

# **Beyond the Election Cycle**

## **Activating Long-Term Governance in Australia**

**Strategic pathways for governing across political  
traditions, generations and communities**



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AUSTRALIA**



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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.



## **With Gratitude**

We are grateful to the leaders, experts and practitioners who gave their time, candour and trust to this research. Their insights have directly shaped this report's analysis and conclusions, and will continue to inform work across Australia's long-term governance ecosystem.

We know how many demands compete for our contributors' time, and we do not take their decision to prioritise this work lightly. That generosity is what makes research like this possible, and we hope what follows does justice to the insights shared with us.

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## About this research

This report is a partnership between Foundations for Tomorrow (FFT) and the School of International Futures (SOIF), with guidance and support from Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) Australia, to map Australia's long-term governance ecosystem and identify strategic opportunities to accelerate and strengthen impact. The research was conducted across four stages between February and May 2026: desktop research, qualitative mapping, semi-structured interviews and thematic coding, with findings synthesised collaboratively into this report.

### Desktop research

The first stage was a structured review of existing material on long-term governance in Australia and in comparable jurisdictions. It drew on government and institutional reports, parliamentary and budget documents, and the published work of organisations active in the field, alongside existing scholarship on foresight, intergenerational equity and democratic reform. It also included an analysis of how the language of long term governance is used across political and public discourse, from parliamentary debate and party communications to civil society advocacy. This stage established the conceptual foundations of the report and surfaced the early hypotheses that the later stages were designed to test. The sources drawn on are cited throughout and compiled in the footnotes of this report.

### Mapping the ecosystem

The mapping draws on a base dataset of 183 organisations and initiatives, identified from an extended pool of 845 actors. Each actor was analysed across an eleven-dimension taxonomy covering sector, jurisdiction, ecosystem role, change orientation, change lever, entry point, policy domain, power orientation, temporal horizon, activity status and centrality to the long-term governance agenda. The dataset spans organisations working across government, civil society, academia, philanthropy and the private sector at federal, state and territory level. A deliberate effort was made to include actors engaging with long-term governance from across the political spectrum, from centre-left reform movements and wellbeing economy advocates to conservative institutional traditions and cross-bench parliamentary actors. A copy of the mapping that informs the analysis in this report is available on request.

### Semi-structured interviews

Between April and May 2026, 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders, practitioners and experts across the ecosystem. Interviewees were drawn from federal and state government, civil society, academia, independent politics, journalism, the wellbeing economy field and philanthropy and impact investment, and focused across four thematic areas: structural and institutional barriers to long-term governance, shared vision and political will, ecosystem coordination and fragmentation, and First Nations and intergenerational governance.

Interviews were designed to stress-test early hypotheses from the mapping rather than confirm them, and contributors were invited to share their own reading of the landscape and to push back on the research's working assumptions.

## **Thematic coding and synthesis**

Interview transcripts were analysed alongside the desktop material through thematic coding, grouping observations into recurring themes and points of tension across the five thematic areas. These themes were then synthesised collaboratively by the project team into the analysis presented here. The full thematic synthesis from across the interview series is set out in the Interview Insights Summary, available as an annex to this report.

## **A note on the use of AI**

AI tools were used at two points in this research process. Where interviewees gave explicit permission, interviews were transcribed using AI transcription software, with those transcripts then being used for thematic coding and synthesis. AI tools were also used to support the organisation and structuring of research material during the writing process. All analysis, interpretation, framing and conclusions are the authors' own.



# Key Terms

## Long-term governance

Long-term governance refers to the capacity of institutions, political systems and societies to make, sustain and adapt decisions over long time horizons for coherent objectives that hold across political cycles. A concurrent and often overlapping concept is intergenerational fairness, set out in further detail below. This paper recognises that while long-term governance often advances intergenerational fairness, the two are not synonymous, as long-term governance can be pursued in ways that are not constructive for the wellbeing of current and future generations.

Long-term governance is also an expansive concept that carries different meanings across sectors, institutions and cultural contexts. Rather than adopting a single disciplinary definition, this report draws on a range of adjacent concepts, including long-term thinking, future generations frameworks, anticipatory governance, stewardship, intergenerational equity and sustainable development, that each illuminate different dimensions of long-term governance. These terms carry different emphases and travel differently across political, academic and institutional settings. They also reflect a broader recognition that 'governance' itself extends beyond formal political institutions alone, encompassing cultures, communities, civic participation and other forms of collective decision-making. What they share is a recognition that governing well for current and future generations cannot be reduced to any single institutional lever, policy framework or reform campaign.

## Wellbeing economy

The term wellbeing economy is used in this report in a broad and descriptive sense. It refers to an economy whose rules, institutions, incentives and component parts are oriented toward long-term human and ecological wellbeing, rather than treating growth or short-term profit as sufficient measures of success on their own.<sup>1</sup>

In the Australian context, the term can carry political associations and may be read as associated with a progressive policy register. This report does not use the term in that narrow sense. It uses the wellbeing economy framework because it offers a useful way of naming a set of governance questions: how is value defined, how are trade-offs made, what outcomes are prioritised, and whether public institutions are equipped to act in the long-term public interest.

Used in this way, the term helps describe a field of inquiry concerned with whether economic governance is oriented toward the conditions that allow people, communities and future generations to flourish.

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Warwick Smith, *The Wellbeing Economy In Brief: Understanding the Growing Agenda and Its Implications* (Centre for Policy Development, 2024), <https://cpd.org.au/work/wellbeing-economy-in-brief/>.

## Other significant terms

### Stewardship

The term stewardship carries different meanings across contexts. It has particular resonance within Australia's public service, government and business settings, where it is often used to describe a responsibility to preserve and strengthen institutions over time. It also holds deep significance for many First Nations communities, for whom responsibilities to Country, community and future generations have been embedded principles of governance for millennia. In this report, stewardship refers to the responsibility of decision-makers to act not only for immediate outcomes, but for the long-term health, capability and resilience of the systems they influence.

### Intergenerationally fair governance

Intergenerationally fair governance refers to the normative objective of ensuring that today's decisions do not unfairly disadvantage future generations or diminish their opportunities and wellbeing. Drawn from the School of International Futures' Foresight Governance Prism framework,<sup>2</sup> the term captures a standard against which the transfer of avoidable costs, risks or diminished opportunities to those who follow can be judged.

Its intellectual foundations run through political philosophy and the sustainable development tradition. The Rawlsian veil of ignorance supplies one basis, since decision-makers who did not know which generation they would belong to would not rationally displace avoidable burdens onto later ones.<sup>3</sup> The Brundtland Report supplies another, defining sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own,<sup>4</sup> a formulation that has since anchored intergenerational fairness in international environmental and development policy.

### Future generations

Future generations refers to people who will live with the consequences of decisions made today. In this report, the term is used as a practical governance concept rather than a legal or philosophical category, drawing attention to the long-term impacts of public decisions beyond current electoral cycles.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jackson et al., "Working For the Wellbeing of Current and Future Generations," ed. Lewis Lloyd et al., with Caroline Star et al., The School of International Futures, 2024, [https://soif.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/09/SOIF\\_DFG\\_Implementation\\_Handbook\\_Sept-2024.pdf](https://soif.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/09/SOIF_DFG_Implementation_Handbook_Sept-2024.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *Theory of Justice Revised Edition* (Harvard University Press, 1999), [https://www.production.hup.harvard.edu/file/feeds/PDF/9780674042582\\_sample.pdf](https://www.production.hup.harvard.edu/file/feeds/PDF/9780674042582_sample.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Gro Harlem Brundtland, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development : Note / by the Secretary-General* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/139811?ln=en&v=pdf>.

# Executive Summary

The decisions that will most shape Australia's future, on fiscal sustainability, an ageing population, climate, technology and national security, unfold over decades. Yet the political and institutional cycles that govern them are often measured in years. This report provides a comprehensive stocktake of Australia's capacity to govern for the long term. It covers the institutions, mechanisms, frameworks, incentives and norms that shape whether decisions made today are capable of serving the wellbeing of both current and future generations.

Drawing on a mapping of 183 organisations and bodies and 31 expert stakeholder interviews, its central finding is that Australia's governance ecosystem is more institutionally developed, politically engaged and sophisticated than the country often gives itself credit for.

This is due in no small part to the deep expertise within the Australian Public Service, alongside that held across academia, civil society and First Nations governance traditions. The central challenge is not an absence of activity or capability, it is fragmentation and uneven distribution. The task ahead, therefore, is one of extending, integrating and maturing these developments so that they form part of a coherent, nationally recognisable approach to governing for the wellbeing of current and future generations.

## Five patterns shape this task:

| Pattern                                | Challenge                        | Core problem                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Political coding</b>                | <i>Cross-partisan legitimacy</i> | Long-term governance has accumulated several layers of political and policy branding that make it harder to build breadth of ownership across political traditions, even where there is substantial agreement on the underlying goal.                                             |
| <b>Futures washing</b>                 | <i>Implementation commitment</i> | As these layers of coding accumulate, support for long-term governance increasingly manifests as rhetorical endorsement rather than institutional commitment. Language signalling long-term intent becomes easier to adopt than the reforms required to give it practical effect. |
| <b>Civil society fragmentation</b>     | <i>Coordination</i>              | Adjacent movements are often pursuing the same objective from different starting points, with insufficient articulation of how their efforts relate to and reinforce one another.                                                                                                 |
| <b>Entrenched incentive structures</b> | <i>Incentive</i>                 | Decision-makers serve citizens that expect them to consider long-term impacts, from within political, fiscal and organisational systems that reward short-term delivery and immediate visible outcomes.                                                                           |
| <b>Thin civic ownership</b>            | <i>Democratic mandate</i>        | Public concern about long-term challenges has not yet coalesced into a broad understanding of long-term governance as a distinct and necessary response. The idea remains disproportionately owned by policy advocates and practitioners.                                         |



These patterns share a common root: Australia has invested more in building the case for long-term governance than in building the conditions that would make that case impossible to ignore.

**This report identifies six activation pathways for building these conditions.** Consistent with the framework used throughout this report, these priorities are organised across three core dimensions of an intergenerationally fair governance system:

### **Political leaders making intergenerationally fair decisions**

1. Broaden the civic and political vocabulary through which long-term governance is communicated, deliberately activating a wider range of values and moral traditions. Peel back accumulated policy branding and political coding so the agenda can be understood through multiple pathways to legitimacy rather than a single narrative frame.
2. Strengthen the connection between long-term governance and economic decision-making processes, including budgeting, performance frameworks, fiscal strategy and measures of national progress, so that long-term commitments shape how prosperity is understood, communicated and pursued.

### **Organisations and sectors prepared for the future**

1. Create stronger practical permission for stewardship, prevention and foresight to shape decisions by linking them more directly to the routines that already govern institutional behaviour: advice processes, prioritisation frameworks, spending choices and implementation planning.
2. Embed futures and strategic foresight capability more directly into strategy, budgeting and implementation processes, and invest in institutional practices that help it endure: secondments, cross-agency seeding of expertise and models that retain strategic memory even when internal functions or personnel change.

### **Citizens engaged in co-creating desirable futures**

1. Build stronger public ownership by making the agenda more intelligible in everyday civic terms, connecting long-term governance to lived experience and using existing community-facing entry points to widen its recognition as a democratic responsibility rather than a specialist policy interest.
2. Build on existing momentum by connecting and stabilising the participatory infrastructure that already exists: convening spaces, cross-sector partnerships, place-based processes and intermediary organisations, so that co-creation becomes a more durable and transferable part of long-term governance practice.

Taken together, these activation pathways are intended to unlock the conditions that allow long-term governance to endure beyond individual champions, electoral cycles and moments of political attention. The destination is a form of long-term governance in which:

- It is broad enough to cross political traditions rather than be claimed by one
- Its advocates speak with a vocabulary wide enough to reach beyond those already persuaded
- Decision-makers are supported and expected to act on long-term commitments rather than celebrated as exceptional for doing so; and
- The communities whose futures are at stake are partners in shaping the direction rather than recipients of it.

This destination is what a mature and durable long-term governance ecosystem looks like in practice.

# Introduction

Most policy reports begin by diagnosing a crisis, identifying institutional failure and then proposing recommendations to address it. This report begins from a different premise. It recognises that across Australia, practices of governing with a longer-term perspective are already beginning to emerge, but in places not always recognised as part of the same story. Within the Australian Public Service (APS), stewardship has been legislated and is beginning to be embedded as a formal responsibility of governing. Across defence and national security, long-range preparedness and anticipatory planning are deeply integrated into capability and investment frameworks. In health, preventative approaches are orienting some policy and practice toward long-term population wellbeing and avoidable future harm. Across civil society, philanthropy and research institutions, a growing cluster of organisations are working to extend political and institutional decision-making beyond short-term electoral and budget cycles.

Within First Nations governance traditions, principles of custodianship, intergenerational responsibility and stewardship have been practised on this continent for tens of thousands of years. These are not simply one tradition among many but the oldest continuing systems of intergenerational governance anywhere in the world. Caring for Country has sustained communities and ecosystems on this continent for more than 65,000 years, predating and outlasting every contemporary framework this report describes. Much of what the long-term governance field is now reaching toward, First Nations peoples have long practised, and First Nations leadership belongs at the foundation of this story rather than at its margins.

What this report highlights is not an absence of activity, but an ecosystem emerging at uneven speed and maturity across political, sectoral and civic domains. Important progress has been made, and some parts of the Australian landscape have developed remarkably sophisticated capabilities for thinking long-term. But these capabilities largely remain fragmented, weakly connected and insufficiently resourced to become durable. Moreover, many practices appear under different language, mandates or institutional traditions, making them difficult to recognise as evidence of the same pattern.

The central task this report tackles is one of activation. It examines how best to extend, connect and institutionalise these practices so they form a coherent, nationally recognisable approach to long-term governance. Part of that task involves building bridges: between initiatives working towards the same outcome from different entry points, between political traditions that share more common ground than the current debate suggests and between communities whose stake in long-term decisions has not yet been adequately reflected in how those decisions get made.

# What this report offers and who it is for

This report provides a comprehensive stocktake and strategic maturity assessment of Australia's governance ecosystem. It brings attention to who is working on long-term challenges, what infrastructure and capability for long-term decision-making has been built, where this remains fragile and where the highest leverage opportunities lie to strengthen its ability to serve the wellbeing of current and future generations. It covers a deliberately broad landscape, from federal fiscal frameworks and parliamentary mechanisms to civil society efforts, state and territory action and the futures and foresight field.

## Beyond just mapping what exists, this report makes three central contributions.

- 1. Conceptual clarity on how the parts of the ecosystem function and relate to one another:** A recurring finding across the research was a sense of competition between initiatives addressing similar challenges in an environment widely treated as resource-constrained. This report reframes that landscape as sequential, identifying how different actors and mechanisms can build coherence and reinforce rather than work against each other.
- 2. A full ecosystem maturity assessment:** Drawing on the School of International Futures' Foresight Governance Prism<sup>5</sup> the report treats an intergenerationally fair governance system as the goal and long-term governance as the capacity that enables it. It identifies where the conditions for that capacity are emerging, where they remain fragile and where they are underdeveloped.
- 3. A set of activation pathways for movement building:** Building on that assessment, the report identifies six ecosystem pathways organised across the three conditions needed to activate long-term governance over time. Together, these pathways provide practical entry points for movement building, institutional strengthening and cross-field collaboration.

The report is written for practitioners working across different policy domains and political traditions. Its pathways offer a direction of travel rather than a set of prescriptive recommendations. Detailed findings from across the interviews series are set out in full in the Interview Insights Report, available as an annex.

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<sup>5</sup> Jackson et al., "Implementation Handbook for the Declaration on Future Generations."



# Chapter 1

## The Moral and Political Terrain of Long-Term Governance

Across Australia, a shared concern is taking hold. Whether the conversation is about housing and retirement incomes, climate and public health, productivity and economic resilience, or the prospects of younger generations entering the workforce, Australians who disagree on almost every remedy are converging on the same question: is the way we make decisions today serving us well, and does it adequately weigh the long-term interests of current and future generations? That question is becoming increasingly prominent in our civic and political discourses, and the honest answer is that we are not delivering as well as we should.

That shared concern has not yet produced a shared capacity to act on it. Ideas about how to govern well for the long term have been absorbed into particular political traditions, with their language and narratives becoming associated with one side of political debate and treated with scepticism by the other. Housing debates have become organised around competing solutions rather than a shared desire for affordability. Climate debates are about competing pathways rather than a shared interest in resilience. Once an idea becomes tethered to a particular political identity, it tends to travel within that tradition more than it travels across it.

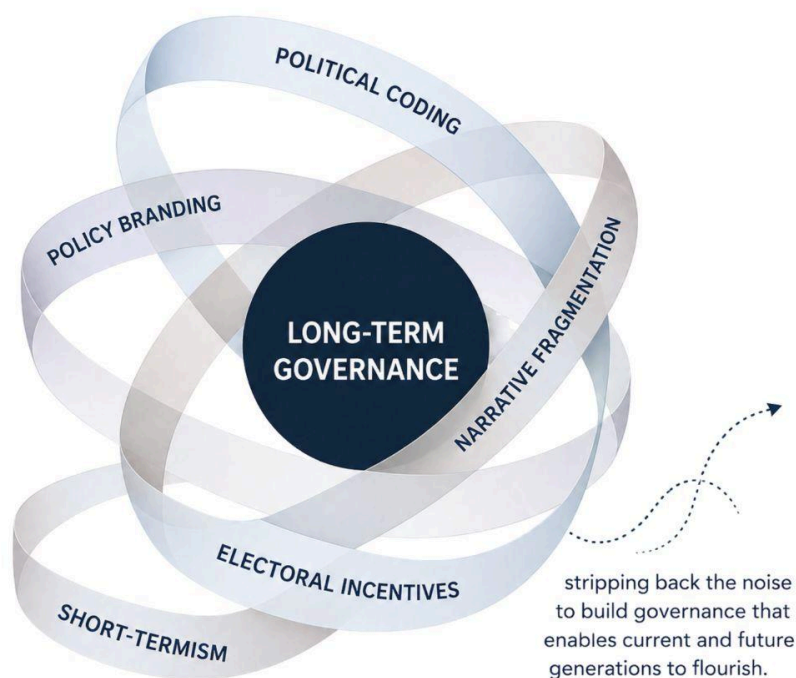
The result is a field that deepens the conviction of those already aligned more easily than it builds support among those it has yet to reach. This matters because once an idea gets politically coded as belonging to one side of politics, it becomes a target when the other takes office. That asymmetry is precisely why building common ground across political traditions is a necessary precondition for long-term governance. It calls for active resistance to polarisation and to the capture of shared goals by whichever side holds office.

Common ground alone, however, is insufficient. A longer time horizon leaves open a question about whose interests are served and which values guide a decision. Strategies that span decades can still entrench inequality or advance narrow ends. This is why long-term governance carries weight only when it is anchored to a clear purpose, such as achieving intergenerational fairness, and pursued through proactive leadership. That purpose sets the test for any long-term decision, whether it leaves those who follow with more opportunity or less. The work this report points to is building the common ground on which a shared future can rest, and taking seriously which contested questions deserve our attention first. A goal or narrative that cannot be owned across political communities, generations and regions will simply not outlast the tradition that built it.

That's not to say political parties or traditions shouldn't compete. Democracy is at heart, a contest of ideas.<sup>6</sup> It welcomes competition: vigorous, dynamic debate drives challenge, accountability and innovation, and the aim is to see that contest conducted with political sportsmanship and within shared principles. The central argument this chapter makes is that Australia's political actors should shift the level at which they compete, contesting ideas about how Australia can govern for a better future for all Australians, not whether that future is a legitimate object of shared concern at all.

Figure 1 below illustrates the work this chapter argues is required to build cross-partisan consensus and stronger public narratives towards long-term governance. At the centre sits a shared goal of a governance system designed to serve the wellbeing of both current and future generations. This goal, however, has become wrapped in several layers of political coding, policy branding, narrative fragmentation and electoral incentives making cross-partisan collaboration towards it harder than it should be. The maturity assessment in Chapter 5 points to how to unwrap and activate this shared goal across generations, communities and institutions.

**Figure 1 - Stripping back the noise enveloping long-term governance**



<sup>6</sup> Danielle Wood et al., *Who's in the Room? Access and Influence in Australian Politics*, nos. 2018–12 (Grattan Institute, 2018), <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/908-Who-s-in-the-room-Access-and-influence-in-Australian-politics.pdf>.

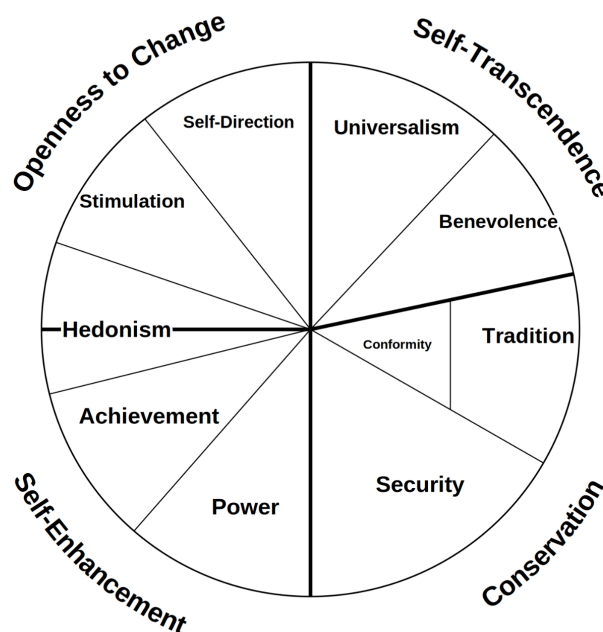
## 1.1 The Moral Register Problem

**In this section, a moral register refers to the set of values, motivations and instincts through which people interpret political questions and evaluate competing priorities. The dynamics of narrative tethering described above are visible in how civil society actors use different registers, intentionally or not, to make their case for long-term governance.**

Across the landscape, this language leans heavily on registers of care, fairness and equity.<sup>7</sup> Those narratives resonate deeply with some Australians, but not all. A movement that activates only part of the country's moral instincts is at risk of consolidating existing support rather than expanding it.

One useful framework for understanding this challenge comes from the work of social psychologist Shalom Schwartz. Schwartz's theory of basic values provides a useful lens for understanding the moral terrain on which long-term governance operates.<sup>8</sup> It illustrates the diverse value systems through which Australians interpret political questions and highlights why narratives that appeal strongly to one set of values may struggle to build support across the wider community.

**Figure 2 - An Overview of Schwartz Theory of Basic Values: adapted for clarity from Schwartz 2012<sup>9</sup>**



<sup>7</sup> The linguistic analysis in this chapter focuses on the 31 actors classified as 'primary' long-term governance actors within the full field of 183 actors examined in the research. A 'primary' long-term governance actor is an organisation for whom the systems, processes and incentives that shape how policy gets made is a core mission or reason for their existence.

<sup>8</sup> Shalom Schwartz, *An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values*, 2, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116>.

<sup>9</sup> This figure reproduces Schwartz's model in a redrawn format for clarity. Minor graphical adjustments have been made (e.g. typography and line alignment) without altering the underlying theoretical framework.

Research, including Schwartz' theory, but also across neuroscience, cognitive psychology and cross-cultural values theory suggests that people do not approach political questions as neutral evaluators of evidence. Emotional orientation, intuitive judgement and deeply held values shape what individuals find credible long before conscious reasoning begins.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio demonstrated that emotion is not separate from rationality, but foundational to decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Daniel Kahneman's work similarly showed that intuitive forms of cognition typically precede slower analytical reasoning.<sup>11</sup> Cross-cultural values research led by psychologist Shalom Schwartz further suggests that people are oriented toward different underlying motivational value sets, which shape how they interpret political language, responsibility and social change.<sup>12</sup>

More recent mindset research has built on these insights by describing mindsets as patterned ways of interpreting and responding to the world, shaped over time through experience and social context.<sup>13</sup> The practical implication for long-term governance communication is that evidence alone rarely builds broad public support. Messages resonate most effectively when they engage a wider range of underlying values, intuitions and social identities.

People respond differently to political language depending on the values and social motivations it activates. Messages framed primarily through care and fairness will resonate strongly with some audiences, while leaving others comparatively disengaged. This does not mean effective communication simply mirrors whatever values an audience already holds. Evidence in values-based communication suggests that some forms of value activation can narrow social concern or reinforce defensive political instincts.<sup>14</sup>

The challenge is therefore not to abandon care and fairness, but to broaden the range of values through which long-term governance is understood, including responsibility, stewardship, institutional trust, continuity and collective resilience. A field that communicates almost exclusively through a narrow set of moral registers is better positioned to deepen its existing base than to broaden it. That is the challenge this section documents.

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<sup>10</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (G.P Putnam, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Giroux, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Shalom Schwartz, *An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values*.

<sup>13</sup> Ashley Buchanan and Margaret Kern, *The Benefit Mindset: The Psychology of Contribution and Everyday Leadership*, 7, no. 1 (2017): 1–11.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Crompton, *Common Cause: The Case for Working With Our Cultural Values* (Common Cause Foundation, 2010), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277002308\\_Common\\_Cause\\_The\\_Case\\_for\\_Working\\_With\\_Our\\_Cultural\\_Values](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277002308_Common_Cause_The_Case_for_Working_With_Our_Cultural_Values).



**Figure 3 - Expanding the civic vocabulary of long-term governance**



**Note:** This Figure is an illustrative display of the variety of terms used in advocacy for long-term governance. It brings together words that describe different objectives, methods and motivations, and is intended to show the breadth of the civic vocabulary in use rather than the relative frequency or prominence of particular terms.

The long-term governance ecosystem does not communicate through a single narrative register. Different actors emphasise different moral, civic and institutional framings depending on their audience, strategic orientation and theory of change. Across much of the field, however, long-term governance is framed predominantly through the languages of care, fairness and intergenerational justice, particularly among organisations focused on economic inequality and systemic reform.

Alongside this, a smaller number of actors have broader vocabularies, communicating long-term governance through registers centred on stewardship, democratic resilience, institutional capability, continuity and public responsibility. First Nations communities are a key example, having long articulated intergenerational obligation through a broader combination of civic, cultural and institutional registers simultaneously. One contemporary illustration of this is the Indigenous Protected Area framework, through which Traditional Owners formalise custodial responsibilities to Country in community-developed management plans that are recognised within Australia's National Reserve System.<sup>15</sup>

This model brings together cultural obligation, civic agreement and institutional governance within a single long-term stewardship framework, demonstrating that richer vocabularies for articulating intergenerational responsibility do exist within the Australian context. The table below maps a sample of these narrative registers currently visible across Australia's civic landscape.

<sup>15</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Respecting Culture and Country: Indigenous Protected Areas in Australia: The First 15 Years* (2012), <https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/publications/respecting-culture-IPA.pdf>.

**Table 1 - Mapping Australia's civic vocabulary: contrasting value registers across the ecosystem<sup>16</sup>**

While examples of a broad range of values appear across the ecosystem, non-First Nations organisations in this sample cluster most heavily around Universalism and Benevolence. First Nations organisations more frequently combine these values with appeals to Tradition, authority, continuity and custodial responsibility.

| Organisation                                             | Example language                                                                                       | Schwartz values activated    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Think Forward</b>                                     | <i>"Intergenerational equity", "care", "fair go", "rigged" taxation system</i>                         | Benevolence, Universalism    |
| <b>EveryGen</b>                                          | <i>"Intergenerational justice", ensuring all Australians receive a "fair go"</i>                       | Benevolence, Universalism    |
| <b>Next25</b>                                            | <i>"What it takes", "systems transformation", "common good"</i>                                        | Achievement, Universalism    |
| <b>DemocracyCo</b>                                       | <i>"Trade-offs", "collective benefit", "democratic participation"</i>                                  | Universalism, Security       |
| <b>McKinnon</b>                                          | <i>"Strong and trusted democratic institutions", "accountability", "effective civil service"</i>       | Conformity, Security         |
| <b>First Nations Organisations</b>                       |                                                                                                        |                              |
| <b>Victorian Treaty Authority</b>                        | <i>"Sacred living documents", "obligations to ancestors and Elders"</i>                                | Tradition, Security          |
| <b>Firesticks Alliance</b>                               | <i>"Cultural responsibility", "cultural authority to Country", "obligations to future generations"</i> | Tradition, Benevolence       |
| <b>Closing the Gap</b>                                   | <i>"Structural change", "shared decision making"</i>                                                   | Universalism, Self-Direction |
| <b>Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI)</b> | <i>"Culturally legitimate governance", "systemic change"</i>                                           | Tradition, Universalism      |

<sup>16</sup> The coding maps each organisation's public-facing language, drawn from its website, published reports and campaign materials sampled in the last 5 years against Schwartz's ten basic values. Values were recorded where they were explicitly or strongly evoked, and coding was carried out by the lead author of the project team, Clare Beaton-Wells. The result is indicative rather than exhaustive, intended to surface the dominant registers in use rather than to measure their frequency precisely.

### 1.1.2 What does this mean for the field?

This is less a problem of evidence than of resonance. As the research cited above suggests, evidence alone rarely does the persuasive work we expect of it, for any audience across the political spectrum. People do not approach political questions as neutral evaluators of facts. What determines whether a pro-social argument lands is not simply its evidential quality but whether the frame around it activates the pro-social values the audience already recognises as meaningful and legitimate. For a movement seeking broad and durable support, the question is therefore not only whether its arguments are compelling, but which values its public language most consistently calls upon.

The Schwartz coding in Table 1 helps make this dynamic visible. Across the non-First Nations organisations sampled, the dominant registers are Universalism and Benevolence, expressed through language of fairness, care, justice, participation and collective wellbeing. While exceptions exist, including Next25's emphasis on capability and systems transformation, DemocracyCo's focus on trade-offs and collective decision-making, and McKinnon's focus on institutional integrity and effective governance, these values appear less consistently across the sample.

By contrast, the First Nations organisations examined activate a broader combination of values simultaneously, drawing together traditions of cultural obligation, custodianship, authority, continuity, collective responsibility and intergenerational stewardship. The contrast is not that alternative value registers are absent from Australia's long-term governance ecosystem. Rather, it is that many of the dominant public narratives through which long-term governance is currently communicated continue to rely heavily on a relatively narrow set of moral appeals.

The task for the field, therefore, is to broaden the civic vocabulary through which long-term governance is understood, deliberately activating a wider range of moral, civic and institutional traditions. Registers centred on stewardship, custodianship, preparedness, capability, institutional responsibility, national resilience and security can all speak to the same underlying objective through different pathways of legitimacy.

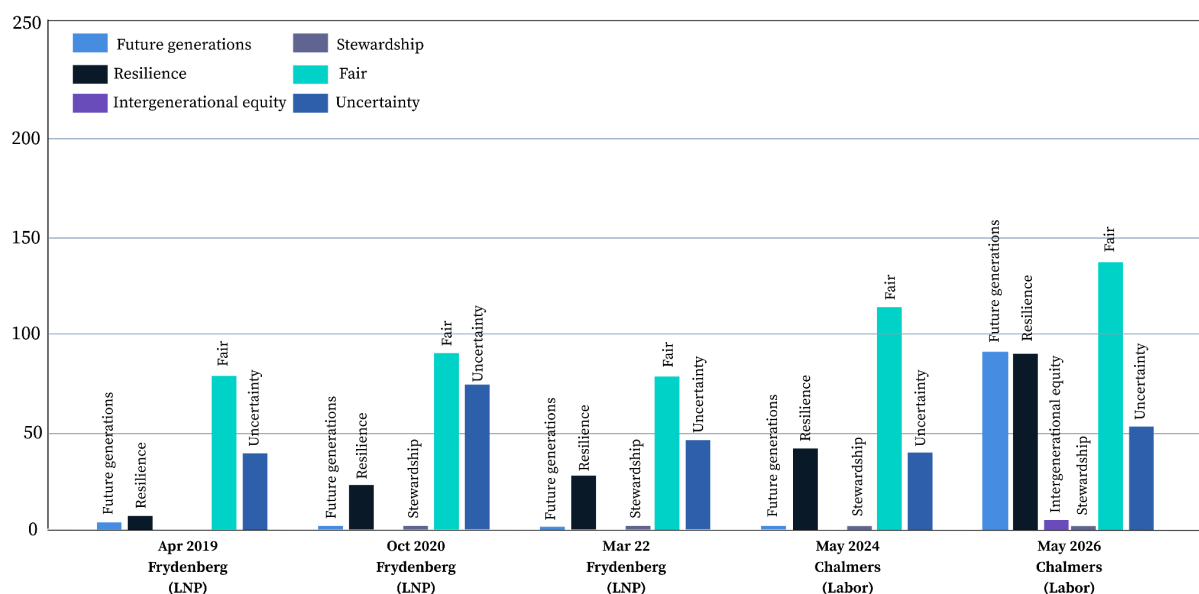
Many of these registers are already visible within the ecosystem, but they remain comparatively underutilised. Expanding their use would allow long-term governance to resonate across a broader range of values and identities, widening and deepening its support.

## 1.2 Language without architecture: long-term governance in political discourse

How a governance system responds to political pressure is one of the most reliable tests of its structural strength. This section examines how long-term governance language is showing up in the current political moment. It draws on the 2026 federal budget as the most recent major data point about how long-term governance language is moving in Australian fiscal politics, the decline in support for the major parties as a system-level signal of the ecosystem's resilience to long-term challenges, and the crossbench as the parliamentary actors most consistently deploying that language with long-term policy proposals behind it. Each is instructive about where long-term governance is gaining traction, what is driving that traction and whether language is being matched by policy intent.

### 1.2.1 The federal budget: long-term language in fiscal discourse

**Shifting economic language across Australian federal budgets (2019-2026)**



#### Keyword frequency in Budget Paper 1: Strategy and Outlook

##### Case Study: How long-term governance language has moved through federal budget discourse, 2019-2026

The above graph examines the frequency of six key terms in Budget Paper 1: Budget Strategy and Outlook, across five federal budgets from 2019 to 2026. Each of these budgets has been selected to represent a distinct political or policy inflection point in the language arc from 2019 to 2026, capturing a pre-COVID baseline, a crisis response budget, the

introduction of wellbeing framing under a new government, its pre-election peak and the current post-election reform budget.

The 2021, 2023 and 2025 budgets have been excluded because they sit between these inflection points and do not add materially to the analytical picture the five selected years produce. The excluded years are consistent with the trend that the selected years describe rather than counter to it. Budget Paper 1 was selected because it is the primary strategic narrative document produced with each federal budget. It articulates the government's overarching economic vision, frames its fiscal identity and makes the case for its priorities. It is the document most directly expressing how a government positions itself economically and the one that receives the most public and media attention. Analysis was conducted by keyword search across the full PDF of each Budget Paper 1.

**91x**

'Future generations' use in the 2026 budget: the term appeared twice only in 2024 and effectively not at all in the preceding years under either government.

**2-3x**

'Stewardship', remained unchanged in its frequency of use across seven years, two governments and a landmark reform agenda.

**0 → 7x**

'Intergenerational equity' appeared for the first time in any budget in the last 7 years.

Three findings from this data are particularly significant.

- 1. References to future generations are becoming more frequent:** The term "future generations" has become increasingly visible in federal budget discourse, suggesting a growing willingness to acknowledge longer-term impacts and responsibilities. However, its emergence has not been accompanied by a comparable increase in the concepts needed to translate concern for future generations into enduring governance practice.
- 2. Stewardship remains marginal:** Despite this shift, stewardship remained largely unchanged in frequency across five budgets, two governments and a landmark reform agenda. The concept continues to occupy a marginal place in budget discourse, suggesting limited movement towards framing long-term governance as an ongoing responsibility of institutions and leaders.
- 3. Fairness remains the dominant register used to frame long-term concerns:** Fairness has remained consistently present across the period examined, indicating that long-term concerns are most often framed through questions of equity and distribution. This suggests that long-term governance arguments are gaining traction when connected to present-day questions of fairness.



In addition to these findings, two further observations are noteworthy:

- **"Resilience"** increased from 7 mentions in 2019 to 91 in 2026, suggesting a growing orientation towards preparedness and forward risk. This represents a form of longer-term thinking, but one framed primarily around withstanding shocks rather than actively shaping long-term outcomes. The contrast with the 2020 COVID response budget is notable: the government's most immediate fiscal challenge produced its most short-term linguistic orientation. This rise also connects to the moral register analysis earlier in this chapter. Unlike fairness, which frames long-term concerns primarily through questions of equity and distribution, resilience speaks to preparedness, continuity and collective security. The growing prominence of this language suggests that long-term governance is beginning to find expression through a broader range of civic and institutional registers.
- **"Uncertainty"** peaked at 74 mentions during the 2020 COVID response budget, reinforcing the tendency for crisis conditions to narrow attention towards immediate challenges. When governments are managing acute pressures, longer-term language becomes more difficult to sustain.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the moral register challenge identified above. The idea of looking out for the wellbeing of future generations has entered federal budget discourse, while the concepts of stewardship and institutional duty that would make that concrete remain marginal. There is an enduring gap between aspirational policy objectives and a consistent recognition of the intergenerational responsibilities owed by leaders and institutions to consider the long-term.

### 1.2.2 Fracturing support for major parties

Recent political shifts are best understood less as a left-right realignment than as a sign of weakening confidence in the major parties' capacity to deliver.

For long-term governance, this matters as a direct test of the system's resilience: confidence in the major parties tends to weaken when institutions are seen to fail people across successive electoral cycles, which is precisely the accumulation of unmet need that durable long-term governance is meant to prevent.

The realignment of votes away from the major parties is not a new feature of Australian politics, nor is it best understood as a single ideological shift. Movements as different as the Teal independents, One Nation and the Greens as well as various state-level challengers do not share a common policy agenda so much as they share a common political condition: a growing sense that existing institutions are not delivering for the people they are meant to serve.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Online edition (Oxford Academic, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780190234874.001.0001>.

What links these movements is not ideological coherence, but the way they register dissatisfaction with major party politics. They arise from different causes and channel grievances in different directions. Some direct it against institutions themselves, while others seek new mechanisms to make government more responsive and more capable of acting for the long term. It is this broader erosion of confidence in the major parties' abilities to deliver, rather than any singular ideological trend, that matters most here.

Understanding this fracturing of support for major parties as a governance challenge rather than an ideological phenomenon is the starting point for a productive response. The conditions that generate it include trust erosion, economic stress and broader social strain across communities and age cohorts,<sup>18</sup> and the felt experience of government failing to deliver across successive electoral cycles regardless of who is in power.<sup>19</sup> Institutions built to govern for the long-term are designed precisely to prevent these conditions from accumulating. That they have accumulated is not a partisan failure. It is a systemic one.

A governance system with strong long-term properties would demonstrate resilience under this kind of pressure by showing that institutions can make decisions that benefit ordinary Australians and sustain that commitment across electoral cycles. The long-term governance ecosystem has invested heavily in building the case for institutional reform. It has invested far less in demonstrating the relevance of that reform to communities whose primary experience of government has been disappointment with what major parties deliver. The political signals of this period make that gap difficult to ignore.

This pattern should not be overstated. Australia is not as exposed to these dynamics as some comparable liberal democracies. Structural features including compulsory voting, which demonstrably shift the median voter toward broader socioeconomic representation, alongside a pragmatic political temperament and trade dependencies, have provided meaningful, if partial, insulation from the more acute populist ruptures experienced elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

### **1.2.3 The independent crossbench: concentration, ownership and coding**

One of the clearest patterns visible in this period is the concentration of policy innovations among a relatively small number of independent crossbench parliamentarians. The significance of this pattern lies less in the political association of the individuals involved than in what it reveals about the institutional conditions under which long-term aspirations can be translated into durable mechanisms.

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<sup>18</sup> James O'Donnell et al., *Mapping Social Cohesion - Social Connections through Troubled Times* (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2025), [https://scanloninstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/SI0001\\_MappingSocialCohesion\\_2025\\_v6.pdf](https://scanloninstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/SI0001_MappingSocialCohesion_2025_v6.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Dassonneville and Ian McAllister, "Explaining the Decline of Political Trust in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (2021): 280–97.

<sup>20</sup> Anthoula Malkopoulou, "Compulsory Voting and Right-Wing Populism: Mobilisation, Representation and Socioeconomic Inequalities," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2020.1774507>.

The federal crossbench's structural position in parliament helps explain why this concentration has emerged there.<sup>21</sup> Independent MPs are accountable first to their electorates and communities rather than to party platforms or caucus solidarity, freeing them from the electoral risk calculus that makes long-term commitments professionally costly for major party parliamentarians.<sup>22</sup> That freedom allows them to engage with ambitious long-term proposals in ways that are harder for major party parliamentarians to sustain. Major party politicians, by contrast, operate within institutional arrangements that place greater weight on party discipline, electoral strategy and short-term political risk. The result is not necessarily a difference in commitment to long-term outcomes, but a difference in the conditions under which long-term proposals can be advanced and sustained.

Victorian MP Helen Haines' campaign for a federal anti-corruption commission provides a clear example of this pattern. Rather than advocating for integrity in the abstract, she developed detailed legislative proposals and maintained sustained crossbench pressure across successive parliaments until the National Anti-Corruption Commission was legislated in 2022.<sup>23</sup> The significance of this example is not the policy itself, but the move from aspiration to mechanism: from identifying a long-term governance challenge to developing a concrete institutional response.

The crossbench enjoys freedom beyond many of their colleagues, but it is also a product of the same system this report argues needs reform. The political capacity to move from aspiration to mechanism remains concentrated among a relatively small number of individuals with the right combination of political positioning, policy expertise and personal conviction. It is not yet institutionalised. When those individuals move on, the commitments they have championed often struggle to endure. Nor is this pattern distributed evenly across the political spectrum.

Progressive independents account for many of the most visible contributions to long-term governance to date, while conservative equivalents are considerably harder to identify. That asymmetry is itself evidence of the political coding documented throughout this chapter. Long-term governance has become associated with a relatively narrow part of the political landscape, limiting its ability to build broad ownership across political traditions. This is not a case of one side having to catch up to the other. It is merely a reflection of a practical reality: once an issue becomes associated with one political tradition, others can become reluctant to engage with it on its own terms, regardless of the underlying merits. The work of decoding these policy reforms so that long-term governance can become a shared responsibility owned by champions across the full political spectrum is precisely the work this report points to.

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Riboldi et al., "Do Independents like to Party? The Rise in Independent and Minor Party MPs in Australian Parliaments since 1970," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2024): 272–90.

<sup>22</sup> Miriam Berger, "Beyond the Bench: Crossbench Influence on a Contemporary House of Representatives," *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 39, no. 2 (2024), [https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Beyond\\_the\\_Bench-Crossbench\\_influence\\_on\\_a\\_contemporary\\_House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_39-2.pdf](https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Beyond_the_Bench-Crossbench_influence_on_a_contemporary_House_of_Representatives_39-2.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Helen Haines, "Helen Haines Welcomes Introduction of National Anti-Corruption Commission Legislation," Helen Haines MP, 2022, <https://www.helenhaines.org/media/helen-haines-welcomes-introduction-of-national-anti-corruption-commission-legislation/>.

## 1.3 The Gap Between Civil Society and Political Discourse

The pattern this chapter has documented has an established parallel in environmental discourse. Greenwashing describes the adoption of environmental language by corporations and institutions to signal commitment that is not matched by substantive change.<sup>24</sup>

A similar dynamic is emerging in the discourse about long-term governance. Futures washing, as it has been termed, describes the increasing adoption of language by political and institutional actors to refer to governing for the long-term, without the policy mandates, accountability mechanisms or resourcing that would give it operational force.<sup>25</sup>

Like greenwashing, futures washing is not necessarily a deliberate strategy. It is what happens when the language of reform becomes easier to adopt than the ambitious long-term commitments that structural reform actually requires. The 2026 budget illustrates it well.<sup>26</sup> 'Future generations' appeared 91 times in Budget Paper 1. 'Stewardship' appeared twice.

A civil society field whose public communications reach the already-convinced more readily than they broaden support, whose political champions depend on individual tenacity rather than institutional infrastructure and whose communities most in need of reaching remain most underinvested in, is inadvertently deepening the conditions for this dynamic.

Futures washing is, in effect, how an agenda becomes captured without being adopted: its language is embraced while its substance is set aside. To name this plainly, and to refuse to let a shared goal become rhetorical cover for one side or an alibi for inaction across the rest, is part of what taking long-term governance seriously demands.

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<sup>24</sup> Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, "Environmental and Sustainability Claims," <https://www.accc.gov.au/business/advertising-and-promotions/environmental-and-sustainability-claims>.

<sup>25</sup> Karla Paniagua, "Are We Futures-Washing?" Medium, 2024, <https://cirila-thompson.medium.com/are-we-futures-washing-ff94d82771c0>.

<sup>26</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Budget Paper No. 1: Budget Strategy and Outlook (Treasury, 2026), <https://budget.gov.au/content/bp1/index.htm>.

# Chapter 2

## The Economy as a Governance Problem

Chapter 1 argued that the core goal of long-term governance has become increasingly obscured by layers of political coding, policy branding and narrative fragmentation across the field. This chapter turns to a different but related challenge: the absence of sufficient clarity around how the economic conditions required for long-term governance are understood, built and sustained in practice.

The chapter begins by examining the economy itself as a governance problem. It argues that many of the institutional incentives shaping political and economic decision-making remain oriented toward short-term outputs that favour narrow or organised interests over the public as a whole, and that neglect the stewardship of our natural environment, rather than long-term public value. It then explores the relationship between two distinct but complementary efforts active within Australia's civil society landscape to address this: advocacy for a wellbeing economy as an alternative economic paradigm and advocacy for governance that addresses political short-termism. These advocacy efforts are developing at different speeds and with differing institutional depth, and the relationship between them is not yet conceptualised clearly enough for their contributions to work together effectively. The chapter concludes by examining the institutional and civic conditions still required to build durable legitimacy for that transition within Australia.

### 2.1 Why the economy matters to long-term governance

There is ample evidence that the prevailing economic system in countries such as Australia is misaligned with what people and the planet need in both the short and long term.<sup>27</sup> Downstream symptoms such as inequality, homelessness, loneliness, food insecurity, precarious work, fraying community cohesion, and environmental challenges (from species loss to global warming) are signs of the economy not meeting the needs of people and the planet.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Jolee Wakefield, *The Economy We Could Have: The Economy of Today, the Divides It Creates, and the Alternatives* (The Next Economy, 2025), [https://46438702.fs1.hubspotusercontent-ap1.net/hubfs/46438702/TNE%20Publications/TNE\\_TheEconomyWeCouldHave\\_Report\\_FINAL\\_SinglePgs.pdf](https://46438702.fs1.hubspotusercontent-ap1.net/hubfs/46438702/TNE%20Publications/TNE_TheEconomyWeCouldHave_Report_FINAL_SinglePgs.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Ziffer, *Australians Less Satisfied with Life than during Pandemic as Financial Pressures Mount*, June 9, 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-06-09/happiness-index-shows-we-were-more-satisfied-in-covid-pandemic/106764966>; *The Job Insecurity Report*, Senate Committee Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022), [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Job\\_Security/JobSecurity/Fourth\\_Interim\\_Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Job_Security/JobSecurity/Fourth_Interim_Report); *Rental Affordability Snapshot - National Report 2026* (Anglicare Australia, 2026), <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/publications/2026-rental-affordability-snapshot/>; "Social Isolation and Loneliness," Health and Wellbeing, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/health-wellbeing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>; *National Climate Risk*



There are a range of reasons for this, beyond the scope of this report to chart comprehensively.<sup>29</sup> Informed by ideas about the role of progress, freedom, governments, markets, and human nature, these reasons relate to the purpose of the economy,<sup>30</sup> to the rules and incentives that shape its functioning and to the behaviours and activities of the component parts of the economy. For example:

- Assumptions, and related but separate, compulsions,<sup>31</sup> that position economic growth as a goal in its own right and a solution to societal challenges, in ways that can understate its wider effects on wellbeing and the environment. The issue is less that decision-makers disregard these effects than that growth is widely treated as a credible proxy for progress, which can leave its broader costs underweighted.
- Costs of production are often externalised, so ecological damage is over-produced whereas social inputs are undervalued (for example care work undertaken outside market transactions) and social outcomes underdelivered.
- Finance dominates many enterprises to the extent that they function in ways that extract resources from communities, nature and individuals in service of short term accumulation by owners of financial capital.
- Progress is often conceptualised and measured in narrow economic terms, particularly Gross Domestic Product (GDP), despite wide recognition of its flaws.

By way of illustration, we consider an instance of the last of these.

There is a basic accounting problem at the heart of how Australia measures economic progress. GDP measures the total monetary value of goods and services produced in the economy over a given period. It is a measure of activity and expenditure, not of whether that activity reflects something beneficial or harmful. When a child grows up in poverty and needs remedial support through schooling, that support is counted in national accounts as economic progress. When a family loses their home to a flood made worse by decades of deferred infrastructure decisions, the emergency response registers as a boost to GDP too. When loneliness drives someone to crisis care, that counts. The bill for preventable harm is recorded as productivity. The harm that generated the bill is not recorded at all.<sup>32</sup>

What gets measured, positioned as ‘success’, and foregrounded as the pre-eminent goal often shapes what institutions are incentivised to prioritise and what policies are designed to deliver. The same logic applies to public spending: what presents as scarcity in one area is often a reflection of priorities set elsewhere rather than an absolute limit.

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Assessment: *First Pass Assessment Report* (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, 2024), <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/climate-change/publications/ncra-first-pass-risk-assessment>.

<sup>29</sup> Ben Kellard, *Re-Imagining a New Economy That Works for All People and the Planet*, Working Paper no. 44 (Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, 2025), <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/aetw/wp44/>.

<sup>30</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Jolee Wakefield, *The Economy We Could Have: The Economy of Today, the Divides It Creates, and the Alternatives*.

<sup>31</sup> Trebeck, Smith, and Frieling, forthcoming.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Chrysopolou et al., *Failure Demand: Counting the True Costs of an Unjust and Unsustainable Economic System* (Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 2021), [https://weall.org/wp-content/uploads/FailureDemand\\_FinalReport\\_September2021.pdf](https://weall.org/wp-content/uploads/FailureDemand_FinalReport_September2021.pdf).

By recording the costs of harm and dysfunction as economic growth, GDP leaves the conditions producing them largely unmeasured and unaddressed. An over-reliance on GDP as a measure of national success does not simply leave these harms unmeasured; over time it can actively entrench them. Counting only what carries a monetary price, GDP cannot easily recognise, let alone celebrate, the things that let a society flourish, from well-functioning communities to healthy ecosystems, unless they come with a fiscal price tag. The result is a system that counts as progress the spending involved in responding to problems rather than creating the conditions for people and communities to thrive.<sup>33</sup>

Instead, an economy designed to deliver long-term public wellbeing for its people would make different choices earlier: investing in conditions that prevent harm from arising rather than funding the clean-up once it has.<sup>34</sup> It would measure what it is actually trying to achieve, not simply what it is spending. And it would hold institutions accountable for results across time, not just outputs within a single budget cycle. Australia does not yet do this consistently. Part of the reason why is because the cause-and-effect relationships involved in measuring longer-term outcomes are often perceived as too difficult to robustly measure. The result of continuing to defer this, however, is that avoidable costs accumulate.<sup>35</sup>

The Productivity Commission's 2020 Mental Health Inquiry report estimated the cost to the Australian economy of mental illness and suicide at up to about \$70 billion per year in direct economic costs, encompassing lost productivity, healthcare, housing and justice service.<sup>36</sup> Much of that cost arrives only after conditions have deteriorated to crisis point. Investment in early intervention, by contrast, consistently generates strong long-term returns. For example, the Commission's report estimates the recommended reforms would deliver up to \$18 billion in benefits per year, mainly from improvements to people's quality of life, plus a further \$1.3 billion a year from increased economic participation and productivity. These benefits would require up to A\$4.2 billion of expenditure per year. The imbalance between what Australia spends responding to downstream harm and what it invests in preventing it reflects a broader governance problem: institutional systems remain structurally better equipped to reward visible short-term outputs than long-term public value.

Redesigning the economy's rules and incentives is about more effective institutional design, where markets enable the creation of genuine value rather than the management of avoidable damage.<sup>37</sup> Where the rules are well designed, individuals have real choices, communities can sustain themselves and the costs of dysfunction stop accumulating quietly on the public balance sheet. Upstream investment reduces the long-run demand on government, not by withdrawing from public responsibility but by discharging it earlier, before problems compound and the costs land on the budget.

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<sup>33</sup> Herman Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development* (Beacon Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Jolee Wakefield, *The Economy We Could Have: The Economy of Today, the Divides It Creates, and the Alternatives*.

<sup>35</sup> Diane Bowles et al., *Avoidable Costs: Better Outcomes and Better Value for Public Money* (Centre for Policy Development, 2025), <https://cpd.org.au/work/avoidable-costs/>.

<sup>36</sup> Productivity Commission, *Productivity Commission Inquiry Report: Mental Health*, no. 95 (Canberra, 2020), <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/mental-health/report/>.

<sup>37</sup> Anna Chrysopolou et al., *Failure Demand: Counting the True Costs of an Unjust and Unsustainable Economic System*.

## 2.2 The relationship between the economy and long-term governance

Across Australia's civil society and policy landscape, questions about the purpose and design of the economy are commanding growing attention. The wellbeing economy is a prominent framework through which that interest is being channelled and organised.

### A shared vocabulary for the wellbeing agenda

"Wellbeing" now anchors a family of related terms that are often used interchangeably, and this slippage carries a cost. Calling a set of indicators a "framework", or treating a single reform as a "wellbeing economy", obscures what has actually changed in how decisions are made and how far upstream a reform reaches. The definitions below, adapted from Trebeck and Smith, set the usage applied throughout this report.<sup>38</sup>

**Wellbeing:** quality of life across all its dimensions, for all people, now and into the future, pursued within planetary boundaries.

**Wellbeing economy:** an economy designed so that its rules, norms and incentives deliver quality of life for people and planet by default, rather than as damage to be repaired after the fact.

**Wellbeing approach:** a holistic, preventative response to a specific challenge, using tools such as a wellbeing vision, dashboards or budgeting. It can apply to a single issue or across government, and does not by itself amount to economic-system change.

**Wellbeing government:** a government that deliberately adopts a wellbeing approach, acting upstream to prevent problems and tracking a broad suite of metrics on how different groups, places and ecosystems are faring. It is a step towards a wellbeing economy, not a substitute for one.

**Wellbeing framework:** a decision-making guide. It sets the goals or domains that must be weighed in decisions, and may specify ways of working or decision tools. Some embed measures; others simply direct what decision-makers must consider.

**Wellbeing dashboard:** a suite of metrics showing progress across domains. It is often called a "framework", a slippage this report avoids.

**Wellbeing budget:** the use of public spending and fiscal incentives to drive wellbeing outcomes and reduce inequalities in who attains them.

**Long-term and intergenerational thinking:** decisions and analysis that account for the needs of future generations, consistent with the intergenerational fairness principle set out earlier in this chapter.

Two distinctions matter most for this report. First, a dashboard measures progress; a framework governs decisions. Second, a wellbeing approach becomes a wellbeing economy initiative only where it acts on the structure of the economy, not its effects.

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<sup>38</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Warwick Smith, *The Wellbeing Economy In Brief: Understanding the Growing Agenda and Its Implications*.

This chapter's core argument rests on the proposition that how an economy is designed shapes a society's capacity to govern well over time. This includes questions of how value is defined, how trade-offs are made and how policy is directed.

One way of grounding this proposition is to ask what people actually want from the economy and from government, independent of how those demands are typically measured. Research recently led by Australia reMADE found that beneath the specific policy issues people raised, three underlying asks recurred repeatedly: the need to connect with others and place, the need to care and be cared for and the desire to contribute to both locally and nationally.<sup>39</sup> These needs do not divide neatly along a continuum of time.

The conditions that would allow Australians to connect, care and contribute now are largely the same conditions that would sustain a society capable of doing so for future generations. This suggests that long-term governance and improving people's lives in the present are not competing claims but two expressions of the same underlying ask.

The difficulty, of course, is that connection, care and contribution resist the kind of measurement that has traditionally made infrastructure spending politically legible.<sup>40</sup> A road's value can be expressed in a budget line. The time, capacity and social infrastructure that allow people to actually use that road to visit family or attend a community meeting cannot be as easily costed, and is correspondingly easier for governments to overlook.

Globally, the wellbeing economy has emerged as a leading organising framework within the broader economic systems change movement,<sup>41</sup> providing common language across a diverse range of approaches and concepts.<sup>42</sup> In a growing number of jurisdictions, that movement has translated into concrete governance mechanisms, including wellbeing budgets and whole-of-government frameworks, designed to align economic governance with long-term social and environmental outcomes.

In Australia, momentum is growing, but the field remains comparatively fragmented: the connections between these concepts and their implications for economic governance have not yet been drawn with the clarity required for them to become embedded in how the economy is governed. A range of Australian civil society organisations are active in this space,<sup>43</sup> each working from a different entry point on the purpose and design of the economy.

A related gap concerns the need for clarity surrounding the relationship between wellbeing economy advocacy and the broader movement for long-term governance in Australia. Wellbeing economy advocates are primarily focused on the purpose and design of the

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<sup>39</sup> Millie Rooney and Lily Spencer, *Reclaiming Our Purpose: It's Time to Talk about the Public Good* (Australia ReMADE, 2022), <https://www.australiaremade.org/public-good>.

<sup>40</sup> Millie Rooney and Lily Spencer, "Pieces of the Same Solution: Reimagining the Public Good," *AQ: Australian Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2022): 3–11.

<sup>41</sup> While the wellbeing economy framework has gained international prominence, it is not the only framework guiding the broader movement for economic systems change.

<sup>42</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Warwick Smith, *The Wellbeing Economy In Brief: Understanding the Growing Agenda and Its Implications*.

<sup>43</sup> Some of the organisations active in this space include Think Forward, the New Economy network Australia (NENA), The Next Economy and the Australian National Development Index (ANDI). This is by no means an exhaustive list and increasingly there is activity towards reshaping the purpose and design of the economy happening across the political spectrum.

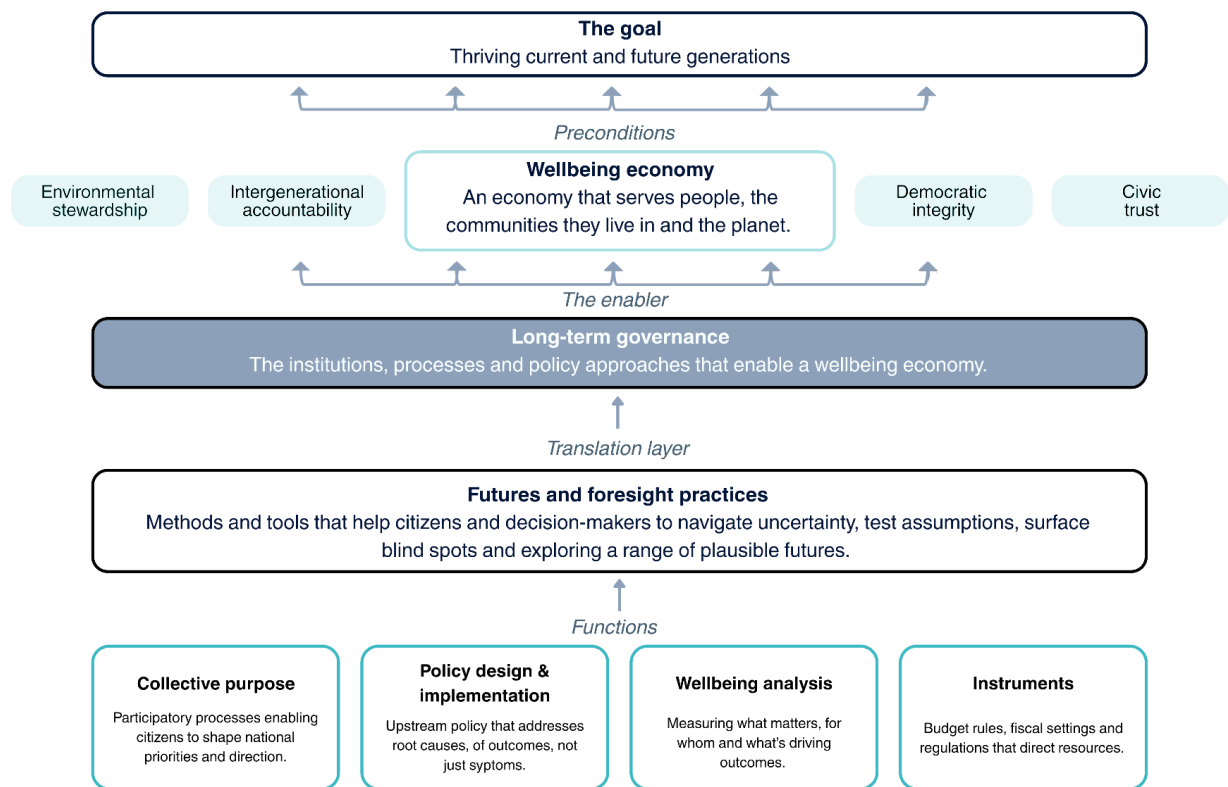
economy, asking what kinds of rules, norms and incentives are needed to deliver long-term social and environmental outcomes.<sup>44</sup> A distinct but increasingly proximate body of work focuses on how political and governance institutions can overcome structural incentives driving short-termism in public decision-making.<sup>45</sup>

Government interest in measuring progress beyond GDP is itself long-standing in Australia: the Treasury Wellbeing Framework developed in 2004 and the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Measures of Australia’s Progress were early efforts to broaden how national progress is understood.<sup>46</sup>

These two streams share a common underlying concern with governing well over time, but the relationship between them has not yet been clearly articulated. As they converge in practice, that gap is contributing to the fragmentation this chapter documents, creating a barrier to effective policy uptake for both. Figure 4 below aims to address the conceptual fragmentation this chapter diagnoses.

**Figure 4 - The relationship between wellbeing economy and long-term governance in Australia**

**Note:** An economic system that services people, society and the planet is a critical precondition for the movement's ultimate goal, but as the grey boxes in Figure 4 show, it is of course insufficient on its own. Figure 4 is intended to clarify one highly specific relationship within the broader ecosystem, illustrating how a wellbeing economy and long-term governance relate in practice.



<sup>44</sup> “What Is a Wellbeing Economy?,” Wellbeing Economy Alliance Australia, <https://weall.org/what-is-wellbeing-economy/>.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor Dee Hawkins et al., *Future Generations Policy, Governance and Leadership: Ending “Policrastination”* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026).

<sup>46</sup> *Policy Advice and Treasury’s Wellbeing Framework* (Treasury, 2004), <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/economic-roundup-winter-2004/policy-advice-and-treasurys-wellbeing-framework>.



Figure 4 situates the wellbeing economy within the sequence of long-term governance. It does so through four functions:

1. Establishing what kind of country people want to live in and leave to their children and grandchildren;
2. Measuring how far the present is from that vision;
3. Designing upstream policies that address the causes of that gap; and
4. Deploying the instruments, including budget rules, fiscal settings and regulatory settings, that direct resources accordingly.

Together, these four functions describe the governance sequence through which long-term wellbeing goals are translated into fiscal and policy reality.<sup>47</sup>

Long-term governance creates the institutional conditions in which a wellbeing economy can emerge and be sustained over time.<sup>48</sup> Futures and foresight practices can help operationalise and embed the functions of long-term governance described above. They provide the translation layer between long-term analysis and the near-term decisions that policymakers actually face.<sup>49</sup> In this way, futures and foresight practices help decision-makers to navigate uncertainty rather than attempting to predict their way through it.<sup>50</sup>

In Australia, the National Security College (NSC) Futures Hub at ANU is one example of how futures and foresight practices can be embedded to support these functions of long-term governance. The Hub plays an independent role in supporting public departments, bodies and teams by equipping them with tools for testing assumptions, surfacing blind spots and anticipating a range of plausible futures. Further detail about the Hub and its mandate is set out in Chapter 3. Overseas, Singapore's Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF) is another example. The CSF represents a more institutionalised model, embedded at the heart of Singapore's governance system supporting the Singaporean Government's capacity to anticipate emerging challenges and integrate long-term strategic foresight into policy planning and decision-making.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Warwick Smith, *The Wellbeing Economy in Brief #7: Getting the Component Parts in Order* (Centre for Policy Development, 2024), <https://cpd.org.au/work/the-wellbeing-economy-in-brief-7-getting-the-component-parts-in-order/>; Katherine Trebeck and Julie Boulton, *Heading Upstream to Tackle the Economic Root Causes* (The Next Economy, 2025), <https://nexteconomy.com.au/work/heading-upstream-towards-a-wellbeing-economy/>.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Boston, *Governing for the Future: Designing Democratic Institutions for a Better Tomorrow*, vol. 25 (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1108/S2053-7697201725>.

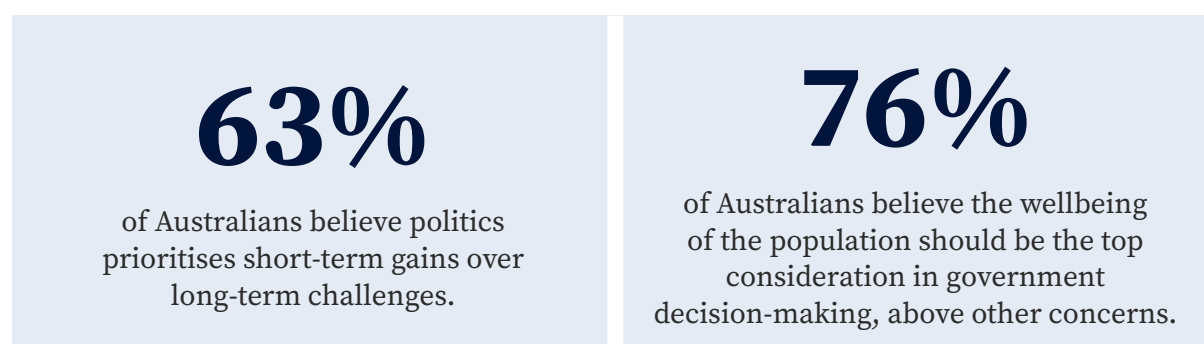
<sup>49</sup> Will Hartigan and Arthur Horobin, *Policy Fit for the Future: The Australian Government Futures Primer* (National Security College Futures Hub ANU, n.d.), [https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/Australian%20Government%20Futures%20Primer\\_NSC-compressed\\_1.pdf](https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/Australian%20Government%20Futures%20Primer_NSC-compressed_1.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Lachlan Wilson et al., *Navigating Uncertainty: The Future of Futures Analysis in the Australian Public Service* (National Security College Futures Hub ANU, 2020), <https://nsc.anu.edu.au/content-centre/research/navigating-uncertainty-future-futures-analysis-australian-public-service>.

<sup>51</sup> Lachlan Wilson et al., *Navigating Uncertainty: The Future of Futures Analysis in the Australian Public Service*.

## 2.3 Building legitimacy and institutional capacity for systems change

Despite growing interest in economic systems change,<sup>52</sup> policy traction towards a wellbeing economy remains relatively nascent in Australia. While pockets of policy experimentation and institutional engagement are emerging, the concept has not yet achieved the depth of political integration, public understanding or institutional coordination visible in other international contexts. As a result, wellbeing economy advocacy and awareness in Australia remains fragmented, unevenly developed and vulnerable to shifts in political attention and priority.



**Source:** *Purpose of Government Pulse 2025: Australian attitudes towards government and democracy*, Centre for Policy Development.

### Policy traction for a wellbeing economy

At the federal level, the Intergenerational Report has been produced roughly every five years since 2002, representing an early attempt to broaden economic thinking beyond short-term fiscal cycles toward longer-term forecasts of sustainability and demographic change.<sup>53</sup> More recently in 2023, the Albanese Labor government announced *Measuring What Matters*,<sup>54</sup> the country's most recent national Wellbeing Framework, building on earlier Commonwealth efforts to measure progress beyond GDP and in December 2025 the Productivity Commission released its final report for the inquiry *Delivering Quality Care More Efficiently*, identifying the establishment of a national framework to support government investment in prevention and early intervention as a key reform area.<sup>55</sup> In 2026, Liberal-National Coalition Leader, Angus Taylor, announced a proposal in his Budget Address In Reply to introduce a Future Generations Fund to manage unexpected resource wealth and pay down national debt should they get elected.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Curtis Moore and Mara Hammerle, *Purpose of Government Pulse: Australian Attitudes Towards Government and Democracy* (Centre for Policy Development, 2025), <https://cpd.org.au/work/2025-purpose-of-government-pulse/>.

<sup>53</sup> 2023 *Intergenerational Report*, Intergenerational Report (Treasury, 2023), <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/2023-intergenerational-report>.

<sup>54</sup> Australian Government, "Measuring What Matters Statement," Treasury, 2023, <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/p2023-mwm>.

<sup>55</sup> *Delivering Quality Care More Efficiently: Inquiry Report*, no. 112 (Australian Productivity Commission, 2025), <https://assets.pc.gov.au/2025-12/quality-care.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Angus Taylor, "Budget Address In Reply," May 14, 2026, <https://www.liberal.org.au/2026/05/14/budget-address-in-reply>.

At the state-level, the ACT government has embedded wellbeing frameworks across its budget process,<sup>57</sup> NSW has launched a Performance and Wellbeing Framework,<sup>58</sup> South Australia has moved toward a wellbeing architecture in its economic statement,<sup>59</sup> VicHealth has been a sustained state-level champion of an alternate model for more than a decade<sup>60</sup> and Tasmania's Liberal government committed to developing its first Wellbeing Framework in 2022, introduced subsequently in 2025 as a whole-of-government and community approach to improving the quality of life of Tasmanians.<sup>61</sup>

These frameworks do not represent the full extent of activity moving Australia towards a wellbeing economy in Australia. Across jurisdictions, elements of the movement can also be seen in a range of more targeted policy initiatives, from circular economy strategies and renewable energy transitions to social procurement, support for First Nations economic participation and efforts to reduce insecure work. While these developments are often pursued under different policy banners, they reflect many of the same underlying objectives. Their challenge is less a lack of activity than a lack of connection to a coherent and enduring institutional architecture. That gap reflects limited engagement with and from decision-makers more than any shortage of expertise across academia and civil society, where the conceptual and practical groundwork is comparatively well developed.

Internationally, by contrast, efforts in some jurisdictions to build a wellbeing economy have reached a level of institutional maturity that outpaces traction seen in Australia. For example, in a previous administration Scotland had a dedicated Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy and was also a founding member of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WeGo) group.<sup>62</sup> Iceland hosts the annual Wellbeing Economy forum.<sup>63</sup> Intergovernmental bodies like the WHO have developed a substantial body of work around wellbeing economy approaches,<sup>64</sup> the OECD has developed research on economic narratives beyond growth,<sup>65</sup> and the multistakeholder network, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll), operates globally with active government engagement across multiple jurisdictions.

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<sup>57</sup> ACT Government, "ACT Wellbeing Framework," ACT Wellbeing, Canberra, <https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing>.

<sup>58</sup> NSW Government, "NSC Performance and Wellbeing Framework," <https://www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/public-sector/financial-information-for-public-entities/centre-for-economic-evidence/nsw-government-investment-framework/performance-wellbeing-framework>.

<sup>59</sup> *South Australian Economic Statement* (Government of South Australia, n.d.), [https://www.dpc.sa.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/1231729/SA-economic-statement.pdf](https://www.dpc.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1231729/SA-economic-statement.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Alexandra Jones and Chelsea Hunnisett, *A Toolkit to Progress Wellbeing Economy Approaches in Australia* (VicHealth, 2023), <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/research-impact/research-at-vichealth/research-highlights/how-to-create-a-wellbeing-economy?keywords=creating%20a%20wellbeing%20economy>.

<sup>61</sup> Tasmanian Government, *The Wellbeing Framework* (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2025), [https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0028/471880/The-Wellbeing-Framework\\_November-2025.pdf](https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0028/471880/The-Wellbeing-Framework_November-2025.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> "Wellbeing Economy Governments (WeGo)," Scottish Government, <https://www.gov.scot/groups/wellbeing-economy-governments-wego/>; Neil Gray, "Managing Scotland's Finances and Working with Business to Drive Our Wellbeing Economy: Ministerial Statement," April 19, 2023, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-debate-managing-scotlands-finances-working-business-drive-wellbeing-economy-ministerial-statement/>.

<sup>63</sup> "Wellbeing Economy Forum 2025," News, 2025, <https://reykjavik.is/en/news/2025/wellbeing-economy-forum-2025>.

<sup>64</sup> "WHO European Well-Being Economy Initiative," <https://www.who.int/europe/initiatives/who-european-well-being-economy-initiative>.

<sup>65</sup> *Beyond Growth: Towards a New Economic Approach, New Approaches to Economic Challenges* (OECD Publishing, 2020), [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/09/beyond-growth\\_b367d081/33a25ba3-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/09/beyond-growth_b367d081/33a25ba3-en.pdf).

## **Case Study: The ACT's Budget Process: embedding community voice into fiscal decision-making**

The ACT Government's wellbeing budgeting process, now in its sixth year, is one of Australia's most sustained examples of all four long-term governance functions operating together in practice. The ACT Wellbeing Framework was developed through an extensive process of community consultation in 2019-20, drawing on input from nearly 3000 Canberrans about what they identified as most important to their quality of life.<sup>66</sup> That process shaped 12 domains and 56 indicators used to measure quality of life through the Framework, making the collective purpose function explicit from the outset.<sup>67</sup> That community-determined vision then drives the wellbeing analysis function directly. In partnership with ANU, the ACT has since worked to develop tools and an evidence base placing wellbeing outcomes at the centre of policymaking, focusing in particular on entrenched and difficult-to-shift problems in health and education.<sup>68</sup>

Policy design follows from that analysis through a dedicated Wellbeing Impact Assessment (WIA), a tool which supports the ACT government to plan and make decisions based on a fuller understanding of the impacts of proposals on wellbeing, with WIA's required for all Cabinet Submissions and Budget proposals.<sup>69</sup> The instrument function is operationalised through the annual budget process, with a structured public consultation process through which residents and organisations can shape where resources go, with budget submissions encouraged to focus on how the government can best support community wellbeing. A Listening report documents how that community input was considered in shaping budget priorities.<sup>70</sup>

The ACT model does not resolve all the tensions between wellbeing ambition and short-term fiscal pressures. However, it demonstrates that the four functions Figure 4 describes can work effectively together, and that sustaining them over several years builds durable institutional memory.

## **Community-level understanding of a wellbeing economy**

Community-facing legitimacy remains a key challenge for the institutional uptake of wellbeing economy ideas in Australia. While values alignment is strong and national frameworks like Measuring What Matters are emerging, the deliberate investment in connecting ordinary Australians' lived experience to the wellbeing economy proposition is

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<sup>66</sup> ACT Wellbeing Framework (ACT Government, 2020), <https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing/wellbeing-framework>.

<sup>67</sup> Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, ACT Wellbeing Framework Consultation Report (ACT Government, 2020), [https://www.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/1499187/ACT-Wellbeing-Framework-Consultation-Report.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/1499187/ACT-Wellbeing-Framework-Consultation-Report.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Tegan Cruwys and Kate Reynolds, ACT Wellbeing Framework Project: Identifying Life Course Drivers of Wellbeing to Support the Development and Success of the ACT's Wellbeing Framework (Australian National University, 2020), [https://medicine-psychology.anu.edu.au/sites/prod.medicine-psychology.sca-lws06.anu.edu.au/files/AWF%20ANU%20one%20pager%20v4.0\\_0.pdf](https://medicine-psychology.anu.edu.au/sites/prod.medicine-psychology.sca-lws06.anu.edu.au/files/AWF%20ANU%20one%20pager%20v4.0_0.pdf).

<sup>69</sup> "Embedding Wellbeing," ACT Wellbeing Framework, ACT Government, <https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing/wellbeing-framework/embedding-wellbeing>.

<sup>70</sup> "ACT 2026-27 Budget Consultation Process," Your Say Conversations, ACT Government, 2026, <https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/act-2026-27-budget-consultation-process>.

still nascent.<sup>71</sup> As Katherine Trebeck, co-founder of WEAll Global, reflected in a 2023 address to leaders across the international wellbeing economy movement, the challenge is no longer a lack of critique or alternatives.<sup>72</sup> Rather, it is whether those ideas are reaching beyond those already engaged in the conversation:

*“Many of the communities who recognise that they have been failed by the prevailing way of doing things are not turning to the ideas in our movement’s reports, our toolkits and laid out in our websites and speeches. If we are serious about being effective, we need to be serious about the need to expand the choir beyond the movement itself.”*

This observation points to a challenge of strategy and engagement rather than policy design. While the wellbeing economy field has generated increasingly sophisticated frameworks, indicators and ideas for institutional reforms, their uptake and durability ultimately depends on whether they can connect with the concerns, aspirations and lived experiences of people beyond the movement itself. and on the level of genuine interest, will and engagement within the institutions that would need to act on them. Building that connection requires more than communicating existing ideas more effectively; it requires engaging a broader range of communities in shaping what economic success means and how it should be pursued.

This does not reflect an absence of awareness or understanding of the importance within the wellbeing economy field itself.<sup>73</sup> Internationally and in Australia, many proponents have consistently argued that durable economic transition requires broad civic participation, public imagination and community ownership.<sup>74</sup> It also requires recognition that many of the questions and principles now expressed through wellbeing economy frameworks have long been embedded in First Nations knowledge systems, governance approaches and cultural practices. First Nations leaders across the continent have embodied and practised intergenerational thinking and stewardship for millenia, demonstrating what it means to steward land, community and decision-making across deep time. In Australia, however, that recognition has not yet translated into sustained community-facing infrastructure at scale.

As this chapter has highlighted, one challenge to this translation is a deeper deficit in public and institutional understanding of what a wellbeing economy is, what it seeks to achieve and how it relates to the broader task of overcoming short-termism in Australia’s policymaking. This deficit is further complicated by an impression this research found of competing civil society “agendas”, which can detract from shared outcomes, reinforce fragmentation across adjacent efforts and make it harder to build a coherent public narrative around long-term reform. Within government, including the Australian Public Service, the wellbeing economy framing has often gone unused less out of indifference than for technocratic and political

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<sup>71</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Julie Boulton, *Heading Upstream to Tackle the Economic Root Causes*; Curtis Moore and Mara Hammerle, *Purpose of Government Pulse: Australian Attitudes Towards Government and Democracy*.

<sup>72</sup> Katherine Trebeck, “Address to P4NE September 2023 Gathering,” 2023, <https://katherinetrebeck.com/p4netalk/>.

<sup>73</sup> Julia Rogers and Katherine Trebeck, “Measures for a New Economy: Shifting Power via Public Participation,” in *Towards Sustainable Well-Being* (University of Toronto Press, 2022), <https://utppublishing.com/doi/book/10.3138/9781487525415>.

<sup>74</sup> Katherine Trebeck and Warwick Smith, *The Wellbeing Economy in Brief #6: The Wellbeing Economy in Practice* (Centre for Policy Development, 2024), <https://cpd.org.au/work/the-wellbeing-economy-in-brief-6-the-wellbeing-economy-in-practice/>.



reasons: there is uncertainty about what a wellbeing economy is and how it would be operationalised, and the absence of clear, decision-ready frameworks makes the concept difficult to act on within existing processes.

This chapter has sought to bring greater clarity to that impression. It has argued that the different strands of work on a wellbeing economy and long-term governance are best understood as complementary efforts directed toward a shared outcome.

Building a wellbeing economy as a precondition for that shared outcome requires broader civic engagement in shaping the futures Australian families and communities want. That work is precisely where the long-term governance field can make its most valuable contribution, and it is the work this report turns to next in Chapter 3.

# Chapter 3

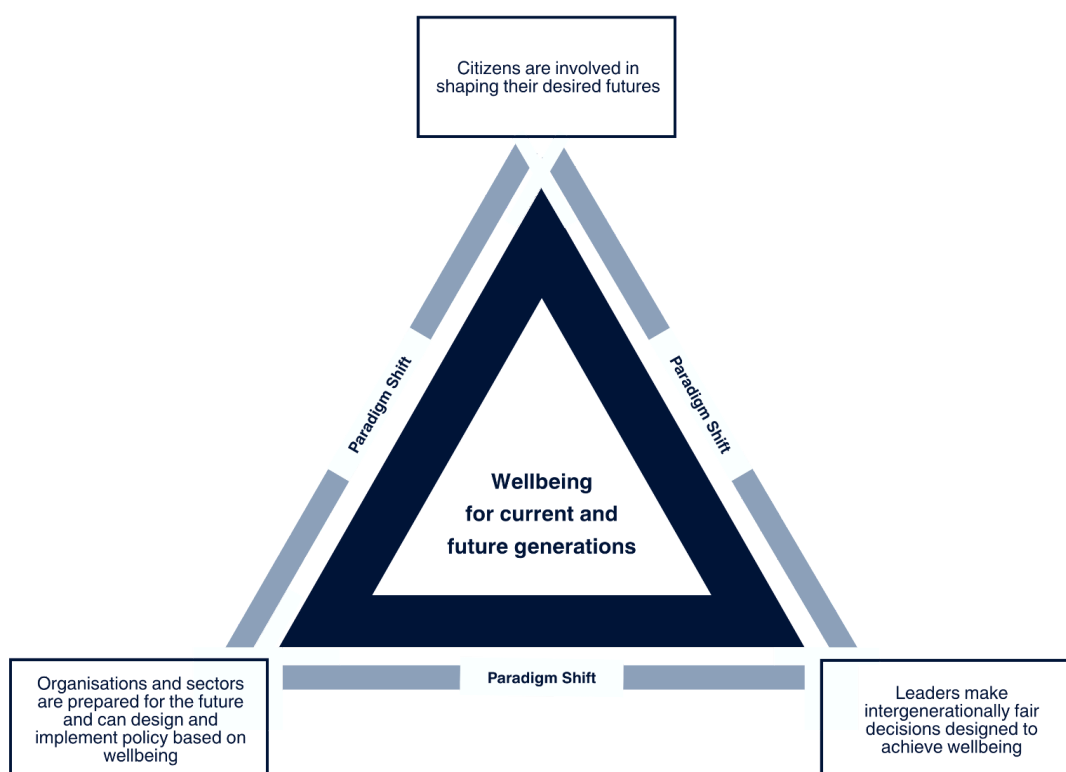
## Taking Stock: Australia's Long-Term Governance Infrastructure

Australia has built more infrastructure towards long-term governance than most accounts of the country's short-termism problem acknowledge. Fiscal frameworks designed to track the long-run costs of current decisions, parliamentary mechanisms designed to give future generations a voice in current decision-making and a civil society ecosystem that has developed considerable sophistication in coalition-building, place-based stewardship, and reform advocacy are evidence of this.

This chapter maps what Australia has built at the national level across political leadership, organisational and sectoral preparedness and citizen involvement. It covers fiscal and economic mechanisms, parliamentary and legislative developments and state, territory and civil society infrastructure. Across these developments, it builds a picture of how Australia's long-term governance infrastructure is distributed and where ambition in this space often outstrips delivery.

**Figure 5: An organising framework: The Components of a wellbeing focused and intergenerationally fair system**

*Systems show signs of long term change which leads to paradigm shift on a larger scale*



Long-term governance is defined in varied ways across disciplines, institutions and reform agendas. Some approaches focus primarily on institutional mechanisms designed to extend political temporal horizons, such as independent commissioners, parliamentary oversight structures or fiscal rules. Others emphasise anticipatory governance capacity within the bureaucracy, democratic participation in long-term decision-making or economic frameworks oriented toward intergenerational wellbeing.

What these approaches share is an underlying recognition that governing well for the long-term requires more than isolated policy reform. It necessitates systems capable of sustaining long-horizon thinking across political, institutional and civic life simultaneously.

This chapter draws on the School of International Futures' Foresight Governance Prism as an organising framework because it captures that interdependence with particular precision.<sup>75</sup> The Foresight Governance Prism sets out the components of a wellbeing-focused and intergenerationally fair governance system.

Long-term governance is the capacity that builds and sustains those components over time, and this report uses the Prism to assess whether Australia has developed that capacity across all three dimensions. The Prism holds that an intergenerationally fair governance system requires simultaneous and interdependent progress across three dimensions:

- citizens actively shaping their desired futures;
- leaders making intergenerationally fair decisions; and
- organisations and sectors with the preparedness to design and implement long-term policy.<sup>76</sup>

No single dimension is sufficient on its own. Progress in one without equivalent investment in the others produces an architecture that is formally capable and structurally fragile. The Prism is used in this chapter not as a definitive model, but as a practical framework for interpreting the distribution of infrastructure across the Australian ecosystem and for analysing the conditions that appear most developed, most fragile and most consequential for protecting the durability of reform.

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew Jackson et al., *Working for the Wellbeing of Current and Future Generations: Learning from in-Country Innovations and Building a Global Community for Change*, ed. Lewis Lloyd et al. (School of International Futures, 2024).

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Jackson et al., *Working for the Wellbeing of Current and Future Generations: Learning from in-Country Innovations and Building a Global Community for Change*.

## Case Study: The Prism in practice: 22-years of the Human Rights Act in the ACT

The ACT's Human Rights Act 2004 offers one of the clearest domestic examples of what the Prism looks like when all three dimensions develop in parallel over time.<sup>77</sup> Enacted as the first human rights legislation in Australia, it has been in operation for over two decades. In that time, it has moved from a formal legislative commitment to an embedded practice of governance across the territory, shaping how laws are drafted, how policy is developed and how decisions are made on an everyday basis. As the ACT Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner described it in this research, the human rights framework has become “part of the landscape” and a “habit” that is well embedded into legislative scrutiny processes such that rights-compliant decision-making is now a baseline expectation of government, no longer an aspiration.<sup>78</sup>

That durability was not produced by legislation alone. It required all three Prism dimensions to develop together, in tandem, over time. Politically, two decades of stable government meant the Act was not subject to cycles of repeal and contestation that have undermined comparable frameworks and progress elsewhere, including Queensland, where a human rights act enacted fifteen years later has had a considerably more contested political reception.<sup>79</sup> Organisationally, the compliance architecture surrounding the Act restructured the advice and decision-making culture of the ACT legislature from the inside. Requirements on the government to justify proposed actions that may limit rights changed what a policy brief is expected to demonstrate and what questions get asked as laws are debated and decisions are made. And at the citizen level, sustained experience with a rights framework has generated public expectations of rights-compliant governance, creating political accountability for deviation that no legislation alone can manufacture.

Administration of the Act in the ACT continues to evolve with time, including the addition of new rights, such as the right to a healthy environment in August 2024,<sup>80</sup> and the right to housing that will come into effect from 1 January 2027,<sup>81</sup> as well as new provisions to enable complaints to be made about alleged breaches of human rights.<sup>82</sup>

The contrast with jurisdictions where rights legislation exists without the corresponding organisational and civic investment is instructive. Legislation introduced ahead of cultural and institutional preparation tends to be read as a compliance burden rather than a governance transformation and is far more vulnerable to political reversal. The ACT's experience points to a conclusion that runs through this report consistently: what makes a governance reform durable isn't the strength of the legislative protections it offers, but the depth of the conditions built around it.

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<sup>77</sup> ACT Human Rights Commission Annual Report 2024-25 (ACT Human Rights Commission, 2026), <https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/about-us/annual-reports>.

<sup>78</sup> Jodie Griffiths-Cook, “Interview on Australia's Long-Term Governance Ecosystem,” (Melbourne, Victoria), Foundations for Tomorrow, April 23, 2026, Video Interview.

<sup>79</sup> Susan Harris Rimmer, *Placing People at the Heart of Policy: First Independent Review of the Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) (Brisbane, 2024), <https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/items/f9697f4d-14e3-4b67-9394-cf7a3de1c82c>.

<sup>80</sup> Soo Kyung Jung, “The Right to a Healthy Environment and Its Realisation in Australia,” *Australian Human Rights Institute*, 2023, <https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/students/blogs/right-healthy-environment-realisation-australia>.

<sup>81</sup> *Right to Housing*, Factsheet (ACT Government, 2026), [https://www.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/3035337/Factsheet-on-the-Right-to-Housing-2026-final-version.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/3035337/Factsheet-on-the-Right-to-Housing-2026-final-version.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> “Making Human Rights Complaints to ACAT,” ACT Government, 2026, <https://www.act.gov.au/law-and-justice/law-reforms/making-human-rights-complaints-to-acat>.

### 3.1 Governing for the future: political mechanisms and mandates

**The Intergenerational Report (IGR) is a legislated commitment to think forty years ahead about the federal budget. What it says about how Australia has understood long-term governance is as instructive as what it shows about the future.**

Published every five years under the Charter of Budget Honesty Act 1998, the IGR projects the fiscal and demographic implications of current policy settings across a forty-year horizon.<sup>83</sup> Its analytical scope is deliberately narrow, focusing primarily on fiscal sustainability and population ageing. Environmental sustainability, intergenerational wealth distribution and the social indicators that shape whether current and future generations actually flourish in the long-term sit outside its frame. The report has mapped the same terrain across every iteration since 2002. It is a long-run fiscal forecast, carefully produced and genuinely useful for what it asks. The question it asks, however, is not the same as asking how Australia can govern better for future generations. In addition to simply projecting what future generations will inherit fiscally, Australia needs to invest actively in shaping that inheritance.

**Australia's sovereign wealth fund, established under John Howard and Peter Costello, is a clear proof of concept that intergenerational fiscal architecture can be designed, legislated and protected from short-term political pressure in Australia's political system.**

The conservative case for long-term governance, grounded in fiscal prudence, institutional integrity and the obligation to leave something better for future generations, is one the Liberal Party has made before. When the Future Fund was legislated in 2006, seeded with the proceeds derived from federal budget surpluses and the privatisation of Telstra, it provided for unfunded Commonwealth superannuation liabilities with a statutory mandate to invest for the long-term benefit of future generations of Australians.<sup>84</sup> Over almost two decades, the Fund has grown to a value of more than \$200 billion as at March 2026, and is now the Commonwealth's largest financial asset.<sup>85</sup> Successive governments from both sides of politics have built on and sustained its mandate, with the Labor government most recently announcing a new Investment Mandate designed to protect the fund as an enduring institution capable of investing for the long-term, while also strengthening the nation's balance sheet.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Australian Government, *2023 Intergenerational Report: Australia's Future to 2063* (Treasury, 2023), <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/2023-intergenerational-report>.

<sup>84</sup> Australia's Sovereign Wealth Fund, "Future Fund's New Investment Mandate," Media Releases, *Newsroom*, 2024, <https://www.futurefund.gov.au/news-room/20241211--Future-Funds-New-Investment-Mandate>.

<sup>85</sup> *Portfolio Update as at 31 March 2026*, News Update (Future Fund, 2026), <https://www.futurefund.gov.au/news-room/Portfolio-update-to-31-March-2026?page=0&itemsPerPage=10>.

<sup>86</sup> Jim Chalmers and Katy Gallagher, *Future Fund Continues Strong Performance under New Investment Mandate*, Media Releases, February 5, 2026, <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/media-releases/future-fund-continues-strong-performance-under-new>.

Three design features explain the Fund's durability. Its purpose is specific and bounded by statute, which gives it a clarity of mandate that broader reform agendas often struggle without. Investment decisions are insulated from ministerial direction, removing the instrument from the annual political cycle entirely. And its intergenerational rationale, leaving something better for future Australians, is legible across the political spectrum, making it difficult for any incoming government to dismantle it without political cost.

These features were not accidental. They reflect deliberate choices by champions within the Howard government who understood that long-term institutional design requires actively engineering protection against short-termism from the outset. The Fund has now survived intact through more than two decades and multiple changes of government. Its limitation is not in what it does but what it was designed to do.

It addresses a highly specific, quantifiable fiscal liability, not the diffuse social and environmental obligations that a fuller long-term governance framework would need to cover. Extending it in that direction would require new legislation, and, more importantly, the kind of political will that built it in the first place. The Coalition's 2026 Budget Address in Reply proposal for a Future Generations Fund,<sup>87</sup> quarantining windfall resource revenues within the existing Future Fund architecture, signals that the will to consider intergenerational obligations remains alive on the conservative side of politics.

The proposal is at an early stage, closer to a statement of intent than a fully developed institutional agenda, and has so far attracted limited cross-partisan engagement. That reflects the state of the field more than the merits of the proposal: the work of building a durable base of champions around it has yet to be done, on either side of the political divide.

**Long-term insights briefings require the Secretaries Board to commission public analysis of the long-term challenges shaping Australia's policy environment. Australia is among a small number of countries to have embedded this kind of anticipatory requirement across its public service at scale. What implementation has revealed is that there is a clear difference between mandating futures analysis and requiring decision-makers to act on it.**

Announced under the APS Reform Agenda in October 2022 and piloted in 2023, long-term insights briefings were given legislative force through the Public Service Amendment Act 2024, which established them as an enduring function of the APS, designed to strengthen policy development and longer term stewardship.<sup>88</sup> Their purpose is not to make recommendations or predictions, but to provide a base for future policy thinking, examining trends, risks and opportunities that may affect Australia in the medium and long-term, while building the anticipatory capability and institutional knowledge of the APS itself.<sup>89</sup> Since 2024, agencies with existing strategic capability have used long-term insights briefings as proper analytical investments, while others have produced documents that satisfy the

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<sup>87</sup> Angus Taylor, "Budget Address In Reply."

<sup>88</sup> Australian Public Service Commission, *Australian Public Service Reform: Annual Progress Report 2024* (2024), <https://www.apsc.gov.au/publication/australian-public-service-reform-annual-progress-report-2024>.

<sup>89</sup> "Long-Term Insights Briefings," Long-Term Insights Briefings, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/government/long-term-insights-briefings>.



formal obligation without shifting how decisions are made. This gap is built into how the system works. No mechanism currently connects long-term insights briefing findings to Cabinet submissions, budget decisions or ministerial priorities in the way that Treasury sign-off connects economic analysis to fiscal policy. Building that connection, and investing in the foresight capability within agencies that would make it meaningful, is the next institutional design challenge for this reform.

**Measuring What Matters establishes Australia's first national framework for tracking progress beyond economic growth, across health, security, sustainability, social cohesion and prosperity. The measurement infrastructure is in place. The accountability architecture that would require policy decisions to respond to what the measurements show has not yet been built.**

Released in 2023, it tracks fifty indicators across five broad themes and positions Australia within a substantial international cohort,<sup>90</sup> with over two-thirds of OECD countries now measuring progress beyond GDP.<sup>91</sup> Although the government presents Measuring What Matters as a framework, it currently functions as a dashboard of indicators rather than a decision-making framework of the sort operating in Wales or the ACT. A dashboard makes progress visible, but only a decision-making framework compels a response to what it shows, and conflating the two risks fuelling scepticism that wellbeing measures can shift policy at all.

Measuring What Matters nonetheless is a foundation for a different kind of fiscal reasoning and Australia's growing expertise in strategic foresight and futures capability could help accelerate the accountability architecture still needed to support it. The task now, in passing the baton from statistics practitioners to policy entrepreneurs, is to make the measures matter, connecting wellbeing analysis to economic and fiscal decision-making.

**The Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025 proposed to establish a positive duty on political leaders to consider long-term impacts, establish an independent Future Generations Commissioner and mandate a large-scale, structured public engagement process to shape a shared national direction for the country's future. Its introduction offered clear lessons about the authorising environment required for ambitious reforms like it to succeed.**

Introduced by Dr Sophie Scamps MP and co-sponsored by Bridget Archer MP in February 2025, the bill drew directly from the Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, proposing a requirement for decision-makers to consider long-term impacts and the establishment of an independent statutory Commissioner to protect the interests of future generations of Australians.<sup>92</sup> The bill's policy ideas received a widely positive response across Australia's civic and media landscape, deepening public awareness of the long-term

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<sup>90</sup> Australian Government, "Measuring What Matters Statement."

<sup>91</sup> "Event Summary | What's Next on Beyond GDP," Beyond Lab, March 2025, <https://www.thebeyondlab.org/article/whats-next-on-beyond-gdp-2>.

<sup>92</sup> Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025, House of Representatives 47th Parliament (2025), [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Bills\\_Legislation/Bills\\_Search\\_Results/Result?bId=r7315](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r7315).

governance movement and support for its agenda.<sup>93</sup> The bill's introduction also offered important lessons about the kind of authorising environment required for ambitious policy proposals to succeed in Australia.

In a country where politics is deeply tethered to short-term elections and budget cycles, policy ideas requiring leaders to take political risks and make difficult trade-offs depend on a high level of public support. This public mandate is now being established through Australia's National Conversation Development Lab, an ambitious civil society-led initiative that is designing a model for large-scale structured public engagement to build the future we want.<sup>94</sup>

**The Australian Parliamentary Group for Future Generations has created a sustained, cross-partisan forum for intergenerational collaboration inside parliament, growing to nearly thirty members across the political divide and two parliaments.**

Established in 2023 and co-chaired across party lines, the Group has convened parliamentarians alongside civil society partners, young people and First Nations voices across nine formal convenings and produced the political platform from which the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill emerged.<sup>95</sup> Its significance is anchored in the institutional form it gives to cross-partisan commitment on long-term policy issues.

An open, cross-partisan forum like this group provides continuity, visibility and engagement opportunities that individual advocacy relationships cannot. The group's sustained presence across two parliaments, including its re-establishment and doubled parliamentary membership following the 2025 federal election demonstrate this in practice. That said, the group's durability remains vulnerable to the sustained engagement and presence of its parliamentary members.

This vulnerability was evidenced with the departure of Bridget Archer MP from parliament following the 2025 election.<sup>96</sup> Her removal meant the loss of one of the movement's key conservative political champions and highlights the need to build a more distributed pipeline of cross-partisan leaders to insulate momentum from the short-term risks of electoral turnover.

**Across multiple Australian states and territories, governments are developing institutional mechanisms for long-term thinking, from future generations legislation and wellbeing frameworks to foresight capacity and preventative budgeting. These**

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<sup>93</sup> "Leaving Our Kids a Harder World: Dr Sophie Scamps Pushes Government to Consider Young People in Its Decisions," *Women's Agenda*, 2025, <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/leaving-our-kids-a-harder-world-dr-sophie-scamps-pushes-government-to-consider-young-people-in-its-decisions/>; David Crowe, "Australia Must Hit Back If Trump's Tariffs Go Ahead," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2025, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/australia-must-hit-back-if-trump-s-tariffs-go-ahead-20250211-p5lb6w.html>; Harry Sekulich, "Government Told to Consider Future Generations When Creating Laws," *The Daily Aus*, 2025, <https://www.thedailyaus.com.au/politics/government-future-generations>.

<sup>94</sup> Taylor Hawkins et al., *Building the Australia We Want: A National Conversation for Our Future* (Foundations for Tomorrow, 2026), <https://www.thenationalconvo.org/>.

<sup>95</sup> "The Australian Parliamentary Group for Future Generations," Foundations for Tomorrow, <https://www.foundationsfortomorrow.org/australian-parliamentary-group-for-future-generations>.

<sup>96</sup> Lucy MacDonald and Clancy Balen, *Tasmania's Northern Seats of Bass and Braddon Flip to Labor, as Liberals' Bridget Archer Ousted*, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-03/tasmania-north-flips-to-labor-bridget-archer-loses-seat/105247112>.

**developments are building a distributed base of sub-national momentum that is advancing independently of federal action.**

The ACT's wellbeing budgeting process, now in its sixth year, is the most developed example, requiring decision-makers to consider citizen input and community wellbeing in determining resource allocations.<sup>97</sup>

In Victoria, the Department of Treasury and Finance has embedded an Early Intervention Investment Framework into its annual budget process since 2021, requiring departments to quantify avoidable costs and long-term outcomes as a condition of funding proposals.<sup>98</sup> In New South Wales, the Department of Premier and Cabinet Office's strategic foresight team, *Shaping Futures*, has developed the NSW Trend Atlas.

Listed as a case study in the OECD's Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, the Atlas operates as a digital platform providing long-term scanning and trend analysis to support government decision-making across agencies navigating future operating environments.<sup>99</sup> In the Northern Territory, a public campaign is underway led by independent Justine Davis MP to introduce a Future Generations Community Members Bill which would establish a legal duty on the Northern Territory Government to consider the health and wellbeing of current and future generations in decision-making.<sup>100</sup>

These institutional developments carry particular strategic value in the Australian ecosystem. States and territories hold direct service delivery responsibility across health, education and housing, which are domains that most directly determine intergenerational outcomes. The embedment of institutional mandates at a state-level builds political precedent and operational proof of concept that can in turn strengthen the case for federal action.

## **3.2 Institutions and sectors built for the long-term**

**The addition of stewardship to the Public Service Act was a significant institutional achievement.<sup>101</sup> It gave legislative force and institutional legitimacy to the principle that public institutions carry obligations not only to present governments, but to the Australians who will inherit the consequences of today's decisions. The task remaining is translating that mandate from legislative principle into an embedded, system-wide practice across the public service itself.**

Across parts of the APS, stewardship has resonated strongly because it connects directly to a deeper sense of public purpose already embedded within public sector culture. Rather than

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<sup>97</sup> ACT Government, "ACT Wellbeing Framework."

<sup>98</sup> Diane Bowles et al., *Avoidable Costs: Better Outcomes and Better Value for Public Money*.

<sup>99</sup> "Case Study Library: NSW Trend Atlas," Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, OECD, 2022, <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/nsw-trend-atlas/>.

<sup>100</sup> "Future Generations Bill: Creating a New Law to Protect All of Our Futures," Justine for Johnston, Justine Davis, [https://www.justinedavis.com.au/future\\_generations\\_bill](https://www.justinedavis.com.au/future_generations_bill).

<sup>101</sup> Australian Public Service Commission, *Australian Public Service Reform: Annual Progress Report 2024*.

introducing an entirely new institutional ethic, the stewardship reform gave language, legitimacy and continuity to responsibilities many public servants already understood themselves to hold. As highlighted by the independent Thodey Review, which preceded the introduction of stewardship, the challenge is less about whether capability to enact stewardship exists and more about whether the institutional conditions exist to distribute and operationalise that capability consistently across everyday decision-making.<sup>102</sup>

Contributors to this research frequently highlighted a “missing middle” within institutional incentive structures, showing that while stewardship and long-term thinking often resonated strongly among senior leadership and operational staff, middle-management incentives remain heavily oriented toward immediate delivery, risk minimisation and short-term performance metrics. Electoral cycles, annual budget processes and the pressure for immediate ministerial responsiveness continue to create structural friction against the enactment of stewardship in practice.

Across the sector, departments have already begun to experiment with ways to overcome this design challenge. For example, rather than relying solely on centralised control or isolated foresight units, departments have turned to models of devolved accountability, shared mission-setting and distributed responsibility.

The APS stewardship guidance released following the amendment reflects this approach, translating stewardship from a legislative principle into a set of expected organisational behaviours and responsibilities across all levels of the public service, rather than concentrating them purely at senior levels.<sup>103</sup> It demonstrates how reform can be translated from an aspiration into a shared organisational culture across the system itself. Policy ideas become durable not simply by being legislated, but through the patient and committed work to embed them into the routines, incentives and processes through which institutions make decisions over time.

**Activating long-term governance in Australia doesn’t require beginning from scratch. Across several sectors and governance models, practices of stewardship, long-term preparedness and intergenerational responsibility are already deeply embedded in culture and decision-making.**

However, these capabilities are not evenly distributed across the ecosystem. Some domains, particularly those operating across inherently long planning horizons, have developed stronger traditions of anticipatory thinking, strategic continuity and institutional preparedness than others. The case studies below are included as evidence that these capabilities exist. What remains underdeveloped is the extent to which these traditions are recognised, connected and translated into a more coherent national governance approach. This is particularly true of First Nations governance traditions, which have practised forms of intergenerational stewardship, custodianship and collective responsibility for tens of thousands of years, long before these ideas emerged in contemporary policy discourse.

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<sup>102</sup> Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, *Our Public Service Our Future: Independent Review of the Australian Public Service* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019), <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/independent-review-australian-public-service>.

<sup>103</sup> “Stewardship Guidance,” Australian Public Service Commission, 2023, <https://www.apsc.gov.au/aps-values/scope-and-application-values/stewardship-guidance>.

## Case Study: Defence and national resilience

The 2023 Defence Strategic Review<sup>104</sup> and the 2024 National Defence Strategy<sup>105</sup> represent some of the clearest examples of long-term institutional planning within the Australian federal system. Defence operates across planning horizons that inherently transcend electoral cycles. Capability investment decisions span decades, while AUKUS submarine commitments, force posture redesign and strategic capability planning are all built around projected future operating environments. The Review's framing of a 'fundamental strategic adjustment' to Australia's response to the changing Indo-Pacific environment is explicitly anticipatory, oriented toward future risk rather than immediate crisis alone.<sup>106</sup>

Bringing national security into this conversation more comprehensively widens the agenda in two ways. It invites participation from constituencies who have not seen themselves in a debate framed around care and sustainability, broadening the coalition with a stake in governing well for the long term. And it raises the stakes of that governing: defence and resilience decisions shape sovereignty, prosperity, alliances and the safety of future generations over horizons few other policies reach, making visible just how consequential and wide-ranging Australia's long-term choices really are. Approached this way, national security is not a narrower or harder-edged version of the agenda but one of its fullest expressions, and a reason for far more of the country to claim a share in it.

The significance for long-term governance lies not simply in defence's long planning horizons, but in the institutional architecture built to sustain them: bipartisan continuity, dedicated strategic capability and protected long-range investment insulated from immediate political cycles. Climate policy demonstrates that collective risk framing alone is insufficient to produce these conditions.

The lesson from defence is therefore not only that other long-term policy domains can draw on the broad resonance of security and resilience framing, but also that the institutional continuity underpinning defence planning offers a model that could be more deliberately extended across other sectors of governance. The exchange runs both ways. National security is arguably where long-term thinking is already most developed in Australian governance, so part of the task is bringing the breadth of the wider agenda to it, and part is carrying its hard-won foresight, planning and institutional-memory capability back out to the sectors still building those muscles.

Doing so would help shift long-term thinking from an isolated capability within particular domains toward a more embedded feature of Australia's broader governance culture.

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<sup>104</sup> Australian Government, National Defence Strategic Review 2023 (Department of Defence, 2023), <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>.

<sup>105</sup> Australian Government, 2024 National Defence Strategy (Department of Defence, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program>.

<sup>106</sup> Australian Government, National Defence Strategic Review 2023.



### **Case Study: First Nations governance and intergenerational stewardship**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance traditions represent some of the oldest continuing traditions of intergenerational governance in the world. Across many First Nations cultures, concepts of Country, custodianship and collective responsibility embed obligations to future generations directly within systems of law, governance and community life. These traditions demonstrate that long-term stewardship is not new to the Australian context, but has existed on this continent for tens of thousands of years prior to its emergence in contemporary policy discourse.

Contemporary mechanisms such as Land Councils, Closing the Gap's long-term target architecture, treaty processes in Victoria and South Australia and the Uluru Statement from the Heart's Voice, Treaty and Truth framework each reflect, in different ways, the continued presence of intergenerational thinking within Australian governance. Their significance within this report lies in the evidence they provide that deep traditions of long-term stewardship and collective responsibility already exist within Australia's institutional and civic landscape.

Recognising this carries an obligation. This leadership and knowledge must be centred, not marginalised, extracted or selectively adopted as a resource to be borrowed. This knowledge demonstrates that long-term governance is not, in this sense, a theoretical aspiration the field is working toward; it is already being practised, and practised well, by First Nations leaders and communities the rest of the system has much to learn from. Meeting that obligation means moving beyond acknowledgement toward genuine partnership, truth-telling and self-determination.<sup>107</sup>

### **Case Study: Preventative health and wellbeing**

Preventative strategies in public health and wellbeing have long operated through planning horizons that extend beyond immediate short-term cycles. Investment in vaccination, early intervention, chronic disease prevention and population wellbeing all depend on the understanding that the benefits of action often emerge years or decades after the initial policy decision. Across Australia, this long-term planning logic is increasingly visible in institutional frameworks such as the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030,<sup>108</sup> the Productivity Commission's proposed National Prevention Investment Framework<sup>109</sup> and the National Mental Health Commission's longstanding emphasis on early intervention and long-term wellbeing outcomes.<sup>110</sup> Together, these approaches reflect a governance logic centred on prevention, upstream investment and

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<sup>107</sup> Taylor Dee Hawkins et al., Future Generations Policy, Governance and Leadership: Ending "Policrastination."

<sup>108</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-30 (Department of Health, 2021), [https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/12/national-preventive-health-strategy-2021-2030\\_1.pdf](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/12/national-preventive-health-strategy-2021-2030_1.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> Delivering Quality Care More Efficiently: Inquiry Report.

<sup>110</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, National Report Card 2024 (National Mental Health Commission, 2024), <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/publications/national-report-card-2024>.



reducing future social and economic harm before it becomes acute.

The significance for long-term governance lies in the preventative logic of avoidable costs that underpins policymaking in the health sector. Decision-making in this policy domain is deeply structured around the principle that long-term outcomes are shaped by decisions made well before crisis points emerge. The lesson for the broader governance ecosystem is not simply that prevention matters within health policy, but that anticipatory investment, long-range planning and upstream intervention are good governance practices in avoiding future costs and harm. The challenge now, as with defence and First Nations governance systems, is extending and translating this logic more consistently across other sectors and systems of decision-making.

### **Case Study: Futures and foresight capability at the NSC Futures Hub**

Established in 2016 and funded by the Commonwealth Government, the ANU's National Security College (NSC) Futures Hub is Australia's national centre of excellence for foresight and futures thinking in government, with a mandate to build the public sector's capability for long-term thinking, strategy and policy. It tests an alternative approach to a persistent challenge in Australian governments.<sup>111</sup> Departmental operating budgets have been progressively compressed across nearly three decades, stripping the discretionary capacity needed for futures work that cannot be attached to a legislated program.

It is worth being precise about what this compression represents. Sustained efficiency dividends are not a neutral feature of fiscal life but a series of deliberate choices about where public resources are directed. The scarcity that squeezes long-term capability is therefore, in significant part, a question of priorities rather than an absolute limit, and one that different political choices could answer differently.

This pattern repeats by design. Futures functions are established as projects, generating valuable analysis and insights, and are then dissolved. Within a cycle or two, when the need re-emerges, the same agency often reconvenes something similar without the institutional memory needed to build on previous efforts.

Rather than housing futures capacity inside any individual department where it is subject to the restructuring and efficiency pressures that have repeatedly eroded internal functions, the Hub seeds capability into the APS through secondments and training. When an internal function dissolves, the people and institutional knowledge it trained don't necessarily dissolve with it. Its location outside the annual budget cycle means it retains institutional memory across political transitions that departmental units are, by their design, unable to maintain.

This model is not unique to Australia. Horizons Canada and the UK Government Office for Science occupy comparable positions for the same reason, while forward-looking

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<sup>111</sup> Australian National University, "NSC Futures Hub: Can We Make Good Decisions Today, If We're Not Thinking about Tomorrow?," National Security College, <https://nsc.anu.edu.au/nsc-futures-hub>.

innovation bodies like the UK's Nesta, Finland's Sitra, and Sweden's Vinnova host important futures capabilities with varying levels of distance from government. What these models share is a common design principle: the most sustainable form of futures capacity often sits partly inside and partly outside the structures that tend to consume it.

There is a direct parallel in how the Hub functions and the legislative proposal for an independent Future Generations Commissioner, introduced by Dr Sophie Scamps MP through the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025.<sup>112</sup> Both are, at their core, addressing the same problem: how to ensure long-term advice reaches the decisions that matter, in a system incentivised to prioritise what is immediately visible. The core challenge lies at the level of incentive structure.

Treasury sign-off functions as a requirement for economic analysis in cabinet submissions. A comparable requirement for anticipatory analysis, specifying what a submission must demonstrate and what long-term advice must engage with would alter the demand for institutionalised futures capability in a way that training, seeding and cultural investment alone cannot replicate.

### 3.3 Co-creation and the license to lead

A considerable portion of the reforms described in this chapter have been the product of decades of sustained advocacy and engagement from actors across Australia's civil society landscape. These efforts have made a substantial contribution to not only putting these policy ideas on the national reform agenda, but in building the public mandate for them to become politically viable. This contribution reflects a sophisticated approach that has moved beyond simple advocacy towards ecosystem-building, including coalition formation, leadership capability development, narrative work, deliberative participation, public engagement and cross-sector coordination. This ecosystemic approach highlights an effort to bridge previously fragmented reform communities, as actors with different entry points increasingly converge around overlapping diagnoses of Australia's governance challenges.

The significance of these developments is not simply that civil society is playing a larger role in catalysing decision-making that looks beyond the short-term. It is that the terms of legitimate leadership are shifting. As highlighted by the experience of introducing Australia's Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025, in an environment of low trust and high civic demand for long-term reform, governments must increasingly partner with communities to design reforms with legitimacy, distributed ownership and a strong public mandate for durable change.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025.

<sup>113</sup> Taylor Hawkins et al., *Building the Australia We Want: A National Conversation for Our Future*.

National initiatives such as The Australian Centre for Social Innovation's National Futures initiative,<sup>114</sup> and Australia reMADE<sup>115</sup> are examples that reflect a shift toward more participatory, place-based and collaborative approaches to shaping long-term direction.

At a more local level, Regen Melbourne's work around the long-term stewardship of the Birrarung (Yarra River) in Melbourne is another example.<sup>116</sup> It shows how sophisticated models that embed ongoing community participation, ecological responsibility and cross-sector coordination can support the development of long-term governance.

In the Hunter Valley in NSW, civil society organisations, local governments, unions, community groups and regional intermediaries are all shaping planning associated with the energy transition, contributing to shared visions and the relational infrastructure needed to navigate long-term transformation collectively.<sup>117</sup>

This shift highlights that the maturity of Australia's governance for current and future generations cannot only be read in terms of the infrastructure built by its political institutions, including legislation, wellbeing frameworks, parliamentary groups and fiscal architecture. It depends equally on how much the public and civil society are treated as genuine partners in the co-design of this infrastructure.

Civil society is not simply a source of pressure for reform but part of the broader governance process through which legitimacy is built and sustained. The initiatives described above point to an important and increasingly noticeable reality: building a governance system that is intergenerationally fair is contingent not just on what leaders and political institutions decide, but how they share the work of governing with the communities they serve.

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<sup>114</sup> Chris Vanstone et al., *Practices for Realising Just Futures: A Review of Current Futures Practices for the National Futures Initiative* (The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, 2025), <https://www.tacsi.org.au/our-work/project/futures-paper-practices-for-realising-just-futures#download>.

<sup>115</sup> *Australia reMade: Creating the Best Version of Us* (Australia ReMADE, 2019), <https://www.australiaremade.org/the-vision>.

<sup>116</sup> "Reimagining and Remaking Melbourne, Together," Regen Melbourne, <https://regen.melbourne/>.

<sup>117</sup> *After the Coal Rush, the Clean up: A Community Blueprint to Restore the Hunter* (Hunter Renewal, 2023), [https://www.hunterrenewal.org.au/restoration\\_blueprint](https://www.hunterrenewal.org.au/restoration_blueprint).

# Chapter 4

## From Assessment to Activation: Maturing Australia's Long-Term Governance Ecosystem

Australia's long-term governance ecosystem has developed unevenly. The stocktake in Chapter 3 documents a pattern of concentrated investment in particular forms of reform infrastructure, alongside underdevelopment in others. Parliamentary mechanisms, legislative proposals and political advocacy across civil society have advanced steadily over the past decade. Meanwhile, the civic and institutional conditions required to sustain those changes over time, including a broad public mandate and distributed futures and strategic capability, have not kept pace.

This asymmetry matters because long-term governance is not built through political commitment alone. Lasting reform depends on parallel progress across three interconnected conditions. As highlighted by the School of International Futures' Foresight Governance Prism, these conditions include:

- citizens actively shaping their desired futures;
- leaders making intergenerationally fair decisions; and
- organisations and sectors with the preparedness to design and implement long-term policy.<sup>118</sup>

Progress in any one dimension without corresponding development in the others produces systems that are ambitious in form yet unable to endure.

The Australian ecosystem increasingly demonstrates this pattern. Long-term governance language has entered political discourse.<sup>119</sup> Parliamentary interest in legislation to protect future generations has expanded.<sup>120</sup> New institutional mechanisms are continuing to emerge across state and federal contexts.<sup>121</sup>

Yet much of this momentum remains heavily reliant on individual political champions, advisory mechanisms or normative aspirations rather than deeply embedded incentive structures or durable public expectations. The result is an ecosystem that has become considerably more sophisticated in articulating the case for long-term governance than in constructing the conditions that would make that case politically and institutionally durable.

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<sup>118</sup> Jackson et al., "Implementation Handbook for the Declaration on Future Generations."

<sup>119</sup> Jim Chalmers, "2026-27 Budget Speech, Parliament House, Canberra," Speech, May 12, 2026, <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/speeches/2026-27-budget-speech-parliament-house-canberra>.

<sup>120</sup> Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025.

<sup>121</sup> Diane Bowles et al., *Avoidable Costs: Better Outcomes and Better Value for Public Money*; OECD, "Case Study Library: NSW Trend Atlas."

The idea of long-term governance resists clean definition, and this chapter does not endeavour to resolve that. It encompasses culture, systems, incentives, practice and legitimacy in ways that cannot be fully captured in any single framework or institutional lever.

The takeaway that matters most here is that long-term governance operates at the level of the whole system. It emerges when culture, decision-making and political life reinforce each other in a virtuous and strengthening cycle rather than working in conflict. This chapter turns to the question of activation: assessing how each condition for long-term governance is currently maturing across Australia, where gaps persist and what work would deepen the connective tissue between them so that long-term governance can function less as a set of parallel efforts and more as a mutually reinforcing system.

## **4.1 Deepening the Prism: Building the Components of an Intergenerationally Fair Governance System**

Chapter 3 used the School of International Futures' Foresight Governance Prism to map the infrastructure Australia has built across its three dimensions for achieving intergenerationally fair governance.

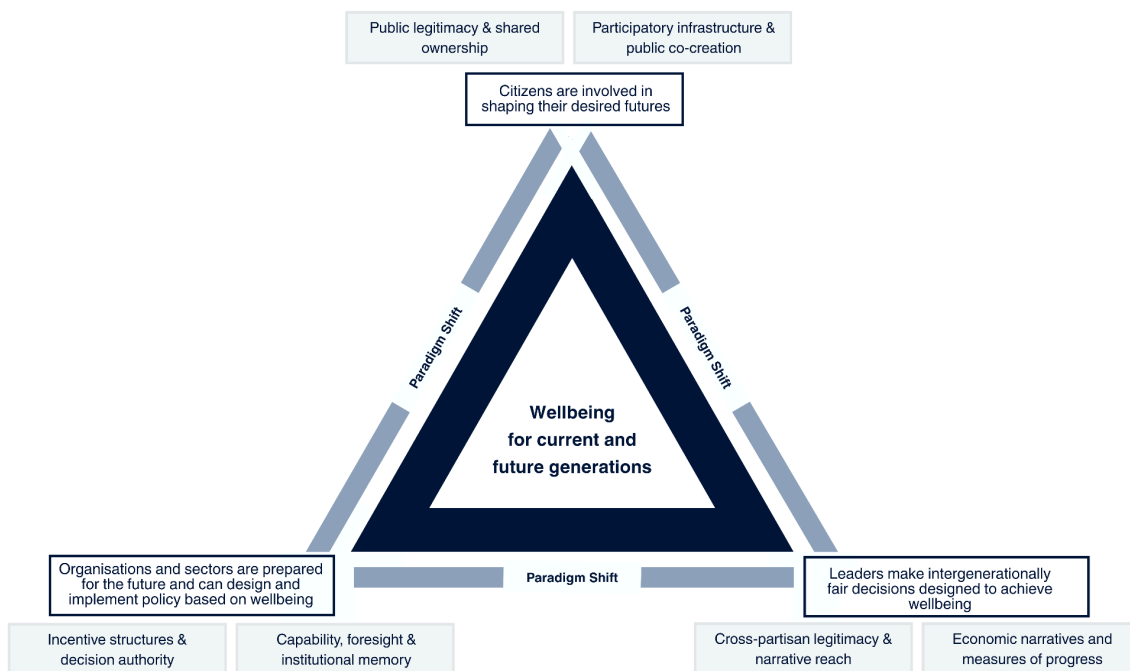
What that stocktake revealed was a landscape considerably more developed than it is often given credit for, but unevenly so. The components are present. The question this chapter takes up is how mature each of them are and what it would take to shift existing strengths into something more durable and coherent.

The assessment that follows is organised by Prism element, offering for each a reading of current maturity, an indication of where current patterns are likely to lead if left unchanged, and a strategic activation pathway.

These pathways are not prescriptive policy recommendations. They are strategic directions of travel: designed to address not only the institutional conditions needed for long-term governance to endure, but also the values, narratives and economic frameworks through which it gains legitimacy and practical effect.

Consistent with the findings of Chapters 1 and 2, durable long-term governance depends not only on institutional architecture, but on the capacity to communicate across diverse moral traditions and to embed longer-term objectives within the economic systems through which governments define and pursue progress.

**Figure 6: Building the components of an intergenerationally fair governance system<sup>122</sup>**



## 4.2 Political leaders acting for the long-term

Australia has produced a growing cohort of leaders willing to publicly engage with long-term governance. What it has not yet produced is a political environment in which doing so is consistently safe, expected or rewarded. The analysis below assesses two sub-elements that together determine whether political leadership can durably make long-term intergenerationally fair decisions: the breadth of the political base from which it is advanced, and the strength of the mechanisms and architecture through which it is institutionalised.

### Cross-partisan legitimacy and narrative reach

Parliamentary engagement with long-term governance has expanded notably over recent years, particularly across the independent crossbench and among a small number of reform-oriented major party parliamentarians. Future generations frameworks, wellbeing approaches and anticipatory governance language now appear in forms of political discourse that would have been considerably less legible only a few years ago. The challenge is no longer the complete absence of champions. It is the political coding that continues to concentrate the burden of advancing the agenda on one side of the spectrum while the other remains comparatively unable to engage.

<sup>122</sup> Figure 6 builds on the School of International Futures 'Foresight Governance Prism' introduced in Chapter 3. It disaggregates each dimension into the sub-elements assessed in this chapter. These sub-elements were identified through the research as the most consequential sites of development, fragility and activation within each dimension.



This uneven distribution has notable consequences. Momentum remains dependent on a relatively small number of highly engaged individuals operating without the party infrastructure, institutional inheritance or civic mandate that would allow long-term reform to survive leadership turnover. The departure of figures like Bridget Archer MP from parliament following the 2025 federal election illustrates a leadership pipeline problem, not an ideological one.<sup>123</sup>

The challenge is less that leaders on any one side of politics disagree with the long-term governance agenda, and more that the system has not yet been built to make acting on it feel electorally safe, institutionally supported or politically rewarded. Leaders who understand the urgency of long-term problems often also understand the risk of acting on that understanding.

That risk is one that is actively shaped not just by short-term electoral dynamics, but by powerful, organised interests across property, fossil fuels, finance and other actors, with significant economic stakes in current settings remaining unchanged.<sup>124</sup> Expanding the pipeline doesn't mean simply finding more courageous individuals willing to act against these dynamics. It requires changing their underlying incentive structure and building the countervailing power that would make acting against them politically survivable.

## **Economic narratives and measures of success**

Australia has made some progress in developing alternative measures of progress and economic frameworks aligned with long-term wellbeing. The challenge is not a lack of ideas, evidence or institutional experimentation. It is that these innovations have not yet become authoritative enough to consistently shape how governments define success, make trade-offs or evaluate progress.

A more mature conversation about long-term governance requires a more mature conversation about what the economy is for. While measures such as GDP remain important, they were not designed to capture many of the outcomes long-term governance ultimately seeks to secure: social cohesion, ecological resilience, national security, the prevention of avoidable harm, intergenerational equity and collective wellbeing. As a result, long-term objectives often remain politically desirable but economically peripheral.

Australia is therefore at risk of a credibility inversion. The language of long-term governance is becoming increasingly familiar across political and policy settings, but the economic narratives, measures of progress and decision-making frameworks that give that language practical force remain comparatively underdeveloped. Long-term aspirations are accumulating faster than the mechanisms used to define and assess national success.

Over time, the risk of this is that visibility outpaces policy delivery. When language signalling an intent to govern for the long-term proliferates faster than the institutional

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<sup>123</sup> Lucy MacDonald and Clancy Balen, *Tasmania's Northern Seats of Bass and Braddon Flip to Labor, as Liberals' Bridget Archer Ousted*.

<sup>124</sup> *Eliminating the Undue Influence of Money in Politics*, Research Report (Centre for Public Integrity, 2020), [https://publicintegrity.org.au/research\\_papers/eliminating-the-undue-influence-of-money-in-politics/](https://publicintegrity.org.au/research_papers/eliminating-the-undue-influence-of-money-in-politics/).

capacity to act on it, the result is growing public scepticism, weaker trust in reform efforts and a widening gap between stated ambitions and lived policy outcomes. Long-term challenges remain unresolved, while confidence in the institutions claiming to address them gradually declines.

**Leaders are making intergenerationally fair decisions**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Sub-element:</b><br><b>Cross-partisan legitimacy and narrative reach</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>Weak and underdeveloped</b> |
| <p><b>Status quo trajectory:</b> Long-term governance will continue to deepen support among already-aligned audiences while remaining vulnerable to polarisation, futures washing and weak cross-partisan durability.</p> <p><b>Strategic activation pathway:</b> Broaden the civic and political vocabulary through which long-term governance is communicated, deliberately activating a wider range of values and moral traditions. Peel back accumulated policy branding and political coding so the agenda can be understood through multiple pathways to legitimacy rather than a single narrative frame.</p> |                                |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>Sub-element:</b><br><b>Economic narratives and measures of progress</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Present but unevenly distributed</b> |
| <p><b>Status quo trajectory:</b> Long-term governance will remain disconnected from the economic narratives and measures through which governments define success. As a result, future-oriented objectives will continue to sit alongside rather than shape core economic decision-making.</p> <p><b>Strategic activation pathway:</b> Strengthen the connection between long-term governance and economic decision-making processes, including budgeting, performance frameworks, fiscal strategy and measures of national progress, so that long-term commitments shape how prosperity is understood, communicated and pursued.</p> |                                         |

**Strategic Directive**

What this component needs is a civic vocabulary broad enough to build durable political legitimacy for long-term governance, and an economic conversation mature enough to align definitions of prosperity with long-term wellbeing. The goal is a system in which long-term commitments are not treated as exceptional aspirations, but are embedded in how success is understood, measured and pursued.

## 4.3 Organisations and sectors preparing for the long-term

Across Australia's public institutions and sectors, the capacity to think and plan for the long term is more developed than its absence from mainstream political debate would suggest. The analysis below assesses two sub-elements that together determine whether that preparedness can translate into system-wide practice: the incentive structures and decision authority that govern when and how long-term capability can be exercised, and the depth of the capability, foresight and institutional memory that underpins it.

### Incentive structures and decision authority

The challenge facing Australia's organisations and sectors is not primarily one of preparedness or capability. It is one of permission. Frameworks and functions designed to extend the temporal horizon of decision-making, such as *Measuring What Matters* or the *Intergenerational Report*, are often advisory rather than directive. Legislated principles like 'Stewardship' and long-term wellbeing analysis frequently compete against political, fiscal and administrative incentives organised around shorter delivery cycles, visible outcomes and immediate ministerial responsiveness.

The result is not that organisations and sectors are incapable of adjusting their temporal perspective. It is that the system disincentivises them from doing so by design. A missing middle persists across institutional incentive structures: stewardship and long-term thinking often resonate strongly among senior leadership and operational staff, while middle-management incentives remain heavily oriented toward immediate delivery, risk minimisation and short-term performance metrics. Long-term capability in Australia's organisations and sectors does exist. The authority pathways and incentive structures that would allow it to shape everyday decisions do not yet match it.

Closing this gap is not only a question of institutional design. It is also a question of institutional culture, and specifically, of what kind of culture a public service needs in order to act as a meaningful steward of the long-term. One useful framing describes this culture as a public service that is warm, wise and willing. Warm in the sense that it is actually centring the people it serves, wise in drawing on evidence and long-term thinking and willing in having the institutional permission to act on what it knows.<sup>125</sup> Naming these qualities as explicit institutional goals, rather than treating them as personal attributes of individual public servants, is itself a step towards making long-term thinking an expected feature of how decisions are made.

### Capability, foresight and institutional memory

Over the past decade, and particularly following the Thodey Review, the APS has seen substantial investment in stewardship, strategic foresight, systems thinking and

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<sup>125</sup> Millie Rooney, *Warm, Wise, Willing: A Public Service for the Public Good?*, (Canberra), 2025, <https://www.themandarin.com.au/288021-warm-wise-willing-a-public-service-for-the-public-good/>.

long-horizon policy capability.<sup>126</sup> Stewardship has now been formally embedded as an APS value.<sup>127</sup> Across defence, health, technology and First Nations governance sectors, futures analysis is being produced, strategic foresight methodologies are being adopted and long-term risks are being considered with growing sophistication. The task at hand is developing an authorising environment that would enable these practices and capabilities to cohere into a recognisable national approach to decision-making. At present, this capability remains unevenly distributed, and is persistently exposed to restructuring cycles that dissolve teams, erode institutional memory and reset accumulated expertise when functions or personnel change. Capability built in individuals or units rather than embedded in the routines and processes of institutions is capability that cannot reliably outlast the conditions that produced it.

Organisations and sectors are preparing for the long-term

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>Sub-element:</b><br><b>Incentive structures and decision authority</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>Present but unevenly distributed</b> |
| <b>Status quo trajectory:</b> Stewardship and foresight are likely to remain structurally secondary to the short-cycle incentives that dominate advice, prioritisation and resource allocation.                                                                                                                                                                |                                         |
| <b>Strategic activation pathway:</b> Create stronger practical permission for stewardship, prevention and foresight to shape decisions by linking them more directly to the routines that already govern institutional behaviour: advice processes, prioritisation frameworks, spending choices and implementation planning.                                   |                                         |
| <b>Sub-element:</b><br><b>Capability, foresight and institutional memory</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Emerging and consolidating</b>       |
| <b>Status quo trajectory:</b> Capability will continue deepening unevenly across parts of the system, while remaining vulnerable to restructuring cycles that erode institutional continuity and accumulated expertise.                                                                                                                                        |                                         |
| <b>Strategic activation pathway:</b> Embed futures and strategic foresight capability more directly into strategy, budgeting and implementation processes, and invest in institutional practices that help it endure: secondments, cross-agency seeding of expertise and models that retain strategic memory even when internal functions or personnel change. |                                         |

Strategic directive

What this component needs is an authorising environment that closes the gap between capability and permission, one in which the foresight, stewardship and long-term thinking

<sup>126</sup> Australian Public Service Commission, *Australian Public Service Reform: Annual Progress Report 2024*.

<sup>127</sup> Australian Public Service Commission, “Stewardship Guidance.”

that already exists across Australia's institutions is connected directly to the decisions, budgets and processes that determine outcomes. The goal is not to build more capability in parallel with the system, but to embed what already exists within it so that long-term thinking becomes a routine expectation of institutional practice rather than a function that competes against it.

## 4.4 Citizens shaping their futures

The public appetite for a better future is strong; the civic infrastructure to understand that appetite and translate it into reforms with broad public ownership is not yet in place. The analysis below assesses two sub-elements that together determine whether long-term governance can move from being an agenda held by a relatively concentrated network of advocates and practitioners to one that is widely recognised, publicly legitimised and democratically owned: the public legitimacy and shared ownership of long-term governance as a concept, and the strength of the participatory infrastructure through which citizens and communities can actively shape long-term direction.

### Public legitimacy and shared ownership

Public concern about the future is increasing.<sup>128</sup> Surveys consistently show that Australians are anxious about the challenges their children and grandchildren will inherit,<sup>129</sup> and broadly supportive of governments taking longer-term approaches to policy.<sup>130</sup> The problem here is not public indifference. It is that this diffuse concern has not yet been converted into a broad-based democratic expectation that leaders act on it. Long-term governance remains disproportionately owned by and concentrated within networks of advocates, practitioners, public sector reformers and highly engaged civic actors rather than embedded across the wider fabric of Australian civic life.

This creates a specific strategic vulnerability. Reforms built on narrow civic ownership are vulnerable to repeal with electoral turnover, not because public opposition exists, but because the public mandate that would make those reforms politically costly to reverse has not been built. Without that mandate, a responsibility to govern for both current and future generations risks being interpreted as elite, technocratic or politically discretionary rather than as a legitimate democratic expectation. The field has invested considerably more in articulating the case for long-term governance than in making that case broadly intelligible in everyday civic terms.

### Civic participation infrastructure and co-creation

Participatory, place-based and collaborative approaches to shaping long-term direction are becoming a more visible feature of how Australia builds policy. Deliberative processes,

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<sup>128</sup> Kate Griffiths, *Pessimism Is on the March* (Grattan Institute, 2026), <https://grattan.edu.au/news/pessimism-is-on-the-march/>.

<sup>129</sup> Nicholas Biddle, *Hope, Hardship, and Democratic Confidence: Social Wellbeing and Political Sentiment in Election-Year Australia* (Australian National University, 2025), <https://politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/files/docs/2025/4/Hope-Hardship-and-Democratic-Confidence.pdf>.

<sup>130</sup> Susan Harris Rimmer et al., *A FAIR GO FOR ALL: Intergenerational Justice Policy Survey* (EveryGen, 2024).

community futures conversations, efforts to lower the voting age and cross-sector convenings and coalitions are building connective tissue between citizens, communities and decision-makers in ways that are hard to ignore compared with previous decades.<sup>131</sup>

The challenge is that these approaches remain asymmetrically distributed and inconsistently embedded. Many civil society organisations continue to operate with limited resourcing, volunteer dependency and weak pathways for engaging constituencies beyond communities already converted to their policy agenda. Participation tends to be episodic, consultative and issue-specific rather than ongoing in the ways needed to build collective ownership of long-term national direction. What exists is promising but scattered: a set of compelling innovations that have demonstrated what co-creation can look like without yet establishing it as a consistent expectation of how long-term governance is done.

### Citizens are involved in shaping their futures

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Sub-element:</b><br/><b>Public legitimacy and shared ownership</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <p><b>Emerging and consolidating</b></p> |
| <p><b>Status quo trajectory:</b> Long-term governance is likely to remain more strongly owned by advocates, practitioners and highly engaged civic actors than by the broader public whose mandate durable reform depends on, making it persistently vulnerable to political reversal.</p> <p><b>Strategic activation pathway:</b> Build stronger public ownership by making the agenda more intelligible in everyday civic terms, connecting long-term governance more directly to lived experience and using existing community-facing entry points to widen recognition of it as a legitimate democratic responsibility rather than a specialist policy interest.</p> |                                          |

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Sub-element:</b><br/><b>Civic participation infrastructure and co-creation</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p><b>Emerging and consolidating</b></p> |
| <p><b>Status quo trajectory:</b> Participatory and place-based approaches will continue expanding through localised and sector-specific initiatives, but unevenly and without yet becoming a consistent, resourced and transferable feature of the broader governance landscape.</p> <p><b>Strategic activation pathway:</b> Build on existing momentum by connecting and stabilising the participatory infrastructure that already exists: convening spaces, cross-sector partnerships, place-based processes and intermediary organisations, so that co-creation becomes a more durable and transferable part of long-term governance practice.</p> |                                          |

<sup>131</sup> Alison Whitten et al., *New Urban Governance: Enabling a Thriving Civic Life* (Regen Melbourne, 2025), [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/697bdc4db990e76ccd48616c/69be120faf865d25a3d8d87e\\_Regen%2BMelbourne%2B-%2BEmerging%2BCommunity%2BLeadership\\_Final.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/697bdc4db990e76ccd48616c/69be120faf865d25a3d8d87e_Regen%2BMelbourne%2B-%2BEmerging%2BCommunity%2BLeadership_Final.pdf); *Australia reMade: Creating the Best Version of Us*; Judith Bessant et al., “Why It’s Time: Lowering the Voting Age in a Polycrisis,” *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-025-00198-7>.



## Strategic directive

What this component requires is sustained investment in the civic infrastructure that enables long-term governance to become publicly owned rather than expert-led. While considerable attention has been devoted to policy development and institutional reform, far less has been invested in the organisations, relationships and participatory processes through which Australians can shape long-term priorities and build a durable mandate for change. Addressing that imbalance is one of the ecosystem's highest-leverage opportunities for investment. The goal is to build a public that not only supports long-term governance in principle, but expects it from its leaders and actively helps shape it.

# Conclusion

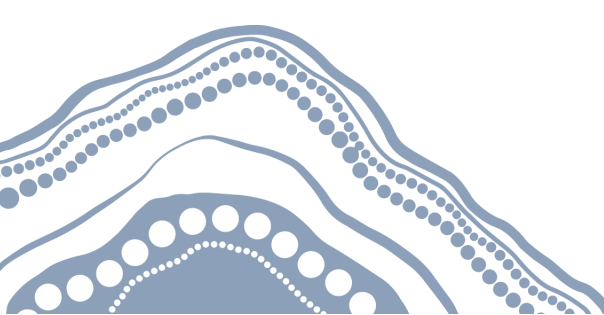
Australia's long-term governance ecosystem has matured considerably, in its political infrastructure, its institutional capability and its civic ambition. What this report has tried to do is give that maturity an honest account. It has examined where it is concentrated, where it is fragile and what it would actually take to make it cohere into something durable enough to outlast the conditions that produced it.

Across conversations with policy experts, political leaders, senior civil society and public servants, what this research heard most consistently was an unequivocal call for greater direction. Not a concrete list of policy recommendations, but greater clarity, commitment and connection required to activate the substantial amount of infrastructure and momentum Australia has already developed to support the flourishing of current and future generations.

The contribution this report offers is therefore a direction of travel. The destination is clear. Long-term governance becomes durable:

- When it is broad enough to cross political traditions rather than be claimed by one
- When its advocates speak with a vocabulary wide enough to reach beyond those already persuaded
- When decision-makers are supported and expected to act on long-term commitments rather than celebrated as exceptional for doing so; and
- When the communities whose futures are at stake are partners in shaping the direction rather than recipients of it.

These conditions do not require building from scratch. They require deepening, connecting and legitimising what already exists. The strategic imperatives this report has offered are designed to guide Australia on a path to this destination. The ecosystem has done the hard work of putting the conversation about long-term governance on the map. The work ahead is quieter, making it so embedded, so expected and so well supported that acting for the long-term stops being an extraordinary idea, and starts being the default.



# Annex

Interview Insights Report

[Perspectives from Across Australia's Long-Term Governance Ecosystem](#)