Climate change. An uncomfortable topic, clearly. Scott Morrison seems unable to settle on it and to project a position coherently.

Worried believer or defiant scoffer; qualifications in climate science aren't required to comprehend the following. Population growth results in an increased need for housing, and in many of our urban areas residential subdivision and development are ongoing. In our cities, old houses on big blocks are knocked down and replaced with multiple dwellings.

There are aerial photos online that show the transformation. When we cut down the trees, rip up the grass, pave the surfaces and install airconditioners that blast hot air outside, the result is a suburb that is hotter.

As the heat rises, so do tempers and disputes. Speaking from experience, hot days are days lost. Workers are allowed to down tools and, if not, walkouts and strikes are more common.

Heatwaves don’t hit the fortunate very hard but they do hit the many. The prospect of a heatwave brings on feelings of dread and anxiety over power bills, and a rush to airconditioned shopping centres. Heatwaves mean a serious risk to health for the vulnerable, too. They are classed as our deadliest natural event, killing more Australians than any other. According to PerilAUS, a database of natural hazard records, between 2000 and 2009 heatwaves killed 532 of us.

Last January, Sydney experienced a hot spell that broke records. Western Sydney residents suffered 37 days of temperatures over 35C. Penrith hit 48.9C, making headlines that day as one of the hottest places in the world.
Subsequent media reports claimed that major parts of Sydney would become unliveable within a decade and even that whole suburbs would be abandoned. The NSW Office of Environment and Heritage said the number of days above 35C would increase across NSW by an average of 26 days a year.

Sydney's most populous local government area, Blacktown, declared a climate emergency. The council is now trying to work with organisations to create “heat refuges” — places with good airconditioning and facilities — where people can go and shelter if they can't relax comfortably at home.

It is not only the Blacktown council that thinks Sydney has an issue. All 33 Sydney councils are part of a program that identifies excessive heat as the No 1 climate threat to residents.

Some may consider heat and coping with a few hot days simply part of life, but the issue has political potential and the well-organised understand this.

Last year an action group emerged, backed by a coalition of not-for-profit organisations. It is run by experienced community organisers and is aligned with a vast network of 775 trained and committed campaigners and strategists.

A project called Sweltering Cities has begun.

Its website says: “Our summers are getting hotter, drier and longer. Communities in our cities are facing searing heat that is changing the way we work, live and play. We’re working together with people who live in the hottest parts of our cities to organise and win campaigns for cooler, more sustainable and equitable suburbs. This summer we’re changing the story on cities, heat, health and climate change.”

Sweltering Cities is surveying residents about life, travel and work on days of extreme heat. It says that “overwhelmingly” respondents are saying “political parties should have policies to address the heat in the city”.

The City of Sydney has an environmental action plan including a strategy for an urban forest with long-term targets to increase average total canopy cover by 50 per cent by 2030 and by 75 per cent by 2050. The City of Melbourne too, has targets to expand significantly its urban forest of 70,000 trees.
Although planting trees and managing cities are jobs for councils, heatwaves potentially have broader political implications. If voters are experiencing discomfort and anxiety in their daily life, governments at all levels, when not in synch with the issue, are vulnerable to campaigns against them.

So, in the short term, climate change will be a bigger issue for voters than the Coalition may imagine. Whether the election is this year or next, the Prime Minister and his team need to find a way to connect with the people on environmental grounds and convince them they are not obstinate blockers but part of the solution.

Arguments about the Paris Agreement target might go over the heads of many, but the lived experience of ordinary people on stinking-hot days could result in a groundswell mood for change.

Voters do notice heatwaves. Clever community campaigners know this. They can turn anxiety and discomfort into fear and anger. These emotions can be harnessed and directed — the end result being changed votes.

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