

CLIMATE EMERGENCY DEBATE

Climate in the Pub, Three Weeds Hotel Rozelle, 7pm, 13th December 2016



“We call on governments to declare a climate emergency and mobilise society-wide resources at sufficient scale and speed to protect civilisation, the economy, people, species, and ecosystems.”

In simple terms: “Yes we know it’s an emergency, but does it help to say so?”

For the proposal (yes it does help): **Phil Bradley**, (Greens & ParraCAN).

Against (no it does not help): **Felicity Wade**, (Labor Environmental Action Network (LEAN)).

Moderator: **Gavin Gilchrist** (Deputy President, CCBR).



On a coin toss, **Felicity Wade** chose to speak first, opposing the call for emergency action.

Yes, of course we are facing an emergency. We are facing changes to the climate that will result in the extinction of many species and many populations.

But communicating this by calling for wide-sweeping emergency powers has important implications for how we as a people organise ourselves, and how we make decisions.

Felicity recalled her earlier days in the Wilderness Society as a passionate environmentalist. Their radical actions attracted front page headlines in the Telegraph – but did they change anything? Now she is the National Co-ordinator of LEAN. She recognises the need to change the key organisations from within. It’s the only way to go.

Vanguard politics says “**we** know what is necessary; we are going to change everything”. But change forced by a minority is very brittle. We need to take the centre majority with us.

The failure of the Gillard government showed the dangers of running with minorities.

Kevin Rudd was a popular centrist who started out carrying a majority with him. There was strong recognition of the need for action on climate change (“the greatest moral challenge of our time”) and even for a carbon trading scheme. But when he abandoned his mission in the wake of the failed Copenhagen summit, people concluded “oh well, climate obviously isn’t that important”. We have never recovered that ground.

LEAN has been working within the Labor party in an attempt to shift the party’s platform on climate. They report some successes – eg stronger Emissions Reduction Targets.



Felicity challenged the quote attributed to Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has”, suggesting that it may have been relevant once, but certainly was no longer correct. It's her lifetime challenge to remove the quote from popularity.

We can call for an emergency all we like – but it's not taken us very far yet. What do we do? Take up arms? No, we need to work from the centre not the edge.

Phil Bradley followed, speaking in favour of calling for emergency action.



Yes, it's an emergency. We need to say so, because people don't realise how much is changing. He mentioned Aboriginal groups. They see what is happening to their land.

It's not a matter of not having solutions – there are plenty. It's a matter of political will. We need a stronger sense of urgency.

Are we so stupid that we can only see and act in the short term? We need to plan decades ahead. We are facing a 1 in 3 chance of exceeding the 2C threshold. We have to call it out. But we can't linger on the risk: we have to brightside it: look at the solutions.

Two thirds of species could be dead within a century. Humans are a threatened species. The problem? Coal donations. But there are many solutions such as Beyond Zero Emissions 100% renewable energy plans, put together several years ago. Many people thought this was the solution – but now we have targets of just 26%. Not good enough; and renewable energy is only part of the problem. We also have to tackle land use, forestry, many other things – they are all important. We have to recognise the enormity of the issue, and act on it. It's not a war, but it needs a wartime scale of action.

Politicians continue with \$40 billion a year subsidies on fossil fuels (an IMF figure), where \$41 billion is the estimated cost of reaching 100% renewable energy. Political will is what is needed.

In NSW, NCC is calling for stronger action even than the Greens.

But we won't get a solution unless we emphasise climate justice. We need to take the poor with us. We need Just Transition plans, employment alternatives. We must emphasise the bright side. Ending coal mining has health benefits – no more coal dust around mine sites, rail lines, dockyards.

It IS an emergency, we have to call it out.



Questions and comments from the floor were put to both speakers:

What about the unions in the just transition movement?

FW: The German example is that the coal industry was closed down quite rapidly (actually for economic reasons not environmental ones), but the government ensured that all workers were offered new jobs. Problem in Queensland is that “the people aren't with us”. Coal workers simply don't believe that there are any jobs except mining, and the Queensland Labor government will fall if Adani doesn't go ahead.

PB: we need to guarantee paid employment. Both ACF and ACTU have confirmed that there are more jobs in renewable energy and in fighting pollution than there are in coal.

How do we organise to counter Hanson and Trump?

FW: It's an incredibly wicked problem. Is environmentalism a middle-class obsession? All renewable energy policies in both parties seem to revolve around privatisation and private enterprises, despite Labor's belief in the effectiveness of public monopolies.

PB: Need to concentrate on social equity and economic justice. Work on the ground with movements like Lock the Gate, addressing people's individual problems.



What are the comparisons with Britain's WW2 mobilisation?

In the 1930s the British government and many people denied that Hitler was a threat, despite Churchill's (wilderness years) protestations. They didn't want to face a repeat of the horrors of WW1. Climate change, like war in the 1930s, is not immediate, but ultimately poses a greater threat even than Hitler. When war came, the threat could no longer be denied.

FW: Yes, Climate Change is a bigger threat than Hitler, but we don't have the numbers who would support the huge war effort level of mobilisation.

PB: Public opinion is shifting: 77% of people now say climate change is real. But we still need a broader public perception of the implications. Phil quoted a selection of IPCC predictions.

How can we make the solutions attractive (or how can we make attractive solutions)?

PB: It's about good marketing. We need to bright-side the discussion.

FW: We need to be more concerned with how to actually do things, less with setting targets for the future. Key is to engage people in solutions. In Germany at one stage over half the renewable energy capacity was community-owned. Now the big corporations are catching up.

Do we call it an emergency? It depends on your audience. How do we get the message out to the wider world?

PB: Through people like John Hewson.

FW: Yes, it's about the right message. But catastrophising is not working.

Unless we are told it's an emergency, we have nothing to talk about. And if we don't talk about it, nothing will happen. We are living in a bubble – created by the fossil fuel industry.

FW: It's like the boiling frog story. We are just warming up gradually.

PB: There is growing scepticism about the role of the mass media, and growing interest in the functioning of social media.

Government action in Nevada this year destroyed the successful solar energy industry overnight. If that can happen, surely it follows that governments can ramp up a solar industry just as easily?

FW. Yes, we need serious large scale government intervention: a sort of Snowy Mountains power scheme for renewables.

PB: Yes. It just needs \$40bn, and costs will fall. Industries can take off fast. But governments can kill industries here too, like the uncertainty over the RET crippling the solar PV industry.

Summing up: each speaker summed up their case in one minute.

Phil Bradley: We can't solve this problem unless we call it out for what it is. An emergency. But we shouldn't brightside the emergency, we should brightside the solutions

Felicity Wade: Yes we have an emergency, but we have been calling it such for a long time, with no result. We need to forget about vanguard politics and get dirty in order to take the middle with us.

The vote:

On a show of hands, the debate was won by Phil Bradley. Votes were approximately 30 for, 10 against the proposal that ***it does help to call it an emergency***, and to call on governments to declare a climate emergency and mobilise society-wide resources at sufficient scale and speed to protect civilisation, the economy, people, species, and ecosystems.