SNAPSHOT

Public support

The Australian public has shown their support and interest in information on climate change science by crowd-funding the Climate Council, an independent not-for-profit organization (<http://www.climatecouncil.org.au>) launched in September of this year by members of the abolished, government-funded Climate Commission. The Council will be “communicating the facts on climate change, on the science, on international action and so on, but being apolitical and unbiased”, according to Councillor Will Steffen.

The Climate Commission was established by the minority Labor government led by Julia Gillard. It was launched in February 2011, having been an election promise in the August 2010 poll, and had funding of AU\$5.6 million over four years. As an independent body it was not subject to ministerial direction. It consisted of six Commissioners, and was supported by a secretariat within the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency. The Commission also had a Scientific Advisory Board for support and expert advice. The aim of the body was to provide scientific information and expert guidance on climate change and its impacts on Australia. A large number of reports were produced, based on peer-reviewed scientific literature and observational data from the Australian

Bureau of Meteorology. These included publications on the regional impacts of climate change (<http://go.nature.com/cZpTG9>).

The election of the Tony Abbott-led Liberal-National coalition this September saw the Commission abolished as a cost-cutting and streamlining measure. This was in line with their pre-election promise. The new Climate Council was announced less than a week later on 23 September. “What really motivated the Climate Councillors was the outpouring of public support ... that was quite overwhelming actually, in that people were feeling that this was a service that the community needed and that they really appreciated” said Amanda McKenzie, the CEO of the Climate Council. Five of the Climate Commissioners formed the new Council, Lesley Hughes explains: “We were really proud of what we’d done on the Commission, we were enjoying it and all felt that we had more to offer and that we hadn’t completed the job by any means.”

The Council quickly gathered supporters through the use of social media — their Facebook page now has over 65,000 likes and almost 8,500 people follow them on Twitter. Support from the public allowed the organisation to rapidly raise a substantive operating budget. The fundraising efforts were modelled on US President Obama’s

crowd-funded election campaign, which targeted a large number of small donors. Amanda McKenzie revealed that in the first month they raised around AU\$1.1 million from over 20,000 contributors, placing the average donation around AU\$80. The largest single donation was AU\$5,000, whereas the smallest was AU\$5. The longer term strategy is to receive regular (monthly or annual) contributions to allow sustainable operations.

The Council will continue along the same lines as the Commission — that is, as an authoritative source of information that is presented in familiar language without the scientific jargon. In the short time since its launch the Council has been very active. In addition to handling all the logistics of moving away from government departments and setting up a non-profit organization, they have produced a number of short reports and hosted live question-and-answer sessions. The Council wants to build its reputation as an authoritative information source on climate change and have a strong media presence to disseminate the peer-reviewed scientific facts on climate change.

In the future, they aim to schedule major publications and activities, while retaining the flexibility to respond to current events and questions from the public — as they did during the recent New South Wales bushfires. A longer report on the link between bushfires and climate change (expected in early December) was planned before the current situation. Hughes said they decided to produce a report after the very hot and dry winter, which resulted in a high likelihood of extreme bushfires during the austral spring and the approaching summer.

The Climate Council is off to a strong start, with a committed team and a large public support base. The long-term vision is to be the best communication organization on climate change in the world, and they hope to be an inspiration for the establishment of similar bodies in other countries.

From left to right: Will Steffen, Gerry Hueston, Amanda McKenzie and Tim Flannery.

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