



Head Hands and Heart: Reflecting on the early years of TRY

Matthew Grogan (founder & former TRY President), 16 November 2024

It's early 2014, and whilst you can still buy a three-bedroom house in Yack for under \$200,000, poor old planet Earth is about to enter a decade during which every single year will be ranked amongst the top 10 warmest ever recorded.

The federal coalition has just won government on the back of a promise to axe Labor's carbon tax. And it delivers, precipitating a mood of despair for those concerned about the likelihood of the aforementioned warmest years.

But there is hope.

In that same election, an army of orange volunteers with a 'can-do' attitude has pulled off the ambitious, if improbable, feat of upturning the conservative seat of Indi.

The price of solar panels is dropping fast, such that a decision to install them is now primarily one of economics. And the seven local government areas of North East Victoria have leveraged this point by funding solar ambassadors to facilitate a bulk-buy program known as Solar North East. The most successful shire in that program is Indigo. And the town with the highest uptake? There are no prizes for guessing that it's Yackandandah.

It was in this context that a group of dedicated people, with the support of an engaged and participatory town, were able to capture lightning in a bottle. Totally Renewable Yackandandah harnessed the 'can-do' attitude of the Indi campaign; traded on sound, affordable technology, and gave people hope by articulating a vision that was in equal portions ambitious, achievable and an antidote to despair.

A committee was formed and inspiration was drawn from towns, both local and abroad, that had proven that community energy was not a 'fantasy' as senator Matt Canavan once gratuitously declared during a tour of our town, but a key part of a democratised, decentralised, decarbonised energy future. These communities, such as Hepburn, wanted to do the hard work required to actively participate in a just energy transition, and so did we.

The goal was 100% renewable Yackandandah by 2022. Clear, bold and focused.

And while our internal drivers were fuelled by a desire to act urgently on climate change where our federal government was not, we were disciplined in our messaging and remained apolitical and unwilling to enter fruitless debates about the merits of climate science. We were also very open about not being experts, which created space and approachability. In turn, this allowed us to build strong, meaningful partnerships across all sectors. Partnerships where the deficiencies in our expertise and balance sheet were compensated by an ever growing stable of success stories. Of action.

So, what was the key ingredient to the momentum that TRY built in those early years? I think that it was trust. By sharing our vision, we were often asking an individual or a group to do something beyond their normal routine. To change. And over tens of thousands of conversations, meetings, emails and phone calls, we proved that we weren't shysters. We were focused on our goal, but we were willing to meet people where they were at, and work from there. Looking back, this approach was incredibly powerful, and I would argue that this building of trust remains the most underrated but important part of the renewable energy transition. You see, an uncompromising vision, mixed with grass roots action is a potent cocktail.

On a personal level, TRY in 2014 was for me a desperate attempt to settle my raging conscience by doing something to act on climate change. I know that's true for many committee members. Any collateral social or economic benefit to the community was at that time secondary.

But as the story of TRY unfolded, this viewpoint has changed for me.

The die increasingly looks to have been cast in respect of poor old planet Earth's temperature. Donald Trump has just been elected with a mandate to 'drill baby drill' oil and gas and that is beyond heartbreaking.

Weather events over the past 10 years have already revealed the strength that we'll need as a society to deal with the consequences of such-short sighted foolishness.

Yet TRY has proven that we grow strong when we're willing to go on a journey together. A journey where people give of themselves to do better every step of the way.

A journey where, when we look back, there is much to be proud of: the uptake of renewables in this town has delivered millions of dollars, and tens of jobs into our economy. We've accelerated new tech, won awards, and created Indigo Power. There are days that we're close to 100% renewable, and TRY is a thought leader of national significance. But this is the part that we have to remember: it's easy to look back. When we look forward, there's a long way to go.



Soren Hermanson speaks at the Yack Community Energy Workshop in October 2017