A climate-first foreign policy for Australia

Human security in the age of climate disruption

Safe Climate Australia

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2 AUSTRALIAN POLICY SHOULD RECOGNISE GLOBAL HEATING AS THE BIGGEST THREAT TO HUMANITY

4 FASTER THAN FORECAST, ACCELERATED WARMING CREATES A CLIMATE TIME-BOMB

7 AUSTRALIA SHOULD DO WHATEVER IT CAN TO REDUCE REGIONAL TENSIONS AND BUILD COOPERATION

10 A CLIMATE-FIRST FOREIGN POLICY IS ESSENTIAL FOR AUSTRALIANS' AND REGIONAL SECURITY

14 APPENDIX

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia needs a contemporary framing of security that places the biggest threat to our future — climate disruption — at the centre of defense and foreign policy.

- Global security alliances are in turmoil, and Australia needs to critically rethink its security stance. But Australia has put all its eggs in the AUKUS basket and a closer alignment with the USA's erratic security stance. This risks Australia being dragged into a war with China on the losing side.
- Accelerating climate disruption and the exceedance of planetary boundaries is an existential threat to humanity's future and a direct threat to Australians' security and economic prosperity.
- Global warming impacts are occurring faster than forecast. The world has already reached 1.5°C of warming, but scientists tell us that 1.5°C is enough to destabilise key climate systems.
- We are heading towards levels of warming that will not support humanity as we know it. There will be widespread food insecurity, economic destabilisation, large-scale people displacement, war, failed states and social collapse for which Australia and the world are almost totally unprepared.
- Climate risks are global, cascading and systemic, and not containable within borders, so the response requires unprecedented international cooperation and a collective mobilisation of resources unprecedented in peacetime to protect humanity's future.
- We have been in a long-term alliance with the USA, but our future is in Asia and China is our most important trading partner. We can work with nations including India, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia to find ways to live with China and build cooperation.

A climate-first policy would would adopt an emergency response, incorporating:

- **Commitment to deep cooperation** with nations that prioritise climate disruption risks, with climate-focused agreements on tax, trade, technology, finance, equity and the like.
- **Diplomatic leadership in high-ambition alliances**, such as agreements: to phase out fossil fuel subsidies and international financing; to phase out the fossil fuel economy; and for a regional economic climate mobilisation.
- **Understanding of the risks** with mandated and regular climate-related security risk assessments, with outcomes shared within Australia and with neighbours.
- **Full integration** of climate risk into defence and security planning, humanitarian response, and conflict prevention efforts.
- **Support for vulnerable and frontline nations**, increased climate finance and leadership in the establishment of international legal frameworks to address climate displacement and migration.

AUSTRALIAN POLICY SHOULD RECOGNISE GLOBAL HEATING AS THE BIGGEST THREAT TO HUMANITY

"We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement."

Boe Declaration, agreed to by the Pacific Islands Forum, including Australia, on 5 September 2018

Accelerating climate disruption is the greatest threat to the human future: our safety and wellbeing, our homes and communities, and how and where we live and work. People in Australia and around the world are experiencing ever-more-extreme floods, storms, fires, droughts and unlivable heat.

Time and again, surveys show public and private sector global leaders view climate change as the pre-eminent risk. The 2018 Boe Declaration of the Pacific Islands Forum, including Australia, recognised "climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific".[1] In December 2021, a group of 101 former Australian ambassadors and foreign affairs officials wrote that "climate change is a global existential threat facing humanity, and an immediate national security threat facing Australia".[2]

The UN Secretary-General calls "climate boiling" an existential risk,[3] meaning one that on the current, grossly inadequate course of action will severely fragment or destroy the systems and structures on which humanity relies.

But when it comes to Australians' future, this conversation is rarely heard. Historian Emma Shortis says that our current leaders' understanding of security doesn't consider so-called "soft" issues such as environmental catastrophe or the collapse of international law as genuine threats.[4] The Australian Government is supporting and expanding dirty coal and gas, and does not want to talk about climate impacts or the scale of the threat we face,[5] while the opposition lives in a dark space between delay and denial.

Only the Teals, the Greens and like-minded independents are prepared to say that this is an emergency that requires an mobilisation similar in scale to the society-wide response in times of world war, pandemics and other global threats.

There is a really simple proposition about climate policy made by the late Prof. Will Steffen, who was the senior climate advisor to the Australian Government 2007–2013. He said that given the magnitude of the threat, climate should be "the primary target of policy and economics".[6]

Instead, the whole world is talking about insecurity and war, and increasing defence spending. In Australia, both sides of politics are primarily focussed on China and the teetering AUKUS, planning to spend hundreds of billions preparing for a war in which Australia would very likely be on the losing side, if it were foolish enough to become involved.

Military spending is increasing, often at the expense of development aid, including climate funding. And wars themselves and the subsequent reconstruction have high emissions consequences.

The ASLCG agrees with Will Steffen, because climate — not China — is the greatest threat to our future. And if that is the case, then climate should be a primary focus for every government department.

A climate-first foreign policy gives Australia an opportunity to cast aside the dead weight of outmoded security thinking and develop relationships that actually put the biggest threat to our future at the centre of international cooperation and domestic politics.

1 forumsec.org/publications/boe-declaration-regional-security
2 diplomatsforclimate.org/a_climate_focused_foreign_policy_for_australia
3 un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-07-27/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-press-conference-climate; news.un.org/en/story/2024/07/1151781
4 theconversation.com/friday-essay-lets-rethink-australias-national-security-and-focus-on-fairness-and-climate-action-not-blind-fealty-to-the-us-258064
5 publish.pearlsandirritations.com/government-refuses-to-articulate-frankly-terrifying-security-risks/
6 theintercept.com/2018/08/14/hothouse-earth-climate-change-neoliberal-economics

FASTER THAN FORECAST, ACCELERATED WARMING CREATES A CLIMATE TIME-BOMB

"Human security – real, lasting security – means addressing inequality, building prosperity, acting on climate and protecting the environment on which we depend. Australia has considerable power and agency, more than enough to pursue this kind of security. We have the thirteenth largest economy in the world. When that world is on fire, we could choose to focus on fighting the flames instead of fanning them."

Emma Shortis, The Australia Institute

The physical reality of accelerating climate heating and faster-than-forecast impacts have demonstrated the gross failure of climate policymaking, which now needs to be rebuilt with up-to-date scientific observations and understandings, and a risk-management approach that gives particular attention to the most-damaging, plausible worst-case scenarios.

Global average warming of 1.5°C was not projected to occur till 2040, but has now been reached 15 years earlier than IPCC scientists indicated just seven years ago:

- In 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted that the world wouldn't warm to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels until 2040.[7]
- Now, a new World Meteorological Organization report indicates that Earth will cross this point in just two years, with a "70% chance that the 2025-2029 five-year mean will exceed 1.5°C above the 1850-1900 average".[8]
- In fact, both 2023 and 2024 reached 1.5°C, and the running average for the last 24 months has been close to 1.6°C. For all practical purposes, the warming trend has reached 1.5°C.

Scientists have been shocked at the pace of change. The rate of warming has accelerated from less than 0.2°C per decade to 0.3°C or more per decade.[9] The concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide is accelerating at an increasing rate. Impacts and new extremes are occurring faster than forecast.[10] The repeated occurrence of "one-in-a-hundred" year floods and storms and heatwaves means the assessment of climate risks is still too conservative.

Big oil and gas are backtracking on reduction commitments fast, and planning increased production to 2050.[11] Big banks and big business are abandoning previous climate net-zero commitments, in part because the Covid mobilisation and the Ukraine and Middle East wars have reduced focus on climate policy.[12] There is the prospect of global emissions dropping only 10–20% by 2050 on the current policy path.[13]

The Earth will likely hit 2°C of global average warming around 2040, with the physical climate system becoming more difficult to control and possibly beyond our control as stronger positive feedbacks in the physical climate system — such as weaker land and ocean carbon stores, melting permafrost, growing emissions from larger forest fires, and less reflective ice — drive further warming.

"We are potentially headed towards 3°C of global warming by 2100 if we carry on with the policies we have at the moment," says Prof. Jim Skea, the IPCC Chair.[14] A majority of climate scientists agree.[15]

Three degrees will very likely mean widespread social conflict, large-scale people displacement, war, failed states and social collapse. In a 3°C hotter world, new extremes — of rainfall and flooding, heat and drought — beyond past human experience will occur. And a committed sea-level rise of several metres will be in the process of inundating coastal cities and deltas. Large parts of the tropics will suffer "near-unlivable" extreme heat conditions, and the dry subtropics will dry out and desertify, together having catastrophic impacts on food and water security.[16]

7 ipcc.ch/sr15/graphics/https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/graphics
8 wmo.int/sites/default/files/2025-05/WMO_GADCU_2025-2029_Final.pdf
9 tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00139157.2025.2434494
10 theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/17/february-on-course-to-break-unprecedented-number-of-heat-records
11 smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/we-should-abandon-the-fantasy-oil-giants-scale-back-climate-pledges-20240327-p5ffoz.html
12 bloomberg.com/news/features/2025-06-12/climate-pledges-dropped-by-coca-cola-bp-hsbc-as-planet-heats-up
13 unep.org/resources/production-gap-report-2023
14 telegraph.co.uk/business/2024/10/06/too-late-save-britain-overheating-climate-chief-jim-skea
15 nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02990-w
16 **For a full discussion, see: XXXXX**

Acknowledging this scenario, we must now also face the bitter reality that when it comes to exceeding 1.5°C of warming, 2040 has become 2025. In other words, we have just "lost" fifteen years from the emissions-reduction timetable.

What does that mean? At the 2015 Paris climate conference, the goal of holding warming to 1.5-2°C was agreed to, together with actions (in theory) to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, based on projections that warming would be 1.5-2°C by 2050. Logically, that "lost" 15 years means that this net-zero-by-2050 goal from 2015 now needs to be net-zero-by-2035.

Most policymakers, including the Australian Government, are yet to recognise this. When the penny drops in Canberra that we are already at 1.5°C, will that realisation be reflected in the government's overdue first National Climate Risk Assessment?

Tipping points are occurring now, including at both poles. Permafrost, boreal forests and the Amazon are becoming net carbon emitters. This year, new research has reaffirmed that 1.5°C is too high to prevent tipping points: there is a "significant" risk of large Amazon forest dieback if global warming overshoots 1.5°C, yet we are there right now.[17] And there is a new scientific warning that "1.5°C is too high for polar ice sheets".[18] The evidence grows that the 1.5°C target was never a safe target for humanity.

There are growing signs of system instability across a wide range of social spheres: democratic, security, economic and health (pandemics and food), to name but a few, as well in natural systems with exceedance of -planetary boundaries. "There is no mean, there is no average, there is no return to normal. It's one way traffic into the unknown," wrote the historian Mark Blyth in 2021.[19]

All of this leads to one conclusion: we are on the edge of a precipice and humanity now needs to throw everything at the climate threat, literally "all hands on deck". Will Steffen's call to make climate the primary target of policy and economics is now a survival imperative. The business-as-usual delusion embraced by policymakers that climate is just another issue is laid bare by the 1.5°C time-bomb.

The risks are global, cascading and systemic, and not containable within borders, so the response requires unprecedented global cooperation, and a collective mobilisation of resources unprecedented in peacetime to protect human security and humanity's future.

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19 theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/11/no-getting-back-to-normal-climate-breakdown-ipcc-report

AUSTRALIA SHOULD DO WHATEVER IT CAN TO REDUCE REGIONAL TENSIONS AND BUILD COOPERATION

"When global governance is failing, and being actively undermined by the Trump regime, it is even more important that other countries try to fill the void, even if this means cooperating with the unlikeliest of partners. Australia and China really could offer a different approach to climate change mitigation while simultaneously defusing tensions in the Indo-Pacific and demonstrating that resistance to the Trump agenda really is possible."

Mark Beeson, University of Technology Sydney

Admiral. Chris Barrie Rtd.

Global security alliances are in turmoil, and Australia needs to critically rethink its defence and foreign affairs policies.

I have watched with alarm as Donald Trump and the Republican administration upend traditional alliances. This is the harshest wake-up call since the Fall of Singapore in 1942. Trump may be gone in four years, but the Republican Party and America's political landscape are being fundamentally changed.

An immediate concern is the future of the nuclear-powered submarines due from the early 2040s through to the late 2050s under AUKUS. There is an increasing likelihood that the UK will not build the submarines on time or budget; nor will the US make available stop-gap submarines as Trump administration officials have made clear.

I have previously supported the idea of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines and they are preferred if we want to operate for long periods in the northern hemisphere, potentially in a conflict with China. But we need to rethink the submarines and Australia's strategic priorities in the light of the escalating climate threat and the fact that USA is no longer a consistent and reliable ally.

We need to defend Australia's interests and deter aggression, but AUKUS and confrontation with China are not the only choice. If our priority is protecting the Australian continent, conventionally-powered diesel submarines could suffice and are an advantage in shallow, continental shelf waters. Conventional submarines, long-range missiles and strong alliances with the archipelago nations to our immediate north are the basis of an alternative to the China-war strategy.

Since retiring as Chief of the Defence Force, I have participated in many war game exercises focused on conflict with China, and in every case the American side lost. That is a pragmatic reason to review strategic policy, but there is a more important one.

The first duty of any government is to protect the people, and we are now facing catastrophic threats that once seemed distant possibilities, such as global pandemics and artificial intelligence gone awry. But the evidence is clear that the greatest threat to all humanity is climate disruption.

Our leading scientists, senior Western security analysts and world leaders such as the UN Secretary General all say we will face existential climate risks. Within the lifetime of most Australians, large parts of South and South-east Asia will simply become unlivable due to unbearable heat, as will parts of northern Australia. Crop yields will fall, and so will some states. People will fight to survive, or be forced to move. Australia will face a climate refugee inflow of a scale that we simply cannot imagine. Think millions of people.

Stopping the use of fossil fuels and transforming the way our economies work is a huge undertaking. So is preparing Australia and our region for the climate impacts we cannot avoid. Together these tasks will require levels of fast research and development, and the deployment and sharing of economic resources, in a mobilisation unprecedented in peace-time.

Making climate disruption the primary focus of policy and economics means putting strategic rivalries to one side in favour of cooperation between states in this fight for survival.

In 2024, my colleagues from the Australian Security Leaders Climate Group and I put out a climate and security plan to "Protect, prevent and prepare". Key proposed actions included:

- Understanding that global cooperation rather than conflict is key to responding to the climate crisis, and act accordingly by building alliances with big and small Asia-Pacific governments for a regional climate mobilisation.
- Increasing support for developing nations to facilitate their preparedness and prevention plans.
- Partnering with nations in the region to deploy a monitoring system to identify potential food insecurity hotspots, and fund enhancement of food, supply chain and energy resilience in the region.
- Releasing the 2022 climate-and-security risk assessment prepared by the Office of National Assessments which has been classified and prevents a proper understanding of the risks both in parliament and for the Australian public.

Yes, China is a regional superpower, but so is an increasingly authoritarian and unpredictable United States. There are many regional security concerns: conflict in South Asia and the Himalayas, the rise of militarised non-state actors, the fragility of many states, and climate disruption. It is a question of prioritising the biggest and most likely risks.

We have been in a long-term alliance with the USA, but our economic future is in Asia and China is our most important trading partner. We can work with other Asian nations to find ways to live with China and build trust and cooperation.

We now face crucial decisions, and more people are now speaking more plainly about Australia's security policy than at any time since ANZUS was signed in 1951.

There are questions we must answer. Are the AUKUS submarines a strategic priority? Is being part of a war with China in our interest? Should Australia's strategy instead focus on regional climate security and preventing state breakdown? Should we commit to broad cooperation with nations on the frontline of climate disruption, with climate-focused agreements on aid, migration, tax, trade, technology, finance and equity?

In a nutshell, Australia should do whatever it can to reduce regional tensions and build cooperation based on a shared goal of a safe future for humanity?

A CLIMATE-FIRST FOREIGN POLICY IS ESSENTIAL FOR AUSTRALIANS' AND REGIONAL SECURITY

"Climate change is the defining challenge of our time. It increasingly threatens livelihoods and ecosystems, sustainable development, prosperity and stability, thus posing a serious challenge to peace and human security… An increasing number of countries and communities have been experiencing insecurity and instability as a result of climate change."[20]

Antje Leendertse, German UN Ambassador, addressing UN Security Council, 13 June 2023, on behalf of the Group of Friends on Climate and Security (comprising approx. 50 nations)

20 new-york-un.diplo.de/un-en/2601564-2601564

For too long, government policy processes have left climate action to energy or environment ministries. That separation is no longer viable. Climate change is an existential threat that demands a whole-of-government — and whole-of-foreign-policy — response.

Such a response should recognise that climate disruption is a key expression of the breakdown of the Earth's complex physical-biological systems, and of the human systems which rely on them.

Decision-makers must recognise that climate change is only one amongst a number of existential threats which now confront humanity as a result of our unsustainable management of the planet, all of which must be addressed - albeit climate arguably requires the most urgent action.

Researchers in September 2023 , in "the first scientific health check for the entire planet" ,found that six out of nine planetary boundaries had been broken because of human-caused pollution and destruction of the natural world.[21] And in September 2024 researchers announced that a seventh boundary — ocean acidification — is on the brink of being breached.[22]

Carbon dioxide levels are already 20% above the planetary boundary, which threatens humanity's future. "Let me just make one point very clear: 2.7°C is without any doubt a disaster. It's a point we haven't seen for the past five million years. There's no evidence that we can support humanity as we know it on a 2.7°C planet," says Prof. Johan Rockström, director of the Potsdam Institute.[23]

Climate change is already reshaping global systems of production, trade, economics, and governance, and it poses a direct threat to Australians' security and economic prosperity, and regional stability.

The nature of the climate threat reinforces the leading role governments must play in assessing the risks, planning and coordinating the economic transformation and building global climate-security cooperation to do so.

In the context of Trump#2 and geopolitical upheaval, Australia's current security frame — "America first, Earth last" — needs to be abandoned. With former prime ministers and foreign ministers providing stinging critiques of Australia's current, bi-partisan security policy, there is an opportunity to put climate at the centre of a new security discourse.

"The heat is on", a recent report from the Australian Peace and Security Forum, notes that Australia "is yet to embed climate security meaningfully into its core security frameworks.[24]"

A climate-first policy would focus on the need to protect all people from climate breakdown, and a commitment to deep cooperation with nations that prioritise climate disruption risks with climate-focused agreements on tax, trade, technology, finance, equity and the like.[25]

Australia should embed climate action across diplomatic, trade, investment and security strategies. Finance analyst Alan Kohler notes: "The US isn't even a comprehensible ally, let alone a reliable one, or a safe place to invest… Australia needs to rethink its relationship with the United States. We've done quite well maintaining a wary, non-trusting trade relationship with China. We now need a wary, non-trusting security alliance with the US, if that's even possible."[26]

The world is unprepared for the cascading and compounding effects of climate disruption: population displacement, food insecurity, economic destabilisation, and rising geopolitical tensions. These changes are already altering global power dynamics, stranding assets, disrupting capital flows, and exacerbating inequity.[27]

21 theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/13/earth-well-outside-safe-operating-space-for-humanity-scientists-find
22 smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/earth-is-on-the-brink-of-breaching-a-seventh-of-nine-planetary-boundaries-that-support-life-180985144
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To protect Australia's national interest and maintain our regional leadership in the Indo-Pacific, we must reposition climate as a strategic foreign policy priority.

A climate-first approach should consider the following key questions in developing a 21st-century foreign policy:

- **Placing climate security and cooperation** above the desire of other nations for geopolitical confrontation.
- **Diplomatic leadership** in high-ambition alliances, such as agreements: to phase out fossil fuel subsidies and international financing for coal, oil, and gas projects; to phase out the fossil fuel economy; and for a regional economic climate mobilisation.
- **Understanding the risks** with mandated and regular climate-related security risk and fragility assessments, with the analysis process and outcomes shared transparently within Australia and with regional partners.
    - Initiate/support forums to discuss planetary overshoot scenarios and rapid response measures, including emergency cooling research and governance.
- **Mandatory climate risk disclosure** and integration in international financial institutions including the World Bank, IMF, development banks and multilateral organisations.
- **Strengthening the role of international law** and reasserting the importance of a human-rights-focused "rules-based order", for example, by recognising ecocide and environmental crimes under that law.
- **Full integration of climate risk into defence and security planning**, humanitarian response, and conflict prevention efforts.
    - Partner with nations in the region to deploy a monitoring system to identify potential food insecurity hotspots, and fund enhancement of food, supply chain and energy resilience in the region.
- **Support for vulnerable and frontline nations.**
    - Champion the creation and strengthening of international mechanisms to support climate-vulnerable countries.
    - Support Australia's development partners to achieve their climate objectives and increase climate finance to support developing nations and facilitate their preparedness and prevention plans.
    - Ensure that transitions to zero emission economies are equitable and do not entrench existing inequalities.
    - Lead in the establishment of international legal frameworks to address climate displacement and migration.
- **Economic and technology cooperation.**
    - Climate-conditioned trade and investment which ties trade deals, foreign aid, and investment flows to climate commitments; and may include border adjustment mechanisms, such as the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.
    - Promote the rapid adoption of renewable energy in the region and enhance green energy and technology transfer and cooperation and partnerships for development of climate solutions.

Is this new climate-focused security emphasis possible? It needs to be, for humanity to have a future.

APPENDIX

"Climate change must be the government's top priority."

An open letter to the incoming Prime Minister of Australia (2022)

As representatives of diverse professions, we have come together to call upon the incoming Government of Australia to recognise climate change as an existential threat requiring immediate national mobilisation.

We are deeply concerned by the rapidly escalating impacts of the climate crisis. Climate change affects us all. Increasingly frequent and intense events such as droughts, floods, heatwaves, bushfires, and marine heatwaves are causing loss of life, livelihoods, and ecosystems. Every year that action is delayed, the frequency and intensity of extreme weather disasters such as the Black Summer bushfires and the recent devastating floods will increase. Catastrophic damage to our terrestrial and marine ecosystems including our prized Great Barrier Reef, will be inevitable.

This places enormous burdens on our first responders, defence personnel, health providers, farmers, veterinarians and others engaged in public service.

Climate change is an existential threat across our region, especially to our Pacific family who are already affected by sea-level rise. Water and food crises exacerbated by climate change, along with population pressures and social conditions are putting at risk the global rules-based order, on which we rely for our security and economic prosperity. Australia has an opportunity to improve its international reputation - and create large numbers of high-quality domestic jobs - by committing to stronger emissions targets more rapidly. There is hope for the future if Australia gets its climate policies in order. We must rapidly decarbonise our economy and transition to low emission energy and industrial processes. Fossil fuel emissions must be reduced to zero soon as possible. If we mobilise all resources to build a zero-emissions economy, we can become a regional energy and industrial superpower – and reduce the costs of climate catastrophe.

Australia can be a global leader in a decarbonised world with significant economic opportunities, especially for rural and regional Australia. But the entire community needs governments to tell the truth about the need to embrace renewable energy and low

emissions agriculture, and to plan alternative opportunities for affected communities. The security, health and future prosperity of all Australians depends on what we do today, not promises for the distant future. Australia has the skills and resources to lead the world in climate action, and Australian leadership will encourage other nations to accelerate the global transition to a decarbonised, safer future for our grandchildren.

We call upon the incoming Government to mobilise the resources necessary to address this clear and present danger, and to decarbonise our economy to reach net zero emissions as close to 2030 as possible. Climate change must be the next Government's top priority.

Your Sincerely,

ADMIRAL CHRIS BARRIE AC (RTD)
Australian Security Leaders Climate Group

RICHARD MATHEWS
Former Australian Consul-General

GREG MULLINS AO, AFSM
Former Commissioner Fire & Rescue NSW

DR HELEN SCOTT-ORR AM, PSM
Former Chief Veterinary Officers Group

DR TARUN WEERAMANTHRI
Public Health Association of Australia

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