

ANU CLIMATE UPDATE 2020

Presented by the ANU Climate Institute (CCI)

Opening Address

by

The Honourable Penny Wensley AC

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ANU

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Thank you, Madam Chairman-(Professor Kate Auty, ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment)- for the introduction;

And thank you, Professor Mark Howden, Director, Climate Change Institute, for the invitation to me to open this Climate Update- the third since this annual series was launched in 2018.

I am stepping in for the ACT Emergency Services Agency Commissioner, Georgeina Whelan, whose preoccupations have necessarily been elsewhere during the worst bushfire season the ACT has known since 2003.

I take the opportunity to pay tribute to Commissioner Whelan for the strong leadership she has shown- and the clear, calm communication she provided to the community- during the turbulent conditions experienced during recent weeks.

As this afternoon we embark on yet another discussion on the emotionally-charged, complex subject of climate change, those contrasting images- one of calmness and resolve- and the other of turbulence- seem to me the scene-setters for this 2020 Climate Update—together with the fact that there is a new level of community interest and involvement with the subject.

For years, here in Australia, we have had great difficulty in holding a reasoned, rational national discourse on climate change- and still seem a long way from doing so. With such a

cast of knowledgeable speakers today and such a well-informed audience, engaged on the issue-this timely forum is an opportunity, I suggest, to set an example of reasoned discussion, to help shift the balance from repetitive, unproductive debate and argument, towards what is needed- positive, purposeful determination to act. It's also an opportunity to bring community action more to the fore.

On the matter of turbulence:

The engineers in this audience will know that in fluid dynamics, turbulence is fluid motion characterised by chaotic changes in pressure and flow velocity. In turbulent flow, the speed of the fluid at a point is continuously undergoing changes in both magnitude and direction. The flow of waters and rivers is generally turbulent in this sense- the air or water swirls or eddies, while the overall bulk moves along a specific direction.

Australians living through these past months,- through the twelve months since Climate Update 2019,- could certainly attest to the “chaotic changes” and pressures they have been experiencing; to the speed and magnitude of those changes—as could communities and populations around the globe—dealing with drought, floods, landslides, typhoons, tropical cyclones, heatwaves, coldwaves, at unprecedented levels. (If watching the daily tv news doesn't provide sufficient evidence of the accelerating pace and impacts of climate change world-wide, check out the world map of disasters that ReliefWeb- a specialised digital information service provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs- is currently monitoring. It presents an alarming sea of red flags- each flag signalling a disaster, a crisis of some kind needing urgent attention- and for me, as a former diplomat and former State Governor- seasoned by many crises and in crisis management- the striking thing is just how many of them now involve extreme weather events- confirming that the “overall bulk”, that climate change represents, is moving not only in a very specific, but increasingly dangerous direction-as scientists have been telling us- warning us- for years.

The UN has identified 2020 as “a critical year for addressing climate change”. In an address last month, UN Climate change Deputy Executive Secretary Sarmad said that as countries prepare to submit their new or revised national climate action plans this year, they will need to show much higher ambition, since the world is currently on track towards a global temperature rise of 3 degrees Celsius, double the target set out in the 2015 Paris Climate change agreement- when 194 countries agreed on the need to act to limit the increase in global average temperatures to “well below 2 degrees below pre-industrial levels”- and to pursue efforts to stabilise global temperature rise at 1.5 degrees, “to reduce the risks and impacts of climate change”.

Some of you here may have been at that Paris meeting- (formally, the 21st Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change)-and will recall the sense of optimism- even elation- that it generated.

Senior UN officials certainly thought it was a break-through:

In that same speech last month, Ovais Sarmad recounted:

“There was a sense, in 2015, that the positive energy coming out of Paris had finally set the world on the right track.....It was a time of great optimism: countries were on board; there was a clear sense of momentum;

(In fact, I recall the Institute, Mark, had an event here at the ANU featuring people who had attended the meeting. It was hailed as a break-through/landmark/as charting a new course in the global climate effort.)

Personally, I was pleased to hear that message-but more than a little sceptical that it would prove true.

I worked on climate change and sustainable development issues and policy intensively for a number of years, as Australia’s ambassador to the UN and for the Environment. I led Australian delegations to the negotiations on the Framework Convention and attended the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties. I gave scores of speeches-in Australia and elsewhere- about Australia’s position- of being uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and to the response measures needed, and about the need for unprecedented global cooperation to deal with this- and other global environmental challenges beyond the capacity of any one government to address. I experienced, vividly and first- hand, the conflicting agendas at play, the tensions within and between governments, trying to address an issue that affected so many core national interests, that touched on so many political and economic nerve-points; And the resistance to climate action of vested interests. Of course,

my experience with hammering out the foundational framework for global action to address climate change, has been re-lived over and over again by policy makers and negotiators through the decades since.

When I stepped away from those inter-governmental negotiations, moving onto other positions, my judgement-my prediction- was that they would continue to grind on-very slowly-and that the real impetus for change would come from outside government---from business, when impacts started to hit home(insurance companies for example), and from the community—for similar reasons. Of course, its far more complex than this, but, sadly, it's a bit like an authority finally acting to install a traffic light at a dangerous intersection, only after a certain number of crashes have had grievous consequences- when the dangers and risks, the effects on people's lives, have become ever more obvious and evident-too striking to ignore.

As has been the case with Australia's fires- and the extreme events-the disasters being experienced elsewhere around the world. In 2019- according to the UN-hurricanes, wildfires and floods cost the world \$150 billion and losses for business and the economy are only expected to increase, because of the rise in natural catastrophes with a link to climate change...that "overall bulk" I referred to earlier.

Surely, these must serve as a game-changer- for many communities and individuals- and for the governments preparing their revised national climate action plans to take

to the 2020 COP-Australia included. Certainly that's my hope- and I expect will be the hope of many at this forum.

One other hope I have- and it's my final point- is for the voice of science to be heard more clearly, respected and acted on.

I am not a scientist- but I have long championed the cause of good science- of scientific evidence being the basis for good public policy. My conviction of its importance (and my appreciation of how good Australian scientists and researchers are in so many areas of relevance to dealing with climate change), dates back to the important role scientific advice played in getting the Framework Convention agreed. At several critical points, when we became bogged down in passionate politics, it was the science- the dispassionate facts and figures the scientists provided- that enabled us to cut through- and find solutions.

Fast forward twenty-plus years, and I am again working on climate change- notably as it is affecting our oceans, Australia's marine environment and the Great Barrier Reef- in my dual roles of Chairman of the Australian Institute of Marine Science and of the Reef 2050 Plan Advisory Committee.

And I am again, constantly reminded of the importance of science and the role it can play- providing not only the evidence and the knowledge that may help us to break political deadlocks, but the research that will guide our responses and adaptation to a warming world.

Most of you in this room will be aware of the assault on science that has been underway for some time- here and overseas-linked to a larger campaign of resistance to climate action. It's a troubling assault- one we simply cannot afford when the need for solutions and new approaches- for transformational approaches to limit global warming- has never been more clear or more urgent. As our communities become ever more seized of the risks of climate change- and of the heavy costs of inaction- so science, research and innovation need to be given-be restored to- their rightful place.

The ANU- and the Climate Change Institute- of course, need no urging in this regard. I thank them for hosting this important Forum-and look forward to a stimulating afternoon.

Thank you