

Canberra Conversations

Thinking together about sustainability, development and growth

ACT Legislative Assembly, Civic

Thursday 27 May 2010, 6-9 pm

Hosted by A Chorus of Women in collaboration with the ANU Climate Change Institute

52 participants (list attached)

Introduction

Our purpose in the Canberra Conversation series is to create opportunities for constructive dialogue on matters of importance to Canberra citizens. At this conversation (the sixth in our series) we talked about what a 'sustainable' future for Canberra might look like. Focusing primarily on the built environment, we explored the relationships between sustainability, development and growth in planning for the city and how government, business and the community could work together to create a sustainable future.

The paucity of genuine dialogue in political and media forums inspires us to work with dialogue and test its value in tackling complex issues such as sustainable development. It is our hope that in developing a culture of dialogue through conversations such as these, Canberrans will benefit from experience in drawing on alternatives to the adversarial modes of debate that generally typify public consultation and decision-making processes.

The use of story and song throughout our conversations is to allow emotional and ethical aspects to be voiced; it is an acknowledgment that these very human qualities are of central importance, yet are not easily brought to the fore in public forums.

Our adoption of the Chatham House Rule prevents names being reported against comments. In this summary we report on the key points of view and lines of argument expressed by participants, and then comment on the process itself.

We have deliberately chosen to hold Canberra Conversations at the ACT Legislative Assembly because it seems like the right place for a citizen's conversation and the statue of Ethos in Civic square represents the spirit of the Canberra community.

Participants

Once again, participants at the event included a broad cross-section of people interested in sustainability, development and growth in Canberra, as members of community and environmental groups, public servants, business people, scientists or other academics, and concerned citizens. We also welcomed Caroline Le Couteur, MLA for Molonglo and ACT Greens spokesperson on (inter alia) Planning, Territory and Municipal Services, and Business and Economic Development. A full list of participants is attached. Thirteen members of A Chorus of Women provided the voice of citizens in the form of songs during the conversation.

Thinking together about sustainability

CHORUS: *You got a right, I got a right
We all got a right to the tree of life*

Excerpt from 'The Tree of Life' — Traditional; arrangement by Judith Clingan

After this opening song by Chorus the participants divided into small groups to discuss what the song meant to them and how it related to planning for a sustainable city. Some people said that the words invoked the potential for human-Earth relations: the opportunity for all to benefit from the beauty and joy that is possible. In others it provoked thoughtful discussion on rights and responsibilities, the nature of our rights to water and other 'ecosystem services' and how these are shared among all people (or not, as is often the case). The notion of natural limits was strongly felt too, and that the right to the 'tree of life' does not entail a right to be profligate. Participants returned to these ideas several times during the course of the evening.

Discussion themes

After discussion of the 'tree of life', the conversation progressed through a process of guided interviews, small group discussions and open plenary session over the remainder of the three hours.

CHORUS: *Talk for our planet's sake
Talk with heart and reason
Care for nature, care for humans
Care for our children's future*

Words and music by Johanna McBride

The following themes emerged during an initial series of guided interviews, smaller group discussions and feedback:

- **'Conviviality' through shared engagement with the issues.** A theme to emerge early in the discussion was the sociability benefits which can be achieved by building shared ownership and addressing of the issues through lively and community interactions (yielding an atmosphere of 'conviviality'). This embodied a desire to see more of us making more of the opportunity to use daily conversations and activities as opportunities to trouble-shoot the environmental problems confronting us. Were this to be part of our daily lives, collectively we would develop new habits, new norms and a more informed base for political decision-making. This is about the stories we tell one another and the meaning and purpose we bring to our daily lives.
- **Name what is happening honestly.** Alongside hopes for lively and positive community interactions, was a desire to name the situation facing us more honestly. Copenhagen saw an accord which aspires to keep average global temperature below a two degree increase above the pre-industrial average. Emission reduction commitments by nations are inconsistent with staying below the two degree goal, yet there is little acknowledgment of this fact by governments. This charge of not naming the situation honestly applied to our conversation too: 'The "spiritual stuff" is all very well, but we are on a countdown'. Unless the difference between aspiration and action is confronted honestly, many saw that little progress is possible.
- **Foster community and relationships between people.** Closely related to the desire for a 'convivial' spirit to prevail in tackling the issues was a longing to shift to less of a material focus and to value and work towards a richer quality of relationships within our communities. There was also the view that groups devoted to working on environmental and related issues are too insular, and would benefit from working more closely with one another and welcoming more engagement across all sectors of society.

- **Efficiency.** Efficiency, aided by regulation and technology, was advocated by some as the best way forward, pointing to Canberra's energy star system for buildings as an example.
- **Limits to growth.** As a counterpoint to calls for efficiency, some argued that technology and efficiency measures will not suffice if very real limits to growth are not acknowledged and acted upon.
- **Ecosystem services.** The term 'ecosystem services' was referred to many times throughout the discussion. It is an attempt to quantify the value that ecosystems bring to our lives by identifying the costs of replacing ecosystem processes with technological alternatives (e.g. water treatment plants instead of forested catchments for providing clean drinking water). Given that economic goals remain paramount in city decision-making, more explicit accounting for the value of ecosystems to the economy was seen as necessary, albeit imperfect.
- **Regulation.** There was a strong view that self-regulation is insufficient to meet the goals of sustainability. Government regulation and regulatory bodies were seen to be vital and more electorate support for regulation was seen as key to achieving meaningful progress towards environmental sustainability. Discussions on regulation touched on policy and economic instruments for pricing damaging impacts, and referred to the need to value ecosystem services (and the loss of ecosystem services by human activities) explicitly in the design of regulatory and pricing instruments.
- **Work with the interconnected nature of systems.** In discussions on planning and regulation there was the view that both planning and regulation are most effective if they account for system interconnections. For example, 'closed loop', 'cradle-to-cradle' or 'integrated system design' principles emphasise the interconnections between different parts of the system, and between actions and impacts, requiring that the waste from one set of actions (e.g. manufacturing) become a resource elsewhere in the system. Similarly, there is wisdom in regulating the effects of actions – their actual impact on the things we care about – rather than seeking to be over-prescriptive about the actions themselves. One group expressed the potential to plan for multiple interconnected goals (e.g. encompass goals of liveability, amenability and function in relation to one another rather than consider these attributes in isolation from each other). Another thread to this line of discussion was the value of reflecting the way nature works, and this was also reflected in the song, 'Sustaining Life'.

CHORUS: *Sprouting seeds sustain and grow*
Flowering potential
Becoming what you are
You grow into fullness
Sow new seeds
Fulfil your promise
Pass on your gifts and die
And new life will live
Sprouting seeds sustain and grow

Words and music by Johanna McBride

- **Leadership and responsibility.** A theme to emerge not only in this conversation, but also in previous Canberra Conversations, is that of leadership and responsibility. There exists in these conversations a component of analysis and attributing responsibilities to others, alongside voices calling for us to take more direct responsibility as individuals for both the problems and the solution (without seeking to lay blame and requirement for change at the feet of others). 'More talk' is viewed by many as unhelpful in the quest for 'solutions'. Frustration was a central emotion to emerge in this and previous discussions. The frustration stems from a sense of

impotence, and the recognition that talk and analysis are far removed from actual change. Attaining a constructive mixture of government-level leadership and personal responsibility for change remains a fraught issue in our conversations. (To give a flavour of this debate, consider this comment from the floor: ‘We love to talk about what we personally do, but green consumerism is not going to make a difference. Green buildings etc are not going to do it. We need to start the conversation with the people with their hands on the fossil fuel taps.’) Constructive dialogue, rather than exclusion and vilification, was considered to be the better way of attempting to do this.

- **Blockages.** Given the common longing in the room for convivial, meaningful relationships that work to solve problems intelligently and wisely, many queried the robust blockages that lead to frustration, impotence and despair. There appears to be such potential for individual and collective empowerment towards rewarding change, yet such empowerment was not the expressed experience of anyone in the room. As with naming the issues honestly (see above) acknowledging this impasse may be a necessary step on the path to sustainability.

CHORUS: *Ethos foretells that the people of the city
will learn the way to Life's renewal
And the dread in heart's red blood will melt
when we find the songs in the gaze of love*

*Songman sing up the harmony
of Earth and her husband, the Sky
Hear the sorrow beneath Gaia's fury
for lament is the start of renewal*

Lament is the start of renewal

Excerpt from ‘The Gifts of the Furies’: words and music by Glenda Cloughley

Dialogue process: observations and comments

The following comments are based on our own observations and interpretation, and were not necessarily voiced explicitly during the conversation.

- **Points of agreement and disagreement.** There was broad agreement around many of the themes of the conversation. There was a common desire for all to benefit from the ‘tree of life’, and the desire for ‘convivial’ community engagement was one that clearly appealed to some participants and was repeated often over the course of the evening. In other areas we heard marked differences of perspective and opinion. For example, there was a strongly expressed view that we are not confronting the gulf between aspiration and action honestly enough (e.g. noting the gap between Copenhagen accord aspiration and the strength of emission reduction commitments). This view was in marked contrast to claims that our current trajectory (e.g. the trend toward increased energy efficiency in buildings) is adequate and in fact a cause for optimism. We also noted a difference between those advocating *efficiency* as a central requirement, and others who questioned the broader context in which that efficiency occurs: are efficiency measures making a meaningful contribution if they are occurring in an increasingly affluent, numerous and materially-focused population living in a system with real limits to growth?
- **Connection with a deeper meaning.** The question of what life is *for* was alluded to several times, but not echoed by all; there was a sense that many wanted the conversation to connect more deeply with these questions of values and purpose (e.g. comments like ‘The world treats

PARTICIPANTS

Facilitator

Janet Salisbury	A Chorus of Women
Amanda Hirschfeld	ENJO Australia
Anna Van Dugteren	
Anne O'Brien	Climate Action Canberra, Canberra loves 40% campaign
Annie Didcott	A Chorus of Women
Audrey Stewart	
Bob Douglas	SEE-Change, Australia 21
Caroline Le Couteur	ACT MLA, Greens
Catherine Keirnan	ACT Planning and Land Authority
Christine Larkin	Quakers, ACT Greens, Cyrenes Women's Choir
David Flannery	Australian Institute of Architects, University of Canberra
Deborah Neale	
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Gay Williamson	ACT Planning and Land Authority
Gill Christie	A Chorus of Women
Glenda Cloughley	A Chorus of Women
Graham Anderson	Pitt & Sherry
Greg Walpole	
Honey Nelson	A Chorus of Women
Jacqueline Yuen	
James Thier	Executive Director, Australian Ethical Investment Ltd
Jan Carey	
Jane Dixon	ANU National Centre for Epidemiology and Public Health, Australia 21
Jen Nell	A Chorus of Women
Jenny Goldie	Sustainable Population Australia, United Nations Association of Australia, Nature and Society Forum
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