

Politically Useful Ways to Help Amplify Climate Concerns

Kay Harrison, Former Climate Change Ambassador, Aotearoa NZ

Notes from Yearly Meeting presentation, 25 May 2025

This piece is extracted from Kay's notes, an edited Zoom transcript, and my own records. Any mistakes, misinterpretations etc are my responsibility and should not be attributed to Kay – Philippa Fletcher, Climate Emergency Correspondent, Aotearoa NZ Quakers

Background

Kay Harrison

- is an independent consultant supporting nations and organisations that [seek just outcomes, cooperation and dialogue for our shared future](#).
- Climate Change Ambassador (2019 -2024)
- Master of Arts (History); Master of Public Policy, Victoria University of Wellington; Harkness Fellow, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard

Kay told us about:

- Where the world is at vis a vis climate
- Where we are at as Aotearoa NZ
- The Pacific - the most vulnerable and the least responsible.
- What else can or should we be doing?

Kay made kind comments about our climate newsletter – containing actions by Quakers, info for thought and reflection, descriptions of what is going on, and links to petitions, submissions etc.

And about Lindsey Fielder Cook's work at Quaker United Nations Office – the quiet diplomacy dinners, advocacy in IPCC meetings, and their production of a [handbook for negotiators](#).

Introduction

So, I ask myself, what am I doing here? Let me share a few thoughts and then, reflecting and exchanging together let us build some new thoughts, reinforce our convictions and move us to greater action and hope.

First, I'll do a short recap of where the world is at in our shared global climate crisis. Second, I'll turn our attention to where we are as a country. Third, the Pacific – our whanaunga – the most vulnerable and least responsible. Last, what else can we, should we, be doing?

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The global situation

It's nearly 10 years after Paris. First the really bad news. There is often a 20-to-40-year lag between greenhouse gas emissions being put into the atmosphere and the manifestation of their warming effects. So that means the impacts we are experiencing now, and they are in northern New South Wales for example, or just a few years ago in the Hawkes Bay and in Auckland; those experiences come to us courtesy of the middle of the last century and beyond.

What is happening now is supported fully by our actions in the 19th century when here in New Zealand we emitted 18 billion tonnes by deforesting two thirds of our country. Those CO2 molecules are still up there keeping us warm. What we have emitted in the last 25 years has yet to have its impact.

The worst news: the Nobel laureate [Paul Crutzen](#), an atmospheric scientist chemist from the Netherlands, introduced the term 'Anthropocene' to describe a new geological epoch in which humans have become the dominant force shaping the earth systems and climate -the atmosphere, its ecosystems, biodiversity and geology.

Officially and technically, we are still in the Holocene epoch, the period of relatively stable climate; the geographical epoch that started after the last ice age around 11,700 years ago. But I think Crutzen is describing things more accurately.

So, my question is what does the [Anthropocene](#) become? What's next after an Anthropocene? Well possibly a post-Anthropocene epoch? And, for those of you who know your Greek, that means a world without people. That is possible. Our world is unutterably altered already.

But we can reverse this. We have the knowledge; the technology. We have a global agreement of almost all governments with a galvanising meeting annually - the Paris Agreement. And the COPs each year to review our progress and test our goals. We have government and corporate commitments; a growing number of laws and policies, litigation, research, consumer demand and ethical choices being made. Every one of us has a role. It just often feels like it's not enough. And maybe it isn't, but we can't stop.

Aotearoa New Zealand

How are we showing up internationally and nationally?

Let's start with the people of NZ before we look at the Government. And I'm not sure whether this is one of those chicken and egg things, so just keep that question in mind, chicken and egg, government citizens.

There's been a shift. In 2023, 80% of New Zealanders were concerned about the impact of climate change on the country. [The latest figure is 69%](#). 54% of us think we should do more about climate change and that's down from 64% in 2024, just in one year.

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New Zealanders are less concerned about climate change than inflation, healthcare and the economy. That sounds rather like the position of our government.

Under the National led government, a number of climate action aligned policies have been reversed. Permitting offshore oil and gas exploration and delaying the pricing of agricultural emissions (our biggest emitting sector), are just two examples.

But in what I believe to be a major achievement, the government has submitted its next climate change target for 2035. Its NDC; it's nationally determined contribution. And it's 1% greater than our current target. It has to be greater or it doesn't qualify as your next target. It's a ratchet clause mechanism of the Paris Agreement. But let me explain why I think it's a genuine achievement.

Many Cabinet Ministers of all parties have been horrified at what New Zealand committed to do under the Paris Agreement in its first nationally determined contribution. And they threw up their hands in horror and some, I understand, said things like, 'let's just come clean and say we can't do it'. And so, their [the current government's] agreement to carry on can't have been easy.

They were just not aware of what we had committed to. ... They were not aware even of the National led government's policies in 2015 that led to the first target. And they just didn't want it. They didn't want responsibility for it.

But, there's a but:

In spite of those voices of both coalition ministers and some National party ministers, we still have the essential architecture in law to transition our economy and to contribute to the global response. We still have the Climate Change Response Net Zero Act. We have the Emissions Trading System. We have the Climate Change Commission. We have budgets for our emissions domestically and plans to meet those budgets. And we have a new Paris target.

It's just like they've turned the volume down to just above mute. It's not good, but they haven't torn everything down.

The Pacific

Pacific Island countries continue to experience the inexorable and exacerbating impact of climate change. *Storms have destroyed infrastructure for tourism in the Cook Islands. Sea levels are rising faster in the Pacific than the global average. There has been saltwater intrusion in Fiji, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, compromising crops and contaminating freshwater resources. That of course has health impacts and it will get worse.*

Projections indicate an additional rise of 15 centimetres in the next 30 years. *Pacific Island countries are actively pursuing adaptation measures while still working hard on reducing their own minuscule emissions. The IPCC, the science basis on climate change, has said that some are experiencing circumstances now that are beyond adaptation, but they keep at it. As you can imagine, that costs.*

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At the COP last year in November, all countries agreed that developed countries would mobilise US\$300 billion per annum climate finance for developing countries by 2035. With a broader mobilisation (i.e. not directly from governments) of \$1.3 trillion by 2035.

New Zealand's last climate finance commitment for the years 22-25 was \$1.3 billion. \$800 million of that came from the Emissions Trading System auctioning, i.e. polluters. They were paying money into the government, and some of that money was being used by the government to go to, for example, the Pacific.

So previous climate finance, \$1.3 billion, 2022-2025. The auction revenues have largely dried up from the ETS because of the settings that the government has [applied], ... and also because they decided not to set aside money from ETS auction revenues for climate action and climate finance, but to use it as part of their resources for tax cuts.

Last Thursday, in Budget 2025, the Government announced that climate finance, which they're ... musing in with other overseas development, would be \$100 million per annum assistance for 2026-2029. So down from \$1.3 billion to \$400 million.

I think last year I used the expression, 'we're all in the same waka'. ... Yes, we're all in the same storm, but we are not in the same waka. Our waka is pretty good, but some of the waka in the Pacific are very flimsy and very vulnerable to being swamped by the storms that they are experiencing much more severely than we are.

What can we do?

For many years, I think, we waited for the world – first scientists and then global governance (say the UN – governments collectively) to get their act together and galvanise us, give us a coherent plan. Surely, we've got to wait for them to agree.

What happened was that science got there a long time ago and then had to fend off attacks and smears and grapple with how it communicates. Governments were clear from 1992 and then set about building apparatus to deliver on their goals – the Kyoto Protocol and in 2015 the Paris Agreement. The were / are flaws, hiccups, missteps, inadequacies, departures – and returns. We keep at it.

Then we needed to see implementation, so we said, well what's our Government doing? They need to set targets, laws, monitoring policies and that might incentivise innovation and change. And they have.

It has happened in our country and it is happening in many. But I believe we're on a point in this journey where we can no longer turn to one another and say 'if only the government had its act together'. Or, 'is it worth trying if the US is out of Paris'? Or, 'yes, but corporates, the G20 big economies, China and the US are the real culprits'.

That time is over. We are in it. All of us. We are the consumers of fossil fuels. We are the voters. We are the frequent flyers. We are those who do or do not talk about the real crisis we are living in. But this is a crisis that we cannot now unknow.

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This is where it gets tricky. I don't have the perfect analogy or explanation but here are a few thoughts.

Climate change is like telling a teenager or a young adult not to smoke or to save for their retirement. Climate change is often characterised as a future thing, but it isn't. ... Most of the time things can feel fine and other pressing and immediate threats occupy our mind, e.g. COVID-19, poverty, war. This is about how we're wired to interpret and respond to threats. And our wiring isn't set up as well for slow moving, invisible, intergenerational threats.

Who is to blame is a very human response in any big global issue. But so long as we're blaming 'big oil' or whoever, we can let ourselves off the hook when it comes to our own action or inaction. Our threats and enemies have always been other human beings; perhaps that's why in the movies the analogy to climate change is an asteroid, possibly aliens next time, but we can see those, can't we?

In this case, every other human being needs to be our ally. Climate change is the ultimate challenge of collaboration. And here too - we are big on fairness as human beings. What if we take a hit to our economy by taking action and the 'others' don't do it? In this crisis we have to act whether or not the other does. And start with no guarantee that they will, or indeed, that we will together succeed.

And then again, we're not very good at change. We're told the things that have helped us and made us feel very safe or successful in our lives, are now the problem.

I think fondly of my father stoking the coal fire on a winter's night in the sense of security that that gave me. I think about the pride I had in buying my first car and I think about my passion for travel. And I know now that I need to change deeply - and this is an industrial revolution of a change.

There's a moral challenge too – we are personally responsible, contributing the problem with our own emissions. But we feel powerless and bewildered. When that happens, we become defensive or silent.

And we're scared.

We will all construct our own story now, our own narrative about climate change and it's likely to reflect our biases and things we've already worked out and feel strongly about.

So, I invite you to get on the balcony and have a look at yourself and the narrative that you construct about climate change. It might include, probably includes, the wickedness of Trump, the insignificance of New Zealand, the importance of producing food. There will be deeply cultural value-laden mind and heart matters that are in you that you need to think about when confronting the hydra of climate change, and what you'll find your mind doing, is constructing a narrative to manage the anxiety, the guilt, or to get around the sacrifices that need to be made.

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Our narratives will make it more distant, more hopeless, or less relevant to us, if that's more comfortable. These narratives can lead to an inadequate response, inaction, denial or a deafening silence.

I've been leaning heavily on a book that I found very helpful in thinking about why we just don't sort this climate crisis since we've got within our power to do so. And it makes sense to do so. And it's crazy not to be doing it straight away. It's a book by [George Marshall](#) called *Don't Think Even Think About It, Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*.

After a really articulate explanation of the answer to that, George Marshall tells us we are also wired to take action.

It is entirely within our capacities – for collective enterprises, altruistic behaviour, preserving for a future beyond our own mortality. I was immediately taken back to Banks Peninsula and the regeneration work there.

We take on faith and conviction with others, without proof, when these convictions speak to our most deeply held values. When we act to address climate change, we can develop an intensified sense of belonging from contributing to a shared endeavour. It's an issue that can bring humankind together and help us overcome historic divisions.

In sum, Marshall says we need to create value and reward for ourselves by acting on our shared conviction.

So – what to do:

1. Talk about climate change all the time, emphasising that it's happening now. Avoid creating distance.
2. Talk about creating a better place. Characterise the action needed as taking us 'back to the garden'. The rewilding of Banks Peninsula is a perfect example. We can build a narrative of positive change, of health and equity.
3. Grab any moment that offers an opportunity to act – a political decision point. When you're deciding on the energy for your new house or car. Any decision point. What is the climate change response?
4. Symbolic moments are awesome. Rosa Parks moments. Could she really have imagined that her action would lead to desegregation in the US?
5. People everywhere find it easier to start by talking about adaptation. If it's easier to start by talking to people about how are you preparing for that next flood or whatever, do it.
6. Don't look for "enemies". Call that out when you hear it happening. It fuels division and is the antithesis of collaboration and cooperation.
7. *Marshall says, and I really like this: "Drop the eco stuff, especially the polar bears and the saving the planet". Because when you talk about polar bears*

and saving the planet, that confines climate action to environmentalists. And if you're not an environmentalist, then it's not your thing. This is everybody's thing.

8. Recognise the grief. *I just need to go to Westport to where my husband's family is from, to see the grief of a community whose lives have changed many, many times. ... They've lost jobs, they've lost homes, and now they're losing those homes to the waters. But do not wallow or indulge in hopelessness.*

Someone said, future generations will either mock us or vilify us, because we know how to fix this or we're not doing it. And when they've fixed it, they'll say, 'you fools', or they'll vilify us because of the mess that we leave them. But I believe we can choose how history will see us. And so, I invite your new thoughts to show us the way.

Thank you

Discussion points (many contributions are included here)

1. Kay is now self-employed and her recent activities have included spending time with a team coaching and supporting the government of Azerbaijan who were hosting the COP because none of them had ever even been to a COP. She may be doing some work in the Pacific on implementation of some of their climate action.
2. Switching to renewable energy generation is the biggest thing that we need to do. It is a big challenge in some places as a lot of countries have many assets tied up in coal fire power generation where power stations have, say, another 30 years of life.
3. Energy is the first place where we make personal decisions. For example, how much air travel do we allow ourselves? What form of transport we use locally? (First best walking; second best public transport; cycling power pedal power or electric power).
4. The ballot box provides the opportunity to elect leaders who will *support the direction of travel for our country*. Local government decisions are very important too. Energy is really critical.
5. Some people say diet is an important factor. Kay: *'I haven't done enough homework to know whether I think I agree that the reduction in meat and dairy consumption is a big help ...'*
6. Fast fashion etc.: *Much of it is produced in situations where the workers are not well rewarded. If it seems too good to be true, then it is too good to be true.*
7. Waste and waste separation. We want to minimise the amount of waste and minimise the amount of waste which goes to landfill. Reduced packaging is a good idea.

8. The big levers are energy and transport globally and locally.
9. Co-operation: *Love is the centrality and that is expressed as co-operation.*
10. Quiet diplomacy dinners: Kay described a Quaker United Nations Office dinner that Lindsey and John lead prior to Paris where they asked '*What are you most afraid of?*' *Negotiators do not talk like that and Kay had the sense that the whole world was waiting for them to deliver something in Paris and ... "somehow we needed to meet as human beings".*
Another quiet diplomacy dinner: ... *"[there was the idea of] acknowledging the hurt that those who have ... caused the problems and now laid upon ... Africa and the Pacific etc. And so, the question for the room was 'how do we acknowledge the hurt in the room'? It ... was an amazing experience that the quietness and the completely different mode of operating did allow some people to speak from the heart. ...*
I think finding ways to bring those quiet moments, those times of reflection would be a gift to a lot of people because that's not how us non-Quakers spend our time."
11. Self-interest: *"We're going to have to rely on some people self-interest ... for them to see the benefit of the choices they make. I mean I can tell you the liberation of never having to go to a petrol station is phenomenal."*
... *I go to this particular church service during the week where there's a guy there and he really wants his niece and her children to come because it's ... a Eucharist in Te Reo Maori and sometimes she can't come because she doesn't have enough money for petrol. It just seems wrong to me that someone who is financially secure like me has a car where I never have to pay for petrol and there are all of these people who are really poor who have to pay for this harmful substance ..."*
12. Enthusiasm about *The Ministry for the Future*; by Kim Stanley Robertson. "... the most motivating book I've read about climate change" – one Friend
13. Reserve Bank and green financial systems: Look at a group called Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action <https://www.financeministersforclimate.org/> . It includes some energy ministers.
14. Calling a Climate Emergency enabled Prime Minister Jacinda Adern to bring a coherence around climate change with its connection in all departments enabling inconsistencies to be identified and dealt with.
15. Renewable generation - *"I know ... that [the Minister] received a report saying the best thing you can do for energy security in this country is to hasten renewable generation". "... the wind industry say we could have six hundred times as much as we need." "...The more you have of [renewables], the less you are reliant on a finite resource - the possibility of discovering more gas, or being enslaved to those who sell you oil or gas."*

16. Small Pacific States and citizen initiatives for channelling money - Many of these governments have trust funds that are very secure and very sound and so any cash can go into that and it will be used for climate support. It's true that not enough money is going but that vacuum will be filled and likely it will be filled by China. China may well add some strings attached to whatever they give Pacific communities.
17. Example of NZ women during World War 1 who got together a phenomenal amount of money via letters in the newspaper and assisted women and children displaced in Belgium. We have so much more agency now [with the internet].
18. Idea of Quakers following Hampden's example where the community bought an electric car and you could book it to go to town. Also, a person in Golden Bay advertises on Facebook and takes people over the hill to Nelson in his EV like a taxi
What we really need is transport and mobility not a car ... [which] people do not use ... 96% of the time and it takes up land ... and it's a nuisance and you have to maintain it.

Quakers YM Whanganui 25 May 2025