

What Do We Think?

Divining the Public Wisdom to Guide Sustainability Decisions

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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, Australian cities are becoming ever more congested. There is a good case that this would be best managed some kind of “user pays” approach, with payments varying according to where and what time one drives. Yet this option is instantly dismissed by major political parties, fearing a public backlash - no matter how ill-informed, short-sighted or self-serving that 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*, that is 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*.



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Australian cities are becoming unsustainably congested. Public opinion stands in the way of what may be the only real solution – some form of congestion pricing.

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, that is become well-informed, reflect carefully, and somehow pool their thoughts into a coherent position. Thinking seriously in this way requires collective *deliberation*, that is constructive discussion and debate.

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

- Respondents are generally ill-informed on any given topic. Indeed they are generally “rationally ignorant”: since anything they say or do is very unlikely to significantly affect any outcome, what’s the point of putting in the time and effort to maintain a knowledgeable perspective?
- Individuals’ attitudes are subject to manipulation by powerful forces pursuing their own agendas, for example major corporates resisting tax system changes.
- The opinions elicited in standard polls may be artificially manufactured by the polling process itself, that is may not reflect any real view 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 we can 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 simply tabulate individual opinions. They do nothing to 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

Why does a safe and timely transition to sustainability require the public wisdom on sustainability issues?

First, because it will help governments to make the needed decisions. The public wisdom can provide the kind of “mandate” or authority a government 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.

Indeed, 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 common ground on climate facts and 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 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.



Image: Fairfax. Permission in process.

Citizens are generally ill-informed about major sustainability issues.

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 parties always have a particular perspective; they see only their part of the 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.

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 to 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. 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 into the public mind, 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.

A large step up from standard opinion polls, there are well-designed surveys, such as those conducted on climate change by Joseph Reser and colleagues. 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 larger role than they currently do in the gauging and reporting of public opinion. However they can't identify the public wisdom, in the sense described above.

Deliberative democracy, and why it is not enough

Currently the best alternatives to standard opinion polling are those provided by the deliberative democracy movement. There are many variations, but a deliberative democratic process (DDP) typically involves the convening of a representative sample of the public – a "mini-public" – to learn about and deliberate over the issues, and producing some kind of expression of their considered views. Australia has had dozens of DDPs, including the 2009 Citizens' Parliament; the proposed Citizens' Assembly mentioned previously would have been another example.

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

However, deliberative democracy, 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 such events are cumbersome exercises and 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* DDPs since the idea was first propounded decades ago. It may be that they are becoming more frequent, which is a surely a good thing, but deliberative democracy 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 DDP. The time from conception – the moment when it is recognised that having a DDP on a certain topic would be desirable – is far longer. And of course most DDPs that have been conceived never get to happen.
- **Once run, they're finished.** The public wisdom identified in a DDP is frozen in time. It becomes outdated and increasingly 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



Image: Rosemary Shapiro-Liu. Used with permission.

Deliberative democracy in action – the Australian Citizens' Parliament, 2009.

be made quickly on issues which are heavily shaped by circumstances arising at a particular moment in history.

For example, should the new “Clean Energy Future” carbon pricing scheme legislation be repealed, as opposition leader Tony Abbot has promised? This is not the general issue of for example whether Australia should take action on climate change, or even whether it should have an emissions trading scheme at some point. Rather it is whether a particular mechanism should be rejected 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 DDP on the topic would be great, but it isn't happening, and practically speaking couldn't happen for many months. By the time a DDP is eventually staged, it may well be too late.

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 must develop something better.

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

- It would generate public wisdom in the fullest sense – that is 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 and ideologically neutral, and independent of government, corporates or any other powerful interest group.

Establishing 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. The internet of course hosts innumerable forums already; many address 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.



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A national virtual forum would allow anyone, anywhere to learn, deliberate, and express their views on major issues.

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 public wisdom 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. “Gamification” techniques will help deepen participants’ engagement. Finally, a major media alliance would situate the NVF in the public’s attention.
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 – that is, 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. However 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” (for example, 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. **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. This problem would start to solve itself just insofar as the NVF achieves critical mass and

credibility – not because governments will be virtuous and do the right thing but rather because politicians will start to respond out of political expediency. 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 in a politically convenient direction, then it will constitute another kind of cudgel with which to beat on opponents.

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



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In only a few years, social media have become major forces in democratic movements, such as in the Egyptian revolution. What's missing is a way to harness such forces for the purpose of divining the public wisdom.

on the major issues affecting it. The ubiquity and sophistication of the internet and the systems built upon it provide a historically unique 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 might be achieved. Remember that Facebook and Twitter are less than a decade old, and have already played a key role in democratic movements worldwide, such as the recent uprisings in North Africa.

References and Further Reading

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