

## **Speech to Australian Fabian Society, Canberra**

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### **How should cities respond to climate change?**

#### **1. Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Fabian Society. I wish to acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of this land, both past and present.

The focus of this talk is the twin challenges of urbanization and climate change and the role of cities in responding to climate change. While discussions between nations may appear slow, I argue here that there is considerable action in tackling climate change between cities and regions. This activity and innovation needs to be harnessed and supported at the national level. It also needs to be placed in the broader context of sustainable development.

At the outset, can I say, this is the *urban century* with over 60 percent of the world's population living in cities by 2050 trending to 90 percent living in cities by the end of the century. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, declared at RIO+20 that 'sustainability should be through our towns and cities'. New York Mayor Bloomberg, chair of C40 (global cities alliance tackling climate change) added 'as cities become more sustainable, our entire world would reap the rewards'. Arnold Schwarzenegger, when governor of California, extended this concept to regions by establishing *Regions 20* – Regions of climate action.

The Climate Commission in Australia has confirmed that the impacts of climate change are already with us. In its report *The Critical Decade* (2011) the Commission confirms that 'the global climate is changing and humanity is almost surely the dominant cause'. Furthermore 'this is the critical decade. Decisions we make from now to 2020 will determine the severity of climate change our children and grandchildren experience'.

The IPCC report on extreme weather (2011) concludes that 'settlement patterns, urbanization and changes in socioeconomic conditions have all influenced observed trends in exposure and vulnerability to climate extremes (high confidence)'. So what we do in cities matters, and how we plan and build our cities will be critical to our global and local response to climate change.

## **2. International action**

International action and agreements between nation states on this issue is variable as shown at the recent RIO + 20 meeting. However at the city and regional level there is much activity. The OECD has recognized this in its series of publications over the last 2 years on cities and climate change and most recently on green growth.

Possibly the most active and resourced activity is the C40 alliance in partnership with the Clinton Climate initiative chaired by New York Mayor Bloomberg. C40 is a 'network of megacities committed to addressing climate change'. It currently has 58 city members including Sydney and Melbourne and is a global network supporting and highlighting action on climate change. Current examples range from a new environmental rating program for buildings in Tokyo, Bogota's comprehensive bike network, the City of Melbourne's Council House, car free days in Seoul, an effective energy efficiency program in Berlin and New York city's plan to reduce emissions by 30% by 2017 (<http://www.c40cities.org/>). In visiting the Mayor's office in New York City, I was impressed with his commitment to evaluation and monitoring of the significant suite of actions being implemented there. New York City has one of the lowest carbon footprints in the world and is leading in action at the local level.

The second significant example is the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). Almost complementing the megacity network, ICLEI is a global alliance of city mayors of towns and smaller cities across the globe. It hosted a major conference in Belo Horizonte in the lead up to RIO+20 in which I participated. The atmosphere at that meeting was positive with a willingness to share knowledge and experience on these issues unencumbered by the constraints of international dialogue between nation states. It confirmed for me that much of the action on climate change would be led by cities. However, as was made clear in the communiqué from ICLEI to RIO+20, cities cannot achieve such transformation on their own.

Which brings me to RIO+ 20. This was not a climate change meeting as such, but a stocktake on how we are traveling on the broader agenda of sustainable development. Clearly responding to climate change is part of that agenda. Despite the pessimistic national press on the outcomes, the actual text reflected a more progressive outcome for cities. The one issue that developed and developing nations agreed on was the need to establish a process for more sustainable cities including 'integrated urban planning'. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard will co-chair a high level forum to guide that process.

### **3. Leading practice in Australian cities**

In a similar pattern to the international scene there is significant innovation and action by cities on climate change within Australia. I suggest this is because local government and regional organizations understand that action on climate change is not only good for our planetary future but has multiple other benefits for the community. In other words many of the actions we would consider for climate change mitigation and adaptation we also would consider as beneficial to the community and leading practice in sustainable development. To illustrate I will highlight five themes – green buildings, active living, public transport, open space for adaptation and community engagement:

- i. *Green Buildings* - retrofitting and reducing energy consumption in public and commercial buildings, public lighting, ensuring planning includes environmental performance in the codes, information and advice to community members on what options there are, for example the 1200 buildings program in Melbourne and the Green Buildings Council.
- ii. *Public transport*- investment in rapid public transit systems including very fast train, light rail and faster regional rail such as in regional Victoria.
- iii. *Active living*- investing in safe bicycle and pedestrian networks, local neighborhood planning, reducing journey to work with local workplaces such as smart local hubs, active living program by the Heart Foundation in Canberra.
- iv. *Adaptation*: local coastal councils adopting adaptation policies; sea level planning policies, setbacks and open space for storm surge; for example City of Mandurah WA and my own South East Coastal Adaptation project at the University of Canberra.
- v. *Engagement with the community*: the importance of community engagement particularly when planning for risk and uncertainty in the context of climate change; for example, Mornington Peninsula Council's 'conversations on climate change'.

### **4. Canberra and the region**

The national capital is unique in structure, design and governance. Its history, planning and development are under scrutiny leading up to the centenary of

Canberra. *Capithetical* is an international design competition that I hope will bring many ideas of inspiration to the table. As Chair of the judging panel I have had the opportunity to review the 114 entries. The themes in the submissions are not dissimilar to the examples mentioned above and the suite of actions that could underpin an integrated response by cities to climate change – sustainability is a key focus with emphasis on energy efficiency, biodiversity, healthy cities and urban resilience to the impacts of climate change.

On the local scene, there are number of other very positive initiatives underway including the current tender process for the largest solar farm in Australia, the establishment of the ACT Climate Change Council which I chair, with diverse membership to advise the Minister (climate scientist, economist, community sector, business sector, urban planner and senior public servant) and the many recommendations including the draft Climate Change Strategy currently being considered by the government. If we can make a serious and long-term commitment to public transport, active living, retrofit our old commercial building stock and retain our green spaces for biodiversity and adaptation, then our national capital should be well placed to be a leading example in responding to climate change. We could become a solar city!

## **5. Not business as usual**

There are many challenges and with that opportunities for cities to tackle climate change. To conclude I would like to make the following points for consideration and discussion:

- i. Our cities and regions are not level playing fields with significant socio-economic differences between and within; the capacity of a population to adapt to climate change will vary according to social, educational and economic status; e.g. communities ability to understand risk scenarios, capability to consider relocation from areas of risk, resilience for rebuilding after disasters. A more integrated regional approach can assist to address these issues by better equipping communities for social and environmental change, becoming “adapted communities”;
- ii. Interdisciplinary research is required for the built and natural environments; new partnerships between research, government and community, for example, Canberra Urban and Regional Futures of which I am co-director, [www.curf.com.au](http://www.curf.com.au);
- iii. Skills and education on cities and climate change must inform the next generation of decision makers; young people from national and international settings will demand both community based and government responses to

climate adaptation. Examples of this are courses in urban and regional planning (UC), climate change (ANU) and new units such as the cities and climate change Winter Term unit at University of Canberra;

- iv. Cities and green growth – innovation and research in low carbon built environments such as green precincts, for example, Northbourne Avenue; smart infrastructure; renewable energy, integrated urban planning; smart local neighborhood hubs for both young and older people;
- v. An Australian Sustainable Development Commission – providing advice, research and a forum for debate- not more government, more effective government ‘joining the dots’ over the long term (Sustainable Cities Parliamentary Inquiry 2005).

## **6. Conclusion**

In this speech I could have focused on the negatives, on the impediments to change and on the political landscape. That’s important and very real but so are the opportunities. In the Fabian tradition, I have focused instead on the many and varied interventions at the local and regional level leading to incremental and progressive change. The carbon price has provided the economic platform for structural change. There will be new economic opportunities ranging from carbon farming to renewable energy to smart infrastructure. The mayors and councils of our many towns and cities are engaged in innovation, sharing knowledge and making a difference on the ground.

Planning for climate change may well need more strategic intervention and transformational change and with that our local leaders will need the support of the national government. Tackling climate change is part of a more integrated response to sustainable development. With more collaboration and strategic investment in the new economic opportunities of green growth there is definitely a pathway for a more sustainable future. The choice is ours, and as Fabians I believe we should be working for that progressive change towards a more sustainable future for our community, our planet, our future.

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