d ever heard the expression “doing it tough”. “We are doing it tough in Australia. You just wouldn’t believe how tough things are,” and this whole litany of sort of problems were sort of, were sort of presented to me, from you know, “House prices, you know, I’ve got four prices, that’s my ... I’ve got four houses, that’s my pension, everything’s going to go down. They’re soon going to be worth absolutely nothing. I’m going to be living in a cardboard box. That’s probably going to be worth more than my place in wherever. Oh, you know, the carbon tax, you wouldn’t believe it.” Okay, well it’s going on, “These dangerous lefties shutting everything down, these eco-terrorists, the whole place is going only one way.” And now I know the expression also, “going south,” okay, which was another word that I wasn’t familiar with at the time.

And you can just imagine this sort of situation, okay? And probably if you take yourself back to that time, we used to hear this stuff all the time. And by the time I got to Annandale, okay, where I was dropped off in a Victorian street full of terraced Victorian houses ... it had started raining by this time, okay? And I hadn’t seen the sea since I’d left the ... and it looked like I was back home, okay? I’d travelled for 24 hours and I’d actually ended up back where I’d started. It was some sort of weird sort of circular loop, as if there was some sort of, you know, *Truman Show*-esque kind of thing going on, and people were going to go, “You know, really you’re back in Britain.”

And it was just this sort of totally shocking thing and I began to think, “My God, you know, actually, this place is like being back in Europe.”

And you have to remember, in 2010 ... and I'd just been ... I'd made a, a documentary ... series of documentaries with the BBC and we'd spent three months, literally just before I came, in Greece. And we'd been living in Athens. And it was extraordinary. Okay there, you saw a situation where people ... huge number of people, you know, proper financial meltdown, eating out of food banks, okay? Every day, riots going on outside your hotel so you couldn't walk anywhere. People were really, really desperate.

And I remember perhaps more than anything, a journey of going up to the north ... we're going up to Macedonia ... and I'm not going to get into this discussion tonight, because I know there's some ... Nicky's here, okay, and if I say about Macedonia ... I'm not going to say which part of Macedonia, whether it was Macedonia Macedonia or Mac-Greek Macedonia.

And I remember there was a sort of, a sort of great moment where I sort of got at an ... got some sort of ... it seemed like a sort of really symbolic thing, a metaphor for what was going on in Greece, where there was this massive viaduct, so a motorway going over this valley, which - we were driving along the side road - just stopped. It literally just stopped in the middle of the valley and there was no barricade or anything like that, and it was just this sort of sense, which people would just be along ... and it was clear the money had just run out, okay, and it just stopped where they were meant to, you know ... and that was it, and you sort of drive off the edge of it or something.

And so I'd come from that world and so it seemed to me like an extraordinary thing, you know? Was this going to be the same? And then of course, once you've been here for a while and you start listening to the radio, watching tele ... and also you start looking at the statistics, and as we know, that in many ways, the sort of 2010 to 2012 period was a total mirage, okay? What we were being told was basically, you know, that we're in some sort of great economic decline. Sure, in some respects, things like commodities prices were going now, but in other ways, in terms of unemployment and other things, it was a sort of false ... a fake situation. And you began to realise, that actually, you know, that wasn't what was really going on here in any kind of way.

And of course that made me interested and I'll tell you why, what's my interest in it, because I'm actually an ancient historian, and bizarrely tonight, I'm going to talk about the dangers of people moonlighting, okay, and saying spurious things, okay? So you can already see that I'm sort of a walking example of this. But my ... I work on decline and failure, okay, and I look at ... in the ancient world, I look at why ... not so much why things fail, okay, but why we think things fail. So I'm much more interested in the sort of psychological area.

And that's the sort of angle that I want to take tonight. And I'm going to explain what this is all for later. This is my ingenious prop I thought up at about two o'clock this morning, and we'll have to see whether it actually works in any kind of way. So great, first of all, that was our first one. Did you show the first one when you came ...?

**Greg:** No, I will now.

**Richard Miles:** Can I introduce ... you can't get the staff. Now I was ... this my glamorous assistant, Greg. And I was trying to get him ... I want him to do a sort of flamenco kind of thing. I want him to be more haughty. I want him to show, you know, really sort of ... but unfortunately ... we'll see whether he managed to do it next time.

**Greg:** (6:59).

**Richard Miles:** So the next ... we've got plenty of time to practice. So Greg, can we please see the next one.

**Greg:** Absolutely.

**Richard Miles:** Now I've shamelessly ripped this off, okay, from a conversation piece that I saw, but it's absolutely right, because after a while, in my naivety, I realised that of course, actually, this was part of the, the greatest and best soap opera which going on in Australia, which is the ... if you're British, is the home of all good soap operas. Not to be cliché, but we're all brought up watching *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* and all those other things. You wouldn't believe how popular they are. But actually, it's the political soap opera that was going on during that period, which is absolutely extraordinary. You know, in the end, this was about winning an election.

But what I'm not going to do tonight ... I don't want this to turn into some sort of bashing of Tony Abbott et cetera. That's the sort of ... something that everybody does all the time. And one of the things I also want to talk about is how even at the university, we're sometimes a bit trapped in a sort of liberal ... this small ELF thought bubble, okay, and we don't actually engage enough with other people. I'm not sure ... I'm sure the recording's going to go off in a minute. I can see Nerida looking a bit nervous on what he's going, what's he's going to say next.

But anyway, one of the things with it is, is that what that's turned into is a story about Tony Abbott and his sidekick Joe Hockey, and it's the sort of classic story of hubris, isn't it, the story of the people that sort of say, you know, "There's an economic crisis coming," who then got into power and then did absolutely nothing. I mean nothing happened, did it? I mean can you remember? I mean what happened during that period? Nothing, okay? They did virtually nothing, and in some respects, what that's done is that, that sort of made us ... I think that sort of personal story has made us forget that actually, they are part ... you know, they are minor players in a much, much bigger story, that we now live in this sort of ... a boom and bust period when it comes to political rhetoric.

And so one of the things I'm going to say tonight is that actually, it's always been with us, we've always had it okay? But actually, I think it's sort of reaching sort of extraordinary - and it's actually quite sort of dangerous - proportions. And now I want to start ... you know, in some respects, you're probably here under false pretences. (a) I'm not a modern political scientist, okay? And secondly, I'm also now going to talk a bit about America and I'm going to talk about Britain and I'm going to talk a bit about Australia too. And I want to go to the man of the moment, Donald Trump.

Okay, now one of the problems ... so Trump, okay, one of the things ... so let's, so let's just have a sip of beer. The thing about Trump is this, that if you looked at the primaries, you looked at the Republican primaries, one of the interesting ... and you had him and you had those other two non-entities, what were they, Cruz and Rubio, okay. All of them were basically talking about America was in almost terminal decline. Can you remember? Basically all they were doing, basically, is they were trying to outdo each other with this sort of doom-laden things about where America was.

And in some respects, Trump won out because (a) his prophecies were more extreme than the others; he was willing to go further, and also - and this is an important fact about ... if you're a doom-monger, never, ever provide context or data at all, okay?

And that's shy Trump ... you know, Trump's an expert in terms of, you know ... he's always on Twitter, okay? All his most effective propaganda comes through something when you can actually say nothing at all of any kind of ... well you don't need to back anything up. No, no, no, no, let's see. Just, just wait. He's desperate. He's, he's trying to hurry me along, sorry. He says I'm missing my cues.

Anyway, but what I want to say is this, is that in that, Donald Trump is often portrayed as some sort of outsider, as an outlier. He's not; he is a mainstream American political figure. And actually, if you look at American political traditions, he's as American as apple pie in terms of what he says.

And if you go back ... I mean there's a great story of Dickens going off to America. You know, Charles Dickens, they sort of ... used to go off to America to basically do all sorts of tours to sort of make money. And he came ... he wrote a letter back to Britain saying, "The thing about being in this bloody country, in America, is they all took about the end of America coming. They're so gloomy. It's all about the end. 'Oh, you know, we're going to collapse. Everything's going terribly.'"

And if you go right back to the beginning, you go back to the founding fathers and you look at the debates that were going on between people like Jefferson and Hamilton, all the time, the rhetoric revolves around decline and the decline of America. You know, whether that means ... you know, there's classic arguments about America's place in the world, should they be out in the world, you know, basically intervening or should they just stay in America and be isolationist? And also in terms of whether you want to have something which is centralist or whether you want to have something which is more diffuse.

And the thing I'd say is that these are what we call declinist societies, or declinist powers, okay? And the two, I think, biggest declinist powers ... and these are powers that basically see the world through the prism of decline, and they're own decline, okay? It's like sort of looking in the mirror. And it has nothing to do with actual decline. Actual decline is something where ... you know, whether you believe it or not, but in the (12:17) we have, it would be something where you would follow bits of data, you'd put it together and you'd watch some sort of pattern.

Declinism – and this is a word you're going to find me using now – is something completely different. It's impressionistic and it's not based on any kind of data at all, okay? It's based on supposition. And in some respects, this has been a powerful, powerful tool, and it's especially ... declinist powers, where do you find them? You tend to find them in societies where elites, basically, are sort of riven with disagreement. And it's ... they're places where basically in the end, you've got the push and pull. In America, we can see that with those two things I talked about earlier, particularly in terms of centralisation against decentralisation, the federal state against other states, et cetera.

But what it is, it's a political rhetoric, and it's a rhetoric that you use. It's about upping the ante. And what I do is I say this: So declinism, okay - well the way that Trump uses it – is always a two-part act, okay? So what you do is I say, "We're done here; we're absolutely done," okay? "We're finished." But in some respects there's a paradox to that because in the end, I don't mean it and (13:26) mean it, you know, and what I'm going to then say is, "But I, me, Richard Miles, I can change this for you," okay? "I can save you. I can really, really save you." So in some respects, declinism is something very, very different. There's a sort of beginning ... there's a before and there is an after.

And that, in many respects, is sort of Donald Trump's game. So in other words ... and those are very, very, very different things, and often we get them mixed up, and I want to give you a, a sort of example of that.

So I work on the Late Roman Empire, so I'm writing a book at the moment, which is called *The Rise of Decline*, okay? And it looks at sort of the classic periods. So the Late Roman Empire, when you're thinking about it, thinking about Edward Gibbons' book, it's about decline and fall, okay? And actually it's about the decline of western civilisation. And what ... the interesting thing about western civilisation is that it's never been not in decline, okay? It's always put across in terms of ... when we started talking, really talking, about western civilisation was when we decided it was in decline, okay, which is interesting in itself.

And the ... if you look at the ... thing about Rome is this, is that Rome has also declined this past ... so the Romans started dreaming about their own decline as they're on their ascent. As they became more and more successful, that is the moment when they start worrying about their decline. And decline for the Romans, and also for the Americans, is like falling off a cliff. It's like a sort of extreme act.

In other societies it's different. So if you think about the British Empire, decline for the British is like going down an escalator, okay? And actually, we're very proud of ourselves that we sort of managed it very nicely. But for America, it's different. It's like it's the end, it's finished, we're done.

And for the Romans, it was exactly the same thing. The first histories that the Romans started writing, when they first got an empire, they were basically all ... they were all worrying about going into decline. And what sort of decline are we talking about? We're not talking necessarily about economic decline: moral decline. So declinism is almost always based around morality, okay? It's based around a particular form of morality, and the Romans were like that.

Now in the period I look at, Late Roman Empire, which is meant to a period where, "Oh, the barbarians are invading and everything's going wrong and the empire's collapsing." It's a classic paradigm of decline. But when you look at it ... and this is what I do in my book, is I look at who tells us the Romans are in decline, okay? And it's not outsiders. It's the insiders. It's the people who are in charge, okay? So actually, where we get all this information from, basically, is from insiders saying to us ... who are already in charge saying, "We're done," okay? "Ah ha, but unless you do this."

So actually, this is the oldest trick in the book, that what you do is you alarm and frighten people into doing things that you want them to do. And it's a really easy short-circuiting way of doing it. So in some respects, it's one of the oldest tricks in the book, decline. Now's your moment. So seriously, you have to see it ... I mean ... so look, I think, I think we need to make a cocktail here and we should make one called the ... we'll make one called the Doom-monger, okay? And what we would have in the Doom-monger is this, is we'd have a measure of fear, okay? We should put that in. A little bit of hatred, followed by a bit of anger. We should obviously fill it up with bitters, okay? (16:58). And then we should put it on the rocks, okay? Seriously, you don't want me making your cocktail, do you? And the rocks of an overwhelming sense of impotence, okay? And this is the toxic brew, okay, that basically, in some respects, is what you need to really create a nice declinist cocktail.

Now if you think about it also ... I mean the psychology. I mean psychologists work very, very hard. You know, all the Abbott stuff, all the stuff we get from Trump, there's a whole series of psychologists working behind that, okay, who understand the way that we tick. And the first thing – just to keep the, the laboured metaphor going, okay, for a bit long; as far as I ... as long as I dare, anyway – you'd say this, that ... first of all, I would tell you, "This is a drink that everybody drunk when things were better," okay? "This is the drink your grandparents drank on the front porch when they were happy and satisfied with what they had," okay? Rosie retrospection.

The second thing I'd do is you'd come into your pub and you'd find this is the only drink for sale, okay, because basically I'm going to make sure there's no other choice. I'm just going to keep on and I'm going to keep on trying to get you to drink it two, three, four times, as many as I can get you to drink. It's repetition and making sure it's the only show in the ... on the road. That's like really mixing your metaphors, sorry.

But going back to the drinks metaphor, you know, in the end, that is about ... you know, that's basically what we do, and this is basically what, in some respects, the end of the world looks like.

Now what is it? So why, why is decline so successful in that kind of way? It's successful because we all know its better taste, okay? We all know decline. And the fact is ... I mean if you ... okay, in this country, everybody has to vote, but in most western democracies, only middle class, educated and usually elderly ... older people vote, okay? And that's why you end up with all sorts of extraordinary things. And actually, if that means that it's more older ... it's older people, we know about decline. You know, people know about going to the loo eight times a night. They know about when they stand up and their knees go, you know, they can feel that decline. It's really ... you know, it's something that's there.

Success is basically, you know, is not ... you know, it basically is not something that we all have, okay? And in many respects, decline is a much, much more powerful thing that we can all, in some respects, empathise with. And also ... I mean you have to also bring in this sort of modern community. You have to bring in, you know ... and again, I said this, this to my children earlier. I talked about the worldwide web; they burst into laughter at the idea that somebody would actually still use that sort of term. It's like, it's like calling a radio a wireless or something like that, which I still do as well.

But ... and anyway, I mean one of the things with that is that ... you know, and it's about the sense in which a community, that those people who want to opt out for those things, that in the end, would be isolated in this sort of area. Now, actually through the web, they can actually get together as a community and back each other up, you know? And there is a sort of ... a term for that backfire effect. The more you tell these people that they're wrong, and the more you show them data, the less they will believe you, okay? And it's this sort of ... and that's a really, really key thing.

And in the end, you've got to keep it very, very simple. If you want to win an election or make a point, do not burden people with information, okay, in any kind of way at all. I mean ... and I now want to skit across to 1979, and to America, and to that great ... a great man and a great sort of martyr, I think, to the political cause: Jimmy Carter, the peanut farmer, the man who cried and said that he wasn't always thinking about his wife in those ... you know, all that ... he'd been unfaithful in his mind, a man who was basically a sort of political PR sort of person's nightmare, okay? So I'm not the worst, Nerida, in that sort of way.

And Carter in '79, all his polls were completely down. Everything was looking really bad. And Carter basically decided to basically get to Camp David, to get ordinary Americans, tonnes of them, and for ten days in a sort of self-flagellating flurry, he got all these people to come along and tell him what's wrong with him, his administration and everything else in his government.

And then he went on television and he gave his famous speech called *The Crisis of Confidence*. And what he said is ... he said, "Look, I've spoken to all these people, I've prayed with them," et cetera. "And actually, my government's ineffectual. We're all useless. We don't listen," et cetera. "But now people, I see the light," okay, "and what I'm going to do is I'm now going to listen to you and together ... we're going to work together and we're going to basically beat this step by sweaty step. It's going to be a hard battle for us. It's going to take us years, but we will get there." Absolute election suicide, okay?

No one was interested, okay, in hearing that they've got to do something, okay? It's his fault, not their fault, what he was trying to do there. And in some respects, that, you know, that doesn't work. It's a far too complex message that he was trying to give. And also, people don't want to hear that he actually ... and the other bad thing to do is to use that thing of saying, "Oh actually, things are quite good."

So Harold Macmillan in Britain ... you've all heard of Harold Macmillan? He's known for one thing, and that's for saying ... you know, basically saying, you know, in the end that we've, you know, we've never had it so good, and actually then ... and since that, derided in every sort of way as some sort of posh idiot from Eton who basically had no idea, who'd lost touch with things.

And then you have Reagan, 1984, okay? And people ... Reagan gets derided, derided for being an idiot. He was no idiot, okay? Reagan was not a ... and as a political operator, in some respects, he was an absolute genius, okay? I'm not saying anything about his politics, okay? But a... and you know, what you have, instead of this sort of Carter thing of sort of banging on about having all these workshops and all of this other stuff going on, what does he do in '84 when actually, Reagan, after his first term, things weren't looking that good? Inflation had come down a bit; other things had come down. Unemployment's still around 7.5%, still bad, he hadn't done anything about that.

He releases a one-minute ad. A very famous ad basically called ... they call it *Good Morning America* and it starts, basically, with the sense in which, basically ... it's all pastels, golden shades, okay? And there you see the post boy delivering the post. The next thing is a family turning up and moving into a house. Then you see a marriage with a sort of apple pie kind of American grandma watching her granddaughter being married.

And he says, "It's morning in America." Nothing else, that's all there is, that's the only message. Absolute trashed everybody. He won it easily, okay? So in some respects, it's about the simple, simple message. If you qualify, quantify or try and implicate people in that decline, it's a kind of mistake. You have to sort of play it in a very particular kind of way.

And I think let's finish with Brexit on this point. And Brexit, okay, which is obviously something dear to my heart, which is the most extraordinary ... and I'll say this, basically as a ... how am I doing for time, timekeeper?

**Female Speaker:** It's 6:56.

**Richard Miles:** When did we start?

**Female Speaker:** Six-thirty.

**Richard Miles:** Okay, I'm going to go about five minutes over, I'm sorry everybody. Brexit, what do we have there? We ... basically we had a situation where it's an extraordinary act of self-sabotage in a way, and I say that because I'm a member of the liberal elite, okay? But it is. There's virtually nothing good that's going to come out of that. But maybe that's just my ... but what you had, is you had two sets of declinist politicians, using declinist language to alarm people, okay, and telling all sorts of whoppers.

On the one hand, you had actually those that didn't want to leave. He said, "We're going to need a special budget if we go out. It's going to be financial Armageddon tomorrow. It will all be over," which was not true, okay?

On another side you had a lot of people ... a load of basically emotionally charged small-worlders, I'll call them, basically saying, "You know what? Six ... we'll save \$600M every day, okay, if we don't give it to Europe. It will go into the National Health Service," okay? "And also, you know what, if we stop immigration, we won't end up speaking Polish and, and all our children won't be eating Madras', you know?" And that was kind of ... I mean obviously I'm sort of slightly ... forgive me. Okay, I'm sure my, I'm sure my lecture now can't go on the Sydney University website.

But actually in the end ... and who won out? The one that had the less evidence, okay, the less evidence. The experts lost completely, okay? The experts ... it was those that had no sort of data behind them that won the argument, okay? And then you had Michael Gove, the ... sort of one of the leaders of the Brexiters saying, "We've had quite enough of experts." So every economic expert was on one side, Michael Gove on the other saying, "Just forget all that stuff." So in other words, you know, we're living in a world there, basically, where actually if you don't know anything, that's a massive strength.

Now just quickly, okay, is decline ever effective? And I'm going to give ... and when I say "effective" I don't mean good, okay? So I'm not making some, some sort of judgement on that. But I'll give you two examples, okay? So Margaret Thatcher basically dressed like a 1950's housewife, okay, and spoke about the British economy as if she was sort of restocking her 1950's larder, okay, in the most extraordinary kind of language, okay? But she changed the political face.

I mean I'm one of Thatcher's children, whether I like it or not, okay? She completely changed the whole place of sort of the British political landscape, almost completely. Smashed the unions basically to a point where ... I mean they're coming back now a bit, but actually changed everything and it changed the way the people actually viewed the world, even people on the left wing. Actually, their views have also changed as well.

So there you would see basically ... and what she did when she first came in she said, "Look, we're in real, real trouble," okay? And actually, something did change. I mean ... and an example: Here's Paul Keating, Paul Keating with his ... you know, people hated hearing the Banana Republic thing where he said, "You know what?"



The days of us saying, you know, “Oh, things are going badly, mate, we need to just dig something else up from the ground and we can sell it to somebody,’ isn’t going to work out.” He said, “We’ve become a Banana Republic,” okay? And actually sort of, sort of going into it without sort of ... guy from Singapore who’d said that we were going to turn into the sort of white trash of Asia, okay?

But actually, if you look at the before and after of Keating ... and actually some of the left wing now, and some of the right wing don’t ... certainly don’t like Keating for what he did. They accuse him of being neo-liberal and all those other things, but actually, he did make a fundamental change to what happened here. So sometimes ... but it only works if you have a crisis, a proper crisis, and secondly, if you actually have something ... you can actually do something.

No, we’ve ... forget that, go onto the next one.

**Greg:** This one?

**Richard Miles:** Yeah. Three things: One ... four things, actually. The boy who cried wolf, okay? It’s extraordinary, okay, but the people that claim that everything’s going into decline, are usually the people, paradoxically, who are least able to actually deal with anything in decline, because often ... actually, when we ... declinism is the product of us not believing we’ll ever ... things will ever come to the end, ever, okay. And actually, it’s like a suspension of disbelief. So we actually think ... and it’s partly ... that’s partly to do with this sort of (28:44) idea, or the liberal idea of history. They want some sort of level of thing ... of progress all the time.

And it’s partly to do ... so if you look at modern history, even if you look at modern history, it looks like we’re on a just sort of continual way up, okay? You know, as if there’s sort of somehow exceptionalism that somehow we can sort of stop the wheel of fortune or we can sort of get around political gravity, which is what goes up, always comes down at some point. It has to. If you work in the ancient world, you never think like that. You realise when you visit cities ... sort of burnt out cities, ruined cities and all sorts of things, you see the what ... you know in the end, decline always, always, always comes, okay? And actually, declinism, in some respects, is a sort of ... symptomatic of us not knowing enough, basically, about what that actually means.

I think ... you know, just ... the second thing is that it appeals to our lowest and basest instincts: hatred, fear and anger, okay? Thirdly, it’s to do with the fact that actually, I’ve never known any declinist politician to deliver ... make us happier, richer or more secure. I can’t think of one, actually, in that sort of way.

And thirdly ... oh sorry, fourthly, it’s about talking down. Remember, all political systems, all societies, are fundamentally ... however much we want to see them as facts and figures et cetera, they’re all about here, they’re about confidence. Empires fall, fundamentally. We spent ages with the Late Roman Empire people looking at tree rings or looking to see how much lead people in the Romans were drinking in case that was the reason for the decline, or perhaps they mixed with non-Romans and they became weak and decadent in some sort of way.

But actually in the end, it’s, it’s got ... it’s to do with confidence, that eventually if you knock something enough, people don’t believe in it anymore.

And if they don't believe in it ... you saw it with the British Empire, okay, that actually the people at the centre in White Hall stopped believing in the British Empire, bizarrely, often before people in the peripheries of it, and actually, that's the end.

So if you keep on talking things down ... and that's what going on in the cycle in Britain with Brexit, is they're basically ... they've talked things down so much that those Brexiters are now desperately trying to stop people ... that cycle of people talking things down.

Now tentative antidote to this, look ... and this is, this is the plea ... and I'm going to be really quick here and say, it's about data, okay? You know, people say, "You get the politicians you deserve," you get the kind of political debate you deserve, and we deserve this, okay? We deserve, basically, you know ... if we're willing to accept people telling us these things and we never, ever check any of the data or information or even ask them for it, we don't deserve anything else, okay?

And actually, this is a really, really important thing, and we will not get ... we need a better, you know ... and actually, I don't think we can blame politicians, okay? Politicians, in some respects, will give us kind of what we require okay? So in some respects, what's also important from that is that ... I, I always worry about politician casts, okay, people who go from just researching to working for a union or a think tank and then become politicians, because they don't have that context, they don't have that perspective, a lot of the time, that you need to really work out if things are bad.

And I think ... look, this is the main point, it's about public intellectuals. And one of the things I notice about this country, okay, and I've noticed ... is the lack of public intellectuals that you see even in America, especially in Britain. And you need these people. You need people who are not politicians to speak up. And these are people who actually know something about the subject that they're talking about.

And actually, the fault for why we don't have enough public intellectuals ... and bizarrely, many of the best public intellectuals in Britain are Australians. Isn't that something? You export them, okay? No, we export them. I'm just about to become an Australian. I have to be careful what I say. And you know, and that's a problem and that ... you know, we can talk about tall poppy syndrome; we can talk about anti-intellectualism. I think in the university, we need to really, really step-up to the plate with this, okay?

And as academics, it's not good enough just to talk to the hundred people or 50 people who are interested in your subject, or talk in such obscure and obtuse language that other people don't see the point of what you're saying. We always have to ask the question, "So what?" 'Cause actually, not everything's important and not everything's interesting. That's, that's, that's the truth. And actually, we need to engage with debate and we need to basically bring that material, bring some context information back into it, some rigour back into it, and that's what we need.

And also, I'd say this: It's very important within the university ... we are - and I'm, I'm including me - we are a liberal with a small ELF thought bubble, a lot of the time. You know, it's quite disturbing how much we all agree with one another. It's a really disturbing thing, okay? And I argue against that in corporations and say, "Look, you can't have groupthink." We're one of the worst purveyors of groupthink in that way. And actually, a lot of the time we spend time criticising conservative politicians for saying stuff that we think's absurd, absurd and ill-informed and that's because, in some respects, we don't have enough conservative academics and public intellectuals.

And actually, if we want to have a proper debate and if we want to have something which sort of really works, we need to have something which is much more (33:53) and something which is much more sort of inclusive within the university.

And just remember, in the end, we'll only have good public debate, okay ... it's good public debate is what basically in the end always defeats bad populist politics. Thank you.

**Moderator:** Thank you for listening to the podcast series of *Raising the Bar Sydney*. If you want to hear more Raising the Bar talks, head to [raisingthebarsydney.com.au](http://raisingthebarsydney.com.au).

**End of Recording.**