

SHORT REPORT: THE NATIONAL CLIMATE EMERGENCY SUMMIT (NCES) IN MELBOURNE (FEBRUARY 2020)

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HOPE INC. (28th February 2020)

1.0 The National Climate Emergency Summit (NCES) in Melbourne February 2020

Over the last few years there has been a growing level of local government interest and public mobilisation around the concept of Climate Emergency Declaration (CED). The author has written more extensively on this topic in a recent briefing paper: *Climate Emergency Declarations by Local Government in 2020*, available from the HOPE organisation upon request.

In Australia, the National Climate Emergency Summit (NCES) held in Melbourne on 14th and 15th February 2020 is claimed to have been the first, major national gathering to consider the value and progress of the CED initiative since its inception in 2016. The Summit event itself was sold out, with a main audience of over 2,000 participants. Additional audiences participated outside of Melbourne through live, online streams from the event. The author of this report attended the Summit as an observer on behalf of HOPE, and gratefully acknowledges the financial support made available by the organisation.

1.1 Key objective and format of the Summit

The key objective of the Summit was to *'bring together climate change strategists, activists, youth leaders, and industry innovators from across Australia to explore and unpack what a climate emergency transition could look like at local, national and global levels.'* The event certainly succeeded in providing a networked 'view from the bridge' with a veritable 'who's who' of thought leaders taken from the fields of environmental and climate change concern, stretching back decades.

The content of the Summit was presented through a series of plenary, workshop and breakout sessions. There were also some opportunities for networking and spontaneous participant group discussion within the main two-day program. Much of the content of plenary and associated presentations has been made available online, as video and podcast resources and details of this content will be given later in the report.

The speaker panel provided a veritable galaxy of experts, spokespersons and key thinkers in the climate adaptation and mitigation space, taken from science, the professions, politics, academia and the media. A small sample of names indicates the overall calibre: Michael E. Mann on related science and research; Rebecca Huntley on research into social change; Peter Garret on social change and politics and Margaret Klein Salamon on social change and psychology.

1.2 Four Strategic Topics

Four strategic topics structured the focus of plenary and breakout sessions. These were:

Climate Emergency Impact

The message from Summit presenters here was on the urgent need to increase public understanding and build widespread recognition of the full economic, social and environmental implications of climate threats and risks

The associated program content explored:

- The latest research into short, medium- & long-term climate threats and risks
- Local and global examples of climate change effects and impacts
- Projections of climate impacts in relation to different levels of response
- How climate change is acting as a catalyst for social conflict and a health emergency

Safe Climate Protection

This topic area focussed on evaluating current climate targets and ‘unpacking’ the climate conditions required to provide maximum protection for humans and other species.

The program content for this topic explored:

- Strategic priorities for maximum protection
- The science of safe climate conditions
- Targets and timelines for achieving a rapid transition to safe climate conditions

Full Scale Transition

The interest here was in considering how to build the capacity for large-scale change, and generate international support for a transition to a safe climate at emergency speed.

The associated program content covered:

- Decarbonisation and the architecture of a safe climate economy
- Capacities for change and Australia’s existing climate action assets
- Justice and democracy in an emergency-level transition
- Social and technological solutions including the latest below-zero emissions advances and carbon sequestration
- Managing the complexity of policy and leadership in a full-scale transition
- Economic, industrial and social change dimensions across different sectors
- Mitigating climate threats while avoiding further ecological damage throughout a transition

Building Societal Will

The fourth and final topic area explored how to connect citizens, organisations and parties from across the political spectrum to support climate solutions, and avenues for action.

Individual subjects of interest included:

- Crossing political divides & connecting with Australia’s diverse communities & values
- Effective communication strategies for the climate emergency
- Theories of change and the diversity of advocacy strategies
- Defining shared goals and collaborative action

2.0 The ethos of urgency at the Summit

Throughout the two-day event, the consistent message from both plenary and breakout sessions was that we were running out of time to take effective action to remedy global heating and dangerous climate disruption. Speaker after speaker concluded that after decades of inaction on

urgently needed climate change response, and the active undermining of required efforts by vested interests, a climate emergency transition, and the declarations which now herald it, represent a major mobilisation within civil society which is responding to the widespread public, if not governmental understanding of an escalating climate crisis. As the Summit program put it:

The evidence is clear. The world is standing at the edge of a major ecological and humanitarian tipping point, and the time has run out for half measures. After formal declarations of climate emergency began in Australia in 2016, the impact and influence of the climate emergency movement has escalated exponentially and led the campaign to become a global call to action.

3.0 The Safe Climate Declaration

By the end of the Summit its directorate had produced an important call to arms in the form of a Safe Climate Declaration which:

'Calls for a new approach to climate action in Australia, a response to match the scale of the threat as climate-warming impacts escalate in Australia and around the world.'

This Declaration could be taken as an outline manifesto for the principles which will guide a just transition to a decarbonised economy and society in Australia in the near future. The author believes that the importance of this document warrants that it should be circulated widely and publicly endorsed at every opportunity. The Declaration is reproduced in Appendix A of this report, and is available to be endorsed on the National Climate Emergency Summit website with link details given in the appendix.

4.0 Legacy of the Summit:

It is too early to say what the final impact this event might have in the emerging story of climate emergency realisation. What was in no doubt was a palpable energy and questing spirit for change and genuine reform, set against a sad history of lost opportunities to tackle the global climate in a serious and systematic way. The recent appalling impacts of extended Australian drought and bushfire events was still front of mind amongst many Summit speakers and audience members – and indeed such impacts were still occurring as the event proceeded. It was depressingly timely that, at the very moment the Summit was underway, Australia was becoming an inadvertent beacon for the World; in showing what climate emergency and climate existential threat might look like in the coming decades, if we do not now prioritise our response and form a task force of international unity to tackle this human induced threat; a threat that will, one way or another, shape human economic, social and environmental destiny for centuries to come.

4.1 Associated Resources:

The video of the plenary sessions held across the two days of the Summit, and audio recordings of some of the breakout sessions are available currently on the National Climate Emergency Summit website. The author has also collated links to video and audio resources and, a few early reports of the Summit. This information is provided in Appendix B of the report.

APPENDIX A:

The NCES Safe Climate Declaration – reproduced from the NCES webpage [with link to sign/endorse the Declaration](#)

A CALL FOR AUSTRALIA

THE SAFE CLIMATE DECLARATION

INITIATED AT THE NATIONAL CLIMATE EMERGENCY SUMMIT 2020

This Declaration calls for a new approach to climate action in Australia, a response to match the scale of the threat as climate-warming impacts escalate across Australia and around the world.

CLIMATE IMPACT

Australia's 2019-20 megafires are a harbinger of life and death on a hotter Earth. The climate is already dangerous — in Australia and the Antarctic, in Asia and the Pacific — right around the world. The Earth is unacceptably too hot now.

The impacts of climate disruption are more severe than previously projected. At 1.5°C warming relative to pre-industrial levels, now likely only a decade away, the Great Barrier Reef will be lost, sea levels will be heading for a rise of many metres, and tipping points will be at hand for Greenland, and for the Amazon and other carbon stores.

The current Paris Agreement emission reduction commitments, if implemented, are a path to 3.5°C warming by 2100, possibly earlier. This could increase to 4–5°C when long-term climate-system feedbacks are considered. National security analysts warn that 3°C may result in “outright social chaos”, and 4°C is considered incompatible with the maintenance of human civilisation.

Leading scientists warn of a “Hot House Earth” scenario, a planetary threshold that may exist at a temperature rise as low as 2°C, in which further warming becomes self-sustaining. The challenge now is to return to a safe climate by cooling the Earth whilst avoiding tipping points which may initiate further warming.

This requires an emergency response, where climate is a primary concern of leadership at all levels.

FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

Influential global leaders including political, corporate, media and financial leaders have deliberately refused to accept the overwhelming scientific consensus on climate change and its risks, using predatory delay to prolong an unsustainable economic system. Driven by perverse short-term incentives and lacking the imagination to understand the implications, they have placed humanity in extreme jeopardy.

Many of Australia's leaders are particularly culpable, having done everything possible over the last three decades to prevent the development of serious climate change policy, internationally and domestically, and to protect the fossil fuel industry. Notwithstanding the fact that Australia is the world's fourth largest carbon polluter, exports included, and one of the countries most exposed to climate change.

The first duty of a government is to protect the people, their well-being and livelihoods. Instead, Australian governments have left the community largely unprepared for the disasters now unfolding, and for the extensive changes required to maintain a cohesive society as climate change impacts escalate.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

In framing solutions to the climate emergency, a stronger democracy is needed, not weaker. The rights of citizens need to be protected to ensure that people are treated with respect, and treated fairly.

Climate change and its solutions will have profound implications for Australia – its peoples and its lands and waters. It is therefore critical to achieve and secure truly meaningful processes that empower indigenous voices, leadership and knowledge.

ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE THREAT

Australians collectively have a duty of care to protect people, nature and civilisation, both locally and globally. Calls to contribute to solutions to the climate threat need to be fair, taking account of people's capacity.

Climate change is a global problem requiring unprecedented levels of global cooperation. It obviously cannot be solved by Australia acting alone, but Australia must be fully committed to such cooperation.

Priorities for action include:

- **Cutting greenhouse gas emissions rapidly to zero.** All fossil fuel expansion to be stopped immediately; policies which encourage fossil fuel use halted and subsidies removed; and the existing industry wound down rapidly with adjustment programmes for frontline communities. Strategies to minimise methane emissions need to be implemented urgently.
- **Drawing down** atmospheric carbon concentrations to a safe level from the current 413 ppm level through actions that include redesigning agricultural and forestry practices and implementing extensive soil, estuarine and ocean carbon sequestration.
- **Working to prevent tipping points and damage** while the zero emission and drawdown goals are being achieved.
- **Integrating adaptation and resilience measures** into the economic restructuring needed to restore a safe climate and repair ecosystems.

Early action is essential. The prevalent idea of a gradual transition to net zero emissions by 2050 is not tenable. A far faster transition is required, using measures appropriate to an existential threat.

Climate change must be accepted **as an overriding threat** to national and human security, with the response being the highest priority at national and global levels.

CALL TO ACTION FOR AUSTRALIA

It is in Australia's self-interest to demand far greater global action on climate change, and to lead by acting itself. It makes no sense to build our economy on fossil fuel resources, practices and technologies which are unsustainable, particularly when Australia has some of the best clean energy resources and opportunities in the world.

This requires leadership which understands the challenge and the opportunities, and is totally committed to accelerating the emergency transition to a safe climate economy. This will not happen with leaders who do not even accept climate change as a priority.

The signatories to this Declaration call on all Australians to join with them in building leadership that embraces the need for such emergency action.

In particular, we will:

- Emphasise the importance of a **non-partisan approach** that embraces people of all political parties and sectors of society who are committed to science-based policies that make climate a first priority of government and of the community;
- Emphasise the value of a **non-partisan government of national unity** on climate;
- **Hold current political leaders to account** if they fail to protect the Australian people;
- Take action to **empower Indigenous voices and leadership**;
- Take action to **strengthen democracy and citizen rights**;
- Give priority to **engaging with the business community** to build understanding of the real nature of the risks and the pace of change required;
- Work to **mobilise and connect all sectors of civil society** to make a powerful contribution;
- Work to **reinvigorate public administration** and governance skilled and willing to drive the political and economic transition;
- Advocate tirelessly in public to **build understanding and community capacity** to drive change;
- Support the formation of a specialist taskforce to set out a **road map for Australia's emergency transition** to restore a safe climate.

APPENDIX B: Some associated Summit resources:

Video and audio recordings from the summit proceedings: are currently available on the NCES website. The video clips cover the plenary sessions held in the Melbourne Town Hall and the audio/podcast recordings cover the audience side meeting/ breakout sessions

Link to this video/audio material here: <https://climateemergencysummit.org/recordings/>

Access the Summit [program schedule](#) at the same time as video or audio selection - to get a greater sense of the structure and sequencing of the overall event.

A short, pre-summit press/news conference (12.24 minutes) recorded on 14th February 2020 with ex-Federal environment minister, Peter Garrett, ex-coal industry, now passionate climate change reform advocate, Ian Dunlop; and leading US climate scientist Professor Michael Mann, fronting this interview and laying out some of the key principles for a climate emergency response agenda.

<https://www.news.com.au/national/full-presenter-climate-change-summit-in-melbourne-with-peter-garrett-ian-dunlop-michael-mann/video/81569efc99cdfa2bf3aec3b197068d9c>

(Mann and Dunlop's contributions are particularly clear and hard hitting)

Text based reviews of the Summit:

‘Climate summit calls for urgent action after Australia's fire-hit summer.’

Author: Ben Doherty, February 15th, 2020

A short journalistic overview of the summit and its outputs from The Guardian Australia newspaper online. The Guardian was a Summit partner.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/15/climate-summit-calls-for-urgent-action-after-australias-fire-hit-summer>

‘Seven snapshots from the National Climate Emergency Summit.’

Editor: Melissa Sweet Author: Marie McInerney, February 19th, 2020

An excellent, journalistic overview of the summit proceedings by health journalist Marie McInerney, working for the Croakey online health publication (‘independent, in-depth social journalism for health’). This article has weblinks to other climate related articles and video and reproduces some key ‘Tweets’ from the summit proceedings.

<https://croakey.org/seven-snapshots-from-the-national-climate-emergency-summit/>