

Prince Charles: how fashion can help mend the planet

Australian Financial Review Magazine April 2018



Prince Charles at Dumfries House, Scotland, where in 2016 the custodians of the world's wool industry gathered to sign an historic commitment to protect the environment. **John Paul Photography by Marion Hume**

Granted rare access to Prince Charles at home, *The Australian Financial Review Magazine* hears our future king's thoughts on how the fashion industry needs to tackle its greatest challenge: sustainability.

"By the sounds of it, we need to give everything a bit of a kick about," says His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, by way of encouraging those joining him in a committee meeting for the Campaign for Wool, which is taking place around the dining room table at Clarence House, his London home. I'm perched to one side on a Georgian straight-backed chair, eavesdropping and observing the prince at work.

The campaign's lively publicist grabs the ball (of wool, as it were), and jumps in with her news of, "a pop-up store and a shoot for *Wonderland* magazine. And Instagram is going well for us, it's our big channel". This while two butlers, one looking exactly as you are imagining, the other with braids down to her hips, are circling with refreshments.

"Would you like tea, madame?" the male butler whispers to me. He pours from a sizeable teapot into a dainty teacup, this of porcelain by Thomas Goode and featuring a bespoke design inspired by the hedges at Highgrove, the prince's country bolthole. The accompanying shortbread tastes fresh from the royal kitchen. But how to tell, given the fine quality of Duchy Originals, the organic food company HRH founded, straight from the tin?

You'll want the view of the room, which is not at all "stuffy great-aunt", this because Clarence House, for almost 50 years the home of the late Queen Mother, has been renovated extensively. Interior decorator Robert Kime, renowned for balancing his clients' own antiques into schemes that manage to be both stately and snug, has done an impressive job, although he's had good tools to work with, from the old-rose tones of the carpet (Punjabi, I'm told) to an outsized wicker basket piled high with logs. Above the fireplace hangs a breezy portrait of a young Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother by the painter Augustus John, unfinished because sittings came to an

abrupt end with the outbreak of the Blitz. Around the walls are moody studies of wartime Windsor Castle by John Piper.

Birth announcement

I've noticed, as I've walked through the hall, that there's more fine British art out there too. Pride of place in the loo (come on, you'd have nipped in too), is a framed newspaper cutting from November 1948 announcing the birth of Prince Charles Philip Arthur George. The hand wash is formulated in accordance with Soil Association standards.

A word now on how I got through the royal door. Each season, as I plan my fashion stories, I start by asking, "Who is the biggest fashion icon now?" Given sustainability, a dull word for a vital preoccupation, is, at last, so chic, I got to thinking my answer would lie with a pioneer. Someone who had gone organic long before it became an entire aisle in the supermarket. Someone who loved the environment, before the rest of us realised it needed more love than we were giving. "But that's Prince Charles!" I realised.

What's more, who better to feature in the *AFR Magazine's* fashion issue, given Australia has 72 million sheep, than a passionate advocate for wool and other natural fibres? Prince Charles has long suspected that synthetics would impact the environment and made his first speech in support of nature when he had just turned 20. Since then, while we might have sniggered about him for talking to plants while wearing old suits, he's become miraculously Millennial, despite being almost 70. #organic #lovedclotheslast #30Wears.

I'll grant you that choosing a subject, to whom I may one day be a subject, albeit in a radically different context, does add some challenges. But the mantras I adopt are his own: "We can't wait for someone else to do it" and "Just because it's difficult, doesn't mean that it can't be done." What I want is an interview. I soon learn from Googling that the prince has granted precious few of those over the years, although he has given countless speeches (feel free to refresh on his views on genetically modified foods and modern architecture). Thus the request to the palace is for the chance to ask five questions relating to the critical challenges facing global fashion.

Press office 'demands'

Six weeks later, on a Friday afternoon in January, I receive a phone call that begins: "I'm calling from the household of the Prince of Wales". It is offered that my questions be answered by the prince himself in writing and his answers must be quoted in full. I can also shadow him in his work relating to sustainability for as long as I like, and I can write whatever I like, thus making his press office significantly less demanding than some in fashion royalty. When I get to meet those working in the royal household, not one of them looks like Tommy Lascelles or even sports a moustache, perhaps because most of them are women.

Oh, how far did you think I was going to get before mentioning hit Netflix series *The Crown*? As time ticks by waiting for his written replies, I ask for an ETA. "They've been in his box for two weeks. It is a very full box," I'm told. Then suddenly, there they are in my inbox. Perhaps he shuffled the paperwork, a handy trick we see George VI teach his daughter, Elizabeth, in season one. Which brings us to question one: Does the growing wish to know the provenance of one's clothes and what happens to them afterwards chime with your own sartorial habits? And if so, how?



Prince Charles has long been outspoken about the environment – he made his first speech in support of nature when he had just turned 20. **Andrew Lamb**

"It is extraordinary how fashions change," the prince replies, "and, speaking as someone who, on the whole, hates throwing away things without finding another use for them or mending them, I couldn't be more delighted if, at last, there is a growing awareness of the urgent need to get away from the 'throwaway society' and to move towards a more 'circular' type of economy. For instance, I was fascinated to discover recently in Malmö, Sweden, that they have actually established something very much after my own heart in the form of a 'thrift market' – in other words, somewhere you can bring all sorts of clothes, shoes, household goods etc. to be repaired, mended and re-sold, thus providing increasing opportunities for people to establish their own small businesses. In any case, I have always believed in trying to keep as many of my clothes and shoes going for as long as possible (some go back to 1971 and one jacket to 1969!) – through patches and repairs – and in this way I tend to be in fashion once every 25 years ..."

16th royal tour

Feel free to judge for yourself if the "once every 25 years" he refers to is now, because he's in Australia, you may have noticed, representing his mother, the Queen, at the opening of the Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast. On this, his 16th royal tour of Australia, he is probably wearing exactly the same Savile Row suits in superfine merino woven into cloth by Vitale Barberis Canonico in Biella, Italy, that he wore last time and the time before that. He's had the same tailor, John Hitchcock at Anderson & Sheppard, for so long, Hitchcock now comes out of retirement only by royal appointment. The royal tour will carry on to Cairns then to the Northern Territory, which should prove a good test of the Campaign for Wool's claims that the fibre can keep you cool.

Back at the committee meeting, Prince Charles has finished a quick recap of the campaign's beginnings that were initiated, he says, by his "interfering busy-bodding". He makes it clear that, in the eight years since, credit for its success lies with the 19 people gathered in this room, the nucleus of a push to get wool back into fashion. And they have succeeded splendidly. Tom Ford, Thom Browne, Paul Smith, Vivienne Westwood, Victoria Beckham as well as Dion Lee, Akira

Isogawa and Ellery are among those designers who have been persuaded of a softness and drape achieved by technological advances in spinning and weaving. Late last year, wool prices hit a record high.



Prince Charles greeting Campaign for Wool committee members at his London home, Clarence House, in February. **Andrew Lamb**

But there are still pockets of consumer resistance that the prince – or, as he describes himself to those in the room, "someone who has some sheep in Gloucestershire" – is keen to deal with. "Sir, it's all about careability," says the campaign's chief operating officer, perhaps a tad nervously given the word is not in the Queen's English. "It's a word we've invented," he adds. The committee chairman then takes command: "We're going to show that it's washable," he declares, before outlining this year's big plan, which is to set up banks of washing machines in a Central London location and wash wool. "We're going to do stain bombs, common household stains like red wine," the keen young publicist adds. "It seems like we need a careability helpline," offers the one person present who is unlikely to have ever sponged soup off his own suit.

Australian connection

That he genuinely cares about wool leads us to question two: Why might Australians join you in this passion?

"Before I established my Campaign for Wool in 2010, it was clear to me that growers were suffering an unprecedented downward price spiral that could have driven farmers across the UK, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and, crucially, Australia, out of business with unthinkable consequences for rural economies. I wanted to help if I could, albeit in a small way. As the major wool-consuming nations began to emerge from the global financial crisis, it was clear that the time was right to reposition wool as the only real, ecological fibre option in fashion that would give consumers a return on capital invested.



Our exclusive feature on Prince Charles appears in the AFR Magazine's fashion issue, inside The Australian Financial Review on Friday, April 6. **Nadav Kander**

"Wool lasts, and as my campaign has demonstrated on many occasions, at the end of its life, it will biodegrade and enrich the soil in which it is buried. Recent research has shown that it will even biodegrade in sea water. It also has remarkable resistance to fire, unlike man-made synthetic fibres which are highly flammable and made from fossil fuel! Australian wool growers across the nation enthusiastically supported the campaign in cash and in kind, and merino wool is now enjoying an unprecedented global revival, which gives me great pride."

Fashion's preferred position is to be ahead of the curve. Yet Prince Charles was so far ahead when warning about man-made fibres, he was the first "fashion influencer" to use their "platform" to support "conscious clothing". And while he may have only 274,000 followers on Instagram

(@clarencehouse), small in comparison with some style supernovas, he does bring an unparalleled "reach" IRL (in real life). To this most visible advocate, question three: What inspired your support of sustainability and encouraged you to stick with it?

Synthetic triumph

"Well, I have to say that it has most certainly not always been fashionable! In the 1960s and 1970s, oil-based fibres began to replace natural fibres with remarkable speed. This trend continued, very much to the cost of manufacturing in the United Kingdom in particular, which, since the early 19th century, had been using Australian merino for men's and women's wear. Many mills closed, production moved offshore and wool was substituted with polyester and acrylic as price triumphed over any ecological consideration.

"This was the beginning of an environmental catastrophe, in my view, which future generations will pay for if the current trends do not change. I believe consumers are increasingly rediscovering there are genuine alternatives, particularly wool, that may cost a little more, but which last considerably longer. I have been persistent in my belief that natural solutions are readily available, a message which seems to be getting through. But what inspired me to start the process of trying to raise awareness of the importance of sustainability was to witness the wholesale abandonment in the 1960s and 70s of so many tried and tested traditional techniques and approaches. In other words, the baby was thrown out with the bathwater in all directions, with increasingly dire consequences, as we have seen. So I have spent a large proportion of my life trying to bring back the "baby" – and I have stuck with it because I happen to mind deeply about the poisoned legacy we are leaving our children and grandchildren and have been attempting to invest in their futures through reminding people of the urgent need to work in harmony with nature, rather than against her."

By now you will have noticed that HRH does not do "fashion speak". Not for him the snappy soundbites perfected by Kaiser Karl Lagerfeld. There are issues one might debate in the above, including why consumers, principally women, embraced so willingly both fibres which freed them up from household drudgery and offered the thrill of fashion even to those on limited budgets. But let's grab a quick breather instead. Shall we pop downstairs and see Prince Harry?

Unexpected discovery

The next event at which I'm to observe the Prince of Wales in action is at Fishmongers' Hall, the sumptuous seat of a 700-year-old livery company on the Thames. Under the watchful gaze of the golden mermaid and merman who grace the gilded ceiling, I am waiting, along with those from the public sector, the private sector, finance, science and non-government organisations, for a "high level meeting" on the tough subject of "increasing coral resilience", this in the face of the most extensive coral die-off ever recorded.

I figure I'll just nip down a sweeping marble stair to check that *The Australian Financial Review Magazine's* photographer, Andrew Lamb, is in position just inside the main doors to catch a shot of the main attraction in motion. While the distance from Clarence House to London Bridge means the prince is arriving by car today, here's something I learn from shadowing him that I did not expect: he walks to work whenever possible.

Our photographer is there all right, but just past him, through the open doors onto the street, I catch sight of a woman's jaw in the actual act of dropping. She nudges her friend and they giggle as they stare back at me, or actually at the man next to me. Only then do I realise it is Prince Harry, who has turned up, unheralded, simply to learn about today's tough subject. He's waiting down here to say hello to his dad.

Once upstairs, father and son sit side by side while we all hear enough to make you weep for the reef. For more than an hour, experts illuminate how perilously close we are to a tipping point. "And how many times have I said that in speech after speech in recent years?" the Prince of Wales ponders. The correlation with fashion is that while coral can be polished up into gemstones of a glorious gradation of colour from the palest blush to the richest red, no one of good conscience would sell or wear it any more. One of the principal supporters of today's event is Tiffany & Co, which had the wisdom to discontinue all sales of coral back in 2002. Australia's own priceless underwater treasure prompts my fourth question: "Should we be paying the Great Barrier Reef a different kind of attention and why?"

Coral bleaching

"The Great Barrier Reef is not only one of Australia's most important tourist attractions, but also one of the planet's most vital ecosystems," the prince begins. "We must not forget how deeply rooted the Great Barrier Reef is in Australia's rich culture and society. However, with the combined effects of the coral-bleaching events and the increasing ravages of climate change over recent years, and the impact they have had on the reef, we are truly at a crossroads in our ability to protect not only the Great Barrier Reef, but the majority of the world's reefs, and so the decisions taken over the next decade will surely determine their fate.

"I have no doubt in my mind that this will need to be a central aspect of the rapidly emerging concept of a sustainable 'blue economy', through which sustainable economic development is achieved via the wise use of ocean resources. Within the blue economy it would be helpful to think of coral reef ecosystems as natural capital assets, assets that require the kind of prudent and wise management that will yield dividends long into the future.

"This in turn requires scaleable, repeatable and bankable ideas for substantially growing investment that will promote coral reef health and, in particular, their resilience in the face of global warming and ocean warming. This is no simple matter and will need collaboration between governments, financial organisations, businesses, the international development community and non-governmental groups."

Over the weeks from late January and throughout February, the palace is gracious in issuing so many invitations relating to sustainability that the photographer and I, at first thrilled to the tips of our freshly polished shoes, start to wiggle out of those "a bit off-piste for a fashion piece", thereby missing HRH making a rousing speech for the Crop Trust about his rare breed pigs. We also miss a day trip to Yorkshire, due to deadline pressures which are genuine but also a reluctance to be on a train north by 6am. What you come to realise is the schedule is relentless and we are only dipping into sustainable initiatives and, in the form of the Campaign for Wool, just one patronage (he has 399 others). I go online to check the rest of it and, after royal duties and the prince's charities, I reach "promoting and protecting" before feeling the need for another cup of tea or something stronger.

Plastic waste of the fashion business

The toughest talk we attend is on "keeping plastics and their value in the economy and out of the ocean" at the British Academy. Situated within Carlton House Terrace, one of London's grandest and most elegant rows of white stucco classical confection, the academy is a centre for the humanities; its walls are hung with oils celebrating past naval triumphs from back when you could throw a man overboard for insurrection. After His Royal Highness has spoken and others have weighed in, I feel like I'm so deep in the plastic waste of the fashion business that I should jump

overboard, too, in shame. And yet the prince ploughs on, wanting to know about "waste management bodies" and plans to "minimise material leakage".

Planet Fashion, which is largely urban, has only begun to grapple with a convoluted supply chain that might start anywhere from sheep in the outback to those lustrous South Sea pearls that can only thrive north-west in Broome (if water temperatures don't rise). During the royal tour, the prince is visiting pristine places, among them the Daintree Rainforest and (crikey!) a coral cay, accompanied by Terri, Bindi and Robert Irwin. My final question is: "What do you hope to achieve by this? Does the urgency of combating climate change weigh upon you personally and if so, what can you do?"

HRH: "Australia's environment is extraordinarily rich. Unique wildlife and wonderful landscapes provide critical services that underpin the economy and quality of life, as well as being of immeasurable intrinsic value. But here, as in so many parts of the world, the pressures on the environment seem relentless and, as more and more is demanded from our lands and seas, they threaten to undermine the capacity of natural systems to adapt and respond.

Extreme weather

"Australia has one advantage over many countries in that there is a long history of innovation to cope with climate volatility and extreme weather. I suspect, however, that this history of ingenuity and resolve will be tested to the full in the face of longer and more severe heatwaves, increased frequency of bushfire weather and increased intensity of extreme rainfall events.

"As I look ahead I believe there is a newly emerging will to work together to innovate and drive change. Over the years I have done what I can to bring people together within sectors and then between sectors, which is not necessarily as easy as it sounds! This has ranged from helping to catalyse a group of banks under the Banking Environment Initiative, the insurance sector under ClimateWise, while my Accounting for Sustainability Initiative (A4S) has done great work in galvanising the global accounting profession, as well as the financial regulators. In addition, over the last 10 years my International Sustainability Unit has pulled together major coalitions in the forestry, cotton, plastics, sustainable fisheries and the wider blue economy as well as bringing in the finance and insurance sectors into all the solutions that have emerged from that process.

"A transition to a low-carbon economy that would keep us within the two degrees Celsius guardrail is still possible, though a great deal needs to change, and rapidly. Inescapably, the big steps have to be taken by governments and the corporate sector, but everyone has a contribution to make. Above all, we need to transition from our current, unsustainable linear economy towards a 'circular', low-carbon economy which more closely mirrors Nature's own economy where nothing is wasted. Whatever the case, we must act before it is literally too late to rectify and we discover we have actually tested nature to destruction. In this regard, if our planet were a patient, no doctor would ever have let it become as sick as we have made it ..."

At a time when a buzzword in science is "adaptation", fashion may have something special to offer; our business is built on transformation after all. While in the past it is true we have used the style stakes to mock the subject of this story, another thing we excel at changing is our minds. What's Hot/What's Not, Who's In/Who's Out. Say what you like about the Prince of Wales or his future job with the United Kingdom, Australia and his other realms and territories, we in the fashion pack have our eyes on saving the planet. As for our King of Sustainability, for all our sakes, Long May He Reign.