

What Do We Think? Identifying the Public Wisdom to Guide Sustainability Decisions.

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Action for 2020 – Establish a National Virtual Forum capable of discerning the public wisdom on major sustainability issues.

Australia is patently unsustainable in many ways, and so will have to change. Will this change be wisely and pro-actively managed? Or will it be forced on us in unwelcome, disruptive and possibly catastrophic ways?

Wise management will require governments at all levels to make lots of decisions, and to make them expeditiously.

In this decision making, public opinion is a critical constraint.

For example, there is a good case for road use pricing to manage our unsustainable dependence on use of private vehicles. Yet this option is instantly dismissed by both major political parties, fearing a public backlash - no matter how ill-informed, short-sighted or self-serving that public reaction may be. Meanwhile our cities become increasingly gridlocked, with escalating economic, health and environmental costs.

Simply put, unless we can improve the relationship between government decision making and public opinion, we're going to "hit the wall" in numerous respects.

Of course, the importance of public opinion has hardly been lost on sustainability advocates. There has already been, and continues to be, lots of good work in this area – particularly as regards climate change. Considerable insight has been gained on topics such as how opinions are formed, how they are related to behavior, and how they can be influenced.

As part of this effort, we must also develop better ways to find out what the public opinion is, i.e. what the public actually *thinks*.

But what's the problem? Don't we already know pretty much what the public thinks, from the endless stream of opinion polls? And isn't the problem in fact that there is too much monitoring of public opinion, and that governments are too sensitive to it?

It's true that public opinion, in the standard sense – what might be called the public *attitude* - is in oversupply.

What we almost never know is the *considered* opinion of the public – the *public wisdom*.

Public attitude versus public wisdom

Public opinion, as we usually understand it, is the kind of information generated by the familiar polls run by organisations such as Morgan and Gallup and delivered as fodder to the mainstream media.

The *public wisdom*, by contrast, is the *collective, considered* opinion of the public. It is what the public as a whole would think if it were able to think seriously about the matter, i.e. become well-informed, reflect carefully, and somehow pool their thoughts into a coherent position. Thinking seriously in this way requires collective *deliberation*, i.e. constructive discussion and debate.

Public opinion falls a long way short of public wisdom. In *When The People Speak*, notable theorist of democracy James Fishkin has pointed to a number of problems with public opinion:

- Respondents are generally ill-informed; indeed they will usually be rationally ignorant on the topic.
- Individuals' attitudes are subject to manipulation by powerful forces pursuing their own agendas, e.g. major corporates resisting progressive tax reforms.
- The opinions elicited in standard polls may be artificially manufactured by the polling process itself, i.e. may not reflect any real attitude held by the respondents but rather are generated on the spot in response to the polling process and are shaped by that process.

To which I would add: the respondents will generally not have engaged in any serious deliberation (on their own, or with others) on the issue, and the polling process provides no opportunity for such deliberation.

In short, standard opinion polls give us a distorted snapshot of the *attitudes* the respondents happen to have at that moment – not a fair reflection of what they (would) *think* about the issue.

To compound matters, standard polling processes do nothing more than tabulate individual opinions. They don't synthesize or aggregate the viewpoints of the respondents into a common or collective position, as would be required for genuine "wisdom of the crowd."

For an example of genuine collective wisdom, consider the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These are generated by means of an elaborate process, involving much high-quality deliberation, in which exceptionally well-informed scientists pool and refine their knowledge, coming up with an agreed expression of what their community as a whole believes.

We need to know what the public wisdom is

One of the main points of this chapter is that to make the transition to sustainability in a safe and timely manner we need to identify the public wisdom on sustainability issues.

Why?

First, because it will help governments to make the decisions we need them to make. The public wisdom can give the government the kind of "mandate" or authority it needs to tackle divisive issues

and make tough decisions, even when doing so may be going against the tide of public opinion as measured by the polls.

Knowing the public wisdom on the matter may also help swing public opinion.

This potential benefit was behind Julia Gillard's recommendation, in the 2010 election campaign, that a 150-person Citizen's Assembly be convened to develop some rational consensus around climate change policy. She apparently believed that identifying the considered opinion of the public on the issue would help break the political impasse. The proposal had some intrinsic merit but was, as [Lyn Carson has described](#), ridiculed from many directions, with such rejection driven by many different agendas and misunderstandings. One lesson of this episode is that we need institutions and mechanisms capable of articulating the collective wisdom without requiring any support or approval from the powers that be (see below).

Second, because on many issues, the public wisdom would be best guide to the truth of the matter. If we're serious about making the right decision, then we must find out what the public really thinks.

Consider an issue like whether we should have more large dams to better manage scarce water resources. This simple-sounding question sits on top of a complex web of issues, involving not just factual and technical matters but diverse competing interests and conflicting values. Certainly many individual experts and interest groups are highly knowledgeable about particular aspects, and their input should be given due consideration. However such folks always have a particular perspective; they see only their part of the larger elephant. The wider the involvement – the more diverse and comprehensive the selection of participants – the more chance that all the relevant information can be brought to the decision, and the relevant interests and values recognised and accommodated.

Note that I'm not claiming that the public's considered opinion is the best guide on any complex matter. Many issues clearly are matters of specialist expertise, and the general public is in no position assess the merits of different theories. An obvious example is the science of climate change. Only the body of climate scientists has the knowledge and competence to settle the scientific issues. Neither laypeople individually nor the public as a whole have any business trying to make up their own minds on this topic.

However on major sustainability issues there are no individuals or special groups in a uniquely privileged position to discern the truth. These decisions are matters of interests and values as much as they are matters of knowledge or expertise, and the Australian people are the relevant authorities on what their interests and values are.

But we don't know what the public wisdom is

The problem with the public wisdom is that we almost never know what it is. That is, on any given major issue, we don't know what the collective considered opinion is. Indeed, that wisdom usually doesn't even exist, in the sense that nothing has been done to put it together.

We do have many windows onto public opinion, but they're all either ineffective (don't deliver public wisdom) or impractical (too cumbersome and expensive).

For example standard opinion polls, for reasons described above, don't tell us what the public wisdom is.

Well-designed surveys are a step up from standard opinion polls (Reser). However, these surveys provide little opportunity for the respondents to engage in any sustained reflection, individually or collectively. They are just more sensitive ways of identifying the attitudes people happen to have. Ideally, such surveys would play a much larger role than they currently do in the gauging of public opinion. However they can't identify the public wisdom, in the sense described above.

Deliberative polling, and why it is not enough

By far the best mechanism we currently have for ascertaining the public wisdom is deliberative polling. It is summarised on the Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy website [as follows](#):

A random, representative sample is first polled on the targeted issues. After this baseline poll, members of the sample are invited to gather at a single place for a weekend in order to discuss the issues. Carefully balanced briefing materials are sent to the participants and are also made publicly available. The participants engage in dialogue with competing experts and political leaders based on questions they develop in small group discussions with trained moderators. Parts of the weekend events are broadcast on television, either live or in taped and edited form. After the deliberations, the sample is again asked the original questions. The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues.

Over the past few decades, dozens of deliberative polls have been conducted around the world. In Australia has had a handful, on topics such as republicanism and reconciliation.

Australia would benefit greatly if deliberative polls were held much more often, and if their results were more influential in major decisions.

However, deliberative polling, in its standard form at least, can't meet the need to deliver the collective wisdom for the purpose of guiding timely decision making on major sustainability issues.

The critical problem is that deliberative poll is a cumbersome exercise and is costly to stage. This has a number of consequences:

- **There aren't enough of them.** The large cost is one major reason there have been so *few* deliberative polls since the idea was first propounded over two decades ago. It may be that the frequency of deliberative polls is increasing, which is a surely a good thing, but deliberative polling currently and for the foreseeable future can address only a fraction of the issues which properly ought to be guided by public wisdom.
- **They take a long time to set up.** It can take six months or more to set up and run a deliberative poll. The time from conception – the moment when it is recognised that having a DP on a certain topic would be desirable – is far longer. And of course most deliberative polls that have been conceived simply haven't been run (yet).
- **Once run, they're finished.** The public wisdom identified in the deliberative poll is frozen in time. It becomes outdated and irrelevant as circumstances and information change.

The latter two points may not be such a problem for relatively timeless issues such as whether Australia should become a republic, but they constitute a severe drawback when decisions need to be made quickly on issues which are heavily shaped by circumstances arising at a particular moment in history.

For example, should Australia adopt the Gillard governments carbon pricing scheme? This is not the general issue of e.g. whether Australia should take action on climate change, and whether it should institute an emissions trading scheme. Rather it is whether a particular plan should be adopted at a particular historical juncture. The debate is raging as this is being written, and ideally we would be able to divine the collective wisdom *right now*. A deliberative poll on the topic would be great, but it isn't happening, and practically speaking couldn't happen for many months. By the time a deliberative poll was staged, it may well be too late.

A more philosophical quibble with deliberative polling is that, as standardly conducted, it doesn't deliver public wisdom in the fullest sense. The primary output of the deliberative poll is the poll results – i.e. a tabulation of individual opinions. Granted, these individual opinions have become more considered through quality deliberation, and are thus worthy of more respect than the attitudes tapped by standard opinion polls. However there has been no deeper aggregation of individual judgement into a coherent collective viewpoint. It is as if the IPCC reports were to consist of an exit poll of climate scientists' beliefs, rather than a carefully drafted and agreed statement.

What do we need?

If the transition to sustainability requires the public wisdom, and if we currently have no practical and effective mechanism for ascertaining that wisdom, then we need to develop something better.

What would such a mechanism look like? Here's a wish list:

- It would generate public wisdom in the fullest sense – i.e. the collective considered opinion based on large-scale deliberation.
- It would be generating that wisdom on all major issues, including new issues as soon as they arise.
- It would make that wisdom available to anyone at any time.
- It would be inclusive in the sense of providing a practical opportunity for any interested citizen to participate, and would in fact involve participation of numerous and diverse members of the public.
- It would be politically neutral and completely independent of control by government, corporates or any other powerful interest group.

A National Virtual Forum

Surveying the wish list, it is obvious that any mechanism capable of delivering the goods would have to be internet-based. It would have to be, in other words, a kind of national virtual forum (NVF).

No such forum exists today. The good news however is that a NVF plausibly could exist. As everyone knows, the internet hosts innumerable forums already; many are focused on serious social, economic and political issues, and support deliberation that is often of surprisingly high quality. While it is de rigueur to sneer at the quality of online discussion, and indeed much of it is rubbish, we should at the same time acknowledge that every day literally thousands of Australians jump online and vigorously debate the major issues of the day.

Further, and more profoundly, there is the fact that internet-based environments or systems have been proven capable of synthesizing collective intelligence or wisdom of various kinds. Wikipedia, prediction markets, Amazon.com, and Stack Overflow are all well known examples. To be sure, none of these generate collective rational consensus of the kind expected from the NVF. How exactly that form of collective intelligence will be assembled or extracted is a major design challenge. But important precedents do exist, and they do more than just prove that collective intelligence can be generated: they provide a wealth of insights and hints for the development of a NVF.

Challenges

A NVF would clearly face numerous major obstacles. In my view, these are best regarded as challenges to be overcome rather than fatal objections to the whole exercise. Here are four, with brief hints as to how they might be tackled.

1. **Critical Mass.** The NVF will have to attract many and diverse participants. To do this, first and foremost the NVF must be easily accessible – simple to use and available via any major channel (website, mobile apps, etc.). It must be thoroughly and effectively integrated with social media (Twitter, etc.). “Gamification” techniques will help deepen participants’ engagement. Finally, a major media alliance will situate the NVF in the public’s attention (similar to, say, the Oursay cooperation with The Age).
2. **Representativeness.** For its outputs to count as the wisdom of the public as a whole, the participants would need to be sufficiently similar to the public – i.e., to statistically represent the public. On the face of it, this will be a problem if the NVF has an open-door approach, allowing its participants to self-select. Despite this various strategies can be used to approximate and enhance representativeness, approaching full representativeness as a kind of limit case. For example, assuming there are demographics on participants of a known degree of reliability, and a sufficiently large and diverse set of participants, it would be possible to select suitable subsets of participants to form the pool for the purposes of computing group wisdom.
3. **Gaming.** If it builds any kind of momentum, the NVF will become a target for “gaming” (e.g. astroturfing) as groups attempt to manipulate the outputs to suit their own interests. This problem can never be fully solved, but could be handled adequately. The problem of distinguishing genuine from bogus participation is similar to the problem of distinguishing genuine email from spam, and Google has shown that this can be done remarkably well.
4. **Credibility/Influence.** The main point of setting up the NVF is to help governments make the best decisions. For this to work, governments would have to take the NVF outputs seriously. I’m optimistic that this problem would start to solve itself just insofar as the NVF achieves critical mass and delivers its intended output – not because governments will be virtuous and do the right thing but rather because they will inevitably start to respond out of pure pragmatic political self-interest. If the genuine considered opinion of the public on a major issue is available, and if it diverges significantly from the public attitude as expressed in the polls, then it will constitute another kind of political cudgel which can be used by either the government or the opposition.

Conclusion – Now is the time to start

Clearly, establishing a NVF of the kind described would be no mean feat. Yet as I've argued, we need such a thing if we're to make a smooth, timely transition to sustainability.

It is high time we had practical and effective mechanisms for knowing what the public really thinks on the major issues affecting it. The ubiquity and sophistication of the internet and the systems built upon it provide us the opportunity to realise this democratic ideal.

The NVF proper will not be built in a day or even a year. Rather, it will evolve in a series of stages, incrementally approaching the full vision.

Eight years (from here to 2020) is probably a reasonable time-frame within which something worthwhile could be achieved. Remember that Twitter is less than eight years old, and has already played a key role in democratic movements worldwide (e.g. North Africa).