

Why we won't be voting for the Australia we want this time

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As the federal election approaches, we can expect to be drowned in political slogans, pork barrels and scare campaigns. It's the way we do politics in Australia.

And these slogans – like 'lower taxes', 'wage growth', 'franking credit reform' or 'negative gearing reforms' – will mostly assume that the voters are as obsessed as the politicians are with economic and financial issues - rather than, say, the kind of Australia they want their grandchildren to live in.

Certainly, other big issues – like climate change, population growth, migration and refugees - will be discussed, but even here, there will be a strong economic perspective - unless the economics are embarrassing. Nauru and Manus Island, for example, can be discussed as humanitarian or migration issues, partly because there's no 'return on investment' debate on the billions of taxpayer dollars spent on locking people up.

And you can be sure that the media will help push the economic barrow, with endless interviews of 'average Australian households' explaining how their family budgets will be affected.

That's not to say that economics and family budgets are not important – clearly they are. It is, rather, to point out the narrowness of our top-down political agendas and how few choices citizens have to vote on the things that really matter to them.

There's no doubt Australians value a healthy economy and it can be argued that Australia has ['enjoyed a remarkable run' over the past 50 years'](#). But they also understand and care about the costs of economic growth, and some other issues that our politicians seem less concerned with.

[Polling consistently shows](#) that citizens care more than their politicians about some quite important issues: like climate change, marriage equality, housing reform, a Republic, income inequality and tax, financial regulation, corporate donations, and the corruption of democracy.

This divide would be troubling in itself, but it's much more of a problem when we consider the wider condition of Australian democracy today – and remind ourselves that our political system is, ultimately, our main collective tool to fix such problems and build a better society.

Trust in politicians and government, rarely high in Australia, seems to have hit an all-time low. The [2018 Lowy Poll](#) shows that only 47% of 18-44 year-olds believe that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government". The share of all Australians who are satisfied with democracy has [fallen catastrophically](#) from 80% in 1996 to 40% in 2018.

At a day-to-day level, the reasons aren't hard to find. With seven prime ministers in 10 years, extensive corporate tax avoidance, rorting politicians, scandals in churches and trade unions, bad behaviour by banks and even our beloved cricket team, rising distrust in institutions and the political system is hardly surprising.

But the deeper reality is that most citizens feel powerless to influence the direction of their country, and more and more are using their vote as a protest, not as a tool to help build their version of a better society.

So why doesn't our political system enable us to discuss and decide on the things that we really care about, like the future wellbeing of our society and even the role of values like kindness, fairness, and compassion in directing our policies (as NZ PM [Jacinda Ardern](#) reminded a startled Davos World Economic Forum in February)?

One reason is that this kind of change requires intergenerational policies and a clear vision for the Australia we want, and we don't seem to have either of these. They just don't fit in the 4-year election cycle. But the more immediate reason – the elephant in the room - is the widely held view in the political classes and the media that continuous economic growth is synonymous with societal progress. If you have that, you can fix everything else. Yet ironically, it is our very over-reliance on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a singular driver of economic and social policy which has led to many of these societal problems, such as inequity, overconsumption and climate change.

Historically, GDP was never intended as a measure of societal progress and [many have questioned its dominance](#). But it's only quite recently that alternative measures of societal progress have been developed and a [global 'beyond GDP'](#) movement has emerged. Internationally, this has led to the [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), the [OECD Better Life Index](#) and the [Canadian Index of Wellbeing](#) - all of which allow countries to track their progress towards aspirational goals like 'Good Health and Wellbeing' and 'Quality Education'.

Some countries are going further. They are developing wider models of societal progress where equitable, sustainable wellbeing is the ultimate goal of government, and they are seeking to build this goal into their economies, budgets, political systems and long term planning, even in some cases their [constitution](#). Many of these models are firmly anchored in a process of citizen engagement and democratic renewal.

Countries like [New Zealand](#), [Wales](#), [Italy](#), [Scotland](#), [Slovenia](#) and some in [Latin America](#) are leading this movement. Most are members of the [Wellbeing Economies Alliance](#), where governments and community groups are combining to construct "an economy that delivers human and ecological wellbeing". In July, the much-admired Ardern will launch the world's first [Wellbeing Budget](#). This will require Ministers to demonstrate the well-being impacts of their budget proposals (as distinct from the marginal seat impacts, as we do here) and show the trade-offs between natural, social, human, financial and physical capital.

All of this should raise a few questions for disillusioned Australian democrats. Do citizens want an alternative model of societal progress to guide our political agenda? What do they consider the most important priorities for the kind of Australia they want? What would an Australian Wellbeing Economy look like?

As part of the national [ANDI \(Australian National Development Index\)](#) project, a long term community-research collaboration based at the University of Melbourne, we recently asked some of these questions. In a national survey (sample 1,850) we found that only 43% of respondents felt that Australia was 'heading in the right direction', but nearly 87% thought that in charting our national progress, health, social and environmental measures were as important as economic ones.

When asked about priorities for national progress, people gave a high rating to issues like children and youth wellbeing, health, education, democracy and governance, communities and infrastructure, fairness, work and work-life, general wellbeing, environment and sustainability, indigenous wellbeing and culture and recreation. Economic life and prosperity were certainly considered important, but at a mid-level in this list.

Encouragingly (for democratic renewal, and the ANDI project) a healthy majority (76%) said they would be interested to participate in a national community program to express their views on national progress goals and measures.

ANDI is planning a large-scale, multi-platform, community program to engage Australians around the nation over the next 3 years, with the aim of producing ongoing 'status' reports on progress in 12 key community priority areas each year.

Such a model in Australia could lead to more insightful policy and more mature political debate. It would encourage citizens to think beyond political slogans and tribalism and politicians to plan beyond 4-year cycles.

In the longer term, extensive citizen engagement, underpinned with high quality research and evidence, could help to build a shared vision and restore trust and democracy. And perhaps then we could vote on the Australia we want.