

An interview with...

Kate Auty

By Philippa Chandler

Professor Kate Auty is a Vice Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne. She is a lawyer with experience in natural resource management and environmental policy, Indigenous justice issues, native title, community consultation and curriculum. She was the Victorian Government Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability.

Kate Auty was interviewed as part of the "Visions & Pathways 2040" project, about the future of Australian cities. For more interviews with influential thinkers, see the project website.

I want to ask you about 2040 and what a radically low carbon, resilient Melbourne would look like.

Kate Auty (KA): Having lived in many of the inner suburbs of Melbourne I think a radical low carbon resilient Melbourne would be an inclusive place that would involve people from the peri-urban. It would involve people from the intersectional councils and would have everybody pulling together to live in a place that looks after people. A place of sociality where our culture is one of sharing, low waste, walkability, of making sure that we're using technology so that we're not being used by it.

We won't need to travel from the eastern suburbs to the western suburbs for work. We'll be thinking about our workplaces as our homes or as our neighbourhoods and we'll be living in neighbourhoods that are embracing and inclusive. That will be a resilient city because that's the sort of city that looks after its people and it's the sort of city that will be sustainable.

Our difficulty at the moment is that we are living in unsustainable times. There isn't enough public transport or people don't use what's available. We do think of ourselves as isolated from our neighbourhoods. We isolate ourselves from our workplaces and it means that you're going to a workplace instead of thinking about living in a workplace.

We'll be living in places that don't necessarily have their own



backyards. We'll be sharing the way we think about green space. We'll have urban forests being promoted by every council. We'll be making sure that the urban heat island isn't killing our elderly and young people. We'll be thinking about urban forests as part of the suburbs' fabric.

A radically low carbon, resilient city would feel like a place that was 'home', a place that you know and love. I don't know that we understand that as well as we could.

How do we get there if we're constantly in 'churn'? Churn is about being wage slaves. Churn is about having to be in places at times which create hassles to get there. Churn is about what you do with your children, so for me and women who are raising children the churn factor becomes one that just drives them. We'll be a place that has integrated all of those things that I've talked about into the way we want to live.

We would like to be healthy, happy and part of a place that we know and love that we feel culturally bound to. How do we get there? We get there through community collaborations, by people of all tiers of government understanding that this is necessary and by that I mean we need a federal government that understands that we do need a city's program, the sort of city's program that we previously had under the Labour Government and we need that at a federal level. We need a state government to understand that it's got to provide things

like public transport. But we need local government to be empowered and funded because they're probably the closest to the constituency.

Many people think that you can regulate for change and that regulating for change will make change happen. I'm a lawyer and I can tell you that regulation works in some places but it doesn't work all the time. We shouldn't be banking on it.

As a lawyer, I say that the structural issues need to be dealt with, and that we need a regulatory framework to develop these ways of thinking about the city. But it won't happen if we haven't got people committed to change.

You have to have robust and candid conversations. We are going to see these sorts of changes if we empower people to have conversations in their neighbourhoods and amongst the people with whom they live and share spaces. That's not something you can regulate.

There will be people who don't accept everything we say about climate change, sustainability or growing your own food. There has to be a place for those sorts of people, even if we dismiss what they say. But until you include those people you're not engaging as broadly as you possibly can.

You've been doing that with VEIL and Visions & Pathways 2040 and where you've had those conversations you know that it produces better outcomes and produces people who are more wedded to the changes we need to see. Because it's not going to be easy and some of what will happen will be imposed on us by outside circumstances. Climate change will make us think about these things.

If it's two degrees hotter in Sunshine than it is in Kew on those 43 degree days, then the councils and communities need to think - not necessarily because they want to. We'll have people who say "I might not have been committed to sustainability in the past but I see I need to be now."

What barriers do you see in getting to this vision?

KA: You don't overcome it by just standing around and singing Koombaya and holding hands.

We need some transition from naked capitalism and greed to people thinking 'it can't go on like this' because we are coming to the end of the resources boom, and we're coming to the end of the resources we can use.

The fossil fuel divestment discussion isn't really about cities but is everything to do with cities.

Now our difficulty in Australia, and in particular in Victoria, is how much access we have to brown coal. It's perceived to be cheap, easy to use and is the way we think about energy.

People have been given a taste of the alternatives and we see solar panels on roofs all over the country. They are in places as diverse as Koorang and Fountain Gate and we know that people are putting solar panels on their roofs in places like Wheelers Hill and Fountain Gate and they're not doing it in Carlton. They're doing it because of the co-benefit of saving money.

We shouldn't worry about whether people come on board because of a co-benefit about the economy or a co-benefit about a philosophical commitment. If they're on board we don't care.

I remember being in a meeting in Benalla where we were talking about the Climate Change Act under the previous Labour administration. I can remember being in that town hall and thinking 'where were the climate denialists?' because they would have been there and they are certainly a part of that community. I sat with an old beef grower and said to him 'where are the climate change denialists?' and he said to me "Tell me the rules and I'll comply with them". He didn't say anything about his belief in climate change or otherwise or his lack of it. He didn't say anything about sustainability. He said "Tell me the rules and I'll comply with them". Those sorts of people are going to be as important as the people who say "I've changed my energy consumption because of my concern about brown coal.

Is there anything you'd like to add on the topic?

KA: Timeliness. We need to spend the time to do this consultative, collaborative work well and many of us don't understand that time is really important. We need to spend the time to do it as well as we can. But we also need to know that we don't have a lot of time. That's an extraordinary tension that we don't always think about the time we need to put into this and the fact that we don't have a lot. Disruptive in its own way.

Sometimes academic research feels slow. These things do take time but sometimes you feel time's running out when you're enmeshed in a long project...

KA: I think that what goes with that too is preparedness - that's where being in academia is really pivotal and important. What you're doing is getting others to think about this from a point of view of getting things done. You are doing the preparing for us. So the role you have is in making sure that when people come into these forums, they are able to start conversing about matters quickly - without having lengthy leading conversations.

You might worry about timeliness from the point of view of being an academic but if you're in a position to provide this sort of material to people and they can embark from that place...

I guess it's a springboard for other people.

KA: It is a kind of disruptive force because universities aren't well known for doing that. It disturbs the academic model of "write the paper, get it into the A journal and after it's peer reviewed we can talk about it - five years later."

Speedy and timely are things that universities and academics haven't always understood.

When you come into one of your workshops, you get a hybrid vigour in the conversation. So, a conversation has disruptive capacity. It depends on people like you doing the work you do.

With social media this stuff is portable. So when you do an urban forest strategy in a place like Melbourne, Camberwell and Sunshine start to think about it. But so do places like Shepparton. Even in places that aren't concrete jungle, they are still living with tarmac and the effects of climate change.

And they certainly are in farming and those sorts of things.

KA: Absolutely. We need to ensure that we don't make assumptions about who it is we're talking to or what it is we're talking about with them.

Like that old beef farmer saying "show me the rules and I'll follow them". It it unexpected support...

KA: It was a revelation to me. You develop a groundswell that accepts that conversations should be robust and candid. A city that does that will be a good place to be.

Before we go, I just wanted to ask you about your future work - what's coming up?

KA: As the Vice Chancellor's Fellow I've got more or less carte blanche. It's a terrific role to have, where you can publish and converse.

We've got this fabulous series of environmental conversations happening in Euroa called the 'Euroa Environmental Seminar Series' and Strathbogie Voices is running it. We've been really surprised about who's come along to these particular sessions. The first one we ran with David Karoly had a packed house of 120 people. I worried that there would be silence in the hall. In fact, we couldn't shut people up!

Apart from that I'm spending a lot of time talking about Aboriginal affairs and justice which is what I put on hold while I was the Commissioner.

Which is so important for a vision of our future. Thanks Kate.

