

Women's Climate Congress

Meeting with Neville Power

Chair, National COVID-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC)

25 June, 2020

Present

WCC: Janet Salisbury, Barbara Baikie, Kirsten Anker

NCCC: Neville Power, Kushla Munro (DPMC, Manufacturing WG), DPMC staff member

Introduction

Janet thanked Mr Power for meeting us and briefly introduced the Women's Climate Congress (details of the organisation and bios of those present were included in our brief).

WCC already has a network of hundreds of women in every state and territory across the country and we are rapidly increasing our contacts through liaisons with mainstream women's organisations. Women are frustrated with the roadblocks to action on climate change over the past decade and there is a hunger for new ways to bring people together around common goals. Women are also half the population and are frustrated at being marginalised in decision making about issues of such importance to our future. The next 18 months are crucially important for Australia as well as for the world and the stimulus packages put in place will determine whether we meet the target of the Paris Accord to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees C.

Key issues (from brief)

Value of diversity

Our request:

We are asking that you approach the Prime Minister to increase the number of women members of the NCCC to at least the government's own recommended level of 40%. Although some time has elapsed since the Commission was formed, your work on economic reform is now at a critical stage and it is timely to review who is at the table.

The NCCC executive has six members (4 men, 2 two women), one advisor and 2 department secretaries (all men). This does not meet the government's own target of 40% representation of women on all decision making bodies. Gender imbalance is further exacerbated in the NCCC working groups:

- Manufacturing — 6 men and no women
- Non-government organisations — 5 women and 2 men (with a man as chair)
- Industrial relations — 4 men and 2 women

Total (NCCC executive and working groups): 19 men; 9 women.

We noted that this absence of women means that (1) women's voices, skills and leadership style (per se) will not be at the table; and (2) issues that particularly affect women cannot be addressed in a satisfactory way. This is unacceptable at this critical moment in history when women's jobs have been very severely impacted by COVID-19, and when we should be working together to build a more equitable, sustainable and safer future.

The [Workplace Gender Equality Agency Gender Equity Insights Report 2020](#) released last week found that more women in key decision-making positions delivers better company performance, greater productivity and greater profitability.

We learnt that the NCCC is currently in the process of reviewing their role, how they operate and the overall representation, including women. We discussed some issues around finding women who are able to commit to such an intense process.

WCC comments/follow up

The difficulty in finding women is a very big societal issue and there was not time to discuss this in detail. WCC will send some information on (1) how to level the playing field for women's participation (in general); and (2) some names of women whom they could invite.

NCCC will keep us informed on their progress on redressing the gender balance.

Nurture of life and care for the Earth

Our request:

We are asking that all programs that you recommend have at least two functions: to stimulate the economy AND to work to create a society focused on a safe and secure future for all. This includes ensuring a swift transition to renewable energy and a sustainable and inclusive economy.

We noted that the success of Australia's COVID response falls in large part to the governments' decision to follow the advice of scientists and to collaborate in their response. The same principle could be applied to climate science. We asked what process the NCCC is following to choose programs and prioritise.

We heard that the NCCC agrees in principle with our request above and has been taking expert advice in relation to this from the Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel.

The initial priority of the NCCC is the short-term goal of creating jobs because of the massive unemployment and hardship caused by COVID. The hotel and tourism industries, in particular, have been devastated. Without rapid job creation, there is a risk of becoming a welfare state. As well as passing on a healthy planet, we must avoid passing on a huge debt.

The NCCC is also focused on the longer-term goal of emissions reduction and will look for opportunities to align short-term and long-term goals.

In relation to renewable technologies, we heard that although investment in energy generation is strong, there is little investment for 'firming' (a term for storage). Battery technology is not fully developed. Both battery technology and pumped hydro have long approval timeframes. Hydrogen firming is another 'nascent' industry. Meanwhile, if we don't provide reliable sustainable transitioning, Australian households will be disadvantaged by unreliable and high-cost electricity.

These factors have influenced NCCC to suggest that firming with gas is the quickest transition to renewables that we have at the moment. Australia is on a transition from baseload coal to baseload renewables. How we manage this is the key issue.

Overall, two avenues would allow faster transition to renewables:

- Rally investors. Investors for 'firming' projects can be linked up with investors in generation. People need to support the companies that will bring the technologies that they want to see in the future (ie not just investing for the return).
- Accelerate approvals. It is important to support approvals for renewable projects. It is always a balance of environmental, heritage community and economic values (and between what we want in our backyard and what we want globally).

In the meantime, every state government is committed to zero emissions by 2050. Business groups have also committed to zero by 2050. The issue is how we get there and what is the fastest pathway.

WCC comments/follow up:

We note that Dr Finkel's views contrast other scientists and proposals/projects that have been launched with confidence in the market/investment readiness of renewables. These projects need assurance from government that they can go ahead or else the investments will disappear. We suggest that a broader consultation with scientists/technology experts would resolve this apparent difference and improve public confidence (see below).

The NCCC would welcome information on how to promote investment in energy 'firming' projects. WCC will follow this up with our contacts and provide feedback.

The value of early engagement with people affected by decisions

Our requests:

We are asking that your process for developing policy recommendations for government involves, as well as consulting individually with peak bodies, a process that enables key stakeholders to come together in a collaborative way to find common ground and work together to balance economic, human and planetary considerations. Further, we ask that you recommend to the government that such processes continue into the implementation stage of policies.

We have expertise in this area among our members and would very much like the opportunity to continue the conversation with you about the design of such a process for the Australian context.

Under the current process, NCCC is listening to many different people who speak to them individually and give their differing points of view. This means that different perspectives are not discussed together to find common ground. Instead, issues become highly polarised and people stay in opposing camps (eg renewables versus fossil fuels). This ongoing discord brings significant social and economic costs. We see that there is hunger in communities to move forward differently. COVID has provided a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reset how we work together and NCCC are in a unique position to influence government. We proposed NCCC could approach government to support a different type of process with broader engagement: one which brings people together around these difficult issues.

In development aid – a sector that is used to responding to disasters – it is best practice to consult with communities about what they need (what is not visible from a position outside the community). There is significant advantage in bringing together a broad cross-section of the community. Involving communities also provides motivation to create employment and encourage investment. This shifts the burden of fear and pessimism because people feel they have control over their future.

We heard that the NCCC will be trialling 2 roundtables in northern Australia – for housing construction and tourism.

We agreed that to find collaborative solutions on emissions reduction, we need to build on what inspires us, including the renewable technology advances of the past 30 years. For example, no-one in Australia is investing in new coal-fired power stations (a proposal in northern Queensland is not going ahead and NCCC knows of no other applications). COVID gives us a further opportunity to reset.

Some businesses are already trialling innovative ways to generate and store energy for their own business use. Such activities could set benchmarks and inform creative solutions. A roundtable approach could help with that.

WCC comments/follow up:

We asked if we could have more information about the process that would be followed for the northern Australian roundtables (including the outcomes). WCC could help to develop a broader engagement process designed to bring people together around common ground and a vision for a safe and equitable future of all.

Follow up

Mr Power invited us to send further specific information about any of the topics we had discussed.

WCC will follow up in the following areas:

- *Women's representation* — recommend names of women for the vacancy on the NCCC and to increase women's representation across working groups. We could recommend people from our own contacts, or contact an organisation that may have more knowledge of who is available.
- *Renewable energy uptake* — pass on the invitation to send details of renewable energy storage (firming) projects to other organisations in our networks, such as BZE,
- *Broader 'roundtable' engagement* — develop a process for broader engagement to encourage adoption by policy makers. Follow up with NCCC about roundtables in northern Australia.

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FURTHER INFORMATION: <https://womenscongress.weebly.com/>