

Canberra's energy future: thinking together about ways forward

Our first Canberra Conversation was run in collaboration with the ANU Climate Change Institute and we welcomed Professor Will Steffen, Executive Director of the institute as our co-host for the event. The three-hour conversation combined information exchange with small and whole group discussions, and original songs voicing the social and ethical challenges that these subjects present for our community. Through these elements we hoped to create a non-adversarial environment where we could inform ourselves and other participants on the topic of stationary energy production and use in Canberra and, more importantly, listen carefully to the diversity of views represented in the room. By welcoming diverse opinions and focusing on listening to one another, we sought to imagine shared approaches to tackle the complex issues surrounding energy production and use.

The event was held in the ACT Legislative Assembly building - the seat of city government - and our first piece of music was the song of Ethos, the inspiring Tom Bass sculpture representing the spirit of Canberra as an ideal city that stands at the entrance to the building.

An initial sample of views around the room revealed a variety of interests and perspectives, including:

- concern about equity considerations in the massive difference between developing and developed world lifestyles
- a desire for more direction and leadership from government on matters of energy production and use, and a desire for more support from the population in encouraging leaders to be active in this area
- dreams of solar collectors on every building
- concern about intergenerational equity, and the fact that some of the consequences of our decisions now will not be felt for some decades
- excitement at the emergence of a forum that encourages genuine dialogue among citizens, and a wish for there to be a focus on involving people from all ages and sectors of society
- confusion about the number of intertwined issues and the vexed challenges of tackling them – is there a common notion that we can hold onto to guide us through the complexity?

Our guest speakers, Mr Mike Johnson (formerly a specialist engineer with ActewAGL) and Dr Hugh Saddler (Director, Sustainability Advice Team; Principal Consultant, Energy Strategies; and Adjunct Professor, ANU Crawford and Fenner Schools), were interviewed by Dr Janet Salisbury (Chorus member and Director of the science information consultancy, Biotext) who was the facilitator for the evening. The nature of the energy grid, the issues associated with incorporating more diverse and distributed energy sources to the grid and the mechanisms and instruments for predicting, bidding for and allocating energy supply (including GreenPower schemes) were all described. The issue of the gas-fired power station and data centre proposal was also discussed. Some participants were surprised to hear about the potential emissions reductions associated with this proposal as this was not a focus of the media or public discussion about this scheme.

Professor Will Steffen emphasised the consequences of continuing with ‘business as usual’ practices: we’re currently tracking the upper level of both emission and temperature projections; impacts are likely to include the loss of the Great Barrier Reef due to rising acidity and sea surface temperatures; the climate changes would be severe and rapid enough to trigger a mass extinction event resulting in extreme losses of biodiversity; and we would expect to see a higher frequency and intensity of bushfires. Professor Steffen articulated a message of extreme urgency, explaining that these issues will cut to the core of what our society will be like.

Small group discussions followed, and the evening concluded with a plenary session seeking to bring together the views aired in the group discussions. Themes to emerge in the plenary session were:

- Frustration at the state of ACT housing, and a strong, shared awareness of well-established steps that could significantly improve the energy efficiency of houses in Canberra. To do so would require better engagement with planners, regulatory bodies and policy makers. Regulatory difficulties were seen as particularly difficult hurdles.
- Willingness to move away from dependence on coal.
- Recognition that both “top down” and “bottom up” approaches are required. More vibrant and engaged communities were considered vitally important. Communities could be better engaged via any number of mechanisms, from more public forums to street parties with a focus on sustainable living. Other suggestions included: a greater focus on allowing people to work from home and so returning life to the suburbs; city planning that combines the benefits of high-density living (more efficient transport and energy use) with a patchwork of land-use that caters to diverse other needs (protecting biodiversity, providing public open space, allowing local food production, accommodating distributed energy generation); and practices that allow us to learn from indigenous communities and other sources of wisdom.
- Suggestions for more self-sufficiency in Canberra, from energy to food production, rather than a reliance on importing from elsewhere. A focus on self-sufficiency would naturally engender more direct awareness of energy-related issues in workplaces and homes.
- Recognition that the atmosphere is a common good shared globally, which suggests our decisions about energy production and use in Canberra ought to be placed in a global context (e.g. Mike described a ‘financial grid’ that operates alongside the physical grid, and perhaps greater recognition of such financial networks and accounting instruments could better facilitate more efficient global investment in carbon-neutral energy production).
- Longing for a move away from adversarial approaches in public arenas such as our Houses of Parliament and the media. Strong differences of opinion are making consensus difficult, and there is a lot of work to do to establish a common sense of national and global direction. Forums that encourage dialogue and avoid hostile or judgmental labelling of people are needed.
- A desire for a greater focus on values of caring, nurturing and considering impacts of our decisions on future generations in public discourse and decision-making (in preference to the current focus on individual short-term economic or personal interests).
- Promotion of Canberra as a potential showcase to bring together these ideas and put them into practice.

In conclusion, the evening created a space for discussion that was welcoming and inclusive. Many in the audience already held common views on the topic, so a future challenge would be to invite participants with more strongly divergent views. For example, a useful follow-up to this first conversation would be to invite participants who are actively involved in commercial development, land-use planning and building regulations to develop a more in-depth dialogue on the issues of building and planning in Canberra.

Many participants thanked us for the musical contribution made by Chorus. Participants told us that the music and lyrics of the songs (see attached program) helped create a listening environment that attended not simply to the technical aspects of the energy use but also the emotional and ethical dimensions.

A review of the evening by Bob Douglas, founder and Chair of SEE-Change and Director of Australia 21 is attached