

Canberra Conversations

Canberra: Celebrating 2010 & imagining 2030

What could be possible when Canberra citizens, business and government work together to co-create a sustainable city?

ACT Legislative Assembly, Civic

Wednesday 1 December 2011, 6–9 pm

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

55 participants (list attached)

Introduction to Canberra Conversations

Our purpose in the Canberra Conversation series is to create opportunities for constructive dialogue on matters of importance to Canberra citizens. The absence of genuine dialogue in political and media forums inspires us to work with dialogue and test its value in tackling complex issues such as sustainable development. It is our hope that in developing a habit of regular dialogue through conversations such as these, Canberrans will benefit from experience in drawing on alternatives to the adversarial modes of debate that are more typical in public consultation and decision-making processes.

The use of story and song throughout our conversations is to allow emotional and ethical aspects to be voiced; it is an acknowledgment that these very human qualities are of central importance, yet are not easily brought to the fore in public forums.

We have deliberately chosen to run Canberra Conversations at the ACT Legislative Assembly because it seems like the right place for a citizen's conversation and the statue of Ethos in Civic square represents the spirit of the Canberra community.

We invoke the Chatham House Rule, which prevents names being reported against comments. 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.

This conversation

This Canberra Conversation, the seventh in our series, came hard on the heels of the ACT Government community consultation initiative — *Canberra 2030: Time to Talk*. Our conversation was designed to build on this initiative. However, the December date for our conversations also prompted us to include a note of celebration by looking at some of what had been achieved in Canberra in 2010, which seemed to us to have been a milestone year in a number of respects.

Overall we hoped to explore what could be possible when Canberra citizens, business and government work together to co-create a sustainable city, while noting that the conversations about this topic often cluster around some apparently polarised, but not mutually exclusive choices:

- a compact, dense city versus urban sprawl
- a biodiversity rich bush capital versus a built environment rich with city and cultural infrastructure
- individual interests versus collective, public good. .

The December date of the event, also prompted the idea that co-creating a sustainable city is a bit like making a Christmas pudding — using many diverse ingredients to create something that is much better than the sum of the parts!

This theme of co-creating through mixing ingredients was used to underpin the structure of the event, which started with ice-breaker small group discussion, followed by a whole group discussion of some of the things that had been happening in Canberra in 2010. After a supper break we continued with ‘World Café’ small group discussions around small tables (<http://www.theworldcafe.com/>). After this session we cleared the tables and returned to a whole group ‘circle’. We invited participants to use a bowl as a talking piece to invoke the metaphor of co-creating (see, for e.g. <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/8-7-2006-104784.asp>).

Of all our Canberra Conversations so far, this one captured the richest diversity of input from participants. For the ‘World Café’ session we provided paper for people to write freely on at their tables. This proved to yield a treasure trove of contributions we could sift through afterwards, so in reflecting back on the Conversation and summarising its contents we no longer relied solely on voices heard in plenary sessions. The final circle discussion using the bowl as a talking piece proved challenging for some of our participants, it also yielded a number of very thoughtful responses.

Participants

As for our previous Canberra conversations, participants at the event included a broad cross-section of people interested in the future of Canberra, including members of community and environmental groups, public servants, business people, scientists and other academics, and concerned citizens.

As usual, we were joined by Professor Will Steffen of the ANU Climate Change Institute, who is our collaborator for the series. We were also pleased to welcome Andrew Cappie-Wood, Chief Executive of the ACT Chief Minister’s Department and a number of other senior ACT public servants whose agencies are closely involved with the future planning of Canberra. A full list of these and other participants is attached. Eleven members of A Chorus of Women provided the voice of citizens in the form of stories and songs during the conversation.

Songs in the city ...

Our opening song for this event reflected our purpose in wanting to hear the voices of Canberra citizens and enable constructive change towards a more environmentally sustainable city.

CHORUS: There are songs in the city in search of singers
 If we make that music now, we can change the climate.
 Chorus of ‘Songs in the City’; words and music by Glenda Cloughley

‘Songs in the city’ was the basis for our ‘ice breaker’ small group discussions with participants asked to consider what (metaphorical) songs had been singing in the city in 2010. Responses from the discussions and other significant activities in Canberra in 2010 that were discussed included:

- **‘The traffic blues’.** Traffic congestion has become more significant in 2010 giving us a hint of what is to come if we don’t act now. As it happened the conversation fell on a day that had seen unprecedented traffic congestion in Canberra due to rain and several car accidents, so traffic featured prominently in the early parts of the discussion.
- **The beauty of Canberra.** Canberra is a lovely place to live and work.
- **Planning and structure.** Infill and higher density have become major issues in Canberra. Planning needs to take account of the ‘charm’ of Canberra, suburbs buildings, water, greenery, individual rights, personal space — to name a few!
- **Canberra 2030: Time to talk.** This initiative involved widespread community consultation on the future of Canberra. People were pleased to have the government listening rather than writing the song. Organisers said it was like conducting a chorus of voices. But not all singing in harmony—some high, some low! However, some ‘harmonious’ themes emerged, which were also consistent across generations. These included the need for higher density as long as it is done well (ie high-quality, sustainable development), not just for development’s sake. A similar process triggered a completely new cycle of activity in Sydney (e.g. more cycle paths). When government and citizens work together to make changes possible, people are more likely to follow with behavioural change.
- **40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.** The ACT Government’s decision to introduce legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Canberra by 40% by 2020 was the cause for considerable celebration. The role of the community initiative ‘Canberra Loves 40%’ in promoting and supporting this decision, was seen as an important victory for the ‘chorus of citizens’. People involved in the campaign were finding it hard to come to terms with ‘big scary global problems’ and sick of global discussions not working out (e.g. Copenhagen). They wanted to do something significant in our patch that would provide exciting possibilities for the rest of the world.
- **School competition.** In 2010, the ACT Planning and Land Authority ran a competition for school children: *Your city, Your Vision for 2030 — Creating a Sustainable Future for Canberra*. Winning entries were published on the ACTPLA website in October 2010. Many of the entries expressed the same themes as the *Time to Talk* participants and the children also showed a great enthusiasm for the use of technological solutions to underpin denser and more sustainable living conditions (such as for waste disposal, recycling and transport). The Office of Sustainability and Environment lent Chorus some posters of the winning entries to put up at the conversation. One particularly striking poster had the caption ‘The future is in our hands’. This echoed a song that Chorus frequently sings that uses the same words to capture the urgency of our current predicament.

CHORUS: We are the generation that needs to take a stand
 We are the weather makers — the future's in our hands.
Chorus from 'We are the Weather Makers'; words by Janet Salisbury (based on the book, The Weather Makers, by Tim Flannery, 2005); music by A Chorus of Women

These discussions also centred around some overarching themes:

- **We're at a tipping point or crossroads.** Not only does the climate science indicate the urgency of our need for change, which was well acknowledged by participants. A sense of urgency came through very clearly in all the discussions. Within Canberra itself there is general agreement that the city has reached some capacities for which it was designed, so now is a sensible time to be make forward-looking changes.
- **Shared recognition of the need to change, and a willingness to do so.** Our sense from all our Canberra Conversations is that Canberra citizens are no longer discussing whether change is needed, but rather there is a strong interest in shaping the nature of those changes. Furthermore, we'd like change in Canberra to be contributing to a constructive global response to sustainability-related issues.

World Café

In our 'world café' sessions participants, in groups of 4 to 6, rotated around small tables and we invited discussion on three questions:

1. Given all that has happened in 2010 and the songs that we are singing in the city, how do you imagine that we can co-create a sustainable city in 2030?
2. Given everything we value and wish for our community, what is it that we could do together that we can't do alone?
3. What do you feel you can contribute at this time?

Here we summarise the range responses to these questions.

How can we co-create a sustainable Canberra?

- Design and plan for multiple objectives, including sustainability, liveability, community, health etc. Build on the connections between these things, rather than address each in isolation: holistic design that recognises interconnections.
- Create constructive partnerships between planners, developers and citizens.
- Foster goodwill, common vision and community.
- Employ principles of cradle-to-grave cycles in production and consumption and follow principles of biosensitive design.
- Use the strength and potential of social networks to enable more cooperative approaches to lowering our ecological footprint. Foster community spaces for cooperative living (shared gardens, cars etc).

What can we do together that we cannot do alone?

- Provide support for one another and learn from each other.
- Help each other find our voice by listening to one another.
- Form and join organisations: these are critical in making change happen.

- Share responsibility across rural/urban, roles and ages.
- Cooperative action
- Dialogue — much discussion about the benefits of dialogue versus adversarial debate. The importance of addressing differences within the dialogue was also stressed; shying away from argument or disagreement stops change.
- Make better decisions
- Address questions around population and common resources.
- Share
- Enable a ‘leader in every chair’ philosophy.
- Collective learning (and enable synergy among interests, not uniformity).
- Reorganise our transport habits: foster appropriate home and work balance (especially around getting kids to school and work on time) and find ways to share these tasks (e.g. walking school buses, childcare, car pooling, local car sharing).
- Reclaim our neighbourhoods: recycle our possessions, street garage sales, create a safe and rich environment for ‘free range’ kids, edible street scapes, over the back fence tours of people’s backyards, vegie growing, chooks, sharing and bartering produce.
- Collective decisions on city-scale infrastructure, such as water supply, sewerage, energy supply.
- Use our votes to put in place the kind of government we want and lobby for political action.

What would you like to contribute?

- Support others who are taking action
- Contribute in ways that aren’t currently recognised or valued by our economic and other reward systems.
- Exercise leadership on these matters in our own sphere (e.g. in our schools, workplaces, organisations and clubs).
- Be a model to inspire others, live by example.
- Express and value the skills/qualities/differences in others. Broaden our beam of compassion.
- Notice who doesn’t take part in the conversation and consider how to include those people.
- Invest something of ourselves into our communities – not be passive recipients/consumers.
- Work together with others in organisations and neighbourhoods.
- Encourage government agencies to have more public meetings (e.g. ACTION buses used to have regular public meetings).
- Help those around us.
- Support farmers markets and other local producers.
- Become more informed and share information with others.

Discussion themes

Across all the sections of the Conversation, including the final circle discussion, the following themes emerged:

- **Changes at individual, community and government levels, with each supporting the other.** Again a common theme across our series of Conversations is that we are not looking only to Government to make change happen, nor are we leaving it up to individuals. Rewarding and lasting change is most likely to occur when actions are mutually supportive across individual, community and government levels rather than at odds with each other.
- **Talk AND action.** In this conversation more than others we heard some frustration and calls for ‘no more talk, we need action’. Where significant changes have occurred, however, it has required both talk AND action (e.g. the recent legislative changes to require greenhouse gas emission reductions in Canberra). Action need not occur at the expense of talk, and ongoing talk AND action is a wise approach that allows ongoing learning and adaptation.
- **A longing for community.** Given the topic was sustainability, the expected topics of transport, water, energy, housing and land-use were discussed. Participants didn’t dwell only on the technical aspects of these topics, however, and themes of community were just as powerful, perhaps more so, than particular technical solutions. This reflects recognition that the changes needed are as much about social creativity and innovation as about technological fixes.
- **Design and planning that accounts for interconnections across issues.** Design and planning were seen to be of paramount importance – we cannot hope that ad hoc reactive decisions will address our need for a sustainable, liveable city. Furthermore, a strong theme to be stressed at many points in the conversation was the need for holistic planning that focuses on the links between sustainability, health, mental health, food, community, housing, liveability and workplaces.
- **Goodwill and dialogue.** The value of listening to citizens before planning also came through clearly. Furthermore, facilitating a dialogue with a spirit of goodwill to discover the collective wisdom and serve the common good is preferable to consultation processes that are run and directed by particular vested interests.

CHORUS: Dear Earth Living Earth
 Will you be our home?
 We need to protect you
 Reconnect with you
 Deep in our bones You are our home.
 From ‘Dear Earth’; words and music by Johanna McBride

Concluding comments

In planning for this Conversation we found the work of Val Brown from Australian National University to be particularly instructive. In her experience five kinds of knowledge need to be brought together for whole-of-community change: individual commitment, community support, specialised advice, organisational resources and holistic purpose. In the past we have heard individuals express the opinion “I can’t contribute anything to the conversation as I don’t know enough information” (and they are usually referring to specialist technical or scientific information). In our Conversations we recognise and emphasise all the kinds of knowledge that Val Brown identifies. This stands in significant contrast to many such public meetings that emphasise specialist knowledge (by placing an expert as the sole speaker, for example) or organisational strategy. We have indeed discovered that welcoming holistic, individual and community knowledge, in addition to contributions from specialist and organisational domains, activates a very different kind of conversation. We are particularly struck by the strength with which the longing for cooperative community activity came through as a key theme, and the diverse list of ways in which participants will make change in their own lives towards these more community-oriented ideals.

Some comments suggested the focus on our own backyard, and on the neighbourhood scale is inadequate (e.g. ‘vegie gardens won’t solve the problem’). For some participants, the scale of the individual and community seems insignificant. Yet the extent to which community, neighbourhood and food gardens came up in the conversations was striking — these themes were raised again and again by different people in response to different questions. There seemed to be a general recognition that action at the local scale is not enough to address the global issues, but equally without it we will be unable to contribute meaningfully to global action.

And finally ...

... twelve ideas for Canberra

In keeping with the Christmas theme, during the course of the evening, members of Chorus gathered up some of the ideas coming through in the discussion and created a version of ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’ to conclude the evening. We invited all participants to sing along:

ALL PARTICIPANTS:

On the first day of Christmas my Canb’ra friends gave me
a jolly good conversation

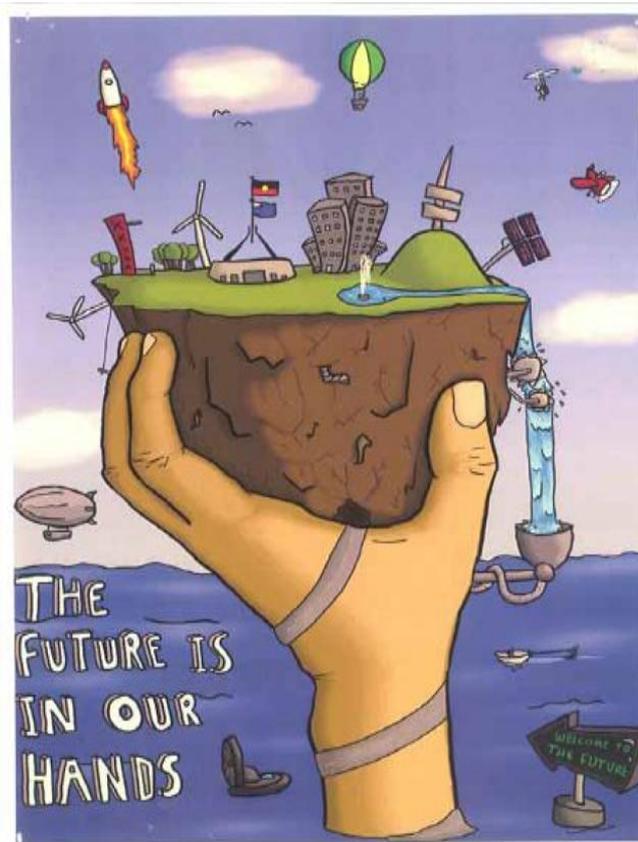
On the second day of Christmas my Canb’ra friends gave me
two children’s visions
and a jolly good conversation

... three street parties ...
... four cyclists’ freeways ...
... *five great ideas* ...
... six songs for changing ...
... seven saving mandates ...

... eight public plum trees ...
... nine known neighbours ...
... ten talks AND actions ...
... eleven local gardens ...
... twelve Sunday buses ...

And a jolly good conversation!

Words by Glenda Cloughley and Sue Hoffmann (A Chorus of Women), based on participants' input.



By Alec van der Velde (Years 11–12 section)

PARTICIPANTS

Facilitator

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Brendan Kennedy	
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