

An open letter to Scott Morrison

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On March 15 the full federal court ruled that the federal environment minister, Sussan Ley does not have a duty of care to protect young people from the climate crisis when assessing fossil fuel developments. The case was brought by teenage activist Anj Sharma, seven other teenagers and an 86 year old nun, Sister Brigid Arthur. This overturned a previous ruling by a single judge that Ley did have a duty of care. This is an open letter written to the Prime Minister by Anj Sharma.



Have you heard of the five-by-five rule? Whenever something gets you down, you're told to ask yourself a series of questions: Will it matter in five hours? Will it matter in five days? Five months? How about five years?

If the answer is no, you don't spend more than five minutes being upset - and then you move on.

Scott Morrison, I'm sure you won't have forgotten the stresses of high school. The five-by-five rule is a mantra of sorts for high schoolers such as me. We're told to remember that friendship drama won't matter in five years. A bad mark won't matter in five years. In five years you won't remember how ugly you looked in this picture or how your crush saw you trip over your heels at that party.

Last Tuesday the full bench of the Federal Court delivered its crushing judgement that our case, which succeeded in establishing that the Environment minister owes children a duty of care to avoid causing us harm from climate change, was overturned on appeal. That day, about an hour after the judgement had been handed down, I was standing with friends on the steps of the Federal Court. We'd just done a heartbreaking press conference, vowing to be back but not even fully convinced ourselves. We had fronted the media and shed many tears.

I had seen one of my lawyers standing alone, a bit to the side, expression blank, and so had wandered over

to talk to her, maybe crack a joke. But as I made eye contact and smiled, going in for a hug, she stopped me and said, "I'm sorry."

I wonder if you can put yourself in her shoes, Mr Morrison. An environmental lawyer, she's passionate and dedicated. She's a beautiful soul. She'd given all she had to this novel common law case. And yet she felt the need to apologise.

Mr Morrison, I wonder at that moment if she had run herself through the five-by-five rule. A duty of care, which she had worked tirelessly to establish, was extinguished in a matter of seconds, as if it never existed in the first place. Will it matter in five hours? Five days? Five months? Five years?

We don't know, of course. No one knows the future. But Mr Morrison, we don't have the time to find out.

I don't know if I've ever felt more shattered than I did at this apology. It felt as if this was everything wrong with the world. Someone with so much love, someone giving her all to fighting for something much bigger than herself, much bigger than you or me, apologising for not winning. While Environment Minister Sussan Ley was promoting her tourism strategy at the Great Barrier Reef, and you were there, exactly? And, more importantly, where was your apology? It shatters me because I wonder why lawyers are blaming themselves for losing a fight you created?

My family's house in India is opposite a settlement of sorts in which many different homeless families live in makeshift tents, constructed from old rags and bedsheets. In some horrible, horrible way, it's an absolutely marvellous innovation.

When I visited India at the age of 11, I made a few friends about the same age who lived in that very settlement. They were always happy and smiling, of course, and delighted in a game of badminton. Whenever the shuttlecock went over a neighbour's fence, they had no hesitation in cheekily jumping the fence. We didn't say it, but I think we all almost enjoyed it more when they were chased out of some neighbour's garden, and we wouldn't be able to stop laughing.

But their breath was so, so wheezy. Every few minutes one of them would burst into a coughing fit. Complaints of chest pain, reports of asthma attacks - these were just part and parcel of life.

Prime Minister, I now realise these were symptoms of living in and among pollution, with no personal protection. I also know that symptoms such as these only get worse, possibly leading to heart attacks, respiratory disease and death.

The children in that settlement have been on the front lines of the climate crisis for their entire lives, and this isn't likely to change. I wonder how different your world view would be if your entire life was within a makeshift tent and a badminton game was peak entertainment.

Can you put your family in their place? Facing a life of cardiovascular disease, respiratory diseases, asthma? Where, at any point, floods or fires or even major winds could destroy everything this life is composed of?

If this were your life, would you still have brought a lump of coal into parliament? After all, don't be afraid, right? Don't be scared?

Would you have requested - allegedly - that climate targets be removed from the Australia-Britain trade deal? After all, our precious economy must be protected at all costs, right? Would you have been proud to lead one of the only countries at the Glasgow talks that failed to sign up to a pledge to phase out coal-fired power? Knowing that these are the people at the mercy of the climate crisis, would you still feel pride at the way you've handled it as our leader?

The emotional climate activist trope has been used to death, but I'm so, so panicked when I think about

my future. I want to look at you and feel a sense of safety, a sense of hope. I want more than just empty words, more than just “politician answers”. I want you to govern as though you are a teenager who has to live with the results of your own governing for decades to come. Because this will matter in five days. It will matter in five years. It will matter in five decades. And as usual, the very people affected will be the last thought on your mind.

Most Australians have never had to sit on their roofs waiting for the SES to rescue them. We’ve never had to take a hose to our own property or heed warnings to pack our belongings and leave our houses behind, lest we get caught up in a climate-related disaster. Increasingly, though, we will.

After the devastating class action result, there were many tears. I’m terrified of the precedent this sets, about how your government might see this as a green light to give even more funding for fossil fuel projects and more approvals for coalmines and gas pipelines. I’m terrified to see the next news headline. I’m terrified because I know what this means for my family in India, and by extension, for us. I’m terrified by what it means for your constituents.

What I’ve learnt in my time advocating for social justice is that life always goes on. I don’t know what you think this whole climate action thing is, but if you were wondering, it’s not a passion project. It’s not an extracurricular activity or community service hours for the résumé. It’s not something to add to the university application. It’s hardly a choice. Rather, it is a responsibility. A responsibility to our families, to our friends, to those who have lost so much at the hands of the climate crisis. It’s a duty.

Climate action is about people’s lives. It’s about being safe. It’s about those who are vulnerable. It’s something you don’t give up easily.

As long as you keep giving us a battle to fight, we will show up every day. Regardless of how much we are knocked back, we will strengthen our resolve and keep going until our vision of safety is more than just a vision - until it is a reality.

This is a promise. One that may be angry, drained and fatigued, but a promise, nonetheless. Don’t forget our names, Mr Morrison. I hope it’s been a good time for you, because when we’re in your seats, I doubt they’ll be as comfy.

Anjali Sharma is an Australian climate activist, who at the age of 16, was the lead litigant in a class action in the Australian Federal Court, against the Federal government, and in particular, the Minister for the Environment, Sussan Ley, for failing to consider the impacts of climate change. Wikipedia