

Independent mediation for uniting action on climate change

‘The natural thing to do’ to secure a safe future for our children

By Janet Salisbury¹

(first created 22 October 2019)

PRELUDE

In 1915, Julia Grace Wales, a 33-year-old English scholar at the University of Wisconsin, published a plan to end WW1 called *Continuous Mediation without Armistice*,² 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 was invited by the famous social reformer, Jane Addams, to join the American delegation to the International Congress of Women at The Hague. At this remarkable but largely forgotten congress, 1300 women delegates from 12 warring and neutral countries overcame many difficulties to gather for the only international peace congress of the First World War. The women passed 20 resolutions that identified conditions for permanent peace and today read like an agenda for all significant human rights law introduced over the past 100 years.³ They also adopted Julia Grace’s plan as their proposal to end the war. Envoys from the congress took the resolutions and peace plan to more heads of government than any other diplomats met with during the war years. These men showed interest in this ‘most sensible plan’, but it was never implemented.

The war continued and killed 40 million people.

As our current generation of school children face a new and deadly global threat, it is time to ask once again ‘What is the natural thing to do?’

SUMMARY

THE FURIES OF EARTH:

*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!*⁴

In 2020, humanity stands at a cross roads. Climate scientists warn that we have only one more decade to get our house in order before we suffer the consequences of Earth's fury. Our children are calling for action to secure their future and our country is on fire. But our party political system of government has resulted in deadlock. We have all enjoyed the wealth that the industrial revolution has brought to the developed world, and therefore we must work together to transition our economy and lifestyles to a sustainable and just future for all.

Currently, in Australia our political parties and aligned groups of citizens are thinking separately in ever more polarised ways. To break the deadlock a plan is needed to enable the best thinking minds from all perspectives to come together to consider the issue. Such a national (and indeed world) 'thinking organ' could offer to the currently opposing political forces an opportunity to collaborate in finding a just and sustainable way to stabilise the climate and secure a safe future for our children without renouncing their overall convictions.

To kickstart a uniting approach that transcends partisan politics, this paper proposes a politically independent council of citizens (a 'wisdom council') chosen from a range of relevant disciplines and backgrounds to develop and mediate proposals for the social, economic and environmental changes needed to avoid further escalation of dangerous climate change. It is further proposed that women should play a leading role in development of the council's leadership and mode of operation. The councillors would accept two guiding principles as the basis for their work: the validity of the climate science as outlined by the IPCC and agreed in the targets of the Paris Climate Accord; and the sincerity of concerns about the potential damage to the economy and society (such as through job losses or dislocation) as we transition away from fossil fuels. This would safeguard the science of climate change from short-term political posturing, while taking joint responsibility for the current situation and facilitating dialogue and action towards transition to a sustainable and just economy.

The issue

THE CHORUS OF CITIZENS:

As the land burns dry

As the rivers die

As the oceans rise

Our children's nightmares pound our frightened hearts

Climate change is the defining issue of our times, casting a long shadow over global and national politics, and creating discord and anxiety among citizens, particularly young people who will suffer the consequences of a heating world. A special report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the peak body of the world's climate scientists, published in October 2018 warned that we only had 12 years to balance our carbon budget to avoid dangerous warming leading to major tipping points in the world's climate systems.⁵ In Australia, the summer of 2019–20 is shaping up as another terrible trifecta of heatwaves, droughts and bushfires and the latest report of the Climate Council further warns that these conditions are made worse by climate change.⁶ If we do not make the necessary changes, we will be at the mercy of the Earth's natural forces and there will be no turning back to the safe climate system that has supported human evolution thus far.

In our parliamentary system of democracy, it is conventional for the government and opposition to engage in polarising debate. Fuelled by similarly polarising forces in some parts of the media and other areas of public discourse, as well as the powerful influences of some sectors of business, this has prevented effective action on climate change for over 30 years. Despite repeated attempts to put policies in place to reduce carbon emissions, Australia's emissions are still rising.

Furthermore, our election cycle is short. Once an election is called, any cross-party discussion is further shut down while the major parties tussle to secure the votes of citizens. Once the results are in, however close, the winner takes all and claims a mandate to set policy. But the results of scientific investigation are not policies that can be voted on as one might vote for a tax cut or workplace reform. The forces of nature that are the subject of scientific inquiry will not wait to listen to anyone's opinion, or back off while we consult about jobs or the cost of electricity (important as these issues are to resolve fairly). Climate science tells us what will happen in response to the chemical changes humans have made to the Earth's atmosphere according to the laws that govern our universe. And it is settled enough to be sure that we can expect the worst if we do not change our ways.

In Australia, we have the High Court for the ultimate resolution of legal issues relating to most aspects of life. A High Court judgment must be adhered to by policy makers. But the judgment of the world's best scientists does not have the same requirement for compliance. While the laws of nature stand firm, human laws are powerless to enforce action. Instead, we rely on our elected representatives in government to make the necessary policies to safeguard the future. But our system of representation has thus far been unable to prioritise the nurture of life on Earth over other economic considerations.

To move beyond this impasse we need a new method of informing policy, which is trusted both by those who govern us and by the people. If our intellectual development and all that has been built up over the course of human history is worth anything, we should, under the stress of emergency, be able to break through the paralysis that the current mode of operation brings and seek an ethical, humane and rational way out. And we must do this before the immovable forces of nature have imposed the ultimate price.

The natural thing to do

We love our children

We will care for the land

Imagine that all the politicians, scholars, business people and activists were to awake tomorrow to survey the environmental and societal consequences of climate change as it unfolds in the way that the IPCC and Australian Climate Council scientists have warned.

Imagine if they could understand the motives that have driven others to behave the way that they have. Imagine if they could see the lack of wisdom in trying to crush or humiliate people with different views, the folly of continued competition and the advantages of cooperation. Suppose that they were able to come to the problem with utter honesty, simplicity and courage? What under these circumstances would be the natural thing to do to safeguard the future for our children?

- It would be natural to accept the analysis and warnings of the scientists and to collaborate to take immediate steps to secure a safe future for younger generations by stopping burning fossil fuels and transitioning our economy to renewable energy as quickly as possible.
- It would be natural to work together to ensure a fair transition of jobs away from fossil fuels, an equitable distribution of wealth and care for all people and the Earth.

This is what Greta Thunberg and the other prevoting age and nonpolitically aligned school students understand so well. Indeed it is what these articulate young people are asking the adults to do. And it is the most natural thing of all to protect our children.

The basis for common ground

When the laws of harmony are broken

and discord shouts down the Songs of Life

Listen to Nature the ancestors teach

Her lament is the start of renewal

Under the party political system, each party claims that it has the best interests of the people at heart.

- On the one hand lies continued employment in fossil fuel and energy intensive industries that have served the economy very well for a long time, and put food on the table for many families, particularly in regional areas.
- On the other lies the need to transition away from fossil fuels as quickly as possible to safeguard the future climate for all of humankind even if this means the sacrifice of whole industries, the jobs that go with them.

The concerns of people and communities are perfectly understandable if the situation is seen as binary and there is no observable transition policy, no plan to prevent catastrophic climate change, and no support offered for directly affected communities. Meanwhile, each side of politics says it has a motive of common good: this makes some unpopular policies necessary but the means used are justified by the ends.

If we accept that these claims are sincere – which I believe is the best starting point for dialogue – it is not surprising that voters find it hard to make a judgment for or against any single party. Hence, elections continue to be closely contested, with only a small majority either way. This in turn fuels further polarisation as parties try to carve out a position that is different from the other side.

Without much deeper conversations than we currently have, it is hard for citizens to distinguish between the values and policies of one party or another. We also struggle to understand the extent of our own responsibility as citizens versus the actions of governments. There is a sense in which we are all to blame and all right at the same time. We are all human together stumbling out of darkness and often afraid to admit what we don't know.

If we accept our politicians' claims as sincere, as I have suggested, then their claims should be open to the ethical challenge of independent investigation and mediation to find the best way forward. And the most compelling test of sincerity lies in an appeal from our children to join them to secure their future.

A time for women to lead

*ETHOS (the spirit of civilised wisdom):
Only when Reason and Love sing together
will cities and Nature be reconciled.*

Women's nurture of life is axiomatic. Their leadership style tends towards compassion, inclusion and collaboration.⁷ These combined attributes are essential in times of emergency when life is threatened. They are also essential for effective mediation. Unfortunately, women's entry into public life in the past 100 years has been glacially slow. Women who have managed to break into the previously male domains have been constrained by organisational cultures that favour a more top-down, hierarchical style of leadership. Women have therefore not yet experienced a level playing field to contribute more relational processes and perspectives. And yet history has shown that when women act together without the influence of existing political cultures they have been able to develop visionary plans like those of the 1915 International Congress of Women in The Hague⁸ and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing,⁹ which have underpinned much international progress in human rights. In the US the Women's Caucus, formed in 1977, facilitates bipartisan relationships and policy priorities among the women members of Congress, particularly in relation to improving the lives of women and families.¹⁰

It is perhaps not surprising that the young leaders of the student climate strike movement are predominantly young women. With the future prospect of safely raising a new generation under threat, the rhetoric of these young people is notable for its wide view of the interconnectedness of the issues of income inequality, treatment of Indigenous people and other disadvantaged groups, and environmental issues including climate change.

A new way of informing policy on climate change

*Gaia! We your people, sing our promise
to turn the tide to harmony
of the mortal law of people and cities
and the immortal law of Earth and Sky*

The core of this proposal is to form a 'wisdom council' of independent open-minded individuals to develop policy proposals for action on climate change. To allow women to participate on their own terms, the council should have a majority of women, including Indigenous women and young women. A robust process selecting these councillors would first need to be developed which would be accepted as genuinely collaborative and fair by both the government and the public.

To gain community support, the council would need to operate under overarching principles that recognise:

- the scientific consensus represented by the analysis and recommendations of the IPCC, and agreed in the targets of the Paris Climate Accord, as the basis for policy recommendations
- the need for a strong economy to sustain jobs and uphold or improve current social services for all Australians.

It is quite understandable that political parties see nothing to be gained by independent mediation, which could involve having to let go of some long-held positions. To gain government support and trust, a good starting point for an independent council would be to adopt the principles that ensure:

- no attribution of blame for our current situation
- independence from political influence
- a method of working that ensures respectful discussion both within the group itself and in relation to all stakeholders in the process.

In developing policy proposals, the wisdom council would identify the principles that underlie the welfare of all. These would create a foundation for agreement by those sincerely invested in the common good.

The council would submit its proposals simultaneously to all parties in government. These proposals would then be discussed at a multiparty forum, preferably led by women and independently hosted by facilitators highly skilled in developing common ground across different perspectives. The results of this forum would be fed back to the wisdom council for further refinement.

This process could continue back and forth until a sound basis for an ongoing multiparty national plan of action to address climate change was agreed.

Such a process would:

- give an opportunity to understand more deeply the concerns currently underlying the different political perspectives (eg economic, social and environmental)
- put the validity of the science out of reach of politically motivated scepticism and denial while maintaining rigorous assessment
- allow women to lead on their own terms, free from existing organisational cultures that have undermined wise decision making
- lift nurture of life for future generations into the realm of a priority political consideration and focus the thoughts of the country [world] on the common good
- restore the shaken faith of citizens in political systems and enable a new course towards a just and sustainable society
- offer governments an honourable exit from a difficult situation.

Some might say that this type of process has been used before and that it is far too simplistic to offer anything new in the face of powerful influences and complex challenges. As a counter to this, I offer that a true dialogue across parties has not previously been attempted because our tendency to attribute blame to one side or another is so entrenched in public discourse.

Far from being simplistic, therefore, this proposal involves a profound change in the way we do business across different perspectives. Bringing together the right people is the start but success requires a rethink of almost everything we know about meeting protocols in order to create a safe space for conversations that transcend the usual polarisations and build on common ground. Practitioners of the international Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter collaboration,¹¹ who have been developing ways to create these sorts of safe spaces, are a resource for this process.

International perspective

As greenhouse gas emissions are shared globally, climate change is an international issue. Ideally, the independent mediation process described here would apply globally. Internationally, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has provided a world ‘thinking organ’ for action on climate change since the first annual Conference of the Parties (COP 1) was held in Berlin in 1995.¹² However, the work of the United Nations has been slow and tortuous. Ultimately, agreements are only as good as the ability of individual countries to realise their targets.

Some countries have been able to work collaboratively across otherwise polarised political parties and have put strong policies in place; for example, Sweden (through the Climate Policy Council);¹³ and the UK (through the Committee on Climate Change).¹⁴ In other countries, including the United States and Australia, the powerful influencers of business as usual in economies highly dependent on fossil fuels have made it impossible to develop policies to effectively address climate change. It is these countries where the approach described here is particularly needed. Strong actions by these nations will promote global progress.

Conclusion

In Australia, as in many other parts of the world, there is an impasse between rapid transition away from fossil fuels to prevent escalating climate change and maintaining the business-as-usual economy that has allowed development of the world economy we currently enjoy. Our party political system of government, with its tendency to polarising rhetoric and approach to policy development, has also served us well in the past but is now floundering. Meanwhile, our children have lost trust in adults to protect their future and are taking matters into their own hands in a reversal of the natural order of life on Earth where protection of the young is paramount. To get out of this deadlock, a method is suggested to create dialogue among all parties through an independent ‘wisdom council’. This council, led by women, would accept the climate change science and our joint responsibility for the status quo, as well as the need to plan for and support those people directly affected by the need to transition to a new sustainable economy. Suspending judgment on who is to blame for the current emergency, this council could work with a multiparty forum to develop nationally agreed policies to secure a sustainable future for our children.

Address for correspondence

E janet.salisbury@iinet.net.au

M 0416 167 280

¹ Dr Janet Salisbury is an independent scholar, Canberra business woman, and was the founder of the science information company Biotext Pty Ltd. She developed a strong interest in dialogue around contentious public policy issues through her work in science communication. For the past 13 years, she has extended that interest through her membership of A Chorus of Women (see below). Janet was the initiator and facilitator of a series of [14 Canberra Conversations hosted by A Chorus of Women from 2009–2014](#). These conversations brought together citizens from across different professional and political perspectives for conversations about environmental and development issues, the arts, peace and human rights. Many were hosted in collaboration with the ANU Climate Institute. She is a member of the international collaboration of practitioners in the Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter and has been at the forefronts of bringing this practice to Australia and Canberra.

[A Chorus of Women](#) is a Canberra-based women’s collaboration formed in 2003. For the past 17 years we have been giving voice to citizen concerns as we weave a creative, artistic voice into public discourse and help develop a culture of conversation in our city.

² This proposal is inspired in part by the paper [Continuous mediation without armistice by Julia Grace Wales](#), an English scholar at the University of Wisconsin. Published in 1915, this paper was a plan to end the First World War by mediation of a conference of neutral nations. Adopted as the official policy of the Wisconsin Peace Society and endorsed by the Wisconsin Government as a resolution to President Woodrow Wilson, it became known internationally as ‘The Wisconsin Plan’.

³ The story of the 1915 International Congress of Women is the central subject of A Chorus of Women’s major productions of [A Passion for Peace \(2015\)](#) and [The People’s Passion \(2018, 2019\)](#) by Glenda Cloughley.

⁴ All the poetic quotes are lyrics from Glenda Cloughley’s [The Gifts of the Furies \(2008-2012\)](#). In this prescient story-song Glenda linked forgotten indigenous Europeans’ wisdom about relations between people and Earth to our changing climate. The work’s 25+ performances include three seasons of major productions by A Chorus of Women and friends at the Great Hall, Australian National University, 2009; in partnership with The Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House in Floriade Festival 2010; and as a service for worship at Canberra’s City Uniting Church, 2011.

⁵ IPCC (October 2018). *Special report: Global warming of 1.5 °C*, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

⁶ Climate Council (November 2019). *Dangerous summer: Escalating bushfire, heat and drought risk*. https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/report-dangerous-summer_V5.pdf

⁷ For example, C Post, IM Latu, LY Belkin (2019). A female leadership trust advantage in times of crisis: Under what conditions? *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 43(2):215.

⁸ Report of the 1st International Congress of Women, The Hague, 1915.

Report of the 2nd International Congress of Women, Zurich, May 1919,

⁹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>

¹⁰ <https://www.wcpinst.org/our-work/the-womens-caucus/caucus-history-and-accomplishments/>

¹¹ <https://www.artofhosting.org/home/>

¹² COP meetings serve as the formal meeting of the UNFCCC Parties to assess progress in dealing with climate change, and beginning in the mid-1990s, to negotiate the Kyoto Protocol to establish legally binding obligations for developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. From 2011 the meetings have also been used to negotiate the Paris Agreement.

¹³ <https://www.klimatpolitiskaradet.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/climatepolicycouncilreport2.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/>