

Just sufficient time to transit

Have we left it too late to mend our climate-hostile ways and transition (if it can be used as a verb) into a new-look economy that minimises cow farting, fossil fuels...and damage to our communities?

Not if we take drastic measures over the next 12 years, says the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Some of those were aired during a recent two-day conference in New Plymouth entitled "Just Transition".

We still don't really know what's going to happen. The transition is just beginning, so all we learned was what others are doing around the world and what changes are emerging as the best bets.

The positive news was Jacinda Ardern's announcement that - despite behind-the-scenes opposition from other energy sectors like geothermal and hydro - New Plymouth will become the national clearing house for ideas and recommendations on how to achieve the aims of the new Zero Carbon Act announced in the same week.

Mayor Neil Holdom is to be congratulated on his handling of the aftermath of the government's shock 2018 announcement it will issue no more offshore oil and gas block exploration licences, a move that has put New Zealand on international oil companies' blacklist (according to their top advocate in New Zealand).

The effectiveness of Holdom's lobbying was evident in his reaction to the prime minister's news that the new energy development centre will indeed be coming to Taranaki, which has the most to lose as fossil fuel exploitation winds down.

He welcomed it, but warned that more money (than the \$47 million announced for the centre and more research) will be needed in future. As Stacey Hitchcock said, Australia has already spent more than a billion dollars on hydrogen alone, and that's just one of the options the centre will evaluate.

Something to note is while it will employ 45 people, the centre won't be doing research, a point missed by National MP Jonathan Young, who said it needs to be careful not to reinvent wheels already designed by others. Presumably, the 45 will look at those wheels and work out which ones go best on our vehicle.

Energy Ministry Megan Woods used an interesting word - "commercialising". She said the centre's role in that would have a ripple effect on energy industries.

That acknowledges a problem innovators find with the government's leading funder of new ideas, Callaghan Innovation, which is criticised by alternative energy start-ups for not helping pay to get proven prototypes into the world marketplace.

The conference had an unusual start.

At the appointed time of the PM's arrival, dozens of big, round, wobbly tables set out in the cavernous venue (TSB Stadium) were occupied by a crowd of 550, who took their seats at the behest of a loud and persistent alarm.

They sat and talked quietly for a while, and then as if by some magic signal, fell silent. Like, as quiet as a tomb. For more than five minutes, nobody said a word, until one or two broke the silence by commenting on it, such was its spooky nature.

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Ardern duly arrived - messiah-like - and took the gathering within in her avuncular-but-deadly-serious grasp, and that was no mean achievement.

While many in the crowd were Labour supporters, admirers of Ardern, and representatives of two groups Labour always courts in its own-organised events - workers and Māori - there were a lot of grey male heads, probably belonging to businesses and industries like agriculture that will be much-affected by what the government is trying to do.

Despite the well-meaning but artificial staging of an "inquisition" of the PM by a panel of those who will feel the most impact of climate change most, young people, her appearance was a triumph in handling the scepticism that undoubtedly still exists within our fossil-fuelled economy.

Even braver were the film-making Camerons, James and Suzy, who told us - one of the world's great dairying provinces - we're doomed unless we slaughter our animals and switch land use to growing nuts to make plant-based milk.

We already make plant-based milk, but the agent in the middle, the dairy cow, is now deemed unnecessary by that climate-wrecking behemoth they've migrated from, North America.

They thoughtfully reminded us not to eat the animals we must now send to the works because we already rank first in the world for bowel cancer, induced by red meat.

We've a way to go, haven't we. But at least the local planning looks promising.