



## Left Wing Panics

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David Marr's new book, *Panic*, has a thesis that I am predisposed to like.

He argues that Australia's political culture is dangerously susceptible to outbreaks of hysterical fear. Yet he is more correct than even he is willing to acknowledge.

Marr nominates what he sees as a few key panics: those over boat people, multiculturalism, domestic terror suspects, radical imams, offensive speech, Bill Henson, and recreational drugs.

But anyone can play this game: what about climate change? Tim Flannery told Australians in 2006 to 'picture an eight-storey building by a beach, then imagine waves lapping its roof.' If that wasn't manipulative hyperbole designed to inspire fear, then what would be?

The federal government's resource material for teaching climate science emphasises the 'death, injury and destruction' of resulting carbon emissions. The Greens leader Bob Brown immediately blamed the Queensland floods on coal companies, despite sparse evidence that tropical cyclone activity is caused by climate change at all. In 2005 the United Nations predicted that there would be 50 million climate refugees wandering the globe: that didn't happen.

Few contemporary issues are more driven by panic-mongering than climate change. But climate is absent from Marr's book: indeed, the word 'climate' only appears to mourn Malcolm Turnbull's loss of the Liberal Party leadership at the hands of climate sceptics.

Marr, no doubt, believes that global warming is a threat, and an imminent one. But that is no excuse for the over-wrought, over-hyped, extraordinarily exaggerated claims made by climate activists every day. Greenpeace says that 160,000 people are killed by climate change every single year; carbon dioxide emissions are 'threatening everything we hold dear', argues its Australian spokesperson. Climate activists know exactly what they are doing: they do fear-mongering better than any other group in politics today.

The absence of climate change in Marr's analysis of panics is conspicuous. And it is not alone.

Like it or not, panic is bipartisan.

Take public health. Nanny State activists describe obesity or drinking as an 'epidemic'. They abuse language enormously when they do so. Epidemiologists-those who actually have expertise in population-level health-define an epidemic as the incidence of a given disease in a population greatly exceeding what is expected based on experience. Neither obesity or the diseases caused by obesity fit that criteria. Neither does drinking-the levels of which have been steady for a very long time.

'The obesity epidemic will only continue to grow', read one press release put out by the Australian Obesity Policy Coalition. This is a completely unscientific statement. But, like climate change activists, proponents of the Nanny State know exactly what they are doing.

'Epidemic' is an evocative word. It implies something that is contagious -which, obviously, obesity and drunkenness are not. It recalls the great plagues which still dominate our imagination-the Black Death, which killed half of Europe's population in the fourteenth century, or the 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed about five per cent of the global population.

The word epidemic arouses a deep, almost primitive fear-diseases which spread invisibly, do not discriminate, and eliminate entire communities. Epidemics are outside human control, and destroy at random. The Biblical and preBiblical world responded to the spread of disease by emphasising the fickleness of the spirit world or the wrathfulness of God. As sophisticated as we are, we still haven't quite lost that primeval association.

Sure, epidemic is just a word. But it is a word used to manipulate us, by people who should know its definition, yet use it regardless. By describing public health problems as 'epidemics', activists

invest their own cause with terror designed to do nothing but spark fear and create urgency.

We could go on: what about the overblown panic over cybercrime? Or the extraordinary claims about the dangers of genetically modified food? Last year Greenpeace activists destroyed an experimental CSIRO crop of genetically modified wheat: one supporter of the action, a Greens member of ACT parliament, said that Greenpeace was just protecting the 'human food chain'. Or what about the amazing bundle of conspiracies and neuroses about capitalism that infect the Occupy crowd?

These panics are not just missing from Marr's analysis but they undermine it. Marr would like us to focus on 'panics' such as conservative criticism of left-wing bias at the ABC. This is slight, to say the least. And it betrays most clearly his purpose: not to study the phenomenon of panic but to pursue a political objective.

Marr is a journalist, not a social scientist. This is most obvious when he attributes to David Malouf the idea that Australia's political culture was shaped by the era in which we were settled: where the Americans imbibed the ideas about liberty and rights that were fashionable in seventeenth century England, we inherited the utilitarianism of the nineteenth century. Yet Malouf is not the author of that thesis. It was developed by Hugh Collins in a highly influential article 'Political Ideology in Australia: The Distinctiveness of a Benthamite Society' published in Australia, the Daedalus Symposium in 1985. And Collins' article is an Australian adaptation of an argument made by the American political scientist Louis Hartz in the mid-1960s.

In his defence, Marr does not pretend to be undertaking systematic analysis. But had he done so, it would have led him down paths he did not like.

Just how is demonstrated by Philip Alcabes in his book *Dread: How Fear and Fantasy have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu*, also recently published. Alcabes' book is a rigorous, scholarly, but highly readable look at panics, from plague to bird flu to obesity. *Dread* is a comprehensive history of the idea of epidemics and their social consequences.

Like Marr, Alcabes sees panics as offering an insight into the human condition. Unlike Marr, his lack of political purpose allows him to make a firm argument. As Alcabes writes: 'all significant spread of illness also creates a social phenomenon; every social crisis moves us to make sense of it ... to read the history of epidemics is to follow a long story of the fears that go beyond the dread of death, the anxieties that make us who we are'.

Panic is overreaction. It is an exaggerated emotional response to risk. We panic when the likelihood of an extremely adverse event seems greater than it really is. Alcabes points out that it is our heightened sense of vulnerability that makes us feel the dangers of road rage, teen suicide, binge drinking, or internet predators so keenly, even though all the statistical evidence shows that we are living healthier and longer lives. It is extremely unlikely that a new global war will suddenly happen and that Chinese farm investors will poison our food supply, but many people worry about it.



Environmentalists have built an entire doctrine which recommends we overreact to extremely lowlikelihood events. The precautionary principle suggests that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, everything new should be assumed to be dangerous.

For instance, we are told genetically-modified food should be avoided-even destroyed-not because there is any evidence it is dangerous, but because there is a tiny, miniscule chance that evidence could be found in the future. This argument simply stokes fear. Many people now believe supermarkets sell 'Frankenfood'believing that corporate farmers have manipulated our food so much it can no longer be accurately described as 'food' at all.

The policy consequences of panic are significant. In a society full of panic, we no longer believe individuals can judge the riskiness of their own choices by themselves. Instead, we are told: there ought to be a law. The government should manage our risk for us. Virtually the whole regulatory apparatus is founded on the idea of panic.

It is panic that inspires the more than 6,000 new pages of legislation that the Commonwealth parliament passes every year. It is panic that has removed swings and monkey bars from school playgrounds across the country.

The fear that people won't understand what they're getting themselves into is why opening a cheque account with an overdraft limit and a home loan now involves 227 pages of documentation.

This fear has consequences. When governments try to manage risk, our ability to cope with future unknowns diminish. The more governments protect us, the more susceptible to panic we become.

Sure, panic isn't new. One observer of the eighteenth century English press compared the 'ghosts, goblins, giants, and bloody-bones' of childrens' fairy tales with the 'dreadful tales of foreign war, domestic discord, loss of trade, breach of public credit, bankruptcies, famine, ruin, misery, and desolation' that filled newspapers. Panic sells. That's no surprise, and no mystery: horror movies do well at the boxoffice too.

Yet blaming panic on the media is too easy. Governments and political partisans have a vested interest in panic. Obviously, politicians push legislative agendas for lots of reasons. But they require public support to get them through. And few emotions spur us into action better than fear. Every side of politics massively overstates the negative consequences of not supporting their preferred policies.

The apocalyptic tones of many climate activists are only the most obvious.

Oppositions of all political stripes pretend that law and order problems are much worse than they are-claiming the government has lost control of our streets. This is an easy one: fear of crime has little relationship to the crime rate. A recent paper by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research demonstrated that the national murder rate has gone down (by 39 per cent) between 2000 and 2009, the robbery rate has dropped (by 43 per cent), motor vehicle theft is down (by 62 per cent) and property burglary went down (by 55 per cent). Yet polls consistently



show that Australians think crime is going up.

Even petty problems and nonproblems are inflated to justify policies. Most ludicrously, sports lobbyists say if we don't keep funding the Australian Institute of Sport, then we won't win Olympic medals and our national pride will plummet.

Alcables' *Dread* explains the sociology of panic and risk well. As he writes, 'empirically speaking, our world is far, far safer than that of our grandparents and greatgrandparents. But the gaze of the world isn't fixed on all the evidence. Anxiety is no statistician.'

Hopefully David Marr would agree. But many of those who buy his book will be looking less for a survey about how panic translates into over-reaction and then overregulation, and more to confirm their prejudices about Australian conservatives. He does nothing to dissuade them from doing so.

Marr's thesis is correct: panic is at the centre of the human condition. But that is a panic stoked by governments and politicians to support their grand schemes; schemes that inevitably grow government and expand the power of the state.