



women's CLIMATE CONGRESS

Building a unified national agreement for Australia's climate response

Proposal for an inclusive process to address climate risks

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CALL TO ACTION

Aim

The Women's Climate Congress was founded in early 2020 with the objective of bringing together the diverse voices in our public discourse to agree national priorities and actions to address climate risks. In 2022, there is new interest in united, collaborative climate action, but there is still dispute on the best ways forward and we need a process to enable this to happen quickly, effectively and equitably.

In this paper, we provide a proposal for development of an agreed, unifying and deliberative process with independent mediation to bring together representative groups with diverse affiliations, interests, expertise and perspectives (referred to here as 'representative groups') to agree national priorities and actions to address climate risks.

The aim of this process would be to balance equally the essential elements of shared economic prosperity, social cohesiveness and environmental sustainability. It would map a pathway for Australia that ensures economic viability by reducing current investment uncertainty whilst supporting long-term environmental sustainability and social (including intergenerational) equality and wellbeing.

We call on the government to begin planning now and to fund such a process in the 2023 Budget.

How the Women's Climate Congress can support this initiative

The Women's Climate Congress (the Congress) is a diverse, Australia-wide network of women. We welcome women of all political persuasions, affiliations, ages and walks of life. We understand that managing and navigating the competing interests and differing perspectives of the range of representative groups presents huge challenges for Australian governments. We also recognise that Australia's current decision-making frameworks and processes that seek to address climate risks have become highly adversarial. Further, the complex nature of climate risks and the necessary actions to address them has resulted in fractures and deeply polarised divides within our society.

The Congress has been founded on the principle of working together with a focus on a safe, equitable future. While we are grateful to fossil fuel industries for the wealth and opportunities they have provided in the past, we also acknowledge the international consensus that it is time to realign our economy to meet our responsibility for the sake of ourselves and future generations. We believe that a carefully designed process of deliberation, with independent mediation would offer an opportunity to find a way forward that brings people together to develop rigorous and robust actions that have high levels of support.

As a nonpartisan group, the Women's Climate Congress is well placed to build community support. It is committed to working collaboratively with governments and others to develop an inclusive process to foster coherent, cohesive and timely responses to increasing climate risks.

An opportunity to increase community support

The Australian response to the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that Australians will expect government to radically reshape economic and social policy in the face of threat, and that they will generally accept these policy interventions when they are based on the best available science and the considered and judicious use of the precautionary principle. This is particularly so when the costs and benefits of the policies are communicated well and are seen to be distributed equitably.

Today, Australians from across the political spectrum are increasingly concerned about climate change and want to see global warming limited to a safe level.¹ The Women's Climate Congress continues to hear from members and others across all political perspectives that people want to see nonpartisan action taken to address climate risks and they recognise the need for urgent action.

Importantly, addressing climate risks is an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of successive Australian governments to the 1972 Stockholm Convention, which recognises the need to ensure intergenerational equity in decision making about all matters that have consequences for future generations.

Leadership on this issue does not require letting go of political ideals. It is not about 'winners and losers'. It is about building a process that brings together the full range of knowledge and those affected to work out what to do, how to do it quickly and how to manage the implications of the actions taken.

Moving from individual representations to collaborative problem solving and decision making

The current Australian government has indicated that it is keen to work across sectors to get the best outcomes.

Such good intentions can sometimes be hijacked if government inquiries and consultations seek input from different interest groups and then require government to 'arbitrate' between these competing groups to decide a course of action. Such processes encourage interest groups to compete to lobby government to achieve outcomes favourable to their particular group but do not require them to consider the needs and interests of others. This type of approach does not allow for collaboration between interest groups, or for systems-wide thinking that could open up the possibilities of new and creative solutions to the challenges that are being addressed.

The Congress proposes that the Australian Government implement an independently mediated roundtable deliberation that brings together a diverse range of representative groups reflecting the Australian community and major stakeholders.

In relation to the current issue of addressing climate risks we recommend an independently mediated process to create an inclusive space for all perspectives to contribute, to allow the most creative and transformative solutions to emerge, and to maximise broad community trust in the outcomes.

This approach is compatible with the idea of a Climate Compact, proposed by Professor Kim Rubenstein, which would lead to an agreed strategy with roles and responsibilities identified for all stakeholders and the negotiation of such a process could be guided by the Joint Principles developed by the Australian Climate Roundtable.²³

1 See for example Lowy Institute Poll 2020

2 A Climate Compact for Australia – urgent, unifying, effective, Kim Rubenstein, 2022.

3 The Australian Climate Roundtable is a broad alliance of major Australian business, environmental, farmer, investor, union and social welfare groups.

Proposed approach

This proposal recognises that there are many different parties, each with valid and important concerns, who will need to come together to build a unified agreement to manage Australia's climate risk. As noted above, the Congress believes that open-minded discussion and consideration of all the various perspectives is essential to moving towards more collaborative frameworks for making agreements. As such, the method described here draws on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) practice as applied to the public policy sphere.^{4,5}

The Congress notes that this approach is consistent with the Australian Government's own broader productivity agenda and Dispute Management Plan.^{6,7}

An indicative outline of our proposed process is given below. In brief, it would consist of four stages:

- Stage 1 — Choosing and setting up the dispute system design team (DSD Team)
- Stage 2 — Designing the process, including terms of reference and protocols
- Stage 3 — Selecting and preparing participants
- Stage 4 — Implementing the process

Note that the final approach adopted will be a unique combination of methods appropriately adapted for the current challenge of responding to climate risks. However, adherence to some central principles is essential for the integrity of the process:

- It is essential that all participants commit to working together to reach agreements that balance equally economic prosperity, social cohesiveness and environmental sustainability, whilst adhering to scientific advice and placing intergenerational equity at the forefront.
- It is essential that those facilitating the process are impartial and independent and will not provide substantive advice or recommendations, and that selection of participants is transparent and trustworthy.
- It is critical that participants are not able to lobby independently of the process for outcomes favourable to their particular interests.
- It is essential that the government, in authorising such a process, commits that it will implement the agreements reached through the process.

For this process to succeed, it needs a strong, broad base of political support. As noted above, the Women's Climate Congress is well placed to build such support. It will also be useful to draw on any established political conventions for achieving this, including those that have been successfully used in responses to the current pandemic.

4 In Australia, mediation and ADR are generally associated with a legal frame (ie in order to keep disputes from escalating into costly court cases). However, internationally mediation has been used as the basis for high-level international negotiations for peace making, as well as at national government levels to resolve policy issues where there is community polarisation. See for example, Susan L Carpenter and WJD Kennedy, *Managing public disputes: A practical guide for government, business and citizen's groups*, 2nd edn, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, USA, 2001. This book includes case studies of how this approach has helped resolve significant public policy disputes overseas.

5 See also Rhian Williams, *Sustainable dialogue: the key to sustainable problem solving and planning*, 2005, and the Sustained Dialogue Institute

6 <https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/alternative-dispute-resolution/dispute-management-australian-government-agencies>

7 <https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/publications/dispute-management-plan>

Details of the approach

Stage 1

Choosing and setting up the dispute system design team (DSD Team)

An independent, nonpartisan group (such as the Women's Climate Congress) would work with government and others to identify the team who would design an agreed process and budget for developing a broadly supported plan to address Australia's climate risks. The DSD Team would need to be accepted by those involved:

- as impartial and independent
- as not aligned with any particular representative group, or substantive issue
- as having the authority to manage the process.

Stage 2

Designing the process, including terms of reference and protocols

The DSD Team would be responsible for designing a collaborative and inclusive process to address the issues.

The framework for any such process must be based on the following principles:

- complete independence of those facilitating the process, who will not provide substantive advice or recommendations
- substantive decision making will be the work of the representative participants involved in the process
- the process will draw on the broadest range of representative groups, including from industry, financial, legal, community and environmental groups, and be broadly representative of Australian society.

The process developed will:

- have clear terms of reference directed towards collaborative resolution of the issues
- involve all representative groups in collaborating to set the agenda for the discussions
- ensure the process is agreed and accepted by all participants
- be educational, open and highly visible
- use a decision-making process based on fact finding and consensus,
- be given adequate time and resources for detailed development of all protocols
- have a clear focus on processes for implementation of agreements.

Stage 3

Selection and preparation of participants

Selection of participants must be transparent and have the trust of the community.

The DSD Team will ensure that participants are drawn from the broadest range of representative groups. After an initial round of selection, the DSD Team will seek suggestions from included groups as to other groups who could be invited to participate.

Each participant selected would be committed to consult with their constituent members. Investing in time to ensure broad-based consultation at this stage will be more than repaid in a process that is fair, inclusive and effective.

The DSD Team will work with the participants to clarify protocols and identify the issues for discussion to ensure that solutions agreed through the process are:

- acceptable to all parties
- innovative, and able to foster new and positive relationships between those involved
- mutually agreed by those involved without imposition by those outside the process
- based on the most complete information available, allowing for new issues to be discussed and alternative agreements to be negotiated as required.

Stage 4

Implementation of the process

The roundtable process will be implemented by the DSD Team in full consultation with the government.

Conclusion

The Australian response to Covid-19 has showcased that Australians can work together in innovative and timely ways to protect human life and wellbeing. However, in relation to addressing climate risks the path forward has not been easy to navigate. In 2022, the new government has an opportunity to chart a way forward that addresses climate risk and is acceptable to all stakeholders.

The Women's Climate Congress respectfully offers the procedural approach set out in this paper as a call to action to build an inclusive national agreement for Australia's climate response that can be supported by all parts of the Australian community.

As a nonpartisan, inclusive group with the aim of promoting intergenerational equity and ongoing environmental sustainability, the Congress is well placed to build a broad base of community support for such a process. We are committed to working collaboratively with government and others to develop an inclusive process to foster coherent, cohesive and timely responses to increasing climate risks.

This position paper has been prepared for general circulation to explain the Congress vision of a unifying process to address climate risks. Please send comments and suggestions to the contact email address below.

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