>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2019 saw 21 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Mar Stears's talk Making Politicians Listen. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

>> Thank you so much, it's so wonderful to be here. Let me start by also acknowledging the land that we are on, the [inaudible]. I want to pay respects to elders past, present, and emerging and to notice of course of that this is Aboriginal land and always will be. It's so wonderful to be here. I'm originally from South Wales, so that's quite a long way away. And in South Wales we have an expression, the one is "Took", which is spelled twp, and it means you've gone like slightly off. So when you're kids, when, you know, I was like six or seven, and you imagine things, you know, and you're always imagining, you know, score the winning try for Wales in the Rugby World Cup final. You know, your mum and dad would say to you, "Marc, don't be twp." What I always thinking when I arrived here tonight, like talking about politics in a pub overlooking the, you know, Sydney Opera House. If I said that to my mum and dad when I was six, I'd be as twp as they possibly can [laughter]. So, you know, it's just wonderful to be here in this setting with you all and I'm really hoping that we can have a conversation as well as me saying a few things from, from the front. And you know, thanks for coming out and I hope it doesn't rain because Tim told me that it comes through the roof when it does, so, you know, if I start putting my hands over my head, that's, that's what's going on there. So I want to talk about how you make politicians listen to you, to us. And I want to start by a request, which is I'd like you all to think about an idea you have for how you might make your community better or Sydney better or New South Wales better or Australia better. So just in your head if you can conjure up a notion. You know, it might be something like, you know, a new street lights at the end of the street because it's particularly dark and scary when you get home. Or it might be a new school building in an area you think which is underresourced. Or, you know, those of you who were here to hear Tim, it might be something about how you counter racial hatred in our society today. And if you conjure that idea in your head, everyone got one. Yeah? So have that idea in your head, and then ask yourself all right, if I really wanted to do something with that, how could I get it enacted? You know, is there a politician out there that I could, like, tweet or ring up or turn up in their office and pitch them the idea, and it would actually happen. So how many people here feel that tomorrow morning your idea could become actual? What, in the back? Fantastic! Scott Morrison has joined the party, everybody. He's at the back. So like you've got this sense of most of you, I don't know how many people there are here, 150-odd people, most of you think I've got an idea but actually, the chances of it becoming real are relatively small. I hope that's not overly controversial in claim. And that's odd when you think philosophically we're meant to live in a democracy. You know, after all, the whole idea of democracy, demos meaning people, is that we are meant to generate the ideas which govern the country.

And like, it's not only that we don't think that our own individual idea will happen, but any of you who've sat down and watched Q&A recently or Four Corners or open the newspaper and read a politician actually saying what they want to do, the chances that you've been really excited are also pretty small, yes? Like now and again there might be something you think yeah, that would be great. Right? But most of the time you're either uninterested or angry, you know? And again, those of you who spend as much time on Twitter as I do will know that, you know, outrage, not against racial hatred but outrage against politicians is like, you know, 60% of the tweets that people send when Q&A is on the TV. You know, you always know it's happening because people are going argh! So, there's something wrong with our democracy, at least in theory, because our ideas don't get action, they don't happen, and the ideas that politicians actually have are the ones we don't want them to have. And you don't just have to take my word for that - you can read opinion poll after opinion poll and it will say exactly the same thing. Politicians in Australia are less popular than in any other country which measures these things apart from Russia. And you know, you're in this situation then that there's something which we've got to get right. So what I want to talk about tonight at just some ideas about how we might change that but also to unpack a little bit about why it is like that. You know, what's going on which makes that happen in the first place. And when I'm thinking about this, you know, being Welsh I, I like, you know, I can't stop to tell a story. You know, I always remember when I was about 8 years old and my mum and dad, who were from a small town in South Wales, they took me on a day trip to London. Which isn't as wonderful as this but it's still pretty cool. And I was walking around London with my mum and dad and we will near the houses of parliament and I will always remember this until I die. A car pulled up alongside, stopped, and the window wound down and I'm doing the action with the hand because I'm that old. There were no electric windows in those days. Yeah. So he's rolling down the window and this voice comes out, "Hello, Derek!" And I looked in and it was our MP, a guy called JP Smith, and Derek was my dad. And my mum and dad were so excited that the MP had stopped his car in the street to chat to them. And he knew who they were. He knew what street they lived on. He knew on their interests were and we had a little chat and he said, I think totally honestly, "I wish you told us you were coming. You know, you could have come in to see Parliament!" And I was so thrilled. I thought this is great, you know, here I'm in London. The MP is stopping to chat to my mum and dad. And I always reflect on that. I think that's what I want politics to be. Like, of course our ideas aren't always going to get, you know, win the day. And of course we're not always done like all of our politicians. But we want to be in touch with them such that they know who we are, they care about who we are, and they're actually interested in the ideas that we have to express. So, you know, that was 40-odd years ago and I'm always thinking like you know, the past was not great. There were awful things in the past but there were some things which were better, and one of the things we know was better is the contact between people and their politicians in most of the established democracies. So how

can we get to a situation like that again, where our politicians really listen to us? That's my challenge. So, you know, as was said, I've done a little bit of time in real politics, you know, and worse than having gone to prison. If you're writing a CV, you just like leave that bit out, but I've done four years of being in Westminster working with the Labour Party, but I've also done 20 years as an academic, researching as a, you know, political scientist and researching these questions. And I wanted to kind of distill everything I've learnt into two very easy lessons. So, so I put it this way. Like when I was working for the Labour Party in the UK, the leader was a guy called Ed Miliband and I was his right-hand person. I could tell you everything you need to know about how to lose a general election, you know, like so only Bill Shorten can help me on that one you know. But, but the thing I learnt really was this question about who would Ed meet. You know, his whole day was meeting people, pitching ideas to them. And so I asked myself well, what kind of people did he spend his time meeting? And looking through the diary and thinking about it, and then looking at the scholarship to try and make sense of it. So I'm going to give you the answer now, I've built it up enough. So there are two categories of people that the Prime Minister or the candidate for Prime Minister meets. The first category is what I call organised money, so just if you look behind us, that's organised money [laughter]. So you know, in politics most of the time it's not a single rich person who happens to shop at Aldi who gets the meeting. You know, it's actually an organisation which possesses a lot of cash or which could create a lot of cash. So if you're the candidate for the prime minister or you are the prime minister, you know, you will take a meeting with the CEO of EY. Or you will take a meeting with the leader of a big bank. Or, you know, when the [inaudible] come knocking, you know, you'll definitely take the meeting. And that's for good reasons and bad. You know, the bad reasons are obvious. The good reasons of course, these people do create wealth and they create jobs and they create possibilities. And if you want to run the country, you've got to be alert to the kinds of things they're saying. So by and large, politicians are not corrupt in a personal sense. They won't meet someone just because they're rich, but they will meet what I call organised money, ie, those organisations in society that have a lot of cash. And that probably has always been the case, especially in a city like this. If you know anything about the history of Sydney you'll know if you have dominant organised money has always been here. But you know, I think it's a characteristic of democracies all around the world. And we're not going to change it. We might be able to regulate it and constrain it. There might be laws and practices, you know, icat does its job and all that's very important. But by and large, that's part of the story. Now I don't know about you, I mean, some of you might be CEOs of big companies but most of us don't represent organised money. So we're not going to get the meeting when we've got our fantastic idea for the new school in the neighbourhood on the basis of, you know, owning a big bank. I did meet one of these people the other day and she said to me, you know, I've got about a trillion dollars to invest. Okay, you know, I hadn't, I'm in overdrive. So, you know, she's going to get a meeting [inaudible] on that category. But there is a second dimension to

getting the meeting or to getting the politician to listen. If you're not organised money, you can be what I call organised people. So just like a politician won't take a meeting with an individual wealthy person generally speaking, nor will they take a meeting with an individual person like you and me who happens to have a good idea. They will meet, however, with a personal group of people who they believe and have good reason to believe represent a large number of other people. So why is Greta now invited to the UN to give that astonishing speech she gave a couple of weeks ago? Because there are hundreds of thousands of people in countries across the world, millions of people in total, who she is taken to represent. She doesn't represent them in any formal organisational sense. They're not members who voted for her. But these are people who will follow her. And that's the key - the people politicians will meet are people with a following. And one thing I'd just love for you to all take away from this conversation is that idea that you know what is a leader? Well, a leader is either someone who's a CEO, has organised money behind them, or there's someone who has a following. And what it is to have a following is a group of people, a large group of people who you can plausibly say will follow you and who you speak in their, on their behalf. Now, so often in politics the people we think are leaders have no following. And as my friend Amanda Tattersall says, that actually means they're just an individual going for a walk.

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>> So the key is in order to be taken seriously by our political masters, we need to represent or be in contact with lots of people. Now that all sounds hopefully, you know, theoretically relatively straightforward. The key historical fact I want to share tonight is 40 years ago, 50 years ago, 60 years ago, that phenomenon was relatively straightforward because some of you know this already, people used to join organisations. Workers were members of unions. People would go to church. People would be members of, you know, local community campaign groups. They'd be members of the, you know, of environmental organisations for their neighbourhood. And therefore, when you were a policy you were interested in meeting people who were part of that network, especially but not only people who were the leaders of that network. And so when JP Smith, that guy, that MP from, you know, my family home 40 years ago, when he stopped his car to talk to my mum and dad, he was also in his mind talking to the people who were in the community groups that my mum and dad were members of. And he knew that because he would obviously come regularly to the meetings of that organisation. So he wasn't just meeting Mr. and Mrs. Stears. He was meeting an organised section of society and that made him positive and worried. You know, when you're an MP in the UK it's about 60,000 people in the constituency. If a member of an organisation of about 5000 or 6000 people is known to you, that's pretty important. You know, those are a lot of votes which can make a distinctive difference in any electoral cycle. Now, most of you again will know this but now most of us don't join organisations. And as a result of not joining organisations, we're not in the kinds of organised people that can actually make politicians action. And then it's true even when you think about the current,

you know, the climate strike and Greta, etc. Is the fact that there's no stable long-term organisation makes it more likely not, you know, not certain but more likely that the movement will dissipate and that she will stop getting those invitations and the politicians will stop listening. And we know that because of what happened to Occupy. I don't know if any of you remember, do any of you remember Occupy? Yeah, Occupy again was a global phenomenon. So, there's a, it's again showing how geeky I am but there's a, there's a Batman film called The Dark Knight which is actually filmed during the Occupy protest. You know, and it's like all these people take to the streets to demand change. And when the movie was made, it was happening in cities across the world. So I was living in London then. St Paul's Cathedral was taken over by tens of thousands of people for weeks living in the campsite. In New York, the execs couldn't get to Wall Street because Wall Street was taken over by the campaigners of Occupy. Everybody thought big change was a coming. That Barack Obama would have to sit down when he became president with the leaders of this organisation, which MPs would have to care about them. The problem is, the story you know, Occupy disappeared. There was no organisation. There were no continuing memberships. There was no sense of organised people for politicians to have to respond to. And you contrast that to, say for example, the green bands issue which save the rocks where we currently are, or the trade union movement in the 1940s and 1950s, fighting for the beginning of the welfare state as we know it today. So, my hypothesis for you all tonight is that if you want to make politicians listen, you either have to become the CEO of organised money. Good luck with that. Or you have to try to recreate organised people. And that means not just coming out to an event like this or not just occupying or not just climate striking, but actually creating long term, deeper, sustained relationships with a group of people who meet over time. Now, the challenge for all, I hope you can see where this is going. The challenge for all that is it's just really hard to make that happen today. Like, you know, one of the reasons people joined groups in the 60s and 70s was there wasn't much else to do, you know? Like, you know, you can't sit at home on the internet watching YouTube videos of cats, you know, before there's an internet, you know? So you kind of have to go down to the community club. But also, you know, people in the old days, they wouldn't get a job if they weren't a member of the union. So even if they weren't really into this union business, they would end up joining the group and therefore the union power would grow, the number of people in it would grow, and politicians would take the meeting. There are so many social factors today which are hostile to this notion of us joining things. I don't know if anyone, that resonates with people. It's like you know, I was just saying to Anna before we started that, you know, it's like now almost 20 past 8:00. You know, my bedtime is by 8:45 so you know, and that's partly because I now live in a world of, you know, I get up so early, I work so hard, I'm very narrowly focussed. I got to get my daughter to school. It just feels like an effort to do anything other than turn on Netflix at the end of the day, you know? And I never see the end of an episode because I've fallen asleep before it, yeah? And that is the life of so many of us now leave. I was talking to a professor of sleep

at the University of Sydney the other night, the other morning. And he told me that there is now a real deficit in sleep in Australian society because people are so wired by the anxiety they have at the workplace and by their social media addictions that they actually can't rest at the end of the day. And if you can't rest, you certainly aren't going to get up and join an organisation and go out in the evening and campaign for it and work for it. So, so the key here is that if you want to rebuild organise people power, you've got to overcome a host of social obstacles. So my final thought is should we just give up? Because there's definitely some people out there, some politicians, who think well they might just like leave it all to us. It will be fine if you guys stop pressuring us anyway, because we've got great ideas. So the University of Canberra released a study today, I don't know if anyone saw it, which said they asked politicians why people didn't like them and they asked people why they didn't like them. And the politicians all said the people don't like us because they're a bit silly, really. Yeah? So they said, the politicians literally said it's a failing of our education system that people don't trust politicians. And you think that's not probably quite right, you know? But it's going to work that way anyway. So what can we do? Well, my instinct here is very sentimental, but it's rooted in you know, my background as a, you know, as an academic and as a scholar. I used to read a French philosopher of the 19th century called Alexis de Tocqueville and de Tocqueville argued in that in a wonderful book called Democracy in America about how was democracy saved in America in the, you know, first few years that it was created? Because he'd noticed all the revolutions everywhere else had gone wrong. You know, in France they'd had a revolution, it had been followed by a dictatorship. And de Tocqueville said okay, what was it that made the Americans able to keep their democracy going? And he said the following. He said people who join organisations firstly by self-interest turn out to actually enjoy the emotional and psychological support they get from being with other people. So they don't join organisations initially because they want to hang out with folks, but once they do join organisations, there's a virtuous circle which generates it. And he wrote that, you know, 200 years ago now we know through social psychological evidence that human beings love being in association with each other. We are naturally social creatures So all of those social phenomena that I was talking about that have divorced us from one another, social media, anxiety at work, tiredness, actually are preventing us from doing something which is very natural. Being together in groups is what human beings are meant to do. And that thought always gives me hope, which is that actually we are now living in a period which is more difficult to sustain than to not. And if we can socialise this idea that in order to save our democracy or at least improve our democracy, we need to be working more collectively and collaboratively and organizationally. We are working with the grain of human nature and not against it. So the challenge is how do you get that natural human process to start. And my inspiration here comes from something that we call in the trade community organising. I don't know if anyone's ever heard of community organising, but it was originated by a man called Saul Alinsky in the United States in the 1940s. The President of the

United States called Barack Obama was trained as a community organiser by a man called Arnie Graff in Chicago when he'd just come out of university. And community organising has now swept across the world. In Australia there are two big community organising organisations. There's the Sydney Alliance here in Sydney and there's the Queensland Community Alliance up in Queensland. In the UK, Citizens UK which is the community organising group is now the largest campaign organisation in the whole country. And it all starts from this observation. That you don't move to action first. You start with building the relationships. So most of the time in politics, we go straight to the thing that we want - that idea you had in your head, you think let's get that to happen, or let's get this election result done. Or let's stop that bill. Community organising is predicated on the notion that relationship precedes action always and that we have to rebuild the organisations first, togetherness first, and only then will we actually be powerful politically. And the way that works is simply by training people to recapture that spirit that most of us knew at some point in our lives of having open and caring and emotionally resonant conversations with each other in places like this, and making commitments to long going, meaningful continuous interaction, especially across difference. So I'm going to end with the most hopeful moment I've had since my time in Sydney. I've only been here like a year and a half, two years and it's been a wonderful time. But the best moment I had was this year at the so-called Sydney Alliance Assembly in the Town Hall. And what the Sydney Alliance had done is it had brought together all different kinds of already existing organisations - mosques, synagogues, churches, trade union groups, hobby organisations - from all across Sydney, like all this whole city. And they brought them into the town hall for a night, 2,000 people in the Town Hall, to listen to people talking about their lives, talking to politicians about their issues, hearing people sing songs from their own cultural traditions. And I tell you why I love that event so much. It's because I was sat up on the stage and I looked out into that room and the whole of the city was represented in a way that you don't see it if you walk down the CBD. People of all different ages, racial backgrounds, ethnic groups, religions, wearing their own clothes of their own organisations, having this sentiment that the only way we get our democracy to work is if we are organised people. Because organised people will be listened to in the same way that organised money is. So that's the challenge I want to put to you today. Can we be part of that process so that we can get those politicians to listen and eventually get our ideas to happen. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

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