

Speech by Tony Nicholson, Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, introducing the national roundtable “Equity in Response to Climate Change”, 26 March 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the conveners – the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Australian Conservation Foundation, the National Welfare Rights Network and the Australian Climate Change Institute – it’s my pleasure to welcome you to this National Roundtable entitled “Equity in Response to Climate Change”.

In welcoming you, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Wurundjeri people, and pay respects to their elders and any elders present here today.

At the outset of this collaboration, the potential power of two of Australia's most influential NGO movements coming together was an attractive one. The great unanswered question was: ‘Can this be done without compromising the core focus of either or both?’

A quick glance at the program before us today would suggest the early signs are that the objectives align very, very easily.

The more 'my side' – the side represented by social justice organisations – look at climate change the more we see who is most exposed:

Internationally it is impoverished Bangladeshi farmers in the low-lying Bay of Bengal delta, the tribal peoples in drying parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the already disadvantaged Pacific islanders who face the real prospect of inundation.

Closer to home, our Indigenous people live in areas where extreme weather events and drought will exact a savage toll and struggling farmers on marginal farm land will be further squeezed, in regions such as Victoria’s Goulburn Valley which, as we meet, is on the precipice of experiencing this state’s greatest natural disaster.

In our cities, disadvantaged members of our communities live in homes that offer little protection from the elements and lack the resources to insulate and climate-proof themselves. Their transport solutions are so limited as they often live where public systems of transport barely reach and their vehicles are anything but fuel-efficient at a time when petrol prices will only be travelling one way.

But we are also seeing opportunity. The same drive that pushes 'green' NGOs to fight for climate change abatement can provide opportunities not only to assist the disadvantaged to reduce their environmental footprint, but to overcome much of their disadvantage by increasing their capacities for taking up the employment opportunities that will inevitably emerge out of the new, greener industries.

Because one way or the other, it now seems clear that climate change and our responses to it are going to bring about major changes in our economy. And wherever there is widespread economic change, the vulnerable can be hit hard.

For the sake of the vulnerable, and the sake of sustaining the prosperity most of us have enjoyed for more than a decade, we can’t allow the mistakes of the 80s and 90s to be repeated.

The economic reforms of the 80s and 90s laid the foundations for much of that prosperity but, in doing so, threw far too many people on the scrap heap. Our response to that economic revolution was totally inadequate. Our social policy response was abysmal. We didn't plan. Instead, we put a whole generation of middle-aged workers with hopelessly outdated skills onto unemployment benefits and disability pensions. We are still coping with that failure, through high levels of male unemployment, skill shortages in emerging industries and postcodes of poverty in once thriving factory communities.

With the maintenance of workforce participation levels critical to economic performance in the decade ahead, we can't afford to repeat this mistake. Our economy can't endure this level of waste again even if it could do so in decades past.

We need to anticipate these economic changes now, and think through how we can help communities and individuals adjust and to put in place proactive strategies rather than waiting for the inevitable social and economic calamity to hit us.

As our economy adapts to climate change, new industries will be created and existing industries will be transformed. New skills will be needed. Now is the time to be anticipating these opportunities and ensuring we have the right plans in place for reskilling those people in industries most vulnerable, as well as those currently not working.

As the author of the British Government's recent climate change report, Sir Nicholas Stern, has said, climate change is not just an environmental issue, it is an economic issue. This makes it a social issue as well. The essential interdependence between good environmental policy, good economic policy, and good social policy, will never be writ larger than in our response to climate change.

We have tried to bring together people with experience and knowledge and bright ideas and vision and energy to:

- do a stock-take of what is happening with the onset of climate change
- examine what is happening abroad and at home and to determine what our options in this field may be
- remind ourselves that this is not new work and that some pioneers have already been doing important collaborative work
- look more closely at what carbon price increases, regardless of what drives them, will mean to disadvantaged people and then to start the tough work of opening up and sifting through the opportunities that abound.

The conveners have been incredibly ambitious in the program they have put before you today. They have been ambitious in the people they have targeted to come along and help work through these issues and we thank you so much for seeing this to be valuable enough work to devote to it a day of precious time.

In the morning we largely want you to listen to what we have put together, but in the afternoon we are calling on you to work, to help us take slices of Australian society and apply what we have heard in the morning presentations to those slices. Are there really opportunities? Will we really be able to collaborate? What needs to come next?

I'd like to say I have been looking forward to this for some time now; I have a premonition that we are entering very fertile territory together and that is indeed exciting.