



Why We Should Not Be Surprised That Murdoch Tabloid's Favorite Sydney School Pupil Didn't Join Climate Strike

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Somewhere in the order of 150,000 students went absent from classes in Australia on Friday afternoon for the global “School Strike 4 Climate” marches.

In what might be seen as an afternoon practical lesson in democracy, free speech, and civic engagement, students from cities and towns across the country and the world marched, chanted, and held placards aloft.

One of the biggest marches in Australia saw 25,000 students on the streets of Sydney, the home of the Rupert Murdoch-owned The Daily Telegraph.

But one student in particular caught eye of The Daily Telegraph — a 17-year-old, Year 12 pupil called Joanne Tran, who wrote an article for the newspaper explaining why she would not be marching.

Real Motives?

Australia’s Education Minister Dan Tehan described the march as “appalling political manipulation” and said parents needed to know “who is influencing their kids, what are their real motives and who is paying for it.”

Good advice, no doubt.

In an articulate column, Tran argued her fellow pupils were “perfect political pawns for activists and their agendas” and that the website for the School Strike 4 Climate campaign was being run by “adults who came from partisan backgrounds.”

Tran said she had learned in economics class that coal, iron ore, and gas were essential for the country’s prosperity and her mates would be better off staying in school to learn about “the importance of the mining sector to Australian life and its contribution to the world.” Clearly, her economics class hasn't covered this study in the scientific journal Nature finding that global warming of 2.5°C to 3°C by the end of the century would likely see a drop in per capita economic output of between 15 and 20 percent globally.

So delighted was the newspaper with Tran’s offering, they wrote a news story on the back of it and interviewed her on video. The newspaper’s editorial page wrote that her column was

“essential reading,” saying: “Teachers have successfully implanted in students’ heads the notion that coal — Australia’s greatest export revenue generator — is wicked. It takes a youngster of great clarity of mind to stand against a mass movement based on panic.”

Tran was also interviewed on the Sky News Australia Outsiders program where host Rowan Dean regularly rejects the science of human-caused climate change. The UK-based climate denial group, the Global Warming Policy Foundation, was just as delighted, tweeting the article and describing Tran as “one brave schoolgirl.”

Koch Links

Now, before we go on, far be it from me to discourage a young person from engaging in public discourse. There needs to be more of it, and I honestly hope Joanne Tran keeps going.

But Tran appears to be one of the newest and perhaps unwitting recruits in a formal and organized project rooted in U.S. neoliberal and Republican politics, backed by fossil fuel cash and big business.

All across the coverage in The Daily Telegraph, Tran is described only as a student — and no doubt, she’s a very talented one.

Tran’s own public LinkedIn page says she is also a “Research Associate at the Australian Taxpayers Alliance.” She has also previously described herself as an “active Young Liberal” (which, in Australia, is a conservative party) with a “staunch belief in small government, individual freedom, and free enterprise.”

So what is the Australian Taxpayers’ Alliance (ATA) and what are the roots of its ideas that young Tran has bought into, and that The Daily Telegraph is promoting?

The ATA was launched in 2012 by Tim Andrews who has previously worked in Washington D.C. for the “Cato Institute, Americans for Tax Reform, and as a Koch Associate.”

In the ATA’s 2012 business plan, Andrews’ biography said since 2008 he had lived in D.C. “learning effective advocacy and grassroots mobilization techniques from internationally recognized campaigning leaders.”

The Koch brothers are the petrochemical billionaires who have poured millions into organizations that push climate science denial, defend fossil fuels, and attack policies favorable to renewable energy and electric cars. They are a key strand in a well-studied “climate countermovement” that has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to block action on climate change.

Andrews, the biography said, had also taken part in an intense year-long training program at the Koch Associate Program, which aimed to “train a select group of activists to become more efficient agents for change.”

In other words, to borrow a phrase from Sydney student Tran, Andrews is an “activist with an agenda.”

Andrews and the ATA have been running campaigns to block laws that would put a price on greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate Science Denial

The ATA's board of advisers includes climate science denialist blogger JoNova. Fossil fuel-funded Patrick Michaels, of the U.S based Cato Institute — a think tank co-founded by Charles Koch — is one of ATA's "academic fellows."

The ATA has also been listed as a sponsor of the Heartland Institute's climate conferences — events that attract climate science denial activists around the world.

The views of Nova, Michaels, and the Heartland Institute run counter to every major national science academy in the world.

Tran has also co-authored an opinion article in the conservative The Spectator magazine alongside ATA's policy director Satyajeet Marar. Marar has begun appearing on Australia's Sky News channel — part-owned by Murdoch — and also writes columns for NewsCorp newspapers, including several in The Daily Telegraph.

An ATA report, authored by Marar, has called for Australia to follow President Donald Trump's lead and pull out of the Paris climate agreement. According to his profile in the report, Marar also worked for "Americans for Tax Reform" — a group that claims any proposals to cut greenhouse gas emissions will have "devastating effects" and cause the deaths of millions of people.

Another ATA adviser is Ron Manners, a Perth-based mining figure whose Mannkal Economic Education Foundation runs an internship program for young Australians to spend time at other overseas think tanks, including the chance to "participate in parts of the closely-related Cato Institute intern program."

It is hardly surprising that with friends like the ATA, young Joanne Tran didn't feel compelled to join her schoolmates for a climate strike. I'd just advise her to remain wary of those "activists and their agendas" who are looking for young, articulate recruits.