

The South Gippsland Citizens' Assembly for a Just Transition

There are serious issues we need our governments to address, but it's clear that voting in elections doesn't guarantee proper policies and legislative action, even when there's explicit demand for them.

68% of Australians support a national target for net zero emissions by 2050, but our government won't commit to that target and won't really discuss it.

59% of Australians would prefer our post-Covid economic recovery to be powered by investment in renewables, but the government has announced \$58.6 million for new gas projects, as part of its 'gas fired recovery'.

71% think Australia should be a world leader in finding clean solutions to climate change, but the government continues to invest in projects that support the fossil fuel industry rather than clean energy solutions.

Citizens don't get from their governments what they clearly want, or what the country needs.

A 2018 survey conducted by the Museum of Australian Democracy and the University of Canberra showed only 41 per cent of Australians were satisfied with the way our democracy works, compared to 86 per cent in 2007.

So, if governments won't, or can't, govern, and citizens are disaffected, then we must look to new institutional structures that renew engagement and participation and move things along.

In other words, let's look for participation in politics beyond just a visit to the polling booth every three or four years. And crucially, politics is the only thing that can change our shared society for the better.

The local level of government and community can be where significant real change happens. If we're not seeing the political will at the national level to implement the change we need, there is plenty of opportunity to act at the local level. The Paris Climate Agreement itself notes that the municipal level can be a "powerhouse of ambitious mitigation and adaptation measures that are hard to legislate and implement at the national level."

Action on the scale we need has to come out of genuine community participation, like that of the community-based working groups of Just Transition South Gippsland (JTSG).

The working groups have produced a [Roadmap](#) to address the impacts of climate change and position South Gippsland as a leader in the shift to a low-carbon world, while ensuring that no person or family is left behind.

The JTSG Strategy is being finalised in time for council elections in October 2021. It will propose the first steps toward an equitable low-carbon economy for the South Gippsland region through infrastructure, policy-building and community engagement.

The JTSG Strategy aims to be a community-built guiding document, for use by Council, business, community groups and individuals who are working towards making the changes we need.

To get there, we see the need for a major joint-investment by Council and people of South Gippsland in preparing a vision of our region's economic future in a time of climate change and rapid technological transition. To that end, Council Matters will be looking to endorse candidates for Council who support a Citizens' Assembly that looks at how we build a future that promotes local resilience and protects people, livelihoods and the environment.

The Victorian Local Governance Association has outlined the process of a Citizens' Jury/Assembly:

"Citizen juries provide the opportunity for a randomly selected 'mini-public' to deliberate thoroughly over an issue, often over several days. (This issue is commonly posed as a question). Participants are chosen through a process generally called sortition. Typically, invitations will be sent out to a randomly-selected group of ratepayers. From those who take up the invitation, a further sample will be selected to ensure that the final jury best represents the demographic of the wider community.

The selected 'jurors' are given a key question, or 'remit' to work through, with the aim of working together towards a clearly defined set of recommendations. This process is typically facilitated by an independent, expert facilitator; this is important, because it affords council some distance from the process and means that the outcomes of the process are more likely to be trusted.

In the course of their deliberations, the jury has access to expert help, through background material and presentations from 'witnesses' with expert knowledge relevant to their task. The jury's deliberations are typically closed sessions, but are open to observers at certain times.

At the end of the process, the jury will issue findings and recommendations to council."

Citizens' juries/assemblies provide the views of the community under conditions of far greater information and deliberation than any presentation session or questionnaire could ever hope to achieve.

The jury shouldn't be seen as a challenge to the role of elected representatives. The final decision around an issue will always rest with the council. The role of a jury is to advise and assist council in making informed decisions.

The jury would in effect be a broad consultation process that would feed into planning the future of the region through the Council Plan. The process doesn't force the responsibility

for outcomes onto council alone, but rather, makes council and local people co-creators of something larger that transcends the disagreements that so often derail effective civil society.

It should be a thoroughly planned, democratically managed process that leads to a better, safer and fairer future for our region.