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Annex

Perspectives from Across Australia's Governance Ecosystem

Interview Insights Report

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Country and waterways on which we operate, and for which our livelihoods depend. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and we honour the resilience and strength embodied across generations of First Nations communities who have fought for their rights, their cultures, and their self-determination. We also acknowledge those who tirelessly strive to protect, preserve and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, leaving a profound legacy for future generations.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

We affirm that the Country now known as “Australia”, always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

We pledge to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, embracing self-determination, social justice, sustainability, equality, and reconciliation. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are diverse, with deep-rooted histories and rich cultures that continue to thrive despite past injustices. We deeply honour the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities, and we strive to amplify their sacred wisdom, knowledge and expertise as we work collaboratively to pave the way for future generations.

A Note on Country

We use the term "Australia" throughout this report for clarity and consistency. This continent has been home to sovereign First Nations for tens of thousands of years, known across hundreds of distinct language groups whose names for their own Countries and places carry living meaning and authority, among them Naarm (Melbourne), Gadigal (Sydney), Lutruwita (Tasmania), Meanjin (Brisbane), and Boorloo (Perth), alongside countless others across the continent. These names predate the formal naming of Australia in 1824 and extend far beyond it. This continent has always been, and remains, a place of sovereign First Nations whose leadership, cultures and custodianship continue to this day.

About This Summary

Between April and May 2026, Foundations for Tomorrow (FFT), in partnership with the School of International Futures and WEAll Australia, conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with leaders and experts across politics, policy, academia, civil society and business as part of research examining how Australia can govern more effectively for the wellbeing of current and future generations.

Interviews were intentionally framed as exploratory and designed to stress-test early findings and hypotheses emerging from the research process. They were not intended to serve as a rubber-stamp or confirmation of working assumptions about how Australia's governance system currently operates. Contributors were invited to share their own reading of the landscape, push back on the research's early indicative findings and surface considerations that public data alone could not capture.

This summary does not attempt to represent every view expressed, nor does it aim to offer a hierarchy of conclusions or actions that should be pursued to strengthen impact across the ecosystem. At its core, it identifies the insights, patterns and tensions that were consistent, significant or illuminating enough to meaningfully inform the research's final findings and conclusions.

Contributing Voices

31 semi-structured interviews with experts and leaders taking place over the two month period. Contributors were sought from across government, civil society, academia, business and philanthropy, with representation at local, state and federal levels. Stakeholders included political leaders and staffers, senior public servants, academics, civil society leaders and youth.

Contributors were sought to provide a range of entry points into the research questions rather than a representative sample of any particular sector. Several contributors occupy roles that sit across multiple domains simultaneously. Others bring an explicitly critical or external vantage point. Depth and diversity of perspective was prioritised over breadth of coverage.

What We Heard

The following five themes reflect the patterns and insights that emerged most consistently across interviews. Insights are presented thematically rather than attributed to individual contributors. Where a contributor's context is relevant, it is noted without full identification. All contributors were given the opportunity to review how their insights are captured prior to publication.

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Theme 1

Future generations and the wellbeing economy: adjacent but complementary agendas

Core insight

The relationship between adjacent civil society efforts to catalyse long-term governance remains conceptually fragmented and underdeveloped. Efforts to advance a wellbeing economy and efforts to overcome political short-termism are too often framed as parallel agendas, with little articulation of how they relate, despite the two pursuing the same end from different starting points. That disconnection weakens both of their contributions to the shared goal of governing fairly across generations. The two are best understood not as competing agendas, but as a single, self-reinforcing cycle, in which progress on one strengthens the conditions for the other.

What contributors told us

One of the primary things this interview series set out to test was how clearly different actors across the ecosystem understood the respective contributions of future generations advocacy and wellbeing economy work.

Across several conversations, it became clear that fragmentation in conceptual understanding about what a wellbeing economy actually is remains a core challenge to its ability to achieve institutional uptake. Contributors regularly conflated a wellbeing economy with wellbeing approaches, wellbeing budgets or beyond-GDP measurement frameworks. Several described it primarily in terms of Measuring What Matters or the ACT's budget process, both of which are important governance approaches, but neither of which constitutes a 'wellbeing economy' in itself. One contributor with an intimate working knowledge of Commonwealth Treasury described the gap precisely: treasury officials understand the measurement components well, but the deeper ideational question of what a wellbeing economy is actually for and who it is designed to serve remains largely outside the frame of day-to-day decision-making. Another contributor built on this description, explaining that the dominant economic education of officials shapes their frame of reference in ways that make paradigm-level questions about the purpose of economic design feel either redundant or threatening to established practice.

In part, this conceptual misunderstanding is a communications challenge. The wellbeing economy field in Australia is comparatively young, and the European movement, from which many of its frameworks originate, is operating at a level of conceptual maturity that the Australian landscape has not yet reached. The implication is not that Australian policy

thinking is less sophisticated. Rather, it is that the deliberate investment in building strong and wide conceptual clarity, through practitioner development, shared vocabulary and accessible public communication, has been relatively underinvested in. The consequence is visible in how political engagement with the wellbeing economy has played out: interest has risen and fallen with individual champions rather than becoming structurally embedded. When federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers was publicly engaged with wellbeing economy framing, the field gained significant political oxygen. When that interest waned, there was little durable institutional infrastructure to hold what had been built.

On the relationship between future generations advocacy and wellbeing economy work, contributors offered a range of framings, revealing a lack of shared understanding about their respective contributions and aims. Several described the relationship as sequential. Future generations advocacy provides the moral and civic architecture, including the case for why we should govern differently, and for whom. Wellbeing economy work provides the economic design, including the alternative set of rules, incentives and measures that would make governing differently possible in practice. On this reading of the relationship, they operate on different but complementary levels, and the distinction matters. A wellbeing approach addresses challenges in preventative and holistic ways but does not work directly on the economic roots of those challenges. A wellbeing economy is specifically about change at the level of the system itself and it is that system-level change that creates the conditions in which genuinely long-term governance becomes possible.

Other contributors pushed back on this framing. One contributor argued that long-term governance is not a mechanism sitting outside the wellbeing economy but inherent to it. Another raised a different challenge: that even within the wellbeing economy field itself, the distinction between system-level economic transformation and upstream social policy is insufficiently drawn, allowing incremental reforms to be claimed as wellbeing economy work when they are expressions of a wellbeing approach at most.

What emerged across these conversations is that the field is in a period of productive but unresolved contestation. The underlying values alignment is strong. Strategic incompatibility is largely absent. What is missing is a shared working map of how the different efforts relate to one another. Several contributors noted that this absence has real costs. In a resource-constrained environment, organisations compete for attention and funding in ways that inadvertently amplify differentiation over coherence. Grant funding structures reward distinctive claims, creating conditions where even closely aligned actors frame themselves as doing fundamentally different things. One contributor described watching the prevention policy field, which is one of the most natural connective tissues between the two movements, begin to develop its own siloing dynamic almost as soon as it gained political attention. The pattern is structural, and it is self-reinforcing.

Tensions and divergences

The most productive tension in this theme concerned the question of what level of conceptual alignment the ecosystem actually needs. Some contributors argued that shared language matters less than shared direction of travel, emphasising that a pluralism of frames

and entry points is a feature of a distributed movement, provided actors can broadly recognise each other's contributions as part of the same larger effort. Others were less comfortable with this position, arguing that without greater conceptual clarity, particularly around what distinguishes a wellbeing economy from adjacent policy work, the ecosystem risks allowing the term to be progressively hollowed out as its language gets adopted without its substance. This is the same dynamic the report identifies as futures washing at the level of political discourse, and several contributors recognised early signs of it already taking hold in how wellbeing economy language is being picked up and deployed.

A second tension, less explicitly named but present across several conversations, concerned ambition and sequencing. Several contributors working on economic systems change expressed frustration that long-term governance work, while politically useful, tends toward the institutional and procedural, including commissioners, legislative frameworks and reporting requirements, in ways that stop short of the deeper economic transformation they believe is necessary. From this vantage point, the risk is that long-term governance becomes a sophisticated mechanism for managing an economic system that remains fundamentally misaligned with human and ecological flourishing. Contributors working primarily within the long-term governance space, by contrast, tended to see incremental institutional change as the realistic path through which deeper economic transformation eventually becomes possible. Both positions have merit. What they reflect is a live debate about sequencing and ambition that the field has not yet found a shared way to hold productively.

Theme 2

Language, Narrative and Framing

Core Insight

The ecosystem is speaking multiple languages at once and the fragmentation is structural. The deeper problem is that the values through which long-term governance is most commonly communicated speak predominantly to those already aligned with the movement. Broadening reach requires broadening the vocabulary through which the case is made, and, more fundamentally, recognising that narrative cannot be designed in the abstract. It has to emerge from practice.

What contributors told us

Across conversations, contributors drew a consistent distinction between language that functions well within the ecosystem and language that travels effectively beyond it. Terms like long-term governance and wellbeing economy were broadly accepted as effective among practitioners. Outside those circles, they tend to generate confusion or the perception of elite inaccessibility. One contributor described the problem directly: the language used in public-facing communications by organisations in this space is often indistinguishable from the language used in internal policy documents. That treatment of a general audience as though it were already a practitioner audience is one of the most consistent barriers to public resonance across the field. Part of this reflects training rather than intent. Technical experts are often not equipped to adapt their communication style for non-specialist audiences, and so they default to the technocratic language of their own discipline: language that can carry precision while missing the values that make an argument resonate.

The values dimension of this problem runs deeper than jargon. Cross-cultural values research suggests that people are oriented toward different underlying motivational value sets, which shape how they interpret political language and social change. Several contributors reflected on this in practical terms. One economist, who has spent years making the case for structural reform, described the dynamic precisely: the same underlying concern that the current system is not working for younger generations lands very differently depending on whether it is framed as grievance and accusation or as a philosophical and practical argument about fairness and shared interest. Words that feel to one audience like an honest description of injustice can feel to another like a personal attack. The practical implication is not to abandon fairness as a value, but to be much more deliberate about the form in which it is expressed. One ACT-based contributor added a useful further differentiation: the economic argument for upstream investment tends to gain traction with decision makers, while the social narrative, which asks what kind of society do we want, and what does government owe the people it serves, tends to resonate more with

the general public. Both are necessary. Yet the field has not always distinguished between them.

A third and further distinctive angle was surfaced on what makes language travel. Cultural acceptability and norm-shifting, it was argued, are the primary drivers of genuine public engagement, not evidence, and not policy sophistication. Real faces, real stories and simplified consistent messaging distributed across everyday cultural spaces matter more than rigorous framing documents. The movement cannot survive by operating only at higher policy levels. It needs cultural momentum, and that requires a level of accessibility and even ‘memeability’ that most organisations in this space are currently unwilling to invest in. Several contributors pushed the language question even further, arguing that the field may be overestimating what communication design alone can achieve. In a fragmented media environment characterised by distrust and information overload, narratives detached from lived experience struggle to gain traction regardless of how well crafted they are. One contributor was direct: the narrative has to emerge from the process, not precede it. If you explain deliberative democracy to people, eyes glaze over. If you run a deliberative process with people and then name what just happened, the story stays with them. Practice is the infrastructure through which narrative becomes durable. This is a significant challenge for a field that has invested heavily in communications and comparatively little in the kinds of participatory and experiential processes that would give its narratives somewhere real to live.

A final insight concerned contextual relevance. One contributor argued that the field's preferred vocabulary, particularly terms like wellbeing, regeneration, and intergenerational flourishing, requires people to make a significant conceptual leap from their present circumstances, and that in a world of increasing instability, that leap is becoming harder to ask of people. Words like safety, security, resilience and adaptation meet people where they currently are. They do not dilute the long-term transformation the field is seeking. They simply provide a contextually honest entry point into it.

Tensions and divergences

The sharpest tension in this theme concerned whether the answer to narrative fragmentation is convergence on shared language or a deliberate pluralism of frames. Some contributors argued for audience-specific framing over a universal vocabulary, pointing to the concept of metaconsensus: the idea that when people with divergent views identify shared values rather than shared terminology, productive dialogue becomes possible without requiring linguistic convergence. From this perspective, the plurality of frames across the ecosystem reflects a distributed movement rather than a coordination failure. Other contributors were less comfortable with this position, arguing that without some shared communicative infrastructure, the field cannot build the kind of broad public recognition that durable reform depends on. Both positions have merit. What they reflect is a live and unresolved question about whether the ecosystem's priority is deepening existing support or expanding its reach, and whether those two goals ultimately require different strategies.

Theme 3

Resistance and the Workability Problem

Core Insight

Conceptual agreement on the need for long-term governance is near universal. The persistent barrier is workability, and workability operates as a system design problem rather than a motivational or cultural failure. Contributors working inside and alongside government described not a lack of will to think long-term, but a set of structural conditions that make acting on that will professionally costly, institutionally unsupported and fiscally impossible to resource. Understanding those conditions precisely is a precondition for addressing them.

What contributors told us

The workability problem operates at three distinct and compounding layers.

The first is the resource and funding architecture layer. Departmental operating budgets have been compressed through efficiency dividends for approximately thirty years. The consequence is not simply that departments have less money. It is that discretionary capacity, the kind of funding that allows a team to do work not attached to a legislated program or election commitment, has been effectively eliminated across much of the Australian Public Service (APS). Futures and foresight functions, long-term policy capability and most work oriented toward anticipatory rather than reactive governance all heavily depend on this kind of discretionary investment. Without it, they are difficult to sustain. The pattern this produces is structural and, contributors noted, remarkably consistent: futures functions are established as projects, generating valuable work over two to three years, and are then wound up when the project funding ends. Within a cycle, the same agency reconvenes something similar without access to what was learned before. Contributors with direct experience of this cycle across multiple agencies described it not as an occasional failure but as the defining structural feature of futures capacity in the APS. The distinction between discrete project-based and ongoing functional investment is, based on what was heard across this interviews series, the single most important structural lever available for activating more sustained, robust long-term governance capacity.

The second layer is the incentive structure and missing middle problem. Senior leadership across the APS already understands, and frequently asserts, the importance of long-term thinking. Operational staff are often intuitively receptive to it. The hardest layer to reach is middle management, namely, Band 1 and 2 senior executives who face an incentive structure that actively rewards short-cycle delivery, risk minimisation and firefighting over anticipatory work. Promotions in the APS, contributors observed, tend to reward those who

bring order to visible chaos quickly, not those who prevent chaos from arising in the first place. This is not a personal failing of the individuals in those roles. It is a rational response to the metrics by which they are evaluated. The consequence is that long-term analysis, when it is produced, frequently does not reach the decisions it was designed to inform. It sits above the layer that actually governs the flow of advice to ministers, rather than being embedded within it.

This points directly to the third and most precise layer: the translation problem. Long-term governance work tends to get dissolved at precisely the moment it becomes effective: when it attempts to create the bridge between long-term analysis and near-term action. That bridge is what would make futures and foresight work genuinely operational within the system. But building it requires a team to move into the strategy layer of a department, and departments are not always willing to accommodate that movement. This irony is structural. The work has to occupy the translation layer in order to be useful. Occupying the translation layer makes it threatening to existing power arrangements. The result is that the most valuable futures functions are also the most institutionally vulnerable ones. Contributors drew a direct parallel here with economic analysis. Treasury sign-off is a structural requirement for cabinet submissions. A comparable structural requirement for anticipatory futures analysis, mandating that submissions demonstrate engagement with long-term risk, would institutionalise the translation layer in a way that no training program or culture change effort alone can replicate. Without something equivalent, futures work will likely continue to be advisory rather than directive, and therefore structurally secondary to the short-cycle incentives it is trying to complement. It should be acknowledged that some within the public service would contest this framing, arguing that directive long-term judgement properly rests with elected government rather than with officials, and that holding the APS responsible for it is therefore unfair. The point here is not to assign blame, but to locate precisely where the gap between long-term analysis and action currently sits.

Across all three layers, contributors were clear that the problem is not unique to Australia. Every comparable OECD country struggles with it. That observation matters because it cautions against treating the barriers as uniquely Australian governance failures amenable to Australian institutional fixes. The models that have shown the notable durability, including overseas examples like Horizons Canada and the UK Government Office for Science, share a common design principle: futures capacity that sits partly inside and partly outside the structures that tend to consume it. Close enough to government to be trusted and useful. Far enough outside the annual restructuring cycle to retain institutional memory across political transitions.

The citizen-level dimension of the workability problem is distinct in character. Behavioural science supports what practitioners described directly in their interviews: humans are structurally poor at long-term thinking, and material stress compounds this dramatically. The capacity to engage seriously with questions about the future is, in meaningful ways, a function of how stable one's present circumstances are. Several contributors pointed to structured social imagination processes as one of the most evidenced and least resourced responses to this challenge. A process described by one contributor, run through the City of Melbourne, paid participants a stipend, provided childcare and created genuine conditions

for community engagement with alternative futures. The active ingredient was not information provision but the restoration of a sense of agency where participants left with a vision to work toward and a belief that shaping it was within their reach. That shift in what people believe is possible, rather than what they know to be true, is what moves futures orientation.

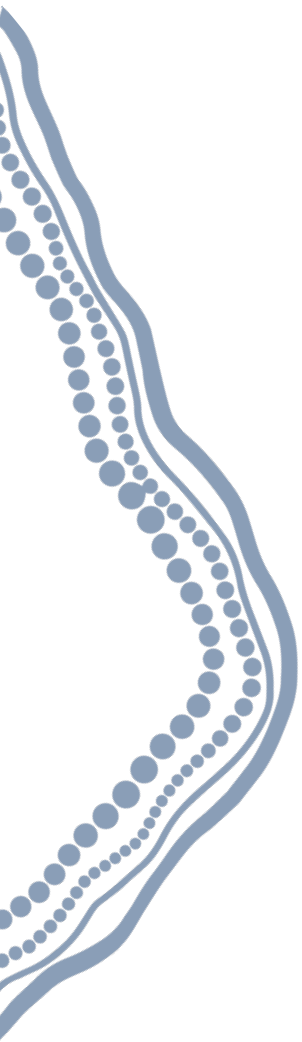
One positive case study that emerged from across the interview series deserves specific attention here. The APS Reform agenda, led from within the Australian Public Service Commission, offers one of the most concrete available examples of what working differently within the system can actually look like. Rather than attempting to drive cultural change from a central coordination point, which contributors noted is near structurally impossible across a system of 200,000 staff, the reform was designed around a principle of devolved accountability. A very clear mission was established and endorsed at secretaries board level. A small number of unambiguous rules of engagement were set. And then agencies were supported and enabled to find their own ways to achieve the mission within those rules, using existing legislative requirements from corporate plans and annual reports to PGPA Act obligations, rather than creating bespoke structures that would require new resourcing. The result, as documented in the subsequent evaluation using complex systems methodology, was measurable cultural change across the system, with the APS census recording its strongest-ever results on the specific dimensions the reform had targeted. The lesson contributors drew from this was not that central coordination is unnecessary, but that the form of coordination matters enormously. Light-touch, mission-oriented, devolved models can achieve systemic change that directive, centralised models often struggle to bring about.

Tensions and divergences

The sharpest tension in this theme concerned whether the workability problem is ultimately solvable within existing institutional structures. The dominant view across contributors was that the problem is one of system design: strengthening tenure protections, accountability frameworks that reward the avoidance of future harm rather than only the avoidance of present error and leadership authorisation that makes long-term judgement legitimate and routine. Several contributors with experience in central agencies added that clear, decision-ready frameworks are a precondition for this kind of judgement to operate in practice, as they are in Treasury, and that this is precisely what the wellbeing economy field has so far struggled to provide.

An alternative view, but a serious one nonetheless, was that institutional redesign alone is insufficient and possibly beside the point. From this viewpoint, the structures of representative government, adversarial in nature, short-term in cycle, and organised around the protection of existing interests, are not amenable to the kind of reform being proposed. The more fundamental work is building the skills, confidence and democratic agency within communities themselves to make decisions collectively and over longer time horizons, so that governance gradually shifts toward where people actually are, and want to be, rather than requiring people to adapt to institutions designed around different incentives. This is a genuine disagreement about theory of change, not simply a difference of emphasis.

A second tension concerned where the primary response to risk aversion should be directed. Several contributors argued that institutional redesign is the priority, that the incentive architecture governing advice, promotion and resource allocation needs to change before individual behaviour can be expected to follow. Others suggested that institutional reform alone is insufficient while public trust in government remains low, and that rebuilding the social licence for bold long-term action may need to come first. Both observations appear to hold in different contexts. What the field has not yet settled is how to sequence them.



Theme 4

Government, Political Will and the Trust Deficit

Core Insight

The relationship between short-term credibility and long-term leadership in Australian political culture is currently inverted. Leaders earn the right to speak about the long term by first demonstrating competence in the short term, when the logic should run the other way. Addressing this requires more than better policy or stronger individual leaders. It demands institutional conditions that make long-term judgement professionally safe and a public culture that rewards rather than punishes leaders for exercising it.

What contributors told us

Multiple contributors described the same pattern independently. In the current political culture, leaders build the credibility to speak about the long term by first establishing themselves on short-term delivery. Several described the ideal as the inverse: a coherent long-term vision as the source of political credibility, from which short-term decisions flow as sequential steps rather than ends in themselves. The gap between these two models is not simply attitudinal. Contributors with direct experience close to government described structural conditions that maintain it.

Where senior appointments are politically exposed and tenure is uncertain, rational actors adjust their advice and behaviour accordingly. Long-term advice often requires raising uncomfortable issues, persisting with positions that may not land immediately with ministers and challenging short-term priorities. Doing so demands institutional safety. One contributor described this with particular precision through the lens of process: Robodebt was a process failure before it was a culture failure. The decision bypassed the standard cabinet and legal scrutiny processes that would have flagged unlawfulness early. One way to respond to this challenge is to build acknowledgement of uncertainty directly into institutional routines, systematically asking of every policy proposal what is not yet known, who has not yet been consulted and what opposition has been heard. That practice, when applied consistently, can help create an institutional culture in which uncertainty is rewarded rather than concealed, and in which the integrity of process becomes the measure of quality rather than the outcome alone.

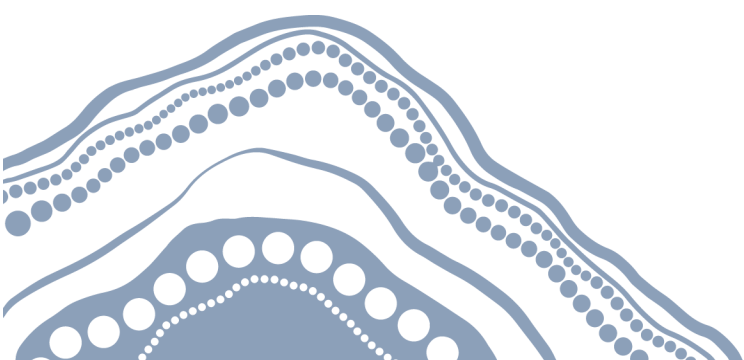
A related finding concerned the APS more broadly. Stewardship, it was pointed out, has resonated strongly across the APS not despite its institutional character but because of it. Public servants are deeply driven by purpose. Stewardship gave language and legitimacy to obligations many already understood themselves to hold. The real challenge is not necessarily capability or motivation. It is the authorising environment, including whether

the institutional conditions exist to allow long-term judgment to be exercised consistently, across levels, rather than only where individual leaders have the courage and positioning to insist on it.

When it came to what actually moves political leaders to act, contributors were more specific than the dominant narrative of political will tends to allow. One contributor described the shift required as being fundamentally one of belief: political leaders need to believe they will be electorally rewarded for long-term thinking rather than punished for it. That belief is not produced by evidence alone. It is produced by a combination of popular narrative pressure, sustained political commentary that names short-termism as a failure rather than a pragmatism and the visible example of leaders who have acted long-term and survived. Another contributor deepened this insight, adding that by tapping into the personal lived experience of decision makers, finding the point at which a policy question connects to something a leader has encountered directly in their own life or community, is one of the most consistently effective entry points available. This entry point sits somewhere between the evidence-based and the cultural-narrative approaches the field more commonly deploys.

Tensions and divergences

Contributors did not converge on where the primary response to the trust deficit should be directed. The dominant view held that institutional redesign is the priority. More specifically, that the incentive architecture governing advice, promotion and resource allocation needs to change before individual behaviour can reliably follow. A dissenting view, put directly by one contributor, held that the public mandate question is less of a limiting factor than the field tends to assume. According to this view, applying consistent pressure on political rivals and on the lobby groups and industry associations that hold influence over decision makers is what actually creates cover for leaders to act. Going public, by contrast, has the potential to simply offend the people whose cooperation is needed. The practical implication of this view is a sequenced rather than broadcast approach to political engagement, briefing departments first, then the organised interests that shape ministerial thinking, and only then, if necessary, broader public mobilisation.



Theme 5

Entry Points, Leverage and What Is Being Underweighted

Core Insight

The ecosystem is structurally overreliant on political goodwill as its primary lever for change. The cultural, narrative and citizen-facing dimensions of the work are currently underweighted, and the funding models that should support them are actively working against them. The result is a field that has become increasingly sophisticated at making the case for long-term governance while remaining underdeveloped in building the conditions that would make that case politically viable and publicly owned.

What contributors told us

The finding that the ecosystem over-relies on political leaders as its primary entry point for change was among the most consistently and independently confirmed findings across the interview series. Contributors described the consequences with notable precision. Political will in Australia is champion-dependent. Without a public mandate that exists independently of particular leaders, every hard-won gain is structurally exposed. The defeat of a key parliamentary champion at the 2025 federal election illustrated this directly, not as an isolated misfortune but as a predictable consequence of an ecosystem that builds momentum around individuals rather than around durable civic infrastructure.

What has worked in building that mandate follows a recognisable logic. The duty of care open letter campaign was cited by several contributors as an instructive case. It succeeded in mobilising a broad coalition partly because it was kept deliberately non-partisan and not explicitly attached to the bill itself. Early credible endorsements made subsequent ones progressively easier, and the strategic investment in getting the first signatories right proved disproportionately important. The underlying principle of keeping the ask at the level of values rather than specific policy creates its own trade-off with the political specificity needed to actually move legislation, and contributors were candid about that tension. Nevertheless, the campaign's reach demonstrated something the field has not yet fully absorbed: that cultural resonance and policy precision require different strategies, different timing and different messengers.

The contrast with how most of the field currently operates is stark. One contributor described watching four substantial reports from major organisations released within weeks of each other in late 2025 with little public impact. Meanwhile, smaller campaigns grounded in narrative and relational framing continued to generate popular resonance. The explanation for this is structural. Competitive grant funding incentivises organisations to distinguish themselves through their specific evidence base, producing siloing as a rational

individual response. Communications is treated as an add-on rather than as core infrastructure. As one contributor put it directly: political will does not arise from research conclusions. It stems from a public that believes something matters and expects leaders to act. Building that belief requires sustained investment in cultural and narrative work that most funding models in this space don't yet support.

Structured social imagination processes emerged across conversations as one of the most evidenced and least resourced interventions available. Paid, supported processes that create genuine conditions for community engagement with preferred futures produce qualitatively different outcomes. The active ingredient is the restoration of a sense of agency and a shift in what participants believe is possible, rather than the provision of information. One contributor made the point vividly: if you explain deliberative democracy to people, eyes glaze over. If you run a deliberative process with people and then name what just happened, the story stays with them. Practice is the infrastructure through which civic imagination becomes durable. This kind of infrastructure is noticeably absent from the Australian long-term governance ecosystem at scale.

The coordination and learning infrastructure gap is equally significant. One contributor described the ecosystem's challenge precisely: everyone has their piece of the elephant, but nobody is systematically helping them learn from each other. Community Hubs Australia was cited as a domestic model worth examining, featuring a small central team, distributed local leadership with full agency and regular in-person convenings that allow hubs to learn from and build on each other's work. The UNDP's portfolio approach was offered as an international comparator. Both point to the same design principle: light central coordination combined with distributed activity and deliberate mechanisms for shared learning. The fit-for-context governance question is also important here. The field has swung from centralised to decentralised organising in ways that have sometimes produced structures so informal they dissolve when the relationships holding them do. Relational infrastructure needs to be durable enough to do real work over time, biodegradable enough not to reproduce the institutional rigidities it was designed to avoid, but structured enough to outlast the individuals who built it.

Tensions and divergences

The sharpest tension concerned why the coordination problem persists despite widespread recognition of it. One contributor offered a fairly honest account: when money arrives in a movement, scarcity dynamics kick in. Organisations that have been building from very little suddenly face competition for survival, and the rational individual response is to compete rather than collaborate. This is not a failure of values. It is a predictable consequence of funding architecture that rewards distinctiveness over coherence. Until that architecture changes, encouragements to coordinate will struggle to produce sustained collaboration.

A second tension concerned the relationship between incremental and transformational theories of change as applied to entry points. Several contributors argued that the field needs to think less like a centralised reform campaign and more like a distributed adaptive system, coordinating around broad principles while enabling diversity and local variation

underneath. Others pushed harder on this point, foregrounding that using participatory and deliberative processes primarily to influence an adversarial political system will always be structurally defeated by that system, and that the more fundamental work is building democratic capability within communities themselves so that governance gradually shifts toward where people are rather than requiring communities to adapt to institutions designed around different incentives. This is a genuine disagreement about what the work is ultimately for, and the field has not resolved it.

What The Field Is Telling Itself

Taken together, these conversations paint a picture of a field that has developed considerable sophistication in diagnosing its own challenges while remaining underinvested in the conditions that would allow it to act on that diagnosis at scale. Across 31 conversations with leaders, practitioners, economists, public servants, political staffers, journalists and community organisers, several things stood out as worth highlighting directly.

The first is how much agreement exists beneath the surface-level fragmentation. Contributors working in different policy domains, political traditions and communities, using different language and pursuing different entry points, consistently converged on the same underlying concern: that the way Australia currently makes decisions is not serving current or future generations well, and that changing it requires more than better policy ideas. The disagreements in how to go about that were evident: about sequencing, ambition, theory of change and where to direct limited resources. Nevertheless, they were disagreements expressed within a shared orientation, not across fundamentally opposed ones. The ecosystem has not yet found a working map that makes that shared orientation visible to the people within it. This annex is one attempt to contribute to that.

The second is how consistently contributors identified the citizen-facing and cultural dimensions of the work as the most underinvested, and how rarely that recognition has translated into a reallocation of resources or attention. The field is aware of this and has been for some time. The structural reasons it persists: funding models that reward distinctiveness, communications treated as supplementary and participatory infrastructure that remains episodic were all named clearly and repeatedly. What the field appears to need is not more diagnosis but more honest reckoning with the incentive structures that produce the gap between what contributors believe is most needed and what organisations are actually resourced to do.

The third is that the most generative moments across the interview series were where contributors actively pushed back on hypotheses and findings: where an economist questioned whether civic mobilisation is actually a limiting factor, where a systems thinker argued that the workability problem cannot be solved from within existing institutions, where a practitioner challenged the field's comfort with its own language. This annex has tried to hold those voices and the views they expressed open as genuine and valid tensions. The field will be better served by sitting with them, rather than smoothing them into a false coherence.

We are grateful to every contributor who gave their time and candour to this process. The quality of thinking we were privileged to hear across these conversations is the strongest evidence available that the ecosystem has what it needs to do this work well. The question the field is asking itself and that this annex hopes to sharpen rather than answer is whether it is yet organised to use it.