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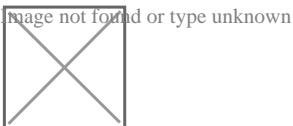
Tomorrow Never Knows

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If educator and novelist John Marsden agrees our kids should be free to take risks; why not also adults?, wonders IPA Adjunct Fellow Cian Hussey.

How ironic for a book called *Take Risks* to come out at the height of the panic-driven response to COVID. As former Prime Minister Tony Abbott said on numerous occasions, we adopted a ‘safety only’ rather than a ‘safety first’ approach to risk throughout the pandemic. And as the IPA has highlighted over the past two-and-a-half years, the way we have responded to COVID has revealed a great deal about our political leaders and the bureaucrats who advise (read: dictate to) them, and about who we are as a people more broadly.



Take Risks: Raising Kids Who Love the Adventure of Life
John Marsden
Macmillan Australia, 2021,
pp400

Educator and author of the *Tomorrow* young adult novel series John Marsden published his latest book, *Take Risks*, late last year. For those who think we have become a far too risk-averse society—where ‘safetyism’ prevails—the title piques interest. Unfortunately, those who come to his book with this perspective will be let down.

The book covers a range of topics: it is part autobiographic, covering some of Marsden’s teaching career and life story in giving writers workshops and starting two schools; part a rant about excessive red tape and faceless bureaucracies that exist to hinder rather than help; part scattered observations about the world, parenting, teaching, and society; and part what appears to be an attempt at political philosophy. Marsden explains the title of the book relatively early on:

If Candlebark and Alice Miller [the schools he founded] have a motto, it is ‘take risks’. I throw in the words ‘take care’ occasionally, as a token gesture... We believe children should be adventurous. If they are not allowed the opportunity to live adventurous lives, they are condemned to a slow spiritual death... The child who is overprotected, kept from danger, is dying the death of a thousand cuts. He or she is likely to become passive, unmotivated, apathetic, alienated or angry, or all of the above.



The hunger for this kind of insight has been demonstrated by the fame of Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, where he delivers almost exactly the same message in his long lectures and podcasts. IPA members and readers of the *IPA Review* are no doubt familiar with this, so to find this coming from a mainstream and nominally left-wing author was heartening. (I say nominally, for now, but later chapters of *Take Risks* expose a far more radical and dangerous streak in Marsden).

Marsden is frustrated because bureaucrats have not implemented his view of the world.

Unnecessary bureaucracy is one of Marsden's pet hates. His perspective is interesting here, because he recites stories of his interactions with various bureaucratic people and organisations and relays how he often ignores them completely or bends the truth to tick their boxes and then proceeds how he would have anyway. Perhaps the most insightful is the story of how, on the eve of opening one of his schools, he found they did not have enough students enrolled in a certain year level to satisfy minimum capacity requirements, and the Victorian bureaucracy said he would not be able to open. Marsden phoned the parent of a student in a younger year, said the student was being promoted to the short cohort, phoned the bureaucrat back to tell him there had been a mistake and they satisfied the requirements. After getting the all-clear to go ahead on the Monday morning, Marsden called the parent back to let him know the child was being returned to his intended class.

Stories like this litter the book, but at times Marsden gets stuck in the details. The first page-long quote from a regulation or letter from a public servant might have added something, but after a few more these passages invite glazed eyes and skim reading. This repetitiveness can be forgiven, for some of Marsden's insights about bureaucracy and red tape after decades of first-hand experience are interesting. Marsden's observation that "at some point in the last generation the bureaucrats won their long-running war for control of the country" is poignant, adding that this war "was fought so silently and invisibly that it is impossible to pinpoint the date of the battle in which they achieved their victory, but the cost of that victory has been dreadful". As outlined by the IPA in countless papers and op-eds, that dreadful cost has been technocracy substituting for democracy and a distortion of our free and entrepreneurial way of life.

It becomes clear as the book progresses, however, that Marsden is not frustrated with this silent victory of the bureaucrats because he believes in democracy and our Westminster inheritance, but because the bureaucrats have not implemented his view of the world. Marsden writes that the "defining characteristic of the bureaucratic mind is fear" and that we are "currently suffering, amongst other pandemics and epidemics, a pandemic of fear, which is all the more bizarre given that the Western world has... never been safer." Especially pertinent given the past two years, he writes that those:

... who suffer from fear have at least one unique characteristic. Unlike other illnesses, where sufferers generally try not to infect others, people in the grip of fear do their best to contaminate everyone.



Yet Marsden seems enthralled to this mindset of fear. Chapter 26, 'An Honest Look at Our Future World', begins with the bland claim:

The world is in deep trouble. We now have evidence the size and weight of Jupiter that humanity may not be capable of saving itself and its only known home, Planet Earth, from catastrophe.

The same chapter contains the asinine comment that “for thousands of years now the ‘goodies’ have been steadily losing ground to the ‘baddies’, and there is no credible evidence that this trend will be reversed in time to save the planet and its inhabitants.”

If your politics are not correct you will be cancelled.

Glossing over these comments is easy as they align with the mainstream narrative. My inclination was to give Marsden the benefit of the doubt; they reflect the fact that, today, everything must be blatantly political, and if your politics are not correct you will be cancelled. Throwaway comments about environmental disaster—and mandatory, pointless, and irrelevant Trump-bashing—are part and parcel of being published in 2022. What comes next, however, reveals the totalitarian streak running through all who think the world is imperfect and only they can uproot the traditions of the past and design a new way of living:

... the number of people in the world whose values are distorted, corrupted, undeveloped, whose behaviour is often motivated by greed, rage, fear or lust and is often destructive, whose mental powers are limited to the extent that they cannot comprehend such abstract ideas as putting the collective good ahead of the individual good or the sacrifice of short-term gain for long-term benefit, whose attitudes are determined largely by faulty thinking, prejudices and perversions, is so significant that the world is moving rapidly and inevitably towards disastrous outcomes...

There are too many of these people for them to be controllable or manageable, and the empathy, sensitivity and respect for others which is well developed in many people [like Marsden] paradoxically prevents the latter from taking strict, authoritative measures to control and manage the former group.

Any illusion Marsden was paying lip service to the “woke communists”, in the words of Claremont Institute chairman and writer Tom Klingenstein, was quickly shattered. Despite insisting the “six years of atrocious suffering that preceded the surrender of Nazi Germany should be seen as six years comprising a huge number of spectacular triumphs for the dark and awful forces of fascism”, Marsden advocates that “there is an urgent need for governments to be more authoritative, strict and controlling”. At this point Marsden finally reveals his true feelings about how democracy has been undermined, asserting we need to:

... urgently find governments which think not of popularity surveys, not of their status in marginal electorates or their prospects of retaining power at the next elections, but which are prepared to urgently pass legislation which will be highly unpopular with some—perhaps even in the short term with many.



But, as he reminds us further down the page:

... one of the bizarre distortions of government in countries which like to call themselves democratic is that those who are elected to represent the people have, for a long time now, come to regard themselves not as representatives but as leaders.

He acknowledges the blatant contradiction, but assures us without any explanation or further clarification that “there is no contradiction”. That settles that.

I read Marsden’s *Tomorrow* series in my early teens and thought they were great books. The first, *Tomorrow, When The War Began* (1993), tracked a group of Australian teenagers fighting back against an invading army. This young adult novel was included in the IPA’s Australian Canon for its quality and the place it captured in the imagination of a generation of Australian teenagers. In 2010 this novel was made into a movie, and then in 2016 an ABC TV series.

In adulthood, I reflect on the novels as being far more important than I realised at the time. They tell a story of sacrifice and courage in the face of an invasion of Australia. A group of young Australians come to the realisation that if they want to preserve Australia and what it means to be Australian, then they must risk their lives to fight and defend it.

A lot has changed in Australia since 1993 when the first *Tomorrow* book was released. So, too, with Marsden’s belief that we have inherited a system of government and developed a way of life worth defending.

This article from the [Spring 2022 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by IPA Adjunct Fellow Cian Hussey.