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## The National Business Leaders Forum: leading the sustainability business

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**Mr Kishor Chaukor, Managing Director of Tata Industries Limited, leads one of the most comprehensive and integrated efforts in corporate sustainability worldwide. In his first visit to Australia, Mr Chaukor addressed the National Business Leaders Forum on Sustainable Development (NBLF) in Canberra, in June.**



Credit: Global Compact Network Australia

Some sectors of Australian industry have loudly opposed deep cuts in carbon emissions for fear of losing business to developing countries. Yet the Indian corporate giant Tata Group is using its response to the carbon problem as an opportunity for growth and innovation.

Mr Chaukor is one of a succession of leading-edge sustainability thinkers and practitioners introduced to Australian industry by the NBLF since its inaugural meeting in 1999. At the 2003 NBLF, for example, Al Gore delivered his famous presentation – later the basis of ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ – for the first time since holding the office of Vice President.

For Mr Bob Welsh, founding CEO of VicSuper and now Executive Director of Sustainability Advisers, the early years of the NBLF were transformative. Hearing Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface Carpets (1999), and Paul Hawken, author of *The Ecology of Commerce* (2000), speak about interconnectedness – the concept of integrating sustainability into the DNA of your company and taking it to the centre of strategy – ignited a spark.

'It gave me confidence to go to my Board with what were regarded as reasonably radical proposals, and then to engage the staff and their natural inclination to move in this direction,' says Mr Welsh.

Ms Molly Harriss Olson established the NBLF four years after working in the White House as the founding Executive Director of President Clinton's Council on Sustainable Development.

'Our goal is to provide a business network of excellence and innovation in Australia – to involve people and organisations who are committed to sustainability and are prepared to invest,' says Ms Harriss Olson.

By showing what is possible – rather than focusing on obstacles to be overcome – Dr Simon Longstaff, Executive Director of the St James Ethics Centre, believes the forum has created a kind of 'social proof' in support of those who are in the position to seize the opportunity for sustainable business.

This year's forum began with a message from His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, who founded the forum's equivalent in the United Kingdom. Professor Tim Flannery, Chair of the Australian Climate Change Commission, then gave an update on 'the science that business needs to know'. Simon Upton, Director of the OECD Environment Directorate, discussed the OECD 'Green Growth' Strategy launched in May, which shows how a transition to a cleaner low-carbon economy is compatible with higher economic and productivity growth.

The climate debate has always been central to the forum's activities. In 2007, led by then Chair, John Hewson, the forum issued a consensus statement and position paper calling for a 20 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020. This was the first time 100 CEOs had supported such a statement in Australia, and was also a catalyst for the subsequent adoption of an Emissions Trading Policy by the then-coalition government. Following last year's federal election, a second 'Call to Action' was championed by federal independent, Rob Oakeshott.

The NBLF courts all sides of politics; Prime Minister Gillard spoke in June, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott addressed the forum in 2010, and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd presented in 2008.

The Responsible Business Project announced by Mr Rudd at that time has since led to the introduction to Australia of the United Nations Global Compact and the United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment, via the St James Ethics Centre. According to the Centre's Dr Longstaff, one of the most exciting things to come from that project is the 'Good Business Register', which helps small to medium-sized enterprises commit to responsible business practice.

The NBLF invites progressive organisational leaders to embrace the sustainability challenge buoyed by the knowledge and support available through its broader leadership network.

*Ecos* magazine has been a partner of the NBLF since 2003. CSIRO is a major sponsor.

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