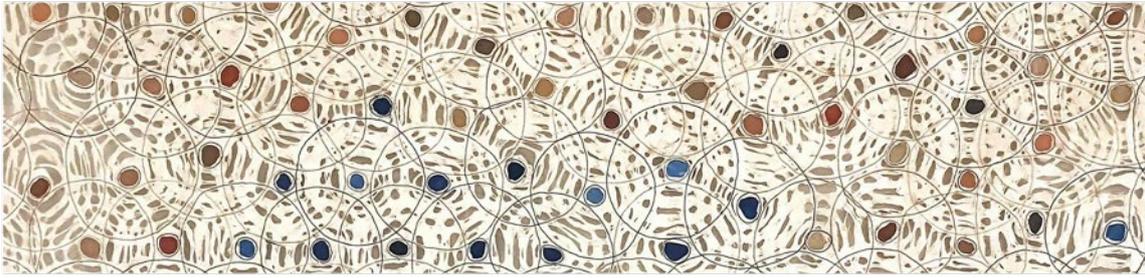


# NATIONAL CONGRESS of women



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

30 November, 2021

### Wisdom Conversation 1

*We, a web of women, seek and support wisdom for the common good<sup>1</sup>*

### Why women? Why now?

Report by Laurann Yen, Honey Nelson and Janet Salisbury

#### Guest conversationalists (see bios below)

Helen Haines MP (Independent member for Indi, Victoria)

Licia Heath (CEO, Women for Election Australia)

Professor Penny Sackett (astrophysicist and former Australian Government Chief Scientist)

Dr Anne Poelina (academic, Earth rights activist, film-maker, and community leader to protect her Nyikina country and waters, Chair of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council in Western Australia).

(Cristina Talacko, President of the centre right organisation, Coalition for Conservation, was sadly not able to attend at the last minute due to a family emergency.)

**Moderator:** Dr Janet Salisbury, Founder, WCC

*Why Women? Why Now?* In this first session of the day we wasted no time in tackling this key question of the Congress head on. This urgent question had brought together over 200 concerned women from across the country to build our solidarity as women, and define both the severity of the climate crisis, and the urgent need for collective action in the face of dereliction by innumerable international leaders and commentators.

Women's Climate Congress Founder, Janet Salisbury opened this first Wisdom Conversation of the day with an acute reminder: *The world is in IPCC Code Red*, facing severe consequences for our young generations unless extreme and immediate remedial action is undertaken by us all. Moreover, in Australia, the abuse of country and waters is driving us into an uninhabitable

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<sup>1</sup> 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](https://www.womensclimatecongress.com/uploads/3/0/2/0/30206683/wcc-vision-final_19sept20_.pdf)

environment. Our government has been prepared to listen to scientists on pandemic matters; but still ignores the sciences of critical climate projections.

Janet also reminded us that history has shown that when women act together without the influence of existing political cultures, they have developed visionary plans like those of the 1915 International Congress of Women and subsequent International Women's Congresses. In the US, a women's caucus was formed in 1977 and facilitates bipartisan relationships and policy priorities among the women members of the US Congress, particularly in relation to improving the lives of women and families.

Over one and half hours, this first conversation went deep into how women's leadership and voices are coming to the fore to provide balance to our political discourse, to promote collaboration across political parties and reset policy agendas, to prioritise care for the earth.

### **Women in politics**

Janet started the conversation by asking **Helen Haines**, the Independent member for Indi, how she saw the parliamentary system playing out for women, and what reforms are needed to make it a fairer environment for women.

Helen responded that, without a doubt, we need a more diverse parliament. And the first step to that is to at least make sure that we have better representation of women in the parliament. In addition, she noted that gender is only one element of diversity and we need to have a much more diverse parliament of people from very different cultures more representative of what the Australian population looks like. We need to have people from different backgrounds and expertise.

On climate, Helen said 'I'm deeply concerned as someone from 30 years of health care around the impacts of climate and health. I also represent a rural and regional electorate. So I'm highly attuned to the impact that climate change has on rural and regional communities who are often very much at the frontline of the increasing intensity and frequency of natural disasters.' She added 'I see the enormous opportunities for rural and regional communities if we embrace some of our transition opportunities when it comes to renewable energy and knowing that in rural and regional Australia is where almost all of that transition will take place in terms of energy generation.' Helen talked of her meetings with regional communities and First Nations people on understanding the issues of energy security which led to her Community Energy Bill.

Parliament is not moving as quickly as she would like to improve gender equity and is gridlocked in its ability to engage in evidence-based policy making that would address existential issues like climate change. With the release today by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, of the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces ('the Jenkins Report'),<sup>2</sup> Helen hoped that we would move towards a more inclusive, respectful political debate that would lead to good governance and the formulation of the kinds of policies that will bring us all forward.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://humanrights.gov.au/set-standard-2021>

**Licia Heath**, the CEO of Women for Election Australia (WFEA), joined the conversation. She identified the challenges posed by the hyper-dominance of party politics where women are locked into the party view. This partisan loyalty is likely to hold back the effectiveness of a women's caucus.

Licia's call for action is for women to stand up and be an active part of the policy and decision making by standing for election and selection at all levels of government- from local to federal. Women's labor assists the status quo at all levels, and patriarchy 'can only work on the free labor of women. It's very noble, and it keeps us very busy, but we could be elected and doing greater things for our community- and being paid at the same time!' (These comments resonated greatly with the participants as reflected in the Zoom 'chat'!)

Over the past 12 months, WFEA has engaged 1900 women in training and preparation for considering and standing for election- some will choose another path, but about half will stand. Licia counted her own experience standing for Wentworth in the previous election as hugely positive even though she was not elected, and would encourage all women to stand up and participate. 'If we want to make this work, we've got to participate. That's the bottom line. We have to turn up.'

Women for Election have also sponsored the formation of a new cross-party WFEA Parliamentary Friends group for Women for Election Australia,<sup>3</sup> which is being launched tonight. This group is not a women's caucus in the sense of the US caucus as it is not set up to consider policy but it may be the start of a way to bring parliamentary women together around issues of common concern. Licia noted that Australia is the only OECD country (check?) that does not have a women's caucus.

Due to the high demands of a sitting day in Parliament, Helen was only able to stay for the first part of this session. The conversation continued with contributions from Penny Sackett and Anne Poelina and then general discussion among all three and in response to questions from the Zoom chat.

### **Women in science**

**Professor Penny Sackett** is an astrophysicist, and former Australian chief scientist. Penny's messages were derived from science, but also clear ethical statements about cultural wrong-turnings and need for reparation.

***Why Women?*** *Women can inherently recognise connections and cycles:* We are vital to the healing and reconnection of whole Earth systems, through our quintessential understandings of cycles and lateral associations.

Present Earth and climate sicknesses arise from the predominant cultural false belief that we are not connected. And yet these very illnesses are due to our own human mismanagement and egocentricity: and a growing culture of wealth disparity, which can disconnect the rich from the consequences of their greed.

***Why now?*** *Human agricultural forces upon the Earth are very recent in our history:* And in 12,000 years we have caused extensive negative impacts, especially in very recent centuries: compared to 40,000 or many more years of restrained Aboriginal stewardship of this country.

The science of astronomy teaches us through attentive observation, and humility, that the universe is unimaginably vast, that our solar system is just one of trillions, and that our Mother Earth is rare

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<sup>3</sup> <https://wfe.org.au/wfea-parliamentary-friendship-group-for-women-for-election-australia/>

and special in her capacity to generate and support Life. The present fancies to carry human life to other planets ignore the simple realities of distance, connectedness, diversity of life, responsibility to life on Earth.

Penny appealed: that we don't look away from what we are seeing, in our governance and in the environment. We may be afraid: but this is not a reason to refuse to act.

### **First Nations women**

**Dr Anne Poelina** is a respected academic, Earth rights activist, film-maker and community leader to protect her Nyikina country and waters, and is Chair of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, in northwest of Western Australia.

Anne talked first about the knowledge and leadership of indigenous women, carrying the knowledge of their ancestors, and women's power to actualise dreams and dreaming.

Her own work and aspirations involve local governance, and individual empowerment alongside 'community-ism': indigenous values raising the collective good, through cultivating relationships or 'relationalism'.

These relationships include with creatures: every child is given a Totem animal at birth, which teaches communion with and guidance from all levels of Earth life. All life is subject to the 'First Law' of the Earth mother: our reciprocal duties to all the life which provides for us, our conduct on behalf of the good of all, not just of self. Traditional governance was multi-centred, founded in equality, and in the absence of over-lords.

This relates also to *local governance*: she stands for regionalism, place-based cooperative governments: as she sees increasing centralisation of power, especially during the pandemic crisis – the muting of regional voices, forced amalgamations, the suppressing of connections.

For many thousands of years, indigenous peoples worked in harmony with the Earth, through the ethics of care, love, attention, pluralism. These values extend to all planetary citizens, including those displaced today by the urgencies of climate crisis, the environmental threats, and the necessity to drastically change our energy industries. Anne has been directly concerned with 'transition' considerations for families in fossil-energy centres.

We need collective wisdom and bravery for these transitions, and indigenous knowledge in order to right-side the planet. Today, our Mother Earth is suffering under a kind of misogyny. In her country, women are rising in councils, of necessity – 'too much me, not enough we!' Women's depth of thought is critical for the recovery of planetary health and wellbeing in the face of climate change.

And we must bring forward the First Law, the voices of First Nations peoples, and the necessity for justice for all life – especially nonhuman life.

Licia commented: In terms of her WFEA work – local govt is of critical importance – too often dismissed as 'roads, rates rubbish – can't do anything there' and yet it is such a critical part of our democracy – including in terms of ecological sustainability – and it is the closest to the community

WFEA has a partnership organisation called Politics in Colour<sup>4</sup> who is a partner working alongside them with similar workshops and training but all run by women of colour. Diversity of people in the parliament beyond just men and women, is very important for change to happen.

Penny commented that she found it difficult to speak after Anne because the flow of Anne's words and the thoughts are so connected and compelling and spiritual. She related strongly to what Anne In contrast, Penny quoted words written by a science journalist but inspired by Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. She said 'Listen to this. Humanity faces 2 possible futures'<sup>5</sup> –

- one of gradually growing scarcity, dwindling resources and continued pressure on the living ecosystems of Earth, which are probably already being driven toward collapse — whether that begins this century, or next, is a really a moot point; it will eventually come.
- the other is one of abundance and expansion, where we continue to power our civilisation with plentiful energy, reduce most of the harmful impacts of our dirtiest industries on the biosphere, and usher in an astonishing new age of innovation that will make the Industrial Revolution look meek by comparison. ....

So in this dichotomy, either our euro-scientific culture will deliver to us collapsing resources; or we will act on a delusional aspiration by some to abandon Earth's depletions and injuries, and go out to mine and exploit other worlds! As Penny said, it is surely a tiny imagination which can only conceive of collapse, or of exporting our polluting industries to other pristine worlds!

Penny also talked about being a whole person. As chief scientist, she was told she should not be political, should not have political views, but should be objective. As a scientist, that idea resonated but it only allowed her to be part of herself – as she actually identifies with many other things as well as science – so this was essentially muting her. To counter this, we can aim to become whole again and not allow ourselves to be divided into these different silos.

As Anne said: Aboriginal people in Australia were the first in everything! in science, engineering, astronomy, architecture – using these attainments on behalf of all life-forms.

The Zoom 'chat' was very engaged and also shared by others of the conversation panel also.

### Questions from the chat

**Is politics broken?** There was much discussion of this on the chat. Some thought so, others did not. It is complex.

Licia said that she believes that politics is not broken but understands why people might think it is. It is sick but not broken! She explained that when she was deciding what she wanted to do, she took a year off and met with all and sundry – polities, retired polities, policy producers, public servants, people from the far left, far right etc. She had a flow chart going. She asked why we don't have better policy in this country? Actually, we know exactly what needs to be done –climate crisis, public education, equitable tax reform, many issues — but we have a execution problem. What is that about?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://politicsincolour.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://medium.com/predict/why-go-to-space-to-save-humanity-and-our-earth-33699b9f82e2>

She concluded It is because of the individuals that in the parliament – and how a number of them are beholden to vested interested. But not ALL of them – there are a lot of very decent people in the parliament who are looking to the left and the right and saying ‘I need help’! If you feel; that you are not being represented, it is probably because you aren’t. And that is because most people have chosen not to get elected. The people who are elected make the decisions. More women are entering for election now: bringing their natural love and desire for fairness, wellbeing, community belonging, harmony with nature.

Collective relationships can grow at local and regional level. Women need to be in the political discussion and process; bringing their courage, empathy, humility, psychological safety in leadership. We need to talk more about values and politics in this country!

Women are mobilising – they have made that realisation. Saying ‘politics is broken’ may actually encourage people to disengage.

**Question on reciprocal relationships**– kindness and empathy in relationships seems to be the blind spot? How can we unblind that?

Anne – its ALL about relationships –human to country, human to human. First Nation’s political economy is based on reciprocal relationships. Looking at our current systems of government at a systems level – the laws and policies are not fit for purpose. We need to bring in all the voices? How do we get the rules right? How do we look at what justice means. Local govt voices are muted because in local government, voting is not compulsory. When Anee stood for local council in Derby, there were only 500 votes counted – a tiny fraction of the population.

Need to stand up to the challenge – show leadership, be in the conversations. Find other women who can bring their wisdom into the systems and to make the policies. Also wrap ourselves around diversity – with diversity we can unpack complexity and find a way to dream new dreams and to stand in those dreams and make them reality because we want to lead them as women because we are born with an ethic of love. It is in our DNA – we come in as nurturers, as cares as helping sisters. It should be about community-ism – about where we live

Its all about dialogue. Not just dialogue for dialogue’s sake but dialogue with commitment for transformation.

Janet noted that we would like the WCC is to bring these threads together to create further action. How can we bring these different groups together to make a movement that is ‘wide and deep’. Judging by the conversation and the engagement, we are really onto something but we need to collaborate to create the futures that we want

COVID has brought some changes in how we think about power. How do we engage women more? Licia spoke about the imminent launch of a ‘rebranding power campaign’ that WFEA have been working on – with TV ad. Ads in the papers etc. This contrasts Imagery of old-world white power (Putin on a horse with no shirt, rockets etc) with the power that women show, which is humming away all the time in our communities. Courage in leadership, empathy in leadership, these are

‘feminised’ traits (not always but in general tend to be that way) – but these qualities are the real power that we need to harness to move forward in harmony with each other and with nature.<sup>6</sup>

Licia also said that Australians are odd about how we talk about politics – part of the reason why we don’t have broader involvement. We need to normalise what it is to be a politician in this country. If someone says ‘I’m going to have a go’ – instead of putting them down, we need to train ourselves to help them to do it.

Anne reiterated her earlier comments that we can dream, and we must dream big. We are planetary citizens and must help Mother Earth to right size. This needs all of us. There are Indigenous women out there doing very good work. A women’s council is rising in the Kimberly – and first Nations women are also rising up with their men.

Anne said ‘Dream big girls!’ This is a world waiting for all of us to stop the misogyny to Mother Earth. We must bring our husbands, sons brothers with us.

**‘We can rise, we will rise and we are rising’**

We need to be tough and take on those hard challenges, and also be soft with kindness and generosity. And humble too —to do this work with dignity and love in our hearts. We must rise and save our planet for our young people. The leadership of women is rising across the planet, across the nation and we are doing good work.

## **Conclusion**

*Janet Salisbury closed the session thanking the guests for their wonderful messages. The WCC be working to promote women to rise together; looking at what different groups are doing across the country and working together to actualise these big dreams.*

## **GUEST BIOS**

**Dr Anne Poelina** — Nyikina Warrwa woman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. An active community leader, human and earth rights advocate, film maker and a respected academic researcher, with a second Doctor of Philosophy (First Law) titled, ‘Martuwarra First Law Multi-Species Justice Declaration of Interdependence: Wellbeing of Land, Living Waters, and Indigenous Australian People’, Master of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Master of Education, Master of Arts (Indigenous Social Policy) Signatory to the Redstone Statement 2010 she helped draft at the 1st International Summit on Indigenous Environmental Philosophy in 2010. Anne is a 2011 Peter Cullen Fellow for Water Leadership. In 2017, she was awarded a Laureate from the Women’s World Summit Foundation (Geneva), elected Chair of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council (2018), Adjunct Professor and Senior Research Fellow with Notre Dame University and a Research Fellow with Northern Australia Institute Charles Darwin University. She holds membership to national and global

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<sup>6</sup> This idea is captured in the WCC Values and commitment statements as follows: ‘We assert that qualities of the heart (such as compassion, love, empathy, forgiveness) are the basis for true strength. These human laws must be reactivated for us to survive.’

See our full Vision, values and commitment statement here:

[https://www.womensclimatecongress.com/uploads/3/0/2/0/30206683/wcc-vision-final\\_19sept20\\_.pdf](https://www.womensclimatecongress.com/uploads/3/0/2/0/30206683/wcc-vision-final_19sept20_.pdf)

Think Tanks. Dr Poelina is a Visiting Fellow with the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University, Canberra Australia Water Justice Hub to focus on Indigenous Water Valuation and Resilient Decision -making.

**Dr Helen Haines** (10.30-11.am only) — the Independent Federal Member for Indi. She was elected in May 2019 – the first Independent to succeed another in the same electorate since Federation in 1901. Before Parliament, she was a nurse, midwife, health administrator and rural health researcher in Victoria’s North East. She completed a doctoral degree in Medical Science in 2012. Helen lives with her husband, Phil, on a small beef farm by Wangaratta’s King River, where they raised three children. She is a member of the House Select Committee on Regional Australia and Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network. She is also co-chair of these Parliamentary Friends’ groups: Climate Action, Bushfire Recovery, Preventive Health, Regenerative Agriculture, and Cycling.

**Professor Penny Sackett** — physicist, astronomer and former chief scientist for Australia. She currently holds the title of Distinguished Honorary Professor at the ANU Institute for Climate, Energy and Disaster Solutions. Dr Sackett led the multi-million dollar effort to rebuild the world-renowned Mt Stromlo Observatory after it was destroyed in 2003 by bush fires, initiating its partnership in the Giant Magellan Telescope. As Chief Scientist, Professor Sackett provided independent advice to the Australian government on matters of science and innovation. In that role, she explained “Why we must act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.” and opened new channels of communication to the Australian public on matters of science, particularly those related to sustainability. Dr Sackett’s interests include sustainability, transdisciplinary research, team building, subnational climate change action, complex systems, effective communication, quantitative analysis, and leadership during change and uncertainty. Her networks in the scientific community are broad and international.

**Licia Heath** — As CEO of the non-partisan NFP, Women for Election Australia, Licia is committed to increasing the number of women, of all backgrounds and lived experience, in public office at local, state and federal levels. With over 1800 women registering for WFEA events in the last 12 months, Licia’s determination to train 2000 women to run by 2022 is on track. Combined with WFEAs “stay very, very mad and get elected” campaign launched at Australia’s march4justice rallies, she inspires women’s engagement in politics and sets the tone that gender-balanced governments improve quality of life not just for women and girls, but for all of society.

**[Cristina Talacko** (apology) — Chair of the Centre right organisation Coalition for Conservation – a movement for conservatives who support decarbonisation and protection of the environment. She has a corporate legal background and extensive experience in executive boards and management of not-for-profit associations, including various energy & renewables boards including the think-tank Beyond Zero Emissions. In 2016, she completed the Executive Program Women & Power at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Cristina is also a businesswoman and founded SalDoce Fine Foods, manufacturing allergen sensitive foods to Australia and export, and is one of the owners of the organic foods retail stores Naked Foods. Cristina is Vice President of NSW Women’s Council and Secretary of the NSW Energy and Environment Policy Branch. She is passionate about the environment, female empowerment and diversity.]