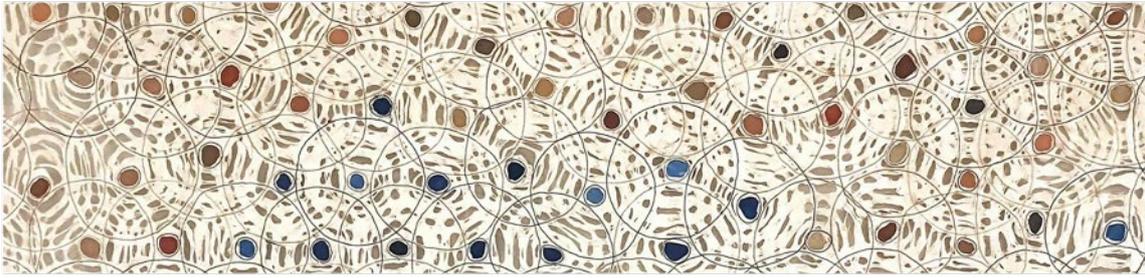


# NATIONAL CONGRESS of women



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

30 November, 2021

### Wisdom Conversation 2

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

### Women are angry about climate change, too!

Report by Kirsten Anker and Janet Salisbury

#### Guest conversationalists (see bios below)

Angela Priestley (Moderator)(journalist, co-owner Women's Agenda)

Janet Laurence (artist)

Professor Danielle (Dany) Celermajer (writer and academic researcher)

Aoibhinn Crimmins (youth climate activist)

In introducing the session, WCC Founder, Janet Salisbury noted that the title of this session is a nod to a recent ABC 7:30 Report series titled 'Women Are Angry About...' with episodes about economic security, unpaid labour, domestic violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Hence our theme is 'Women are angry about climate change too!'

This theme might at first sight seem at odds with the WCC principles of collaboration and cooperation, and of nonpartisanship. However, anger and outrage are important parts of our emotional landscape. This conversation was aimed to explore how we can express anger and outrage in a way that is still be useful in promoting collaboration and nonpartisan action on climate change, authentically and with a sense of accountability and compassion.

After introductions, Janet handed over to Angela Priestley to moderate the session.

Angela noted that the gender pay gap, violence against women, women's careers and opportunities are all influenced by climate change. We have seen with the COVID pandemic how women's interests are impacted in an emergency, and the same applies to climate-related emergencies. Climate policy can either address these and other social issues or re-enforce existing structures under which conditions are currently declining. So climate ultimately underpins all these other things that women are angry about. And so we must include it as part of the conversation.

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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)

## **1. How angry are you about this issue? (We don't get to say very often how angry we are)**

The panellists described their feelings:

'a constant state of rage'

'outraged and really, deeply concerned'

'I often feel that I just want to lift my head up and scream as loud as I possibly can, and bang my fists against the walls and rip out my hair'

However, they are finding ways to express that anger in a positive way.

Janet: I have to find outlets for it. Because I don't want to be eaten by it. And I have one [outlet] with an activist group, the witches. And by creating spells, spells that are born of anger ... I find that's a very good kind of transformation in me.

Aoibhinn: But I like to think that [anger] is a positive thing. Because if I wasn't feeling that, then I would be feeling not very much at all. And that, for me is worse, I'd rather be feeling the intensity of all of my emotions than have to switch them off just to survive. So yes, very angry. But using that to make the world a better place.

Angela commented that she 'really enjoyed that last couple of minutes, because I feel that we don't really get the opportunity ... to [express our feelings] like that. We have to spend so much emotional time and energy, and so much physical time and energy dealing with other things that we don't always get to express how we really feel. So please feel free to share that in the 'chat'.

And these feelings were expressed in no uncertain terms by many participants in the Zoom 'chat'!

## **2. How has your anger changed over the years?**

The panellists spoke of their experiences that generated their anger. They have directed that anger into positive activities: writing, art and activism.

Dany: The disparity between the realities of what climate change is doing and the abject failure of those whose duty it is to act in the interests of life has intensified my anger. Anger is an important political emotion. Righteous anger is about injustice, which helps us to focus our minds on where injustice sits and where it needs to be addressed.

Aoibhinn: At school, climate change was taught as a scientific problem, not as a political one. It was disconnected until I began to see its impacts in my everyday life. So I joined the climate strike and was awakened to the urgency of the situation. It was a positive moment, because I was filled with a sense of power and hope because of all the people coming together to demand a better future. At school, I had the sense that we were being taught to sit back and leave things to the adults. But when I had the chance to scream until my throat was raw, it was empowering. The anger has remained and a sense of righteousness – a powerful feeling that quickly descends into hopelessness. I've had to mature quickly. A lot of young people feel the world is changing very quickly, it's hard to keep track. But that can be a comfort because it presents opportunities. So I feel parts of my youth have been robbed from me but that's outweighed by my hope for a better future.

Angela: My son comes home from school saying he wants to study this and that so he can help solve climate change. But, in fact, we know what to do. Approaching climate change from this perspective invites a different conversation (why are we not doing it?), which isn't happening at schools.

Janet: My first big art action was In the early 80s, the South East Coast forests that were being felled. I was arrested and was in jail with Bob Brown. It was a very determined action; very powerful. And

I've been committed since then about using my art, to talk about these issues, but also to talk about the amazing wonder and beauty of what we are losing. And so my art varies enormously in its presentation but it is always a plea to engage with what we will lose.

Art has the capacity to incorporate large amounts of data and information and transform it into something beautiful. But for me personally ... I'm engaging with care, and aesthetics of care, and aesthetics of healing, to generate love. And the fact is that I and my team, wherever we were, all experienced this feeling. We all know that feeling when you give love, that generous feeling that swells inside you. That's the feeling I would love to be generated for viewers in the work as well. So I think that I try and create a space of love in making the work.

### 3. How do you manage the emotional energy?

The panellists spoke of how their engagement with their communities, and for Janet Laurence with her art, was empowering.

Dany: None of it is ever an individual pursuit; you are part of a broader collective action. And by being involved in action, that doesn't mean that you don't go through moments or periods of enormous grief. There were particular parts of *Summertime* that I wrote where I would get sick for three days afterwards, because my body was just so imbued with what it was that I'd been writing about. But that's real, that's the truth. And like justice, it's very important to me. Being in the doing of it, as a way of moulding that complex emotional landscape of care and love and grief and rage is, for me, actually the most empowering place that I can be.

Janet: Making art creates a space of hope because hope is an action; it's not a passive thing. Art itself creates imaginative and poetical ways that open avenues for communication, wonder, love and curiosity. It can embody areas of conflict and enable a resolution by accepting complexity. The other amazing thing is that artists are free, independent voices. Art is really about revealing the invisible — the lost and the disadvantaged. It's about revealing what's underneath.

You have power as an artist to provoke in a way that doesn't alienate but that engages. Art is a language of the soul and the heart. And it can excite and open up possibilities, and it can be a very shared experience, it creates controversy and conversation and is able to really make changes. It also can deal with issues and values that have been lost because it speaks the truth. While it's the individual speaking it's also about a shared experience.

### 4. How could you work with the people or groups who have contributed to your anger?

Angela then took us back to the purpose behind the Congress to promote collaboration and nonpartisan action on climate change. And yet we all have these feelings. And so we're trying to find a way to bring that into action as well. How can we do that authentically and still be holding people accountable at the same time? And how can we even form partnerships, despite anger, with some of the people or some of the organisations? How can we channel this anger for good, particularly when it may mean some level of cooperation that we don't necessarily feel? How can we use this anger and these emotions to make sure that they are being used in a way that will help affect change?

Aoibhinn: My immediate thought is to always be honest. If you're not being honest with yourself or others, then you are walking down a false path and eventually you'll find yourself back where you started. So if you're having to work with people who are not very cooperative, who have thus far caused us immense pain, have done great damage to our world, it's about being straight up honest about that so that you can work towards collaborating later down the track. And when I think about

how I deal with my anger, because it is at such a level where I just want to scream until I can't scream anymore. I think it's about surrounding yourself as best as you can with people who understand and recognise and appreciate your anger, and who can support you. Ideally, it would be good, as a society, if we could always be vulnerable with everyone but we're not quite there yet. And so I think it's making sure you have a support system in place so that you can be completely open and not have to justify your feelings but just to feel them so that you can properly understand them. Then there can come a more cold, precise rage where it's scarily calm because we have already felt all of the very red hot rage and now we know exactly what we need to do we know that we are not going to stop until we see something change.

Janet: Art has the capacity to create a space of hope, because hope is an action, not a passive thing. We have to act. I think the art itself creates imaginative and poetical ways that open avenues for communication for wonder, love, and curiosity. It can embody areas of conflict, and enable a resolution by accepting complexity and to stop division. Artists are independent voices, which is very important as they're one of the few groups in our society that are able to speak purely with very crafted skills. Artists actions have been able to change boards and sponsorships of museums by the work that's exhibited that exposes things. I work with scientists and can often see the things they they're not supposed to speak about.<sup>2</sup> So you have this power as an artist, to provoke, but in a way that you don't want to alienate, but you want to engage. I believe that art is a language of the soul and the heart. It can excite and open up possibilities, and it can be a very shared experience creating both controversy and conversation. As an artist, I have to really think hard about how I create the sort of space that others can enter and engage with all of that. And it's about working with feeling and emotions. The arts (in general) are one of the few languages to do that.

Dany: It's an abuse of power to contend that anger is incompatible with a commitment to conciliation. It's one of the ways power is deployed — by framing those who say no to violence as being unwilling to conciliate. But if the partner with whom I'm being invited to conciliation renders me or other women, or other creatures, as lesser beings not having the right to flourish, then it's a fake conciliation. The only conditions for true conciliation are conditions of respect. This isn't to say that everyone has to come to the table, and it's a dynamic situation. But we should not be invited to a table of conciliation under conditions of radical inequalities of power. We have learnt from the experience of First Nations people that offers of reconciliation are often a pretext for neo-colonialism and neo assimilation.

So whether or not to sit down at the table with someone will depend on the situation. One always finds oneself in complex circumstances, where you are doing the best possible balancing act that you can. It's complex to balance the short-, medium- and long-term good. That said, we know that the public discourse has gone from denial to delay to new forms of greenwashing. Fossil fuel and media industries who have formerly denied climate change have now moved to forms of greenwashing because outright denial is no longer sellable. The type of transformation that is required and that we need to demand cannot be bought by a simple shift of marketing strategy. So in, in making a decision about with whom I would collaborate, I would be asking questions about what are they doing, not just in this particular moment but at a deeper level.

Aoibhinn: I think it's really important to come from a place of values rather than facts. If people have reached their own facts, then it's going to be very hard to argue against that with your own facts. Honesty is always my first port of call and being open and vulnerable — something that's not

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<sup>2</sup> Penny Sackett spoke about this in Wisdom Conversation #1

common in our society and is disarming if you simply start off by explaining how you're feeling and what you're seeing and experiencing and what you hope to see and experience for everyone.

## **5. What have you found in your conversations with politicians?**

Aoibhinn: I've been very privileged to have quite a few conversations with politicians. Obviously, one's political opinions will bias these interactions. And so the most positive interactions I've had with Greens members. I had a depressing conversation with Susan Ley and cried at the end of it, it was it was heartbreaking. [But] ... I now wish I had known the tips and tricks [mentioned above] at that time.

I've had some interesting conversations with Labour politicians. My local member (Alicia Payne) has a lot of hope. So that that was a very hopeful conversation, even though I don't agree with her on everything. She was willing to really listen to me and my concerns as one of her constituents. So I think that is there are some politicians out there who really do believe in their work, and that their work can bring about change.

Even though science tells us what we have to do to address climate change, if we knew how to fix it we would have already done it. So we need to try new things and recognise the scale of the problem is an opportunity in disguise. It's easy to feel burned out and lose hope if your work doesn't seem to be going anywhere. It's a team effort. The more people that are trying different strategies and communicating the pros and cons of those strategies, the quicker we'll actually arrive at what is going to work. And I think it's going to be a combination of strategies. So doing whatever you can is really the most powerful thing.

## **6. What are some of the most successful things you've done to change people's minds?**

Janet: Yes, particularly with organisations involved with fauna and flora and through my exhibitions. Many people come in [to an exhibition] and they've been totally unaware. Years ago, I had a work that had a koala hospital in it (and that was long before we were talking about the koalas and people had no idea). Through the art, I showed a very empathetic, caring love that was occurring in the koala hospital. But and that hospital was only funded by one German tourist. Since the bushfires it has received enormous funding. I have felt enormous sway of people, suddenly they all joined forces and contributed and cared about things like that. I also have a lot of school children visit exhibitions who then engage and write essays and we have endless letters that go to and fro for years, which is amazing.

When it comes to political front, I'm baffled by politicians and have no trust. I don't really try to engage with them. But it is wonderful to have people like David Attenborough come and talk to you about your work and then be able to engage on that level about how we can we make people address things. On a group level, artists can influence museums to become conscious of something and bring it to the public.

### **Questions from the chat**

#### **Why does animal agriculture and the massive methane and other gases released not getting much attention?**

Dany: I absolutely agree about animal agriculture —it's a multidimensional violence. Look what's happening in the Amazon: the clearing of the Amazon for cattle is massively responsible for deforestation, toxicity of water, destruction of lands and direct emissions through methane. And let us not forget these fellow Earth beings who are living lives where they are bought into life so that

they can be tortured and killed. It's not just instrumental with respect to climate change. For me it is also what type of respect we have for those with whom we share the planet. I think part of the reason that it's not spoken about is because the proportion of greenhouse gases through fossil fuel emissions is larger. But also in this country, there's a lot of mythology around the identity of colonial Australia and the farming industry. And so I think we need to look at those myths as well.

### What do women bring to leadership?

Aoibhinn: Just off the top of my head, it is hard to think of examples, which I think is because we just don't have enough women in leadership positions to actually know what women would bring to leadership. And so, for me, my immediate reaction is that it's only fair to include the whole population in decision making processes. And that reason is enough. But if I was to think a little further, I guess I would say that my age group is in a transformative stage of our life. Initially, when I was a bit younger, I was naive and hopeful that maybe there aren't actually that many differences [between male and female friends] and that we're just taught to believe that there are. But I do think that my male friends are not as in touch with their feelings because of toxic masculinity. And so perhaps women can bring emotions, which are not the negative things that they have been suggested to be, but are actually really powerful and important for decision.

Janet: Well, of course, we have to have women in powerful positions. They just have to be there – to be present. It [governance] is such a toxic situation at the moment that somehow that there has to be a way of cutting through. As I said before, my witches group create spells. And occasionally we think they're working as a way of imagining. We have to imagine the possible, but it sometimes feels like the impossible.

### Conclusion:

Janet Salisbury noted that this had definitely been a wisdom conversation and that as the day progresses we are seeing threads of women-thought coming together from different parts of society.

One of the things we'd like to come out of today is some ongoing threads that we can take forward in the form of practical actions. And this conversation held significant and important ideas that need to be brought forward in the public discourse. We have heard reflected from all the speakers how most of us feel, and different ways we can express this to create a picture of the sort of democracy and governance system we want in Australia, and which is so badly needed to address the complex issue of climate change.

With thanks to Angela for great moderation and to Dany, Janet and Aoibhinn for such an insightful conversation!

### GUEST BIOS

**Angela Priestley** is the co founder of Agenda Media, publisher of the daily news platform [Women's Agenda](#), [Women's Health News](#), the national Leadership Awards and more. She's the founding editor of Women's Agenda and continues to oversee the publication's editorial team, who all share daily journalism offering a female perspective on politics, climate, health, business, leadership, tech and much more. Angela is also an advisor to the Arise Fund at Action Aid, supporting women's leadership following climate-related emergencies across the world.

**Janet Laurence** is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists, exhibiting nationally and internationally. Bridging ethical and environmental concerns, Janet's art considers the inseparability of all living things.

Across photography, sculpture, video and installation, she explores the deep interconnection of life forms and ecologies to produce work that is distinctive, complex and beautiful. Within the recognised threat to the lifeworld she explores what it might mean to heal, albeit metaphorically, the natural environment, fusing this with a sense of communal loss and search for connection with powerful life forces.

Janet was awarded the 2020 Australian Antarctic Art Fellowship and selected as the Australian representative at the UN's Artists 4 Paris Climate 2015, in which she brought international attention to the fragility of the Great Barrier Reef. In September 2021, her work was included in *Biocenos21* – an international exhibition of contemporary art within the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) World Conservation Congress, Marseille.

**Professor Danielle Celermajer** is a Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney, Deputy Director of the Sydney Environment Institute and lead of the [Multispecies Justice project](#). Her publications include [Sins of the Nation and the Ritual of Apology](#) (Cambridge University Press 2009) and [The Prevention of Torture: An Ecological Approach](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2018) [The Cultural History of Law in the Modern Age](#) (Bloomsbury 2019) and [The Subject of Human Rights](#) (Stanford 2020).

Through the experience of living through the Black Summer bushfires with a multispecies community, she began writing about a new crime of our age, [Omnicide](#). Her latest book, [Summertime](#) (Penguin Random House, 2021) was written in recognition of the critical urgency of conveying the complex conceptual recognition of the multispecies harms of the climate catastrophe in ways that can provoke affect and hence action.

**Aoibhinn Crimmins** is a young climate justice activist, intersectional feminist and second year student at the ANU studying a double degree in environmental science and politics, philosophy and economics. She became involved in climate activism in 2019 through the global School Strike 4 Climate movement, taking on a lead organising role at a national and local level in Canberra.