

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Wangaratta—Thursday, 13 February 2020

MEMBERS

Mr Darren Cheeseman—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESS

Ms Lizette Salmon, Convener, Wodonga Albury Towards Climate Health, and Coordinator, Repair Cafe Albury-Wodonga.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing. I just want to run through some important formalities before we begin. All evidence today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the Committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report. Thank you for making the time to meet with the Committee today. If you could just state your name and title for the record.

Ms SALMON: My name is Lizette Salmon, and I am the Convenor of WATCH, Wodonga Albury Towards Climate Health. I am also the Coordinator of Albury-Wodonga's Repair Cafe.

The CHAIR: Fantastic, Lizette. It is over to you. If you would like to make a verbal submission, that would be fantastic.

Ms GREEN: I should have brought some stuff to repair.

Ms SALMON: We can speak about that later. Thank you for instigating this Inquiry and inviting me to speak. In my written submission I listed community groups in Albury–Wodonga that are doing their best to mitigate and adapt to climate change. I also suggested ways the government could support their actions. If you would like more details on this, particularly regarding the Repair Cafe and the heatwaves impacts database, I would be delighted to take questions after my presentation. But during the next 10 minutes I want to focus on the experience of community climate advocates and conclude with relevant recommendations.

My background is as a speech pathologist and health research coordinator. Thirteen years ago, in consultation with my husband, I gave up my health career and income so I could focus on climate advocacy. I had become increasingly concerned about climate change and extremely frustrated by the then Howard Government's dismissal of this issue which, as David Attenborough says, could lead to the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world. I began by forming a climate advocacy group called WATCH. Our initial intention was to engage with people in positions of influence and encourage them to take action on climate that is consistent with the science.

We started with politicians and held more than 20 meetings with local, state and federal members, including Greg Hunt, when he was Federal Shadow Minister for Climate Change; David Davis, when he was Shadow Minister for Environment and Climate Change; and Sussan Ley, our member for Farrer, who is now the Federal environment minister. These meetings were deeply disappointing, with one MP after the other demonstrating a limited understanding of climate change, disinterest in the topic or lacking recognition of the urgency of the problem. Their wilful ignorance of the consequences of climate change was exemplified during a radio interview with Prime Minister John Howard when he was asked, 'What do you think Australia will be like when we are 4 degrees warmer?'. And he coughed awkwardly and said, 'Well, I guess we won't be quite as comfortable as we are now'. The leader of our country, the highest person in office, was turning a blind eye to all the science he had received and completely dismissing the horrific scenario we face with 4 degrees of warming. This was one of many moments we felt totally let down by our political elites.

These experiences did, however, lead me to wonder how politicians viewed climate change in private moments, so I embarked on a postgraduate qualitative research study through Latrobe University and conducted in-depth interviews with 11 non-metropolitan Victorian parliamentarians from a mix of political parties. Three of my key research findings were, firstly, climate change had been politicised before it was fully understood with one exception—MPs from the Liberal and National parties doubted human-induced climate change, while those from the ALP accepted it. Secondly, those who doubted human-induced climate change sourced information on it from their peers and from journalists in the Murdoch media. They received credible scientific reports from the

IPCC and the CSIRO but avoided reading them. And, thirdly, politicians interviewed were generally not well-informed about climate change. They lacked knowledge about tipping points and positive in the climate system. Even when prompted, not one of them mentioned the risk of permafrost thawing and releasing vast amounts of methane. Most were unaware of the exponential nature of climate change and the potential for it to accelerate of its own accord once certain tipping points had passed. Those who were aware of runaway climate change did not talk about it for fear of causing the public to panic.

Although this is a small research project conducted 11 years ago, many would agree these findings still hold true among current politicians: climate denial remains an issue; knowledge of climate science, particularly the exponential nature of climate change, remains poorly understood; and climate change remains deeply politicised.

This politicisation means that even left-leaning politicians are reluctant to speak up on the issue. The worst moment in my many years of climate advocacy was during a meeting with an MP who publicly accepted climate science but was loath to speak up on the topic. Her house had been threatened by fire two years running. I asked her to mention the link between climate change and bushfires the next time she spoke to the media, the next time there was a bushfire, and she turned to me and said to me, 'No, that's your problem'. I was gutted, shaken and furious. She was caught up in the spiral of silence surrounding climate change, and I felt utterly abandoned. This brings me to the crux of my presentation. What our community needs to help us tackle climate change is more politicians, including Victorian ALP parliamentarians, to really champion climate change.

In preparing for today a colleague conducted an internet search into the seven of you on this panel, on this environmental committee, to determine what you have said about climate change in the media, your inaugural parliamentary speeches and the last four to six months of your Facebook posts. One of you has spoken up on the need for climate action, another has dismissed it and the rest of you appear largely mute on the topic. You discussed bushfires, drought, renewable energy, and the Murray-Darling Basin plan, but not, it would appear, climate change. I am glad you are all here today, but I had to say this.

One of Julia Gillard's greatest regrets about her time in office was that she did not carve out enough time for the important things. I know there are many competing demands on your time, but what is more important than the livability of our planet? Yet there are only a small handful of MPs in the current Victorian Government who champion climate action. That is not enough. I think back to one of the Labor politicians I interviewed for my research, who said that every time she was asked to give talks to community groups she always spoke about climate change. We need more MPs like her.

The recent bushfires, as we have all heard, have been catastrophic and the cost of recovery will be astronomical, but these fires have opened the public conversation on climate change. Now is the ideal time for politicians, including you, to speak up about the reality of climate change and about how the longer we procrastinate about reducing emissions the greater the cost to our economy. We could be world leaders in renewable energy and the jobs it creates, but we need your leadership.

So my recommendations to the Victorian Government are: firstly, that all politicians are briefed on the consequences of climate change including the potential for climate change to accelerate of its own accord; secondly, that all politicians become informed on climate messaging and how to best engage different audiences; thirdly, and critically, that you nurture climate champions within your ranks—we need more than just a handful of Victorian MPs to really lead on this issue; and fourthly, that your departments employ more staff with a deep understanding of climate communications and cultural change.

For a whole-of-society engagement you need the expertise of sociologists, psychologists and communication specialists. To really help communities and businesses tackle climate change we also need climate policies that will genuinely support the transition away from coal. I am so pleased you will be visiting Yackandandah this afternoon and seeing the wonderful groundbreaking work they are doing, but there is no point in assisting us with such community renewable energy initiatives and other attempts to fiddle away at the edges of the problem if we continue burning coal, oil and gas.

So my four additional recommendations are: one, that the Victorian Government set interim carbon emission reduction targets for 2025 and 2030 that are at least at the upper end of the independent expert panel's review of ERTs—i.e., at least 39 per cent on 2005 levels by 2025 and at least 60 per cent by 2030.

Two: that when states and territories meet to discuss national air pollution standards you must advocate for European-equivalent standards. Australia currently ranks second worst in the OECD. By tightening these standards it will also have the flow-on effect of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Three: that when Victoria's onshore gas moratorium expires in June 2020 we ask for the moratorium to be continued. Gas is not a credible energy source as it still has half the emissions of coal.

And, four: Victoria must burn less coal, oil and gas, and plan for an energy transition. Germany has provided a good example of such a plan. If we do not plan a transition, world markets will make all the decisions for us, with little warning. The resulting shocks as the price of fossil fuels drop will cause stranded assets, redundancies, bankruptcies, energy shortages and other negative consequences that accompany a no-plan scenario. I would like to finish with a quote from Martin Luther King, who said:

We shall have to repent in this generation, not so much for the evil deeds of the wicked people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.

You are all good people, but many of you have not spoken up on this issue. We face an incredibly bleak future without drastic action. To ensure a viable future, please talk about climate change and make climate solutions your highest priority.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Lizette. Has anyone got any questions?

Mr FOWLES: Thanks, Lizette. That was a highly entertaining presentation. I wonder whether you might give us some commentary about the things specifically in the Wodonga–Albury area that you are doing, or what you have identified amongst your community of interest as being the things they would most like to see from the State of Victoria on these matters.

Ms SALMON: Sure. And because being an advocate has been a frustrating experience and sometimes you feel like you are banging your head against a brick wall, and that is why I had to say what I had to say, I do now focus very much on tangible things. So, as mentioned, I am the Coordinator of the Repair Cafe. Repair cafes, if you are not sure, are places where people can bring broken household items and get them repaired with the help of volunteer repairers. So they get furniture repaired, battery-operated appliances, bikes, clothing and textiles and so on. It was an idea that began in the Netherlands in 2009. In Albury–Wodonga we were the first repair cafe in Victoria in 2015, and there are now 25 repair cafes across Victoria, so it has really had a wonderful ripple effect. We are open once a month, but we have managed to fix 2500 items, so it is a really popular service. And it has wonderful not only environmental benefits but social benefits, because people do not just drop off their items and then leave; they watch, they learn how to repair and it upskills them in the art of repair.

The environmental benefits: obviously we are keeping goods in circulation for longer. That means diverting them from landfill, which is good, but there is another really important environmental benefit, and that is to do with the fact that everything we buy contains embodied energy. A lot of campaigns to help householders reduce their ecological footprint or their carbon footprint have focused on how they can reduce their electricity or gas use in their home, but that is only sort of 20 per cent of their carbon footprint. Another 20 per cent is the stuff they buy. We are a very hyper-consuming society, and sadly, our happiness levels were actually much higher in the 1970s when we had smaller houses and less stuff. But everything we buy has embodied energy, and that is about 20 per cent of our carbon footprint. So initiatives like the Repair Cafe are fantastic, because they also mean that we are saving greenhouse gas emissions when people get their radio, get their chair, get whatever fixed and do not have to go out and buy another one. And it is engendering a repair culture that has potential jobs in it for professional repairers.

Mr FOWLES: So how do you think you would tip the balance, though, when it is cheaper to replace your microwave with a brand-new one than it is to get the old one fixed? How do you actually change those economic fundamentals?

Ms SALMON: That is right. People who come to us pay nothing; it is a free service. But we do not do electrical appliances. So I will tell you my recommendations in regard to this issue. There are four recommendations. The first one is developing campaigns for households where there is an emphasis on reduce, reuse and repair, and educate the public about embodied energy in consumables. Secondly, you have got a DELWP Shifting Victoria to a Circular Economy report that is due out at any moment, and Australia needs laws wherein manufacturers must design goods with the circular economy in mind—so if you could really carefully consider the findings in that report.

There has been a parliamentary inquiry—last November—into recycling and waste management, and one of the findings, number 25, was that you support the introduction of new initiatives across the state that extend the life of products. I also suggest you adopt recommendation 26, and that was that the Victorian Government works with the Commonwealth Government to consider the introduction of extended warranty requirements for products, so there is a way.

Mr FOWLES: Sorry, so there is your recommendation about initiatives that extend the life of products and there is changing the warranty rules. Are there other things specifically you are asking us?

Ms SALMON: Yes, so for example in Europe, in France, they have introduced a law where if manufacturers deliberately build in planned obsolescence, company directors can be jailed—yes, true, in 2015 France introduced it—and subjected to significant fines. There is also legislation in Europe being discussed about a right to repair, and the ACCC is looking to what is coming out of Europe.

One other thing, just to finish my four recommendations, if that is all right, is about Sustainability Victoria, which does a great job. I know we have just listened to this panel saying, ‘Can we have more money?’, but if there could be a Sustainability Victoria representative, a person, for each major township rather than one person for the whole of the Hume region, that person could help coordinate initiatives like the Repair Cafe rather than relying entirely on volunteers.

If I may, also initiatives like Sustainable House open day—I have looked through a lot of the transcripts, but I did not see any mentions of the Sustainable House open day, which is a Sustainability Victoria initiative, which is fantastic. It is one of the best things—

The CHAIR: We saw some evidence, actually, from Geelong if my memory serves me correctly on that.

Ms GREEN: They do it in Nillumbik, where I live.

Ms SALMON: One house in Wodonga got 600 visitations. But again the coordination of that is all left to volunteers. Those 600 people are new audiences. They are not the greenie tree-hugging variety. They are people who want to see what is actually happening in a house that they can do, and I think if there was more funding towards that, that would be really beneficial. I know I have just gone from talking about the Repair Cafe to the Sustainable House open day, but they are kind of linked.

The CHAIR: Sure. Are there any other questions?

Ms SALMON: You did ask about what else I am doing. Can I tell you about something else that we are doing, but it is mainly my baby. It is a heatwaves impact database. In 2013 I happened to hear at the farmers market that 3000 chickens had died in our area—three or so different producers—after a significant heatwave. And I said, ‘Why isn’t there more discussion about this? I haven’t heard anything about this in the media’, and I was told those producers were concerned because they thought they would cop it from the RSPCA. But they had just not had such significant heatwaves. And then I started wondering, ‘Well, what other impacts are these heatwaves having on crops, livestock, flora and fauna?’, and it turns out there was a pig farmer and his sow had, during the heatwave, dropped a breeding cycle. So the sow was not able to get pregnant and hence the pork supplies were affected. He thought he would adapt the following year. He thought, ‘Right, I’m going to have those piglets earlier’. He did, but during the following year’s heatwave the sow stopped lactating and his piglets died.

Some of these things you can adapt to. So with the chickens now I have not heard of any of those large-scale chicken deaths because they are misting more now. The pig farm I do not know what is happening there. But with every heatwave we have reports of crops—they frazzle, they cook; there is tens of thousands of dollars of

damage—but a lot of the farmers are not actually reporting on it. So what we did was we recruited 100 citizen scientists. We recruited gardeners, farmers, teachers, ecologists, engineers, health professionals and teachers, and every time there is a heatwave I contact these 100 people and say, ‘What changes have you noticed? What are your observations?’. It is not just about crops, livestock, flora and fauna, but what health impacts, domestic violence, are linked with heatwaves. We then collate that information, we put it on our website, and we speak to the media about it.

Again that is something that I feel should not be left to communities. This information about local impacts is really valuable. A lot of research says that if you tell people about what is happening to the polar bears, they switch off. People want to know about local impacts, and obviously the bushfires have been a big one. We hear about algal blooms, but these other things often just disappear, and if more of these things were publicised, and their adaptation strategies, you would get more people on board, more of the community on board.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Lizette. Is that it? Any questions? Fantastic. Thank you for coming.

Ms SALMON: That was so short.

Ms GREEN: Darren, I just wanted to assure Lizette. I reckon maybe you need to get your researcher to have a look at our contribution scheme, because I just googled all of us.

Ms SALMON: Yes.

Ms GREEN: I was thinking, ‘I know I have’, and I think almost everyone on this Committee—

Mr FOWLES: I have had eight Facebook posts on climate change in the last year.

Ms SALMON: Well, he went back four to six months, and I just looked at the last month again. I did not want this to be the case—I really wanted to—because you are on this planning and environment committee.

The CHAIR: We have spent six months travelling around regional Victoria doing this exact thing. So we have been taking a lot—

Ms GREEN: I think that you should be assured that we are all on board. And I just wanted to let you know I made a top for my sister out of a pillowcase last weekend. So I am living it.

Ms SALMON: But are there enough champions? It was not just me. I have spoken to other heads of environmental NGOs and said, ‘Do you feel there are enough climate champions within the Victorian parliamentarians?’ and they said, ‘It is often left to a fairly small group’. I just want to encourage you. The more you can talk about it, the better. I would love to see it; we felt those things because we tried and could not find much.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your time. We very much appreciate it. You probably heard the submissions with the round table earlier. I suspect if you actually thought about and allocated a bit of time to each one of those people—

Ms SALMON: I know.

The CHAIR: It seemed like it went forever.

Ms SALMON: That is right. I think that was really important.

The CHAIR: We have probably given you the exact same amount of time. Thank you so much.

Ms SALMON: Thank you, Darren. I thank all of you.

Committee adjourned.