My comments will be largely focussed on the domestic context of climate change governance. This is not to downplay the importance of global climate change negotiations but rather to acknowledge that any internationally agreed upon targets or reforms will need to be implemented by individual nation states within their own polities. In the Australian context this means developing policies that can move beyond short-term party politics to consider our collective interests through democratic processes. For this reason I am going to be arguing that effective climate change governance in Australia must take seriously the need for citizen engagement and public legitimacy more broadly.

Minister Combet referred to the challenge of building consensus in a hung parliament. And the broader goal of building community consensus has been at the centre of the Gillard government’s reform agenda on climate change. Building community consensus is also an explicit goal of the newly established Multi-Party Climate Change Committee. In addition to providing advice on the implementation of a carbon price in Australia, the Committee has been tasked to provide advice on, and participate in, building community consensus for action on climate change.”

What does this goal of “building community consensus” imply?

- Are we striving for complete agreement among all members of the community OR broad public acceptance?
- In either case how will we know when we have reached ‘community consensus’?
- Are we seeking consensus on substantive policy directions, or consensus on procedures for determining and implementing these?
- Who do we consider to be ‘the community’ – does it include the various vested interest groups who have to date dominated much of the domestic climate change debate?
- If not, where do these more adversarial players fit into the ‘building consensus’ picture?
There are no simple answers to these questions.

Perhaps a useful starting place is to consider whether the term consensus is helpful in the context of climate change. After all the notion of complete agreement is an ideal that most democratic theorists acknowledge is impossible to attain in our modern complex and plural societies. We might be able to reach some sort of agreement on abstract values – for example, that policies addressing climate change should not generate inequalities or further disadvantage the marginalised – but deep disagreements will abound on what those policies should be, and how they should be developed.

Consensus is also a dangerous concept in the context of climate change policy for it suggests that the problems are shared. But we know that the science of climate change is ongoing and that the predicted impacts will fall harder in some communities, sectors and countries than others. Indeed it is the very uncertainties surrounding climate change and its differential impacts that make its governance so political, and fraught with disagreement.

When the term ‘consensus’ is used in this context it suggests unhelpfully that disagreements can and will be resolved; that we can collectively settle on a definitive policy direction. But practice reminds us daily that polices are rarely settled – their development, implementation, evaluation and redesign are under continuous contestation. In other words, the process of developing and implementing climate policies will be ongoing. And in those circumstances when some degree of consensus might be reached, it is likely to be temporary.

Rather than consensus, I would argue that the central goal here should be to facilitate public debate on climate change and search for areas of common ground. To achieve this we need to extend the debate beyond experts and elites into the public realm. The Minister noted the need to inform citizens about the science of climate change. We also need to improve public understanding of the various policy options. But the broader task here is one of public engagement -- we need to create spaces where the public can contribute their own ideas, and scrutinise the arguments and proposals of others. The notion of facilitating public debate (as opposed to building consensus) encourages us to think more seriously about process. It probes us to consider how we might best activate our democratic systems and citizenry to deal with the kinds of disagreements that climate policies will generate.
In facilitating public debate, we need to acknowledge that there are multiple ‘publics’ – some more vocal and better resourced than others. For a long time in this country the issue of climate policy has been considered too technical for the broader public – and so much of the ‘public’ debate has been left to elites and experts with strategic input from lobby groups. As a result proposed reforms have failed to gain public legitimacy.

Climate change governance at the federal level has been largely disconnected from the broader public. We might get signals of public sentiment from elections, opinion polls, focus groups or the market but these sources are limited at facilitating the kind of informed public dialogue necessary for the dealing with the complexities of climate policy.

A sophisticated approach to exploring public voices and values is needed so we can move beyond crude ‘signals’ to an informed national public debate on climate change.

This approach should be guided by the following principles of public engagement:

First, engagement should be inclusive – we should strive to include different kinds of publics. On one level this means engaging ‘organised’ and elite publics in the way the government has begun to do with its Business and NGO Roundtables, and its Multiparty Committee. But we also need to extend engagement to everyday Australians interested in contributing to climate and energy policy.

Second, engagement should be deliberative and public – People should be given the opportunity to learn about the issues, to question assumptions and arguments, and to publically scrutinise policy proposals. In other words engagement should foster public deliberation where the focus is on reasoning and collective outcomes.

Third, engagement should be influential – it should make a difference to policy outcomes.

These might seem like unrealistic democratic ideals for a controversial and complex issue such as climate change. But there are numerous examples of participatory processes based on these principles occurring at the local and state government levels across Australia. Let me highlight a few recent ‘mini-publics’. 
The first is a Climate *Consensus* Project, which was held in 2009. This was a partnership between the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water and 14 local councils across the state. The project involved forums in each local region with randomly selected citizens, plus a state wide community summit.

This NSW Consensus project stimulated several other similar projects. For example, Ballina Shire recently facilitated a series of community discussions and forums to inform the development of its Climate Action Plan. Further south in Newcastle, another inclusive and deliberative citizens’ forum was conducted in June this year to inform the NSW Premier’s Taskforce considering a Low Carbon Future for the Hunter Valley.

The Victorian government has also begun to facilitate community dialogue on climate change issues. Earlier this year its Department of Sustainability and Environment sponsored an extensive citizen engagement process on climate policy called *Local Voices Shaping Our Future* - which included two citizens’ juries in North East Victoria.

Deliberative processes are also being used for research purposes to explore individual and collective public responses to climate change. A team here at the ANU, led by Dr Simon Niemeyer, have been researching how people’s attitudes to climate change vary when exposed to information and deliberation. Preliminary findings suggest that people’s support for collective efforts addressing climate change *decreases* when there is a perception of systemic governance failures. In other words, any climate change governance failures we incur today will make it more difficult in the future to mobilise popular support.

These and many other participatory initiatives around Australia (and the globe) indicate that citizens are keen to get involved in climate governance, and that when given the opportunity, information and space to deliberate, they offer valuable insights into possible paths forward. They also reveal that for communities around Australia there is much more to climate policy than finding the right pricing mechanisms – people are also concerned about livelihoods, energy sources and efficiency, local planning issues, future generations, ecosystems, and governance integrity.

It is worth noting that these direct experiences defy many of the concerns raised in response to Labor’s Citizens’ Assembly proposal -- especially the worry that randomly selected citizens have little to offer climate policy. There was also the
concern that this kind of direct citizen engagement somehow usurps existing institutions of representative democracy. As many commentators and MPs from the coalition and the Greens put it “We have a democratically elected citizens assembly – the parliament!”.

Yet these experiences demonstrate that citizen engagement can enhance, rather than undermine, democracy by giving elected representatives a clearer picture of the concerns and ideas of their constituents on specific issues and reform proposals. Everyday citizens -- unlike most MPs -- are able to move beyond party lines. In the cases I described earlier elected representatives were keen to receive, and act on, the citizens’ recommendations. As one Councillor put it: “Council has been looking for guidance on how to tackle this issue and the process has given Council the confidence to proceed”.

Public engagement on climate change is clearly happening in Australia. Governments and various partners are reaching out to communities, and grounding participation in ways that matter to people. Yet to date these projects have been sporadic and disconnected from broader federal policy debates on climate change, particularly those on carbon pricing. Herein lies an opportunity for the federal government: it could to play a more active role in supporting these local and state initiatives, and inject citizens concerns into federal debates. These participatory initiatives also offer a great practical resource for the Multi-Party Committee on Climate Change and the Roundtables as they consider concrete proposals for how to facilitate informed public debate on reform options. Deliberative forums offer an ideal means for exploring citizen feedback on technical proposals such as pricing mechanisms because they provide spaces where diverse samples of the public can be informed about complex matters, and then deliberate on key issues through facilitated debate.

Clearly there are many opportunities here. There is considerable evidence around the globe and across diverse regions in Australia that communities want to engage in climate change governance. And as we have seen there are established mechanisms and compelling reasons for doing so.

I want to conclude with a few cautionary remarks.

We need to acknowledge that the current participatory context of climate change policy in Australia is extremely fragile. Many people feel disappointed by unmet expectations, and there is considerable scepticism and mistrust about the idea of

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public engagement. To some extent this is understandable; people are tired of being asked to participate in public forums only to find that decisions have either been pre-determined, or delayed indefinitely. Some actors are concerned about cooption, while others might question the motivations or timing of consultation.

For these and many other reasons communities may be wary of announcements for public engagement on climate change issues. The challenge for policy makers in the current context is to convince the public that their engagement will be authentic and influence outcomes. Engaged citizens and the broader community will want to know how public input might connect to, or even feed into parliamentary processes, advisory committees, roundtables and so on. They will also want to see evidence of consistent government policies and action across relevant portfolios, especially those dealing with climate change and energy.

We also need to recognise that attempts to bring the public into debates on climate policy may be resisted by powerful actors, such as the media or interest groups. I made the point earlier that inclusive public deliberation needs to go beyond these vocal actors, but at the same time their support is crucial to the success of any public debate. In my research I’ve seen many cases where groups with vested interests have attempted to undermine citizen engagement. Here the way the citizen assembly process was proposed provides some useful lessons. Announcements on policy process (such as establishing a public forum) need to be appropriately timed, and to be communicated openly with background information on purpose and format.

Any international progress towards long term climate change mitigation and adaptation will require ongoing public deliberation in democratic countries such as Australia. The global dimension of climate change is often cited as an aspect that plagues its governance but we should be encouraged that Australia is one of many democratic nations seeking to legitimise policies on climate change. There is much to learn from comparative experiences of public participation.

Finally, if Australia is to have an informed public dialogue on climate change, then we need to start engaging citizens and activating our democratic processes at the federal level. There is now considerable urgency to this task as Prime Minister Gillard yesterday announced that 2011 is the year Australia will decide on carbon pricing. In the haste to make decisions we should not resort to ‘politics as usual’. This is would be a lost democratic opportunity, and it would severely limit our capacity to generate public legitimacy for the far reaching reforms that climate change demands.
Thank you.