

NATIONAL CONGRESS of women

Renewal

How can we save the Earth for ourselves and future generations?

Sunday 11th – Monday 12th September 2022



Albert Hall, Canberra (and online)

An attendee's impressions of the first day

by

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Imagine walking into a room filled with strangers and feeling immediately welcome. The people who are here are keen to share their experiences, learn from each other, connect and grow. The conversations held in this space touch a chord and allow us to create a shared vision.

This was the first day of the National Congress for Women (NCW), a two-day celebration of women's voices, calling for collaborative action on climate change. The vision of the Women's Climate Congress (WCC) is to create the space for collaborative, cooperative women's leadership that can create meaningful solutions for the existential threat of climate change. When we consider climate science, one thing scientists do is compare present-day climate to the past. This comparison is useful to accurately determine the levels of change – for science, the past acts as an anchor. This is different when we consider climate action – the solutions are clear and the need is for urgent action. Blaming past actions is an expensive distraction that does not change the challenges of the present. Rather than talking about what brought us to this predicament, the conversations in the Congress are about solutions. They explore different avenues for climate action and how women's voices can find place in them. I attend the congress as a migrant, from a country where climate change is a lived experience and where violence against women is a shameful reality. With my lived experience and cultural reality come the knowledge that climate change and its solutions have many faces. Engaging meaningfully in climate action requires representing various perspectives and creating space for a multiplicity of voices. These are the two aspects of the NCW I will explore.

As someone living in Canberra, I know I live in a city that is well-loved and cared for. One aspect of this is certainly its infrastructure that befits the capital of a developed country. But I believe it goes beyond that – every time I listen to a ‘Welcome to Country’ by Australia’s First Peoples I am struck by their timeless legacy and continuing love and care for Country. Dr. Matilda House, a Ngambri-Ngunnawal Elder started the day with a fierce and rousing call to action on climate change. Her ‘Welcome to Country’ was an honest conversation that didn’t hold back the anger that she feels about climate change; it is a familiar anger – I feel it, I’m sure everyone in that room was there because they felt anger at what’s happening to our beautiful world. I have found her exhortation to use that anger to “get your spurs on” and drive change a valuable approach to the emotional impacts of climate change.

What came after Dr Matilda House’s ‘Welcome to Country’ was just one example of how different voices and perspectives were seamlessly brought together in the NCW. Drawn from ancient Greek mythology and some more recent Canberra history with poet Dorothy Cameron and Australia’s first Greens senator Jo Vallentine, Dr Glenda Coughley’s presentation wove art, music and poetry to tell a powerful story of our connection to the Earth and what we as women can change. This story was about [The Singing Hill](#), a poem by Dorothy Cameron, celebrating women’s voices; in setting the backstory to the poem Glenda took us back to the 1980s, a brief moment in history when some Canberra women met in the Australian Parliament House to meditate and create the environment for collaboration. I found the image of women meditating profoundly moving in its approach, not to mention the courage it must have taken for an act of coming together to meditate. The calm and clear voice of Jo Vallentine reading the poem *The Singing Hill*, as she did in 1991 to a testosterone-fuelled Parliament as she resigned, was one of the most emotionally moving moments for me in the NCW. There was quiet determination in her voice, the same determination that fuels everyone who decides to make a difference.

The next session, *Wisdom of the Elders*, continued on this theme of bringing different experiences together. The intentionally and aptly named ‘conversationalists’ (rather than the conventional ‘panellists’) were Professor Valerie Cooms (Chair, Quandamooka-Yoolooburrabee Aboriginal Corporation), the Hon Margaret Reynolds (National President, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom; former senator and minister for the Office for Women), Jo Vallentine (former senator, peace activist) and the Hon Dr Sharman Stone (Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies; former federal MP, minister and ambassador for women and girls). With wide-ranging experience in public service both inside Parliament and in other settings, the discussion was guided by the lived experiences of the many challenges women continue to face; whether it is getting elected into Parliament, balancing various roles and responsibilities and the pressure of dealing with a patriarchal Parliament to name a few of a long list. The discussion of war, war games, emissions by the world’s armies and a masculine worldview was honest and crucial. Women carry a disproportionate risk and burden of climate change. Honest conversations about the impact of deep-rooted social norms are needed. One powerful solution discussed in this conversation was meeting people where they were. I found this useful, especially in the context of climate change; rather than ‘preaching’ to people, approaching them with empathy and understanding can help build bridges and catalyse climate action. The other was the importance of allies – something the WCC envisions and events like the NCW create the platform for.

The next session *Seeds of Renewal 1 – Transforming power through political leadership* shifted from past politicians to current politicians. Moderated by Cheryl Durrant, the session had Karen Grogan (Senator for SA), Bridget Archer MP (Federal member for Bass, Tasmania), Zali Steggall MP (Federal member for Warringah) and Janet Rice (Senator for Victoria). To me the discussion made evident that while some challenges remain, many many strides have been made, standing on the shoulders of women like Jo Vallentine who have paved the way for many freedoms that (thankfully) women of the present times can (rightfully) take for granted. The conversation with present politicians brought to light a certain shift in culture – from competition to collaboration and from hard to soft power that these women in Parliament today are championing. The women spoke about the ways they work across party divides including collaborating away from the cameras. Some very interesting questions were posed to this panel, including how they would change the current Parliament. The answers shed light on the patriarchal and binary conventions of the Parliament along with challenges posed by a larger cultural shift to bipartisan stances. To me it was interesting how support and allyship was once again highlighted as a key step in creating a more inclusive environment in Australian politics. Another interesting theme that recurred throughout conversations was meeting people where they were as a starting point for climate action.

What is the role of hope? When faced with the enormity of climate change where does one draw strength from? The role of hope was an important discussion in this conversation. Hope can spur action, be the source of one's strength and create much-needed bridges. It is also the one thing stronger than fear.

A famous artist once said "Art is the highest form of hope". Art is a crucial element of climate action, especially given its social and emotional impact. The role of art was explored in the next conversation *Seeds of Renewal 2 – Transforming power through creative vision* with artist Dr Sally Blake (moderator), Dr Valerie Cooms (Chair, Quandamooka-Yoolooburrabee Aboriginal Corporation) who grew up with the poetry, storytelling and activism of her aunty, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), Dr Janet Salisbury (science communicator, Founder of the Women's Climate Congress), Miriam Pickard (performer, theatre director, mythopoetic storyteller) and Alison Plevey (Founder and Director, Australian Dance Party). In a world where science is treated as the only important thing one conversationalist's retort was 'what can science do on its own?' The role of stories – whether they are timeless cultural stories or the stories about one's own family, the role of dance as a medium of expression and education, music as a form of protest, were all discussed in this far-ranging conversation. In what was to me a profound summary of the practise of art and its transformational capacity, artist Miriam Pickard said 'Wisdom isn't just for the old, innocence isn't just for the young.' Art allows for thinking, imagining, expressing and, not surprisingly, activism.

What started as a day with the Wisdom of Elders came a full circle with a conversation with young and emerging voices. The final session of the day was *Seeds of Renewal 3 – Transforming power through community and business leadership* moderated by Professor Kate Auty with Sam Mostyn AO (President, Chief Executive Women; non-executive director and sustainability adviser, with a long history of governance roles across business and

community sectors), Charlie Wood (Campaigner, organiser, and policy advisor across the environmental movement, former Campaigns Director for 350.org Australia, and Australian Youth Climate Coalition), Sophia Hamblin Wang (Chief Operating Officer, Mineral Carbonation International, MCI) and Emma Garlett (First Nations legal academic; Industry Fellow, Sustainable Minerals Institute, University of Queensland). With three young people who have been in the frontlines, leading climate action, this conversation ranged from discussing their challenges to speaking about strategies that they use to overcome these challenges. When you're a young person, especially a young woman, in a room full of older men in a patriarchal system, where do you start change making? When you're a young mother and social norms dictate child-caring responsibilities, how do you nurture your career? These are tough questions, wicked problems, with no easy answers. But rather than providing answers, the conversationalists in this session shared their challenges, experiences and approaches. One such approach I found powerful when considering climate action – an existential task if there ever was one – was the analogy of 'patchwork' used by Charlie Wood. "*What can you do in your patch*"? If each of us tends to our patch, create a network of allies across other patches we can create what Charlie called 'an ecosystem of movements'. And this ecosystem can be a powerful, people-centred, connected, nurturing one.

The full circle of Day One of the NCW with its inspiring selection of speakers brought home many important lessons for me. The importance of diversity. Of creating support. Of showing up. Speaking up. Of bringing up the ones that come behind you. I learned from every session. But I also learned in the sidelines of the session. During the tea breaks and lunch breaks when I spoke with women with a wide range of interests and careers who all care about climate action. We all have different life experiences. And here we were at the Congress, listening to each other, cheering each other on, coming together for a shared vision for the future. To me that is an ecosystem of movements.