

Confronting the Climate Threat to Island Existence

Guest Speaker **KAREN-MAE HILL**

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Nik Gowing

Welcome to Talking About Thinking the Unthinkable, our latest leadership conversation and podcast. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. How much do you think about SIDS? SIDS are small island developing states. The very existence of these small states is threatened daily by the dramatic rising waters and intensifying winds created by climate change.

Yes, their very existence. It's not unthinkable. It's the reality the SIDS face. Globally, there are 57 small SID nations and sovereign states grouped into three geographic regions. One of those three regions is the Caribbean. And there, one nation in that Caribbean group is Antigua and Barbuda. Antigua and Barbuda is an archipelago of largely flat islands covering just 140 square kilometers. The highest point is just 400 meters. For the population of around 100,000, this means incredible daily vulnerability, a daily uncertainty which is ever more intense and more frequent.

Well, recently I was at a SIDS conference convened by the Commonwealth of Nations and I was very struck by the vivid, dramatic, passionate picture painted by my guest. She detailed what her nation confronts daily and even confronts hourly, why action is so urgently needed. Karen-Mae Hill is the High Commissioner, that's the ambassador to London for Antigua and Barbuda. Karen, a very warm welcome.

I speak to you because you always describe yourself as this island girl. Paint that picture that Antigua and Barbuda is now facing.

Karen-Mae Hill

Well thank you so much for having me on your podcast Nik and for meeting again to speak to your audiences. Yes I am this island girl. I am the product of a small island developing state smack in the middle of the Caribbean archipelago and as a small island girl I grew up with a lot of nostalgia about what island life was. It was about the oceans, it about the fish, it was about coconut palms swinging the breeze.

It was about all of these idyllic things until 1989 when I experienced my first hurricane, Hurricane Hugo. And I realized then how within a matter of seconds, hours even, an entire country's

trajectory can be transformed. A single event could do so. And that has been an experience that has been repeated now several times for us as Caribbean nations. And Tegan Babuda has experienced, I think, in 20 years at least seven or so major storms, the last one being in 2017, Hurricane Irma. So this island girl recognizes that islandness has its own vulnerabilities, its own idiosyncrasies, because when these hurricanes hit, when these massive climate-pipitated activities take place, we have to rebuild. Rebuilding costs money, costs opportunities, and those have to be resourced. And that's not always easy.

Nik Gowing

Describe the predicament that you and your 100,000 fellow Antigons face every day. Is this something that you live with and think about simply because of the uncertainty, the vulnerability, and potentially the deeply, deeply scarring impact that anything like a hurricane is going to have?

Karen-Mae Hill

Every year, once the month of June rolls in, and we're recording this actually on the first day of June, right down until October thereabouts, I think most Caribbeaners will be thinking about will this be enough for hurricane season?

And will we dodge the bullet in terms of any mega storms? And I use the word mega storm deliberately, Nik, because what we have experienced in the past five to 10 years with these hurricanes is that they're not your normal size storms. In Antigua's case with Irma, I think it was described as being the size of Texas, passing over an island the size of a dot. These are massive storms, the sustained winds are higher than anything we've ever seen before. We're told to man for hour sustained winds and lasting for long periods of time. And so what we're facing is this issue. We're also facing other issues as well.

The warming from things like El Nino has led to the increase of things like seaweed. So I got some seaweed that now proliferates across too many of our waters. And this seaweed, it is thick, it is putrid when it decays, and it has a huge impact on our tourism product, on the quality of life, because the smell of it, the sulfuric smell of it makes it almost impossible to live around it. So we also experience that as well. We also experience the challenge of being in small islands.

So in a world where there's so much geopolitical tension, we're not a military power. We're not even a food security supplier power. We're not even an academic powerhouse in the sense that we're only 100,000 people, as you said. So it's very easy for us, along with other small island developing countries, to be overlooked because our populations do not have the capacity or the heft even combined to sway international attention to us. So we have to make a lot of noise. We have to be very creative around how we keep attention on our issues so that we're not overlooked and we're not forgotten.

Nik Gowing

Do you think that people around the world, and I was at that conference with you and there have been many other gatherings as well, accentuating, highlighting just how profound the threat really is. But the stark reality is that one hurricane can destroy your island and particularly it can destroy your GDP. A single economic event, a single climate event can be absolutely destructive to everything that keeps your islands going.

Karen-Mae Hill

That is the sad reality. You know, I said to people, if they can think back to the COVID-19 pandemic, and I remember saying that to a UK senior minister back then, that for the first time, think the UK could understand and developed countries could understand what it feels like to literally have most of your productive sector shut down in a single event as we experience during COVID. With a hurricane, it's exactly what we experience.

And because we're islands, we can't drive to Manchester because London is destroyed. There's no Manchester. Manchester for us is the ocean. So when a hurricane impacts an island state, for example, it's the whole country that's gone. And so when you're faced with this sort of climatic event repeatedly, it means that in some instances, 100%, 200 % of your GDP is wiped out in a matter of hours.

Now, that has to be juxtaposed with something else that's even more alarming is that the current geopolitical strains means that even developed countries are experiencing budget decisions. They've got to decide how to resource healthcare, how to resource education, how to meet commitments that have been made to wars that are raging around the world.

And these countries cut these things like home-seed development assistance. There's this almost a stigmatization of the need so much happening in their own homes that they need to address. There's that issue. But then there's also the issue of this creep and skepticism that we're seeing around whether climate change is indeed that important, is indeed that detrimental, if it's not a hoax. There are people who question things like cop and they wonder around why are people getting on planes and flying there? Is it real? Is it just a hoax?

For us in Bona Aneleba, it's not a hoax, it's a reality, it's a lived reality. Because we have been at the forefront of receiving these climatic challenges, whether it's the seaweed, whether it's also acidification, whether it's coral reefs being bleached and destroyed. We are living it, we're experiencing it. And then the response to it is a few hours in a new cycle that this country sadly has experienced this massive climatic event or activity.

And then the new cycle moves on and so does the interest. And we're left seeking to rebuild, although we're not the agents involved in global warming. We're not emitting anything that's making any significant impact on any level, how it assesses global warming sort of events. Yet we're left in the situation, sometimes forgotten, I would say, in the conundrum.

Nik Gowing

57 states, just like Antigua of our Buddha, but you are facing sometimes twice a month, not once a year, twice a month, this kind of predicament, hurricanes longer and bigger than they've ever been before, protections being eroded and washed away. Do you feel that the reality is slipping away from your ability to protect and conserve the life for your 100,000 inhabitants?

Karen-Mae Hill

You know, it's a very interesting question that you asked there, Nik, because I also am very keen to paint Small Island Developing States as not just mere victims of fortune, that we have also been at the forefront of innovations in how we can confront these realities. So we've invested, for example, in technologies that help us to build smarter, to build more resilient infrastructure.

So every home in Antigua that gets approved for construction will have to have a system because we suffer from drought because of climate changes. We'll have to have a type of roof structure in place that responds better to hurricanes. I remember when Hurricane Hugo came in 1989, almost 90 % of the homes and buildings on Antigua were affected in some way.

We then discovered that it had to do with how you build things like the roof. If you do a flat roof as opposed to a hip roof. If you reduce the overhang and have it less. If you tie the rafters into steel, into the concrete, so you build a more solid and robust roof. It makes a difference. And lots of people are responding in that way. It costs more, so it affects how much people can do, but it actually, in the long run, helps us to be more resilient against these sorts of climatic events. So there's... There's that in terms of how we are agents of our own engagement.

Nik Gowing

Let me get to the core of this, I can very quickly. Is this about money? Can money buy, if there's enough money funding from the World Bank and from the IMF, if there's enough money, could that in some way mitigate and reduce the threat?

Karen-Mae Hill

The need for more money is a reality. We need to mitigate the threat. If you follow the Bridgestone Initiative, which was an initiative championed by Prime Minister Motley about how we access and repurpose financing to support developing countries, vulnerable countries, that was also augmented by the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS, which was document elaborated at the fourth United Nations SIDS conference in Antigua, and of course the work of the Commonwealth in terms of climate finance access and financial development.

There is on the one hand the need for us to find ways not to invent new money but to repurpose existing money, reset existing partnerships to greater support seeds. But also there is a need to ensure that the education, the commitments that big emitters, whether companies or countries who are involved in affecting our environment remain accountable for their actions, we have to

balance the two and the two and money should not be used to whitewash or greenwash the challenges as much as the money is needed to mitigate the challenges.

Nik Gowing

Do you think those who need to be persuaded really are understanding the predicament of your state, the other 56 states as well, about the very existence that, the threat to existence which you are facing? And I'm not exaggerating there because of the kind of language I've heard you use on platforms.

Karen-Mae Hill

We need to get more actors to believe it and not just turn up and say that they do. And we say actions speak louder than words, and they really do. Companies, if governments around the world believe that SIDS matter, that it does matter for an entire civilizational country to be destroyed, and that they can do something about it by ensuring that the resources are there to mitigate, but also that their actions are being corrected to support the longevity, the sustainability, the resilience of these countries, the two have got to be engaged equally.

So I call for more awareness, for more understanding, for more realism. I ask the politicians, and we have to be fair, that we're seeing a creeping rise in skepticism around the whole climate debate. And we need to sit with these actors, these leaders, these companies, and speak to them and show them the realities that we are facing so that we come to a conclusion.

I don't think that the aim is to condemn them or to call them stupid or to say that they're unfair. It's about education, it's about dialogue. And whenever I speak, I call for that sort of dialogue. For us to have these frank exchanges, we need to understand what we're experiencing and how we can work together to mitigate the challenges of those experiences.

Nik Gowing

Let's go back to the positives that you referred to a few minutes ago, because that's actually very important. One of the critical areas that you had massive problems in is coral. Now, you've got a couple of institutes, big institutes now set up in the Caribbean to try and move this forward. And I've certainly been talking to scientists who said things are beginning to move. We're not quite sure why, but they are beginning to move in the right direction, not on a massive scale, but we can reconstitute these coral reefs. Is that what you're experiencing?

Karen-Mae Hill

Yes, that's what we're seeing as well in Antigua and Barbuda. And agencies like the Centre for Oceanography and the Blue Economy, the ANU Blue, which is a conservancy by private investors but also working alongside government, involved in projects that are looking at ways that we can regrow coral. At one point, Antigua water was covered by Elkhorn corals, and those were diminished by up to 85 % in some instances. And we're now seeing that these corals are reviving, not just because of the work of these conservancies and so on in terms of direct contributions to

them but also because of the education program. Even our hotels have come on board. A lot of our hotels understand the importance of reef safe sunscreens and we speak to our guests about what they put on their bodies when they enter the waters to swim etc that it can have an impact and there more tourists who and it is working.

Nik Gowing

And it really has worked talking to people like that. People don't think when they're putting on creams that actually that's' going to affect what's under the water.

Karen-Mae Hill

Yes, and we are working with our hotel partners to say educate your guests on it. Only bring in products into your hotels that are reef safe and our hotels are responding positively to all of these sorts of interventions and changes.

Nik Gowing

So you've got a new institute for oceanography and the blue economy called COBE. What impact is that having? It's only been going a couple of years, but is that also beginning to change mindsets, changing the science as well?

Karen-Mae Hill

A COBE is poised to be a major player, not just for Antigua and Barbuda, but for the Caribbean nations around informing government policy on how we keep our oceans healthy. So COBE has already started to work on things like how do we deal with and measure sagas and seaweed.

They're partnering with institutions around the world and around the Commonwealth to look at how we can measure what we have in terms of fish stocks, in terms of coral stock in terms of wave energy, terms of pharmaceuticals that can be derived from the oceans, research that is being fed into the policies that government will make.

So, COBE has a huge role to play and we're excited about the fact that COBE will be leading one of the four official side events at the Commonwealth of the Government meeting in Antigua later this year. Because again, it recognizes that we need to keep educating people around this ocean resource that we've taken for granted, I think, in some respects for decades, but it's so fragile, but still so fundamental to our existence and to our well-being.

Nik Gowing

So a very important question here, Karen, which permeates right through all our thinking, the unthinkable work is the changing of mindsets, creating new mind muscle to think differently, faced with the predicaments and the speed at which things are happening and the intensity. Do you reckon even in the tourism business, which is so central to Antigua's economy, that that is happening in a significant way because actually people's lives and economic wealth and future depend on it?

Karen-Mae Hill

You know, it's a tension that small island developing states have to deal with all the time, that we have to balance the need to create jobs, to open new hotels, to increase fishery stocks, to feed people with the need to conserve. And finding that balance can sometimes be challenging. We've done a few things in Antigua that I'm particularly proud of. We have observed some very large marine protected spaces.

We have an island off the coast of Antigua called Redondo and persons can look it up as well. That's now a marine conserving seat, Redondo. There was work done to remove rats and some goats that are involved to live on this rock, like our little rock of Gibraltar, working with local NGO's and working with government agencies and the United Nations and the UN.

We were able to transform this little island into this incredibly beautiful space that before was totally destroyed from the mining of guano, from goats that had evolved and said to live in these rats that were there as well had been trapped and removed and this is now I think a 30 hectare protected space, the largest in the eastern Caribbean.

So we've done work around protecting manual, protecting spaces, developers have to understand and engage in environmental impact assessments before we make approvals for developments and you will have to lose a few trees yes here and there but we will not sacrifice our ecosystem in the name of creating jobs. We find that balance as best we can. Not always easy, but it's something that we seek to do.

Nik Gowing

But I come back to that critical word, mindset, whether it be in the Caribbean or in the city of London or in Frankfurt or in Zurich or wherever people have got money. Are people beginning to change, people with money realizing there's growth potential, there's money to be made from being sustainable and not violating the biodiversity and nature of the planet?

Karen-Mae Hill

I want to say yes with some degree of positivity that there are more and more people who are converts to the importance of this. I'll give a concrete example if I can name a company. I've had the privilege of my prime minister sitting in meetings with Andrew Forrest, the CEO of company called Fortescue Mining. he, enormous company in Australia, and his vessel, the Green Pioneer, which is run fully, think on ethanol, was in Antigua in February and will be in Antigua again during Chug on WeHo.

Nik Gowing

It's an enormous company in Australia.

Karen-Mae Hill

But he has found a way to decarbonize his mining operations and still turn a profit. So there's also the important message that we have to get out to businesses that is possible to be profitable without and still embrace the doctrines of sustainability.

Nik Gowing

And does Andrew's experience with his determination, he's spending an enormous amount of money on it as well, does that convince the waivers, those who are not totally convinced at the moment that actually there's money and there's profit and there's opportunity?

Karen-Mae Hill

I think it can and I think it does. I just this week, our Carrier Common Caucus of High Commissioners met with Greg Jackson, the CEO of Octopus, another company that's doing a lot of work around renewable energy and heating energy. We're seeing these sorts of CEOs step forward and say that it's possible. They are a minority, I think, but they're an important minority. And I think the more that we get people like these to share their experiences, to show the profitability of their investments and their belief in energy efficiency, we can make the case. Because at the end of the day, just be real.

Nik Gowing

And does that work? Sorry to interrupt you. Does that that work with SMEs, small and medium sized enterprises in Antigua on your islands? Do they realize actually it can be done by this enormous company corporation based in Australia so we can do that here now?

Karen-Mae Hill

But you know, thing is that we don't have to make it draconian. There are little things that everybody can do to realize efficiency with energy. It can be collecting the bottles from your company to be part of recycling. So just not using plastics. Do know Antigua Nik was the first country in the Caribbean to completely ban the use of plastic bags and Styrofoam?

In 2017, we completely banned it. There are no plastic bags in Antigua. And if there are, they're there illegally. There are no Styrofoam products in Antigua and we replace them with biodegradable type substitutes. People go to the supermarket now and they always have bags that we recycle made from canvas, whatever it You take your bags, it's normal to the supermarket now in Antigua. People thought when Ray's and I bought it, thought, that's a bit odd, but now it's normal. It's just normal in Antigua and Barbuda. Little things. doesn't happen. And sometimes I think a lot of activists tend to be on the extreme end and I think they sometimes do a disservice to the message that we want to get out to normal people.

You don't want people to think that you're some sort of nut job, who's anti-human, who thinks that we should go back and live in caves and perhaps just eat grass like a cow. We can be realistic about how we incrementally but consistently manage people's understanding, manage those

mindsets and convert people in our story. We talk a lot, to rooms filled with people who are converts to what we already believe, not recognizing that perhaps these converts, as I would like to call them, are not the majority of the man outside of that black cab driver out on the street or that taxi driver in Antigua, that farmer, that person who is operating a speedboat making money from tourists or operating a business.

And we say to them to do things that they know will have an impact on their bottom line. But we can say things that they can actually do that doesn't impact the bottom line but actually expands it and they're also part of the conversation. I want to press the little things, Nik, alongside the big things.

Nik Gowing

Well, Karen, we've got about 90 seconds left. So just let's call this the takeoff moment. What's your message from Antigua, a country, a nation of only 100,000 people, an archipelago, a small island developing state? What's your message about what can be done, providing it's realized?

Karen-Mae Hill

My message is that everybody, every nation, large or small, has a part to play in this global struggle. And we are not going to sit back and take in that we do not wait on others to do what they should do. Despite being small emitters, negligible emitters, if we can even call ourselves emitters of Venus gases, in spite having large oceans filled with sargassum that we didn't have to put there because of global warming, we are doing what we can as a small and developing state.

What we ask each company to do, each CEO who's listening to do, each nation to do, each island state to do, is to do something, however small, however big, that moves this conversation forward in a positive and constructive way. And I think we have demonstrated in our own way, and I think it might be that it is possible to do so, to bring people along with you on this journey.

Nik Gowing

Marvellous, Karen. We don't like to be doomy and gloomy on our podcast. Thank you so much. You can reference every detail that High Commissioner Karen-Mae Hill gave us. That's because a transcript of the podcast will be posted on our website in parallel, along with contact details for us and for Karen, if you want to get in touch with her directly.

Do please share your experiences. Join us when we next have a conversation about Thinking the Unthinkable. Subscribe to our YouTube channel where you'll find our podcasts very much in the same vein of frankness as we've just heard from Karen. So from me and Nik Gowing, until the next time, keep thinking unthinkables. More than ever, it's both possible and it's necessary. From Karen and me, bye bye.