

The Chair
Senate Select Committee on Covid-19
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Inquiry by the Senate Select Committee on Covid-19

Lighter Footprints Inc welcomes the invitation by the Senate Select Committee to contribute to its inquiry on Covid-19. We see this inquiry as an important opportunity to remind Government of the range of interconnected threats currently facing humanity that, because of their high level of risk, need to be confronted systemically and in a coordinated and just manner.

We see the coronavirus pandemic as representing a catastrophic risk to human civilisation. Unless we recognise the serious nature of this threat and its high risk, it is likely to cause significant damage to human populations. We believe the threat cannot be solved in isolation but must be addressed in conjunction with the range of other high risk threats currently confronting our world.

We regard the most significant of these threats as climate change, which we see as being an existential rather than catastrophic risk. We see that there is a high level of probability that, unless we act immediately and decisively, climate change will threaten all life on earth as we currently know it. As such, any measure to address the pandemic must be assessed against its capacity to mitigate or adapt to the threat of climate change.

If you have any queries about the content of our submission, please contact me on 0411 115 186.

Carolyn Ingvarson
Convenor
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Who is Lighter Footprints?

This submission is by Lighter Footprints Inc, a community based environmental group that has a large and active membership and supporter base of around 2000 residents in the Boroondara and Whitehorse municipalities of Melbourne. We were formed in 2006 to raise awareness of the growing threat of climate change to our environment and to encourage decision makers at all levels of government to respond to a crisis which has now become an emergency.

Our Position

We are concerned that the current crisis surrounding Covid-19 has drawn attention away from the other threats currently confronting our world and that, in an attempt to solve that problem, we will ignore the coincidental opportunities to address these other threats. It is essential that policy developers and decision makers realise that there is not just one way to solve a problem but that the best solution is one that opens up opportunities to address concurrent threats.

Our greatest concern is that the existential risk associated with the climate crisis is being sidelined by the Federal Government in an attempt to restart the economy. Language such as 'snapback' and 'return to business as usual', suggests a frame of mind that sees the pandemic as an isolated and temporary setback that can be overcome quickly using solutions that ignore their effect on the larger threat of climate change.

We are also particularly concerned as to the way the much of the management of the response to this pandemic is in the hands of people associated with strong sectional interests. This creates a high risk for potential conflicts of interest as people find it difficult to rise above their personal influences and to remain unbiased and independent in their thinking. There is the danger that this may see them supporting positions that are at the expense of the broader community. The most worrying example is the appointment to the National Covid-19 Coordination Commission of a significant number of people closely involved in traditional mining and energy generation industries and the way they may have used these positions to press their personal agendas.

The management of the response has been conducted in ways that lack transparency, accountability or scrutiny. Normal processes have been sidelined in the name of speed and efficiency and have created an atmosphere of secrecy and disempowerment. In the absence of parliamentary sittings, a substantial amount of legislation is being passed by regulation or by delegation and are not subjected to debate or detailed examination.

What can be learnt from Covid-19

There is much to be learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic, the most significant lesson being that we cannot and should not try to return to life as it was before this catastrophe. The pandemic is not part of the cyclical change that our economy periodically experiences. This represents structural change and should be treated as

an opportunity to change the way we do many things in order to create a more sustainable, long term future for life on this planet.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed a range of weaknesses in the Australian economy that have hampered our capacity to restart economic activity. These weaknesses contribute to our extraordinarily high vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and need to be addressed to create a more resilient and sustainable economy.

These weaknesses include the following elements:

- The lack of economic complexity as demonstrated by the high reliance on extractive industries and exports to create the basis for our high standard of living.
- Low levels of innovation within various industry sectors. This has led to failures to commercialise the research of our world regarded scientists into understanding climate change and the development of new technologies to adapt to and mitigate the damage caused by this threat
- A high reliance on consumption led economic growth to fund our high standard of living to the detriment of our environment.

[Applying these lessons to our response to the climate crisis](#)

These lessons have pointed to critical factors that will be essential to the creation of a prosperous and flourishing society that is sustainable over the long term and can meet the challenge of climate change:

- **The importance of scientific evidence and advice as a basis for climate policy**

Covid-19 has demonstrated the strength of Australia's scientific and medical research community and how relying on their advice and expertise has enabled policy makers to make good decisions in the best interests of the community. This contrasts starkly with the way the expert advice of our climate researchers has been disparaged and ignored in the development of climate policy.

The value of scientific evidence and advice rests in its capacity to adopt a more objective and longer term perspective. It provides important information that can quantify the impact of climate change and substantiate calculations around the costs and benefits of any policy response.

- **Recognition of the value of basic research as the primary source of innovation on which to base long term, durable and value adding solutions to meet the threat of climate change and to facilitate effective adaptation and mitigation strategies**

The strength of Australia's medical research to contribute to greater understanding of the virus and to develop effective treatments and a vaccine has been very apparent during this crisis. Organisations such as the Peter Doherty Institute have contributed significant expertise and effort to finding technical solutions and providing scientific advice for better quality policy responses.

This is a timely reminder of the strengths of Australia's research community generally and especially in the field of climate science. For many years now, our scientists have been the source of significant discoveries and knowledge on which to base new products and processes for responding to climate change. The CSIRO¹, for example, is an invaluable and world recognised source of much of this research.

And yet, our policy makers have ignored this expertise and vision as a basis for high quality responses to climate change. They have been starved of funds and their status has been downgraded because they are not seen to be of immediate commercial significance.

Too often also, the products of this research have failed to find local companies to develop and commercialise this research and the opportunity has been lost to overseas developers. The work of solar researchers in universities such as the University of NSW and Monash is world leading and yet they often struggle to find sources of funding to commercialise the results in Australia.

- **Any solution should adopt a long term vision and be based on a clear assessment of costs and benefits that reflects the interests of all members of our community not just the business sector**

The plan to base any recovery around gas as an interim step in achieving an economic recovery and a reduction in carbon emissions is misguided and short sighted. It fails to give prominence to the significant emissions that gas creates, the expense that this approach would represent, its diversion of resources away from better approaches, the and the fact that it is not a long lasting solution but will need to be phased out over time'

We point to the work done by a number of agencies into strategies for an economic recovery that map out paths to a more sustainable and resilient future capable of dealing with the range of risks currently confronting humanity on a local and global scale. These plans recognise either the importance of an ethical base or the need to give climate change priority in such strategies. These agencies include The Australia Institute, The Australian Conservation Foundation, Beyond Zero Emissions, The Grattan Institute, The Smart Energy Council, and the Group of 8 Universities.

- **The values that determine the kind of economy and society we live in need to be re-examined to ensure greater sustainability, resilience and fairness.**

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the vulnerability of our reliance on economic growth as a determinant of a good and secure life. As pointed out by many participants in this debate including the European Environment Agency, we need to '*... start to think of how we live well within the limits of the planet*'. The following observation by the EEA in its

¹ <https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Climate>

2020 report *Is Europe living within the limits of our planet*² applies equally so to Australia:

Pursuing economic growth at the expense of the environment is no longer an option as Europe faces “unprecedented” challenges from climate chaos, pollution, biodiversity loss and the overconsumption of natural resources, ...

We believe that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a limited and outmoded measure of a nation's success in creating a stable, secure and prosperous society. We advocate the use of a Wellness Index which many countries including New Zealand have put into effect. The Wellness Index provides non-economic measures of economic and social wellbeing to supplement the economic measures provided by GDP. It was developed in recognition of the limitations of GDP, a measure that was developed at a very different time and for very different economic and social conditions to that which prevail now. A useful discussion of the inadequacies of GDP is provided by a recent report commissioned by the Credit Suisse Bank entitled 'The Future of GDP'³.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has done some very useful and thoughtful work around such non-economic measures under the title Measures of Australia's Progress. In this work, they sought to look beyond GDP '*... to provide a selection of statistical evidence about aspects of Australian life across the economy, the environment and society*'⁴. Unfortunately, ABS has not published any further reports since 2014⁵.

This pandemic has had a significantly unequal impact on the various parts of the Australian community and has imposed a heavy burden on more lowly paid workers who have had the greatest role in implementing this response. It is already apparent that climate change will impact our communities in very unequal ways much as the pandemic has done. The closure of coal mines and fossil based energy generation plants will lead to serious disruption to the workers employed in these operations, especially in regional areas.

We advocate that any strategy for an economy recovery embrace the concept of 'just transition', whereby the needs of all people affected by a change are taken into account in the decision making process. The principle of just transition aims to ensure fairness and social justice for all who have been dislocated and disadvantaged through changes to their working life.

Just transition is an important principle in The Paris Agreement on climate change. It is *... not a fixed set of rules, but a vision and a process based on dialogue and an*

² <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/is-europe-living-within-the-planets-limits>

³ <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us-news/en/articles/news-and-expertise/should-we-still-care-about-gdp-201805.html>

⁴ <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/1383.0.55.001Main+Features282009>

⁵ <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/1370.0?OpenDocument>

*agenda shared by workers, industry and governments that need to be negotiated and implemented in their geographical, political, cultural and social contexts.*⁶

The International Labour Organization sets out guidelines to guide the transition to environmentally sustainable economies and societies⁷. As part of its vision, the ILO states that:

Managed well, transitions to environmentally and socially sustainable economies can become a strong driver of job creation, job upgrading, social justice and poverty eradication. Greening all enterprises and jobs by introducing more energy and resource efficient practices, avoiding pollution and managing natural resources sustainably leads to innovation, enhances resilience and generates savings which drive new investment and employment.

We refer you to the work of the Latrobe Valley Authority and its recent report entitled *Transitioning to a Strong Future*⁸.

The capture by vested interests of the policy making process

We are disappointed in the degree of access to power and authority that interests such as the mining and gas sector and corporate business have been given in the development of plans to restart our economy. It is an unbalanced approach to the structure of the Commission and other mechanisms, and limits the vision and scope of the policy making.

Membership of the National Covid-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC) is heavily biased towards representatives of the mining and gas industry and other parts of big business.

The most worrying example is the appointment of Mr Neville Power as Chair of the Commission. In recent times, Mr Power has sought to manage the conflict of interest arising from his position as a deputy chairman and major shareholder of Strike Energy, a West Australian company that is developing a gas field in West Australia. We believe however that his long involvement in the mining, heavy engineering and metal manufacturing sectors makes it very difficult for him to adopt an independent view of Australia's economic future or to imagine this future in ways that preference more environmentally sustainable approaches to economic recovery than gas.

In light of the NCCC's strong promotion of 'a gas led manufacturing recovery', we consider other members of the Executive Board have potential conflicts of interests arising from their involvement in fossil fuel industries. Catherine Tanna is Managing Director of EnergyAustralia, one of Australia's leading electricity and gas retailers.

⁶ http://www.unglobalcompact.org.au/new/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2019.08.13_Just-Transition-Article.pdf

⁷ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_432859.pdf

⁸ https://lva.vic.gov.au/news/community-report-released-today/12770-DJPR-RRV-LVA-community-report_v7a-web-ready.pdf

While Greg Combet has an understanding of climate change policy from his time as Minister for Climate Change in the Gillard Government, he has also consulted in the past to the gas giants Santos and AGL.

Andrew Liveri was appointed to the NCCC Board as a special adviser. Mr Liveri is the former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of The Dow Chemical Company, deputy chairman of Worley, the world's biggest engineering consultancy for the oil and gas industry, and also a director of the world's biggest oil and gas company, Saudi Aramco, which is looking at gas development in Australia. A draft report he prepared for the NCCC board calls for the scrapping of 'green and red tape' on gas development, including a relaxation of Australian standards for equipment used in gas infrastructure and a loosening of environmental regulations and approval processes.

This potential for conflict of interest is also reflected in the NCCC's Manufacturing Taskforce⁹. This body includes several members who have an active involvement in the fossil fuel and gas industry or through their membership of Manufacturing Australia have been associated with public statements supporting the growth of the gas industry. Scott Wyatt is the CEO and Executive Director of Viva Energy, one of Australia's leading energy companies that owns the Geelong Refinery and makes, imports and delivers gas and oil based fuels and lubricants

Manufacturing Australia¹⁰ is a coalition of Australia's largest manufacturers. Its CEO, Ben Eade has made strong statements in the past supporting the growth of the gas industry and calls for government support. James Fazzino is a former CEO of Incitec Pivot and a strong supporter of shale gas.

We would see the call by the taskforce for a 'globally competitive gas market' as a potential conflict of interest. In its report to the NCCC, the taskforce argues Australia has a '*... clear opportunity to deploy [its] gas resources to reduce electricity costs, offer confidence to industrial gas users, and bring in new investors*'.

The structure of the Commission and the taskforce cries out for additional representation from across the community to balance the framing of a response to Covid-19.

The failure of the Commission's agenda to acknowledge the most significant factor in determining Australia's long term economic security, climate change

We are particularly disappointed to note that nobody on this commission has been given responsibility for climate change. Any economic strategy must take into account our

⁹ <https://www.themandarin.com.au/133991-covid-19-coordination-commissions-manufacturing-taskforce-wants-to-grow-australias-gas-industry-to-build-post-pandemic-economy/>

¹⁰ <http://manufacturingaustralia.com.au/>

international obligations and give them due weight in developing plans for a post Covid-19 future.

The Paris Agreement which Australia has signed and ratified in 2016 includes a number of principles which we consider are basic to the formulation on any strategy for economic recovery following the Covid-19 shutdown. The following principles from the Agreement are of particular significance:

- Climate change is a common concern of all humankind, that requires respect, promotion and consideration of human rights obligations including those relating to health, indigenous people, local communities, migrants, children, people with disabilities, people in vulnerable situations, gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.
- Efforts should be directed at a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities.

Thank you for this invitation to contribute to the inquiry by the Senate Select Committee on Covid-19. We would welcome the opportunity to participate in any further consultations you may conduct.

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