



Introduction

Our system of public policy development to tackle entrenched, complex and controversial problems such as climate change, poverty, and the financing of health care, has broken down. Vigorous policy debate is healthy and has always been with us, but governments seem to have lost their ability to bring facts and evidence to bear to resolve conflicts among interests in society and reach broadly-acceptable conclusions. Politics is riddled with short-termism and the back-door influence of powerful interests, the policy-making capacity of the bureaucracy has eroded, and communication between government and the public is distorted by the ‘noise’ of the daily media cycle and social media.

It is no surprise that trust in government and faith in the democratic process have diminished.

These problems will not go away with the election of the next government, whoever wins. Governments and representative organisations need to work together in a sustained fashion to tackle the hard issues, and this work must be informed by the best evidence, with ample opportunity for public involvement. In these changed circumstances, it is no longer sufficient for governments to appeal to the authority of independent ‘expert’ bodies or establish a string of one-off public inquiries to address hard issues like tax reform.

To build a base for a new way of working through complex challenges that cut across Ministerial portfolios, we propose new whole-of-government advisory architecture.

We also know that public debate in Australia is heavily influenced by well-resourced interests. These powerful voices often dominate, and communities and groups affected by poverty, disadvantage and marginalisation can sometimes struggle to be heard. Voices from the community must be amplified by the Federal Government, not constrained with gag clauses and cuts to the funding of groups and organisations representing the most marginalised and disadvantaged people and communities.

Policy proposals

Establishing a standing advisory body – a national reform council – to advise government on long-term whole-of-government policy challenges

Recommendation 1 A statutory National Reform Council should be established as the key whole-of-government advisory body:

- (1) The Council would draw together expertise from government, business, unions, community and environmental perspectives and respected independent experts, and encourage all sectors of the community to work together with government to find practical solutions to these challenges.



- (2) Membership would either be drawn from peak representative bodies or prominent individuals associated with different interests in society.
- (3) It would work together with a First Nations Voice on challenges facing First Nations communities, and the relationship between them and the wider Australian community, and include representation from that body.¹
- (4) The Council would draw on and integrate economic, social and environmental goals and perspectives, and have an independent Secretariat as well as access to Departmental advice and resources.
- (5) It would seek input from the community through discussion papers, reports, and an annual public forum.
- (6) The Council would replace the Productivity Commission (and other whole-of-government advisory bodies, as appropriate).

The Council would be underpinned by a fixed number of expert Commissions tasked with solving whole-of-government policy challenges

Recommendation 2 A fixed number of standing and fixed-term expert Commissions should be established to advise government, and the National Reform Council, on major, complex whole-of-government policy challenges:

- (1) Policy challenges to which Commissions would be assigned could include income inequality and poverty; digital transformation; a robust, fair and efficient public revenue base; climate change; economic, social and cultural engagement with our Asian neighbours; affordable, efficient and liveable cities and regions; and the provision and financing of care for older people, people with disabilities or chronic illness (in connection with retirement incomes and reform of federal-state financial relations).
- (2) In any given year, there would be a fixed number of standing and fixed-term Commissions.
- (3) Commissions would draw, in a flexible way, on expertise across sectors, governments, academia, (for example, by commissioning academic research in the manner of the Australia Housing and Urban Research Institute - AHURI), and the experience of people affected by public policies.
- (4) Commissions would either be supported by independent Secretariats, or draw upon the Secretariat for the National Reform Council. In some cases, existing standing bodies (such as AHURI) could undertake the Secretariat role.

¹ 1 Voice Uluru website (2019): <https://www.1voiceuluru.org/key-elements/>



- (5) Each Commission would be assigned 'policy missions' by government incorporating goals, strategy and evaluation.²
- (6) Commissions (along with the Council) would replace the independent advisory role of the Productivity Commission (which is over-stretched in terms of policy expertise) and supplement Ministerial advisory bodies such as the proposed Social Security Commission, National Housing Council, and Human Services Partnership Forum.

Restore and lift funding for peak bodies and advocacy organisations so that marginalised voices are heard in public policy debate

Public debate in Australia is heavily influenced by well-resourced interests. These powerful voices often dominate, and communities and groups affected by poverty, disadvantage and marginalisation can sometimes struggle to be heard. One of the most significant factors that affect a community or people's capacity to engage in effective advocacy is the resources available to it. Yet over the past five years we have seen significant funding cuts and defunding of organisations that represent or are focussed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, young people, refugees and migrants, people experiencing homelessness or struggling in the housing market and other disadvantaged people and communities.

Recommendation 3 In order to ensure that everyone's voice is heard in our public debate, peak bodies and advocacy organisations representing people facing disadvantage should be adequately funded.

Cost: \$5 million

Commit to fund and support advocacy by the representatives of people and communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage as a legitimate part of national public debate

In the past five years we have seen legislation and policy implemented by the Federal Government that have, in their application, had a chilling effect on advocacy by community sector organisations. These actions include de-funding of peak bodies involved in advocacy including the Refugee Council of Australia, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, and housing and homelessness peak bodies; the inclusion in the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services of a restriction that requires that federal funding can no longer be used for law reform advocacy; the removal of advocacy activities from a broad range of Commonwealth funding agreements; and the narrowing of peak body funding agreements so as to preference training and sector development over policy development and advocacy.

² Mazzucato, M (2017) *A problem-solving approach to fuel innovation-led growth*. European Commission.



In addition to these restrictions, the Department of Social Services has now ‘banned’ organisations funded by the Families and Communities Service Improvement program from using Commonwealth funds for advocacy.

Recommendation 4 Support the legitimate role of community organisations as policy advocates in the interests of their communities by removing restrictions on using Commonwealth funds (or funding pursuant to National Partnership Agreements) for advocacy purposes (gag clauses).