



Submission to the Senate:

Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

Re: Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and

Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023

Large numbers of young people globally regard governments as failing to acknowledge or act on the crisis in a coherent, urgent way, or respond to their alarm. This is experienced as betrayal and abandonment, not just of the individual but of young people and future generations generally.

Hickman, C. et al, Lancet Planetary Health, 2021

About Psychology for a Safe Climate

Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC) is a not for profit Health Promotion charity. Our vision is *Supporting People Emotionally in Facing the Climate Reality*. PSC has been a leading organisation, nationally and internationally, in the emerging field of Climate Psychology since our formation in 2010. Our activities range across the continuum of mental health and wellbeing, from promoting social and emotional wellbeing, to mental health prevention.

PSC provides:

- Support for people working on climate change including activists, researchers, policy makers and scientists, who are vulnerable to the emotional impact of the work they do.
- Professional development and networks for mental health professionals in order to build evidence-based capability in social and emotional support in the era of climate crisis. This assists people of all ages, especially young people, to receive appropriate support regarding climate distress.
- Consulting services such as workshops, talks and interactive seminars for the broader community. We respond to requests for support from workplaces, community groups, councils and government to provide guidance, networking and training on various subjects related to mental health and climate change. In doing so, PSC has worked with young people, parents and educators.



Support for the Duty of Care Bill

Mental Health Effects

The Duty of Care bill is crucial for the mental health and wellbeing of current and future generations of Australians. The Australian government has a duty of care to children, not only to minimise their suffering in the future, but also in the present.

The alarming science and what we are witnessing indicates that the climate crisis is happening now, and will only worsen. Our government and all governments need to take emergency action to cut emissions. We know that despite scientific advice and Australian Government aspirations to the contrary, that global emissions continue to rise and that new fossil fuel projects continue in Australia.

There is no doubt that climate change is both causing and exacerbating mental health problems through extreme weather events, and slower changes of drought and temperature increases. This will undoubtedly increase as the climate crisis deepens creating more stresses on the communities and systems we live in, including water and food supply, uneven distribution of wealth, migration and conflict.

Dr Lise van Susteren, a US psychiatrist and expert in the mental health effects of climate change was the principal psychiatrist expert witness in the recent successful case against Montana state about climate change duty of care. Her comprehensive account of the mental health effects of climate change is of vital importance.¹

Climate Distress

PSC's submission will focus on **climate distress** (also referred to as climate anxiety). Climate distress is the distress associated with the awareness and knowledge of current and predicted impacts of climate change, even when a person was not directly affected by a particular climate change impact. The Duty of Care bill has great potential to reduce climate distress.

¹<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/571d109b04426270152febe0/t/5cfa8de085229a0ee2a35f5/1555015906660/Doc+271-1+Van+Susteren+Expert+Report.pdf>



We prefer the term *climate distress*, as anxiety can imply pathology, whereas distress is a healthy response to a stressful situation. Furthermore the term climate distress includes a variety of feelings including grief, anger, fear, anxiety and powerlessness.

Climate distress can significantly impact an individual and develop into a mental health condition such as clinical anxiety or depression, particularly if not adequately helped by a climate aware practitioner.

Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC) has much experience of witnessing climate distress.

Young people are particularly distressed by the climate crisis as their whole lives will inevitably be impacted by the climate crisis. The climate distress of young people has been outlined in a very significant paper in Lancet Planetary Health (Hickman et al, 2021)².

It is worth recounting some of its findings. This 2021 study of 10,000 young people (16-25 years) from 10 countries, showed that common feelings are fear(68%), anxiety (63%), sadness (68%), anger(58%) and powerlessness (57%).

Other major findings were:

- 56% of surveyed young people said “humanity was doomed” due to climate change (including 50% of Australian respondents)
- 75% said the “future is frightening” because of climate change (76% of Australians).
- 39% said they were “hesitant to have children” (43% of Australians)

These results correspond to the levels of distress we see in our workshops across the age groups. Other studies have shown similar levels of distress in young people.

Government Betrayal

The Lancet study, as above, also reports a correlation between feelings of climate anxiety and government inaction on climate change, with 58% of those surveyed (55% of Australians) saying that governments are betraying them. They note that climate distress is often grounded in relational factors with children often experiencing “an additional layer of confusion, betrayal, and abandonment because of adult inaction towards climate change”.

²[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)



We depend on our leaders to engage with climate reality. However we know they are only taking limited action. As Weintrobe says, “To feel this uncared for is deeply traumatic and can also lead to unbearable anxiety, born of a feeling of helplessness and aloneness in the face of survival threats”³.

Dr van Susteren notes: “When a trusted and powerful institution that people depend on (e.g., schools, church, or government) is implicated in causing harm, the trauma is exacerbated. This “Institutional Betrayal” occurs “when an institution causes harm to an individual who trusts or depends upon that institution” (Smith and Freyd, 2014). It can occur when the institution affirmatively causes the harm, or when the institution fails to take protective, preventative, or responsive actions. It Includes institutional actions covering up or destroying damaging information related to the harm it perpetrated (Smith et al., 2014). Institutional betrayal can lead to a higher degree of psychological harm. It is uniquely harmful because it involves a betrayal of trust in a relationship in which the individual depends on the institution. Those who have less power and status in society, such as minorities and youth, are especially vulnerable to institutional betrayal”⁴.

In other words, the climate distress caused by the awareness of the climate crisis is exacerbated by lack of government action. This Duty of Care bill therefore has the potential to reduce climate distress.

Government Denial

It is important to view the lack of necessary government action through the lens of denial. Though complete denial of anthropogenic climate change is diminishing, there remains much turning of blind eyes, either consciously or unconsciously. Denial has been classified as literal denial or implicatory denial⁵ (Cohen, 2001). In implicatory denial “there is no attempt to deny either the facts or their conventional interpretation. What are denied or minimized are the psychological, political or moral implications.” Unfortunately this type of denial is rife institutionally (and also culturally and individually). Sadly there has been much implicatory denial not only by the

³S. Weintrobe. The difficult problem of anxiety in thinking about climate change. In S. Weintrobe ed. Engaging with climate change. Psychoanalytic and interdisciplinary perspectives. UK: Routledge. 2013.

⁴ Van Susteren op.cit

⁵ S. Cohen. States of Denial. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2001



government but also the legal system. A classic example of implicatory denial is the Government's continued expansion of fossil fuel extraction.

Duty of Care

The duty of care of the Australian government is not only taking the right action but also by looking after young people's mental health and showing trustworthiness in their care. The Australian Government needs to take good care of young people's climate distress, as they have in part created this distress. This distress needs to be acknowledged, validated and helped (see 4. below).

There are a number of ways that young people's climate distress can be helped and this Duty of Care bill has great potential to achieve this, particularly with regard to items 2, 3 and 4:

1. The lowering of Humanity's carbon footprint
2. The Australian government doing everything they can to reduce emissions
3. The government showing that they care about young people's distress
4. Increased government funding to help those young people (and their families and educators) currently distressed by the climate situation, as we emphasized in our submission to the NHCS (September 2023). Right now there is a duty of care to young people's mental health.
5. Organizations such as Psychology for a Safe Climate, assisting young people suffering from climate distress. PSC has had experience working with young people, parents and educators. We support parents and educators to become aware of their own climate distress, so they can help children with their distress. Our approach aligns with suggestions by Cunsolo et al including "Already-proven individual and group therapy strategies should be harnessed" and "Increased training for health professionals on climate change and mental health"⁶.

Psychology for a Safe Climate strongly supports this Duty of Care bill which will offer considerable help for young people's health and wellbeing in Australia for current and future generations. Not only will it help to lessen some of the adverse psychological

⁶ Cunsolo et al

<https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196%2820%2930144-3/fulltext>



implications of climate change, but it also follows the moral implications of an escalating climate crisis by requiring decision makers to consider the wellbeing of current and future children when making certain decisions that are likely to contribute to climate change, including decisions that will increase scope one, two or three emissions.

Signed on behalf of Psychology for a Safe Climate

A black and white photograph of a handwritten signature, which appears to be 'Charles Le Feuvre', written in dark ink on a light-colored surface.

Dr.Charles Le Feuvre, Psychiatrist (FRANZCP)

PSC Board member and Senior Advisor volunteer

For any enquiries contact Charles Le Feuvre cmlefeuvre@gmail.com

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Supporting people emotionally in facing the climate reality

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