

Canberra Conversations

Finding Wisdom on Climate Change across the Political Divide

ACT Legislative Assembly, Civic

Thursday 4 March 2010, 6-9 pm

Hosted by A Chorus of Women in collaboration with the ANU Climate Change Institute
52 participants (list attached)

Introduction

The topic of our fifth Canberra Conversation was ‘Finding wisdom on climate change across the political divide’. The purpose of the conversation was to focus on *finding wisdom* (as opposed to a technical discussion about the science or economic policies associated with climate change). Given the complex nature of climate science and its policy responses, as well as the spectrum of perspectives, positions and opinions it attracts, we wanted to find out what is happening in our public discourse and what processes might pave the way to wise actions. Dialogue is well suited to such questions because it allows widely opposing views to be expressed and held in the room without requiring agreement on a single ‘right’ interpretation or course of action.

Often we are asked about the intended outcome of the Canberra Conversation series: if we are not requiring agreement or consensus, and not crafting recommendations or ‘action’ items, then what is the ‘outcome’? Our observation is that genuine dialogue is largely absent from political and media discourse on complex topics, and yet dialogue has the potential to characterise complex, incompatible views in a non-adversarial and constructive manner. In hosting these Canberra Conversations it is our intention to offer a working model of dialogue in action on a range of topical issues, and allow participants to judge for themselves its value as a practical alternative to more adversarial modes of discourse.

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.

Our adoption of the Chatham House Rule 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 then comment on the process itself.

We have deliberately chosen to run Canberra Conversations at the Legislative Assembly because it seems like the right place for a citizen’s conversation. At previous conversations we have highlighted the special significance of the statue of Ethos in Civic square. On this occasion Chorus member Glenda Cloughley spoke a few words about Tom Bass, the sculptor of Ethos, who had died the previous Friday, aged 93 years.

*I am Ethos
Though I do not speak with words
I speak to you in other ways
I say to you that
I am the spirit
Of this place ...*

From the poem, ‘*Ethos Speaks*’ by Tom Bass written in 2005 and carved in a bronzed plaque which is set in the pavers near the statue of Ethos.

Participants

Participants at the event included a broad cross-section of people involved in the climate change and/or emissions trading scheme debates either as scientists or other academics, business leaders, economists, writers, members of nongovernment organisations and community groups, public servants or concerned citizens. We also welcomed Shane Rattenbury, Speaker of the ACT Legislative Assembly and ACT Greens spokesperson on climate change. A full list of participants is attached. Twelve members of A Chorus of Women provided the voice of citizens in the form of stories and songs during the conversation.

CHORUS: *We are the people
So many different voices
Citizens' Chorus!
Singing together's a way to change.*
Words and music by Johanna McBride

Finding wisdom on climate change

Ross Garnaut famously said that climate change presents us with a diabolical policy issue. The overarching question for our conversation was therefore: 'Can we turn a 'diabolical policy issue' into an opportunity for wise action?'

To discover something about where to find wisdom, a member of Chorus told the story of King Solomon and the two women who came to him with one dead and one live baby and asked him to resolve their argument about who was the rightful mother of the live baby. After the story, the participants divided into small groups to discuss what the story meant to them and how it related to our current issues for finding wisdom on climate change. Many people highlighted the instinctive altruism of the real mother. Preservation of the baby was a triumph of altruism over self-interest. Likewise, rather than dividing up the Earth's resources, we need to cooperate to protect life on Earth because, at the end of the day, we only have one planet.

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

Discussion themes

After discussion of the Solomon story, the conversation progressed through a number of whole group and break-out sessions over the remainder of the three hours. In the early part of the discussion, a number of participants expressed their anger and frustration towards various players in debates about emissions reduction.

CHORUS *Why don't the leaders fix the problem?
Why don't scientists and engineers?
Why don't our politicians listen to our worries?*
From 'The Gifts of the Furies', words and music by Glenda Cloughley

In later sessions and breakout groups, people approached the issues with an intention to listen respectfully to divergent views, acknowledging the complexity of the issues and the need to

be inclusive of all the perspectives, including the emotional burden as we seek to solve our problems. This shift is discussed in more detail in the section on ‘Dialogue process’, below.

CHORUS: *There's not enough power in kindly hands
Not enough care for mothers and Earth –
The climate is changing O Earth – our children!
Where can we plant the seed of our love?*
From ‘*The Gifts of the Furies*’, words and music by Glenda Cloughley

During the discussions, a number of themes emerged, which are described below.

- **The role of information.** There was a strongly held view by some that the public remains poorly informed: ‘if only they knew’ then wise action would follow. Alternative views were that ignorance need not impede a constructive dialogue, and that knowledge and information alone do not ensure meaningful action will follow. People being ‘entrenched in their corners or ‘locked into single voice positions’ were seen by some as far more significant barriers to wise action than lack of information. The urgency implicit in the facts was deeply distressing to some, however, and they felt that there is no time for such collective learning.
- **Altruism and selfishness.** The current interests of individual nations, companies and individuals are more easily acted upon and met than those of the collective whole, yet the nature of global change problems requires a global and intergenerational perspective. This was seen as a key barrier to implementing wise actions. In politics, for example, the pursuit of short-term political advantage can take priority over making meaningful steps towards a lasting genuine solution.
- **The role of individuals and government in change.** One view was that ‘politicians are not leaders – they will only go as far as the community will let them’; it was a plea for communities to develop skills at collectively recognising what is needed for the common good in the long term and empowering politicians to make those decisions. This perspective was interpreted by some as politicians shifting the responsibility to individuals: ‘don’t look to us, look to yourselves’. Others expressed anger at the focus on individual domestic choices when ‘the real carbon arithmetic lies in the big infrastructural systems’ over which individuals have no influence. Yet others in the room stressed that it is the cumulative sum of our individual decisions that has led to our current emissions-intensive infrastructure, and they wanted to see individuals questioning their own lifestyle decisions more.
- **The art and ethics of negotiating.** The difficulty of letting go of deeply held values and principles for the sake of coming to a negotiated compromise was seen as a key factor affecting the nature of both local and international negotiations on climate change. The negotiating approach each political party took in response to the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) was cited as an example. On the matter of the CPRS there were mixed opinions in the room on whether the ‘right’ thing to do was support a compromised CPRS (and allow for much evolution and ‘learning by doing’) or require a scheme that more faithfully adheres to targets and frameworks necessary to achieve desired emissions abatement.
- **Framing climate change as an ethical issue.** Some suggested the discussion around climate change should be framed around ethics, values and the needs of future generations. An alternative view was that ‘ethics is the worst way to frame it’, as in doing

so risks implicitly labelling people with opposing views as unethical which is intrinsically unhelpful. On climate change in particular, fingers were pointed at ‘the small minority who profit from production and consumption [of emissions intensive products] - they love their children surely, but they have not been convinced of the need to change’.

- **Judging other people’s attitudes and motivations.** In the early stages of the conversation some judgements were expressed regarding the attitudes and motivations of people involved in emissions intensive industries, such as: ‘unwilling to engage’, ‘selfish’, ‘interested in the perpetuation of conflict’, ‘only interested in profit’. This led to some feedback about what it is like to be on the receiving end of such judgements and that this is not conducive to creating the pre-conditions for dialogue. Later, when exploring the possibility that in a sense ‘everyone is right’, and with the benefit of further discussion and clarification, and it was easier to find common ground and start to see the bigger picture.
- **Recognise economic externalities and pay the true cost associated with the carbon emissions of products such as aluminium.** This principle was seen as fundamentally important and found common agreement around the room. The disputes were seen as being in the detail: whether Australia can ‘go first’ and make such changes in isolation (so risking emissions and jobs being shifted offshore) or whether Australia should only enact such change if it is done globally.
- **‘Nothing else matters.’** Some suggested that climate change is such a national and international emergency that it warrants a single issue focus: throw away secondary considerations and make it the primary basis for decision-making. Others wanted to see a broader approach, one that recognises that before climate change was even on the agenda there were strong indications of the need for profound change that addresses fundamental questions of how we choose to live and more fully account for the global consequences of our individual lifestyles.
- **Sources of quality of life.** Some said that both climate change and its remedies jeopardise quality of life: considerations that might lead to deeper questions around what makes for quality to life. Could the potential for intrinsic and non-material sources of meaning and quality in our lives lead to departures from the current focus on extrinsic and material sources, and offer the opportunity for transformation that is not characterised by deprivation and hardship?
- **Examples of global collective action exist.** During the global financial crisis we saw nations act collectively and decisively in the face of great uncertainty. They shared the pain for the sake of a collective outcome.
- **We have a stake in one another.** Suggestions were made about a pathway to an ‘ethical sensibility’ (as meaning something more than ‘ethics’). These included listening with an intention to discover how ‘everyone is right’ and to focus on what we would like to happen rather than complaints about what we don’t want. Our training and social practices focus on deconstruction, rather than listening with appreciation and listening for ‘what is trying to come into being’. This is not about being naively optimistic, but rather sitting with differences of opinion and difficulties. The Ethos poem by Tom Bass expresses this aim.

Many of the discussion points described above included polarised views and the notion that ‘everybody could be right’ was helpful in trying to find common ground. This idea is embodied in the African notion of connectedness, or Ubuntu.

CHORUS: *I am who I am because of you
We are who we are because of each other
Ubuntu!*
Words and music by Johanna McBride

Dialogue process: observations and comments

Chorus members tend to focus on listening rather than speaking during the plenary discussions, so in this section of the report we offer our interpretation of events and inject more of our own observations and comments.

During the course of the evening on some topics we observed a shift away from adversarial language that sought to blame others towards a more constructive dialogue between alternative perspectives. The widespread acknowledgment of a general willingness to pay the ‘true’ cost of emissions-intensive products was an example of this. Note that such *agreement* was not required to have a more constructive conversation, but rather a respectful appreciation of one another’s views and where they differ. The willingness of participants to listen and understand one another, without needing to *agree* was of paramount importance.

In some other areas of discussion we observed clashes of opinion where opponents apparently found it far more difficult to see one another’s arguments in a constructive light. For example, in the discussion on the role of individuals and government it seemed to us that greater clarity on what is meant by ‘individual responsibility’ might have been helpful. For some participants there was frustration that voluntary restraint by individuals is not going to be enough to solve the problem, so change cannot be left to individual action and requires action by global governments. Others were uncomfortable with shifting the focus away from our individual lives, and wanted to see individuals take more responsibility for their own actions. These positions appeared to be in conflict, and yet each can be accommodated without excluding the other. Requesting that individuals recognise their responsibility does not limit the range of actions to only ‘voluntary restraint’ by individuals, and political decision-making does not preclude meaningful engagement by individuals at all levels (from attending to their own domestic emissions to engaging in the international political process).

In cases such as this, and in other points of discussion around the room, we observed the hazards of mishearing. For example, hearing ‘individuals act collectively’ as ‘it’s all up to individual voluntary action’ reflected a missed opportunity for a shared understanding of different aspects of the same problem. Had such shared understanding been reached, it might have opened the conversation to a creative discussion in which participants could imagine what would have to happen for those scales of action (from individual to nation and globe) to work more productively in concert, mutually supporting each other.

Previous conversations, particularly those on transport and energy, focussed more on the technical and technological than the ethical and philosophical. By contrast, the subject of this conversation seemed to generate more willingness to broach topics such as ‘what gives meaning to our lives?’ and for participants to bring their emotions and values into the discussion. We saw participants express more anger, frustration and despair than in previous conversations, but also that participants were well able to hear such feelings and respond

PARTICIPANTS

Facilitator

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