

Season 3, Episode 9 - Mark Zirnsak

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SPEAKERS

Dr Millie Rooney, Lily Spencer, Mark Zirnsak

Lily Spencer 00:15

Hey reMAKERS, welcome to the podcast. It's Lily here, your host. Very happy to have you, very excited that you are here for a conversation with really one of our favourite people. So, I have Millie back on the pod joining us today and together we are talking to Mark Zirnsak, who is just a gem of a human being. He is a beautifully intelligent, curious, compassionate person who has spent the very vast majority of his career in social justice working on issues, both domestic and international. So let me just tell you a little bit about Mark. He comes to us from the Uniting Church where he is the director of their justice and international mission. His job is to basically find out what matters to the people who are the members of the Uniting Church congregations all over Australia, and then to help focus that energy into effective advocacy work. So he has...he's been on a number of advisory bodies, both to the Commonwealth and State Governments in Victoria. He is the Secretariat for the Tax Justice Network in Australia. He's been in leadership positions on you know, Jubilee 2000, Make Poverty History, the Micah Challenge, he's active in anti-corruption movements. He's got his fingers in a lot of pies, but he's also like really, truly, genuinely steeped in a lot of really big, important issues of our day. And he can connect the dots with a kind of clarity, curiosity and compassion that I think is really rare, and wonderful. So I hope that you love this conversation as much as I did. There are some great gems in here about, kind of, extending our empathy and compassion and curiosity to decision makers. Seeing the bigger picture, as in the kind of hidden systems at work. Why things like just electrifying everything and powering everything with renewable energy actually isn't enough to kind of turn this ship around as a whole - that that actually even if we solved climate change tomorrow, we might have other existential crises waiting in the wings unless we kind of do some deeper transformation work. So he's an interesting person who manages to speak about this stuff in a way that doesn't leave you just feeling daunted or depressed, but actually believing that it's possible. So, I give you Mark Zirnsak.

Lily Spencer 02:53

Mark, welcome to the reMAKERS podcast. It is just absolutely delightful to be here with you. And welcome back, Millie. It has been a minute since we had you here on the pod and I was very pleased that you were able to join us today. So, I feel like this is a real treat to have this

conversation with two of my favourite people in this work and in this space about, kind of, the world that we're working for, and the way that we sustain ourselves on the inside as that happens. So Mark, we've given people a little bit of an introduction to you. But I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you came to be doing this work? Because if I'm not mistaken - so you currently work as a Senior Social Justice Advocate, you work with Uniting Church, you have this really broad local and international focus on a whole range of super important issues. But you started out - you have a PhD is it in chemical engineering? And you started out in the mining industry. So you've been on a journey there. And I would just love it if you could maybe tell us a little bit about how you came to be doing what you're doing now.

M

Mark Zirnsak 03:45

I think, well, the issue for me was going through school, I was very good at maths and science and not so good on humanities. So when you got career advice, and you looked at what careers are available, engineering ended up sort of being sort of where you were channelled or I was channelled into at that time, and I think getting to uni, I started to pick up a...I mean I'd already grown up and growing up through a school, a religious school, Catholic school, in a church that had a fairly strong focus on social justice. So there was, there was kind of a view at that stage that my life path was going to be well, I'm going to sort of do this, you know, math-science based type career, and then in my spare time, I'm going to be able to put some volunteer time into doing social justice. And so I ended up, sort of, going through doing a PhD and by that stage I was heavily involved with groups like Amnesty International and Pax Christi and the international campaign to ban landmines. And I, you know, my engineering career ended up with Rio Tinto working as a Research Engineer, and then, you know, part time - or volunteer, sorry - putting in time with all the civil society organisations. And, but eventually, I sort of, you know, ended up feeling like, well, spending my life, just making a little bit of extra profit for a large multinational company probably wasn't what I wanted to be doing with most of my time. Not that, as an employer they were, you know, if they needed you, they treated you well. It was a good, a good employer from where I sat. I mean, I'm not going to say that's a universal experience for people who've worked for Rio Tinto. And so, but certainly, I had, I didn't have a negative experience with them as an employee. But I did just felt feel there was more that I could be doing with my life and position came up with the Uniting Church that was, uh, about a third of the cut in the salary I was taking at the time. But I felt, well I could make that actually work that, that was going to be enough to absolutely live on. And then I could be spending all my time just doing what I was passionate about, and what I felt a calling to, in that sense, as well.

L

Lily Spencer 03:58

Wow, that's so cool. So had you been...did the kind of religious interest and the sort of humanitarian stuff, had that always been embedded together? Was it...did you want a job within a faith-based structure to sort of use that passion and feel that calling? Was that part of it for you?

M

Mark Zirnsak 06:33

I wasn't, I mean, I did feel that there was certainly an interplay for me between my Christian faith and a sense of social justice. And that had been really strongly emphasised - I think the

Catholic secondary school I went to had a fairly unusual curriculum. So like, year seven, we did, we did a novel about the sort of massacre of First Nations people in Tasmania, you know, and then through the subsequent years, we did a section on how Western colonial powers had sort of stolen the oil from the Middle East and cheated Arab populations out of it. We did, we looked at the Boxer War and how the Western colonial powers basically fought a war so they could push drugs into China. And so this was kind of very much, you know - English, we did a novel, "The Moon is Down", which is a John Steinbeck novel sort of about Nazi occupation of Norway. You know, so you had, throughout the curriculum, it wasn't just you kind of had your RE class, and that was where religion was contained. There was a very strong sense that the faith was influencing the overall curriculum at that school. And I think that really embedded, really helped embed it for me. I think it was reinforced at home as well. I mean, my parents had a fairly strong sense of social justice, as well, but not, not politically active or not engaged in actually pursuing that - "probably more verbalising it rather than actually acting on it as such.

L Lily Spencer 08:03

But yeah, so that that had been an important link. And I think, with the Uniting Church, I was able to find a position where I could pursue that social justice from, from within that faith context. Yeah, it's a fascinating position that you have within the Church. Can you explain that a little bit to people like, what is your role? And how do you help? Like, how do you decide, for example, what the Church is going to be working on so that you don't have 300 congregations working on 300 different social justice issues that they care about?

M Mark Zirnsak 08:31

Yeah, so look, I think one thing about the Uniting Church is it has a very democratic structure. So in actual fact, it's its governing bodies are all elected by the Church members. So there is a kind of election process, which does make a difference to some of the other churches in that sense as well. And therefore, in a way, the staff in the Church are supposed to be there to serve those elected bodies of the membership. So it is very much a service type role. And within that, what we've set up in working on the social justice is, we have a support a base of about four and a half thousand people, both in the Church and outside of it. And annually, we asked them "what do they want to be resourced to work on?" So our role is to focus on: how do we how to resource people be active on the social justice issues they're interested in? But that was pretty important from early on, because otherwise, it either becomes the staff's preference - "so you kind of do what you want to do and that doesn't feel very much like service then to the membership. Or...I did, when I first came in, we weren't, there wasn't a sort of survey and what was happening was you would have people with a particular passion for an issue, and they would try and lobby the head of the Church to sort of get it on the agenda. And no real test whether that was a something else.

M Mark Zirnsak 09:57

So when I first started we had, we only had a supporter base when I started about 327 people, and we surveyed them as to what issues they wanted to be resourced on, that came back with a list of 176 issues they would like to be resolved on. So we had to sort of narrow it down and sort of say, well, you know, there's got to be a threshold there that, that where an issue only

has one or two people interested in it, we just have to direct them. Like, here's the organisation, you know, if you're against duck shooting, and there aren't many people in the Church who might think duck shooting is where they want to put their effort - here's, here's a bunch of organisations who work on duck shooting, right? And that's completely, that's great. It's great that we've got members who want to engage in all sorts of different issues, that's really good. But obviously, with um, with our staff limit, there's a limit to how many issues we can actually meaningfully engage with and help them get involved and resourced on to be involved in.

L

Lily Spencer 10:48

And so what are some of those big issues that have been a themes throughout your career and your work with the Uniting Church?

M

Mark Zirnsak 10:53

It actually has shifted over time. So let me start with the present day. So present day, last few years, the big issues have really stuck with climate change sort of being the top, then justice for First Nations is sort of always been second or third, then people seeking asylum - refugee rights - is there. And then, then more recently, in the last few years, family violence, as has appeared as a high issue. And then modern slavery has been after that. So they're sort of the big five, that, that have sort of caught the Church's attention. But when I started, there was probably a lot more focus on international issues, which is interesting. So there's been quite a shift, there was a much stronger focus on poverty, for example, from church members. And that's really fallen down the level of interest, as well. There was quite a strong interest in gambling reform. And again, that's that sort of, it's still, there's still a level of it. But I think people have come to the point where they feel, you know, the pokies industry has been around for a long time. And it's hard to maintain the, the energy or the the commitment to want to keep pursuing more and more reform in relation to pokies, when there are other issues pressing as well. It's often not that people don't care about certain issues that simply they're asked to prioritise, and they have to prioritise. So, they have limited time as well. So even if they, even if they could ask us and even if we were able to resource 100 issues, the reality would be not, if you remember, could work on 100 issues. So there's, there's a level and helping people be more focused allows for a building of critical mass. So, because I do notice in some other denominations where they don't have any central social justice staff, their congregations might still pick up social justice issues and work on them. But, you know, it'll be, if you've got 150 congregations and they're all working, they're working on 100 issues, then their ability to focus energy on any, to bring about change at any point in time, is somewhat limited. So either they, they then have to hook in with any other civil society organisation, or their efforts may not have the impact that they otherwise could. So, by having a sort of centralised, "let's find out what we're all more interested in, and then let's work together collectively", we can actually have more influence.

D

Dr Millie Rooney 13:25

It's so interesting to me, Mark, one of the things that I've kind of admired about your approach and how you deal with this stuff is that, you know, you can take the global context and the historical context, like, you know, talking about the books you read as a, as a student, I'm really

struck by how that still has impact on you, and how you can put those systems pieces together in quite an unusual way, I think, and quite a powerful way. You know, you talked about the top issues of climate change, First Nations justice, asylum seeker, refugees, etc. You seem to come at it as not just segmented separate issues. But as a, you know, what is the crux of all of these issues? And what, what is it about the structures we have in the systems that kind of hold all of those issues in certain places? How do you...in your work, I feel like from what I've observed, that you are kind of going for that systems change that, that brings it all together? Can you talk us through some of that?

M

Mark Zirnsak 14:24

Look, I think that is really important, looking at the systems issues, and I think that's one of the luxuries I've had in my role with the Church is because I've, because I'm, effectively the members are asking us to work on a range of issues, it means you're not looking just at your own little - not that, sorry, I don't mean to diminish that, I mean, it's great that some people are focused on one issue. And there's a real there's a benefit to that, that you have put a lot of effort into that one issue. The downside though, is that potentially you miss opportunities or you miss the see the links that exist between different issues and I think, I do think the system stuff becomes really important in seeing how things are actually connected and understanding. And the need often, sometimes we're not working on the issues that are actually really foundational to, to, you know, helping other issues go forward. So, for example, we did do work on the Tax Justice Network. Part of that was the view, we needed to see if we could build more government revenue, because with more government revenue, well, then we can fund a whole bunch of things that we want, we can, we can have the space to fund mental health services, we can have the space to find better aged care, we can have the funds to fund better domestic violence support. So no, so it becomes...whereas, sometimes, if you're working just on the one issue, so if I'm working on mental health, then I'm just focused on how do I get more money for me, or for for the issue I care about in terms of mental health, but not thinking about what impact that might have on other important needs within society. So that's an important issue there as well. I think the other one that we've picked up more recently, what we've realised is, even when you, if you fight for the tax justice side, and you get more revenue, unfortunately, if you can a government then who's elected, who decides they're going to do a Stage Three Tax Cuts, and give it all the way to the wealthy, a lot of your effort may not have had the impact that you wished it would have had in that sense. So then it becomes how do we actually improve our democracy? Because I think I am struck by the fact that we do have, we have at the moment, democracies that, where the very wealthy get to skew the system in their favour and get the policy outcomes they want.

M

Mark Zirnsak 16:45

But certainly, on that issue of overall systems I have recently, and it was a book recommended to me by colleagues in Australia reMADE, having looked at Nancy Fraser's Cannibal Capitalism. Now, I think it's a pretty hard read, if I'm honest, because I think she can be fairly polemic at certain points. But I think she does weave together the idea we need to look at the system. And I think that's, I've particularly been struck by that with the environment movement, we get some people in the environment movement who sort of say, "well, climate change is this existential crisis, and therefore, it justifies, basically, we just do whatever is needed to fix the immediate, and we don't think about systemically how we got here." And I think that's going to

be flawed thinking, I think, at the end of the day, if all we do is electrify everything, and we leave the underlying neoliberal economic system unchallenged and in place, then I think we're just waiting for the next crisis to emerge anyway. And there are plenty of them hanging in the wings, whether it's going to be misuse of antibiotics, to the point where in the food industry, where antibiotics don't work anymore, or whether it's going to be a development of an AI. You know, we've got people like Stephen Hawking saying, we need to think about the threats to, that AI might represent, I mean that's, when, you know, when someone of that calibre start saying you need to pay attention here, it's probably worth paying a bit of attention. Or, you know, we've got the the multinational food industry " the estimates are at the moment that by 2035, a quarter of the world's population will be obese, and a quarter will be overweight, and the health impacts, the health costs of that just let alone you know, the loss of quality of life and all that. But if you just wanted to put it into dollar terms, we're talking sort of \$6 trillion worth of health costs by 2035, if we continue on the current trajectory, so there are plenty of other crises. And I think, looking at how those things weave together is really important and recognising you can't just fix one. You know, and I'm very disturbed by the notion that well, we just electrify everything, and we kind of ignore all the human rights abuses that are going on in the system that are going to allow " you know, so solar panels have to be cheap to compete. Okay, so that cheapness is paid through forced labour out of China, and we kind of just turned a blind eye to that. So someone else pays for our getting it cheap, effectively.

L Lily Spencer 19:03

Is that what you were referring to earlier, when you mentioned modern slavery? Was that one of the...

M Mark Zirnsak 19:08

Yeah, sorry, modern slavery is sorry - you get a bit of jargon there probably - modern slavery does refer to, it sort of bundles together what was slavery - so slavery is direct ownership - and then, but we also talked about forced labour where people are compelled to work without the freedom to choose not to. Human trafficking, where basically you are tricked or deceived and moved into a exploitative situation of work. And there's it also, it includes the worst forms of child labour under the Australian definition as well. So, so where children are also being exploited.

L Lily Spencer 19:41

I mean, I think, as Millie was saying, there are relatively few people that I think we encounter, you know, even steeped in the world of social justice advocates and advocates for environmental sustainability and progress and even economic systems change, people who can kind of hold all the pieces, hold all the complexity, hold the pain and the suffering and stay sane and, you know, be, be at it for the long haul. And I'm wondering, if in your ability to sort of do that, one, if you have some wisdom for us, because I definitely want to hear that. But sort of, two, like, do you have distilled for yourself a bit of a vision of what we're aiming for. Like, if what you've identified as the kind of neoliberal - like the money and the politics of the two issues, you know, they kind of drive everything else. Like, we need a healthy democracy, and we need an economy that doesn't model itself off this kind of neoliberal thing that is hurtling us

toward a climate cliff, but as you say, there's 10 other existential crises waiting in the wings, what are the opposite of like a dysfunctional demeanour? And even the money in the politics, obviously, the, the politics is captured by the money. So like, do you have a sense of what is the world that we are aiming for? How is it kind of fundamentally different in a way that would allow all of these issues that we care about to be solved?

M

Mark Zirnsak 21:08

What I would, firstly, I'd probably give a plug for Australia reMADE, because I think, you know, there was a great working together from a whole lot of civil society organisations coming up with a great vision for Australia. I'd probably want to lift that slightly higher and say, "well, we do also need a vision for what a great world looks like." But it is pretty simple, right? We just, it is about, how do we have systems that mean, we treat each other with respect and kindness and empathy? And this is one of the great paradoxes for me, we are, as human beings, we are capable of such great levels of love, empathy, care for one another. And yet, we have ended up with such terrible systems that inflict suffering and pain and people pursuing greed in order to advance their own interests at the expense of other people's basic needs. I don't understand, you know, it's kind of really hard to figure out how did, how did, given you know, given all that goodness that we can be capable of why we've been such bad systems. And I think that also gives me hope, that if we are good, the fact that most of us are good and and people who don't want to harm others will, how do we actually amplify that empathy, so that we redesign our systems to achieve that outcome, where everybody can have a decent life? And I'm not the only, you know, there are plenty of visions out there that people give us hope with, I mean, I can think of Kate Raworth's Donut Economics provides, you know, one example of challenging neoliberalism and sort of suggesting that, you know, we need to find the boundaries between meeting people's needs and the same time not destroying the planet on the way through. And you know, and then you get down to the interpersonal where you start looking at some of the behavioural like, one of my favourite books was - I don't like the title - The War, The War for Kindness, which is by Jamil Zaki. And he's talking about empathy, and he's basically looking at well how do you amplify empathy? And yeah, one of the big barriers is when empathy is easily, most easily done, when you are face to face with somebody, when they're immediate to you. Yeah, and that's not that's not a new concept. Interestingly, Adam Smith, the, who's sort of credited with the founder of modern capitalism, he wrote this sort of essay piece where he sort of says, well, you know, imagine someone, they're sitting at the breakfast table, and they read in the newspaper, that 10 million people have died in an earthquake in China, and they sort of go, "wow, that's a you know, that's tragedy. I feel very sad about that." And then while eating their breakfast they sliced the top of their little finger off, right? And so what are they going to be really focused on? Well, it's gonna be, you know, what they've just done to their finger, right? Because it's immediate, it's felt very close. And that, that, and that lesson, out of empathy is, we're kind of empathy to closeness. So the lesson out of that I probably take is, how do we make the distant closer? How do we actually bring to people's attention, the experience of others to draw out that empathy that they will, they will naturally have. But also Jamil, Jamil Zaki talks about there are ways of also enhancing empathy. Empathy is one of those things, it's like a muscle, the more you use it, the stronger it gets, there isn't a, it's not a, it's not a currency where if you spend it, you're going to run out of it. So, so they're the kind of things that really give me hope, that I really think we are capable of much better and I see lots of signs, both local and international, you know, I can look at stuff we've worked on, like, you know, probably 30 years ago, you can pretty much pay a bribe, companies could pay bribes to foreign officials anywhere in the world, and they could claim them as tax deductions. And that was pretty universal, right? Now, it's pretty much nobody, you know, no where, it doesn't mean

bribes have been eliminated, but they are criminal everywhere. And, and certainly, you know, there's been a lot of progress in eliminating some of that corruption. It's not gone, still, it's still a problem. But, you know, I can say we're making progress in in many areas. And I think that's, that's like really good, as well as the things that still threaten us and the new the new problems we create for ourselves collectively.

L Lily Spencer 25:07

Are there other examples that come to mind of places that we're making progress, because I feel like when we don't hear about the systemic progress, like often the good news at the end of the broadcast is the equivalent of like a cute puppy. And, it's actually really dispiriting, right, because we, you know, we take in so much information about all of the problems of the world, and then the good news story, it just makes you feel like saying, "well, abandon all hope, because this is the best we can come up with", you know. And yet, I think that there are so many wonderful things, you know, the world may feel like, it's getting better and worse at the same time, but we only hear about the worst. And so we have this narrative of doom and gloom, and panic, which is quite understandable, right? And we're also hardwired to, like, you know, take those negative things and hold them really dear, right, to kind of keep our species going. So, you know, what are for you that the other areas, you know, you're just speaking about corruption? Where else are we making progress?

M Mark Zirnsak 26:05

Well, look, I think if you took a longer term view, you'd certainly, probably, I'd start with the ability "if you think about democracy, democracy, ultimately, and ideally, it's a system that ultimately should give every person an equal say, within our society. And if you think about where we came from, the feudal system was basically you were born to a place in society, largely, and whether you were going to be at the top of that society or at the bottom was just by chance of birth. That was quite different, and even the transition, I mean, when, like, England, early 1800s, you still had, voting was based on property, right? So only about 5% of males in England were able to vote in the early 1800s, right? So you have this whole movement emerged - the Charterists - which was basically like a liquid petition saying, well, "voting should be universal, we should have universal suffrage, everyone should get a say", right. So that was an early movement and the, you know, that pro-democracy movement was really crushed by the establishment forces in England, right? It's kind of quite ironic, when you sort of look at some of those sorts of things. 1820, you know, you had you still in France, wealthy people got two votes. That was by law, right. So, so you had you know, you think about some of those acronyms and how far we've moved.

M Mark Zirnsak 27:21

I think, also, if I looked at the status, gender, gender rights, I think I've really, really shifted. Again, maybe not everywhere, but certainly large parts of the world, you've seen significant improvements in those. I can even think about, one of my friends wrote a PhD, he was looking at the veteran, when veterans returned from the First World War, but he was sort of commenting about some that wit as sort of ,this newspaper reporting, or the common view of Melbourne at the time was the noises you would hear at night were the barking of dogs and the

screams of women from the family violence, right. That's how common it was. Or, you know, I can think about an essay, I read on a journal article, looking at the French Revolution, and it was looking at Family Violence in France, late 1700s. And, sort of, family violence was acceptable and talks about this dinner party where this husband is assaulting his wife, beating her in front of the dinner guests. And it's only when he pulls a knife to go and stab her that the other guests intervene. And go, you know, that's too far, right. So, so I think, yeah, there's a lot of, you know, there is a lot of progress made.

M

Mark Zirnsak 27:26

I mean, I talked about modern slavery, but if you thought about slavery itself, that sort of ownership for people. I mean, one, it's pretty much illegal everywhere now. And, two, that direct ownership is probably at a much lower level, than, you know, those those really bleak times. There's still, I mean, I think where we've seen the growing problem in that space is the forced labour issues, and the sort of human trafficking deceptive, exploitative labour. But again, I can look at, you know, I can look across these different areas. And you can see quite a few areas where we'd say society has shifted, often in much better ways.

D

Dr Millie Rooney 29:09

I'm really struck, Mark, again, by your very unusual ability to hold the scale of the problem and to be able to see all those connections, but also to hold the hope and possibility. Like, I think that, that, both this ability to look at the scale that you look at and kind of see the huge opportunity and love and possibility in the same moment that you see the the problems. And, you know, you were talking before about, you know, there's no point us electrifying everything if it comes at the cost that it is currently going to come at. And I had this moment of reaction to you being like panic, like "what do we do then?" And then you continue to talk, and this kind of love and possibility comes through. And so I guess I have a question about, like, how do we bring our panics together and see them as not competing panics, but as, we sort of have a greater opportunity when we address them both. Like how, you know, how would you guide us, a movement, the country, the world? Like, how would you guide us through that challenge of, of moving from seeing this kind of scarcity of solutions to abundance of solutions that fixes multiple problems?

M

Mark Zirnsak 30:34

Look, I, firstly, I'll probably respond by first saying I probably wasn't trying to suggest we don't need to move urgently on climate change. Lamentations is, unfortunately, what my point here is, we're now in such an awful situation on that issue, that we have no alternative but to accept human rights abuses, and violence against other people as a way of solving the problem of climate change. And that's just a horrendous situation to be in, you know, I just, that causes me to such great lament. I can't look at solar panels and feel any feeling of positivity about that, I kind of go, "well, this is a necessary kind of evil at the moment, because we've allowed ourselves to get to this sort of point where we don't have, you know, solutions - although there are - that avoid this. I mean, we could obviously make some decisions that would, you know, we could go for greater energy efficiency over prioritising some of these products made through exploitation. So there are, certainly, we have choices, some of them will be more

expensive, that's the issue. But, I think, at the end of the day, if they're more expensive for us, or if they're cheaper for us, that probably means someone else, somewhere else, somewhere, someone somewhere else has paid for them, I think is the answer on that.

M

Mark Zirnsak 31:44

But going to your question about how do we come together? I think that is really, I think the answer is in that, we actually do need to come together and listen to each other, and actually recognise the connections between the issues we're working on and how they impact on each other. And here, I'll give a shout out to Mark Chenery from Common Cause, I think he's really championed that in Australia in a really positive way, and highlighted the research that actually shows, you know, when we when we get people to act on one sort of social justice issue, that often has a, it often activates them to be concerned about other social justice issues. So we kind of get a mutually reinforcing benefit from doing that. So rather than saying, "well, I need you to only act on my issue, and that's the one that's the most important, to the exclusion of others," I think, if we're open to actually say, "well, when we get people to act on and, and to rethink the world in a positive way, and to be focused on the good of all, then they gotta be activated to do that on a whole bunch of things, not just the one, the one issue." So trying to get people to look more holistically and think about, well, "how do I do, how do I ensure good for not just myself, but for others as well, more broadly, and that we're all better off?" We don't, you know, it's not a zero sum, I think, you know, we don't need to see it as a zero sum game. So I think that communication, being willing to support each other in different issues, and being generous in supporting others is part of the solution to that.

L

Lily Spencer 33:09

You made me think about that in relation to government and how it's like, we're worried that they only have so much political capital to spend. And so right now, at the time of this recording, we're coming up to the big Voice Referendum vote. And I've heard it, you know, talked about in kind of progressive circles, and in this sort of civil society world that the Albanese government is spending all of its political capital on the Voice, it's their one area where they're going big and bold, and if it fails, they're going to be kowtowed with their tail between their legs, until they hopefully get reelected, or maybe they won't. And it's, it's sort of sad to me that we have, that we put these limits on ourselves, because on the one hand, we're always wanting to change everything, we're always seeing, you know, the whole suite of things that need action and progress. But then we come at it from this kind of scarcity mindset of like, "oh my God, but let's be real here. You know, we can only ask for so much. And if the one thing we decide we're gonna go for doesn't work, then we fail at everything." And it's like, wow, we are really not setting ourselves up for success here. You know, like I recently I had someone on the podcast, Sally Hill, who was talking about like, in an email privately to me afterwards, she was like, yeah, "business is really good and an abundance mindset." And the not for profit sector isn't, like we don't have those same resources. We're not looking at the world through the same lens. We're trying to solve problems, not create markets, like it's a whole different kettle of fish, but that sort of scarcity fear-based approach to the world, like I just don't think we're going to birth a beautiful world through that kind of mindset.

M

Mark Zirnsak 34:41

Yeah, I think, I mean, a couple of comments I'd make there is, one, I think they might, you know, we end up perhaps being too focused on what is appearing in mainstream media at times and thinking that's the only thing taking place. Because I think about the current government, they are moving on so many fronts simultaneously, a whole bunch of reform. So, you know, everything from major industrial relations reform going to try and tackle exploitation in the gig economy, gig on demand economy, for example, then moving on anti-bribery laws before the Parliament at the moment, they've done a whole lot just to improve the scheme that brings Pacific Island workers interest rate work on Australian farms and meatworks. A whole lot of improvements taken place in that space. They're working on improvements around family violence and how it relates on people on, you know, temporary visas. So there's all this stuff going on. I mean, the the limitation on government probably is passing laws. There's, there's limits of time in the Senate. So they have to prioritise. And so, for any government, they're always, their legislative agenda is probably the limitation. That is the one thing we all have as finite. Our finitude is we all only have time. Time is the equaliser, right, all of us get, we all get at the same. No matter who we are and where we're from. We all get time, time passes. You might have a slightly longer life, but the number of hours in the day is the same for all of us, right. So there is a finitude within that, but we get the choices about what how we want to prioritise that time. And I would say, this is a government that is doing a whole lot of things, all simultaneously. Some of it's just not in the...

M

Mark Zirnsak 36:16

The other thing that really excites me is civil society is really vibrant. The community is really vibrant. All those issues I talked about, there are groups everywhere working on their little bit of the society, to help make our society better. And often, if you're working on your one issue, you're just not aware that there's a whole lot of people working on all these other things. Even just recently, I suddenly became aware I hadn't come across them before. Someone alerted me to this group, there's a coalition working together called Welcoming Disability, which is trying to remove the current exemption that exists on in the anti-discrimination legislation as it applies to the Immigration Act. So in other words, we're sort of, you know, if you look at state level, you've got state governments producing laws saying ableism is really bad. But when it comes to immigration, well, we go, now, "if you've got a disability, you're not welcome." Where does that fit, right? We have a, we have a cognitive inconsistency on that. I think that, so I think they're onto something, their moment is really strong, because they can point to that complete inconsistency, where internally we're sort of saying, well, we want to treat people with disability with respect and acknowledge the important role they can play in society. Well, that doesn't stack up if you're then saying to someone wanting to come to our country, "sorry, you've got a disability, you're not welcome."

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Lily Spencer 36:16

And is that because they just think that personal costs Medicare too much money?

M

Mark Zirnsak 37:39

Yeah, it's the kind of sense of, and it fits with a sense of the, you know, immigration should be, alright, so I'm gonna let me start with the positive framing, I think immigration should be about a mutuality of us looking at, obviously, we need to think about how are people going to fit into

a mutuality of us looking at, obviously, we need to think about how are people going to fit into our society, and, you know, what, what, what will the impact on our society be. I think that's a valuable, that is a necessary thing to think about to make immigration work, because it's got to work for both. It's not going to work if people here suddenly feel hostile to those who have come, it's also not going to work if it's all about bringing people here so they can be exploited, mistreated, treated with racism, that's that's not going to work either. So it's got to be a mutually beneficial system. But I think for too, for far too long, in Australia, the view sort of at a governmental level, has been that, "well, immigration should simply be about our benefit." So, you know, "migrants should only be allowed in this country, if somehow they bring riches that advance", rather than, you know, what can we do that's going to be mutually beneficial? And we, we are a bit, you know, we're in a bit of two minds about that, because we do, I think many people would acknowledge the benefits multiculturalism has brought to Australia, that sense of rich culture, that ability to learn from different perspectives around the world, I think, you know, a lot of people would value that and introducing us to a whole lot of rich, different sort of cultures across that, so, yeah.

L Lily Spencer 39:06

It's, it's really interesting. I'm of two minds as to where to take this conversation next, because I'm conscious of time. And still, I feel like it's just such a treat - I feel like I'm sitting down in front of somebody who has like, absorbed a library in his big. And I just want to ask you kind of everything. I think while, we're on the topic, a little bit of government and decision-making and what that sort of world looks like - I'm aware that you also sit on a number of advisory bodies, right. And so you advise state and federal governments and you've been in lots of rooms with decision makers pretty close and speaking pretty candidly. And that you have seen up close some of the tensions that are on these leaders to, you know, that what they are aware of, should they make calls that, you know, powerful interests do not like. So when you talk about fixing our democracy and, you know, making sure the, the power of the voices of the wealthy don't sort of drown everybody else out, what do you see from decision makers who, you know, we had a guest on the show who was saying, "look, when the minister looks you in the eye and tells you they, they believe in what you believe in, and they share your values, but they just we can't afford it, and it's not going to happen right now. You know, we just, we'd rather pay for these submarines where the Stage Three Tax Cuts," what they're doing is basically saying that, you know, they're they're kind of lying to you about what they care about. I'm curious, I think you have a slightly different take, and I'm curious if you could maybe expand on that a little bit for us.

M Mark Zirnsak 40:39

Yeah, look I do think, people, I think about myself, like, sometimes you'll, you'll be presented with an idea. And you'll need to think about it for a while, right. And and similarly, you know, for a government minister, they will have a, they have limited time. So they've got to make decisions about what are they going to pursue and what do they want to try and achieve while they're in office. So they are making some of those decisions, so they can't work on every issue. So they're going to have to think about what, in my limited time, what can I and can't I do. So they can't respond to everything. And that it is a question. I think I've found people in politics are often not that different to everybody else, right? So you'll find people can be very complex. Well, they'll have very, you know, they can have a really positive views about some things and, and, you know, really, you know, be really good on some things and not not so good

on others. I can think of people like, you know, and I will talk about probably, because it's more unusual, I guess, from my side, but to talk about, you know, people from the more conservative side of politics. So if you thought about someone like Alan Tudge, a very controversial figure, particularly now. But, you know, he was one of the absolute champions of getting reform around online gambling and the harm that online gambling was caused. And that was because he had a constituent who had been ripped off by an online gambling company, and he connected the empathetically, connected with that person. And he and Nick Xenophon, and he was the champion inside the Liberal Party for absolutely seeking, seeking that reform. So I think, you know, you can hear stories like that I know, you'll hear like, you know, Michaelia Cash, I'm, my understanding is she became very passionate about human trafficking after visiting a place, one of the centres where people have been subjected to human trafficking, you know, are taken - so survivors from human trafficking. So, you know, people, making those empathetic connections can cut across politics, right? So you can do that, you can still make pretty awful decisions at the same time as making as being empathetic and moving on that. So I think there's always a bit of hope that if you can hit the right button, for some people, a lot of people will, can be moved in that space.

M

Mark Zirnsak 43:04

But the constraints they then face is they do need to think about what are the consequences and what are, you know. And there's sometimes the things we say, when we haven't looked at the whole system, then probably an area where that I'd probably say that applies to be it would be people applying on the protection system, right. So a lot of organisations that would work with people seeking asylum, we would see people who have a genuine claim for protection. Having done a lot of work with Pacific Island workers coming in on the scheme that Australia rounds that brings them in on farms, I've seen a lot of migration agents who go out to Pacific Island workers and say, "hey, for 5000 bucks, I'll file a meritless protection claim and get your permanent visa, and I'll take your \$5000." There's no hope that that that's going to be the outcome the worker gets, so they're exploiting those people. So, if you're in the immigration department, you are seeing both legitimate claims, and you're seeing the the negative claims. And I think we need to think about the people in those systems. The danger for them is they become cynical, right? So they start to not be able to recognise the genuine need and the genuine claims because they're seeing people trying to misuse the system or manipulated or those who are facilitators exploiting it. So I think sometimes on our side, too, we need to think about what are those wider implications, what might be the unforeseen circumstances. Another example I can give you, like, I worked on child employment laws in Victoria. We managed to get travel time, included in, you know, there was a limited number of hours if you're a child, you know, you're working the entertainment industry, you're only 10 years old, there's a limited amount of time. And we got travel time included into that, right. So for some of the big performances. And so what we found out what's happening was the show produces would require the family to live in a hotel next to the theatre, so that they wouldn't have to, travel time wouldn't need to be taken into account, right. So you kinda got to think through, you know, when you're designing system and regulation and laws, how enforceable are they? What are they sort of, what might be some of the unintended behaviours, you drive that are undesirable? Right. So that's some of the challenges that people in government face as well.

L

Lily Spencer 45:11

And when it comes to democracy and sort of that influence of money over politics and power,

do you have examples of countries that are just doing this better or getting it right? Because I feel like there's also real fears with, you know, say, the mining industry, being able to spend a lot of money to topple you, as Prime Minister or spend a lot of money to help your opponents. I mean, they don't even necessarily have to actually even donate, they can just threaten to, right. And that's pretty scary for your career. So how do we start to change that system?

M

Mark Zirnsak 45:46

Yeah, look, we have certainly seen, some of the European countries have been able to put further restrictions. You've got countries like Belgium, where corporations can't donate at all. So any individuals can donate into the system, and then it is, it is tightly capped. As such, so you are limiting the influence of money within that system. Now, I think, obviously, there's a balance to be struck there. Because, I think there is a, there's a legitimate issue to say, for the community, potentially, if the community is open to wanting certain people wanting certain ideas, you need to allow people who might present those ideas to run in the election. But I do think the focus here needs to be on the community, those who want to be elected, rather than those who wish to be in power. And I probably say, if you're designing a democratic system, people who should be in tight focus, are the electors, not those who wish to rule. And you design your systems differently when you start thinking around that space. I certainly, Spain has, has started to do better at trying to bring some more public money into the system. And if you're bringing in more public money, and you're restricting private finance, well, then you're starting to rebalance, those, those, those equations.

M

Mark Zirnsak 47:09

I mean, the one that's pretty exciting for me that we've been exploring just recently is the is the study in Seattle. So Seattle's just, you know, one city in the US. And in 2015 it introduced a system where every resident of Seattle, whether you were a citizen - a voting, a person who could vote or not - you were sent four \$25 vouchers that you could give to any candidate in the Seattle election. And that now means that Seattle has now run that four times. And it means Seattle has the largest and most diverse donor base in the whole of the US. And a whole lot of new candidates came into the system as well. So you've had a whole lot of people. And like one person I was looking at, he's an anti-poverty activist, African American, had \$10,000 to his name. And he was able to get up and run he raised over \$100,000 through democracy vouchers for his campaign. And he was the runner up in his district. So we got 47.7% of the votes on the runoff. Out of that first time, first time candidate standing in a local city election, right, which is pretty amazing. And he ran, he ran for the Democratic Socialists of America, which I kind of would have thought if you put "socialist" in front of your name in America, that's gonna make you unelectable. But, but look, Seattle, also at the moment, Republicans don't get elected into the local city council. So the, the sort of most right wing candidates who get to run in Seattle elections are sort of business-focussed Democrats. And you certainly have had, you know, it was previously a candidate elected from Socialist Alternative on the Seattle Council. So I'd say it's an interesting place.

M

Mark Zirnsak 48:50

There are some lessons there, there were, there was, there have certainly been attempts, when there was a proposal to introduce a business tax in Seattle. Because the US system doesn't.

there's a kind of free speech argument that was won at the Supreme Court level, it means there's not an ability to shut out all private money out of the system as such, and if people want to run a campaign outside of giving it to a candidate, they're pretty much free to do that. And as a result of that, there was a 2019 election, there was a proposal to introduce a business tax and as a result of that, Amazon poured in, reportedly, a million dollars into the Seattle local council election to try and influence the election, right. So this is the issue that if you're going to empower ordinary citizens to have a voice and to participate more actively in the system, power doesn't surrender itself easily. Power will cling on and power will fight back. Those who have power find it very hard to give it up. And they will fight back to try and make sure they're not having to surrender it and share it. So that that that unfortunately is something we can expect. It's very hard for people to voluntarily choose to give up their power.

L Lily Spencer 50:00

Well, I'm struggling to voluntarily choose to give up our hour here, but are rapidly coming to an end. And I'm very aware that I've had the privilege of asking most of the questions here. So Millie, is there anything else that you would like to ask before we I start to wrap it up a little bit.

D Dr Millie Rooney 50:17

I know, but I loved your description of sitting here was someone who might have swallowed a library. Because I think there's, you know, this, I'm really fascinated by that idea of public money into democracy. And I just wanted to clarify this when you're talking about the Spain example. And you're talking about putting public money into the system, that this idea of that people have democracy vouchers in Seattle, that's, that's basically about giving anyone who's never even had an opportunity to think about influencing the process beyond the vote a kind of tangible, public money, public voucher to engage in ways, is that what you're talking about that public money in the system?

M Mark Zirnsak 50:58

Yeah, look, absolutely. So those, those vouchers are publicly funded. So there's a, there's a property tax in Seattle that funds the vouchers. So effectively, it is, it is basically saying - you know, because of the argument, and I've heard, certainly heard Labor people say this in Australia publicly, is, well, you know, people's ability to spend money into the electoral system is part of their democratic participation. Well if I'm on, if I'm on JobSeeker, you know, where's my chance to, to engage in that sort of democratic participation? So giving people those vouchers is a way of saying, well, here's and here's an opportunity for you to actively participate within the system, which you otherwise wouldn't have. So, but, as I say, the lesson out of Seattle is giving, allowing those people to have more voice is only going to work is if you say those who have loads of money, can't just swamp the system. So you can't have a mining magnate or another billionaire, turn up and just flood the system with unlimited funds to drown out the voices of the majority. And I think that that is, that is one of the lessons, when you look at the Seattle one, if we're going to allow people more rights to participate, and to meaningfully engage in the system, we're going to need to find ways to ensure that those who have vast wealth can't just drown them out or shut them out of the way.

L**Lily Spencer 52:19**

Well, as we do have to reflect on some of these amazing ideas, I was just wondering if you might be able to kind of help us end on a bit of a philosophical note, or a sort of more internal kind of reflection of like, what sustains you to kind of keep going, how do you, how do you stay awake and engaged and plugged in, in times when a lot of people are saying for our mental health, we should all stop reading the news, and we should just focus on what we can control and, you know, love our families, and spend time in nature and be with our friends. We need advocates, we need fighters, we need people who are aware and in touch with the world's pain and doing something about it. And then we need those people to not go crazy and to also have good lives. And you seem to be somebody with a unique capacity, not exclusively just to you, but a fairly rare capacity to do that over many, many years - decades now. And so I'm curious what you've gathered along the way that sustains you in that that you might be able to pass on?

M**Mark Zirnsak 53:22**

I think, first thing is to actually is to be aware of those signs of hope, to actually look at the good things that have happened and the good things around us and where there is positive progress. And the decency that, to acknowledge that the people are generally pretty decent. I think one of my life lessons was one of my former human resources people I work closely with, he sort of said, "look, when someone's behaving in a certain way, the question you should be asking yourself, 'why would a reasonable rational person behave in that way?'" If you start to think about that, you then you start to explore "well, what is driving them?" Be curious, one of the big lessons here is be curious, why would a person behaving that way? Think about what's going on for them. And often, there is other stuff going on in their life or you might be, you know, that interpersonal level. And that can also be true for people making decisions at a political level or a business level about thinking about why would I make those decisions and how do I get them to rethink doing that. I think the other thing I found really sustaining, got me to really rethink - one of my favourite authors is this guy Adam Grant, who is a Organisational Psychologist. And he kind of highlighted that, when we think about burnout or getting worn out, it actually is different for different people. And he pointed out, for people who - there are certainly you need to find what motivates you and what energises you, and he gave this story about a student teacher in America. She went to a really difficult school students, weren't appreciative. The other staff weren't appreciative. She felt really deflated felt really started really started feeling burnt out. But instead of just taking time off what she did instead was to join up to a teacher mentoring program, where she got to mentor other, other young teachers. And through that, she got to mentor these people and had this massive, positive feedback about the influence she'd had, and the positive. And out of that she felt completely re-energised and was able to go back to the school she was struggling with and actually not suffer burnout at all. So I think and that's not to say, well, you know, the only way to deal with with you know, if you are feeling overwhelmed is to go and throw yourself into something else. I'm not suggesting that, but I'm suggesting figure out what what energises you. And for some people that is going to mean, actually you need to take a break and just, you know, switch off from other things and recharge your batteries in that way. But it's not true for everybody. And for some people, it's going to be: find what really energises, find what you really find meaningful. And that might mean you're just doing something else. And that actually helps you get through. And I think for me, that's probably where I'm a bit at, I feel in my own life is, there's a lot of positive stuff and a lot of interactions, a lot of affirmation even, you know, doing

this interview with the two of you, I feel wow, what a great affirmation I've had from Lily and Millie. So you know, it's, it's been great. And I think, you know, so there are lots of different things that sustain us. That's also great, you know, I find I get a lot of boost out of feeling like I've actually been able to contribute something positive, hopefully to people's lives in their interaction with me. Hopefully, most of the time, people walk away, where I felt like I've at least, you know, I've tried to do something that made their life, maybe that tiny, maybe just a tiny bit better is the option. Not going to be true all the time, you know, I think that's true of all of us. But, you know, that's certainly sustaining.

L Lily Spencer 56:41

Well, look that is beautiful, um, for people who want to find more of your work, and maybe get involved, is there a place that you would recommend some website that they can go look up?

M Mark Zirnsak 56:52

Yeah, sure. So we have, look, we do have a website, which is justact.org.au, is the website where they can find the work we do with, within the United Church. And there's a range of social justice issues there that people might want to connect with.

L Lily Spencer 57:08

Fantastic. Well, we will be linking to that. And we'll be linking to many of the references that you dropped into our chat today. It has been such an absolute pleasure, I could talk to you for three more hours. And I'm sure Millie could too. So thank you so much for for taking the time today. It's been a real pleasure.


M Mark Zirnsak 57:25

Likewise, thank you.

L Lily Spencer 57:41

Well, I don't know about you, but next time, I need to be reminded about how far we've come, I'm going to look back to England and France, and the origins of modern democracy. And, you know, just how much we have expanded, who has a vote and a voice in that time, as well as gender rights and all kinds of remarkable things. I love that Mark has both the kind of inner...he's, he's thought about the inner work and the outer work, and he never stops being curious about either. And so, I have the recommendations and the things that he's listed there for you in your show notes. If you want to go check out the website, justact.org.au, and you can sign up to be part of the campaigns there being run with the Uniting Church. Thank you so much for listening. Thank you for your company. Thank you for your feedback for sharing these episodes for getting in touch with us podcast@AustraliareMADE.org. We really do love

cultivating these conversations and bringing them to you as part of a network and community of people doing wonderful things all around the country and all around the world. So we'll see you next time on the reMAKERS.

 Lily Spencer 59:14

Thanks for listening to the reMAKERS. I'm the host Lily Spencer and I record my part of these conversations on the beautiful Gubbi Gubbi country on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland. Just want to honour the incredible elders of these lands and waters. An Aboriginal culture, 60,000 years, is the oldest continuing civilization on earth. I also want to pay a shout out to our Producer, Anna Wilson, to my colleague and sometimes co-host Dr. Millie Rooney. You can learn more about Australia reMADE and everything we're about over on AustraliareMADE.org And in the meantime, thank you for sharing, thank you for listening and subscribing, sending us your thoughts. We really appreciate all the support that you get the podcast. We'll see you next time over on the reMAKERS.