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Why inaction is not an option

Presentation by

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Commission

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Video and audio versions of this speech are available [on
the Communities in Control website](#)

About the presentation:

Adjunct Professor **Susan Pascoe** AM was a commissioner for the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. Reflecting on her experience in this role, Susan then speaks to Jo Dodds to generate insights on action in the face of political resistance. Ms Pascoe is also the chair of ACFID, the Community Directors Council and other boards, and was the inaugural Commissioner for the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

Jo Dodds is a councillor at the Bega Valley Shire Council and the President of Bushfire Survivors for Action. On March 18, 2018, Jo witnessed devastating bushfires rip through Tathra. Since then, she has dedicated her time and effort to speak out against our political leaders who fail to listen to the experts.

Adjunct Professor Susan Pascoe AM:

In the nine minutes I have I'm going to take you through a little bit of the climate science. Frankly, after Hilary Bambrick's talk there is absolutely nothing I can add, so that's going to be very brief. I'll be addressing some of the COVID impacts, and then perhaps trying to pick up from where Hilary left off, trying to identify constructive actions that we can take, both systemically and as individuals in our community.

I was one of the three commissioners on the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. What was interesting at the time was that we had before us evidence provided by the CSIRO about the destructive impacts on the environment of human-induced global warming. At that time, the CSIRO work was really relying on modelling. A decade later, after the devastating summer bushfires that we had 11 months ago, we've now got the evidence, and I won't repeat all the evidence that Hilary's just provided so eloquently.

Sadly, we still live amongst climate deniers and conspiracy theorists, and among self-interested short-termist nations who are slowing the progress that we could make – retaining fossil fuels, for example, and stalling on infrastructure for electric cars and other means of moving us toward a much more sustainable future.

But - here we get the uptick - Biden and Kamala Harris have won the US election, and that's going to make a difference for Australia because they've foreshadowed that trade relationships will be impacted if countries are not taking their part in climate action. That could have a material impact on Australia. And we've seen with institutional investors, particularly the superannuation funds, they're now saying it would be irresponsible for them to be investing in fossil fuels.

Even this morning - looking at the next group, the doctors - there's a consortium of 29 health and medical practitioner peak bodies that have written to the federal government imploring the government to take further action on climate change in relation to people's health. Many banks, we know, have moved – I think as recently as last week the ANZ announced that it wouldn't be investing further in fossil fuels.

Consumer demands are getting much stronger. I think that's a very important factor. People are showing, through the way they're spending, that they want to have an impact with the dollars that they spend, and

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increasingly companies are going to have to demonstrate environmental social and governance credentials. The big professional member groups for directors, such as the Governance Institute of Australia and the Australian Institute of Company Directors, are publishing regularly on this now, and if companies don't heed the warning there's exposure not only for those entities themselves but for their directors.

We've got some fabulous research here in Australia. Ernst & Young did a piece of work for the World Wildlife Fund a few months ago, and more recently Deloitte followed suit - and they show clear evidence that there are more jobs in a renewable recovery than in fossil fuel. It's very powerful stuff. If we're wanting to do the right thing by the Australian community, that's where we move.

Regionally, our Pacific neighbours are desperate. If their neighbours don't phase out fossil fuels, rising sea levels will literally put their survival at risk. It's as drastic as that. So I think that what we need in Australia is to be demonstrating that renewables are becoming much more affordable. We can do it as citizens, but we want action from the government as well.

And we've got unlikely champions. Prince Charles has always been somewhat of an environmental activist. Pope Francis has recently given a TED talk on his proclamation *Laudato Si*, but it was on the environment. As well as youth activists such as Greta Thunberg, organisations like the Business Council of Australia and the National Farmers' Federation and so on are speaking up. We've got a huge amount of action.

Now, Fiona showed the addition in 2013 of the purple and black, but just look at those across the BOM data of temperatures in Australia, and there are more to come. If you need an evidence base as to what we're talking about, there's some of it.

Let's have a quick look at the COVID impacts we've seen in the last few months here in Australia and globally. Most countries were unprepared. Many had health systems were unable to cope with the volume of cases, and now, very sadly, we're seeing it recur in the northern hemisphere. In some countries, you'd have to say, their problems have come from a disregard for science. For others, their systems haven't been able to cope. But as we know, COVID has a differential impact on the poor, the vulnerable, homeless people, disabled people, and other disadvantaged groups. Within Australia, we did pretty well, as couple of commentators have noted; the formation of the National Cabinet, the narrative of

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protecting lives and livelihoods, hospitals and disability settings going immediately onto a crisis footing.

We did have some uneven management within the states and territories, although I think everybody's got it now, but what we can see with today's news is that sadly, even with the best systems in place, states like South Australia can have a recurrence of COVID into the community. It just shows the need for perennial vigilance.

We've seen changes to the way we work; many of us working from home, schools temporarily closed, and home schooling. A lot of families now appreciate teachers much more than they did. Personal air travel and vehicle travel have been dramatically reduced. Sadly, we've had waves of redundancies, with possibly more to come. Business has been impacted, and supply chains disrupted.

But what we've seen, again trying to be a bit positive, along with the reduction in travel, is an improvement on air quality, and we've seen that people can be as productive working from home. In fact, I know some very large enterprises that have found that they've been more productive working from home. And company directors - I've got tight for time here. I'm going to leave you to read some of that - but you can see that large enterprises, too, are investing now in renewables, because, frankly, there's a dollar in it, but also for the sake of Australia, for the sake of our children,. We want to save species and save the country for a better future.

So what are some of the things that we can do? We can follow the lead of global tech companies and allow people to work from home in hybrid or full-time arrangements with all of the benefits of work/life balance, reduced stress on infrastructure (particularly roads) and so on.

We can enable the move to rural, regional or outer urban settings, which would reduce the need for freeways and the stressors of long commute times. We can regenerate local areas - suburban or regional - with these decentralised populations, and that's been happening a lot, and that helps to generate a sense of local community. That happened during the pandemic.

We can normalise working, meeting and conferencing. Look at what we're doing here. Why can't we do it in further years? We can see from Dr Fiona Kerr's presentation that we wouldn't want to stop human interaction altogether and go fully virtual, but there's plenty of opportunities for us to

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work in a virtual fashion and still be as productive. And we can follow the EU's Green Deal, where they've got a multifaceted approach to reducing greenhouse gases.

Some of the practical measures that we could think to put in place - and this is taking it to the personal - really commit to doing what we know matters. In our personal lives, reduce consumption. We don't need all that stuff. Re-use, recycle. These are pretty old messages but they're still very current. Make your consumer actions count. If you can afford it, install solar. If you're doing a renovation, make it energy efficient. Buy an electric car. We did during COVID. It's been absolutely fantastic, but the government does need to put more infrastructure in place for longer trips. Avoid consumerist obsessions and so on. I'll leave you to read some of that.

Join local community initiatives, such as sharing produce and goods no longer needed. There's lots of online communities that are doing this. Preserving green spaces, supporting those in need. Invest ethically and make sure your super fund does as well, your bank or your company, and they're attuned to this now, these large enterprises. Consider the impact of a move from fossil fuels to renewable on those employed in increasingly obsolete industries. In other words, we actually have to think about retraining and making sure that we don't leave people behind because - well, there's a human cost to that, but also because that's where a lot of the obstruction is likely to come from if people feel that their lives are going to be dramatically reduced in terms of their capacity to earn an income.

And take citizen action. Join interest groups. Note the success of the Business Council and the National Farmers' Federation, or medical fraternities. Lobby locally for national action. For example, the ACT has electric vehicles. But lobby for decarbonised transport wherever you are. These things can happen. There are plenty of cities in America and elsewhere that are doing it. And don't support companies or parties who disregard our climate emergency. We're moving, sadly, in a direction that puts us into a bit of a billabong rather than on a straight path forward. I encourage everybody just to take their small part of the action.

And who better to finish with than David Attenborough, who, at 94, is still advocating that we respect the planet and all of its species, not just the human species? The truth is that the world is changing, and we're changing. We're totally dependent on that world. It provides our food,

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water and air. It's the most precious thing we have, and we need to defend it. It's surely our responsibility to do everything within our power to create a planet that provides a home not just for ourselves but for all life on earth.

Thank you for that, and I'm going to move immediately to Jo Dodds, the President of the Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action, and she will take us, I think, more directly to the impact on the ground.

Jo Dodds

Thank you so much, Susan, for the introduction. I'm coming to you today from Yuin country, where the Djiringanj people have cared for this land for around 80,000 years and never ceded their relationship with this land.

Experts today have been giving you the undeniable science around climate change and global warming, and they've asked you to act, and some of you might have started making a plan about what you might do to help reduce your greenhouse gas emissions. Recycling, composting, perhaps you'll install another solar panel or dust off your bicycle, which is something I've done. Perhaps you'll contact your super provider with a question about their investment in fossil fuels. And I have to say I'm coming to you today from my fully solar-powered house on my solar-powered internet, and I hope that it's running smoothly.

But 2020 has sucked, hasn't it? So I'm sure that some of you are feeling overwhelmed by the tasks that you've got waiting for you at home and on your desk. To-do lists, shopping lists, emails to deal with, Christmas cards to write, bills to pay. It's a lot and we're all busy. So adding yet another task to that list might just have to take a back seat, right? But sometimes - this is the story that I'm here to tell you - sometimes something happens that just stops us in our tracks, that puts our plans on hold, that changes how we value things and the direction of our lives. This something happened to me on March the 18th 2018.

I hope my story's worth listening to, and it is quite personal, because I want to take you into what climate change feels like, what it looks like, what it sounds like, what it smells like, and I also suggest that if you might find that traumatic – and some of the images I show are traumatic – possibly you should tune out or turn the sound down or go and make a cup of tea if it's getting a bit much.

So on that day, March the 18th, I was returning from a local government conference in Gundagai with a colleague, Sharon. It was a long drive and

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we had a lot to discuss. We talked about the conference, about women in government, about our families, our colleagues, about our plans for the week ahead.

What we didn't talk about at the conference or before or after was climate change. This should have been a topic that I'd raise, because I'd been aware of climate change for at least 15 years and I'd been working as a volunteer with Clean Energy for Eternity, which is a community group who are interested in renewable energy. I'd been doing that for about 12 years. But since getting into local government I'd realised that talking about climate change in political circles meant trouble and I was busy enough, right? So I stayed quiet during those first two huge years as a councillor because I didn't want to get targeted and I didn't think the problem was as urgent as my emails.

Sharon and I drove into Cooma and then began the descent down Brown Mountain. It looked like a lovely autumn day, and indeed the sky was a brilliant blue, but the wind was feral, and, as we descended into the valley, which was still looking green after a damp summer, we noticed the temperature outside was rising wildly.

In the distance, between us and the ocean, plumes of smoke were rising. Sharon checked the Fires Near Me app and called her brother, who's in the emergency services. While I drove on, curious but not alarmed, Sharon read out to me some of the locations that were on fire. When she mentioned Reedy Swamp, I asked for more details. Reedy Swamp was on fire because the powerlines had ignited the bush beneath them. The fire was travelling eastwards, driven by the same ferocious winds that were buffeting the car.

Sharon then read out the name of my road. My road. I called my partner, Tony, who'd built our little mud brick house in the forest by hand over 20 long years. He's one of those people who can fix anything and build anything. He was onto the fire situation. But I could hear a tremor in his voice that I'd never heard before, and I realised that this shit was officially real.

Sharon read out the house numbers along my road, and each one took the fire a step closer to my home. She dropped me in Tathra where the Bega River flows out to the sea. At the riverside carpark, Tony and I stood for the next four hours watching the fire grow towards our place. People gathered. Locals, tourists, children, elderly people. The adrenaline was

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phenomenal. We checked our phones. We texted family saying, "We're safe. We'll call you when it's over. Don't know about the house."

The smoke became a great wall, thickening and widening. It was so many beautiful colours; dense grey, cloud white, lit with pink and orange from within. This was the forest burning. At intervals, sudden columns of black smoke just rose up, and each black column was the end of a car, a shed or a home. The columns marched slowly towards us like the giant footfalls of some extraordinary beast, and I counted those that rose from my road. These were my neighbours' homes. Neighbours I could only hope had escaped in time.

The wind was a blowtorch, so hot and dry that it felt like it was blowing from hell. We heard gas cylinders exploding in Tathra. A string of cars appeared out of the smoke and crossed the bridge. I saw a four-wheel drive so packed with people that they were pressed to the windows. Close behind, another vehicle towed a large open boat, and in the boat sat many people, their faces slack with horror and shock. I had the ridiculous thought, "Oh, that's a bit dangerous for the kids," and then I realised that these people were fleeing from a greater danger back behind the smoke, something so awful they were prepared to put their kids at this risk, and the horror of what all refugees go through was suddenly there in my town, and these refugees were my community. And all the while we could see our little home nestled in a clearing a kilometre upstream.

And I'll just put the video on now, if we could, and yeah, if you're not happy about watching this, please tune out.

The wind caused the river to rise in waves which chopped against the riverbank. It dragged tears from my eyes. My clothes whipped like sails. I kept finding my hand over my mouth. I paced. I breathed. I watched my little home; inside everything I own. No time to go back now for all the things that were left behind. I thought of my journals. I'd been writing in them for 40 years. They've made me a writer, the thing I most aspire to be. They are the stories, the record of my life, of my friends and family, all the things we've endured and struggled with, all the reckoning and resolution I'd sweated on. All I could think is, "I've worked out so much of my shit in those books. If they burn, what do I do then? Start from scratch?"

And I thought of all the other history. My great-grandmother's clock. The gold and ruby ring that belonged to my grandma. My mother's last letter to me. The photos, the poetry, the letters and recipes and tea sets and

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buttons and the favourite dress, the stories and shoes and pot plants and rugs and books and journals. Again, the journals.

In the end, we were lucky. As the fire reached our property and the heat and anxiety were at their maximum, the forecasted cool change arrived. But 69 homes were lost. The homes of my friends – Jan, Evan and John, Robin and Julian, Lisa and Matt, Deb and Ingrid, David and Ngaire, Jenny and Steve. We lost track of which friends had lost their homes. There were just too many.

The toll on our health, particularly mental health, was huge and will be for decades. And even though we live near one of the most beautiful beaches in the world, hot days now don't mean swimming like they used to. To us, they mean fire.

On March the 19th, 2018, I rewrote my to-do list and started taking action and talking about climate change, about who is getting hurt and what we needed to do to stop this happening to more communities. By this date, today, one year ago. the Black Summer fires had begun and my community lost another 470 homes and three people died.

If I can bring you one message today from that grim place where I stood and watched, it's this: Do not wait until the fire is at your door before you do something to bring change. Bushfires don't only happen to rural communities. There are suburbs in Melbourne and Adelaide and Sydney that are increasingly dangerous as bushfire weather increases the risks, and, as emergency experts have warned, the coming fires will be too hot and too unpredictable to fight.

But there is hope. The narrative is changing, as we've just heard from Susan, and if we all take some small steps right now, we will change the direction of our world. If we stop now, change will slow down.

So I'm going to reiterate some of those things quickly. Make sure your money isn't working in ways that may cause your house to burn down. Ask your super provider about their investments in fossil fuels. Check out the market forces website for more info on the best options. If you've got shares, find out where they're vested and, if it's in fossil fuels or companies that support them, move them.

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Two: Influence the decision makers. Write to your local member. Request a meeting to discuss your concerns. And if you see a politician or a business doing the right thing, let them know too, and let your friends know.

And the third thing, which for me in some ways is the most effective and why I'm talking to you today, is please support the groups that are taking meaningful action on climate. If that's Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action, that's us. You can find our website and become a supporter there, or join any of the other great groups who might align with your take on this situation.

We run on a shoestring ,and yet we're now taking the New South Wales EPA to court to hold them to their remit to protect our environment. We're small, but we are kicking goals and doing big things. So support the people who are taking action, take your own action, because lowering your own emissions won't be enough to get us over the mark.

I really appreciate you listening today and sitting through what is, in many ways, a very terrible story. We've seen so much of it in this year, and the past three years, that I feel very conflicted about bringing it to people again. But here we are. We need to do something, and that's my call to you.

ENDS

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