Anoraks, train timetables, bus rides and biscuits: Taking on the impossible in the politics of climate change

Stewart Williams

Abstract
In this paper I explore a climate change politics which is deemed ‘impossible’ by some yet still offering opportunities for radical difference. Neoliberal managerialist approaches to climate change combine a consensual populism and technical economic instrumentalism to reflect what Žižek and Rancière, among others, heralds an end to politics. However, the demands for social action around sustainable transport, for example, challenge such ‘post-politics’. My own role on a community advisory panel established to evaluate a light rail proposal for the city of Hobart provides an opportunity to examine social action as it unfolds in this context. Recounting some of the interactions among government and community members involved in this project, I discuss how individual experiences of concession, failure and resistance under a post-political paradigm can still give effect to a real and meaningful politics. Indeed, it is in the contingent materiality of our everyday practices that we get to take on the seemingly impossible politics of climate change as we engage ethical issues—explained in Derridean terms as the undecidability of aporia— which force difficult decisions and thus enact the political as it might be better understood.

Acknowledgements
The writing of this paper was supported, in part, by a grant awarded by the Australian Commonwealth Government’s Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency. Thanks are due to the community members and others participating in the political process described here and I salute all those working towards more sustainable futures.
Introduction

We spoke of the doing which does not reduce to knowing, and of that being able to do the difference which is what marking comes to. This is what goes on and what comes about here.

Jacques Derrida, *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan*, 1984

I awoke to a grey dawn with the wind and rain still blowing in hard from the night before. It was not a morning for walking. The weather might settle down and the promised 16°C might arrive later. It was just days until Christmas and yet the last few weeks had seen unusually bad weather, even for Hobart. This Saturday was no exception. So, was I really going to venture out in weather like this? If so, how would I get to where I needed to be? This is what the invitation had suggested:

This is an invite to join me to walk parts of the rail corridor and an opportunity to catch some Metro bus services.... Meet near Box Hill Road (on cycle track) at 9am on Saturday 18th of December. For those departing from Hobart the 8:10am route 118 service departing from stop E is recommended. Hopefully there will be an opportunity to catch a limited stops (rail service like) X7 service after the walk has been completed.

What else had the email said? Oh, yes: ‘Do not in any way feel obligated to walk this is a purely optional activity.’ From inside my warm bed it was a no-brainer. But then, again, as the Tasmanian state government had just recently appointed me to chair this group—a community advisory panel helping evaluate a light rail proposal in Hobart—I really had to attend. So, go I did … and thus found myself in an unusual setting with unusual company to match.

Back in the boardroom when I was first meeting staff of the state’s Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources (DIER) and chatting over tea and biscuits, it had seemed an excellent idea to visit the site and inspect the old railway line (still used to move freight but no longer for people). Then came the text messages with explanations and apologies because, of course, professional practitioners and senior officials are just too busy or otherwise indisposed for this kind of activity. However, that was most of the panel, which then comprised two local mayors, one regional planner, a city engineer, the head of the public bus service provider Metro, and the waterfront authority’s chief executive, as well as two community members interested in alternative transport, particularly rail, with me as the lone academic and chairperson. After DIER’s project manager, Peter, had suggested several options, two walks proceeded with a few panel members in tow. First he was accompanied by Ben, president of Hobart’s Northern Suburbs Light Rail Action Group. On the next Saturday (described above), I met him together with Toby, secretary of Future Transport Tasmania.
With just us three passengers on the bus ride out, there was a palpable sense of adventure as we prepared to brave the elements. Then, trudging along the six kilometres of track, we got to know each other by sharing stories about the railway companies and services that once crisscrossed the state; childhood memories of journeys to school by train; rail’s place in our social and economic history; the fate of locally decommissioned rolling stock and its likely international whereabouts now; recent corporate mergers in this truly global transport business; and other related matters. It was obvious that my two colleagues were the real experts, fully kitted out and so engaged with the subject matter of conversation. I noted their sensible attire because I was discovering just how much my old Waproo® jacket was not waterproof any more. As we got more and more drenched I couldn’t help but feel moved by the dedication of my new and learned comrades. In discussing which buses to catch so as to avert further saturation, and identifying the trains we encountered, I witnessed their ability to draw on a vast and arcane knowledge of train timetables, bus networks, engineering specifications, and much more. But most telling were the breaks that occasionally punctuated our morning’s march. Anticipation and excitement were signaled first by a checking of watches and then brief conferral amid fidgeting and furtive glances that would open up (soon afterwards and without fail) to a distant rumbling, next whistling and then visible joy confirming that such and such a ‘loco’ was hauling down the line.

I had, in hindsight, been with those true rail enthusiasts, elsewhere dubbed train-spotters. Their dedication was signaled, among other things, by their wet-weather gear. In this case it was japara oilskins but I keep thinking of the UK anorak (more on this later). After a hard start, ours turned out to be a most enjoyable and revelatory time together. Through the morning’s rain and smiles I had sensed a little of the passion these people have for trains as well as for sustainability more generally. The extent of their hopes for a light rail system in Hobart continues likewise to impress me. At the time of writing, the proposal’s fate remains undecided, and yet its outcome is not the concern here anyway. Of greater interest is the evaluation process itself as it reveals how possibilities for effecting change through social action can still unfold in relation to a politics that has become so difficult—especially now with its entanglement in climate change—as to be regarded impossible. Indeed, this evaluation has suffered several adverse moments of its own, but sometimes to surprising effect and not least, as recounted here, when driven from unexpected and seemingly ordinary quarters.

This paper advocates for a more contingent, material and modest form of social activism that persists within an impossibly difficult contemporary climate change politics. It is divided into three sections. First, I suggest that climate change discourses and practices constitute a political problematic qua impossibility based on the paradigmatic constraints of instrumentality, universal abstraction, and marketisation. Sustainable transport in Australia is therefore posed as providing a useful empirical focus for further analysis.
Secondly, I reflect on my work with the Tasmanian state government and community in the invited voluntary role mentioned above. In explaining various efforts to manage that process, I comment on the limitations of the political (or rather, the post-political) context. Thirdly, I discuss some of the difficulties experienced by stakeholders in quite ordinary situations; focusing on practical matters within which an alternative, contingent form of political action can be discerned. Understood as ‘aporia’, these situations present ethical dilemmas which can reinvigorate an otherwise impossible climate change politics in the everyday realms of social practice.

Post-political impossibilities in relation to climate change

Recently, scholars drawing on Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Rancière, among others, have described the politics of climate change as overly fearful and anxious, empty and illusory, but ultimately as impossible and perhaps even over. I offer a sympathetic critique of this, but there is room here for confusion and contradiction. Agreeing that climate change discourse and practices are co-constituted across natural scientific and socio-cultural terrains, I concur with the moves toward a more deliberative cosmopolitan ethos. However, such a shift can entail loss of engagement as discussed here in terms of the post-politics of climate change and sustainable transport.

Global climate change has resulted from modern progress driven by scientific and technological developments (as well as the social and political-economic imperatives of capitalism). It is now understood primarily in such terms, too, and the organised efforts of many scientists worldwide continue to shape the public debate. Since first reporting in 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has collated sufficient findings to be very confident that human activity is contributing to global warming and sea level rise. Much of this science concerns global circulation models which focus on equilibrium and stability, and it aims to manage greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and global warming by setting targets; capping CO₂ levels at 350ppm and limiting temperature increases to a maximum 2°C are common preferences. However the issues of uncertainty, positive feedback and underestimations all prefigure what is likely to be far more sudden and disruptive if not catastrophic change.

Apocalyptic discourses of fear and chaos consequently abound. However, Mike Hulme has produced a body of work illustrating how our attempts to conquer climate are unrealistic cultural constructions. Instead, he suggests we might shift our attention away from this perceived need to fix or control climate towards an appreciation of its fluid hybridity. Traditional boundaries and dualities between the natural and cultural, the local and global, and the present and future, are thus collapsed. There are parallels to be found in ideas about the co-constitution of nature and culture, and the bridging of science and democracy. Consider Bruno Latour’s critique of the modern constitution and call for a ‘parliament of things’ comprising
subjects and objects from both human and non-human worlds, for example, or Ulrich Beck’s arguments for a democratised science and cosmopolitanism.8 Beck’s notion resonates with Hulme’s ‘cosmopolitan approach to knowledge’ in all its diversity and particularity.9 As the world faces the pressing issues of climate change a more flexible attitude to possibilities for learning and responding across multiple scales with sensitivity to difference is required. Rather than concentrate on regional or global climate trends we ought to note the particularities of place. In addition, Beck describes how recent decades of environmental challenge have driven a shift from traditional class politics to a more reflexive society where individual choices about risk, for example, open up a sub-politics involving scientists, technical experts and managers.10 Incorporating so many players (as well as uncertainty) into this climate change democracy has therefore seen a premium placed on knowledge and trust in interactions. Collaboration and communication are now placed foremost in policy and planning.11 However, this paper will demonstrate why such efforts are regularly undermined—or otherwise seen to fail—even though embodied experience opens possibilities for action not contained in debates about the status of a universal knowledge or the correctness or otherwise of climate science.

Ironically, a cosmopolitan ethos emerges when climate change is perceived as a universal humanitarian threat. However, it also gets entwined with a post-political populism which silences social differences and disavows conflicts of interest whilst blaming and externalising specific ecological issues (rather than the social relations and structures of capitalism that gave rise to them). Cosmopolitanism is undermined, too, by an environmental movement in which either an anti-democratic, near-religious faith invites fundamental closure or, alternatively, ‘end-of-the-world’ mentalities are paralysing.12 Such political conservatism speaks of rearguard politics—in contrast to the forward driven dialectic of antagonism—yet it is also now bleeding into contemporary, populist, third-way politics with its pursuit of balanced dialogue and consensus. This post-political condition, according to Slavoj Žižek, results from ‘the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension.’13 Likewise, Jacques Rancière critiques consensus in terms of ‘the annulment of dissensus … the “end of politics.”’14 For Erik Swyngedouw, the technical administration and management of sustainability and climate change problems with increasing reliance on scientific and market-based instruments is implicated in a ‘consensual post-politics’ which has ‘eliminated a genuine political space of disagreement.’15 Such post-politics can be explained in terms of the limitations of rational, scientific, communicative or free market paradigms as well as a totalising closure and arrest in environmentalism itself. It is evident within the transport arena and yet here we see that assorted forms of activism continue to arise.
Climate change and public transport

Transportation is central to the challenge of global climate change as it is responsible for approximately one third of all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and car use is growing rapidly in such populous nations as China and India. The issues here extend beyond travel behaviours and social attitudes to take in freight logistics, political lobbying, marketing, technological innovation, and infrastructure provision. However, car dependence—or automobility—has long been perceived as a key problem in the affluent global north where it has shaped the landscape in lasting ways.\textsuperscript{16} North America and Australia are dominated by urban sprawl and attendant problems of air pollution, congestion, environmental damage, road accidents and obesity. However, ‘peak oil’ is now also featuring in how we rethink our resilience to ever more complex futures.\textsuperscript{17}

Forward thinking has necessarily become more sophisticated. John Urry, for example, uses a complex systems approach to identify institutional lock-in and tipping points which can suddenly establish new patterns of path dependence and hence social change. Automobility is ‘remarkably stable and unchanging’ however, and so we continue to imagine its development in linear terms ‘even though a massive economic, social and technological maelstrom of change surrounds it.’\textsuperscript{18} We therefore need to look at factors of change beyond just carpooling or oil prices. Urry suggests we focus on an overarching architecture of transformation rather than deal with single technologies so as to develop an integrated, organic approach that no longer separates transport systems from the broader landscape. He imagines new technologies supporting a network of small, light and de-privatised, or even driverless, vehicles using new fuels and construction materials with electronic systems regulating access, cost and speed. He also imagines intelligent software coordinating the different transport modes and types of access—virtual as well as physical—and optimising the various tasks, opportunities and outcomes.

In contrast, transport policy is often inert or monolithic, with issues of congestion, pricing and pollution handled in isolation. In Australia, the focus is on problems of infrastructure provision with limited opportunities for change.\textsuperscript{19} In a climate change context, GHG emissions are central. Yet the federal government’s latest \textit{State of Australian Cities} report states that:

\begin{quote}
Transport emissions are one of the strongest sources of emissions growth in Australia. The increasing trend in transport emissions is of particular concern to Australia’s cities, which feature high levels of personal car use and automobile dependency. Strong growth in emissions from the transport sector is expected to continue, with direct CO\textsubscript{2} equivalent emissions projected to increase by 22.6 per cent over the period 2007 to 2020 (or around 1.58 per cent a year).\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}
Here CO₂ is seen as a problem to be managed in the usual instrumental fashion but it also figures as Swyngedouw’s ‘fetishized and externalized foe’ in the ‘sustainable climate futures’ battle. Without diminishing the need to address CO₂ levels, its objectification as our number one enemy can distract our attention away from the systemic issues of overconsumption and growth ‘at any cost’ as well as social injustice and inequality. Social movements for climate action might offer ways to counter such an objectifying instrumentality. Action around sustainability has long been tied to the environmental movement but the prospects of it coming to a post-political halt in the face of the impossibilities of climate change have been noted already. Rethinking and realising other forms of social activism will therefore become critical.

Peter Newman draws on the latest developments in Australia and elsewhere (especially the EU) to show how it is only in combination with new patterns of social organisation that the emergent technologies of the smart card, renewable energy and alternative transport infrastructure can enable us to achieve better outcomes in our cities: ‘The social capital being built up around these new technologies and lifestyles’ are, he suggests, ‘... poised to become the basis of a major social movement’ transforming the sustainability of our cities. Without engaging in any critical assessment of this claim, it still seems overly optimistic if politics or post-politics deflects the social through consensual management and limited participation. The centrality here of social interactions — including social movements and social activism per se — requires greater attention and imagination, even from those who are promoting broad approaches to mobility.

Policy and planning responses to climate change at local and state levels are seen in post-politics as blunt instruments wielded in a ‘policing’ role. Swyngedouw uses the term ‘polic(ym)ing’ to highlight this convergence. It is useful here to look at the experience of South East Queensland (SEQ) because this region is now undergoing more rapid urban growth than any other in Australia. A recent review highlighted limitations in its current policies and plans, noting that some progress has been made in the technological and economic areas but not in others. According to this review, the SEQ Regional Plan and Draft SEQ Climate Change Management Plan highlight ‘the need to increase public awareness’ and yet the review adds that ‘Harnessing the transformative role of social movements is perhaps one of the least developed aspects of the adaptation policies and plans.” The review notes that prevailing policy and planning tools often employ the same technical and economic instruments which underpin neoliberal economic theory. Little surprise, then, that the few proposals for alternative and public transport that are contemplated in the plan are mentioned as ways to increase choice and accessibility rather than to address environmental and social justice concerns. Rather than looking to innovative collaboration and investment, the priority is defending assets and bearing future costs. However, without indicating who might have to pay or who
might need assistance such a strategy tends to be regressive and risks lapsing into arguments over legal liability and technical detail. It therefore ‘reflects a “business as usual” approach to planning that needs to change if the region is to adapt equitably to climate change impacts.’

The more scientific, technical and economic measures that prevail in neoliberal policy are now prominent in climate change adaptation worldwide. For example, changes in human behaviour are to be brought about, it seems, through developments in Australia and elsewhere of carbon-pricing, carbon-trading and carbon-accounting. The market is a universal mechanism that supposedly respects the individual, yet its ability to deliver socially just and responsible outcomes is questionable. The commodification of carbon and the use of predictive, actuarial approaches to managing extreme weather events exemplify the increasing reliance on a quantitative calculus and instrumental regulation; valorising cost-effectiveness and consumer choice in climate change politics.

Because of climate change the need to develop sustainable transport options continues to attract attention in civil and political-economic spheres across Australia. It is therefore still an arena for effecting radical difference as well as planning and policy implementation. The Tasmanian government’s decision to engage community stakeholders in the evaluation of a particular transport proposal therefore presents a timely empiric with the opportunity to examine social action within a political or post-political process.

**The Hobart light rail evaluation**

Participation on the community panel advising on a possible light rail service in Hobart has been subject to close public scrutiny as well as the state government’s own ethical requirements. It has enabled me to reflect on the impossible politics of climate change as the Tasmanian government engages the community on sustainable transport. A qualitative research approach—employing autoethnography, participant observation and discourse analysis—was used to examine the experiential and other data associated with the evaluation, including reports and minutes available online. The proposed light rail development would make use of existing infrastructure, and some community members have been lobbying for such a service linking Hobart to its northern suburbs for some years. From this starting point I was able to observe participants’ ongoing experiences of hope followed by concession and even , but also their resistance to any post-political ennui or end of politics.

In mid-2010, the Tasmanian Greens Party leader, the Hon. Nick McKim—in his role as Minister for Climate Change, Sustainable Transport and Alternative Energy—announced his commitment to investigating a possible light rail service for Hobart. He then made the state government’s Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources (DIER) responsible for the evaluation with $350,000 provided primarily for an independent
consultancy. A community advisory panel was formed at the minister’s invitation and its members, under my chairmanship, have since been involved together with DIER staff in this project.

When the state government allocated funds for the light rail evaluation in its 2010-2011 budget, the minister made direct links to climate change:

Light rail has the potential to address climate change challenges by preparing Hobart for the demands of a carbon-constrained future, as well as improving access to the city and the need for social inclusion.30

The process has subsequently been immersed in that same milieu of climate change politics or rather post-politics. Although the issue was always highly politicised, it has been made clear that the panel is to avoid politics. From the start, for example, the terms of reference, as spelled out for us by DIER, stress consensus:

Panel members are asked to consider issues raised both from their particular perspective and in the interests of the wider community. While consensus is sought, as far as possible, between the members of the Panel, it should be recognised that there may be issues on which the views of the Panel members may conflict. In such instances, members of the Panel are asked to consider and acknowledge the views of others and to endeavour to balance the positions of all involved.31

This was a big ask. As the panel’s chairperson, I struggled with the imagined freedom or objectivity which was assumed at the first meeting but never openly discussed: ‘The independent role of the Chairperson Stewart Williams was highlighted along with the key role of DIER and the Project Manager Peter Kruup.’32 In fact, I had accepted this role for the same reasons of vested interest and/or high hope as had most, if not all, other panel members. It was only a matter of time before such desires erupted.

**Managing the politics of an advisory panel**

Across the panel a range of views and interests strive to be heard. Differences arise amongst government officials (from various local municipalities), the transport providers (each with their own understandings and preferences, say, between bus and rail) and others such as the planner, the engineer, and the councilor-cum-demographer. Still, antagonism is avoided with friendly cajoling, for example, when I ask the panel to state any conflicts of interest. There is, however, an underlying reality of opposition. Contrary to the train enthusiasts’ hopes and aspirations, for example, both the Hobart City Council’s engineer and the CEO of Metro have put forward ideas for the existing rail infrastructure’s conversion into a concrete-covered busway, calling for a Bus Rapid Transit option in any evaluation.33 Sometimes panel members become bodily agitated, and verbal stoushes ensue, but such disputes then get directed to the evaluative machinery at hand.
Even as these internal conflicts somehow get managed other concerns arise. For example, from early on, the panel has been aware that its role is only to advise rather than direct government. Panel members have suspected that even if the proposal’s value was proven, government inaction might follow. We have been reassured that carriage of this matter remains in government hands, resulted in the following expression of concern recorded in the meeting minutes:

There was some concern expressed by Panel members over the outcomes of the LRBC especially in the situation were [sic] findings are positive. There was concern the associated report may simply ‘sit on the shelf’. It was confirmed that the LRBC results would be presented to the Minister and further action would be under his direction.  

Above all, the project has been questioned by panel members for relying primarily on economic assessment. The project was always identified as the ‘light rail business case’ or LRBC, and we have therefore endeavoured to address the possible shortfalls. In our first meeting it was agreed that the request for tenders should be worded so as to secure consultants capable of operating outside a restrictive economic mode, noting:

The need for a Consultant to have broad experience in more than light rail was raised. Specifically, it was suggested that experience with general passenger transport, environmental issues and social planning as well as economics be strongly considered.

This concern has not gone away. At its second meeting, the panel ‘agreed that the assessment of social and environmental factors was critical. At the third, a panel member commented on how the specifications ‘appeared to have lost the “triple-bottom-line” focus that was originally agreed and instead had a greater economic focus’. Even now, with the consultants secured and reports completed, the panel strives to make the evaluation more comprehensive, insisting that the less tangible social benefits be included, and that qualitative insights and case studies from elsewhere be used. The prevailing framework, however, remains a scientific, technical and economic one under which the project’s viability is assessed in terms of infrastructure condition, upgrade requirements, stock-purchasing options, current travel demand, net present value, benefit/cost ratios, and optimum operating service models.

Another difficulty arose early in the project’s scoping with the evaluation’s focus on a truncated version of the proposal. Consultants ACIL Tasman, in the Background Report, recommended terminating the light rail service at Claremont (in the city’s middle ring of suburbs) rather than extending to the outermost suburb of Brighton which ‘may in fact render the system as a whole unviable’. This assessment was based on estimated net annual revenue for each station. On the other hand, they recommend keeping the rail corridor intact (not concreted over—much to the bus-lobbyists’ chagrin)
because Brighton municipality is accommodating much of the region’s population growth and the infrastructure’s availability for possible future use remains central to any flexible public transport policy.

Limiting the extent of rail development did cause initial upset but the uproar was less than expected. Brighton’s mayor, Tony, was overseas when feedback on that first draft report was sought. A proxy attended the meeting. He expressed dismay that two locations in his municipality originally identified as stations (Bridgewater and Brighton) were deemed unviable, but the meeting minutes record that ‘while Brighton Council was disappointed … the finding to exclude these stations from further analysis was accepted.’

This outcome is surprising but not unusual in its context. However, the matter was not over.

The outermost northern suburbs of Hobart suffer great socio-economic hardship and transport disadvantage. Investment in a rail service extending outwards from Hobart’s CBD was thus seen by many as a salve for the more distant and isolated suburbs of Granton, Bridgewater and Brighton. Their subsequent exclusion has since been a sticking point. When the Brighton mayor returned in mid-April, he indicated his ‘displeasure’ by offering his resignation (verbally) from the panel which prompted a response letter from me in which I also expressed my disappointment that his municipality had been excluded and on that basis we sought a meeting with the project manager. Perhaps we could see a way through the impasse by paying closer attention to Brighton’s problems.

When we subsequently met—over the usual offerings of departmental tea and biscuits—Tony made an impassioned plea that his local community deserved better public transport. Services are currently slow and infrequent, failing to meet the needs of people who live in an area of high unemployment but still have the usual needs and rights around mobility including access to schools, shops and other services. We started exploring the options. The break-through came as DIER agreed to upgrade the bus services to Brighton and this was included in the draft third report. With this seemingly impossible contradiction resolved—albeit temporarily, no doubt—Brighton’s mayor remains on the panel and an improved alternative transport outcome has been attained.

Post-politics and resistance in the panel

Along with such wins, some panel members insist that the light rail be developed irrespective of cost given the many intangible, non-quantifiable benefits. The rail enthusiasts also succeeded in getting a monetised value for that particular attractiveness of trains known as the ‘sparks effect’ incorporated into the modeling. Other panel members have identified positive aspects and outcomes in terms of the sustainability notions of precaution, inter-generational equity, and social as much as ecological wellbeing:
The Panel noted that it will be important to provide a statement outlining the conditions that would make a northern suburbs light rail service viable in the future, if it was not considered so presently. The consultants stated that the light rail service did not necessarily need to make a profit for it to be viable and it was important to consider wider social benefits.44

Yet neither the panel’s advice nor the minister’s assertions about ‘the need for social inclusion’ in the context of climate change, peak oil and a carbon-constrained future, have gained traction. Rather than being driven by a political vision or social justice imperative, decisions are mostly determined by scientific argument and use of technical, economic instruments. Efforts to gauge the social benefits flowing to community and to value transport-oriented development, for example, remain aligned with the evaluation’s ‘business case’ framing. At one point a panel member—the president of the Northern Suburbs Light Rail Action Group—suggested inviting a visiting expert on transport issues to meet with the panel, but the minutes note that:

Ben Johnston advised Panel members that Professor Peter Newman was visiting Hobart to conduct some public seminars and was open to meeting with Panel members. The Panel discussed Professor Newman’s offer, and decided that members could instead attend the public seminars, to maintain the clear advisory focus of the Panel.45

Peter Newman had been invited to Hobart by the Northern Suburbs Light Rail Action Group and he had given public support to the light rail proposal, yet this counted against him because the panel wanted to avoid any appearance of partisanship. Some panel members did, however, attend his public seminar. In contrast to the proposal’s business case evaluation, Peter Newman saw only one ‘real obstacle’ which he was later reported describing as ‘purely a political one’.46 In a process redolent of post-politics though, any political confrontation was discouraged and antagonism brought into order. Against the veneer of good management, differences amongst panel members are now surfacing. By 23 May 2011 we had commented on the second stage draft report by the consultants Hyder P/L. Discussion of the optimal operating services model was primarily technical, as expected. However, the aforementioned Ben rang me to express his concern that any future demand and need for a light rail service was being under-estimated. He was preparing to resign from the panel. We talked throughout that morning and the next. We agreed on wanting the proposal to go ahead somehow, and that working with the government was necessary. I thought I had succeeded in persuading him to persist with the process, however uncertain I was myself of it being able to deliver any positive outcome. Imagine my surprise, then, when I read in Tasmania’s metropolitan broadsheet The Mercury that the action group deemed the project ‘a failure’ with its president resigning from the advisory panel.47 Of course, DIER had been well prepared because our terms of reference requiring that any dispute be resolved internally:
The Panel may elect to take an issue arising from DIER’s actions, where DIER is considered to be either acting against the advice of the Panel, or acting where there is conflicting advice, to the Minister for Sustainable Transport, through the Secretary of DIER.\textsuperscript{48}

In their effort to ‘shunt’ the project—as the newspaper headline put it—the action group refused to keep matters in-house and openly questioned the government’s light rail commitment.\textsuperscript{49} Its members then called on a local independent politician to criticise the state government over the process.\textsuperscript{50} Conversely, some panel members expressed disappointment at the action group’s behaviour in publicly criticising the process. Yet I sensed that they had done the right thing from their perspective. In one sense their claims are unfounded in that the Panel fulfilled its brief. But the project does have limitations and the decision to escape the restrictions of this de-politicised process seems understandable, even laudable. Furthermore, the group may have relinquished bargaining power within the consultation process but it is free to speak out publicly and this may have more political impact. Meanwhile the panel will soon complete its final report and wrap-up.

The post-political critique suggests that politics as we know it is increasingly lost through the prevailing managerial techniques of negotiation and consensus. Certainly that resonates with the experience of the Hobart light rail proposal’s evaluation. However, the panel members have stayed with their convictions despite the disagreements and disappointments which have even led to resistance and refusal. Some disapprove of their colleagues’ steadfastly held positions and the irresolvable arguments. Others criticised the individuals approaching the media on the grounds that the newspaper article upset the process by ‘making it political’. But that is precisely what must happen, it seems, with such an impossible politics.

**The political’s materialisation in an impossible politics**

In taking on an impossible politics one presumably meets a dead-end. A look at my own role in chairing the community advisory panel reveals the emphasis on management which even lapsed into mismanagement. Following Žižek and Rancière, we might conclude that politics here has been reduced to policing. Yet the control and closure resulting from any supposed post-politics is far from clear-cut in this example. There can be little doubt that the government acted in good faith in seeking community participation and the fact that representatives from Future Transport Tasmania continued to sit on the panel even after the representative of the Northern Suburbs Light Rail Action Group departed also raises questions about the outcome. Remaining as the panel’s chair, I likewise wonder whether as social idealists or activists we must fail in a situation like this. Have we been coerced and co-opted, or has it been worthwhile?
According to Oliver Marchant, the individuals, communities and organisations that get enrolled in post-politics are afforded a ‘seeming politicization’ that is really not political at all:

Such assimilation of political conceptions to non-political situations amounts to what one could call a ‘placebo’-politicalness. Here the political is not truly political because of the restricted nature of the constituency.\textsuperscript{51}

Climate change politics elsewhere is seen as being impossible, and ‘radical forms of environmental activism’ in the UK, for example, similarly get incorporated and are thus ‘doomed to failure.’\textsuperscript{52} However, I suggest that the political proceeds apace. Drawing on post-political theory and this Australian empiric, I argue that the political emerges within even the most impossible of politics in terms of what Jacques Derrida terms ‘aporia’. In this approach undecidability grounds social conflict or antagonism so as to constitute the political in specific, material, contexts.

Our engagement in an impossible politics and its crystallisation around issues of climate change must still manifest in ordinary, material practices. While we might well concur with Mike Hulme or Erik Swyngedouw in criticising the consensual populist, neoliberal managerialism of post-politics as radically reactionary, these scholars can get stuck on the framing and mediation of climate change. Of course, they are right in calling for a more cosmopolitan, re-politicised, approach to the climate debate. But it is telling that while Hulme looks at discourse with ‘our identities and our interpretations of the world around us’, he concludes that its representations ‘can never fully escape encounters with place and materiality.’\textsuperscript{53} Elsewhere, he has criticised the globalising tendency found in our knowledge systems of environmental change, ranging from earthquake and climate models to indices of temperature and human vulnerability:

Global kinds of knowledge yield global kinds of meaning-making and policy-making. They erase cultural differentiation and heterogeneity. They fail to do justice to the plurality of human living and may have considerably less purchase in problem-solving and policy-making than a multiplicity of local and diverse tools and indicators.\textsuperscript{54}

Such particularity is critical, but it pertains to more than just our ways of knowing climate change and trying to manage it through the use of ‘tools and indicators’. Beyond this concern we need to recognise how climate change policy and policy-making (and thus their policing) are implicated in an actually existing politics that is only ever constituted through contingent, material practices.

Žižek and Rancière move towards a new political materialisation with efforts to understand the making of a politics proper.\textsuperscript{55} Yet others working in this vein, and specifically on climate change, appear more interested in political representation than enactment. Swyngedouw, for
example, urges us to rethink climate as ‘a question of democracy and its meaning’, which gets posed in an explicitly deliberative political space identified ‘for expressing conflict, for nurturing agonistic debate and disagreement, and, most importantly, for the naming of different possible socio-environmental futures.’ Politicising climate change is about the articulation of an alternative vision understood as political representation. However, its physical presence is necessarily attendant and cannot help but appear albeit unremarked in Swyngedouw’s work. He elsewhere states: ‘These symbolizations … are about claiming a metaphorical and material space for those who are unaccounted for, unnamed and whose fictions are only registered as noise.’ Although new identities are constituted through processes of subjectivisation — described as a naming, calling or interpellation — their embodiment in political practices, including social action, is paramount.

As demonstrated in the Hobart light rail evaluation, the issue of representation and its fashioning of names is just one of contemporary climate change politics’ many aspects. Here, we have seen some panel members suffer disappointment and disillusion with this process, with limitations imposed by its terms of reference, closely regulated roles, economic framing and scope. But when moved to action and working together or individually in specific contexts with material things they have become most political. Take, for example, the interactions around one community’s daily travel needs, the organisation of public meetings, seminars, and media presence on facebook and in newspapers, which were all undertaken to make demands — and in some instances get results — with alternative public transport provision. Likewise, my own political engagement has occurred through actual encounters when out walking or busing, being present among these social actors, sharing embodied experiences and forming affective bonds. The evacuated centre, or void, of politics as an empty signifier or ‘the place of Nothing’ requires such content so that solidarity as well as antagonism (or agonism) can take place and the political be realised.

Everyday aporia and the political

If enactment is critical to politics, its particularity and materiality might then seem at odds with an ontological structure such as the political. Yet, this contradiction is in character with a paradoxical politics that is aporetic or undecidable, as much as it is impossible. In this sense, the political presents specifically as an ethical demand and one made in response to an otherness that is infinite (contra the certitude of any supposed ‘end’ suggested by Rancière and Žižek). It figures in Derrida’s work on the difficult but everyday situations arising around law, justice, responsibility and forgiveness, for example, which all refuse easy closure. An aporia is ‘the “coming to pass” of an event’ but also ‘… the impossible passage, the refused, denied or prohibited passage, indeed the non-passage’. One
Local–Global

arrives at aporia as if running into a barrier, encountering a limit where decisions must be made in order to proceed. Here the impossible opens up possibilities:

[T]he aporia is not a paralyzing structure, something that simply blocks the way with a simple negative effect. The aporia is the experience of responsibility. It is only by going through a set of contradictory injunctions, impossible choices, that we make a choice. If I know what I have to do, if I know in advance what has to be done, then there is no responsibility. For the responsible decision envisaged or taken, we have to go through pain and aporia, a situation in which I do not know what to do. I have to do this and this, and they do not go together. I have to face two incompatible injunctions, and that is what I have to do every day in every situation, ethical, political, or not.60

Dichotomy marks contemporary climate change politics. Tensions exist for Hulme in bridging nature and culture, global and local. With an inclusive cosmopolitan ethos, too, the neoliberal hegemony of a populist consensualism as well as technical economic managerialism heralds the post-political at its worst, leading scholars such as Swyngedouw to advocate more specific, situated conflicts. The contradictions of climate change are certainly aporetic but undecidability also poses an ethical demand. Requiring response, its impossibility can force decisions, including personal, ethical and hence political ones which inspire social action, manifesting in different ways.

The case of the Hobart light rail evaluation has illustrated how difficulties arise but passages can get worked out. The particulars are significant in revealing how a meaningful and substantive politics imbues things as well as people in connection to the broader processes and relations in which implicated. An impossible politics thus still holds possibilities for the political:

It is evident that, if one remembers the intertwining or chiasmatic relation between politics and the political, both sides must be involved to some extent. Yet the side of politics (what, in the case of the ontological difference, would be the ontic aspect of the difference) has not yet received sufficient attention... A more deconstructive approach would put emphasis on the fact that antagonization — like hegemony — occurs all the time, even if to different degrees. The moment of the political, when society is confronted with its own absent ground and with the necessity to institute contingent grounds, has always already come and does not stop coming. We do not have to wait for the grand historical events of uprisings and revolutions, we always enact, in the most diverse and ‘shattered’ ways, the political within the realm of the social.61

In examining the process behind the light rail evaluation, a politics that is generally not given much attention has been detailed here in terms of an attempt at the management of a post-political situation with its subsequent
mismanagement which, in turn, evoked resistance and refusal. The link between this politics and the political more broadly understood is therefore worth a final note. The political as an ontological structure, the ‘onto-political’, infuses all social and cultural entities, including objects, subjects and the inter-relationships in which it is constituted; everywhere, yet nowhere. So, even with its manifestation as a necessarily contingent politics or ‘the ontic’, the political still gets enacted.

A major lesson from my experience with the community advisory panel to date has been seeing positive results emerge from an otherwise motley assortment of people gathered together to work through a business case evaluation. Some small achievements have already been obtained and others are perhaps yet to eventuate, either within or without the post-political process. Initially, it seemed no broad goal or aesthetic could be upheld by such a collection of individuals ranging from high-level professionals and practitioners through to some rather quirky as well as zealous railway enthusiasts. On occasions, their differences remain intractable. There have been conflicts involving parties distinctly opposed over different public transport modes, and clashes between local councils either collaborating or competing with each other. Yet, it is precisely at those most awkward moments of difficulty, when sitting at an impasse marked by contradictions as much as working through the actual detail, and then in having to respond to the attendant ethical issues, that substantive political outcomes start to be realised.

Back to anoraks

This paper ends, as it started, remarking the good company of those heritage rail buffs, public transport enthusiasts and sustainability advocates with whom our foray into an impossible climate change politics began and has been since unfolding. With them we have seen the very heart and soul of politics playing out through what might appear and otherwise remain inane or innocuous interests and activities (maybe laughable as well as undesirable, if not necessarily radical, to some observers). We therefore need to stress the important content provided by these social actors and not dismiss or overlook it as others might.

Consider, for example, a particular item from my introductory story: the anorak. A waterproof jacket long associated with train-spotters, the anorak is now widely used to indicate ridicule and derision but also a social alienation extending well beyond any original identification. It provides a material connection in this case, but it is perhaps also appropriate to figure here in representing that ‘part of no part’ which demands equal recognition and thereby instigates the truly political. Swyngedouw suggests that an impossible post-politics focuses on the instrumental management of externalised objects such as CO₂ or desertification (and, presumably, sustainable transport provision), distracting us from the real danger of
capitalist relations: ‘Demands become depoliticized, or, rather, radical politics comes to be not about demands but about things.’ Conversely, the case examined here has revealed in its empirics a relationality and materiality with anoraks, train timetables, bus rides and biscuits variously galvanising the political in conjunction with a call to social action.

There is a solidity—as well as solidarity—that comes from walking together in adverse conditions. It arises too in the interactions that develop around reworking a local bus service, for example, or in responding to a contentious newspaper article. Our daily struggle with other people and things is what provides politics with a substance and meaning all of its own. Even when pursued reluctantly or seemingly inadequately under a post-political paradigm, opportunities to make decisions and effect change present themselves. As we agonise over ordinary matters, including, in this case, whether or not to venture out in bad weather unprotected by a raincoat, to engage others’ passion for trains, or to continue with a panel process that challenges one’s own beliefs, we face the impossibilities of aporia. Each is uncertain, contradictory, and undecidable because each is irreducible to any calculation, program or causality. However, they oblige us to make choices and to act in ways through which more just or ethical outcomes might be attained. Indeed, social action can build on such small gestures including those which address climate change through our participation in, active use of, and demand for more sustainable public transport.

While we engage in a politics that can appear foreclosed, we subsequently, albeit sometimes inadvertently, still enact the political. Our participation here continues to be political, but it is a form of activism that refutes the empty signifiers of right or left, red or green. It includes quite ordinary and even unwitting enactments, and is thus a drabber, perhaps ‘daggier’ everyday sort of engagement. In these times of climate change, the political is apparently receding behind an expanse of technical, economic, managerial and market instruments with rational abstractions and justifications typical of the neoliberal paradigm. Even the environmental movement seems beset by a totalising and exclusionary universalism and apocalyptic imaginary which are closing down the hopes once held there for resistance. In recognising anew what social activism can entail, however, and recalling the critical importance here of an otherwise too-often overlooked contingently material practice, we can revitalise our prospects for taking on the impossible politics of climate change.

Stewart Williams is a lecturer in the School of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Tasmania. He teaches and researches on sustainability, ethics and planning viewed through a critical post-structural lens. His work is published in Australian Geographical Studies, Geographical Research, Social Forces, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, Island, Housing Studies and the International Journal of Housing Policy.
Endnotes

2. Group email to panel members from DIER project manager, 8 December 2010.
3. Ibid.
15. E. Swyngedouw, ‘Apocalypse forever? Post-political populism and the spectre of climate change’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 27, no. 2–3, 2010, p. 228. Swyngedouw continues to summarise the underlying problem as follows: ‘These post-political climate change policies rest on the following foundations. First, the social and ecological problems caused by modernity/capitalism are external side-effects; they
are not an inherent and integral part of the relations of liberal politics and capitalist economies. Second, a strictly populist politics emerges here; one that elevates the interest of an imaginary ‘the People’, Nature, or ‘the environment’ to the level of the universal, rather than opening spaces that permit the universalization of the claims of particular socio-natures, environments, or social groups or classes. Third, these side-effects are constituted as global, universal and threatening. Fourth, the ‘enemy’ or the target of concern is continuously externalized and becomes socially disembodied, is always vague, ambiguous, unnamed and uncounted, and ultimately empty. Fifth, the target of concern can be managed through a consensual dialogical politics whereby demands become depoliticized and politics naturalized within a given socio-ecological order for which there is ostensibly no real alternative’ ibid.; (see also E. Swyngedouw, 2007, 2009).


25. Ibid., p. 209.

26. Ibid., p. 213.


32. Light Rail Business Case – Community Advisory Panel, Minutes of meeting, 27 October 2010.

33. See the minutes for the Community Advisory Panel meeting held on 13 April 2011.

34. Light Rail Business Case – Community Advisory Panel, Minutes of meeting, 7 March 2011.

35. Light Rail Business Case – Community Advisory Panel, Minutes of meeting, 27 October 2010.


37. Light Rail Business Case - Community Advisory Panel, Minutes of meeting, 1 December, 2010.


40. Light Rail Business Case - Community Advisory Panel, Minutes of meeting, 13 April, 2011.


42. Email from DIER Project Manager to CAP Chair, 19 April, 2011; and letter from CAP Chair to Brighton Mayor Mr Tony Foster, 20 April, 2011.

43. ACIL Tasman, Hobart to Northern Suburbs Light Rail Business Case: A report detailing the findings of the third stage of the project, report prepared for DIER, Tasmania by ACIL Tasman, Melbourne, June 2011, (not publicly available at time of writing).
44. Light Rail Business Case – Community Advisory Panel, Minutes of meeting, 13 April, 2011.
45. Light Rail Business Case – Community Advisory Panel, Minutes of meeting, 7 March, 2011; DIER also facilitated a private meeting between its CEO, Norm McIlfattrick, and Peter Newman.
50. Ibid.
55. Rancière is explicit here, distinguishing between ‘those who play the game of forms (the vindication of rights, the battle for representation, etc.) and those who direct the action designed to eradicate this play of forms.’ J. Rancière, Disagreement: politics and philosophy, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, (transl. J. Rose), 1999, p. 87. See also J. Rancière, ‘Post-democracy, politics and philosophy: an interview with Jacques Rancière’, Angelaki, vol. 1, no.3 , 1994, pp. 171–78.


62. On its website the UK Guardian has comments posted about this peculiarly British (and almost endearing but still derisive) term: ‘To clarify, an anorak is a waterproof jacket, typically with a hood, of a kind originally used in polar regions (derived from Greenland Eskimo “anoraq”). These garments found favour with those pursuing outdoor activities, most noticeably “trainspotting” (collecting railroad train numbers) and during the 1980s it became a general derogatory term for an obsessive person with similar unfashionable and largely solitary interests.’, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/notesandqueries/query/0,5753,-19185,00.html>, accessed 1 August 2011.