



‘Neighbourly conversations’ — cross-party conversations with MPs from nearby electorates

An initiative of the Women’s Climate Congress

Celia Hammond MP (Lib, Curtin, WA) and Josh Wilson MP (ALP, Fremantle, WA)

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Hosted by the Women’s Climate Congress, with facilitation by Wicked Elephants Cooperative

Introduction

At a time when Australian society is deeply divided on the question of climate, a central principle of the Women’s Climate Congress is to promote collaboration and mediation among the currently polarised political and social groups that have prevented unified national action on climate change over the past decades.

The ‘neighbourly conversations’ initiative is one of a number of projects the Congress is developing to model and promote a different style of public discourse that can bring the currently divided perspectives on climate change together to find common ground.

For our first ‘neighbourly conversation’, the Congress was delighted that Josh Wilson (Labor, Fremantle) and his political neighbour, Celia Hammond (LNP, Curtin), agreed to join Congress members for a Zoom chat. Moreover, they agreed to throw caution to the wind and have a different type of conversation intended to highlight common interests and generate greater understanding of other people’s views.

Who was in the Zoom room?

The 1.25-hour conversation was introduced by Congress Founder, Janet Salisbury (based on Canberra), and facilitated by Deb Collins and Caresse Cranwell (both in NSW). Also online were 11 other Congress members from 3 states and (including a number from each of the two guest MP’s electorates).

Process

The process for the conversation was developed by our facilitators, Deb and Caresse, in conversation with members of the Congress core group. It was designed to be different to the other public conversations that we are usually part of — in that it was neither debate nor Q&A, but rather a shared space of discovery and hearing other perspectives.

The aim for this conversation was to:

- EXPLORE a new kind of conversation
- BUILD relationships and understanding
- OPEN pathways for further constructive conversations and collaborative action.

Our facilitators used a process that helped participants explore their positions and their values round climate change through storytelling from their own life experience, and then sharing as a group what we resonated with.

The conversation was run under the 'Chatham House Rule'¹ and was not recorded.

The conversation

These are some of the ideas, values shared interests that arose during our conversation.

From the start it was clear that we came together with shared concern for human and nonhuman life, on behalf of ourselves and of those in the future.

Participants spoke of feeling connected to the natural world. We were drawn to the idea of 'stewardship': that we are responsible to the generations to come for how we consume, nourish and tend the planet. People also value their relationships with friends and family and are concerned that the division over climate has the potential to undermine those relationships.

Despite the conflict around climate action in Australia, we share these values. There was a shared sense that the adversarial system of political decision-making is unhelpful, especially given the importance for us all of taking action on climate change.

As individuals, we may feel we are not able to influence events, but when we're connected with others, we feel more powerful and better able to respond to the challenges that are arising. It emerged that the concept of 'power' is relative, and community members can feel powerful when they are engaged in group actions whereas polities can feel less powerful if they are not at the forefront of decisions and are the receiving end of community disdain. 'Agency' might be a more useful concept as it reflects people's capacity to act. Even politicians have greater agency when working with the support of communities, and they value that support. These relationships are necessary to break through the webs of complexity that make it difficult to do even the things we know to be right.

The problems that we face us are not just about the planet – they're also about our society and the ways important decisions are made. There is a difficult balance to be struck between taking action on climate change on the one hand and mitigating the impacts on jobs and communities on the other. We need to hold the tension inherent in these positions — to not see them as in opposition but as interconnected and equally important. We have a duty to sit and deliberately listen, to unlearn the adversarial ways we have of knowing and being and to create new kinds of discussions and decision making. Creating 'bridging conversations' at the close of discussions is one way to keep talking.

For some years now the effects of climate change have become more apparent — climate change and environmental issues need to be moved up the priority levels. Concern is for the future is very deep, including for those whose voices are unheard or have been silenced – the natural world, the animals, the youth, the unborn, those most vulnerable and marginalised.

At the end of the conversation, several participants expressed that they had been drawn to look at things from a different perspective (see participant's comments below).

In concluding, Janet identified some possible areas of ongoing collaborative action, including:

- Follow up a Women's Climate Congress proposal to host an event with the Parliamentary Friends of Climate Action.
- Host cross-party conversations with parliamentary women.
- Host further 'neighbourly conversations' in other electorates around the country.

¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>

- Constituents from Fremantle and Curtin could follow up with their own communities in relation to further conversations with Josh and Celia.

Comments from participants

'I enjoyed Monday's conversation so much. I felt very energised and motivated afterwards - it was a great reminder of the many wonderful people in our community who want to see the same changes that I do, but whose voices are not heard in the national discourse around climate change. I'm really grateful to Josh and Celia for their time, their openness, and their willingness to listen to our perspectives. My biggest takeaway from the conversation is that we, as citizens, need to do more to empower our representatives so that they can be the drivers of the change that we want to see in politics.'

The 'neighbouring electorate' approach is a good one - as is the emphasis from the outset about the rules of engagement. I too was challenged (in a good way) by listening to what others had to say... and the beauty of the environment you helped create today, that 'challenge' did not cause a 'defensive shut down' - but, rather, more thought and reflection.

I really enjoyed the conversation, and, even better, learned some things and was pushed to think differently about some things along the way.

Well done for yesterday's meeting! I felt it went very well! [The politicians] were open and receptive – and clearly have strong desires for climate action.

Thanks

The Women's Climate Congress thanks Josh Wilson and Celia Hammond for joining this conversation, all the participants for your time and wholehearted contributions. And a very big thank you to Deb and Caresse for working with the Congress to develop this initiative, designing the process and for your expert facilitation on the day.

Contact and further information

Please send suggestions for further conversations to:

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For further information about the Congress, see

www.womensclimatecongress.com

And to join our National Congress of Women series of events, see

www.nationalcongressofwomen.com