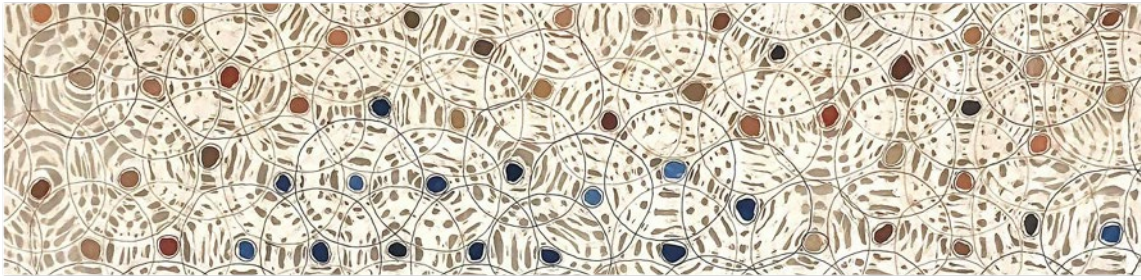


NATIONAL CONGRESS of women



Day One — Women Rising. Why Women? Why Now?

30 November, 2021

Wisdom Conversation 3

We, a web of women, seek and support wisdom for the common good¹

How can we get there?

Report by Barbara O'Dwyer

Guest conversationalists (see bios below)

Professor Kim Rubenstein, Co-Director 50/50 by 2030 Foundation, academic

Dr Mary Graham, First Nations leader, academic, community leader

Natalie Isaacs, founder of 1 Million Women

Sanaya Khisty, Chief Strategy Officer, Beyond Zero Emissions, Women's Environmental Leadership Australia

In this conversation, we pulled together the threads of the previous sessions and other work of the Women's Climate Congress over the past 18 months to consider what practical steps we can promote to make the transformational changes women want to see.

WCC Founder Janet Salisbury introduce the session with the following framing

What systems changes can 'women rising' promote to transform the political and public response to climate change. How can we draw on our true strengths in kindness, love, compassion and empathy to rebalance environmental and economic priorities and to bring climate safety for future generations and preservation of all life on Earth.

What steps can we take right now to make the changes needed towards gender collaborative, Earth centered approaches to climate and environmental action

¹ From the Women's Climate Congress Vision, values and commitment statement. See:

https://www.womensclimatecongress.com/uploads/3/0/2/0/30206683/wcc-vision-final_19sept20_.pdf

What can we do together as women to weave the threads together across our various sectors and activities to make the change to our governance systems that we collectively long for.

After the introductions, Janet handed to Professor Kim Rubenstein to moderate the session. Kim invited each of the guests to speak to the topic and each brought a different (but interconnected) lens:

Relationality

Mary said that is important for all of us to ground ourselves always in the safety and security of our environment and to take the profound step of reconciliation in recognizing the traditional owners.

We need a gender balanced governance system; that is a traditional Indigenous idea – women’s business, men’s business, women’s spirituality, men’s spirituality, women’s law, men’s law and so on. It embodies relationality, not just relationships between people but the whole philosophy – to the land and Mother Nature; it was in the governance of traditional societies – four main attributes – autonomy, balance, place and ethics. Every human being is an autonomous being so there is no hierarchy. It is a flat system – men and women both run things. Women are not handmaidens.

Looking after land goes with being against war. There’s an old Aboriginal saying ‘look after country, look after kin’. Country comes first because it’s the bedrock of looking after people.

Constitutional structures

Kim said that our Constitution needs to be updated to reflect those aspects of modern Australia that we should be affirming in our governance structures. This includes the way we operationalise our representation; for example, to encourage co-leadership and the need to create deliberative environments that build on the points of relationality that Mary spoke about. We need to provide support that benefits the whole nation rather than acting in our own camps, where we seek to beat others in order to maintain and exercise power. Rather than creating a structure where power is over others, that power should be exercised to support all of us. Our Constitutional structure should be relied on to promote that. That was the motivation for creating a federal system. Economics and commerce were the national building issues of the time. But the current situation with COVID has caused a rift in the federal system with states making their own decisions. We need to recognise that different governments can work together in harmony or corepresentation; that is, a shared notion of power with two people representing a particular electorate (could be a man and a woman).

We could also think about how to have more people involved in policy making and how to break down the hurdles that the two-party system has created with its adversarial nature – a system set up by largely white males whose life experiences were not diverse enough to take into account the full needs of the community. The current system is about beating the other and winning power, as opposed to exercising that power to achieve the best policy possible. Climate change action is a perfect example where we have failed to move forward

as a nation. We have a responsibility to become as active as we can as citizens to influence our governance structures, both through our vote and more actively between elections.

How do we engage women and girls?

How do we bring in women and girls who aren't yet engaged in climate action?

Natalie told the story of her own journey to change her lifestyle in response to climate change. Many women feel they don't have the knowledge or expertise to be involved. Based on her experience, she said that 1 Million Women encourages women to be courageous and 'jump in' and when you have the support of all those other women it truly becomes collective power. We need to build a new world in the process, one that is kinder and more compassionate. This starts with a deep spiritual relationship with our Earth. We need to listen and learn from the wisdom of our First Nations people; and we need to be fiercely optimistic and to get politically engaged, particularly at a community level.

Systems level action

Sanaya said that Beyond Zero Emissions focuses on systems level change because that is how to achieve the scale and pace that is required to achieve the emissions reduction needed to get to by 2030. The way to achieve that is through a strong collaborative approach and building on that relational approach Mary talked about earlier, by working with movement partners as well as people outside the movement from industry, from communities and from government. BZE's philosophy is that 'if we're competing, we're playing the wrong game'. There are finite resources and we all have shared goals. The best way to achieve them is to work together. This is also happening outside the movement with major industry players such as BlueScope Steel publicly saying that the way to get green steel is by making sure we're collaborating with the rest of the industry. The scale that we need to transition the economy to a zero emissions economy requires collaboration across government, industry and community.

A good example of this collaboration is the First Nations Clean Energy Network that is designed to make sure that they can support communities to lead the development of clean energy projects in communities in partnership with industry, so that communities can benefit from reliable energy sources as well as the economic gains that come from the scale of these kinds of projects.

After the presentations from each guest, there was general (and very animated) discussion, including in relation to questions and comments in the Zoom chat. Some further themes emerged:

Authority and power

Society is run by the wealthy, the powerful and the highly weaponised. People need to take back the power. Traditionally, instead of conflating authority and power, Aboriginal people separated them. Authority was in the hands of knowledgeable persons but power was

always in the hands of the people. This suits women's way. It's the way women are bent. Women are tough (strong). They need to get back their fearlessness.²

In other words, that is a flat society and not a hierarchy where it's mainly men at the top. It means a genuine authentic meritocracy system has to come into place. One idea is that of deliberative democracy and such things as Citizens Assemblies where people are chosen at random to serve on them. There is a growing consciousness by our citizenry that our parliamentary frameworks are not doing a good enough job in representing the breadth of interests in our society.³ We should be demanding a system with a greater diversity of representation that better reflects the lived experience of our community.

How do we foster the move to flat structures and support for citizen assemblies? Collaboration is crucial – and greater numbers of independent members of parliament would help to change the power of the party system. It is interesting that it is largely women who are saying they don't want to play the old game, that they don't want to play a game but one that is truthful to and authentic to the policies and commitments and values and that we don't want to have to compromise those aspects of our identity in becoming involved in political action.

We have to accept that there will be differing points of view but we should listen to what they are saying and what is motivating them in their position. We can support each other in coming to a place that is actually better for all of us. While we might have different views, we can be respectful of each other and to bring kindness and compassion and love of the Earth to everything we do. By having diversity we can see outside our own experience, to contribute, but also benefit from other experience to develop a policy, not only on climate change but on everything that impacts profoundly on us.

Economics

'We must humanise capitalism'. The old companies like the British East India Company were ruthless. Their only concern was profits. We need to change that. Coal country communities have to have something to transition to. There are huge opportunities across Australia and we have to make sure we're thinking of who should be benefitting.

Natalie described something of her time at COP26 in Glasgow. It was frustrating at COP26 that women were so underrepresented at the higher negotiating levels – but when women's voices were heard, such as in a speech by Mary Robinson of the, this provided a contrast to the mainstream economic arguments, including from the Australian Government.

The original Congress of Women

² See also the conversation about redefining power and women getting back their fearlessness in Wisdom Conversation #1

³ In Wisdom Conversation #1 there was discussion about whether the political system was broken. This expression 'that our parliamentary frameworks are not doing a good enough job in representing the breadth of interests in our society' may resolve the tension that was expressed in that earlier conversation (comments welcome!)

Janet Salisbury rejoined the conversation in response to a comment by Mary about the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The foundation story of WILPF was the 1915 International Congress of Women held in April 1915 during World War 1. About 1500 women came together in The Hague to try and find a way to end that war (short-term) and create the systemic changes needed to establish a sustainable peace (longer-term). A number of WILPF members are participating in this National Congress today, and the Women's Climate Congress and this National Congress of Women has been inspired by the 1915 International Congress of Women, which was a marvelous case study of how women working together without a party political agenda (most of the women in 1915 did not even have the vote) can produce an inciteful policy agenda for radical short and long-term change. Today our challenges are rebalancing the climate before further catastrophic impacts overtake us (short-term) and creating the systemic conditions for a sustainable future (longer-term).

Conclusion

This session provided a number of tangible avenues for further collaboration and development of ideas, such as in relation to how First Nations governance structures can inform constitutional reform to properly balance men and women's roles and to realign power with the people (cf authority). Also, taking a leaf out of BZE's approach, we can look at ways to build relationships and cooperate across political difference instead of competing.

The WCC will work to develop these ideas into actionable initiatives in preparation for the next National Congress events on 28 April (online) and in September (face to face).

With thanks to Kim for her moderation of this session to Mary, Natalie and Sanaya for a great and wise conversation!

GUEST BIOS

Dr Mary Graham is a Yugambah Kombu-merri (Gold Coast) woman through her fathers clan and Waka Waka through her mother. She is now retired from her position as Adjunct Associate Professor (UQ). She holds an Honorary Doctorate (QUT)

She has lectured in Aboriginal history, politics, and comparative philosophy at UQ and other educational institutions. She was the Administrator of the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency (AICCA) and served on the Boards and Committees of many Aboriginal organisations. She worked in Native Title area with the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA).

Mary was a member of the first Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. She is engaged in research projects involving Australia nationally and internationally (UK.) She currently does research work with Institute of Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH). She continues to work with her own traditional community on a wide variety of projects.

Professor Kim Rubenstein is a professor in the Faculty of Business, Government and Law and Co Director of the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation at the University of Canberra. A graduate of the

University of Melbourne and Harvard University, she is Australia's leading expert on citizenship, both around its formal legal status and in law's intersection with broader normative notions of citizenship as membership and participation. This has led to her scholarship around gender and public law, which includes her legal work and her oral history work around women lawyers' contributions in the public sphere. She was the Director of the Centre for International and Public law at the ANU from 2006-2015 and the Inaugural Convener of the ANU Gender Institute from 2011-2012. She is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Law and the Australia Academy of Social Sciences.

Natalie Isaacs is the founder of 1 Million Women, a global movement of women and girls who take practical action to fight dangerous climate change by changing the way they live. Her first book, *Every Woman's Guide to Saving the Planet* (HarperCollins/ABC Books, 2018), has been republished in the UK in 2020, and the US in 2021.

Since launching 1 Million Women in 2009, Natalie has dedicated herself to empowering women to act on climate change. Under her leadership, 1 Million Women has grown from scratch into a movement of over 1,000,000.

Natalie is deeply invested in building a better world for today's and future generations. She believes we're all living in the critical decade for climate action, and we're all needed to drive transformational change by 2030.

Sayana Khisty is the Chief Strategy Officer at Beyond Zero Emissions, where she leads strategy, fundraising, and stakeholder engagement. She oversees the organisation's work with state and federal governments and its industry engagement in the regions. She has a decade of experience in policy, federal politics and private sector consulting to governments. Sayana is a mentor for Altioem, a Fellow of the University of Melbourne's Pathways to Politics Program for Women, and participated in Women's Environmental Leadership Australia 2020.