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Session III: Natural and Built Environment

Discussion and Questions

Julianne Schultz: David, I was interested in your response to Angelica because the imaginaries that you're engaging with your communities and then tried to pull back into a policy — or rather a legislative framework — seem to me that there's a connection there, which is quite interesting.

David Schlosberg: That's exactly it. There's the creativity, there's the energy, there's the drive, there are the ideas, and they're grounded. To hear that kind of frustration in young people — that they're not heard, they're ignored, they're being preached to — this has been repeated again and again. This is the problem of not actually engaging in communities that are disadvantaged communities or vulnerable communities. These are communities that are made disadvantaged and communities who are made vulnerable. There are actions there. That kind of disempowering language and action is one way that that's illustrated. Thanks for the work, is what I'd say.

Tone Wheeler: Moving back with your parents is a problem because of the way in which we've run our society for the last 100 years: on the basis that the moment you become independent, you leave home. Whereas a very large number of the people who've settled this country: the one third of migrants are used to what we would now call, in academic jargon, multi-family homes. You have grandparents, parents, and children. The idea the grandparents are looking after children while the couples are working, we're adopting it in this country because it's now so hard to make the money that both parents have to work. Problem is we are not designing houses to make this possible. One of the programs that one of my colleagues is working on is a way of converting what are called mansions into multiple flats. You take a house which is designed essentially for children at a very young age so that they're open-plan and you make it so that it is comfortable for you, your partner, whoever it is, children, whatever, can live in the one house. And it's passed on from family to family. It's a design change for social need.

Leyland Fisher: Leyland Fisher from Oxford. There's an elephant in the room and it was a wonderful session and people started to point to the elephant. Louise pointed to it when she started to talk about the need for the big-picture view. David certainly referred to it when he talked about adaptive strategies and converging multiple threats, but it's something that we're not really facing up to: the consequences. We talk a lot about, say, global warming, sometimes about the refugee crisis, sometimes about income disparity. The World Economic Forum put out a report listing 21 major global threats,[1] and all of them are connected to all of the others. Until we start dealing with that network as a whole, we're in real trouble. I don't want to go on, but this is called a "complex adaptive network." One of the features of a complex adaptive network is it can suddenly change without warning. You can get the crash you had with the network of banks. You can

1 World Economic Forum, *The Global Risks Report 2023*, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf

get all sorts of sudden changes, which you have to be ready for. There's only one way of governance that lets you handle that. That's the way of governance which is flexible and fast.[2] That doesn't work with any of our current systems where a government is based on dogma of the left or the right or whatever. They're based on a set of rules and things have to fit. How do we deal with this need for flexibility and for sudden change, covering of a sudden change?

Louise Adams: Yes. It's a complex question. I think you're absolutely right. The bigger picture — and that's why I made the comment about in Australia, certainly in the past, we're starting to see a bit of it now, — but the lack of government leadership in what this journey looks like, because we need to bring all these different pictures together. If we do leave it up to private businesses — and there's some credit in those private businesses doing what they're doing, but they will do it down their individual lens and in the silo? — they may do it with good intent, but the unintended consequences — because they're doing it for what's good for their business — will flow through. Somebody earlier spoke about system thinking, and I think we are going to see more and more system-thinking approaches put to some of this, because I don't see any other way that you can break through the complexity of it and get action.

I do think the complexity in part is what leads to the experience that we heard in the last panel, which is 55 different inquiries with 9,000 different actions and not really anything moving forward. You get that "plandemic" that was referenced. I think there is a role to play in systems thinking and to start to see that play out more. But I can't see how we can take these steps forward without a very clear overarching narrative at a government level. We could talk all night about the complexities of how that trickles down through the federal state and local governments.

David Schlosberg: I think the other way of responding to that is by talking about complex systems and something like collapse or an emergency — just look at the floods, look at the fires, and then look at the community response to that. The Governor talked about an Aboriginal woman saying she knows where people are, knows what their needs are. There are folks in communities who completely understand those complex systems, and those are the folks who are organising spontaneously in the midst of disasters, in the midst of flooding, in the midst of fires, to save each other, to save animals, to support communities, and to clean up and to rebuild and all of those things. That complex knowledge is there. What I was talking about before and what adaptation is looking for is just a recognition of the validity of that knowledge. The recognition that that complex knowledge and response to emergency is already there, if we just pay attention.

Questioner 1: You're talking about response. What we're talking about is doing something before the event. That's a very different matter.

David Schlosberg: This is another thing that we're working on now, a number of people are. Looking at the way that communities

2 See Len Fisher and Anders Sandberg (1922). A safe governance space for humanity: necessary conditions for the governance of Global Catastrophic Risks. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 155: 48–71. https://royalsoc.org.au/images/pdf/journal/155-1-FisherSandberg.pdf [Ed.]

self-organised in response to disasters so that we can formalise that knowledge so that we can incorporate that knowledge and risk reduction going forward. The problem with a lot of those events is that, after they're over, nobody talks to residents, nobody tries to get an understanding. But when we go in and do focus groups after disasters, the first thing people say is, "I'm so glad you're here. I'm so glad someone is listening to us. Nobody has come to us and asked us about our experience." So, yes, there is the potential of using that system knowledge to lower risk going forward. It's just a matter of paying attention to it.

Tone Wheeler: I take the point that we've reached 1.5 degrees C already and we're heading for 2.5 and it's not going backwards. I've got very little confidence that the way the world is at the moment. I've written about the way in which we try and address those threats by having a ready reaction to them. One of the things is that what you're describing in a way — the cynic in me would say — is "Well, the Rural Fire Service and the SES and so on are volunteers. It's a form of philanthropy." It should be governments funding it and funding it properly so that you don't have to beg and have a cake stall in order to get another rural fire engine. We're going to see more fires, we're going to see more floods, we're going to see more cyclones, more damage being done, and we're going to call on volunteers to fix it up? I don't deny the knowledge. I just think the knowledge should be codified, paid for by the government because it is a way of maintaining communities. Otherwise, the communities like Lismore are going to eventually get exhausted by it. I think you have to address the effects of climate change. Can I ask you a question? In reference to the very, very good thing that was asked, most of your activities: are they to do with climate change or the effects of climate change?

Angelica Kross: We've been very reactive. It has been there's an amount of climate change. We can see it through these crises. What are we doing now to mitigate and adapt? We put our heads together and we chat to people and we say, "Well, this is potentially an option." I think our reactive work in a community is usually reactive because we're often not given the resources to start doing it before it happens.

Questioner 2: Hi. I work in Youth Mental Health activism and, Angelica, I really resonated with a lot of your opinions that you said about having youth voices and also on the ground voices at the forefront. Given the crowd here, I was just wondering what you think is the best way for institutions and for the government to be working with young people and people on the ground with lived experience when looking at environmental issues or just societal issues in general.

Angelica Kross: It's a hard answer, but I think I did talk a little bit about how it's ground-up. It's a flat structure where grassroots activists are treated with respect in the rooms and they're invited to the table. Often, they aren't, often just an academic speaks for the grassroots activists. I really appreciate the Royal Society for bringing me to the table because that represents a great change. Even though I'm not trained in a tertiary sense, I'm a teaching student, guys. Really not any way related to climate or infrastructure. I think the way that institutions should is to invite them to the table and they should — when they say something — write it down. Look, it seems really boring. I haven't got much. Really, it's a hard question.

Questioner 3: This is also a question for you, Angelica, and it follows on from that. Thank you for being a community activist first of all. But, also, I just wonder what, as a young person, are the top three things that really worry you and your friends? There's obviously climate change, but I'm interested, I guess in the other two.

Angelica Kross: The gentleman next to me has just laughed. Can you do it for three? I'm like, "I think it's inequality. It's vastly just inequality." We've talked about how economic and health and Indigenous and climate are all built into qualifiers of inequality, right? It means sometimes that housing, the right for your property not to increase might be a thing. You buy a house and that's it. You live in it. There's a shelter, it's a human right, it's yours, potentially. You lease essentially to our First Nations and then you don't have a right for your property to increase. Right? That drastically changes the way that we use policy to incentivise. It's also like writing legislation so that rental properties have to have solar panels, because rental properties don't. A person who owns a house can make changes and modifications to make it more climate- and environmentally-sustainable, but a renter doesn't have that choice. They can't install something because then it's the rental property's installation. It's changing legislation to make that a standard. I don't know, I'm not a lawyer. I don't want to be a lawyer, either.

Questioner 4: Tone, I was just wondering, on the question of inequalities — the have and have nots — that's extending quite large in society from a younger generation to the older generation. I suppose this is something that links with Louise, we have a shortage of workers in this country, and we have a million properties on Airbnb or stays for short-term rental. We have a crisis that the number of homeless people is rising, flooding across the east coast. If we are going to bring in more people that need to be developed for our next generation of decarbonisation — the engineers and workforce — where are we going to house these people? And how are we going to help the Australians inside the country who don't have shelter? How do we address this complex system where we want to maximise the opportunity of economic prosperity, but that prosperity needs to trickle down to people like Angela who can participate in all aspects of and fabrics of society? Because I think that's an important question that policy setting is not giving representation effectively to make sure that the different voices are heard in order to address what would be a good outcome for all Australians.

Tone Wheeler: Thank you for that. I think the biggest issue that threatens Australia and the world at the moment is climate change. But the way in which it's felt is unequal and it exacerbates inequality. It's really interesting that Angelica's answer to that question diverted to housing. Because I used to think that it was just because I'm an urban designer and architect that I'm obsessed about housing and that that's where the inequality is, and I see it. But most of what I heard today actually reinforces my idea that I'm right. The biggest source of inequality is in housing, because, if you don't have safe shelter, it affects your health, it affects your mental health, it affects your relationships with your community. Therefore, I think housing should have been a major focus in the budget rather than a series of what I described in my article as "Morrison on steroids."

You can see that I'm not without some partisan belief in this. You read it, the three page, read it. It's terrible and it gives me no hope. The answer to your question, I think, is forget the federal government, they have no idea. State governments do. West Australia has got fantastic programs for homelessness. They have a minister for homelessness in the title. I think that's important. Queensland and Victoria have much, much better programs for social housing, but I think the answer to your question is a million small developments. What we were looking for was the grand plant. The Frenchman Jack Lang, whom I referred to earlier on, was the inventor of the *Grands Travaux*, The Great Works. I don't think it's that anymore. I think every house that possibly could, should have what's colloquially called a "granny flat" — I'd rather call it a garden studio. But every house gets one. What happened after the First World War and then after Second World War is that bed-and-breakfasts were very common, and the widows who still owned the house would subdivide the house into a boarding house.

I don't think that's such a bad thing. I think the aspiration that you actually own your own house on a big piece of land will give way to a million small developments happening throughout Sydney. We have got big blocks of land, some of them with very small houses. You put a different house and you put a granny flat on it. If you did do that it undermines the economy of there only being one kind of house to rent. Then you can start to look at the way in which you can buy things, which you can't currently buy. You can't buy anything less than 50 square metres in New South Wales as a home. But we are making lots of — thank you, Frank, for calling them — boarding houses. We are making boarding houses with small rooms in them, which are awful.

The most popular investment at the moment in my business is with clients wanting to build boarding houses. Why? Because it's a form of diversity of housing. I don't think there's one big fix. I think there's four or five. I think there's changing what you have on the suburban blocks of land, I think it's changing what you build in the cities. I think it's changing rental agreements, but overall, I think its community groups getting in there and doing things that really shake it up. That's why I think the Faith Housing Alliance[3] is really interesting.

Louise Adams: I think I'll leave Tone to talk about the housing. If we talk about where the workers are coming from: typically, when we bring them in from overseas, we tend to bring in skilled workers who don't necessarily have those issues. But when I talk about the skills shortages, I do think there's a lot of work to do within inside Australia already. We've got a lot of skilled workers sitting on the bench, a lot of migrants who have qualifications who can't access work. We need to ensure that there are pathways to find out who they are and get them gainfully employed in this movement, in this pipeline of work that we've got. There's a lot of women who have qualifications who left to have children and who can't, again, re-enter: how do we get them back in?

I also think that we need to go almost a step back in time and go back to apprenticeships and those sorts of models where we can give people on-the-job training to enter

3 https://fha.org.au

the professions and start to really tap into communities. That gives us a pathway to reach into those communities where there is that generational underemployment, where if, as a professional services organisation, I go to them and say, "Go to university. There's a gap that you've already created there, but if you can invest some time, it's a substantive investment." The government should put some money into this to help organisations create those apprenticeship models and similar pathways to build up those where businesses can engage with those communities to build up the skill sets and get them into employment. There's plenty of capacity yet to tap within Australia. But, as I said, there are numerous different levers that we have to pull for that problem.

Judith Wheeldon: I'm Judith Wheeldon, vice president of the Royal Society of New South Wales. I'm an educator. I've taken extreme interest in everything that's been said today. Right now it's at a very interesting point where the rubber meets the road, what do we do about it? I'd like to just start by remembering what Tone has just told us about all these many, many little projects, because it sounds remarkably like being community activists with each one taking responsibility. I'd like to say to Angelica, you should be very proud to be a community activist. You stand in big shoes. Barack Obama started there and was very proud of it. If we're now being challenged to all be community activists, I think we need to think about what that means.

I'd like to point out that we have seen some sign of that in Bernie Shakeshaft, for example, with his BackTrack, where he just set off and did something, took personal responsibility and did it. But Angelica has told us — and I am coming to a question — that what she wants is for people to be treated as if they are smart people. That really is the key to the whole show. I think that people should be treated with respect, treated as if they're smart, because, when that happens, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy and it's the basis of all education. Education is what we really need in order to change society and in order to change the whole political system. I promised you a question. I'd just like to hear more about what panel members feel it means to be an activist and how that can be effective overall in actually getting something done and changing society.

Angelica Kross: It comes down to a concept, a question of democracy, right? I often say we don't *have* a democracy, we *do* a democracy, we *do* it. It's an active thing that we do all the time. It's about turning up to boring meetings. It's about writing down things. It's about listening to different people who you don't agree with and also electing people, but then getting rid of them if they do not respect your behaviour. It's about being active and also the outcomes that you might not like. You come to a conclusion that being a community activist is actually reminding yourself that democracy is an action word and it's uncomfortable. That's it.

Tone Wheeler: Great question. My sense of my professional life is that I am in contact with all those smaller groups. My bigger activist cap would be to try and get some way in which you can convince the Federal Government to change negative gearing, so it applies to your own personal house, not your investments. I've been lobbying for that and I've worn out paths trying to do that because that, along with capital gains tax, that's what happens in the United States. It would radically transform how we see our

housing that we put regard into your own house and not into property development. I'd have a path, I'm not going to declare where it is, but I think there is a very green path.

David Schlosberg: This question of respect is absolutely key. One of the things in the history of environmental activism and environmental movements is that governments and corporations are afraid to talk to activists because they're afraid of what they're going to hear. They think by ignoring them, they'll just go away. And, of course, they don't go away, they make bigger trouble, which is great, right? But there's plenty of evidence that — and the Environmental Justice Movement is a good example of this — folks just want to be heard and respected, right? If you hear and respect people, you may actually be able to negotiate with them. There are numerous more examples of that. I think that idea of respect for people's knowledge and input is key.

Louise Adams: As a person from big corporate here — I might couch it in that space because I think it needs to — there's a lot that corporates could do in this. I think for me it is about being active, which is the opposite of being passive. I sat down recently with our Australian Leadership Team, and we went back to the early 1900s and we picked out some of the top 10 things that happened in the world in the early 1900s. We had a reflection of what we thought about what happened. It's amazing when you do that, how much you sit there and you go, "How did society tolerate that happening? How did the world let that happen? How did political leaders, how did leaders let this go on?" Some of it you think's good, but there's a whole lot of it that you sort of sit there in hindsight and say, how was that tolerated?

We challenged ourselves to go forward 100 years and reflect on the legacy we think we are leaving through the lens of what our future generations might think of us. I think when you do that and you look at things like climate inaction and you look at things like inequality that we've discussed today, you don't necessarily paint yourself a pretty picture of what our future generations might think of us as leaders. That's a really powerful way to then get up and look at yourself in the mirror and say, "Right, it is time to get more active rather than passive."