

Canberra Conversations

FROM PROMISE TO ACTION: How will we turn the tide on Canberra's carbon emissions?

ACT Legislative Assembly

Monday 1 August, 6:30 – 9:30pm

Hosted by A Chorus of Women in collaboration with the ANU Climate Change Institute

80 participants (list attached)

Introduction

Canberra Conversations provide an opportunity for Canberra citizens to talk about important issues for the city and beyond in a collaborative environment that provides an alternative to the adversarial debate that we see in politics, the media and much other public discourse. The conversations are based on the principles of dialogue; however, they are not about getting everyone 'to agree'. We have discovered that many disagreements reflect different 'framing' so that both parties can be 'right' within their own frame, which is revealed through careful listening.

We use story and song as part of our conversations to allow the emotional and ethical aspects of a topic to be voiced. These human qualities are of central importance but are not easily brought to the fore in public forums.

Our conversations are run under the Chatham House Rule, which means that we do not report names against comments made. In this summary we report on the key points of view and lines of argument expressed by participants, and conclude with comments on the conversation process itself and ideas for keeping the conversation going.

The topic

Chorus: We are the generation that needs to make a stand

We are the weather makers, the future's in our hands.

Words by Janet Salisbury, music by A Chorus of Women

According to our scientists, to avoid dangerous climate change, atmospheric carbon dioxide must be stabilised this decade and the 'tide turned' from further increases to a rapidly decreasing trajectory.

In response, the ACT Government has pledged to 'turn the tide' on carbon emissions by having its per capita emissions peak in 2013, a mere year away, and then fall by 40% (compared to 1990 levels) by 2020 and 80% by 2050. Meanwhile, the federal government is introducing a price on carbon to reduce Australia's carbon emissions overall. This policy is currently under vigorous and often acrimonious debate ahead of legislation being tabled in parliament shortly.

In this conversation we explored what these ambitious targets and policies mean for us as citizens of Canberra, and what we can do to help turn the tide on dangerous climate change.

The participants

Participants at the event included a broad cross-section of Canberra people, including federal and ACT politicians, members of community and environmental groups, public servants, business people, scientists and other academics, and concerned citizens.

We were joined by Professor Will Steffen of the ANU Climate Change Institute, who is our collaborator for the series. Among others, we were also pleased to welcome Gai Brodtmann MP; Mary Porter MLA; Caroline Le Couteur MLA; Mr Michael Costello, CEO of ActewAGL; Chris Faulks, CEO of the Canberra Business Council; Heather Tomlinson, Environmental and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT Government; and Professor Andrew Blakers, Director of the Centre for Sustainable Energy Systems and the ARC Centre for Solar Energy Systems, ANU; and Dr Glenda Cloughley, Jungian analyst and social ecologist (see full list attached).

Fifteen women from A Chorus of Women provided the voice of citizens in music that commented on and deepened the conversation.

The conversation

Information-sharing interviews and presentations

Informal interviews brought information from different perspectives in the room. We heard about the range of federal and ACT Government initiatives aimed at reducing carbon emissions. Importantly, although a national carbon price will reduce carbon emissions in Canberra, this will only account for a small proportion of the decreases needed to meet ACT Government targets.

From the business perspective, we heard about the opportunities that come from a broader willingness to confront emission reductions, and the benefits of forging new partnerships in this area. For example, the Canberra Business Council and the Conservation Council have worked together to highlight opportunities for light rail in Canberra. The need to bring together many sectors was apparent.

The emissions reduction targets for the ACT cannot be achieved by making changes in one sector alone, and there's a clear recognition that government policies and business strategies alike benefit if they are informed by wise integration across sectors. Part of the 'implementation gap' (the gap between intended and realised emission reductions) can be addressed by better integration to avoid policies in one sector working against emission reductions in another sector. Effective partnerships and cross-sectoral working relationships were identified as an important way to meet this need.

In listening to the different perspectives, the shared willingness to work towards the ACT emission targets was clear. It is an unsettling time and a time of uncertainty, and nobody claims to have all the answers. There was a common recognition that the existing knowledge and technical options offer a number of well-accepted ways to act now and make significant changes. The uncertainty came through in the alternative

ways to assess and interpret the costs of such changes, and currently the biggest barrier to change lies not with the technical aspects, but rather the pathways of social and psychological change processes.

From the human psychology perspective we heard of the parallels between the pattern of effective therapy in times of crisis and the needs of the current situation. In times of crisis or profound change many psychological defences emerge, including denial and rage. A safe, trusted environment enables feelings to evolve into expressions of hurt, loss and lament. Expressions of lament hold the seeds of longing, from which hope and new possibilities emerge. Emotions such as 'hope' cannot be ordered up under instruction; particular environments and modes of interaction between people need to be established to enable such emotions to emerge. The current polarised and adversarial nature of the public climate change arena is not conducive to such healing and helpful psychological processes. The dialogue processes we practice in our Canberra Conversations are intended to foster an environment in which differences of opinion, fears and points of conflict can be voiced safely.

Chorus: We Canberra people know this grief
 Our dreams foretell the future nightmare
 Clashing laws howl in the wind
 Riverbed dust instead of sweet water.
Words and music by Glenda Cloughley

Small group conversations

The story of King Canute tells that this 11th century king stood on the seashore and commanded the tide to stop. Was he deluded by his courtiers' flattery, or was he a wise politician who wanted to show his people that even kings were not above the law of nature?

Participants were invited to talk briefly in small groups about what issues this story raised for them. A strong reaction to the story was to note that Canute displayed rare courage in a politician. He was willing to highlight and draw attention to his limitations and make his fallibility clear to all. Our current electoral environment is not a place that nurtures such leaders. Another reaction to the story was to observe that we can't make a comparable demonstration on climate change. We can point to evidence that makes human-induced climate change 'beyond reasonable doubt' and yet others can still dismiss it.

We invited small groups to discuss the tides that need turning. Here are some of the tides that came from those discussions.

- We cannot change the 'laws of nature' – a tide that we cannot change – but human choices have driven increased emissions and human choices again could change that tide.
- Create environments in which courageous decision-making is supported: a tide of courage.
- Create spaces to enable a more flexible range of psychological responses, and so foster a tide of social change.
- Tides of change working together. Work on building the reinforcing potential when behavioural change and system infrastructure change work together (e.g. changing transport infrastructure to enable a cascade of behavioural responses that in turn support and reinforce useful infrastructure change).

- A tide of imagination. Create opportunities for collective imagination to be put to work on difficult challenges.

We also invited small groups to discuss ways we can share our knowledge.

- Make conscious efforts to develop interdisciplinary skills in our education, training and professional development processes. Such skills make it possible to work effectively across sectors, and those developing these abilities would benefit from being supported and rewarded.
- Foster an adaptive capacity so that individuals are able and confident to swap jobs as opportunities change, rather than a decline in a particular sector being a trigger for traumatic rise in unemployment.

Note: We did not have time for specific reporting back from small group discussions so we would be happy to hear further comments from participants in response to this report. (See below about keeping the conversation going.)

Chorus: We love our children
 For them we must act
 Let's share our knowledge
 To find the right course
Words by Janet Salisbury, music by Honey Nelson

Plenary 'circle' dialogue

The circle dialogue is a chance to bring threads of conversation together and build on one another's contributions to the topic. The following themes were brought out in that process:

- **Challenges and difficulties** were spoken of many times in the conversation. There was a strong sense that we face a shared set of challenges and difficulties; nobody sought to blame or shift all responsibility to a single sector (e.g. government). Workable strategies were identified for contributing usefully in the face of such difficulties.
- **Cost.** Two contrasting perspectives were offered: the cost of switching to renewable energy sources will 'cost big dollars' and we would be wise not to underestimate that cost; contrasted with an alternative view that it is affordable and cost-effective to move the world to 100% renewable sources now, at current prices. The difference in perspective comes from different ways of framing 'cost'. If we look only at the energy sector and energy prices we see substantial energy price increases. If we look globally and use as our baseline the long-term real cost of unchecked 'business as usual', the investment in switching to renewable energy emerges as an affordable option that brings energy security in the face of resource peaks, addresses the need for emission reductions and stimulates new jobs and opportunities (and costs no more than current war expenditure, while bringing many more benefits than war). Both perspectives are needed: one draws attention to the immediate local cost in our own households, while the other looks at the long-term costs and benefits to humanity. We have the opportunity to build bridges that cross these scales and perspectives.
- **Emission reduction — a technical issue, or something deeper?** When technical solutions are offered, some suggest that to focus on the technical is to miss some

more fundamental processes at work: a society that seeks fulfilment through the ever-increasing acquisition of material goods. To frame these perspectives as non-overlapping alternatives was identified as a false dichotomy: sustainability is certainly about more than technical solutions and there are deeper issues to tackle; but equally there are existing, accepted technical solutions for some aspects of the problems facing us, and we are wise to devote effort into both dimensions of the problem.

- **Risk, uncertainty, change and transformation.** The future is uncertain and for many, unsettling. The way in which we frame risks and uncertainty and respond to them shapes the kinds of changes that are possible. The changes being called for require risks to be taken; impacts of change cannot be predicted with certainty and there will be unexpected consequences associated with change. However, currently risks are framed in such a way that ‘business as usual’ is perceived as ‘safe’ when in fact the mounting evidence for the risks and long-term costs of ‘business as usual’ is compelling. So long as ‘business as usual’ is considered safe, in many domains of decision-making it will be easier to ‘fiddle around the edges’ rather than bring about transformation.
- **Leadership.** In response to the King Canute story, there was a desire to see leaders willing to admit to fallibility and exhibit decision-making that is open to learning and change (rather than being cornered into fixed positions). Such leaders can only exist in an electoral environment that recognises and votes for individuals with such traits. Fostering environments in which leaders can express doubt and uncertainty and be supported in taking new risks would enable more transformative change. The potential for each of us to exhibit leadership in our own lives came through very strongly in this conversation. Leadership is complex and reveals itself in unexpected ways, and each of us can lead in our choices and behaviour. We were invited to each think about what it would mean to embrace that opportunity more fully.
- **‘Opportunity’** was an oft-mentioned word, and there was a strong willingness to use the challenges and difficulties ahead to foster new opportunities. Times of change are times of new potential, and that sense was palpable in the conversation. Interestingly, this is consistent with the pattern of emotions presented early in the discussion: from difficulty and loss can spring longing, recognition of potential and hope.
- **‘Partnership’** came up many times for different reasons, and many participants referred to the benefits of linking different interests via partnerships, and the lost opportunities if such partnerships don’t exist. We heard of the satisfaction in being able to shape government policy that combines economic and environmental reform, for example.
- **‘Time’.** While not brought out explicitly, the way in which we incorporate and interpret time considerations came through as significant in many parts of the conversation. The way we assess costs and benefits is very sensitive to the choice of timescale used in our analysis, and we saw clear benefits to forging strategies that better enable short-term and long-term perspectives to work together. The timescales of environmental change and human response were described as ‘requiring a generation’, and yet political and business decision-making struggles

to operate at that timescale. We also heard a longing for greater attention to cross-generational exchange: we're in a position of power to determine our legacy to our descendents, and we can reflect back and learn from the impact of changes imposed on earlier generations (e.g. changes imposed on indigenous people).

- **Work with stewards of resources.** Those currently providing essential services such as electricity, gas, water and raw materials are often the recipient of accusations of pollution and inaction on emission reductions. One participant pointed to the wisdom of working constructively with the current stewards of these resources; they exist because society demands their services at an affordable price, and the responsibility for change rests with all of us.
- **Framing and context matter.** What's 'logical' or 'obvious' depends on the frame of analysis and interpretation. We saw that apparently opposite views on the cost of emission reductions primarily came down to different frames of reference. (e.g. the way we talk about 'costs', what's affordable and what's not – cost of war vs cost of long-term renewable energy options).

Chorus: Gaia, we your people
sing our promise
to turn the tide to harmony
of the mortal law of people and cities
and the immortal law of Earth and Sky.
Words and music by Glenda Cloughley

Reflections on the conversation process

Contributions from those present

An ongoing challenge for Canberra Conversations is to hear from as many people as possible in the room. Although we invite certain people who have particular knowledge or responsibility, we try not to privilege that above other types of knowledge or skills, and to encourage the full range of community values to be expressed. This is very challenging within the three-hours of the event and some people might be disappointed that they have not been able to contribute more. In addition, some people who are more reserved may not be comfortable to speak up and we would welcome suggestions on how to empower everyone to contribute.

Conflict

Our conversations are not intended to avoid conflict, but rather allow the space for differences to co-exist. We'd like to use conversation opportunities to highlight the benefit of allowing such differences; some of our richest insights for participants and Chorus alike have come from moments of tension and conflict within Canberra Conversations.

Preaching to the converted

One comment we hear at nearly every Canberra Conversation is: 'You are preaching to the converted'. Furthermore, this comment is not limited to Canberra Conversations and we hear it in many public forums. It reflects a longing to engage more broadly, to connect meaningfully with those outside our usual circle. We'd like to respond to that longing and build on it.

“You are preaching to the converted” can also carry the implication that our activities will achieve little because we are ‘only talking to ourselves’. However, isolated individuals cannot make the changes we are seeking in response to complex issues and there is so much more we can achieve together than alone. Having guided several of these conversations we know that it is not trivial to work together, and much dialogue is needed – even among those who mostly agree with each other – in order to bring about collective change. It is another false dichotomy: the need to talk to others does not mean we should stop talking to ourselves. Similarly, in earlier conversations we saw that ‘talk versus action’ is a false dichotomy: we need both, and each is more effective if enriched by the other.

Continuing the conversation

Before the conversation we collected many insightful comments from participants (see attached). We therefore know that there was more collective wisdom in the room than was expressed and appreciated in one evening. We would therefore like the conversation to continue. The following directions are promising seeds for continuing the conversation:

1. The different perspectives on the ‘cost’ of switching our stationary energy to renewable sources. Acknowledging that our view of ‘cost’ depends on our frame of reference gives us an opportunity to build bridges between these perspectives and to inform actions that will have broader community trust and support.
2. The experience and issues that are emerging for local groups embarking on emission-reduction projects in the community (e.g. SEE-Change, Canberra Loves 40%).
3. Bringing more attention to what others are doing in their lives to contribute to tackling this issue – the room was filled with people who are actively working on these issues in their professions, their communities and in their personal lives and it would be eye-opening to capture a stronger picture of that.
4. The presence of business leaders, politicians, government policy makers, community activists and citizens together in the conversation showed the possibility of these sectors working together without each being fearful of what the others are doing.

We have already received a number of further comments by email since the conversation and welcome more.

Conversation in the Square

Later this year or early in 2012 (when the weather is warmer), we hope to hold a bigger conversation in Civic Square to build on information gathered and continue the conversation. We hope to see you there with your friends, family and colleagues.

In the meantime, please send your ongoing comments to:

janetsalisbury25@gmail.com

And watch this space for more information on our ‘Conversation in the Square’ event:

<http://www.chorusofwomen.org/whatsnew.htm>

Participants

Janet Salisbury (Facilitator)	A Chorus of Women, SEE-Change
Alan Ford	
Amanda Hirschfeld	
Andrew Blakers	Centre Sustainable Energy Systems, ANU, ARC Centre for Solar Energy Systems, ANU
Andrew Zehnik	
Anni Zehnik	
Angela Giblin	Chorus
Arthur Davies	Electric Vehicle Association, Canberra
Berendina de Ruiter	
Caroline Le Couteur MLA	Greens spokesperson for: Planning, Territory and Municipal Services; Business and Economic Development; Arts and Heritage
Cathrine Keirnan	ACT Government
Cedar Newton	Chorus
Chris Faulks	Canberra Business Council
Christopher Dorman	Sustainable Population Australia
Cindy Eiritz	Healthy Soils Australia, Outcomes Australia, Chorus of Women, SEE Change, Canberra Safe Climate Alliance, climate xchange, LETS, Transition Canberra, Climate Action Canberra, Cooleman Ridge Parkcare, Permablitz ACT, Aboriginal Embassy, Journey of Healing (ACT Branch), Nature and Society Forum
Cordelia Dalton	
David Jones	2011 Canberra International Electric Vehicle Festival, CanberraEV (ACT branch of Australian Electric Vehicle Association)
Debra Grogan	ACT Government
Edwina Robinson	
Emilia Della Torre	Chorus
Felix MacNeill	ACT Greens; North Canberra Community Council, Dickson Precinct Group
Fraser Argue	
Gai Brodtmann MP	Member for Canberra
Genevieve Wauchope	Canberra Environment Centre.
Gerda Mark	Nature and Society Forum
Gill Christie	Chorus
Gillian Helyar	Watson Community Assoc, The Greens, Nature

	and Society Forum
Glenda Cloughley	Chorus, Jungian analyst and social ecologist
Graham Anderson	Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU
Graham Cooke	Canberra Multicultural Committee Forum Australian Institute of International Affairs, ACT Branch
Graham Jackson	
Greg Walpole	Canberra EV (Canberra Electric Vehicles)
Heather Tomlinson	Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT Government
Helen Pilkington	Chorus
Honey Nelson	Chorus
Hugh Saddler	Pitt and Sherry
Jane Spence	
Jodie Pipkorn	Canberra Loves 40%
Johanna McBride	Chorus
John Agnew	
John Warhurst	
Judy Clingan	Chorus
Karin Schulz	Climate Action Canberra
Kate Champion	Chorus
Katie Holbrook	
Keith Helyar	The Greens, Nature and Society Forum, Charles Sturt University Graham Centre for Agricultural Innovation
Kylie Catchpole	ANU Climate Change Institute
Lawrence McIntosh	SEE-Change
Lyn Stephens	Director, ANU Centre for Dialogue Project
Marcus Dawe	GreenMag Group
Marea Fatseas	climateXchange, Inner South SEE-Change, Residents' groups
Mark Spain	Global Learning, SEE-Change, Beyond Zero Emissions, Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream, Transition Towns Canberra, Way of Nature Australia, enACT for the Future
Mary Porter MLA	Deputy Chair of the Assembly Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water; Chair of the Assembly Standing Committee on Planning, Public Works and Territory and Municipal Services SEEChange, Greening Australia, FoTPIN, Ginninderra Catchment Group
Meg Rigby	Chorus

Merilyn Jenkins	Chorus
Michael Costello	ActewAGL
Michael Kirk	
Miles Prosser	Australian Aluminium Council
Nicholas Mayo	Canberra's Sustainable House
Nicky Grigg	Chorus, SEE-Change, CSIRO
Noel Cowell	
Paul Sutton	
Phoebe Howe	Canberra Loves 40%
Prue Watters	
Rae Jacobson	Chorus
Rebecca Horridge	Beyond Zero Emissions and Melbourne University stationary energy plan for Australia Australian Forests and Climate Allianc
Ren Webb	Canberra Loves 40%, SEE-Change
Robyn Craig	Griffith Narrabundah Community Association, Inner South Community Council
Robin Shannon	
Rupert Saville	
Sarah Stitt	ENJO Consultant
Shirley Pipitone	Designing bush
Shobha Varkey	SEE-Change, Quakers
Steve Blume	ACT Government, Solar Energy Association
Sue Hoffmann	Chorus
Val Brown	Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU
Vasiliki Nihlas	Chorus
Walter Jehne	SEE-Change
Will Steffen	ANU Climate Change Institute
Zahira-Madeleine Bullock	Chorus