

# A Climate for Leadership: how Australia should respond to increasing disasters

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**Ebony Bennett** [00:00:03] G'day, everyone, I'm Ebony Bennett, Deputy Director at the Australia Institute and welcome to our 2022 webinar series. Thanks so much for joining us today. I want to begin by acknowledging that I live and work on Ngunnawal and Ngambri country and pay my respects to elders past and present. Sovereignty was never ceded and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. As you will all know, if you're a long time watcher of these, the days and times for the Australia Institute's webinars do vary, but head on over to Australia Institute dot org dot au to register for upcoming webinars so you don't miss out. And of course, next week is the federal budget, and the Institute will be breaking down everything you need to know from the budget with our team of economists. That'll be next Thursday. Just a few tips about Zoom before we get started. If you hover over the bottom of your resume screen should be able to see a Q&A box where you can type in questions for our panel. And you should also be able to upvote questions from other people and make comments a reminder to please keep things civil and on topic in the chat or will beat you out. And lastly, a reminder that this discussion is being recorded and will go up on our YouTube channel later this afternoon. So for decades, military leaders around the world have been highlighting the ways in which worsening climate change will destabilise global security. In 2014, the US Pentagon confirmed that the climate change poses immediate risks to national security as a threat multiplier and outlined a climate change adaptation roadmap. Last year, the Australian Security Leaders Climate Group, made up of former senior military intelligence and public service officials, published a report entitled Missing in Action, responding to Australia's Climate and Security Failure. One of the report's urgent calls to action was to conduct a national climate and security risk assessment. But it's not just members of the security establishment that recognise the need to understand how vulnerable Australia is to climate impacts. New Australia Institute polling released

today shows that over seven in 10 Australians, or seventy two percent, agree that the Commonwealth government should undertake a national climate risk assessment. Three out of four Australians three quarters agree that the federal government should develop a national adaptation plan to reduce our vulnerability to unavoidable impacts of climate change and the majority of Australians, regardless of which party they vote for, want the federal government to come up with a national plan for how we deal with climate impacts because we don't currently have one. And given the rising costs of climate disasters, two thirds of Australians also want a levy on those that profit from climate change on fossil fuel producers and their exports to help cover climate impact costs. Joining me for this discussion today on Australia's preparedness or lack thereof is admirable. Admiral Chris Barrie, now retired, who retired in 2002 after serving as chief of the Australian Defence Force and serving in the Royal Australian Navy for 42 years. Chris was a consultant, teacher and mentor through the Oxford University's Strategic Leadership and Stimulus Forum programmes. He's been a distinguished visiting professor at the National Defence University in Washington, DC, and he's currently an honorary professor at the ANU and patron of the Australian Crisis Simulation Summit. A student led one week event for aspiring national security policy makers, and which I know several of the Anne Kantor fellows at the Australia Institute have raved about. Chris Barrie is an outspoken commentator on climate change and security to raise awareness of the potential costs of inaction. He represents Australia on the Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change and as a founding member of the Australian Security Leaders Climate Group. Joining him today in conversation is the head of the Australia Institute's climate and energy programme, Richie Merzian. Please welcome. Welcome to you both, Chris and Richie. Thanks so much for joining us. Chris, I'll put my first question to you. Since the recent flood crisis, there have been many calls for more support from the ADF on the ground to affected communities. But you've warned that Australia's already pretty dependent on the ADF. Whose responsibility do you think responding to climate induced natural disasters should be?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:04:40] Well, I think it's a complicated question, Ebony, in the sense that in the past the Defence Force has provided assistance to the civil community on an as available basis. But we were talking about conditions under which they were long gaps between events and on nearly every occasion, and we weren't all fighting somewhere. There was IDF personnel available to go and assist. And I think it's important over the events of the last three years to consider the real issues here. The first point I want to make is that in the black summer of bushfires, Shane Fitzsimmons, who was the commissioner of the Rural Fire Service in New South Wales, he had out in the field 78000 volunteers. Now, Defence Force is about 62000 personnel, and although some of them are very highly technical specialities and the ADF at best can't put more than about six to 7000 people in the field. So that's a paltry number compared to the kinds of numbers that Shane had out in the field, and that's not even thinking about what they did in Queensland and Victoria. So the scale is an issue. The second part of it, of course, is that ADF personnel are very highly trained. They're probably the most expensive workforce we have in this country because all the investment we have got to make in their skills and capabilities and to use them in these in this way is okay on a space available occasion. But we're starting to see now calls for the ADF to turn out all the time and to go and assist communities. And I understand at community level, having uniforms on the ground is important and I think our our people do a terrific job. I've yet to talk to somebody in the ADF who didn't appreciate what I was there, what I had to try and do and so on and so forth. And that that seeing a uniform on the ground that appears to know what they're doing does give communities

some. If you like confidence, that would be okay in the end. But we can't go on doing it because it means that when sailors, soldiers and airmen go home, they have a break. Now they're called out to do these other things. So on top of their military task, now they're doing these community led tasks. And that becomes an impossible equation eventually. We know that Minister Dutton's announced you're going to get another 18 and a half thousand people in the Defence Force. I know by the way, he's going to change the conditions of service. The only thing I can say to that is good luck because in my six years at the top of the Defence Force, we were always 10 to 15 per cent short of people to do work.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:07:41] Right. That's a big gap. But you just want to bring up earlier today you were in Parliament House with other security leaders calling on all Australian political parties to make the security risks posed by climate change a key focus in the upcoming federal election and to commit to a comprehensive climate security risk assessment. Could you please explain why you think that's essential and how a future government might go about undertaking such an assessment?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:08:12] That's a terrific question, thanks, Ebony. I want to start at the beginning for me anyway, and that was back in 2008 when I was asked to be com involved at the Climate Change Institute, and I knew. And before I agreed to go on board as a member of the Expert Advisory Panel, I did some homework. I did my research. The more I read, the more concerned I became. And there were a number of articles and books out there which just said to me, You know, this is a very, very big issue. So since 2008, I've worked with the Climate Commission, then the Climate Council, I've been part of the CCI. I've done presentations, I've given lectures at the National Security College and so on and so forth. And I've travelled around the nation giving talks on climate change at various venues. Early last year, when the coming together of our failure to do anything of manifest ability over the last 20 years to do much about climate change and its consequences, the prospect of the Conference of the Party 26 in Glasgow, some of us put our heads together and said, You know what? We've had enough. It's time to stop pussyfooting around on the issues of climate change and consequences and go out there and tell it like it is. And that led to the production of the Missing in Action report, where we really accused the leadership of the federal government of being missing in action and doing anything about the sorts of things that we were seeing. And we invested effort in trying to make sure that the Australian government would go to Glasgow with something meaningful. Well, we know that didn't work. And if I was, to paraphrase what Antonio Guterres said three days ago, he called out Australia as a missing in action country. He talked about climate change, and he talked about the results of Glasgow being naive in terms of its ability to make any real difference to the planetary consequences we're thinking about. That's another reason why we're doing what we're doing. We want to play and speak about the issues, and we want to convince people that this forthcoming election is the most important election I can think about in my voting life. Because the parliament, the shambles after this next election will have the responsibility for doing the climate risk assessment and security assessment. And from that will flow the setting of priorities, the allocating of resources, the establishment of a plan and harnessing the energy of the nation to do something about it.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:11:09] It's such a huge and important issue, Richie, I wonder if I might come to you next. Before he joined the Australia Institute, I know you worked for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and you've represented the Australia at UN climate negotiation negotiations on the issue of adaptation. What does the United Nations say about preparing for climate impacts and has Australia listened?

**Richie Merzian** [00:11:37] And yes, it's been a number of years with the role of leading on adaptation for the Australian government. And it was it was a really useful way of seeing firsthand how other countries engaged in this issue for smaller nations, for less wealthy nations. This is front and centre. You have small island states. When they get hit by some of these climate impacts, it wipes away almost a year's worth of GDP or more. So huge consequences that they can't just bounce back from. And so what you saw firsthand is of the 200 or so countries around the table. You had the majority who took climate seriously and the impacts seriously. And so one role that we had there was to actually outline the structure that countries could adopt and national adaptation plan. And I had the privilege of being asked to chair these negotiations with my counterpart from the Maldives. And we managed to actually outline a plan for how countries go ahead and undertake a national adaptation plan, something that, despite helping to shape globally, Australia has never done it home. In fact, the Australian government funds these national pension plans in the Pacific. It will often talk to the importance of them. And yet it won't actually undertake the steps here. Which is this a real? A real shame because it means that we don't know how vulnerable we are to climate impacts, which allows us to get away with the question of the cost of climate impacts versus the cost of action, which is often been this inane conversation we've had in numerous federal elections. And it's left us vulnerable, vulnerable and lurching from one response to the next. When the majority of countries around the world have now undertaken these national adaptation plans of a 70 per cent of wealthy countries have undertaken these national adaptation plans. And Australia doesn't have anything in that place. If anything, the federal government appears to push this responsibility down to states, and local governments are far less able to actually do the homework and fund the responses necessary.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:13:48] Well, that raises a number of interesting questions for me because we talked about the idea of being able to respond at community level in Australia, but the idea of also trying to do humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in our region. So when Cyclone Pam hits the Philippines, guess who goes to help the people in the Philippines? It's the ADF, or to the small islands in the Pacific? That's where we go, even with the recent volcano in Tonga, for example. So it's extraordinary that we're missing in action here in Australia, where it's the security of our own people that we ought to be concerned about. And worse than that, as Ritchie points out, we've not we've not learnt anything from being involved in the process of putting these adaptation plans together. It's almost like the leadership site is absolutely vacant at the moment, and I think this sort of concern all of us.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:14:41] It certainly should. And I guess to come back to you, Chris, we've seen. You know, the recent flood flooding disasters all across the east coast of Australia with Lismore in

particular seem to be really taken by surprise by the intensity and the level of the flooding event there. And it's only been a couple of years since the Black Summer bushfires, which once again engulfed most of the East Coast of Australia. Obviously, we have extreme weather events and climate fuelled disasters occurring around the rest of the country as well. But it seems to me a lot of the effort is spent just responding to disasters and far less on preventing them or pre-empting them. Could you just tell us a little bit about the challenge of preparedness, preparedness and scenario planning as opposed to disaster response? How does Australia, compared to how other countries prepare for these kinds of things?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:15:39] You know, look, that picks up on what I've just said about the ADR task and the idea of does I actually do rehearse and train for doing that sort of stuff in somebody else's country? But I say, if we don't do it here, it's also interesting now to focus on the question I was asked this morning up at Parliament House. You know, the 2019 election, the ALP, you had a climate platform and they didn't win the election. What's really changed? Well, the what's really changed is the Black Summer bushfires pandemic and the floods. And to paraphrase the problem of the floods in Lismore, I was speaking late last week with somebody who is in Lismore, and he sent me a piece of paper over the weekend. And you know, this is why he writes to me, you know, this is the third one in 100 year flood in less than five years in Lismore. That's not one in 100 years, that's three in five years, that's one every two years. And the services are not working collaboratively with communities on why that lives and businesses can be protected. So this is the issue, as we said in the Missing in Action report. We need to prevent in the first instance the consequences of climate change impacts, then we need to prepare to deal with those things we haven't been able to prevent. And then finally, we have to be able to protect our communities. And this is a fundamental security responsibility for the federal government. And it's why we are saying today the next election is so important because the members of the parliament that we elect in May are going to have to deal with this in the three year term of this parliament. Because if they don't, the game is over.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:17:32] Yeah, Richie, it is quite a short timeframe, but it does seem like that climate disaster bill just to stick with, I guess, the Lismore floods and those impacts for the moment, that bill just keeps growing. It was a huge kind of bill for the Black Summer bushfires. Now we've got these floods, which kind of no one escapes, and it's on those front lines that, you know, it seems like the public are ultimately paying for these disasters in the end, either through, you know, ad hoc levies that we sometimes imposed or through increased insurance premiums. But I know the Australia Institute has been advocating an additional source of revenue, an alternative source of revenue. Can you just talk to me a little bit about a climate disaster levy?

**Richie Merzian** [00:18:25] Yeah, sure. It's clear that because we don't know how vulnerable we are to climate impacts, we can't prepare for them, which means that we can't figure out exactly how to even cover the costs that are a result of responding to, let alone the costs involved in preparing for it. So if you think about the 2011 Queensland floods, the government response to pay for the bill was an ad hoc tax on everyone to cover that bill. What you often see is those on the front lines are

the ones who pay, and then the Australian public pays through disaster response payments or through increased premiums that we'll all have to carry or or in the general bills that go in terms of preparation, those who don't pay, which we keep banging on about here. The Australians aren't the actual companies that profit from climate change, those who extract and sell fossil fuels. We know fossil fuels are the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, and the polluters have no responsibility to pay in Australia. And so the Australians just proposed a \$1 levy on the embedded emissions in every tonne of coal and gas that Australia exports. With that, we can raise at least one point five billion every year that goes into a bucket that we can then spend on these relief arrangements, but more importantly, to help adapt and prepare and minimise the impact. What we've found with the most recent polling, which we just carried out in the last two weeks, is that sixty seven per cent of Australians support this national disaster levy on fossil fuel exports because if anyone should be contributing to the bill, it's those who are profiting from the cause and that really comes down to fossil fuel companies. And if you wonder why Australian fossil fuel companies are responsible, Will Australia's the third largest exporter of fossil fuels in the world after Russia and Saudi Arabia? That's the company that keeps these companies don't pay much by way of tax. They don't employ many Australians. If you look at it, if you look at the numbers like we have and they're not paying anything for the pollution they cause, we think that should change and this is a good place to start.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:20:27] And Richie, how much of a problem is it that idea of insurance? Because, you know, as we said, premiums rise. We've had a lot of stories, whether it's bushfires in WA or floods in the East Coast, where people just as insurance is, is unaffordable.

**Richie Merzian** [00:20:46] Yeah, I mean, we're going to see more and more these red zones.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:20:49] Yeah. And I've got a piece of paper in front of me from my insurance broker that says insurers look to recover their large losses from over recent years. This translates to between 15 to 30 percent increases in lower risk residential schemes and between 20 to 40 percent. And rates can vary depending on the operator's for lower risk commercial and industrial risks. Unfortunately, and this is the kicker, unfortunately, the market indication is for much higher in prices 30 to 75 per cent for plants with higher risk profiles. So what do I read into that? If you live in Lismore, you may not be able to get insurance cover for your property. And if you can't get insurance cover, you can't have a bank loan. I know in the Brisbane floods of a shopping mall that was uninsured. To the surprise of its tenants. So this issue of insurance and trying to cover off on how they can still make a business, all of us really important. And what's fascinating, ebony, is that in the Australian newspaper today, where we've published our open letter to our future political leaders immediately opposite. Is a statement from the Insurance Council of Australia calling on the federal government to do something about our infrastructure because the assets are going to become uninsurable.

**Richie Merzian** [00:22:21] And just to add to that, Ebony, the government's response has been to come in as a reinsurer. So currently there's a bill before Parliament. The federal government wants to allocate about \$10 billion, I believe, to a reinsurance facility in North Queensland for cyclones. So that's just one impact in one vulnerable area, where it now appears that the federal government will have to play a role in ensuring insurance companies. And we've already heard from one of the government members that that will hopefully be expanded into other areas as well. So not only will Australians pay in terms of the disaster relief and their higher premiums, they might actually have to move in as an insurer of last resort in a more formal capacity. We've seen how badly this plays out overseas and this is all a flow on impact, right? Because we don't know how vulnerable we are. We go ahead and we develop in areas and expand our development in areas that we should be developing in. And then these impacts hit and then private insurance pools out, and the federal government then has to step in and respond to all these things build on each other. It's like a decade of inaction is now coming home to roost.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:23:26] And I was asked the question this morning about the budget for next week, and my expectation is that the government is going to go through the usual process of flinging money at all sorts of things. The first thing that would be on my mind is what are the priorities for spending here? How can we do riots in car parks and all these other things that we know about and not invest in the kinds of things we're talking about? You know, we've got to hold our governments to account for what they do without money, which is actually held in trust for us all. And I don't think we've done sufficient to hold them to account for what they spend as priorities. The second part of it is I often allocate money to solve problems, but I never follow up. I know there are people in Lismore who were affected by the floods in 2019 who still do not have access to the relief that were promised. So the money gets allocated as I would solve the problem, but frankly, no one goes out and checks that on the ground. This is actually happening. So, you know, we've just got to change this and hold our governments to account.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:24:35] Yeah, we'll go very shortly to questions from our audience. So just a reminder, if you've changed in today, you can type in questions for Chris and Richie. I can see already a few there. But yeah, before we get to those questions, I was wanting to look ahead to the budget. So thank you, Chris, for that. Richie, just quickly to you. You know, we've already seen massive public subsidies towards coal and in particular gas in recent years. Are we expecting more of that in the budget? What's the government's priorities in terms of spending? Is it investing in solutions or otherwise?

**Richie Merzian** [00:25:17] It won't come as a surprise Ebony Bennett. I think we'll have a guest by budget here. We're going to see more money for fossil fuels. We've heard numerous announcements over the last few months even I think. Just yesterday, Minister for Emissions Reductions Angus Taylor was announcing additional support for gas exploration. Through the research of the Australians, we uncovered over \$10 billion worth of fossil fuel subsidies at the federal and state level. Just one fuel fuel subsidy at the federal level was larger than the Australian expenditure on the Australian Army in that one year. So these are huge subsidies that are being

offered to continue the fossil fuel addiction that Australia has, and we can most likely expect more of that in the budget, which will come out next Tuesday.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:26:05] Well, that just reinforces my view, Richie, that at this election, we, the voters really do have to take our vote seriously. I think, you know what, we hope our voting community will do is ask serious questions of every candidate about what they are going to do to try and deal with climate change consequences because we just can't go on fiddling around on the periphery of these issues. And you know, I understand that fixing legacy infrastructure, for example, is not going to be cheap. I mean, it is going to involve a lot of us, but it's got to be done. Otherwise, we're in the in. We're in the business of having a reinsurance cover to deal with the mess that we've been created. I mean, to me, imagine that we've had what happened in Brisbane at the recent floods, accompanied by a Category five storm that blew the place to smithereens like Cyclone Tracy did in 1974. I mean, that would be an unmitigated national disaster. But we got to do something about infrastructure where at 15, 20 years too late getting on this, so we got to get going on it and we got to do it fast.

**Richie Merzian** [00:27:19] And just to add to the getting too late for it, just I think it's only a few weeks ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its assessment on the impacts from climate change, the vulnerability and adaptation required as well to respond. And it said the window to adapt to unavoidable impacts is closing and will get severely reduced come 1.5 degrees of global warming, which we're on track to hit in the next decade or so. And so the actual window to make these investments that Chris is talking about is closing as we speak, so we really can't afford to fiddle our fiddle with our thumbs anymore.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:27:56] Hmm. All right. Well, we might go now to questions from the audience. I've got one here from Alistair McCulloch, who says I'd be interested in hearing the panel's view on the extent to which the use across Australia of military and police leaders delayed responses to major challenges, including COVID, not just disasters, is a consequence of the hollowing out of the state and the diminution of the public service capacity over the last couple of decades. And his question is really, can the civil service no longer provide leadership in these sorts of existential challenges? Chris, do you want to take that one first?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:28:35] Well, I take that one because. And in 2006, at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, I launched the idea that somehow or another, we had to think of wise and better using the capacity of our younger people in all sorts of ways like this. So my take on, let's say most emergency services is there are much fewer younger people in those than there are older people. And I know from my time in the military you don't need a military full of older people because they just don't have the energy, you know, and the endurance that young people have is so that I proposed a scheme called Aussie the Australian Universal Service Scheme, matched with individual expectations. And it is a universal scheme for all young people. And in my view, would be not not like a conscription method. But an incentivised system. A thousand points of service by the age of



26, but in my scheme? Give you a passport. Get rid of your HECS debt. Give you a five percent personal income tax reduction for the rest of life. But you would be allowed to accrue those points in different callings, so some might go to the military and some might go into aged care homes. Some might go into emergency services. Some might go into some kind of Peace Corps activity now. But here's the really interesting thing. I've done 12 focus group with Australia young people. And you know what provided us universal? They do not have a problem it. And I also include, in my universality, differently abled people, so I see no reason why people, you know, you are differently abled, couldn't be employed in a scheme like this as well as everybody else. So I think it could be a fantastic scheme. Well, now I didn't dream it up by myself. It came out of a conversation I had with the president of the Swiss Federation in the Sydney Olympic Games and asked him if he was going to be in Sydney for the closing ceremony. And he said, No, I'm going to go home and do my national service. And I looked at him and I said, But you're only the head of state. And he said, I'm also Swiss and I do my national service. It makes me feel Swiss. And I thought to myself, Well, maybe we could have a scheme in Australia that makes us feel Australia. Why not? So maybe there's a possibility with this scheme. I don't know whether it would have good legs or not, but wow, that could make a real difference to our national law.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:31:24] It certainly could. And Richie Chris made the point earlier that the experience we do rely heavily a lot on volunteer service in this country. But just to that idea of the hollowing out of the public service and Allan Behm, also on staff here, has talked a lot about the fact that we securitise everything and bring in, you know, defence and police and military leaders to solve heaps of problems. But, you know, like when it comes to a pandemic, it was a bit shocking to me that we had to call on this. You know, the military to run the vaccination should now health department have been able to do that. I mean, how much of a role is there for the public service in being better prepared, preparing the community to respond to climate?

**Richie Merzian** [00:32:16] It's it's the essential role. And it wasn't just the health service like the health service had to call on other public servants. So I know colleagues from the Department of Foreign Affairs who ended up going and working in the health space during the pandemic. So got it. Has our public service become? And you see this over and over again, like when the decision was made to build the COVID Recovery Taskforce, the COVID 19 commission, instead of appointing public servants or those who had served Australia over the last few decades, the corporate sector was called upon and you had a gas executive come up with a gas fired recovery. And so over and over again, you see the public service being told to just do what the executive government wants and to not provide ideas and to not provide that kind of advice and expertise that we, I think, are missing. And that's one thing you want to see, like the budgets for the consultancies that are now being contracted to do a lot of the services that the public service used to provide just continue to climb year on year. And I think it's ridiculous. We need to be investing back in the public service. That's the role of a government. And if that means having a big government with a big public service, then that's what we deserve because we can afford it. And instead, the money is going to consultancies and we're being left here without the skills and the capacity to respond to the dangers we face. Yeah, but

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:33:41] We don't have the skills in the public service we ought to have, the talent is going to go elsewhere if it's not kept inside the public service doing meaningful work. I mean that, you know, it's a ridiculous proposition to hollow out of public service because they are there to serve the community

**Richie Merzian** [00:33:55] And you see that across the board. You could pick any department, any agency, and you can point to it? I mean, I was I witnessed firsthand the aid agency, the Australian agency, being demolished and sucked into the Department of Foreign Affairs and many public servants with decades of experience in helping our neighbours on their development pathways, just leaving.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:34:14] Mm-Hmm. The next question I've got is from Peter Penn, who says, Is it time to have the national government move to a war cabinet to bring together a whole of government urgent approach for national security and other key aspects of climate change, which I think has been proposed by a number of experts? Chris Barrie I imagine the Defence Force would have, being the chief of the Defence Force would have given you a fair bit of insight into that type of leadership and what's required to approach really wicked problems. What's your response to that?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:34:49] Well, you know, I think that's a really terrific question for a number of reasons. But when when I when I started the vote way back when, of course, I guess the idea was you either voted with sort of Liberal Party Country Party or the ALP, and it was about the two party system. I've had to reflect on that over time as both parties have really, really changed a great deal. And I I've spent the last year talking to parliamentarians as part of the Security Leaders Climate Group. And I would be really impressed. Very, really impressed if we could put into the next parliament a lot of independent women. Because in the conversations that I've had with independent women in the last year, what really stands out? One, they're very highly committed to their seats, so the people who live in their communities, they are very highly committed to them. True. They talk together a lot. You know, women are good at talking to each other much better than men in my experience. But but but the women in our parliament, they do talk together a lot. Three, I think they would understand the agendas that need to be run. And of course, you know, they might end up holding the balance of power on the next parliament. And that wouldn't be a bad outcome, I know for years people have argued about this party or that party or else. Well, I don't know. I think that maybe getting a lot more independent women into our power would be a fantastic result in the May election.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:36:37] Mm-Hmm. And Ritchie, we've certainly seen a move towards away from the major parties and towards minor parties and independents. And, you know, no party has a monopoly on good ideas. But to this idea that we do need kind of a whole of government approach that works together to solve the problem, not with one department, you know, making it worse than another one trying to fix it at the same time. How important is it that, you know, this is a priority of not just the climate change department, but all departments in government in the next parliament?

**Richie Merzian** [00:37:14] Yeah, this is a key one when we're at the UN level when negotiating these national adaptation plans. A key element of it was that it had to be based as a central agency. It had to be directly connected to sort of the leaders department or the leaders cabinet or the leaders secretariat. It couldn't be put to the side in the Ministry for the Environment or the Department for the Environment or some other line agency. It had to be a central function of government. Otherwise, you weren't going to get the changes you needed because climate change impacts everything. You can't point to a single sector that wouldn't be impacted by what climate change has to offer, and therefore you need that power to reside in the middle and make sure that it flows on elsewhere. That climate change is integrated into every decision that's made in the health or in education or in the Treasury. And hopefully, if we do go down the path of undertaking a comprehensive national risk assessment that would be based out of the premier and cabinet.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:38:16] And can I go back for a minute to the war cabinet idea? Yeah. I think this I'm highly attracted to the idea that a ruling party made up of the best talent in the parliament would be a terrific thing and may be essential for delivering over the next three years what we really need. So it's not about which party you belong to us, about the talent you bring into the parliament. We know that this might actually have some legs to it.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:38:44] Mm-Hmm. Chris, I've got a couple of questions here that touch on a few things in Ukraine, which are not necessarily climate links, but the big issue at the moment. So I've got Cheryl Cooper here who's interested to know what you think about the announcement that Australia is sending coal to Ukraine. Will that be helpful? And I guess overall about Australia's response to helping Ukraine and what we can provide them?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:39:14] Well, I suppose it will be helpful to provide some source of energy if you cry and I've no doubt, I've no doubt that the Russians will be playing with the energy mix and trying to do the worst that they can. Frankly, I was I spent an hour last night involved with Chatham House inside the presidential palace in Ukraine. And I don't think there be many surprises as to what I heard apart from this. The claim that 70 percent, 76 percent of Ukrainians are supporting what its government is doing and given the last four weeks, I think that is a really meaningful outcome because what it's telling me is the old equation that I know that when when you are an invading force, it's not like you are being invaded. You know, if we think about Afghanistan, they saw off the Soviet Union in 10 years and they saw us off in 14 years. And guess what? Afghanistan now is still in the hands of the Afghans. Imagine in Ukraine if they are really committed to their culture and their identity and where they see themselves in the future. The Russians are going to find themselves owning a really big problem, even if they think they can occupy the place. It won't go away because Ukrainians being the invaded country will. They will they will make it nasty for them all the time. It would be really interesting. So as this unfolds, it's going to be fascinating. I think for us in the West, and I think there are some big meetings in Europe this week to decide the extent of additional support Europe could provide to Ukraine. There was a big play last night about providing air defence over Ukraine and No-Fly Zones and all of that. But one of the big

points the Ukrainians put forward was you may think this was just about Ukraine, but it's not. And I mentioned a hologram of a whole list of RIM countries, frontline countries to Russia, which might also be part of the grand plan. So, you know, this is this is a very big issue for us all. And of course, here in Australia, we've got our eyes on China and what it means by then. If you if you look at what's happening in the Chinese stock exchange, you'll say it's already having a significant impact.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:41:48] The other question that I had that relates to Ukraine is more climate related. It's from B White. And he says, can we learn from Russia's action in Ukraine about about the invasion? Moving to energy independence? And in particular, because Australia imports most of our petrol, our reserves are held in the USA. And also, of course, Europe is heavily dependent on Russian gas, for example, and has plans to decarbonise Richie. I might come to you first and then to respond, Chris, about that idea of energy independence and how important that's going to be

**Richie Merzian** [00:42:28] The federal government undertook a review of Australia's liquid fuel security. That is how aligned is it on foreign oil, and it found in April 2019 that Australia has only 20 days worth of of petrol and diesel at its current consumption rates at any one time. The final version of that report is supposed to be released at the end of 2019, and we still haven't seen it. But really, since then, Australia's become more liquid fuel insecure, with more refineries shutting down than it than it was a few years ago. Basically, there's a real opportunity. And yes, the lesson learnt here is Australia should become energy independent when it comes to its transport fuels. We could be making all the fuels we need to power our cars in our trucks, with sun, with wind and with hydro. If we electrify our transport, we get ourselves off foreign oil. But unfortunately, all the efforts that have been made around liquid fuel security around shoring up more supply, securing reserves in Texas rather than actually demand side in reducing our reliance to electrify electrified transport or even improving the efficiency of our vehicles. We have some of the most inefficient cars in the OECD because we don't have standards on the CO2 coming out of the tailpipe. So there's so much that we could be doing here. The same thing with gas overseas. The lesson learnt here is to get off gas, not to try and dig up more in Australia has no shortage of gas. We went through this yesterday, 80 per cent of Australia's gas is exported. We tripled production on the East Coast and prices went up. You don't have to be an economics professor to know that there's something wrong there. If they were shipping it all out for very little income and as a result, we're paying more for the things we need gas for. The best solution is to get off gas. If we do that, every household could save a finally end with the positive because it's almost always negative. If we did electrify our homes and our cars and put panels on their roofs, the average Australian household would save five thousand dollars a year. That's the opportunity that's available to us by actually becoming more energy independent. But it's one that needs governments to back in so that we and everyone can take that.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:44:43] Yeah, it's it's a wonderful segue for sighing at the I and you, of course, we've been beating this drum for a very long time. But we're seeing the impact of having a transport distribution system based on fossil fuel and price was asked as the price of fuel goes through the roof. All those other options that Richie just talked about, you know, harvesting the sunshine, harvesting the wind, you know, doing the smart stuff, electrification of a railway system

that needs a huge improvement in its capacity and so on. And these are these are what I talk about the legacy systems we really need to work on when you know, we just need to do a lot better. We live in a very big country with very few people. Are becoming very important things. But you know that dependency on a few days of fuel can cripple this nation overnight. No doubt.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:45:41] Well, I have a question for you, Chris from Graham McClay. He says has climate change been factored into Australia's defence planning and preparedness?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:45:53] In truth, it has been factored in, though, probably not as significantly as that ought to have been. And I think the current state of affairs General Angus Campbell has announced now he's looking at the structure of the Defence Force to see whether it changes necessary. That's a terrific idea. It's about 12 years after they did it in the UK and the US, but nonetheless, it's still up a terrific idea because it means we're going to get something done. So, yeah, if things are going on and we should always remember that our defence bases are subject to the impact of climate change like everybody else. So, you know, we've got airfields said they've got to be under a metre of sea level rise. We've got some places we'd probably prefer not to be in and so on and so forth. So yeah, it has to be factored in because it becomes important why our ability to operate. And then secondly, our ability to make a contribution to where the nation is going on.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:46:54] And I imagine the military might have a pretty big petrol bill for its fleet of our

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:47:00] We are a fossil fuel based Defence Force. Make no mistake about it.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:47:03] Yeah, I'm I'm just realising I'm behind on the questions because I've been so busy listening to these wonderful responses from the panel. I've got a couple of questions here again that go back to the idea of all of our volunteers. So Amanda Lamont says, I understand the military need a break, but so do our emergency services volunteers and that we've known for a long time that all of these impacts were coming down the line. Chris, if defence and emergency services are exhausted and overcommitted, going back to this idea, who is left to respond?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:47:45] Yeah, look, I think this is a big question and an I don't have a crystal clear answer to this. And I understand about our emergency service and needing a break too, because the work they do is demanding. Make no mistake about that, it requires high levels of energy and organisation and so on and so forth and commitment, to be honest about it. But but the Defence Force is in a similar situation when I was living in New Delhi many years ago. I remember having a conversation with the chief of the army staff there about a riot that had taken place in a city in North India, where the troops are trashed the town. And he made the point that Defence Force

that is doing defence tasks, but spending all its time on other things like internal security and something loses its mojo. So when you recruit people into a defence force, they're there to do a particular set of tasks associated with dealing with the nation's enemies. That's why they're there. That's why they give their service to start using them and always otherwise does sap the energy. And I'd hate to see the day when the merger of our Defence Force has been sacked by doing all these other tasks. So I think we have to find a better way. This is another priority effort for past the next election.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:49:11] And the next question that I've got, I guess goes follows on a little bit from that in terms of priorities. Diana KiLynn asks and Richie Merzian this one to you first as part of an Australian climate change adaptation plan. Was the top priority action to safeguard security, she says of our water resources. But what's the top priority action?

**Richie Merzian** [00:49:35] It's interesting because you can't help but think about how badly we've bungled up the Murray-Darling Basin, which if you look, if you look at the the way that the the water levels have been allocated, they're based on assumptions that assume that water levels that we received in the past will just carry on forward in the future. So it hasn't factored in. It was one of the most interesting things that Marion Slattery, I think mentioned to me once is that they didn't factor in climate change in terms of how precipitation, how the water flows would change. And yet now we have, you know, all these dire situations that continually crop up every summer. And so in terms of securing water, which I think is one key part of the picture, even when it comes down to a very visible and problematic asset like the Murray-Darling Basin, we haven't nailed that, let alone at large across the entire country. The first thing first you have to do a risk assessment at the national level. The federal government has to take responsibility for it. It has to spend the resources. When I was with the Department of Climate Change in 2009, I did a stint in the adaptation section, which was actually starting to pull together the plans to do this. We we knew about this decades ago and we should be acting on this now, and it requires actually centralising that that area with the back. When there was a Department of Climate Change, it had three focus areas mitigating emissions, reducing emissions, which was going to be through a carbon price, doing the international negotiations and adapting to the unavoidable impacts with the three pillars of the Department of Climate Change. And they all work together. If you didn't reduce emissions enough, you'd have to adapt more. We didn't have an international agreement, then you'd have to do more of both individually. And so all three things were interlinked. Now they're all in different departments. Now they're all being handled separately by different ministers. And you have this real mishmash. It's really absence of leadership, which is, I think, why we wanted to call this this webinar. You know, climate for leadership, because at the end of the day, it feels like that's what we're missing.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:51:42] And I just make a really important point because it was about water security. Water is fundamental to human life and it's fundamental to the production of our food. So the management of our water is really our freshwater is really, really important. And the problem about not factoring in climate change's consequences is that out we're going to have water scarcity in some parts of Australia, for example, Tasmania in this last summer had its fourth

lowest rainfall recorded since nineteen hundred. And yet up in the northern parts of Australia, we had enormous tropical rain downpours, you know, and so matching where we go on our water security to where we've been is a really important piece of work now. I can't speak to the priorities coming out of the climate security risk assessment there. What I can say is at least where, you know, the vulnerabilities lie and you know what might be required. You can start to set of priorities, you can start to allocate resources and you can start to get something going. At the moment, we don't have any of that.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:52:51] Hmm. The next question I've got is from John Inglot. He says, Not sure if I pronounce that right. John Hartley I have many municipal and shire councils are proactive in building community resilience and adaptation to climate disasters and climate mitigation, but on very limited budgets. His question is should they be funded by other levels of government to support their work in this area, perhaps as part of a national climate adaptation plan? Ritchie that might speak a little bit to the climate disaster levy that you were talking about earlier, but how important is that that because you know, the people doing the on the ground work have the least ability to raise funds to do it?

**Richie Merzian** [00:53:36] Yeah, no. It's the local government association across Australia have raised. They're responsible for something like 25 percent of public assets and yet only really pulled in about five percent of public revenue. And so they've got this huge responsibility with very little resources to respond to it. But they're called on is a first port of call because they're they're closest to those, you know, those counsellors live in the area, they're feeling these impacts and they want to best respond. So there is this disparity and we've seen a lot of interest. We've seen mayors come out in support of this climate disaster levy. Really, if we can find a way to tax polluters for the pollution they causing for the climate change they're causing. And the first the first area that we should fund is local government responses, both to the impacts, but then also to help with their preparedness. That would be the best way to use that money. We raised taxing fossil fuel exports and feeding it back into local governments.

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:54:31] And of course, local government areas are about communities and communities that are affected by the impacts of climate change. And that's why it's really important. I happen to know because I work with someone who did a lot of the climate change adaptation plans the local government authorities that every local government authority in Australia has a climate change adaptation plan. But when I've been involved and asked them about how they're getting on with it, the plan sits on a piece of paper. It lacks funding, as Ritchie has just pointed out. But just as we're saying, we need a new approach to deal with the risk of climate change. It just seems to me we've also got to think about innovation and change when it comes to how we found some of these things. You can't simply say to the right pioneers of Bashar or council, you guys are going to have to pay for all this. I mean, there has to be a different way. And maybe this approach to have a levy is one of them, but there might be other avenues and fundamentally it's going to come down to how we set the priorities. So what we want to do after the next election?

**Ebony Bennett** [00:55:41] Mm-Hm. Chris, the next question is from where did I just lost it here? Here we go from Sandra Guides, who says, in your view, is the federal government approach to others adaptations i.e. the Pacific nations, local government and the rest just a way of avoiding the major issue of climate change so that we can continue with business as usual. And her question is, what do you believe is the main reason for the government being missing in action, as you've termed it?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:56:19] Well, that's a good loaded question. The first thing that I teach and all the leadership stuff I've ever done is that leaders have to walk that whole. So what happens in Australia, we go to the Pacific islands and we have a step up programme, we're going to solve their problems on climate change by recommending all sorts of things we're not doing in Australia. I mean, you know, don't have to be real smart to get that. You don't really mean what you're saying. You just hope it will go away or something like that. So walking the talk is part of it. And secondly, you know, real leadership cares about people. That's why I talk about Brad Banducci and what he did with Woolworths going out there, being up in Northern Rivers and South Queensland days before the federal government was there, looking after his staff, looking after his supermarkets, making sure the stock was getting through to the supermarkets where possible and so on on. That is leadership and action. And that's what I think has been lacking with all of this leadership inaction. And you know, I find it stunning that after the Black Summer bushfires and now the pandemic and all the floods, we still haven't learnt that lesson in this country.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:57:40] Hmm. Richie, is there anything you want to add to that?

**Richie Merzian** [00:57:45] I think Chris nailed it on that one. It comes down to leadership at the end of the day and you get the leaders that you vote for, which is why it's so important that people use their vote properly and why there's a contest of ideas as well. And hopefully with the additional independents, with the additional interest off the back of another climate impact, we might actually be able to have this conversation and have the ideas come out of it.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:58:10] Chris, we've only got a few minutes to go if you've got a message to everyone watching again today. Do you just want to repeat it there?

**Admiral (Ret) Chris Barrie AC** [00:58:17] Well, I will take the opportunity to say to everybody, as far as I'm concerned, the vote I cast in May is the most important in my voting lifetime, and I think all of us, as voters, ought to question the candidate's standing in our seats. We ought to make sure we're trying to get the best person into the parliament for our seat and hopefully we'll get better answers out of the next parliament. But you know, if we voters don't take responsibility for getting the outcomes we desire, then I think we are missing in action too.



*Transcript: A Climate for Leadership: how Australia should respond to increasing disasters*

*Recorded live on 23/03/2022*

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**Ebony Bennett** [00:58:58] Thank you very much, Admiral Chris Barrie and Richie Merzian for your time today. Thank you all for your amazing questions. I'm sorry we couldn't get to them all. But that was a really wide ranging and fabulous discussion, thanks in part to your wonderful questions as well. Please join us next week as we break down the federal budget with our economists Richard Denniss, Matt Grudnoff, and Eliza Littleton. That will be next Thursday, the 31st of March, just after the budget. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcast. Follow the money available wherever you normally listen to podcasts, and you can see coverage of the press conference that Admiral Chris Barrie did today, covered in most of the media today. So jump online and see what they had to say. Thanks so much for your company today. Take care out there, everyone, and we'll see you soon. Thanks very much, bye bye.