

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Melbourne—Tuesday, 10 March 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

WITNESSES

Dr Nicholas Aberle, Campaigns Manager, and

Ms Taegen Edwards, Senior Campaigner, Environment Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing. Before we begin there are some important formalities that I must outline. All evidence taken 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 that 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 the evidence in the next week or so for you to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the Committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report. Thank you for making time to meet with the Committee today. Could each of you please state your full name and title before beginning your presentation.

Dr ABERLE: Dr Nicholas Aberle, Campaigns Manager at Environment Victoria.

Ms EDWARDS: Taegen Edwards, Senior Campaigner, Environment Victoria.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Over to you.

Dr ABERLE: As you can probably tell from the fact that we have the word 'campaign' in our titles, Environment Victoria, despite what our name sounds like, is not a government agency. I know we are wedged in here between Agriculture Victoria and Sustainability Victoria, but we are well and truly independent of government, both in terms of our activities and our funding. Environment Victoria used to be predominantly funded by State Government, but for the last five years or so we have been proudly 100 per cent financially independent of both State and Federal governments, thanks to the incredible donations of thousands and thousands of Victorians who keep us afloat.

This Inquiry has very broad terms of reference, and the list of submissions and the diversity of the organisations that made those submissions, I think, is quite telling, and I think it really comes back to the very simple fact that climate change is not an environmental issue; it is an everything issue, and the terms of reference in acknowledging that climate change will be affecting different parts of the community across different scales and layers I think really acknowledges that. I just wanted to point that out.

One of the elements on the community response to climate change I just want to flag here at the beginning, just because you may not hear it from some of the other people giving evidence, is that one of the critical things that we see in how Victorians are responding to climate change is through activism. There are a whole bunch of other fantastic, legitimate ways of people expressing their concern about climate change, and that might be getting involved in community energy projects or any number of other local initiatives, but the participation of Victorians in activism and protests is an incredibly important part of the democratic process. It has a long history in any number of social movements as an important thing for driving the change that we need to see in the world. So we would encourage Government and Parliament to welcome that, to respect that and to acknowledge that the participation of Victorians in climate activism is an incredibly important and legitimate part of how we respond to this crisis.

I appreciate we provided our submission quite late in the game, so apologies if you have not had that much time to have a look at it. Before getting into questions I just wanted to focus on I guess a bit of a summary of the types of things that we think State Government should be doing or could be doing to support those in the community who are trying to respond to climate change. These are listed as four unnumbered dot points at the top of page 4, I think. This was just sort of an attempt at categorising what follows elsewhere in our submission. I think the first obvious one is providing funding. There is an enormous number of communities out there and a wide range of organisations who are keen to be doing all sorts of different things on climate change. For many of them the thing that prevents them from doing that is access to funding. The State Government in particular seems like a pretty obvious source to be able to enable those local groups to trial a range of different things that then may get scaled up more broadly if they work well.

A second point there is around ensuring that non-environment-related programs are attuned to the possible cascading impacts of climate change. Climate change is not just about bushfires and heatwaves; it is obviously about those things, but that is really just a starting point. You would need to do no more than go to Mallacoota and see what is affecting that community right now to understand that those primary impacts, if you like, of climate change—those extreme weather events—are really just the lightning rod that then trigger a whole series of cascading impacts. It has everything from economic impacts to social impacts. I think the submission from VCOSS in particular was talking about the rise in domestic violence that often occurs as a result of heatwaves. So we think about heatwaves, and we talk about how hot it is, but there are a lot of often hidden impacts, and really that is a key area for the Government to deal with. It might not sound like a climate change program to be dealing with domestic violence as a result of a heatwave, but it really is a climate change-related issue.

Another point is around creating or reinforcing the policy environment. Victoria has many community groups and other organisations who are at the forefront of responding to climate change, and that is fantastic and we should encourage that, but it would be naive to think that those groups alone are going to be sufficient as a response to this threat that we have. Giving a small number of millions of dollars to spread across hundreds of community groups who want to do interesting things is nice, but if the weight of government policy is pulling in a different direction, then it is just sort of tinkering around the edges, really.

I guess that leads into the fourth one, which is around leading by doing. The State Government needs to be driving the change that we need to see, not hoping that others will do it for them. That is not a critique of what this or any other government has been doing; it is just a statement of the role that we see state government needs to play.

There are a couple of things elsewhere in the submission I just want to highlight before handing over to my colleague for a few other comments. Climate targets: in the context of state government leading by doing, one of the key things that the State Government needs to do is set the trajectory for action on climate change. There is no better nor important opportunity for the State Government to do that than by setting climate targets for 2025 and 2030 that are consistent with the objective of the Paris agreement. Those targets need to be set, or the decision needs to be made on those targets by the end of March. So this is a decision that is happening right now. Environment Victoria sees that as a critical opportunity for the State Government to set that trajectory and show to all those community members out there who are concerned by this that the State Government is taking this issue seriously.

Home energy hubs is another one. The State Government has set up three—I cannot remember the exact name; it is community power hubs, perhaps—around the state. But these were really quite limited in scope. They were really just about providing support to community groups who want to develop community renewable energy projects, which is a great idea, but it is still quite a narrow concept of what these home energy hubs could have been. We had been saying at the time that we would like to see these act more as sort of clearing houses for community members to get information about what they can do at an individual level but also at a community level to improve the consumption of clean energy and improve energy efficiency.

Another one is around adaptation research. For several years Victoria had the Victorian Centre for Climate Change Adaptation Research, VCCCAR. At the same time the Federal Government had the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility. These at the time were really world-leading institutions for driving the research that we needed to inform the types of responses that government and community groups needed or would benefit from. Both of those organisations have ceased to be funded, disappointingly, and we would like to see that coordination of adaptation research re-funded and to be driven by State Government so that we are actually plugging the research gaps where we need to. With that, I will handpass over to my colleague Taegen.

Ms EDWARDS: I just wanted to really add one point, and it is really around the scope of this Inquiry. We really welcome that it is focusing on the community scale because of how important that actually is for people who are looking at taking action on climate change. We work with a lot of volunteers around the state and a lot of community groups as well. I think we have noticed—and I have noticed from a personal perspective in terms of dealing with climate change as well—how much easier it is for people to stay motivated when they are working in a community structure. It is such an overwhelming issue to deal with. When I first got involved in looking at climate change—and I think this is a story a lot of people have certainly told me that they faced as well—you know, I am talking 10 or 15 years ago, I changed my light bulbs, I started riding a bike and I did a

whole lot of stuff around the house, and it was not until I actually got involved in a community climate action group that I felt that I was doing something to deal with climate change that was at the scale that was required. There is just so much more that we can do when we work together. We hear that sort of story repeated across the state, and we see it play out with all of the work that we support in terms of working on action on climate change. I wanted to, I guess, congratulate you for looking at it at this community scale—really wanting to see the structure and support for that scale of action, I feel, is really important.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. I have, I think, a couple of questions. In Victoria we obviously have the Victorian renewable energy target, and that target, I think, by and large has been taken up by the big commercial and largely international renewable energy companies, investors and others. It occurs to me, and certainly some of the evidence that we have seen to date is that—there are a couple of elements to this, actually—some communities wish to set up their own community-owned renewable energy, Hepburn energy being one. But we have also heard some evidence that various communities might wish to buy into a commercial project, so buy a hundredth turbine or something like that. What might future government policy potentially look like to help support individual communities who wish to either establish a couple of turbines or buy a turbine as part of a commercial development? What sort of policy reform might support that? I am sort of thinking at the 3 megawatt to 10 megawatt kind of scale—the three-turbine size perhaps?

Dr ABERLE: That is what they were established to provide: technical support to community groups who are interested in establishing their own small renewable energy projects. I am not talking about people putting solar panels on their own roofs, nor am I talking about a giant wind farm, but that sort of small-to-medium scale—similar to Hepburn Wind, I guess. Those community power hubs were intended to provide that technical support and access to a bit of funding for feasibility studies and that type of work, because commissioning a bunch of engineers to tell you what is the best place to put a wind turbine or how to do solar panels or commissioning those works is often outside the scope of a small community group, so that was the purpose of those community energy hubs. I think in that sense they work quite well. It is a good model for how community groups can be encouraged and enabled to take up those types of projects. Again I think they were useful, but not sufficient.

The CHAIR: Could there be a potential carve out of the VRET, so not reducing the overall component to that, but setting a part of it aside for community-scale renewable energy?

Ms EDWARDS: That is where my mind went with the national schemes: doing that with small-scale renewable energy—anything less than 100 kilowatts I think it is. It is possible.

The CHAIR: It seems to me that we do commercial really well and we are now doing at home really well, but there is a potential public policy gap between the two.

Dr ABERLE: The VRET legislation is very broad. It really just says, ‘We will have a target’, and it does not say that much about how we are going to meet it. We saw with the first round of the VRET auctions that there were a wide range of criteria that got considered as part of that reverse auction process, and I do not think there is any reason why you could not call for tenders for those 2 to 10 megawatt projects and just come up with a range of criteria for how to assess them. That could be anything from ensuring that they are in different parts of the grid to where other projects are—they may not be the most commercially viable in that sense, but if they give you a bit of electricity supply in places that need it, then that is useful. You might apply a socio-economic overlay, you might put them in places that are generally lower income or you might put them in places like the Latrobe Valley that are seeing a big change in their workforce as a result of power station retirements. There is no reason to think the methodology that was used in the first VRET auction could not be applied to small-to-medium scale processes for community-driven projects.

Mr MORRIS: I was interested, in the submission, in the suggestion or recommendation for the launch of a joint climate change action fund, and you are talking in that second paragraph about ‘supporting projects developed by particularly vulnerable groups and those communities experiencing first and worst consequences’, which at first glance seems entirely reasonable and sensible, but I am just wondering how those judgements are made, because apart from anything else, in many cases it is going to be pretty subjective. Home is pretty precious, and if it is directly affecting you, your community and your local environment, then it is going to be a really big thing in an individual’s mind, so how do you make those sorts of judgements?

Dr ABERLE: That is really difficult. I think we have been pretty lucky so far that we have not really been forced too much to turn our minds to the really hard decisions in climate change adaptation. We have seen it in climate mitigation, where we have had the climate wars for the last 10 or 15 years which have really set us back as a nation and we have seen those issues become very highly publicised. I hope that we will not see adaptation get politicised in the same kind of way. I think there is a risk as we get to that point where we need to start making those judgement calls that that will happen, and that concerns me very greatly. I think that is why it is important that we have discussions like this ahead of time so that we can all try to get on the same page about what the smartest response is.

You are right, who is impacted first and worst is pretty loose language in many ways. Certainly there is plenty of evidence that low-income or otherwise disadvantaged households suffer the most from climate change, but that is not to deny the fact that if you have a \$2 million house by the beach and it gets wiped out by a cyclone—not that we get cyclones in Victoria—that is an impact and that has an effect on you as well, for sure.

I think what we are talking about with the idea of this fund is not so much around providing like a broad approach to funding State Government-driven adaptation work but more to funding those community-scale projects that improve our adaptive capacity or resilience. So I think in that sense, those would most sensibly be put more towards what we might classically refer to as more vulnerable or disadvantaged communities.

Mr MORRIS: If I may just in responding to—

The CHAIR: Yes, quick, go.

Mr MORRIS: Nick's very valid point earlier about the climate wars. My feeling and my hope is that there is enough wriggle room, there is an opportunity, for people who are climate deniers, for want of a better word. I suspect there may be enough wriggle room for them to blame other things, whether it is bushfires or all the myriad things that are going to be aggravated by the climate change we are experiencing. I am more optimistic on that front because it has got to be done.

If I can just follow up on that point, one of the things that has been mentioned again and again in this Inquiry, and frankly over my period I have heard it far too often to be comfortable, is around the challenges that many community groups face just simply putting the grant application in and the red tape that must go—that does go with it. I was going to say 'must' go with it because after all we are spending public money so we need accountability. But any thoughts on how we might get the money out there—retain the public accountability without needing a degree in accounting to actually complete the application form?

Ms EDWARDS: I think Sustainability Victoria is up next, are they?

Mr MORRIS: Sorry.

Ms EDWARDS: I am just aware they may have some good recommendations on that. I just know that some of the models that are already in place, funding officers in different regions to go out and actually work and identify which community groups might benefit from certain grants and work with them to actually help with that sort of stuff, a lot more of that I think would be pretty useful. Because you are right, it is a big struggle to actually get across what grants are even available to them, let alone filling in all the forms and that sort of thing. So certainly thinking about that in the structure of how those funds—

Mr MORRIS: Every community group I know, regardless of whether they are environment groups, Rotary clubs or whatever, they all have someone who specialises in doing the forms, doing the applications, just to try—and that just seems a tremendous waste of resource. They could be actually doing things that matter.

Ms EDWARDS: Yes.

Mr MORRIS: That is useful. Thank you.

Dr ABERLE: Just one thing I would probably add to that quickly is I think it is a really similar issue to what I was mentioning about the academic research around adaptation in the sense that you do not necessarily just want to make a giant pot of money available for anyone who wants to do anything. So if the State Government were to establish a Victorian climate change action fund, then I think the smart way of doing that would not just

be to say, 'Here's a giant pile of money. Tell us what you reckon', but to say, 'Right, here's a pile of money. We are interested in projects that fill this gap, that fill this gap, that provide this solution, that address this concern', so actually you are creating really clear categories that help, I guess, focus in the types of applications that people can put together; because it is not just about giving money to community groups, it is about increasing our adaptive capacity, and DELWP, Sustainability Victoria, others will be best placed to think about what gaps there are in government knowledge and what gaps there are in government programs to set those boundaries and criteria.

Mr MORRIS: Yes, you are dead right, and I think that is an important point: that it is effectively about getting more bang for the public buck, and if we can engage the community and get them involved in it, then that is what we want to do. It is not about just getting money out the door, which sometimes unfortunately is the way it comes across. Thanks for that.

Mr FOWLES: Two questions. You used in your example around the role for state government, in the reinforcing policy environment you used the freeways example specifically, and I guess it prompted a thought about if the building of new roads or higher capacity roads reduces congestion, does not that improve the environmental outcome? Secondly, does the electrification of the vehicle fleet more broadly change your view about the way in which we tackle transport within the climate change adaptation?

Dr ABERLE: On the congestion front, I think every freeway that has ever been built in the history of freeways has shown that it will get congested very quickly. I cannot remember what movie it was, but, 'If you build it, they will come'. As soon as that freeway exists, I think the projections are always that within five to 10 years it will reach capacity and you will just have another congested freeway. I think some of those assumptions around having extra road capacity meaning that our freeways are less congested and that therefore cars are travelling at 100 kilometres an hour without having to have their foot on the brake pedal every 10 seconds are a bit optimistic. There is certainly evidence that just building a freeway does not solve traffic congestion.

On a point around electrification, I think that can obviously play a very big role, and needs to play a very big role, in reducing emissions from our vehicle fleet. Transport is responsible for 17, 18 per cent of Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions. The vast majority of that is from road transport and I think 90 per cent of our road transport emissions are from private vehicles—cars. Obviously electrification has a role in cars but also in heavier vehicle transport as well. I think it would be a mistake to rely exclusively on the electrification of the vehicle fleet as a transport mitigation policy.

There are a couple of things there. One, if you are saying we are going to build freeways and we are going to have electric vehicles in the future so that is going to solve our transport emissions problem, you would want to be putting a fair bit of effort into driving, pardon the pun, the uptake of electric vehicles. We have seen some early steps towards that from the State Government, not enough I think in terms of being able to say that in 10 years time we going to have a really clean vehicle fleet. The other point around vehicle emissions is that we do not even have any kind of meaningful emissions standards at the moment. We saw the Federal Government consider it a couple of years ago and put it in the too-hard basket, so even our combustion engine vehicles are hopelessly inefficient compared to international counterparts. Does that answer your question?

Mr FOWLES: Yes, that answers the question, thank you. A different topic: you no doubt have a bunch of very engaged activists amongst your ranks. You have got people who are seriously passionate about these issues. To what extent have you seen some real climate anxiety creeping through the ranks? To what extent are there mental health pressures amongst your cohort, and what things do you think Government can do to assist with that?

Ms EDWARDS: To a large extent, I would say. We have not done any measurement of the sector or our volunteers in the last summer that we have just had, but we are certainly getting a lot of anecdotal reports back on that. Actually I think it is not just people who have been involved in climate activism that are feeling that; I think that is much broader. Some people I think might be going straight to that. In some ways people who have been involved in climate activism have thought it through and come up with mechanisms probably over the last five to 10 years or longer. In terms of ways to support, I guess it is Psychology for a Safe Climate.

Dr ABERLE: Yes, there is an organisation called Psychology for a Safe Climate that is involved in a few different things, but one of the services they provide effectively—they are all trained psychologists and they run workshops to help people deal with climate grief. It is a real thing. We see it from our volunteers all the time, we see it amongst our staff, we hear it from our supporters, and it is quite debilitating for a lot of people.

Mr FOWLES: So would you see Government as being to be able to support the work of groups like Psychology for a Safe Climate, or do you see there being, I do not know, anything else more broadly to assist in this emerging category of anxiety?

Ms EDWARDS: I wonder about providing spaces for communities to come together and talk about this where they are not already there and they are not already thinking about it. I do think that it is going to be really important that governments are trying to set up communities to be able to deal with these things together. I think we have just seen in recent times that people go quickly to, ‘What can I get for my household?’, ‘What can I do to prepare as a household?’. But if we can create spaces in the community where they are actually going to a community hall to talk about that—what we can do for our community to prepare for something we are really scared about or multiple climate shocks at the same time—then absolutely there is a role for Government to play to help facilitate those conversations and create more positive spaces.

The CHAIR: There is obviously a network of what I am going to call your branches, but a network of groups out there that come under your umbrella. There is also obviously local government out there, and they are a bit of a mixed bag in themselves. There is some that are really innovative and leading the debate within their communities and then there are more resource-constrained councils that in the mixture of priorities that they might have climate change perhaps is a little lower order of magnitude. They are struggling with basics like roads, rubbish, rates, those kinds of things and they just do not have the internal financial capacity to fund climate change programs to support their communities. What would be your observation in terms of what Government might best do to help support those councils in working with their communities? I am thinking perhaps of communities where you may not have a natural reach into them. Is there a way in which Government could support local government on that front?

Dr ABERLE: I am sure there is. To be honest, I think you might get a more useful answer from a local council. I am not sure if you have got any councillors coming to give evidence. I know that a bunch of them made submissions—

The CHAIR: They have presented to us, and they always of course look for money. But I am wondering, from your perspective, because you have got lots of different groups around the place, but I am sure there are lots of big holes, if you like, and perhaps local government might be one of a number of different ways in which Government could help support those communities and look at local initiatives.

Ms EDWARDS: Well, I was just thinking of, say, the Darebin Solar Savers program. I am not sure if you know about that one. But as far as I know—I am not going to explain the whole program because it is not my area; I am not sure quite how it works—it is providing solar for folks, on their roofs. It is a council-run program where there is not actually a cost. I think there is risk taken on by the council over time to provide loans, but it is not actually costing the council.

Anyway, my point is that there are programs that councils have been running in places where there are a lot more resources going into trialling things and thinking things through where they are win-win and cost-effective. And actually there is a really strong case to be made—ways of getting councils together to show and learn from others about what has been working and what are actually cost-effective solutions that they could be implementing.

The CHAIR: So Darebin is obviously a relatively densely populated community. It is a large community. Obviously there are large parts of Victoria where that density does not exist, and the councils maybe have a much larger landmass to manage but a much smaller community. And I am just wondering what level of support might be provided to those smaller communities, those smaller councils because I am sure NGOs like your group may not have a particularly strong reach into those areas either. And what sort of support might be provided to doing something like that Solar Savers program and helping support smaller communities in doing that through council or wherever else?

Dr ABERLE: A couple of things. I think your point was really spot-on around local governments being stretched and needing to prioritise, you know, roads, rates and rubbish. But I think that is sort of an embodiment of a broader issue that we have, that too many institutions still see climate change as a future thing that we can deal with down the track. And it is not, it is happening right now and if we do not do things right now, it is going to get much worse down the track.

If we were responding to climate change like we are responding to coronavirus, we might be in a much better situation. And I think that observation around the fact that councils have limited resources and that therefore they are focused on what they see as their core business I think could equally be applied to state and federal governments as well. You know, a lot more resources at both state and federal levels could be going into ramping up staff capacity not just in DELWP but across all departments to ensure that every institution has the capacity to do what needs to be done.

Specifically for councils, you know I reckon probably every council in the state will have at least one staff member who really gets it—who understands the local challenges, who is well tapped in to different members of the community and what they need from both the mitigation and adaptation perspectives. Probably what they could do with is some colleagues who could help them expand that work. So it might not just be giving them money that they can then distribute to other organisations, just giving them that core staff capacity of trained people who can identify the needs at a local level is critical.

I think that sort of leads into my next point around the need for localised adaptation research, because adaptation is very localised by nature—and your point around how a high-density, inner-city Melbourne council is going to have very different adaptation issues to a council in the Mallee or in the north-east or on the coast. And so one of those things that those councils might need is: where is the actual information about what we are going to be dealing with? I mean, DELWP produces climate change projections, which are broken down pretty well now by scale in terms of its primary impacts. But again taking that through to those sort of cascading impacts of climate change could be a useful thing for State Government to work with local councils on.

And just a final point on that is around planning schemes. My information on this is a bit out of date, but my understanding is that councils have been screaming out for more clarity and guidance and support from state governments around planning schemes that deal with climate change issues.

The CHAIR: So would you recommend that we recommend to the Parliament that the *Planning and Environment Act* be redrafted to include climate change action as a part of the Act? Because at the moment it is silent.

Dr ABERLE: I have not read the *Planning and Environment Act* for some time, but if climate change is missing from it, then that is a real problem. Again this is going back some time, but just one quick story that I recall.

Port Albert, down on Corner Inlet in Gippsland, has a heritage overlay on the planning that meant that no building in the town could be built above the height of the local pub. It was like a heritage pub, and that was going to be like the tallest building in town, right? This is how high you could put your buildings. And then the State Government released, not inappropriately, guidance about how high off the ground buildings need to be built to deal with sea level rise. And so that meant that buildings rather than being this high above sea level now had to be that high above sea level. And it had this ridiculous situation where, because you could not go above this heritage overlay and the floors had to be this high, you actually could not build anything because there was not enough height between the top of the pub and where the new floor level needed to be.

I am not a planning law expert, but I have got no doubt that there is probably a wide range of improvements that could be made to the *Planning and Environment Act* and to our planning scheme generally to better enable councils to make good decisions around climate adaptation.

Mr FOWLES: So has EV done any research into the environmentally sustainable design space or the contribution that buildings make to our greenhouse gas footprint or any of those areas? We have taken evidence from a number of people who have, but is that something that has been a focus for you guys at all?

Dr ABERLE: I guess a lot of what I was saying just before was about adaptation and responding to climate impacts. In terms of the built environment and its contribution to emissions, Victoria's homes are responsible for about 13 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions when you account for the electricity and gas they consume. We do a range of work in that area pushing for better energy efficiency regulations at the state level. The National Construction Code is currently being reviewed, so State Government has a role to play in ensuring that the buildings—our homes of the future—are built to better standards. At the moment the minimum for a new house is 6 stars, but a 6-star home today is not necessarily very well equipped to deal with a heat wave of 40- or 45-degree temperatures, and you have got ANU telling us that by 2030 we might be getting 50-degree days in Melbourne. Is our building code currently cut out to deal with that? Probably not. So there is certainly a lot of improvement that could be made on that front.

The CHAIR: All right, thank you. We appreciate your support and your submission.

Dr ABERLE: Thanks very much.

Witnesses withdrew.