



Celebrating the women's climate congress Annual General Meeting, 28 October 2021

Introduction to the Women's Climate Congress

by Janet Salisbury

*I'll bring drought and fire under filthy skies
I'll scorch the farmland and torch the forest
I'll raise the ocean, drown the cities
I'll spare no human being!*

So said The Furies of Earth in [The Gifts of the Furies](#) — my friend Dr Glenda Cloughley's marvellous choral and dramatic adaptation of Aeschelus's famous play – the Eumenides. This play is one of the many teaching stories from ancient Greece about how to live in right relations with the Earth. In Greek mythology, the Furies are the most ancient female spirits of the Earth who avenge wrongdoings against mothers and the Earth.

In January 2020, with the Black Summer bushfires raging, and choking smoke all around, the Furies words seemed awfully real.

But, after more than a decade of bitter debate, our government was divided, seemingly unable to move the policy dial enough to create a nationally agreed plan to address climate risks.

But I know that government is a really complicated business – with lots of different voices to balance inside the House, not to mention pressures from lobbyists, and it is hard. And I certainly do not profess to know all the answers – but I *am* sure that the climate scientists know what they are talking about and that we need to work together to solve the problem.

It was time for action. I distributed a [discussion paper](#) that I had been working on for a while about how women could lead an initiative to bring the polarised political positions together so that we could collaborate to transition our economy and lifestyles to a sustainable, regenerative future before we are overwhelmed by climate change.

And apologies for those who have heard this before, but I need to say that I was inspired by Julia Grace Wales, a 33-year-old English scholar at the University of Wisconsin. In 1915 she published a plan to end WW1 called *Continuous Mediation without Armistice*. She proposed that, without attributing blame to either side, the neutral nations should form an independent conference to mediate between the warring countries. This was, according to Julia Grace, 'the natural thing to do'.

In April 1915, Julia Grace made the Atlantic crossing to The Hague with the American delegation to the International Congress of Women at The Hague. At this largely forgotten congress, the only international peace congress of the War 1300 women delegates from 12 warring and neutral countries passed 20 insightful resolutions that identified conditions for permanent peace, and they adopted Julia Grace's plan as their proposal to end the war. Envoys from the congress took the resolutions and peace plan to heads of government across Europe and the US. These men showed interest in this 'most sensible plan', but it was never implemented. The war continued and killed 40 million people.

My paper was based on two important ideas.

A mediated process to develop a national plan for action on climate change

The first is that we need a way for political parties and aligned groups of citizens, who are currently thinking in polarised ways, to come together in a national process – a 'thinking organ' – that could offer the opposing forces an opportunity to stop arguing, listen and collaborate to resolve this very difficult issue without renouncing their overall convictions. In Australia, we have all benefited from the industrial economy. So can we put our blame for how we got here to one side and work together to secure a safe future for all? We need a process some sort of 'wisdom council' to mediate the different perspectives and develop a national plan that meets the scientific criteria for a safe future while looking after those most affected by the changes.

A time for women to lead

The second idea is that it is the time for women to take a lead. Our governance systems were designed and inhabited solely by men for generations so our policy frameworks, economics, business management, leadership criteria and much else are the product of a male lens which tends towards combative leadership, technology, extraction and survival, and places caring, regeneration and nurture of life outside of the main policy arena. And although women are now participating in increasing numbers – they are 'fitting in' to these systems. This is not to say that men are wrong per se or that women have all the answers – but things are way out of balance. It is timely for a new women's movement to build out authority to finish the job. The suffrage movement called for votes for women, the women's liberation movement called for equal rights and representation. We call for a structural rebalance in the systems themselves. We are done with 'fitting in'. it is time for autonomy, respect and for safety.

So, on 20 January 2020, amidst a scene of shredded trees and smashed cars caused by a massive hailstorm in Canberra, 32 women arrived at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture hoping that women's voices and leadership, collaborating beyond partisan positions, could show the way to address climate change and focus on nurturing life on Earth for future generations.

Jenny Robinson, one of our founding members, was looking after the registration desk. Afterwards, she wrote:

Women arrived, slowly then more quickly.
Many arrived close to the start time. Hiatus.
Unable to move from the table.
Preoccupied with the trashed and shredded trees. Overwhelmed.
Car parks full of cars, all scarred by hail.
A late start. Polite listening. Sensing gradual grounding. Deeper listening.
Then A Chorus of Women sang 'Dear Earth'.
Participants were transcended to that place, far from where they were minutes before.
Now connected to the ground, to the Chorus women and to each other, they were ready.

We had answered nature's call –and the rest is history. We formed the Women's Climate Congress. We developed a vision statement to achieve climate balance by 2030. And we wrote a set of values and commitments that expressed, in the most heartfelt language we could muster, the cultural change that women long for. We refer to these values often and you will see them reflected throughout our annual report that Lyn will speak about in a minute.

We set about creating a network of women across the country who related to our principles. COVID played into our hands sending us onto Zoom and talking to women across the country. We set a goal to have members in every electorate so that we could talk to MPs and promote our principle of collaborative action. We currently have about 350 members spread over at least 90 electorates and we have met somewhere approaching 30 MPs/Senators or their advisers.

We have developed a more formalised plan for a mediated stakeholder roundtable process which we promote in our meetings with MPs and others. And we have also promoted the idea of a parliamentary women's group where women from all parties could support each other in representing the concerns of women and finding that new balance in our systems.

But more than anything, the past year has been about listening and learning. We have been listening to each other in our Steering Circle, Hub group and other circles – a massive but hugely rewarding job.

Listening to the women who have joined our members' circles, online conversations and other activities.

Listening to the politicians, decision makers and other community leaders we have met.

Listening to the creative insights of artists — opening new ways of thinking and connecting us to our common humanity.

And listening to First Nations women about their different approach to governance rooted in balance between men's business and women's business and connection to the Earth and Earth laws.

And we thought we would be ready by November to bring women together from across the country in a National Congress of Women to start to join the dots on what we had heard. We planned for a 3-day face to face gathering in Canberra but COVID intervened and we have rescheduled the National Congress as a rolling series of events launching online on 30 November – more about that later. I'll come back to that at the end of this event

There are many women who have made this all possible and I will come to them later after the formalities.

In the meantime suffice to say that in that old Greek play, about the Furies there was a happy ending. The Eumenides is the only Greek tragedy that has a happy ending. Under the guidance of Athena – representing civilised wisdom — the people learn to revere the Earth again and the Furies return to their nurturing Earth mother form as ‘The Kindly Ones’.

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