

# Moving beyond 'Yes we can' to 'Yes we will'

Written on reflection from a busy 2008 in the Australian and global climate movement, for the movement's consideration.

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There is a big difference between 'Yes we can' and 'Yes we will'. In the case of solving climate change, there is a whole world of difference between the two. While the vast majority of us are quite comfortable with stating the former, how many of us within the climate movement are prepared to state the latter? What would it take to give us, collectively, that level of certainty and confidence?

In the last few months, the first whisperings of 'we will' have begun to appear in the climate movement. They are very few and far between, but to see the *possibility* of change shift to a *certainty*, even if only in the minds of a few people, is a significant shift. Given that no-one can know the future, to say 'we will' represents a leap of faith, especially when the odds have, for so long, been stacked so high against us.

*"We must have the modesty to recognise that the future is unknown, not because today is the end of everything or the beginning of everything else, but because today is where we are."* (From Turbulence magazine, July 2008.<sup>1</sup>)

The sections below discuss, in turn, reasons for the emergence of faith or certainty in change, the possibility of pathological optimism when using the language of certainty, and what it means to win, before concluding with an assessment of where we are now, at the start of 2009, and where we are, or should be, heading in the next year.

## **Reasons for faith in change**

A friend recently shared this quote on the climate movement from Paul Hawken, in 'Blessed Unrest':

*"This is the largest social movement in all of human history... coherent, organic, self-organised congregations involving tens of millions of people dedicated to change... If you look at the science that describes what is happening on earth today and aren't pessimistic, you don't have the correct data. But if you meet the people in this unnamed movement and aren't optimistic, you haven't got a heart."*

Critics of Hawken's book argued that he was overly optimistic because the atomised, 'self-organised congregations,' which globally involve a huge number of people, don't yet constitute a 'movement': the groups are too atomised, too uncoordinated, too discrete, with no sense of united specific purpose aside from 'stopping climate change'. However, despite this contention, Hawken's source of hope and optimism still remains true – 'the people in this unnamed movement'.

The people – you and I, or the less tangible 'we' – are at the core of the emergence 'we

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<sup>1</sup>, Available at [http://turbulence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/turb\\_04\\_0708.pdf](http://turbulence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/turb_04_0708.pdf). This was great reading, forwarded to me by Holly Creenaune. I recommend pages 20 and 51-54 as a priority.

will' thinking, for three key reasons. These three reasons have never crystallised before as they have at the start of 2009.

## **1. We are educated.**

We are educated not only about climate change science and policy, but also about how to create social and political change. Regardless of debates about whether we are yet a 'movement' or not, this education enables us to think like a movement. We understand that we can't win this battle with persuasive scientific, technical or emotional arguments alone – we have now tried all these, and know instead that we need go right to the heart of democracy, demonstrating our numbers and the irresistible force for change that we embody.

In Australia, this understanding of the need for mass action on climate change was not evident on a broad scale at the start of 2008, when we were basking in the glory of Kyoto ratification and perhaps made the mistake of giving the new government a break, allowing them a chance to come up with the right answers, which they promised to do after the Garnaut report and the White Paper. We were evidently too trusting. But now we know exactly where the government stands. The slap-in-the-face '5% by 2020' announcement was proof that the persuasive arguments of traditional NGOs can be heard but easily ignored in the absence of broadly-based social pressure. We now understand that need, very strongly. The Camp for Climate Action in Newcastle, and the emergence of and discussions between grassroots Climate Action Groups across the country further contributed to this understanding. The Grassroots Climate Action Summit at the end of January 2009 will be a great pressure-building and movement-building event.

Internationally, the understanding of a need for global social pressure has manifested in strong progress being made towards mass mobilisations on the streets outside the Copenhagen UN conference in December, on the scale of the Seattle WTO protests, and on the tenth anniversary of the same. Discussions are ongoing regarding the nature of this mobilisation – should we 'protest against' the UN, which may be our only credible option for truly global cooperation? A discussion happening in London on February 9<sup>th</sup> entitled '*Copenhagen: lock them in, shut them down or cheer them on?*' illustrates the diversity of perspectives on the significance of the event – but regardless of the outcomes of that discussion, Copenhagen is already bringing global social movements together – green NGOs, grassroots climate groups, and anti-capitalists.

## **2. We are unwilling to accept failure.**

A friend recently said, "*I am optimistic that we will succeed, because I don't see an alternative to success.*" Failure is not an option for us. Massive social, political and economic shifts simply must be achieved. While the science is increasingly scary, and while we are already too late for a large number of dangerous effects, we are so passionate, so dedicated, and so unwilling to continue business-as-usual, that we will do everything in our power to ensure change. 'Everything in our power' is a phenomenal amount. The level of risk that we are willing to engage in has stepped up substantially. The escalation of direct action on climate-destroying infrastructure in 2008 has been a

physical manifestation of our collective resolution. I expect that such actions will redouble again in 2009.

Higher levels of risk are also becoming more common as we approach the deadline of Copenhagen, where the new global climate treaty is slated to be finalised. Those who are organising for Copenhagen are discussing what a 'good' outcome would look like, and also what would be 'unacceptable'. In the event of an unacceptable agreement going forward, the processes both internal (through AOSIS and LDC nations) and external to the negotiations (through civil society and social movements) would not allow it to be approved, or would create a better alternative. Most acknowledge that a lack of agreement at Copenhagen is better than a bad agreement that resigns our planet to total catastrophe.

### **3. In the midst of failures, we gather strength.**

Right now, the Pacific islands are being inundated by rising seas, the arctic is disappearing, malaria is spreading, lakes are drying up, and there are wars raging which are fueled by climate change. New coal power stations are built every week, and increasing global consumption is still used by neo-liberal governments as a benchmark for progress. In Moscow a 'Millionaires Fair' was just held – literally a promotion for millionaires to purchase insanely rare luxury goods, while in Cambodia there is no sanitation system. These are all terrible injustices and failures, which exist, now. They are all around us, but still, this movement remains. We don't and won't give up. We stand together, looking outwards, believing in change – and growing every day. Our successes are small, but accelerating. We *are* the change, and we are building momentum exponentially.

John Hepburn wrote in his end-2007 piece 'Climate Changed', *"I'm confident that social movements will rise to the challenge of climate change in the years to come, but it won't be the movement of professional NGOs that have dominated climate politics to date. Sure, they'll still be part of the landscape and will have an important role to play, but the real people's movement that will rise up to transform our society is still only barely discernible. It's still just a sparkle in that student's eye. ... The movement has reinvented itself before, and it will do so again, as the tide of public opinion turns once more."*

Have we moved from being 'a sparkle in that student's eye' to being a cohesive new movement, 'rising up to transform society'? I believe we are at that tipping point, right now. The incredible work done by ASEN<sup>2</sup> organisers this year on Climate Camp and now the Grassroots Climate Action Summit has pushed the social movement from a mere sparkle into tangible existence. The work of traditional NGOs in pushing through the initial 'public education' phase of this movement, and in supporting the initial establishment of local Climate Action Groups, cannot be underestimated. The powerful work done in reaching out to new sectors, such as trade unions, social justice and faith groups is also crucial in the building of this broad movement. Finally, the international work that I have been part of with the AYCC<sup>3</sup> has shown me that a global social movement, showing solidarity and exerting political pressure across political borders, is both necessary and

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2 ASEN is the 'Australian Student Environment Network' <http://asen.org.au>

3 AYCC is the 'Australian Youth Climate Coalition' [www.aycc.org.au](http://www.aycc.org.au)

emerging, this year.

All this accelerating social progress has occurred in the face of continuing 'failure' on climate change, both in our natural and political systems. This indicates a rarely-expressed belief that we can overcome adversity. If this belief did not underlie our movement, we would not be continually inspiring so many others to join it, as we are demonstrating. Despite failure, we remain committed, and we are growing.

**These three reasons – our knowledge of social change, our unwillingness to accept failure, and our growth even as failures occur around us – are the basis of my faith that we will win.** Uncertainty occurs when we do not feel powerful enough to resist the forces that oppose progress. Certainty occurs when a person feels that their movement has the power required to win, and I feel that we are now gathering that power.

### **The Necessity of Hope and the Language of Certainty<sup>4</sup>**

**The question that we can find ourselves asking is whether or not we believe that our movement's gathering momentum will overcome the incredible inertia of consumption and the eternal-growth paradigm – the incumbent 'way of doing things'.** Entangled in the answer to this question is a definition of ourselves – are we pure idealists who would continue to push for change regardless of our chances of success, or are we practical idealists, fighting a battle that we know we will win. I encourage each of you to consider the answer for yourself. I know that there is a spectrum between these two ends, but the fact that at least some of us believe that we will win gives me great hope.

Personally, I am not here to hold to a moral crusade while business-as-usual goes on around me. If I didn't believe that our movement would overcome incumbency, I and many others would already have given up and moved to something that brought more joy to me and my immediate community – perhaps dancing, arts, cooking, or creating a community garden. Instead, I am in this for the longer term effort, to be part of a massive social (r)evolution, in this lifetime, and I believe that this will happen.

Some people have questioned whether my faith in change is pathological, that perhaps I am lying to myself because I believe faith creates hope, and that without hope we will fail.

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the personal and emotional nature of 'optimism', I have extensively used the first person in this section. I did not wish to use the general 'we', nor abstract impersonal language. I was also inspired by a footnote in Sam La Rocca's Honours Thesis (Available at [www.thechangeagency.org](http://www.thechangeagency.org)), which read "*Sunera Thobani ... wrote an excellent paper in response, from which I derive great inspiration, particularly for her self-described location concerning her work as a scholar: "I place my work within the tradition of radical, politically engaged scholarship. I have always rejected the politics of academic elitism, which insist that academics should remain above the fray of political activism and use only disembodied, objectified language and a 'properly' dispassionate professorial demeanour to establish our intellectual credentials. My work is grounded in the politics, practices and languages of the various communities I come from, and the social justice movements to which I am committed"* (Thobani 2001:2). In line with this philosophy I use first person as a way of finding my own voice in the academic terrain and also as a way of communicating my agency and subjectivity."

While I do believe the latter, this is not the foundation for my optimism and faith in change, which I have outlined above. The concept of 'the necessity of hope' is, however, worth discussing on its own merits.

Noam Chomsky in 1992 described hope for freedom. Today it applies equally to climate change:

*"On the issue of human freedom, if you assume that there's no hope, you guarantee there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, that hope is possible, there's a chance for you to contribute to making a better world. That's your choice."*

Hope is necessary. From hope grows the possibility. That much is logical. However, faith and certainty are inherently un-rational<sup>5</sup>. It is based on conviction, and so is often labeled naive, arrogant, or pathological. But no matter how correct or incorrect these labels are, faith does build power. Not the least through our language choices, which are manifestations of our underlying beliefs.

## **The Language of Certainty**

The choice on whether or not to speak with certainty and faith about 'winning' and 'success' on climate change is similar to our choices of language around the effects of climate change. Consider, for example, the difference between the two sentences:

*'As a result of climate change, the Great Barrier Reef will be irreversibly destroyed.'*

or,

*'If we fail to solve climate change, the Great Barrier Reef would be irreversibly destroyed.'*

The first sentence implies that climate change, and the Reef's loss, is a certainty, whereas the second still holds within it the power of human choice, bringing human agency into the equation. Most climate communicators over the last two years have learnt to be very careful to use the language of agency, rather than of imminent destruction beyond our control. This is empowering and motivating language, and encourages the audience to make a choice between alternative futures, rather than accepting fate. Science without movement theory embedded in its communication is depressing and disempowering. When communication resigns someone to accept inevitability, we lose the opportunity to engage them with the movement, and so the movement is weaker than it could otherwise have been, and becomes more likely to fail. Choosing such 'inevitability' in communication thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Knowing that language holds the power to bring different futures into being, our choices about communicating whether we will win or not are similarly crucial. On solutions to climate change, it is rare to see language couched in certain terms, but this is a conscious choice that we can make. Do we say:

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<sup>5</sup> *Un-rational*: not rational, outside of the sphere of rationality, a different way of making decisions. *Irrational*: against rationality, drawing conclusions that don't make sense.

*'Over the coming decades, we need to move to a low-carbon society, transforming our energy systems, our production systems, and our consumption habits,'*

or,

*'Over the coming decades, as we move towards a low-carbon society, we will transform our energy systems, our production systems, and our consumption habits.'*

The first, in the language of need, implies a daunting, formidable task<sup>6</sup>. The second, however, is an invitation to be involved, to learn more, and to prepare for the transition. Hope and a vision for the future is embedded and the (r)evolution becomes inevitable, an irresistible, political, force.

Whether we choose the language of need or the language of certainty has the power to bring about transformation. But if we don't have certainty and belief in change, we cannot use such language with integrity and honesty. I feel ready to use the language of certainty, and I encourage everyone to explore these beliefs for themselves. What language we choose as individuals or as organisations is a decision for that individual or organisation, and 'certainty' must not become a doctrine, or end in itself.

### **Leaving space for debate<sup>7</sup>**

Many movement-building revolutionaries and philosophers have discussed the importance of belief, or faith, in their movement's success – Marx, Guevara, Martin Luther King Jr., even liberal parts of some Christian churches. Unfortunately, it has also been used by some revolutionaries to advocate totalitarian methods for carrying out their revolution. Consider the control of Mao over the Chinese population due to violently enforced faith in communism – Orwell's "1984" – as well as fundamentalism from a variety of religions, where the space to question the certainty of the movement is removed. Where individuals are undermined, oppressed and denied the chance to honestly express their views within the movement, it leads to fracturing, loss of integrity, and the movements demise.

Totalitarian or fundamentalist leaders often use the enforced 'faith' of their followers to drum up fanatical celebrations which achieve no real change, only reinforcement of the faith itself. We must be careful to avoid this within our own movement. For example, events like 'Earth Hour' and the 'Live Earth' concerts must be used as an opportunity for the necessary outreach and political mobilisation, not promoted as solutions themselves. Similarly, the declaration of an 'emergency' must carefully avoid the tendency towards short-termism (and thus activist burnout), and also over-simplification of the issue, which can then lead to alienation of the broader public.

If we leave space for discussion and honesty, expressing our fears and despair, or alternatively our hope and faith, and use these discussions as grounding for our activism, we can create calm determination within our movement, long-term commitment, and continual progress towards a solution.

While I personally feel certain that change is coming, and I hope to convince others, I do

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, solving climate change is a daunting, formidable task.

<sup>7</sup> With thanks to Max Hamon, a lecturer in Religious Studies from the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, whose comments helped me to develop the thoughts in this section.

not wish to enforce this belief onto anyone else, and wish to open space for discussion, and encourage others in the movement to explore and to share their own convictions, and the implications of these convictions for our future campaigning.

Hope, distinct from faith, is an essential part of human nature, with the power to unite people for progressive movements – as demonstrated clearly by Obama's success with "The Audacity of Hope" and the "Change you can believe in" campaign. Whether or not Obama *is* a 'change you can believe in', the way that his campaigns mobilised hundreds of thousands of US citizens is a great example which we can learn from.

### **'Hope is not a strategy'**

Nick Towle, a *Climate Project – Australia* presenter from Tasmania, pointed me towards a presentation from Richard Denniss (The Australia Institute) at the 2003 *In Search of Sustainability* conference, in which he argued that 'Hope is not a strategy'. I agree. To develop true faith in change, rather than blind and foolish faith, we do need (in addition to hope) real plans, and real progress. Despite political setbacks, I believe that we have these or are quickly developing such plans, that we are beginning to think 'like a movement', and that because of this we will succeed.

Additionally, feedback and support from my (politically diverse) family, friends and arts communities indicate to me that is not only the climate campaigning community, but the general global public, that is ready to move beyond 'climate education' and on to the 'social movement' phase of this transformation.

I genuinely believe that 2009 is our year, because we are now at a political tipping point, and because we have the right strength in the movement, the right passion to succeed, anger directed in the right places and in the right ways, and joy in our campaigning communities.

### **What it means to win**

It is only the very brave or the very stupid who would try to completely define a hard measure of a win on climate change, beyond which we can declare victory. As mentioned above, there are failures now on many fronts, and these failures cannot be undone – our losses up to this point, and those locked in for the future, clearly indicate that we can't achieve a 'total win'. Additionally, a multitude of ideals and 'solutions' – different definitions of 'winning' – exist across our movement, at different levels of depth, and in different spheres of the movement. Sometimes these ideals are conflicting. Yet despite the diversity, the movement is still tangible. Regardless of where we see the path ending, we are pushing in the same direction – towards a safe and just future, and as far away as possible from runaway climate change.

I don't believe that we will reach a 'moment' of victory, some point at which the switch is



flicked and we declare climate change 'over'. It is a complex crisis, requiring complex and ongoing solutions, but gradually these solutions will be realised, creating a sustainable and just future. Global carbon emissions will peak and decline and our society will shift, in values, politics and economics. The sustainability revolution will go down in history like the industrial revolution, the IT revolution, or the feminist movement. I have not believed this before 2009. It is the new tangibility of the movement, on a global scale, that creates this belief in me. Together, we are already on the right path.

This path never reaches a destination where we can stop. Like the industrial, IT and women's revolutions – all of which are also ongoing in one form or another today – the quest for sustainable change is an ongoing process of transformation, not a single battle. The resolve and constant search for unity within this movement ensures that we will not disband until 'change' (however we define it) is achieved. I feel like I am part of an irresistible force for change. It is in this sense that I believe we will win, and perhaps even that we have already won.

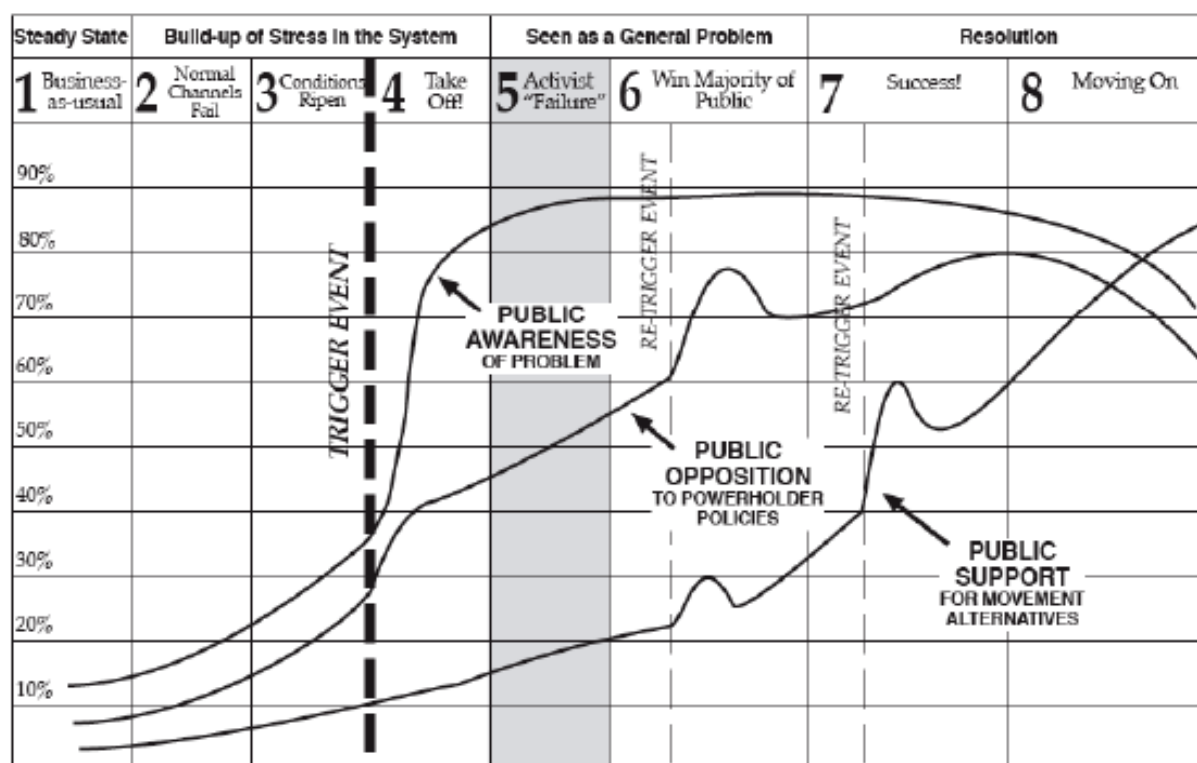
### **Our current position**

2009 is a make or break year. With Copenhagen coming in December, whatever that conference means for you, it is acting as a major, looming milestone for the global movement.

2007 and 2008 were very different beasts. I think we collectively did extremely well during the last two years. We moved, dramatically, forward. But it would be foolish to think that it's over with those last two years of action. The '5% by 2020' announcement proves this.

In the 2007 publication 'Move into the light?', the Turbulence collective wrote, *"If the whole emphasis of environmental activism over the last few years has been on raising awareness about the threat of climate change, then 2007 must be seen as the year when 'we won'. The issue is now everywhere, and everyone, politicians and big companies included, talk about it. Yet it is precisely this victory that could prove to be a defeat."*

We need to ensure that after (incredible, major, necessary, wonderful) victories such as our awareness-raising efforts thus far, that we both comprehensively reassess the direction in our own community and look to further extend our successes. We as a global movement and in Australia, have been doing this for some time now, and are finalising that process of re-directing ourselves now.



**Winning the Public in Three Ways**

Adapted from Moyer, Bill, *The Practical Strategist*. San Francisco: Social Movement Empowerment Project, 1990.

Bill Moyer's theory of social change created the famous movement model above. After the initial 'trigger event' that was An Inconvenient Truth, the 'Take Off' phase was quite amazing to be swept up in – the establishment and rapid expansion and improvement of both community organising and NGO campaigns was phenomenal. 'Public awareness of the problem' is now easily up around the 90% mark. Even if only to a very shallow level, the public are aware and largely supportive of our goals. After all, who *doesn't* want a sustainable future for the planet?

'Public opposition to powerholder policies' was made much easier in Australia once the government finally announced their terrible targets, and we have been seeing for some time an ever-increasing amount of direct action on coal infrastructure. Public support for activists who take direct action is also increasing – the recent court decision in the UK acquitting the Kingsnorth protestors, as well as various court cases within Australia for direct activists, is included in the shifting tide of public support. The backwards motion at the Poznan UN conference enables opposition to powerholder policies to increase on a global scale. So if 'public opposition' is currently spiking, or will spike throughout 2009, we may be ready to move out of phase 5 – Activist "failure" – and power forward towards phase 7 – "Success!"

## **Where to from here**

To push us squarely into the final phases, Copenhagen 2009 is already primed to be a major re-trigger event on a global scale, where 'Public Support for Movement Alternatives' could dramatically increase. Of course, we're not just talking wind farms here – these days everyone already loves wind farms and solar arrays. The movement alternatives that we need to build support for are complex, deep and total shifts in society – an end to wasteful consumption and 'continual growth' thinking, and massive realignments of our economic system, in addition to the simpler but also necessary ideas like wind power, an end to deforestation, and funding for adaptation in vulnerable nations. To create these shifts, we need to recognise that we are in a new phase of campaigning, that education on climate science and effects is over, and that we are desperately in need of new narratives beyond just 'problem and solution'. Here I propose two potential narratives, which are closely interlinked.

### **1. The democracy narrative**

Polling in Australia and globally, consistently shows that the majority, or the vast majority, of people support a climate solution and would strongly support a government who implemented appropriate policies.<sup>8</sup> But while the public is supportive, they see a government that is now so far from such action, that they don't believe that changing the government's approach is possible. Unlike those within our movement, those outside the movement are (generally) not so fully educated about social change. Without knowing how to create change, it is hard for them to believe that political change is possible, and so they disengage. What we need instead, to engage them and draw them in to our movement, is a new narrative.

*"The policies, technologies and behaviours that we need to deploy are in almost all cases already known. We will make them a reality if we create a new politics of climate change that persuades politicians to act." - Steven Hale, The Green Alliance, in 'The New Politics of Climate Change: Why we are failing and how we will succeed'<sup>9</sup>*

The old narrative was about the troubles of climate change and support for renewable energy and strong targets. The public now knows this, but can see a government that doesn't change in spite of knowing, and so they lose enthusiasm for repeating the old messages again.

The new 'democracy narrative' is instead about the fundamentally un-democratic nature of our current government's policies. Consider the following as not just our internal, movement logic, but for public communications: *'The vast majority of us agree that solving climate change is the right thing to do. When public support is so obvious, and backed by polling, why aren't governments acting? This is against the central principle of*

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<sup>8</sup> Yes, support dipped with the financial crisis, but it is still strong, and delaying climate action due to the financial crisis is easy to make a case against.

<sup>9</sup> Available at <http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/uploadedFiles/Publications/reports/The%20new%20Politics%20of%20climate%20change%202008.pdf>

*representative democracy – that our representatives should actually 'represent' our views. We are the people who vote, we elect them to represent us. Coal companies don't. We are disappointed, even angry, and we feel embarrassed at the selfishness and sheer stupidity of our nation's policies, which purport to represent us, and we are ready to hold them accountable. We would support a government who leads, who inspires us, and who gives us hope that our future will be a safe one. We want a government that would make us proud.'*

The new democracy narrative would give the public a sense of ownership over and new belief in change. With this belief, we would attract new people to the movement.

A major benefit is that unlike talking about climate change science and then asking people to write to their politicians, this narrative directly applies pressure to the government. It brings social change theory out of the activist classrooms and into public debate. *'People want change and are ready for it – we are willing to change our lifestyles dramatically if governments have policies which allow us to do so.'* A public discussion of why voluntary action alone doesn't cut it is all part of the package.

*"The public will is expressed in three ways; through behaviour, attitudes and political mobilisation. ... Political mobilisation is the most critical of the three dimensions of individual action." - Steven Hale, 'The New Politics of Climate Change',*

We have spent the last two years shifting attitudes and behaviours, while governments consistently blame consumers for not shifting behaviours enough. Now we are ready to explicitly move on to the phase of mass political mobilisation – not just in our actions, but to also explain to the general public why this phase is necessary.

Karo Korkeila, an outstanding youth organiser from Finland who attended the Poznan conference, stated the following, which eloquently reflects a necessary principle – a people-led but government-supported transition.

*"It became apparent to me:  
- That change will come from the people. People who feel so motivated and inspired to change their lives and their communities for the better, that they radiate positive social change all around them. Like ripples spreading and growing across water from the impact of a tiny pebble. ...  
- That the people, however, must demand that the political system supports and strengthens, rather than hinders and weakens (as is all too often the case at the moment), this people-led transformation of society."*

In order to achieve the required, supportive policies, we need nothing short of a reinvigoration of democracy, en masse. To kick-start our democracies again, we need more people, who all understand how to apply pressure to governments. To further draw people to our movement, we need them to believe that they can make political change. The public already believes that climate change is a huge and important issue – we don't need to spend further time and effort educating them about climate change. We need to

teach them that a social movement is what will stop it, and invite them to be involved.

This attitude that *'I've changed my lightbulbs but I can't change politics'* is too pervasive, especially in Australia, where the public (and often us as well) tends to look down their noses at politicians, saying that they're all in it for the power and that politics corrupts and that they can't make any real change. But cynicism about political change can be overcome with education about social change: *'We CAN change politics. We DO change politics. We live in a democracy, and right now it is broken. By exposing its flaws, exercising our citizenship, and helping others to do the same, can we regain control of it and solve climate change.'*

Another key part of the democracy narrative (or perhaps one of its key defences) is shedding the idea that people who care (like us) are 'too political'. We live in a democracy and engaging with it, encouraging our government to support the people-led transition, is quite literally our last hope for a safe climate. *'We need to do things that challenge the political status quo. Addressing environmental problems in any other way does not create fundamental change. Lightbulbs, trees, greenpower, all create environmental good, but they don't fundamentally shift society. What is more, we cannot take good environmental actions unless we have the options available to us from a government level.'*

This people's movement, engaging with our democracy, is already happening. The need for a shift away from volunteerism and towards political changes has been discussed within the movement now for over a year – it is time that we made this argument a core part of our public narrative. Perhaps we shied away from doing so in 2008 because it touches on the deeper philosophical underpinnings of our thinking, and we didn't want to delve into the 'green ghetto' and risk alienating the rest of the community. We stopped at wind turbines and solar panels, but the solutions go much deeper. Now is the time to move the public on, to deeper values.

## **2. Climate politics and processes**

The second public narrative is about the UN process. We have 11 months to go until the UN process is slated to effectively decide the fate of the earth and all the people and other species that live on it. If the agreement in Copenhagen is a failure, in the absence of other credible global alternatives, runaway climate change can be expected. If the agreement is a success, we have a strong chance of saving our global future and nations of the world will commit to action.

There are currently many discussions and opinions on whether the UN is capable of giving us what we need in terms of political agreement, with many critics saying that such a top-down process denies the grassroots leadership, and that it is inherently corrupted and that it cannot be extracted from capitalism, which is the root cause of climate change. In my opinion, for the people-led but government-supported transition that we need, the UN is the only currently credible global forum in which we can get all nations' governments to agree and to support the coming shift.

One only needs to walk through the nearest city's high-end fashion mall or through a street of exclusive car dealerships to conclude that the grassroots needs the support of

governments if we are to shift current patterns of over-consumption and wastefulness. The vast amounts of money that needs to be transferred, from developed nations, to developing-nation local communities for climate adaptation, can only be coordinated through sound international agreements. For a global problem like climate change, a global solution is necessary, and the UN is the only forum currently existing and broadly respected, where we can set a global level of collective ambition.

However, despite its astonishing significance, extremely few people in the (global) mainstream public know about the UN process at all. Perhaps this is why the UN process and the Kyoto protocol has failed up to this point. Further, and especially in Australia, the public are not aware of their nation's approach and attitudes within those negotiations. We need to educate the public about the process (and hence the urgency for political action now) as well as policy (what their government is advocating within the UN process, compared to what we want to see) and about how they can influence policy change (democratic participation).

The Change Agency's online organising report from 2008 stated that the movement needs 'something it can agree to', something that is achievable, and something that will be effective in solving the problem, rather than creating the illusion of action. Educating the public about the UN process and Australia's shameful role within them seems to me to tick the last two boxes, and time will tell if the movement thinks that this is 'something it can agree to'. Australia's engagement with the UN process is far from transparent for the ordinary Australian. We can bring it out into the public sphere and use public outcry to shame the government into change across the spectrum of climate issues – not only targets, but also deforestation, 'clean coal', and adaptation funding.

The same sort of education about the UN process is now being planned and promoted in nations across the globe. It is crucial that strong activism – and particularly activism around the UN process – takes place in those nations which are attempting to water the global agreement down: Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. The USA, with its new administration, is a given target for change, and the movement there is very strong. We need to focus on the remaining bastions of conservatism, and bring them down with domestic and international pressure. Canada and Japan in particular are nations where skill-sharing from Australian and European activists – particularly on direct action – would be of great benefit. Encouraging progressive national governments to 'call out' the most regressive nations – as South Africa did to Australia during the Poznan conference, is another tactic that can be used internationally.

Phillip Sutton recently state in his '*Strategy Paper for the Australian Climate Summit 2009*', that "we need to recognise that even the 'best' possible result from Copenhagen will be nowhere near good enough. Inevitably, something dramatic will have to happen after Copenhagen to put the world on the right (fast) track. ... perhaps a massive social mobilisation or a constructive revolt."

I am not yet convinced that Copenhagen will fail, but am open to that possibility. I agree with Sutton that we need to develop 'a dual strategy', pushing for the best possible outcome at Copenhagen, and also for moving beyond it in the (arguably likely) event of failure there. I believe that, by educating the public about the UN process and what the ideal agreement should look like, we make it easier in 2010, should it prove necessary

after Copenhagen, to react, to revolt, and to mobilise around a credible alternative. The 'World Safe Climate Covenant' that Phillip promotes is one possible path for a superseding agreement, but I anticipate that communication about this Covenant will not be palatable to the public in 2009. In contrast, The UN is an entity that the public currently respect, which they will be open to learning about, and which they will be open to criticising once they are aware of its shortcomings.

## **Conclusion**

We are a galvanising movement at a crucial moment in history. We understand deeply the need for real movement thinking, and we are building it. Together, Australia's Climate Action Summit, coordination through the Climate Action Network Australia, and diverse grassroots and professional efforts, are very busy building the unified ideologies, platforms and strategies that we will use to bring us success.

Robert van Waarden<sup>10</sup>, a young climate-change and climate-movement photographer from Canada recently wrote:

*"There isn't any option to not succeed. The consciousness of the world is shifting quite quickly to the understanding that Climate Change is the largest problem we face. ... If we look historically at how quickly this movement has gained steam, it is going to soon turn into a run away train, and we have no choice but to get on board. ... By looking at the big picture, I see that we will win....Humanity and the right choice will eventually triumph, and knowing this is part of the reason I continue."*

We already have, within this movement, the power, knowledge and wisdom needed to win. There exists now, in the quiet corners of the emerging movement, an understanding not only that we can win, but that we will win. In a sense, because of this understanding, it could be said that we have already won.

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*Anna Keenan is a youth climate advocate who worked throughout 2008 with the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, and has been actively involved in climate change education since 2006 through The Climate Project – Australia. She attended the UN climate negotiations in both Bali and Poznan as part of the global youth caucus, and is spending 2009 in Europe preparing for the Copenhagen convergence. This article is a personal commentary and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of any organisation or group with which she is associated. Any part of this paper may be freely reproduced, especially if it is to spread hope further.*

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<sup>10</sup> Robert's work is available to view at [www.vanwaardenphoto.com](http://www.vanwaardenphoto.com)