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Australia has found common ground to respond to Covid-19. We can do the same for climate change | Emma Herd, Cassandra Goldie, Innes Willox

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After all we have already endured in 2020 we should know that stopping an emergency is far better than responding to one.

In just a few short months, many more people in Australia have faced greater adversity in 2020 than in the decade since we emerged from the global financial crisis.

The bushfires that affected the health of millions, claimed lives and livelihoods, blighted our landscape and destroyed communities were unprecedented in size and intensity. Now the acute shock of the Covid-19 pandemic has also taken lives and left many more living in fear, while throwing hundreds of thousands out of paid work, shattering businesses and leaving us facing an unstable new world.

The impact of both continues and will ultimately leave scars on our nation. But we can be proud that as our 2020 challenges have mounted we have seen a remarkable and growing willingness across our community to drop old grievances, listen to the science, experts and evidence, and look after each other, including people most at risk, with united purpose.

And we should take some confidence that we can meet other significant challenges for our economy, people and the environment, in particular the systemic threat of climate change, if we build on this momentum and common purpose.

These crises have demonstrated the importance of trusting expert advice and scientific evidence. We took heed of the epidemiologists and other medical professionals, and embraced physical distancing, quarantining and good hygiene measures.

We also took action early to prevent worse outcomes in the future. We started physical distancing and quarantining while caseloads were low, rather than waiting until our health system was overrun.

We built stronger, albeit still imperfect, safety nets for people without paid work and businesses facing dire circumstances. We gave targeted financial support [by lifting the jobseeker payment and providing a wage backstop for hundreds of thousands of people who would have otherwise been thrown out of work.](#)

We criticise ourselves and our institutions a lot. That is not without cause and is part of how we get better. But our society and our institutions have been tested this year and have shown great underlying strengths.



We are an educated society, with a strong democratic foundation and robust public institutions such as our healthcare system and public service. Our financial sector and private enterprises increasingly recognise their important stewardship role in our society, including helping deliver more equitable and environmentally sustainable outcomes.

Australia still has a long path to recovery from the bushfires and Covid-19. At the same time climate change remains an enormous and growing threat to our wellbeing and prosperity.

It is frustrating that after decades of trying we still don't have political consensus on durable energy and climate change policies that look after workers and people experiencing disadvantage, support investment and drive down emissions. Partly as a result, we have an increasingly desperate need to protect lives and livelihoods with greater resilience to the impacts of global heating already locked in.

But, as with our emergency responses to the bushfires and Covid-19, we have a solid foundation to establish an effective climate change response that will create a more sustainable and prosperous future for all.

Bodies such as the Australian Climate Roundtable are continuing to bring different groups like ours into forums where we are finding common ground on the path forward. Many actors in our community – businesses, investors, civil society and unions – have consulted with the scientists and experts, and are together advocating for stronger action and coalescing around science-based targets such as reaching net-zero emissions by 2050.

That is an arduous ascent, but we also have guides on hand with the expert advice to help us get there. Australian climate scientists are globally recognised; strong public institutions are in place, such as the Climate Change Authority, financial regulators and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, to help guide the private sector and community through the transition; and we have considerable policy expertise in the development of effective measures to reduce emissions while supporting trade exposed industries and their employees. The Australian Climate Roundtable is currently bringing our constituencies together with climate change experts to explore the risks of climate change and find solutions for a just and successful transition.

If we can couple these solid foundations with the other main characteristics of our recent emergency responses – prioritising immediate preventative action and ensuring workers, business and people on low-incomes or experiencing disadvantage are not left behind – then finding that elusive, bipartisan resolution to the political dispute over climate policy is possible.

Australian governments are now turning to economic recovery after the bushfires and immediate shock of Covid-19.

Our recovery will be stronger and more enduring if we invest in measures that simultaneously cut greenhouse gas emission and build resilience, while creating secure sustainable jobs.



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If Australia and the world don't take seriously the climate change challenge facing us, then the physical and transitional impacts of a warming planet will continue to cause escalating damage and disruption to our lives, businesses and environment. Damage that expert scientists tell us will ultimately be worse than what we've already seen this year.

For years, Australians have argued about estimates of the cost of climate action that ranged from fractions of a percent of GDP growth to fractions of a fraction. This year, faced with a pandemic, Australians have – rightly, but painfully – chosen to halt much of our economy to save lives. If we have learned anything from what we have already endured in 2020 it is that stopping an emergency is far better than responding to one.

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