



# A Chorus of Women

## Our Canberra: Centenary Canberra Conversation

Margaret Whitlam Pavilion, National Arboretum  
Sunday 28 July, 1.30–4.30 pm  
Hosted by A Chorus of Women  
75 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. The adversarial discourse in politics, public decision-making processes and the media has prompted us to work with more dialogue and test its value in tackling complex issues. It is our hope that in developing a habit of regular dialogue through conversations such as ours, Canberrans will benefit from experience in drawing on alternatives to the more usual modes of debate.

We use story and songs from A Chorus of Women's own original repertoire as part of our conversations to allow artistic, emotional and ethical aspects of a topic to be voiced. These human qualities are of central importance but are not easily brought to the fore in public forums.

We chose to hold our Centenary Canberra Conversation in the intimate space of the Margaret Whitlam Pavilion at the National Arboretum with its sweeping views of Civic, the Parliamentary triangle and beyond. In a 1915 plan of Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin depicted a design for an arboretum, incorporating all the continents joined as one in Gondwanaland. Canberrans are now talking about our newest national centrepiece as a visionary idea. It is a symbol of rebirth that came out of the traumatic event of the bush fires; a symbol of the future and how we might leave this a better place and provide a gift for the future. It is also a symbol of patience because trees grow slowly and need love and nurturing due to the harsh environment. The aim of 'Our Canberra' was to creatively explore experiences of who we are, and how the diverse threads of community, business, academic, artistic, public service and political life can interact holistically to re-imagine the 'ideal city' of the city's designers and founders<sup>1</sup>.

### The participants

Chorus: We are the people  
So many different voices  
Citizens gather  
Singing together, we make our home  
*Words and music by Johanna McBride*

As with our previous Canberra conversations, we heard many different voices representing a diverse set of interests about the future of Canberra. Participants included Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Burley Griffin: *I planned an ideal city – a city of the future. A garden city – a city splendid ... When we were building Canberra we wanted to create a Utopian city — a fair and equal place, in balance with nature and beautiful to behold. ... We thought it imperative to create an ideal — a Shimmering City, never fully entered but constantly calling us forward towards the achievable horizon.* [From script prepared by Chris Latham and Barbara Blackman for the Canberra International Music Festival, 2013]

elders, members of community and environmental groups, public servants, business people, academics and interested citizens.

A list of participants is attached.

## The conversation

Chorus: Talk for our city's sake  
Talk with heart and reason ...  
*Words and music by Johanna McBride*

The conversation comprised many components:

- A welcome to country by Ngunnawal elder, Janette (Nin) Phillips.
- Quotes about the vision for Canberra from Walter and Marion Griffin.
- Original songs sung by A Chorus of Women.
- 'So many voices' conversation: 6–8 participants in conversation with each other while others listened.
- Small group discussion: several small groups discussing what Canberra means to them.
- David Pereira played 'Sun' from his Black Mountain Views on cello while Carol MacKay danced to the music.
- 'Reimagining' conversation: open to all participants.

Over the course of the three-hour event many stories were told, feelings were expressed and different themes emerged. We learned about one another's experiences, fears and hopes about Canberra.

Chorus: After the fire.....  
  
Weave me in water, weave me in fire  
Weave me in wind and in clay  
Bind me in tears, bind me in blood  
Bind me in longing and love  
*From Websong, words and music by Glenda Cloughley*

Some of the stories and themes are summarised here:

- **Change.** The version of Weston built after the firestorm is very different to the one that existed before the fires. Photos of Reid from long ago show no trees, reminding us that the way a suburb begins is not a reflection of what it will become. We know there are big changes ahead: what will Canberra be in an Australia with 36 million people, mostly in South-Eastern Australia? How will we maintain our values while including so many more people?
- **We've got many things right in Canberra.** The landscape accommodates human settlement; green spaces are embedded in our urban structures, cooling the city, providing inspiration and allowing welcome experiences in nature. Canberra is socially progressive: incorporating social housing in every suburb of Canberra has been a pioneering social policy in this country. Our town centres make it practical and possible for people to come together. Newcomers to Canberra are welcomed and included. Levels of violence are low and are much lower than years ago. Again and again we heard how much people love Canberra and want to be here, and that Canberra has a soul!

- **We don't like everything about Canberra.** While 'we love it' was a common sentiment in the room, we also heard about aspects we don't like. For example, many don't like how retail activities have been given pride of place in our town centres, and others spoke with dismay at how cars affect our behaviour and our city.
- **We keep the good things for some at the expense of others.** Canberra benefits from a spider web of interdependencies with communities beyond Canberra (e.g. Queanbeyan, Bungendore), yet many of the communities that we depend upon do not feel included and miss out on many benefits available only to Canberrans. Our current lifestyle has come at the cost of unacceptable treatment of Indigenous Australians. For a long time Canberra was unwilling to establish a prison, or confront the need for health standards in brothels (needle exchanges, blood testing), so the needs of whole groups of the Canberra community were neglected and swept under the carpet, or outsourced to jurisdictions outside Canberra. This has now changed with the building of the prison and introduction of a needle exchange program in the city.
- **More than one way.** Canberrans are diverse, and we can point to extremes of compassion and selfishness alike. There are many conflicts, and when we project our vision of Canberra it may reflect only what our small sub-culture is interested in. There are many different desires for different kinds of city (e.g. those who want open space and those who don't, those who love Summernats or the Skywhale and those who don't). There are many perfect ways to play a symphony, and heterogeneity can be welcomed, but ways of reconciling differences peacefully are needed too.
- **Gifts.** Canberra was described as a gift we've received from a diverse mix of people who have come before us. Participants voiced a strong desire to give, share among each other, and create welcome gifts for future generations.
- **Courage and resilience.** Some described the joys of regeneration: we bounce back from fires, drought, past wars and other extreme events. We're humbled, not defeated. We're not afraid to look each other in the eye, and we find ways to confront those things we're not proud of, such as the treatment of the Indigenous people on this land.
- **Love of landscape.** Many spoke of our landscape as our home, our inspiration, and an amazing country where we feel safe. We are passionate about our environment.
- **A city to enable the citizens to draw out of each other that which would make for the common good.** There were many references to the design work, the considerations of landscape, buildings and people that help realise this aspiration for Canberra expressed by the Griffins.
- **We have so many symbols that are about war, and so few symbols, actual objects that are about peace.** Participants were passionate about prospect of changing this and creating the possibility for memorials to peace to be at the heart of Canberra.

The room was filled with a mix of emotions. Feelings of love and care about Canberra and its future were expressed again and again. Many appreciate Canberra so deeply, feeling compassion, security, warmth and a welcome sense of place, a sense of home. Participants also expressed confusion, frustration, shame and disappointment in many things, including the treatment of people excluded from or harmed by events in Canberra's past and present. The room was very cold due to a heating system malfunction, and this created much discomfort for many participants, yet we were also warmed by the passion and love that was voiced by so many.

When listening to the cello and watching the dance we experienced stillness and an opportunity to reflect that brought a welcome change to busy spoken conversation. Participants expressed feelings of hope and inspiration, particularly when imagining truly safe and peaceful futures. There were also acts of courage: those prepared to be the bearer of unwelcome truths or perspectives in an environment where so many were focussed on desirable ideals, hopes and possibilities.

All these voices and feelings were welcomed, and we were grateful to the participants for bringing such honesty, patience and good will to this event.

## **Aspirations for Canberra**

Participants voiced many aspirations for Canberra. Above all, there was a plea for peace, compassion and healing from past pain and damage. Participants would like to see all benefiting from the wealth and opportunities in Canberra, and not for these benefits to be concentrated among only a few. There was a longing to give, to learn how to share more, and to bring more compassion to our decisions and actions. Participants want to protect those things they care about in Canberra — peace, inspiring landscapes, a healthy environment, green space, caring relationships, and creative experiences — and to honour the gifts we've received from those who have influenced this place.

There was a clear longing for reconciliation and healing with Indigenous people. Aunty Jude Kelly expressed this by knocking the talking stick against the large glass door frame that opens out to overlook Canberra:

*Knock knock knock knock  
Let us in. Let us have our say. Let us have our place. Let us have our peace, not just this place  
but all places, all people, all languages.*

*Knock knock knock knock  
What are words without meaning, what are actions without truth.*

*Knock knock knock knock  
What are buildings if things aren't being right? Where is heart, where is soul, where is  
justice?*

*Knock knock knock knock*

*Let there be peace in all the lands, where culture and harmony have been lost. Let there be  
peace on the streets, where all who walk on the sacred soil feel safe and secure.*

*Let there be peace so all can sleep without fear of bombings or missiles.*

*Let there be peace without fears of knives and shootings and fights.*

*Let there be peace when all are sick of fighting wars of misled trust*

*Let there be peace where all children grow up in caring communities.*

*Let there be peace where hatred and anger are diffused, where tolerance and communication  
open up to equality for all.*

*Let there be peace in people's hearts to lift up their brothers and sisters.*

*Let there be peace for the forests around the planet, where so many of our animal relatives  
live and now die.*

*Let there be peace without greed and consumerism, where everyone on this planet has  
enough.*

*Let there be peace instead of blood on our hands.*

*Let there be peace and time to listen and reflect, to make peaceful decisions in our lives.*

*Let there be peace without envy, jealousy and falseness.*

*Let there be peace without religion to bring about pure spirituality.*

*Let there be peace and treaty to heal our wounded souls and minds.  
Let there be peace.  
Knock knock knock*

*(‘Let there be Peace’ — Jude Kelly)*

The conversation was not a plea for one perfect Canberra, but to find ways to create many possible futures and opportunities, futures that include a greater diversity of people and give freedom to citizens to express themselves in their own ways – whether as musicians, dancers, artists, writers, nature-lovers, public servants, scientists, sports fans or those wounded by past wrongs — so long as those ways foster peace and compassion.

Finally, the group recognised that while expressing ideals and discovering shared visions is important, a harder challenge remains: translating our ideals into practice. It requires more than a conversation like this to make that possible, but recognising our ideals is a good place to start. We heard that a musician without ideals does not know what they are practising for.

### **Reflections on the conversation process**

We are still learning about the art of conversation. We designed an event in which we hoped the principles of dialogue would thrive. These principles are:

1. Suspend the need for decisions here and now;
2. Suspend judgment and bring an open mind to the conversation;
3. Be as honest and transparent as possible;
4. Build on one another’s ideas in the conversation.

We would like to thank all participants for embarking on this kind of conversation with such care and integrity. We know that not all voices were heard, and that many thoughts, feelings and reactions in the room were not expressed for all to hear. When listening to the recording of the event afterwards and reflecting on our own role as A Chorus of Women, we know that we’d like to learn ways to listen more, and to conduct these conversations so that we draw out and understand more of what people bring to these events. For this reason it is important to see the conversation as just one small contribution, one opportunity to practise the skills we will need to build a better future. We encourage all who care about this art to let us know what worked and what didn’t work so that we can only improve in future events.

### **Conclusion**

Change is inevitable and with change comes both peril and potential. By making the most of the gifts we have received from others who came before us, and creating gifts of our own for those who will follow us, we explored the prospect of building a place of peace, a place that shows what it is to live in an ethical, compassionate society with the capacity to include and provide for more people than we do at present. Others have laid the groundwork for Canberra to have such an identity. In this conversation we saw a glimpse of what it will require to bring together hopes, aspirations and dreams, and yet have the courage to look bleaker truths, challenges and realities in the eye so that such ideals are not unrealistic dreams, but have the prospect of being realised. Ideals and dreams are a vital start, but they are not enough.



## Participants

Aart Groothius	Telling the Story
Aileen Power	Environmental science writer
Allan Spira	Allan Spira Architects
Andrew Purdam	Chorus
Ann Cleary	Architecture, University of Canberra
Anne Clarke	Executive Officer, SEE-Change
Annie Didcott	Chorus
Aunty Jude Kelly	Yamatji/Noongar stolen generation
Barbara Norman	ACT Climate Council; Canberra Urban and Regional Futures; Urban Planning, University of Canberra
Barbara Nosworthy	
Boni and Peter Maywald	Peace Knits
Bradley Carron-Arthur	ACT Young Citizen of the Year, 2012; Mental health research, ANU
Carol MacKay	Canberra Dance Theatre, Gold Group
Caroline Le Couteur	
Carolyn and Elmer Kiss	
Catherine Carter	Property Council of Australia
Cathy Cleary	
Chris Finnigan	
Christine Larkin	Quakers
David Pereira	Cellist, composer
David Purnell	ACT Conflict Resolution Service, Quakers
Denise Higgins	Artist; Educational research, ANU
Dierk von Behrens	
Ellie Gilbert	
Emilia Della Torre	Chorus
Evan Mann	
Gai Brodtmann	MP, Member for Canberra
Gill Christie	Chorus
Gina Brinsmead	
Glenda Cloughley	Chorus
Hannah Semler	National Arboretum, Events and Venue Manager
Helen Pilkington	Chorus
Honey Nelson	Chorus
Ian Ross	Hartley Lifecare
Janet Salisbury	Chorus, Facilitator — Canberra Conversations
Jannete Phillips (Nin)	Ngunnawal elder
Jeanette Hahn	Friend of Arboretum
Jeffrey Frith	Sculptor
Jeremy Nelson	
Jess Dixon	
Joan Kellett	
Johanna McBride	Chorus
John Finnigan	Complex Systems Science, CSIRO
Jono Crane	Alliance Australis
Julia Wolfson	Turning Forward
Julie Chater	

Kati Görgenyi	Chorus
Kaveri and Arko Chakrabarty	
Lara Alexandrow	
Leonard Arnolda	
Lorna Sullivan	Disability ACT
Lyn Stephens	ANU Centre for Dialogue, Australia 21
Mahesh Radhakrishnan	
Margaret Bearlin	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
Margaret Duncan	
Mark Spain	SEE-Change
Meg Rigby	Chorus
Melinda Spink	Canberra Dance Theatre, Manager
Merilyn Jenkins	Chorus
Natasha Hudson	
Nicky Grigg	Chorus
Sarah Stitt	Chorus
Shirley Pipitone	
Sue Hoffmann	Chorus
Sue Packer	Paediatrician, Canberra Citizen of the Year 2013
Susan Helyar	ATC Council of Social Services
Toni Bauman	AIATSIS
Valerie Brown	Fenner School of Environment and Society
Zoya Patel	Editor-in-chief of <i>Lip</i> (international online feminist magazine)