# Next25 Recoded:

# Understanding and improving how Australia makes its future

Vol. 1. Ed. 1

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Next25™

# Abstract

This report is the first output from Recoded, Next25's ongoing research and engagement program that builds the knowledge and support required to drive action that improves how Australia makes its future. Recoded is a core pillar in Next25's purpose of ensuring Australia maximises and shares its success across current and future generations.

Next25's approach is underpinned by systems theory. We understand Australia's future-making system is made up of a complex arrangement of elements and their interactions, such as institutions, individuals, structures, resources, and the mental models and paradigms that sit beneath it all.

Drawing from 50 deeply reflective, one-on-one interviews, this report explores and synthesises how established and emerging leaders from different parts of this complex system understand it in its current incarnation, and how they believe it might be transformed to ensure intergenerational success.

The report opens by examining interviewees' perspectives on the future, then outlines the strong common ground between definitions of success for Australia. Following this is an in-depth discussion about several trends that interviewees identified as having a strong influence on how Australia's future is made. The report then delves into whether change is required and, if so, what types of change are needed. It closes by identifying four leverage points that, if addressed, have catalytic potential to positively transform Australia's future-making system:

- Articulating and embracing an inclusive Australian identity
- Authorising and embracing success paradigms beyond GDP
- Enabling and embracing constructive discourse
- Engaging with and embracing public wisdom in decision-making

As Recoded continues, Next25 will engage the system to gain a deeper understanding of the findings in this report and choose one of the leverage points to take action on. Just as we have done with Next25 Leadership, we will then work with system actors to bring a new solution to life to improve Australia's future-making system.

For more information about how you can be involved in the next phase of Recoded, see Section 10. To have your say on what leverage point we investigate, complete this short survey.

For more information see Next25.org.au/recoded
If you have any questions or comments about this research,
please email jessica@next25.org.au

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## Thank you to the interviewees who made this research possible

Next25 would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the 50 research participants who generously contributed to this research. Without them, this work would not be possible. In addition to those interviewees publicly acknowledged below, ten further interviewees engaged on an anonymous basis.

| Name | Title |
|---|---|
| Nigel Anrade | Partner & Member of the Global Board, Kearney.<br>Board of Directors, Next25. |
| Professor James Arvanitakis | Executive Director, Australian American Fulbright Commission. |
| Dr Subho Banerjee | Deputy CEO, Research and Advisory, ANZOG. |
| The Honourable Kim Beazley AC | Governor of Western Australia. |
| Angie Bradbury | Principal Consultant Bradbury&Co.<br>Chair of Wine Victoria. |
| Shakhira Branch | Y-Change Project Administrator, Berry Street. |
| Dr Anne Bunde-Birouste | Adjunct Senior Lecturer, School of Population Health, The University of New South Wales.<br>Founder and CEO, Football United. |
| John Burke | Convenor, TelSoc Broadband Futures Group. |
| Alexandra Burt | Co-Founder and Proprietor, The Landsmith Collection.<br>Chair, Next25. |
| Dr Neil Byron | Adjunct Professor, Institute of Applied Ecology, University of Canberra.<br>Former Productivity Commissioner. |
| Morgan Cataldo | Senior Manager Youth Engagement. |
| Kate Chaney | Director, Innovation and Strategy, Anglicare WA.<br>Board of Directors, Next25. |
| Eva Cox AO | Sociologist, Advocate, Feminist, Stirrer. |
| Professor Meredith Edwards AM | Emeritus Professor, University of Canberra. |
| Mark Elliot | Founder, Managing Director, Collabforge. |
| Hon. Ruth Forrest MLC | Member of Legislative Council, Parliament of Tasmania. |

| Name | Title |
|---|---|
| Brendan Grylls | Director, Brendon Grylls Group.<br>Former Member of the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia. |
| Emma Harrison | Director, Gourlay Charitable Trust. |
| Kirra Horley | Y Change Lived Experience Consultant, Berry Street. |
| Ross Kelly AM | Chairman, Clontarf Foundation. |
| Tom King OAM | Chief Investment Officer, Nanuk Asset Management. |
| Amelia Loye | Managing Director, Engage2. |
| Bill Manos | Owner, Manos Capital. |
| Rod Marsh | Director, Strategy and Programs, Watertrust Australia. |
| Cat Nadel | Co-Founder and National Director, Tomorrow Movement. |
| Alan Oakley | Media Consultant and former Editor for News Corp and Fairfax Nine.<br>Board of Directors, Next25. |
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| Graeme Prior | CEO, Hall & Prior Aged Care Group. |
| Dr Lynne Reeder | Founder, Mindful Futures Network, Australia21. |
| John Richmond | VASSP Principal Field Officer. |
| Professor Chris Riedy | Professor of Sustainability Transformations , University of Technology Sydney. |
| Dr Millie Rooney | National Coordinator, Australia reMADE. |
| Megan Shellie | Operations Director, Think Forward. |
| James Shaw | Barrister. |
| Thea Snow | Director, Centre for Public Impact. |
| Steve Spurr | Exec Director, Spurcoe and Non-Executive Director of Shared Value Project. |
| Professor Miranda Stewart | Professor of Law, University of Melbourne. |

| Name | Title |
|---|---|
| Dr Tanya Vaughan | Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research.<br>Research Committee Member, Next25. |
| Dr Bruce Webber | Program Director, Western Australian Biodiversity Science Institute. |
| Cassandra Wilkinson | President and Co-Founder, FBI Radio.<br>Executive Director, Policy and Budgets, NSW Treasury. |

Please note that all participant responses have been anonymised throughout the report, with randomised numbers used as identifiers. For more information on the Recoded interviewees, see Section 4.3.

### Suggestions on how to read this report:

- **For a brief overview:** read the Abstract and Key Findings
- **For a rich understanding of where we are now:** read Section 5 Perspectives on Australia's Future and Section 7 The Current State of the Future-Making
- **For a picture of our desired future and the change required to get there:** read Section 6 The Desired Future State for Australia and Section 8 Perspectives on Change Required for Australia's Future
- **For what this report means going forward:**
    - The key leverage points identified, one of which Next25 will take action on: read Section 9 Transformative Leverage Points to Improve the System
    - What we can each do, as individuals, as organisations, and as part of the future-making system: read Section 10 Where to from Here: for Next25 and for Individuals, Organisations, and the System
- **For information on our approach:** read Section 2 About Recoded, Section 3 Overview of Recoded Activities and Long-term , and Section 4 About This Report: Findings from the First 50 Interviews

However you engage with this report, we welcome any reflections and feedback on the findings through this short survey.

# Contents

## Acknowledgement of Country

Next25 acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

# Key Findings

## I. The desired future for Australia: How interviewees define success

While Recoded explores a broad range of perspectives, several common themes have emerged in defining success for Australia. Below, each theme of success is described in relation to our nation and where interviewees want to see Australia head into the future.

- **Egalitarianism**: Reconciliation with First Nations and truth-telling are the foundation for our future, and we embrace Indigenous wisdom. We have a fair and equitable society that reduces gaps of inequality and disadvantage, and ensures access to quality social systems to enable equal opportunity. The diversity of our country is reflected at the highest levels of leadership, and we consider and act to ensure the wellbeing of future generations.
- **Broadening success measures**: Going beyond profit and growth, we account for the environment, we value all contributions, the immaterial and the non-monetised. We consider the common good and what it means to look after and serve the community and the long-term interests of the whole population.
- **Common ground as unity**: As a country we are cohesive and inclusive, we have an Australian story that does not shy away from historical harms and trauma, and also celebrates all our diversity, difference, and contributions.
- **Systems renewal**: In a complex, rapidly changing world, we understand interconnectedness, we are capable of continually evolving, learning, and experimenting, and we embrace change as a democratic process.

## II. The current state of the system through the eyes of interviewees

Interviewees see the current state of Australia's future-making system as:

- A system driving **unbalanced outcomes**, including wealth disparities and conditions that perpetuate disadvantage, which are unacceptable in a country with the resources of Australia.
- A **growth-driven** system, with the widely accepted goal of continuously increasing economic growth and market-based decision making. Originating in the 80s and 90s, it is "dominant discourse" perpetuating unbalanced outcomes and undermining success. Although there are noted green shoots across the system to improve and challenge the status quo.
- A **stagnant** system, characterised by minimal reform over recent decades, risk-aversion, and a lack of long-term vision. Australia has become complacent. Particularly prevalent among politicians and the public service – there was some nostalgia for politicians of the past, alongside concern over the public service's diminished capacity.
- A **multi-layered, disconnected system**, where siloes between and within sectors prevail. Disconnection is especially evident within and between politics, the public service, experts, and members of the public; through our Federation system and broader public and institutional attitudes to expertise. Although COVID-19 and transdisciplinary research approaches were pointed to as outliers.
- There are **pockets of public engagement**, alongside a desire for more bottom-up decision making, and a recognition of the value of lived experience, and young peoples perspectives. However, existing mechanisms are seen to be limited and found wanting, with a lack of faith in ordinary citizens**.**

- A **non-representative system**, where leaders rarely look like members of the public, share their experiences, or are representative of their beliefs. Lack of representation is a systemic issue, but it is particularly prominent in politics where structures promote homogeneity. Although, examples of diverse leaders were noted, and there is desire for new types of politicians.
- A system **beholden to vested interests**, where big money, business, media, and lobby groups have a concerning amount of influence in Australia, especially on politics. Lack of accountability enables bad behaviour in politics and business particularly, marked by a string of scandals and consequent loss of community trust.
- A **polarised** system, where social division is increasing and worsening. On their own, politics and the media are seen to be creating conflict, and drawn together their fractured relationship brings out the worst characteristics of each. Although, the role of constructive conflict and dialogue was heralded.
- Finally, a **lack of agency** and sense of powerlessness over the future is shared by leaders and members of the public. Disconnect between priorities of the public and those who lead us and limited understandings of civil capabilities also reinforce disempowerment.

## III. Transformative areas to improve the future-making system

Our interviews identified four leverage points with catalytic potential to transform the future-making system:

- **Articulating and embracing an inclusive Australian identity**
  How might we embrace a national identity and story that is honest, inclusive, inspiring, and values the contributions of all people?
- **Authorising and embracing success paradigms beyond GDP**
  How might we embrace a success paradigm that goes beyond economic growth to also include social and environmental factors?
- **Enabling and embracing constructive discourse**
  How might we enable more constructive discourse across Australian society?
- **Engaging with and embracing public wisdom in decision-making**
  How might we enable all people in Australia to contribute to, and feel represented by, the decisions made on their behalf?

Learn more about our next steps, and how you can work with Next25 to help us identify and develop a solution to one of these leverage points in Section 10.

# Part 1: About Next25 Recoded

## 1 About Next25

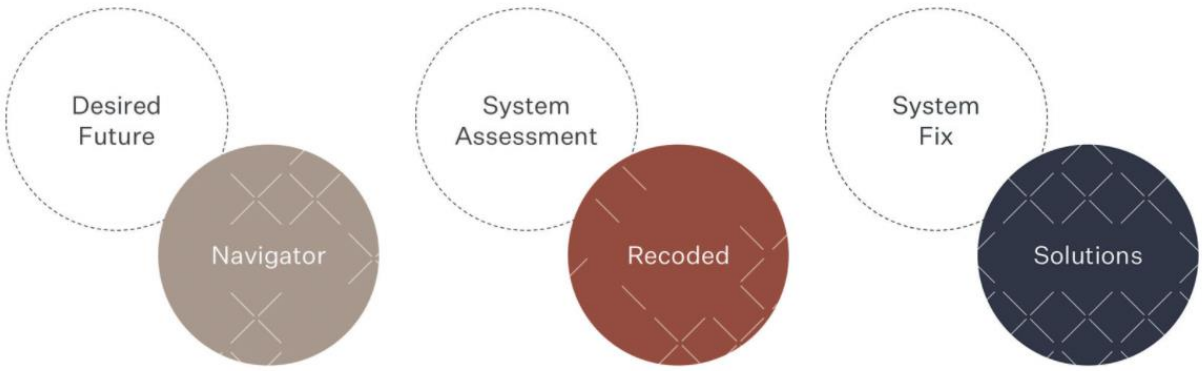
Next25 is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation dedicated to understanding and improving how Australia makes its future. Our purpose is to ensure Australia maximises and shares its success across current and future generations.

During our first decade of research, Next25 has uncovered deep-seated problems hampering effective progress on issues such as climate change, inequality, and growth. These problems lie in Australia's future-making system.

The future-making system in Australia is not limited to just government or politics. It includes media, business, non-government organisations, experts, academia, and more. The system also encompasses numerous actors who all have degrees of influence on Australia's future, including institutions, organisations, groups, and individuals.

We know Australia can make the future it wants only with three strong pillars in place that (1) describe the desired future, (2) assess the future-making system's capability, and (3) fix the system where it is found wanting. However, from deep engagement with the public, decision-makers, and experts, we have learned that each of these three pillars is weak. Next25 is focused on strengthening them. Here's how:

Figure 1: Next25's organisational pillars




**Pillar 1: Desired Future**

A comprehensive picture of the future Australia wants and whether we're on track.

**Pillar 2: System Assessment**

A clear diagnosis of whether the country has what it takes to create the future Australia wants and, if not, what more is needed.

**Pillar 3: System Fix**

Ongoing action to fix Australia's future-making system and keep it fit for purpose in a changing global context.

## 2 About Recoded

Australia's future-making system is dysfunctional. Through ten years of research and engagement with the system, Next25 sees two preconditions required for powerful system-fixes:

1. **System support**: actors in the system support and act on improving the future-making system.

2. **Knowledge**: actors in the system build a shared understanding of the system's status quo, potential leverage points for improvement, identification of potential solutions, and implementation plans for promising solutions.

Recoded engages with experts and decision-makers from a diverse cross-section of the future-making system to address these two preconditions. By assessing the public's desired future (identified in Next25 Navigator - pillar one), we can see whether the country has what it takes to get there, and if not, what more is needed.

After conducting an extensive landscape analysis, Next25 found there is currently no other organisation, individual, or body in Australia undertaking this kind of work. Not only does Recoded directly contribute to system-fixes implemented through Next25 Solutions, but it also lays the foundations for others to take steps of their own towards improving Australia's future-making system. Without the system support and knowledge produced by Recoded, Australia cannot achieve the desired future.

# 3 Overview of Recoded Activities and Long-term Plan

Recoded is designed to continually identify and explore system challenges and solutions that have catalytic potential to improve how Australia makes its future. This objective is achieved via the "Staircase Approach" (see Figure 2), the approach is a combination of always-on core modules and deep-dive modules that enable Next25 to be more responsive to system findings as they become apparent.

**Module 1:** System Engagement
Ongoing engagement with established and emerging leaders from a wide range of backgrounds. Participants simultaneously inform Recoded research and apply it to their own work, enabling further impact.

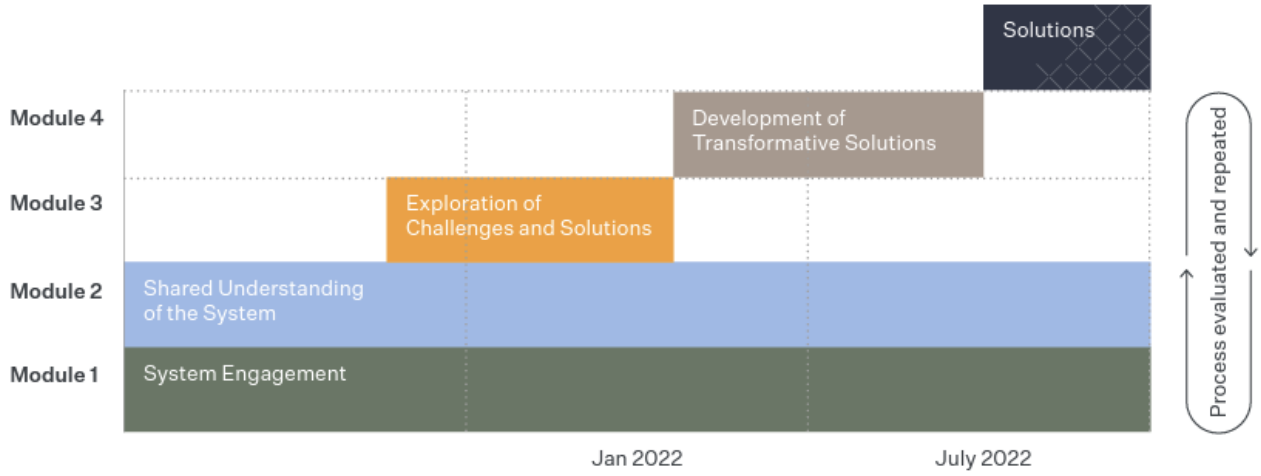
**Module 2:** Shared Understanding of the System
Ongoing exploration of how actors understand the status quo of Australia's future-making system. Identification of potential leverage points that may be addressed to transform how Australia makes its future.

**Module 3:** Exploration of Challenges and Solutions
Key leverage points explored further through reflective research. Activities such as roundtables and workshops investigate challenges and potential solutions. One solution collectively prioritised to take to Module Four.

**Module 4:** Development of Transformative Solutions
Facilitation of stakeholders to develop a plan to incubate and implement identified solution from Module Three.

After Module Four of Next25 Recoded, we will move the solution into Next25 Solutions for further development and implementation.

Figure 2: Recoded Staircase Approach




The Staircase Approach allows us to remain flexible and proceed to Modules Three and Four as often as progress in Modules One and Two and funding allow.

## 3.1 Current phase / place in process

In September 2020, Next25 commenced Module One. This ongoing module consists of primary research in the form of deeply reflective one-on-one discussions with emerging and established leaders from across Australian society. Next25 is committed to diversity and reflection, inviting a diverse range of actors to participate, including established leaders, emerging leaders, and those with lived experience. Providing participants with the opportunity to deeply reflect allows a shared understanding of our future-making system to be created.

To date, we have had the privilege of engaging with 68 participants, comprising of 35 women and 33 men. Participants come from different sectors of society, including community leaders, business leaders, politicians, teachers, scientists, and philanthropists. This report draws on findings from the first 50 interviews to create the basis of an ongoing development of a shared understanding of the future-making system. Using this knowledge, Next25 identifies potential leverage points to transform the system (see Section 9).

## 3.2 Next steps

As Recoded continues, Next25 will engage the system to gain a deeper understanding of the findings in this report and choose one of the leverage points to take action on. Just as we have done with Next25 Leadership, we will then work with system actors to bring a new solution to life to improve Australia's future-making system.

**For more information about how you can be involved in the next phase of Recoded, see Section 10. To have your say on what leverage point we investigate, complete this short survey.**

# 4 About This Report: Findings from the First 50 Interviews

## 4.1 Applying systems theory to understand the current state of Australia's future-making system

There is a strong sense that there is a 'systemic' problem hampering effective and efficient progress on important issues such as climate change, inequality, and growth (Ashton, 2013). The problem lies in Australia's future-making system. The future-making system is a complex adaptive system (McKenzie, 2014; Ashton, 2013). A complex adaptive system is dynamic, self-organising, and always adapting to change and feedback from other components and independent systems.

Recoded therefore applies systems theory as a core methodology. Systems theory looks beyond individual parts in a system to the interactions and patterns that characterise the whole, providing a conceptual framework to understand how the system works. (See Annex II for more on systems theory.)

In complex, adaptive systems, gaining a "shared understanding" is a vital first step towards establishing a democratic sharing of voice[1] and knowledge to galvanise the system towards transformative change. By a shared understanding, we do not mean consensus or superficial alignment, as that is not necessarily an attainable or desirable goal in complex systems. Rather, we are interested in uncovering diverse understandings and experiences while not shying away from difference, as everyone has unique experiences within complex systems.

Recoded creates this shared understanding through the practice of deep reflection and action research, which links critical reflection to action (see more on action research in Annex III). The process itself enables transformation at the individual level, including exposure to new networks, information, and inspiration – and at the system level through facilitating collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and levels of power towards transformative change.

Our starting point for building a shared understanding is a simple systems map (see Figure 3) representing the key institutions from across Australian society that influence how Australia makes its future. It is more than government, politics, or democracy. It encompasses numerous actors including institutions, organisations, groups, and individuals, as well as the relationships, structures, processes, resources, and mental models that influence these actors. Mental models refer to how actors see and understand the world, which can reveal assumptions, values, beliefs, and blind spots (Ashton, 2013).

[1] A democratic share of voice is about engaging with the system representatively and providing all participants with an equal share of voice in how we understand the system and identify key leverage points to address

Figure 3: The future-making system


## 4.2 A vast array of leaders engaged in deeply reflective, one-on-one discussion

To gain an understanding of how this complex adaptive system is currently operating, Next25 continuously engages with a range of emerging and established leaders from a broad range of sectors in deeply reflective and anonymous one-on-one interviews. The aim of the interviews is to understand the system through the eyes of those operating within it and identify where leaders share common ground or see the system differently.

Each one-hour interview allows participants to reflect and have an in-depth discussion about the influences on the current state of Australia's future-making system and how it can be improved. The questions follow a semi-structured and conversational flow, exploring themes of: (1) how the interviewee defines success for Australia today and in the future, (2) the extent to which they believe the system does (or, does not) require change to achieve their desired future, (3) who and what does and does not have influence on Australia's future, and (4) areas that can be addressed to improve the future-making system.

The research does not shy away from disagreement or complexity, as building consensus in a complex adaptive system (such as Australia's future-making system) is not possible. Rather, our focus is on building a shared understanding that reflects the diversity of people's experience and uncovering areas that warrant further investigation.

## 4.3 Overview of research participants

Next25 interviewed 50 established and emerging leaders from across Australian society. These include: current and former politicians and high-ranking public servants; business leaders (including CEOs, industry representatives, investors); experts from across

science, economics and academia; community leaders (including teachers, activists, social workers, non-profit leaders); and many more.

Next25 set targets around the types of interviewees we want to engage, as shown below in Table *1* and Box *1* - It is important that they reflect a variety of backgrounds, sectors, and perspectives. As these Recoded interviews are ongoing for the foreseeable future, our targeted participants will evolve as the research progresses. As Table *1* shows, most interviewee targets have been achieved within our desired range.

Next25 also seeks to ensure participants are as representative across gender and geography as possible (Box *1*). A relatively even gender split was obtained, although there were gaps in geography, as no interviews from NT, QLD, or SA were completed. See Annex VI and VII for comparison to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures and further detail on limitations.

To encourage honest and frank reflections, research participants were interviewed on an anonymous basis. Therefore, throughout the report, interviewees are nameless. Instead, they are referred to as randomised numbers that correspond to their identity (eg, 001, 002).

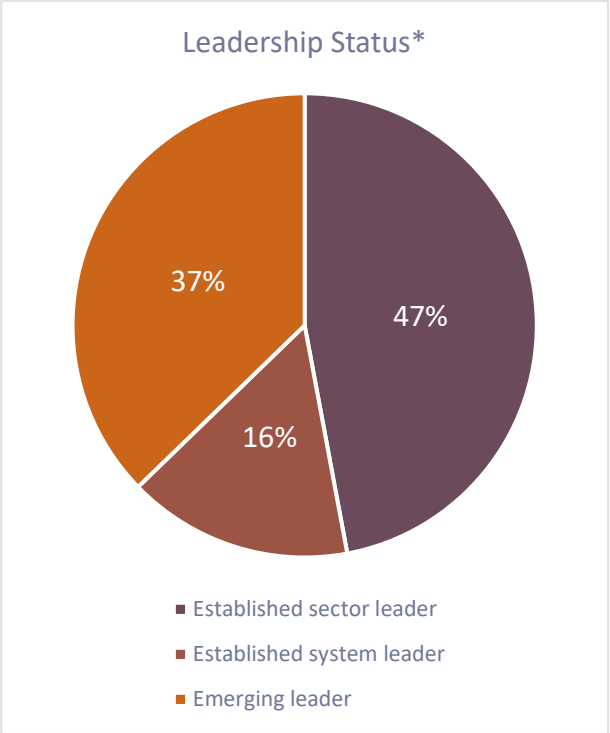
Interviewees who provided approval to be recognised publicly for their contribution to the research are acknowledged in the opening of the report. In addition to the individuals listed there, a further ten people were interviewed, but chose to remain anonymous.

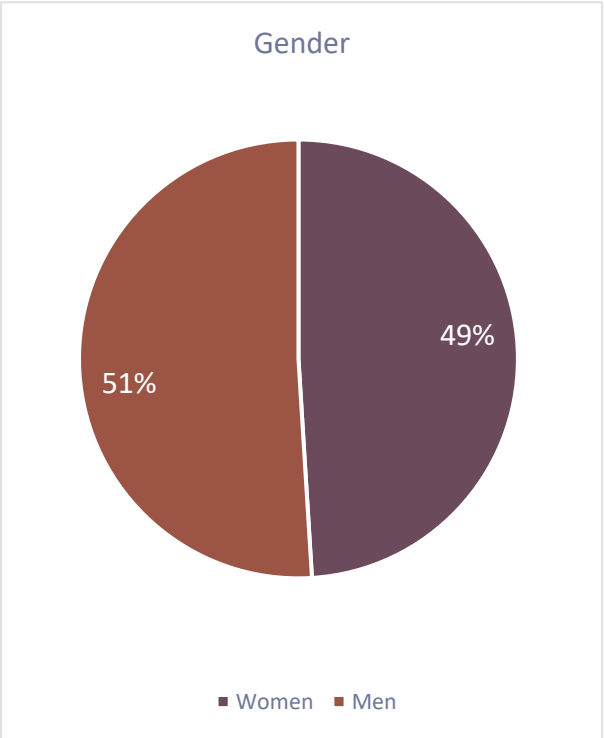
**Next25 extends our deepest gratitude to each person who participated in and contributed to this research. This work would not be possible without the curiosity, generosity, insight, and support of the system.**

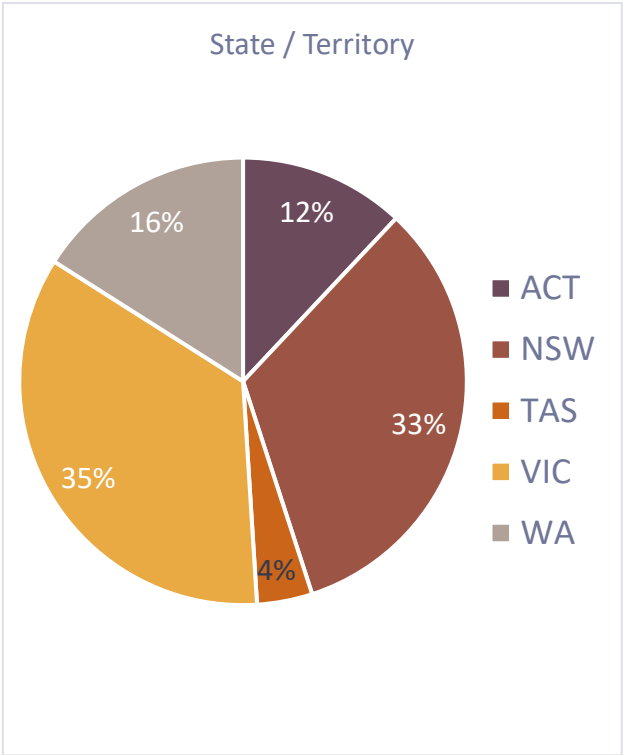
Table 1: Interviewees by sector

| Sector | Aim | Achieved | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Politics** | 5-10% | 7% | Current and former State and Federal politicians |
| **Public Service** | 10-15% | 13% | High-ranking former and current State and Federal level public servants |
| **Media** | 10-15% | 9% | Journalists, media executives, art and entertainment practitioners |
| **Business** | 15-20% | 17% | Industry representatives and business leaders from sectors including agriculture, finance, energy, hospitality, resources, and aged care |
| **Community** | 20-25% | 31% | Education, democracy, youth, ethics, sport, social work, activism, philanthropy, and lived experience |
| **Expert and academia** | 20-25% | 23% | Scientists, economists, and academics specialising in areas such as |

| Sector | Aim | Achieved | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | agriculture, education, futures, humanities, gender, health, law, military, public policy, and sustainability |




* Next25 defines these leadership types as follows: established sector leader, as a decision-maker or influential person within a sector (sectors outlined in Table 1); established system leader, as a decision-maker or highly influential person across the system more broadly; and emerging leader, as someone newer to their sector or the system that is on the path to becoming more established.

# Part 2: The Findings

## 5 Perspectives on Australia's Future

### 5.1 Concern about Australia's intergenerational future

*Do you often consider the intergenerational future of Australia? Perhaps the future for your (real or hypothetical) children, their children, and so on?*

Each Recoded interview began with this warm-up question, providing an opportunity for interviewees to ease into a reflective mindset and settle in for the journey the interview follows (see Annex IV for interview method and questions).

As we conducted more interviews, we realised our warm-up question was revealing rich findings about what motivates and prevents individuals from partaking in intergenerational thinking. These answers also unearthed a shared concern among virtually all interviewees for the future of Australia. A common fear is that "younger generations today are the first that won't have a better quality of life than the previous ones" (005).

> "We're feeling a huge sense of anxiety about not just our own lives, but more about our children's and grandchildren's lives." 012

> "I think there's a very widespread lack of optimism… and a lack of optimism, to me is a prediction of disaster." 029

Interviewees' deep concern for Australia's future is inextricably linked to unsustainable environmental and economic practices, causing significant anxiety for future generations. As one interviewee put it:

> "The people that run the place in 2040, or 2050 will have a massive foreign debt, no coal, no iron ore, or gold export industry to underpin the country's financial position – and huge holes in the ground. I'm extremely concerned about that situation. I think of all the futures I see, that's the one that's most prominent in my mind." 051

In particular, young people are identified as feeling deeply anxious about the future, as stated by an interviewee who works closely with young people:

> "The thousands of young people primarily aged 18 to 26 in our community are seriously anxious about the future. They were already anxious about climate change, but I'm almost daily, really taken aback by the increasing level of anxiety. I'm just really shocked at how much they're worrying about where they [are] going to be in 10 years." 012

**Should we be concerned for the future?**

Indeed, Recoded found that virtually all interviewees feel pessimistic about Australia's future. But is this a sentiment also shared by the public?

Social research from Next25's Navigator (2021) found that 52% of the public believe Australia will be worse off in 5 to 10 years. This is consistent with trends from the Scanlon-Monash Social Cohesion Survey, where in 2007, 11% of Australians expected their lives in three to four years to be worse, doubling to 19% in 2017 (Markus et al., 2019). It is also consistent with findings from the Pew Research Centre, in 2013, 53% thought the next generation would be worse off in Australia, increasing to 65% in 2019.

The pessimistic sentiment held by the public and leaders toward the future is explored further in this report. Additionally, there is a wealth of evidence that shows despite Australia being a prosperous democracy that performs well on several international comparisons, there are reasons to be concerned for the next generation. For example:

- **Intergenerational wage and wealth inequality** – the wealth of households under 35 years old has barely moved since 2004, while older households' wealth has grown over 50% in the same period (Wood & Griffiths, 2019).
- **Wage growth stagnating** – the Wage Price Index grew only 1.5% (March 2020-21), which is not fast enough to outstrip inflation. The pre-pandemic Index was 2.4% in March 2018-19, in comparison to 4.5% in March 2004-05, 14 years earlier (ABS, 2021).
- **Household debt is comparatively high and increasing** – Australia's household debt is the 5th highest in the world: in 2009 household debt as a percentage of net disposable income was 189%, in 2019 this increased to 210% (OECD, 2020a).
- **Record house prices** – Australia has the fourth-highest house price growth out of the world's advanced economies over the last 20 years (at 120%), and mortgage debt as a share of the economy is the second-highest following Switzerland (OECD, 2021).
- **Government spending on social protection is comparatively low** – Australia ranks number 26 out of 38 OCED countries (OECD, 2019).
- **Limited efforts to address First Nations' disadvantage and reconciliation** – of the seven Closing the Gap targets, only two are on track, with child mortality, school attendance, literacy and numeracy, employment, and life expectancy targets remaining unmet (Australian Government, 2020). Since the release of the Uluru Statement of the Heart and its calls for the government to implement a Voice to parliament, a treaty, and truth telling, none of these measures have been implemented (Grant, 2020). Alongside this, since the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, there have been 474 First Nations deaths in custody (Allam et al., 2021).
- **Worst mammal extinction rate in the world** – more than 10% of Australia's 320 land mammals known since 1788 are extinct (Department of Agriculture, Water, and the Environment, 2021).
- **Lack of action to address climate change** – Australia ranks last out of 57 countries on climate policy in the 2020 Climate Change Performance Index, and last out of 50 developed economies on green spending as a proportion of fiscal responses to COVID-19 (O'Callaghan & Murdock, 2021; Burck et al., 2020).

| Should we be concerned for the future? |
| --- |
| • **Lagging internationally on carbon emissions reduction and targets** – the US, Japan, South Korea, the EU, China, Canada, and the UK all have 2030 reduction targets that are twice as ambitious as Australia's.<br>• **Education test results are declining** – in the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (2019), Australian students recorded their worst international testing results to date and, for the first time ever, Australia failed to achieve the OECD average for mathematics. |

## 5.2 Who participates in intergenerational thinking and why?

### 5.2.1 Work as a motivation

All Recoded interviewees are big thinkers or leaders in their fields, with many having committed their lives to solving the big challenges for Australia's future. Due to the nature of our research and the community we engage with, it is not surprising to learn that most interviewees often think about the intergenerational future of Australia – whether that is due to the nature of their work or motivators across their everyday lives.

Most Recoded interviewees were invited to participate based on their occupation and industry. Unsurprisingly, two-fifths of interviewees said the nature of their work often leads to intergenerational thinking." For these individuals, thinking about their potential impact on future generations is a central "constant refrain" in decision-making (025). Interviewees are regularly "asking the question, what's the best thing that we can pass on to future generations?" (037). As one interviewee remarked:

> "What are the long-term prospects for my progeny and their progeny, and so down the track? Are we leaving the place a better place for them? Are we leaving it more secure? What are the things that I need to do to help make it safe and prosperous? I think, you'd find that most people in politics in different sort of ways ask themselves that question all the time. It's a primary motivator for us now, we don't come to the same conclusions by any means on any of that, but it is a primary motivation." 031

However, constantly thinking about the future and working on Australia's big challenges comes with a strong sense of responsibility and enhanced stress about what might happen in years to come. As one interviewee who is working on combating environmental threats reflected:

> "It's scary and frightening, and often really depressing. I work in an area where we are very aware of what is most likely coming in the next five to 10 to 20 or so more years. I think we are blissfully unaware of just how frighteningly bad that's going to be. Whether we like it or not, even if we pull our fingers out now and do something, it's still going to be horrific." 044

### 5.2.2 Family and other motivators

Changing life circumstances, particularly within families, is another big motivator for thinking about the intergenerational future for Australia (mentioned by at least one fifth of interviewees). Some explained that since having children or grandchildren themselves, their concern for Australia's future has become heightened. However, others commented specifically that they had made decisions not to pursue having children due to their worry about Australia's future. As one interviewee remarked:

> "I would say that one of the reasons I'm not having children is because I've considered the future… But I just, can't celebrate when people have kids. I mean, I celebrate to them, but because I think too much about what that future is going to look like…it's not that children aren't wonderful and beautiful and amazing." 020

Of course, having children is not the only motivator for long-term thinking. In fact, as one interviewee stated, intergenerational thinking "can sit outside of a paternalistic view, instead thinking about communities and people in general, rather than that connection that we have for them being our child, therefore, for us to care deeply about the future." (052). Likewise, another interviewee remarked on how not having children can shape a more societal or collective perspective, "I think you're freed if you don't have children, [you don't] have to buy into that truth of family is everything in quite the same way, which just gives you a little crack to think about things differently" (043).

Additionally, many interviewees said long-term thinking is deeply embedded in their disposition, linking this to experiences in childhood, or exposure through their family, education, research, and reading (024; 042). One interviewee commented that their life "was changed" when they were introduced to the concept of intergenerational equity in high school: "from that moment on, as far as I am able, everything I do, every decision I make, including purchases, is about minimising my environmental impact and maximising my social impact" (026).

Importantly, several interviewees also discussed how thinking about the future is a privilege that many in Australia cannot afford. This can be due to getting bogged down in immediate day-to-day necessities, being too busy or concerned with (often vital) immediate issues, or not being provided the space or opportunity to reflect deeply about such big-picture questions. As one interviewee reflected, "Most of our time is spent trying to deal with reactive sort of issues in the here and now because there are just so many of them" (010). Furthermore, as one interviewee remarked, those who have lived experience of disadvantage are far less likely to "even be able to picture, first, a future in general, and then to be able to dream big and think of all the different opportunities" (046).

> "A lot of people with disadvantage are striving to survive. Survival is the first step." 052

Reflection and long-term thinking can often become delegitimised or not deemed a practice worthy of consideration as "there is no dollar figure on reflective practices because you don't need an immediate outcome" (032). These conditions are front of mind for many, who feel lucky and privileged to be able to undertake the type of work they do.

> "I think I'm lucky in that I have a lot of opportunity for self-reflection and reflective systems change practice. I feel very grateful and honoured to have as part of my work." 032

# 6 The Desired Future State for Australia

## 6.1 Defining success for Australia

*How do you define success for Australia today and in the future?*

This blue-sky question was the first interview question after the warm-up question for interviewees (see Section 5). By asking interviewees how they define success, Next25 seeks to understand how each person individually perceives a successful Australia and whether we, as a nation, share common ground. However, in a complex adaptive system such as the future-making system in Australia, finding perfectly cohesive alignment is not possible due to the expanse of differing, yet valid, individual experiences and perspectives. The nuance in these perspectives is something we wish to embrace and explore further. Interviewees also saw the plurality of paths to success, and that difference in perspectives is something to be embraced:

> "Creating some opportunities for people to think differently about what the future [holds] involves [the] opportunity to be open minded and have a plurality of paths to defining your own success." 007

> "Everyone's got their own prism they're looking through things. That's why when you asked what a successful Australia looks like you're going to get a broad spread, and 150 different perspectives. I'll be interested to understand what the common themes are. I think they're just so diverse … we all just have an alternate point of view and that's what makes us all learn and educate and evolve from there." 038

While Recoded has explored a broad spread of perspectives to date, numerous common themes have emerged in defining success for Australia. These include ideas around improving and embracing equality, fairness, opportunity, and diversity while also changing the mindsets and paradigms that dictate how we measure and understand success. In particular, interviewees spoke of looking beyond GDP and economic measures as Australia's core measure of success.

**We would encourage each of you reading this report to similarly ponder the question, "What does success for Australia look like to you?" Think about whether the themes outlined in the subsequent pages resonate with you, or if you conceive of them differently.**

## 6.2 Embrace egalitarianism

Calls for greater equality, equity, opportunity, and fairness for all were dominant themes in conversations about success for Australia. We have grouped these interrelated themes together under the sentiment of "egalitarianism." Much like success, egalitarianism carries a multitude of meanings, which often overlap. It is about equity and reducing gaps between the "haves" and the "have nots" and equal opportunity. It is also about diversity of representation and thought at the highest levels of our country, alongside fairness, particularly in terms of reconciliation with First Nations peoples and a greater consideration of their wisdom. Egalitarianism is not just about the present, but also extending to the past and future generations.

### 6.2.1 Reconciliation and learning from First Nations wisdom

For many of our interviewees, reconciliation with First Nations peoples is deeply intertwined with the success of Australia. Nine interviewees specifically stated that Australia cannot consider itself to be successful until reconciliation is reached. Furthermore, the fact that Australia is failing First Nations communities shows a need for action on reducing inequality gaps (see Section 6.2.2), improving fairness (see Section 6.2.3), and diversity (see Section 6.2.4).

Reconciliation can take a number of forms. Many avenues were discussed in our interviews that echo the Uluru Statement from the Heart, including truth-telling, treaty, and a Voice to parliament. While there is an understanding that the three overlap, truth-telling in particular was highlighted as a foundation necessary for Australia to face the future:

> "I do believe that Makarata and the truth-telling, without that I don't think Australia can deal with its future unless we deal with our past. Unless we deeply reconcile with Indigenous Australians in the process, I think we're just going to be perpetuating all of the same problems that we have in the past." 015

Another interviewee echoed the necessity of truth-telling at a Federal level and noted the beginning of a formal process at Victorian state-level with a First Nations assembly (016). Intrinsic in truth-telling is a shift in mentality away from paternalistic or protectionist attitudes. Instead, truth-telling is about understanding the realities of the past by "coming from the position that everything we treasure was built on the bones of their ancestors who were raped and murdered by the people who built our community" (017).

> "The more you learn, the more it feels like, of course, we had to not learn about it at school. Of course, we had to not talk about it in the parliament. Of course, we had to put them all in prison, because if you really knew what you've done, you would have to take radical action, like it's appalling. **I just don't think a really successful Australia can be built on anything less than a treaty**." 017 – emphasis added

Interviewees remarked on the extraordinary wisdom First Nations hold, which should not only be celebrated, but also used to guide and inform our decision-making. Australia often looks to Western countries like the UK and US to provide examples on how we can do things differently. This is despite being home to the oldest living civilisation in the world which provides Australia a unique opportunity to "reflect on its Indigenous knowledge systems" (009) and "tap into the wisdom of First Nations people" (032). Again, such an approach requires a shift in mindset. It is not about assimilation policies of the past, but about "flipping it on its head so we're learning from Aboriginal thinking and realising we've got some stuff pretty wrong here" (007). Interviewees recognise that appreciation and incorporation of First Nations knowledge holds incredible potential:

> "Wouldn't it just be amazing if we were one of the first countries to show that we could do this? To show that we're not going to make tokens of our First Nations people, we're going to have them leading our culture. I just think that would be so incredible." 032

Aspects of First Nations wisdom brought to the fore in our interviews include: a deep understanding and knowledge of complexity and "interconnectedness of all things is really powerful" (009); Dadirri, deep listening, deep listening to the land and to each other (032); and

bushfires as a challenge we need external help on, particularly drawing upon and being led by Indigenous fire practices (019).

### 6.2.2 Reducing the gap between the haves and have nots

For most interviewees, success for Australia is well summarised in this response: “Really, truly having systems in place that don’t contribute to the growing gap between the haves and the have nots but reducing them across the board” (037).

To many, success is not reached at equality, but only when equity is attained. This means not just ensuring everyone has access to the same resources (equality) but recognising that individuals have different circumstances and allocating resources to enable an equal outcome (equity). However, the challenges of defining equity as success do not go unnoticed. As one interviewee explained, there are many ways to interpret what equity means:

> “When you say equity, what do you mean? Everybody gets exactly the same? Or, where the people who worked very hard get more, and the people who are lazy get less? Or, you could say that the widows and the orphans and the poor and the landless, they should get a bigger share than everyone else? Or we could put all the resources into the village into one big heap have a perfectly fair lottery with everybody, man, woman, a child has an equal chance winner take all? **Parity, priority, precedence, performance, or potluck? These are all five different forms of equity.** I don't think I've ever heard any politician anywhere in the world say, I'm in favour of inequity. It's just that I might be talking about one sort of equity and you're talking about a quite different version of equity. And we both believe we're talking about fairness and social justice. But you're talking about more for the widows and orphans. And I'm talking about more for the people who work. Or vice versa.” 037 – emphasis added

Regardless of questions about what forms of equity Australia pursues, eg, “parity, priority, precedence, performance, or potluck” (037), interviewees agree it is important to ensure that “no one gets left behind” (043). There is a strong sense that if a part of the population “is having it really tough at the moment, then that's a matter of concern for all the rest of us” (037).

Notions of equalitarianism are not new in an Australian context, but we need to “preserve, restore, grow [them] in the future” (017). There are two inequality gaps that interviewees often highlighted:

The first is in relation to wealth disparity and redistribution, where “an equitable world does imply a degree of recognition of relative wealth and income” (016) and “being brave enough to stand up to big money” (041). As one interviewee remarked:

> “I just do not see how a society can accept that some people barely can meet their needs at the end of the month, and other people are sitting on billions, if not trillions of dollars in their bank accounts. I think that's an unacceptable way of the world working.” 037

The second is gaps in Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences in Australia:

> “I don't think we can define Australia as successful when the fact that you're Indigenous or you live in a remote part of Australia means you're going to die 15,

> 20 years earlier than someone who lives in Balmain. Unacceptable. I know that's the bleeding obvious, but to me, that's scandal." 023

### 6.2.3 Fairness and equal opportunity

Fairness and equal opportunity for all is another consistent theme in defining success for Australia (mentioned by one fifth of interviewees). The importance that Australians place on fairness is seen as ingrained. However, paradoxically, there is a strong sense that unfairness is embedded within Australia. Interviewees commented that unequal outcomes are not necessarily the reason people "feel hard done by", rather it is that the system lacks fair treatment to all:

> "It's not the inequality itself that makes [people] feel hard done by. It's the way the system is not fair." 029

In defining a fair system, interviewees spoke of a populace and system that is non-discriminatory, non-biased, and just for all – focusing on the needs of all people and not just some (004; 018; 042). A fair system is one "where all minorities or diversities are all [treated as] majorities, get an equal footing and a lot of ways to start off in life" (018). Interviewees also see a fair system as one where the provision of services and meeting of needs enable "equal footing" and true equal opportunity for all (013). They see a fair system as one where "regardless of economic background, you have a chance of success" (013). It is also having access to systems enabling that success, including, but not limited to basic welfare, basic medical systems, basic insurance systems, housing, employment, and education (018, 021, 052). In the words of one interviewee:

> "My idea of a desirable country is one in which there are opportunities for people to live the life that they want to live and to define their own path and their own success … there are a few things that are prerequisites I see as part of a longer-term vision for Australia. Part of that is the social systems that ensure that people get a fair go." 009

Specifically, the treatment of First Nation People was pointed to as an example of deeply rooted unfairness in Australia (004). There is a sense that Australia needs to walk the talk, "We talk equality of opportunity, but I think we're actually going backwards in some areas around that" (023). Aspirations of equality of opportunity for children and in education were also highlighted (009; 042).

Further, fairness goes beyond an anthropocentric view, extending to equilibrium within our living ecosystems. Fairness is also recognising that a stable climate will impact people's opportunities in life and that the consequences of climate change will largely affect those who are already marginalised and vulnerable. "It's where there's a sense of equilibrium occurring in our greater world. Not just human success, but success for the planet success for the ecosystem, for the plants and animals that we live with." Fairness is where there are "fewer winners and losers" on environmental, educational, and economic fronts:

> "It's not necessarily, fairness in terms of we're all equal, everybody gets paid $60,000 a year and lives in bark huts kind of thing. But it's a sense of equilibrium in the system where there's fewer winners and losers." 015

### 6.2.4 Diversity

A key part of embracing egalitarianism, in the eyes of our interviewees, is that Australia's diverse society is reflected at the highest levels of leadership, in politics, the public service, media, community groups, and business. Diversity needs to be represented in all its facets, including but not limited to, gender, race, ethnic background, younger people, older people, First Nations, and LGBTQI+ (021). True representation must also extend to those holding positions of power, such as government ministers or commissioners (008). It is about going beyond tokenism to "create space for the voices that aren't being heard … and action for the words that they're saying" (049). As one interviewee pointed out, leadership sways toward white Anglo Saxon males, despite the fact:

> "We are a multiracial, multicultural community. Nothing is going to change that. We need to ensure that all the different groups that make up our society are represented in politics, in government, in our bureaucracies in our professions, throughout life, as they reflect our society." 050

Our differing life experiences and identities bring diversity in thought and opinion. Some interviewees argued that ultimately, success will be when the latter becomes the defining feature, not the former. As one interviewee notes, "The differences that we have are not based on the usual identifiers, like race or gender or sexual orientation or disability. They're based on arguments that we have about differences of opinion on policy, or on ideas for the future of the country" (050). It is believed that unless diversity of experience, thought, and opinion is embraced, the status quo will remain:

> "Success is diversity… It's diversity of thinking, which is the harder one to get at times. Because if you don't have diversity of thinking, just get the same old, same old basically. And you end up going back a full circle and ending up where we are now." 021

### 6.2.5 Intergenerational wellbeing

Our interviewees established the importance of intergenerational thinking early (Section 5), which has carried through to definitions of success. Intergenerational thinking is also linked to other ideas of egalitarianism, including fairness and diversity.

Front of mind for interviewees is the idea of "sustainable prosperity", described as prosperity that is intergenerational, considers resource allocations, sustainable constraints, population patterns, and taxation systems (045). We cannot prosper at the expense of those who come after us, "so it's not one generation that has a boom, and the next that has a bust, or achieving artificial prosperity at the expense of future generations" (027).

Intergenerational wellbeing is also about ensuring young people have opportunities and that decisions are made to support that (021). Further, there is a sense that intergenerational wellbeing should go further and be aiming for an improved quality of life for the next generation. However, some feel we are losing this value, saying "the idea of sacrificing for the future generations used to be very commonplace, but it seems to have maybe petered out a little bit" (028).

## 6.3 Embrace new success paradigms

### 6.3.1 Beyond GDP

At least one in five interviewees believe that how Australia defines success must be reflected in the measurements we use as a society. However, there is a concern that what we use to measure success, primarily through Gross Domestic Product (GDP), does not encapsulate what is most important to us. For many, success for Australia means less reliance on GDP and chasing of GDP growth in the current form (006, 009).

GDP was called into question by interviewees for its focus on growth and the economy at the expense of people and planet. For many, a successful Australia is one which goes beyond GDP and a focus on material goods to embrace social and environmental considerations. There is a strong sentiment that success must incorporate and embrace social and environmental elements that have not been given or cannot be assigned monetary value. Interviewees highlighted a number of areas including, our wellbeing, different types of care, and building and maintaining relationships.

Happiness as a measure of success was proposed as one such alternative to GDP (009) and New Zealand's wellbeing budget was also highlighted (032). "Having a society that feels happy" was linked to people having a sense of connection to their community and feeling like they are making a contribution (028), whether through paid work or care work. One interviewee reflected on recently having a child and that "we need to recognise and value all work":

> "We're chasing GDP growth. But if we can break out of the current thinking of everyone needs to contribute to GDP growth, [then] I think everyone will be much happier, which I feel that's what success should be measured by, how happy, how content are people with their lives?" 006

Another described the relationship between GDP, tax, and the household economy (or care economy). "GDP is an important measure for tax because it essentially measures the monetised economy". However, it does not measure what is not "monetised" (and not measured in the economy) such as the benefit of living with your family or the benefit of love or care (045). Although, the two are mutually exclusive, wherein "the market economy sits on top of the household economy, the care economy, like a layer cake or a pyramid. In many ways, the care economy is even bigger than the market economy" (045).

As one interviewee remarked, "[another] aspect of the non-accounted for economy is, of course, the environment" (045). Incorporating nature into measurements of success reflects that, "not every dollar is the same. When you look at the earnings profile of a company, is [it] deep, responsible and sustainable? Or is [it] dark red, which is easy money, quick and unsustainable?" (027).

Success is recognising that the environment is interconnected with society and the economy. An interviewee pointed to Kate Raworth's model on doughnut economics as an alternative measure – "that space where we live underneath the environmental ceiling, and yet provide a fair social foundation for all" (039). Creating a sustainable future(s) would "embrace the environmental agenda fully" and look to opportunities beyond those that do damage to the environment (041).

It will require a "fundamental flip":

> "How does Australia succeed as a nation? We need to shift to a way of living that accurately reflects finite and infinite resources. So ultimately, a far more

> sustainable way of life. And it's sustainable indefinitely. Not just for the next three to five years, but indefinitely for millennia. **That's a fundamental flip to happen.** For as long as we're going to be driven by metrics such as GDP and political systems where issues that should never be politicised are used as ways to garner votes on a three-year voting cycle, we're screwed" (044 – emphasis added).

Many also see the need to change societal norms and expectations as attached to material goods. Decoupling this attachment from achievement and happiness could lead to a more successful Australia. Breaking out of the cycle of endless capital accumulation, with "a few less toys and a few less trinkets, might actually make a more just, a more successful society" (037) and allow us to simplify our lives with more time for things that truly matter (007). Where all our basic needs are met, everyone can "experience a joyful life", then we can have time to "do other things, like spend time with our families and friends, be creative, create culture and community, and have access to beautiful nature" (047).

### 6.3.2 The public interest, the common good, the public good, a greater good

> "Success is around a broad conception of the common good… without a conception of the common good – what we share in common - we don't exist as a successful polity." 025

The common good, greater good, public good, and the public interest are posited as a compass to guide decision-making and a means to bridge divides and conflict at multiple levels of society. By "ways of articulating the common good" we have "ways of ensuring legitimate decision-making and ways of resolving intractable conflicts" (025). Recognising that it is a relatively ambiguous and amorphous term, and unlikely to ever be a definition upon which everyone will agree, nonetheless it could serve as a useful goal.

The common good is about the community, not the individual. It is "equitable, fulfilling, sustainable" and provides a counterpoint to individualist philosophy. The idea of the common good embodies each person as part of a bigger whole, "a sense of what's good for society and us as individuals in society" (016). It is about the many, not select powerful interests. It is about the long-term interests of the population:

> "The greater good ⋯ is in the long-term interest for the bulk of the population, rather than the short-term interest of some small and vociferous vested interest group. I think Australians are very good at recognising noisy vociferous special interest groups, and sort of hosing them down, no matter how well connected they are. And that, is really important." 037

Importantly, the common good is something universal that belongs to the public. It can be ours to reclaim "in a really practical way", by stopping the privatisation of public goods, like hospitals (020). Reflecting on a program that directly engaged with small focus groups about the public good, one interviewee said:

> "So, someone in one of my focus groups said to me, 'you know it's like the government has assumed we have a set of values, but we don't have a national consensus about what those values are'. I've really liked [the public good] as a term because it's about the needs of people on and planet over, the wants of money and market, and it's about making sure that the things that we decide as

> a community are important are actually available to people who need them, regardless of the cost." 020

The importance and potential of trying to understand and define the common good, and similar terms such as the public interest is something we wholeheartedly believe in at Next25. Our other research program, Navigator, uses the public interest as an anchor to understand, from the public's perspective, "What future does Australia want and are we on track?"

## 6.4 Embrace a common view of what brings us together as Australians

Embracing a common view of what brings us together as a country, across all our differences, is another theme that arose when envisioning success for Australia (mentioned by at least 11 interviewees). This vision depicts a country with high levels of social cohesion, where the "common good" could serve as a unifying goal to guide decisions and enable us to bridge divides. Underpinning this is the need for a national story that recognises the importance of all communities who have contributed to the nation. This national story needs to understand and define who we are, what we believe in, and what we stand for as Australians.

### 6.4.1 Cohesive society

Success for Australia is a country where "everyone connects, matters, and belongs" (020). A place where everyone, each sector of the community, feels safe and comfortable in their home, their workplace, and their community (003). A country where we embrace togetherness and social cohesion, which is simultaneously built on respect for and encouragement of difference:

> "My overall hope for [a] successful Australia [is] that we can comfortably interact together and appreciate each other's differences, allow individuals to be different, but to become part of a cohesive society." 003

Many interviewees who see success as an inclusive and cohesive society also connect it to fairness and reducing inequality gaps (020; 037). "The quality of society is how it treats the under privileged or the disadvantaged. And so, to me, what success for Australia looks like is cohesive and inclusive" (037).

### 6.4.2 An Australian story that embraces everyone

> "I think Australians are unsure of our future. The key is that we don't know our past … we've really got to ask ourselves, if we don't understand the past and celebrate the past and know the history, our future has no fundamental basis. [There is] no foundation for the future." 051

As discussed with interviewees, Australia has an incredibly rich history that has shaped the country as it stands today, both the good and the bad. The Australian story dates back at least 80,000 years to the traditional custodians of the land, where truth telling is an essential part of success for Australia and reconciliation with First Nations (Section 6.2.16.2.1). In the past 230 years since colonisation, innumerable communities and individuals have contributed to Australia's success today, and it is important this is recognised and embraced for a more holistic and inclusive Australian story. Engaging with our past is foundation for our future, as it informs our present and

shapes the future. This knowledge is key to understanding the broader historical, political, and social forces that influence the circumstances of an individual or community:

> "You're never going to understand why things are the way they are right now. You're not going to understand why, a white Australian man is naturally going better than an Indigenous Australian who's [for] better or worse been oppressed for tens of dozens of generations, right? These are all contributing factors as to why people start off in a worse spot than other person today" 018

The interviews highlighted great potential for a renewed Australian national story, which is mindful of shortcomings and flaws within our current approach and telling of history. It is about being inclusive and appreciative of all who have come before and all who are here now. In the eyes of some interviewees, an updated narrative for Australia would move away from the dominance of the American national story (043) to create our own narrative that is representative of our diverse population. "There's no question that the mainstream media is increasingly out of touch with Australia … not everyone shares the same national pastimes of cricket, AFL, and rugby league" (028).

Furthermore, interviewees reflected on a need to go beyond an Australian story that is male, white-washed, and narrow in its historical focus. Currently, "it's about men" (051), and "we teach our kids nowadays in terms of the First Fleet in [the] British colonisation of Australia. It's very, very, very whitewashed, most of the history picks up from 1770" (018). But Australia is a multicultural country, with so many cultures, ideas, foods, and ways of living.

> "If we look back at our history and recognise that there has always been diversity ... it's very easy for someone who neglects Australian history to be racist, to say, an Asian person. The classic adage of like, I grew here, you flew here. But if you really knew Australian history, Asians have been here since the gold rush. Americans have been here since the Gold Rush; the Dutch have been here forever … There have always been minorities in Australia, it's not a new thing, the majority of White Australians have only played a part [in] history for 300 years." 018

> "Women paid an enormous price [for] this country over the last 200 years, and it's not talked about. It's about men. But what about the women and their sacrifice? Personally, my grandmother and great grandmother made horrendous sacrifice for their families, this country, and it's not talked about…we have a lot to be proud of." 051

Australia needs to become a country that is comfortable dealing with our past and does not work to avoid or hide it. We must embrace important lessons from the past and should not reduce history to simplistic retellings or binaries. "This country won't talk about its history … there's such an extreme desire to hide the past" (051). There is consensus and strong sentiment that telling our history is not about "persecution" (051), or placing blame or guilt:

> "It's not about guilt tripping white people.... it's more [about] saying, look at how much more history we have than what you think there is, isn't that awesome?" 018

The Australian story is about remembering and embracing those who have been forgotten or omitted because their story is a hard one to tell. Often, this can be difficult or confronting. There is bad mixed in with the good, and we need to reconcile both. One interviewee pointed to the

church as an example of this, “if you were involved with church activities as a Reverend preacher today, you [would] probably want to run away” (051).

Our misunderstandings and mis-telling of the Australian narrative has led to what interviewees see as an outdated sense of self that is being carried out on the world stage. “We’re dining out on something that was probably appropriate before the First World War” (030).

However, our nation has a rich history to draw upon. Australia has incredible organisations, individuals, community spirit to be proud of. One interviewee said they feel the overlap between the Anzac myth and the Rural Fire Service is a missing sentiment in Australia’s narrative, “That mateship, the sense that you have to look after others … you want people who are willing to work together for the greater good,”

> “If you think of Australia as the land of droughts, floods, and rains, there are often those sorts of emergencies where neighbours have to help neighbours, otherwise they all go down … It’s really important that if you try and function as an isolated atomistic individual economic unit, with disregard of everybody else around you, it's almost impossible to succeed in Australia. So having that support network or trying to build one is really important. And those that do try and trample over public interest usually get pulled up short. The public [recognises] if there's some very rich or powerful organisation that is going to start trampling over the public interest.” 038

## 6.5 Embrace systems renewal

As we face many “complex adaptive challenges” (025) now and in the future, interviewees spoke of continual systems renewal as their version of success for Australia. A few key, overlapping features are identified as characterising this approach:

The first is a system that acknowledges and understands complexity and systems (009; 025), including inherent interdependencies and adaptiveness. It is “the opposite of silos and layers” and instead takes a collective view of the whole, and relationships between all elements, including our connection to Country (005).

Second, a successful system is one that is capable of continually evolving and improving as needs arise, to proactively keep pace with rapid change. It is one that recognises “progress is best made through learning and experimentation” (009). It must mirror the environment, “as society changes, young people change, needs change, [so] the system is going to be constantly needing to change” (026). As one interviewee pointed out, it is not necessarily a set, steady “state of success” or a specific benchmark to aspire to. Rather, it is about the approach and process we take, one that embodies:

> “[A] continuing capacity for development and review of actions to be an equitable, fulfilling, sustainable society, and effective international citizens… it's really a process focus through which ideas and actions are refined, examined, critiqued and developed … A workable and improving system.” 016

> “[As] needs change, the system is going to be constantly [be] needing to change. So don't just build one and expect that to work for 1000 million years, it's going to need to change [and] build that [into] the system.” 046

And finally, a successful system is one that is truly democratic, constructively engages citizens, and fosters healthy relationships between leaders and the public. Put simply, "the area of change is [a] democratic process" (026):

> "What's needed for Australia, to be able to deal with the radical uncertainty of the next century and beyond, are better ways of engaging citizens in legitimate and trusted processes to make decisions in the common good. And that itself is a political project." 025

Such a shift would promote deliberation and "move us away from that surface foam of conflicting issues and interests, [to] go down to the structural issues … decisions that move us towards civil debate around what the common good is at a national level." (025). Again, it involves an approach and a process which is built into our model of democracy and governance, that understands and balances different interests, is transparent, and makes data-driven decisions, enabling us to "self-organise as a species to deliver better outcomes for ourselves":

> "Success for me is having systems in place, in our institutions, who are responsible for making decisions that are considerate of the needs of community now and into the future, that they have systems in place to truly understand social issues and make decisions that are in the best interests." 026

Politics is highlighted as a key part of the future-making system, which in addressing and incorporating these characteristics could transform Australia (009; 025). Importantly, these three characteristics overlap and interact in a loop, as one interviewee nicely summarises:

> "A successful future vision for Australia is a renewed vision of government at all levels at federal, state, and local … which focuses **not just on a new way of doing things, but on a new belief system**. And the beliefs that we want government to start acting upon … is that the world is complex. We need government to think in systems and embrace complexity. We need governments to start believing in the power and importance of human relationships. And the belief [that] progress is best made through learning and experimentation. And those are all the loops. Because **if you understand the world to be complex, then the way that you nurture healthy systems is by nurturing healthy relationships. The way that you design services and policies and interact with a complex system is through integration, your experimentation, iteration and learning."** 009 – emphasis added

# 7 The Current State of the Future-Making System

*What are the trends, patterns, underlying structures, and mental models that influence the current state of the future-making system? Who are the actors (individuals, groups, organisations, institutions) and relationships that play a key role in determining the future for Australia?*

These are the types of questions we explored with interviewees to gain insight into how they view and understand the current state of Australia's future-making system (for an overview of the future-making system see Section 4.1).

Several key themes have been unearthed through a sense-making and synthesising process by Next25. The findings illustrate how the state of the current future-making system is perceived by

those within the system. The themes are explored in further detail throughout this section of the report.

With regards to who is currently influencing the future-making system, an overwhelming number of interviewees came to the same conclusion. Many pointed to politicians and the media as key in setting the agenda and determining decisions that impact the future. There is concern that expertise is being ignored and that citizens are not represented or engaged enough in the system. Likewise, while some see business as fulfilling a public good more than government, many interviewees also raised concerns regarding the heavy influence of money and big business, such as lobby groups and media influence.

## 7.1 A system driving unbalanced outcomes

### 7.1.1 Wealth disparity and disadvantage

> "We've got an increasing number of millionaires and multimillionaires in Australia while we've got increasing rates of homelessness…There's lots of gross inequalities in our society that need to be addressed." 015

> "You can tell the quality of the people by the quality of the most marginalised." 032

Interviewees are concerned that, in Australia today, we are seeing an increase in unbalanced outcomes across the country, which is often characterised as economic inequity or inequality. As some reflected, while Australia does not have the acute wealth disparity seen across the globe, "it [wealth disparity] has been growing over the last decade or so, that doesn't seem to me like the mark of a successful country" (017). Not only is the issue of economic equity and minimising wealth disparity important to interviewees in a values and moral sense, but many also believe balancing economic outcomes is vital for upholding social cohesion and functioning systems. As one interviewee explained:

> "I believe a lot of that dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement comes from them feeling like they've missed out, missed the boat. Everyone else is winning in this system, and they're not. They've got nothing to lose by not caring about the system. That's why I think we need to keep an eye on economic inequality. I think it is fundamentally destabilising if it continues." 050

Numerous interviewees called out the poor treatment of marginalised people and groups, including First Nations, refugees, and people living in very rural areas – many of whom have a lower quality of life than most Australians by objective and subjective measures:

> "We've been quite blind to the exclusions and quite blind to gender and racial equity, particularly blind to First Nations inclusion and equity. Blind to our own racism towards immigrants and refugees. Those are things that we sort of know, but we are not terribly systematic in addressing them and remedying them." 017

Interviewees view good education as the core mechanism to improving outcomes for disadvantaged and marginalised groups. However, many are concerned that the trend of moving towards a model of profit in education itself is continuing a cycle of the reproduction of inequalities. As one interviewee said, "putting up the prices of education is punishing those who

are poor" (032). While another asserted, "it seems like access to education [is] only open to people that can afford to be there" (052).

> "Within education, there's just a reproduction of the social inequalities [that] gets played out, based on where people are born, based on the social capital that surrounds them, based on the resources that they have." 013

These reflections on education show how the pursuit of profit has undermined Australia's success by further entrenching disadvantage for many marginalised people. This is a sentiment conveyed by many interviewees, which is explored further in Section 7.2.3.

### 7.1.2 Intergenerational disadvantage

An uneven distribution of wealth across generations is another prominent concern for interviewees. Some pointed to emerging outcomes showing that older generations are financially better off than younger generations in Australia (see for example, *Generation Gap,* Grattan Institute, 2019). As one stated, "in real terms, young people's wealth has not moved for 20 odd years…Even though they've contributed a lot, they're growing our tax base, and Australia is becoming wealthier, [but] young Australians aren't seeing a share of that wealth in real terms" (019). As another interviewee explain:

> "The accumulation of asset returns or wealth in older generations who have had the benefit, both of high economic growth over periods of decades, high wage growth, and of a very substantial increase in asset values, particularly land and housing, and the private superannuation system and a massive increase in equity values over time. The intergenerational aspect of that, is that wages have stagnated for about a decade now, and economic growth is slow. That's partly population driven as the population ages and fertility rates are lower. And inevitably, I think economic growth is slower and of course, we face environmental risks. So future costs of course, and also constraints on growth maybe or else growth needs to be reoriented. So, these are the specific issues and the critique of the current tax system, this is a reasonably well-known critique in Australia is that the system is biased against, or is overtaxing, perhaps the return to wages relative to the return to capital or wealth, and so those, usually older generations, not always but usually who have accumulated wealth or had wages in the past but are now living on assets facing a relatively lower tax burden. As the population ages, we also have a smaller working age population who will be taxpayers in future. And that smaller working age population must support the dependent population against the non-working population. And so, it's not just a function of specific aspects of Australian economic growth and tax system, but of the broader population trends, that we have these effects." 045

## 7.2 A growth-driven system

### 7.2.1 How we got here: the 80s and 90s in Australia

Upon digging down further into issues around inequality, inequity, and uneven distribution of wealth or access to services, interviewees would often reflect on how the system came to be the way it is today. These conversations were predominately around "the rise of neoliberalism from

the 80s onwards" (007), which many see as having set a course for Australia that emphasises market forces and de-emphasises the role of government and the common good. As interviewees explained:

> "Australia went from being socially capitalistic to full on capitalism through the 80s, and that liberalisation of capitalism and crazy money everywhere through the 80s made a lot of quite historically poor people very rich. So, the people that probably would have been most critical of capitalism 10 years earlier, were now benefiting from it. And it created this sort of drug-like effect where capitalism lost many of its objectors, or its people, who were thinking about its weaknesses. They just kind of disappeared. And by the time the 90s came, no one was questioning capitalism." 043

> "What we see today is partly an expression of neoliberalism. Hawke and Keating really drove the neoliberal with neoliberal ways of operating - even though they would've hated to have been called that, but effectively, they did. They did it in a way that got them effective, very good cooperation across various stakeholders. So, it was highly acceptable at the time. But I suspect that this notion of individualism and choice outside of government is more important than decisions being made by government. In other words, lowering the role of government in decision making." 040

> "In the 1990s, there was a more neoliberalist, emphasis upon market forces, on deregulation, and on a reduction of the role of government.... we couldn't talk about the national interest - national interest was disputed that such a thing existed. In my opinion, we have had 30 years really of reductionism in that ability to look forward on a national interest basis. Because everything was about market forces and competition, so locked into that domain." 016

> "We have much more precarity in our social system [than] we've had for a long time. If we think about that post war period, particularly up until the 80s, as being one where in many ways, societies in the developed world look towards creating a society, one of the roles of government was to reduce risk and reduce precariousness, in lives. Now, we've shifted well out of that space, we're now in a space where all our economic structures drive precarity. And in that case, it becomes much, much more difficult to think about the long term, just structurally no matter where you sit in the system." 025

Since the 1990's, a primarily neo-liberal or "late capitalism" (025) ideology has driven most decision-making throughout the future-making system. The impact can also be seen throughout the public service, with the emergence of New Public Management in the 1980s and 90s, as "a movement that said government needs to operate as a business, with metrics, KPIs and efficiency" (009). As another interviewee explained, we have seen a paradigm shift. They attribute this to neo-liberalism, where "we only measure things which are measurable in financial terms. And they're the only things that count or are important" (029).

### 7.2.2 "The dominant discourse", "A dominant common sense", "The untrue universal truth"

Since the 1980s, neo-liberal based ideology and narratives have become what one interviewee described as the "dominant common sense" (046), the "dominant discourse" (039) that shapes

Australia today, and a “universal truth that wasn’t very true” (043). As another interviewee (045) explained, the prevailing “ideology” that “the market is better than the state at delivering goods and services people want, and that we should not have deficit” sets Australia apart from other countries (particularly in care and education sectors).

As interviewee 039 said, neo-liberal capitalism assumes that “endless economic growth and free markets will find us the solution that we need, and that story is dominant and accepted on both sides of politics, it’s normally accepted”. However, they went on to explain that this “story about individualism, competition, separation from nature and each other doesn’t really mesh with the reality of how most people live their lives… How we measure growth doesn’t measure what’s important to us… **we're stuck in this story that had some value for a time that has now outlived its usefulness**.” (039 – emphasis added). Another interviewee sees these narratives being shaped by the norms and mindsets that guide us as individuals. They explained that:

> “The stories we tell and the narratives we co-create have an impact on the collective values and mindset of a society. Most Australians believe in the stories and the narratives that buy into and align with the neo-liberal agenda. That people need to fight, step on others, and elbow their way to succeed instead of ‘we’re all in this together, let’s trust each other.” 009

Part of the reason why neo-liberalism is so embedded in Australia is that it is perpetuated by a “self-supporting system”. As one interviewee said, “All actors are acting together to prop up the narrative of neoliberal capitalism. If any one of those actors suddenly started telling a completely different narrative, the system would collapse. And so, it's a self-supporting system” (037). Others see those many who are in power and successful as “beneficiaries of the neo-liberal perspective, and in their minds, it’s been very good to them and there’s no need to challenge that system” (007). However, “a longer historical perspective and telling different stories frees us up from the idea that nothing can ever be different to what it is now” (007).

### 7.2.3 Undermines success for Australia

> “I think for any system to function properly, it has to have a healthy tension. Let's look at the economic phenomenon of neo-liberalism. It's such a great project theoretically, efficiencies and transfer of markets and massive mobility of workforces, and the efficiencies of all those things are built into that. So, it's great but it rips a heart out of communities, it rips a heart out of people. The ability to come up with the idea is brilliant, theoretical ideas are brilliant, right? But we've got to understand that society is not a perfectly controlled lab.” 034

Interviewees noted that while there are many positive elements to the way a neo-liberal paradigm has driven decision-making in Australia over recent decades, it has also been “a big cause of inequality in Australia” (047) that “favours the rich” (009). As interviewee 047 explained, the current prevailing ideology “encourages handing over more power to markets, companies, and people who already have means” resulting in those who already “have less and less support becoming more and more unequal” (047).

> “There's so many things in the system that are biased towards using the market. We know the market doesn't work; neoliberalism failed around the global financial crisis.” 029

Furthermore, this movement towards privatisation and smaller government has caused interviewees to feel concerned that the national good is being undermined (043). As one interviewee stated, “as government steps back and as things get privatised, it starts to cost money to hang out” (020), and it gets more difficult regulating privatised industries and ensuring they behave in the public interest (016).

Everything is commoditised and based on a dollar value, meaning that there is no incentive to consideration of social or environmental factors. As interviewee 032 explained:

> “There's no dollar figure on reflective practice because you don't see an immediate outcome. It's then delegitimised, and people don't see it as being that important because, what am I doing? What's the outcome? What's the product from this.” 032

The system is in a place where, because it prioritises numerical values, the voices most emphasised are “more skewed towards businesses and lobbyists focusing on numerical values” (006). This prevents a richer representation of those contributing to decision-making for the future. Furthermore, these conditions mean that “we only measure things that are measurable in financial terms” (029). And, as outlined in Section 6.3.16.3.1, measuring success in purely financial terms is barrier to achieving success for Australia.

Finally, interviewees are concerned about the impacts this has upon the relationship between politicians and the public. As one put it, elections tend to be fought over which party will save you more money “It’s like Woolworths versus Coles [saying], ‘We’ll reduce your health costs’ and ‘We’ll reduce your childcare costs’” (029). This is a product of “the assumption that voters can be bought”, which interviewee 029 sees as “part of the reason voters are deep distrustful. They might respond to being bought, but they don’t like it. They’re being treated like customers” (029).

### 7.2.4 Beginning paradigm shifts and barriers to change

While interviewees are concerned about the dominant growth paradigm embedded in Australia, there are many places across the system where the narrative is evolving. Many within the system are recognising that “fundamentally, the neoliberal agenda is an economic agenda, and I think that until we start to address that, [it] is constrained (009). In particular, the concept of Donut Economics from Kate Raworth was identified multiple times as a viable alternative that addresses the issues of the current system in a realistic manner (009; 039).

Furthermore, it’s not just academia and the non-profit space where these conversations are taking place, but also “amongst business circles, with very powerful and influential businesspeople now starting to think about these questions. Despite what people say, not all businesspeople are evil, and many are motivated by wanting to create a better world” (009). For example, ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance) is a priority and “hot topic” for many investors and “main global capital providers” (035).

However, even if ESG goals are valued by business leaders and investors, interviewees noted that “our leaders still need to be setting the tone and driving change”, because “as much as we’re good corporate citizens, we’re all capitalists” (035). As another interviewee explained, “the current subsystem around corporates and corporate Australia is broken and flawed and definitely [creates] incentives for CEOs and boards in the wrong direction. Not just because they [CEOs] are greedy…In a sense, everybody wants dividends, everybody wants their franking credits. Everybody wants” (027).

Furthermore, the concept of Stakeholder Capitalism, rather than Shareholder Capitalism, has also become a dominant global conversation. As one interviewee explained, the concept has been rejected by many prominent Australian businesspeople. "The Business Roundtable of US, which is sort of the equivalent of the Business Council of Australia, took a position that we need to move away from shareholder capitalism to stakeholder capitalism for business to maximize value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders. However, when that debate came to Australia, there was a vociferous attack on it. You had legal opinion floating around, which said this would make things too confusing and director obligations would get obfuscated, and it would be too much of a risk. Basically, the Australian corporate system took a view that now we're not going down that path, [but] we're surprisingly going to stick with shareholder returns as the key objective. And, economists also wrote quite extensively, actually favouring the Australian opinion, basically saying, CEOs should not think [so] highly of themselves, that they can solve these problems, and to leave the government to do what the government is good at" (027).

## 7.3 A stagnant system

### 7.3.1 Australia's had it too good and we've become complacent

Reflecting on the past decades of Australian decision-making, many interviewees expressed that Australia's continuous economic growth and general success has made the nation complacent. Furthermore, in a country that "prides itself on fiscal performance", for some, Australia's emphasis on economic performance as a nation is keeping us attached to an "extreme" (007) preference of maintaining a status quo. As some interviewees put it:

> "It's 28 years of uninterrupted economic growth [that has] allowed us as a community to become fat and happy. By that, I mean, by being complacent. We stopped thinking about what it was, where growth came from, and why you had to work hard to get it, and why it was important to share around." 022

> "It's possible that Australia's 30-year run of extraordinary growth and wealth creation has, in some ways, allowed us to stop paying any attention to the machine that makes it all possible. And so, our good fortune has bred complacency." 007

> "I think we're stagnated. So, when people are not faced with an urgency, they become complacent, and they look inward at their own comfort." 041

Notably, interviewees are not just referring to complacency among leaders and institutions, but also across the public. As another explained, "There's always seemed to me to be this passive attitude of Australians. And I wonder if it's because in terms of privilege with a lot of other countries, most of us *don't have it too badly*, in quotation marks, and so there seems to be this attitude of, 'eh it doesn't really affect us'" (032).

### 7.3.2 Lack of vision and reform in politics

Many interviewees link Australia's sense of complacency to a lack of vision and reform – and the impact this has in a rapidly changing and uncertain world.

> "We need that national vision and we're lacking that at the moment." 045

A consistent theme across interviews was that there are no political leaders today articulating a national vision for the country or introducing genuine reforms. As one interviewee explained, “The major political parties are responding rather than leading, there’s a lack of vision in those groups” (007).

Incentive structures in the political system create conditions that do not empower or enhance the likelihood of expressing a vision or introducing new reforms. As one interviewee said, “Government is often the gatekeeper of reform” and “the people who are meant to do the reform are the ones who may have created the problem in the first place. It’s a vicious cycle” (049). Moreover, according to several interviewees, creating new policy and reforms are not the priority for governments. Instead, it is about staying in power, not creating genuine reforms (030).

Interviewees recognise that the backdrop of the current state, including a “competitive” political environment (007) and increasing pace of change and uncertainty (051), creates conditions that make long-term thinking, risk taking, and visioning difficult – particularly for politicians:

> “Politicians hamstrung the whole time about external forces, whether it's the GFC, or pathogens, or climate change, or China. Somehow deal with all that nonsense and stay focused on the future. And that would be very, very demanding on these people.” 051

The fast-paced, 24-hour, reactionary news cycle can mean that “there's just no room for politicians to even slightly put out something that is long term” (012). As interviewee 022 explained, this “doesn’t give people the opportunity and time to be able to tease out issues”- which has led to a completely new policy-making environment over the past ten to 15 years. Interviewees also noted that the way the public respond to political failure heightens risk aversion in politics:

> “The big change needs to be the way that we actually respond to failure. So, I think one of the reasons that there is an aversion to failure is because the reaction is swift, we are very good at setting up a royal commission, we're very good at inquiry. We are very good at rooting out and finding blame when things go wrong. We're very good at kind of shutting the book on people that we deem to be failures.” 019

> “But I think, sometimes I look at politicians and I feel like they have all the power. But at the same time, they're totally subjected to the will of the people and the media kind of lambasting them. They're almost afraid to act.” 028

> “Politicians are much, much more wary [of] doing anything that they would think is brave, and I think it [has] led to self-censorship. I think, collectively, we have got into this habit of blaming our politicians. And it's all about their inadequacies, rather than the fact the world has changed. And we need to think about how we [can] support them so they can do a better job, [and] do better at the job that we want them to do. So, it's a bit of a chicken egg situation.” 022

> “It seems to me the first recourse is setting up a verbal battle against the politicians in power rather than a constructure suggestion. We should be disregarding or engaging with ideas based on the merits of the proposal, and not who is making the proposal.” 041

These conditions mean that for politicians “because of the backlash, it’s just not worth it” for them to introduce any type of radical reform or thinking (019). “They don’t want to rock the boat, and no one is willing to stick their necks out” (019). As interviewee 002 reflected, “we don’t have leaders who are willing to take risks by offering a different future”.

The Federal election cycle has been called out as a driver of the short-term decision-making seen across politics. As one interviewee explained, the desire to get elected and stay elected can take up a significant portion of a politician’s time and energy (038). The “election cycle process means the parties have to play to whatever the populace wants and use short-term phrases rather than engaging thoroughly with clear policies” (013). This means “no one actually rates, or cares about the policies. There’s no long-term view, just a three-year election cycle” (013).

> “Decision-makers in politics are driven by the political cycle. They're either spending half their time being elected, or a quarter of their time being elected, half their time managing, and then the other portion of their time being re-elected. And so, I think that actually limits the amount of long-term thinking and courage that it takes.” 038

> “Decisions aren’t made in the public interest; they’re made in the short-term interest of the public because then it delivers electoral benefit.” 023

Box 3: Looking back on visions from past leaders

**Looking back on visions from past leaders**

While reflecting upon whether leaders today implement long-term reforms or articulate a vision for Australia, many interviewees made references to past leaders. Many spoke of Hawke, Keating, and Howard, and how they successfully articulated and implemented their vision for Australia:

> “There have been points in time where we've had, you know, uniquely strong and able leaders in the political system who've made structural changes that have been important to the country. And I think you've got to go back to Keating really to find someone who spent their political capital doing things that had a big, long-lasting effect on changing the direction of the country. And they're few and far between.” 002

> “I think Howard was good. I think Keating and Hawke were good. And I can't think of anyone since Rudd, who was quite good. In a way he was savvy, but he didn't have the necessary skills to remain as a leader. So, yes, I think we've been missing that. That's a real challenge for your programming. You know, training people to be leaders. Unless they're in top positions and being strong and courageous, in a much more difficult environment it's I'll go with the short term. I’ll go with the easier decisions.” 008

> “John Howard was someone with vision, and not 100% aligned to mine. But he’s a person who spent a 30-year career pursuing a consistent set of principle-based objectives. And had the good graces never to sue anybody who attacked him for thinking differently. You know, Bob Hawke is someone who spent his whole career advocating the same things consistently. We kind

**Looking back on visions from past leaders**

of look around now, and I'm not sure where the Howards or Hawkes are right now." 017

"There's no one really shaping, or prepared to stand up and shape, the debate. So, if you talk to the bar room, they seem to like Mr. Morrison, he's done a good job, he's in front of COVID. But you don't get the view that there's a lot of inspiration here or putting your neck out, a la Whitlam, Howard, Costello - the big ones. So, we seem to be very much in a consensus position at the moment where no one is prepared to really make a big leap forward."051

"Certainly, under the Howard years, they did a very good job. On the base two levels of Maslow's theory. I wouldn't go above that for time being on Howard. But they did a very good job of righting the ship. Even as the sense of safety and security to cope with [the] unforeseen changes, having orientation in the world and being proud of ourselves as being fundamentally, at that stage a white nation, a Christian nation, at the bottom of the globe, I think that that worked very well. And we all wanted more of that." 051

"You knew absolutely what Gough Whitlam wanted in terms of the vision for Australia. You knew what Malcolm Fraser wanted, which was [to] just keep everything pretty much as it is, a few minor changes. It was quite clear what Hawke and Keating had in mind; they were very articulate. It was also quite clear what Howard had in mind again, and often in the case of the conservative politicians, it was, 'I don't want what they want. I'd rather keep what we've got.' But that's okay. You've got clarity. But if you look at leaders today, I have no idea what they stand for" 022.

"However, **even if you dropped a Hawke or a Keating, or even a sort of a younger John Howard into this environment, they'd be the same. We've got to be really careful not to look back wistfully**. And think that they were the good old days, because then … you get to my age and just become a grumpy old man." 022 – emphasis added

### 7.3.3 Long-term thinking and risk-taking in the public service

The public service is commended by interviewees as a "stabiliser" and "the best place for long-term thinking" (024), where "you can plan for very long-term things…20, 30, [or] 50 years ahead" (017). However, interviewees also noted that it is an environment that does not encourage risk taking or radical reform. A preference of small government has meant that in recent decades, "all incentives within government are aligned to make as few decisions as possible" (007; 042), which can limit the imagination of both the public and the government as to what they can do to reform and improve Australia. This is linked to the persistent neo-liberal ideology (see Section 7.2.2), where small government is favoured. As one interviewee explained:

> "Government tends to operate in a way which fixates on accountability and risk, and that creates really perverse behaviours, because what's actually driving them is a sense of wanting to fly below the radar, not taking risks and not get

> anything wrong. Rather than being driven by a sense of 'we want to make people's lives better'." 009

Furthermore, some interviewees (007; 017; 043) are concerned the increasing trend of outsourcing consultants and expertise creates a structure that discourages long-term, proactive approaches:

> "The intellectual firepower of government departments has just been sucked out and put into consultants. As a result, they're just reactive as a whole… there needs to be a rebalance, but it's not going to happen with the current expertise or capability." 007

In the current environment, where government is incentivised to make as few decisions as possible (007; and see Section 7.2), public servants can be discouraged from speaking out. In the eyes of interviewee 017, this has had a "chilling effect across the public sector" (017). As the reputation of the public service continues to degrade, we become more encouraged to see external advisors and consultants as the alternative "safe pair of hands" (043). However, this ignores that often consultants are not "selling recommendations" but "selling the masthead", and consultants are often hired to do things that are within the capacity of the public service itself (017).

> "There's been a diminishment of the quality of expertise in the public sector. That hasn't been [an] accident … There have been numerous cases where public servants have lost their jobs for speaking out against bad policy, [which] has a sort of a chilling effect across the public sector." 017

> "Government [has] lost confidence in itself and formed the habit of paying a lot of money for other people to tell it what it wanted to do on their brand." 017

Consultants are seen as a "safe pair of hands" to go to, but ironically, the government who bought the service still often shoulders the blame when contracted projects or initiatives go wrong (043). This creates a system of "zero accountability" and "the ultimate safety net for these firms (043). It also has concerning implications on transparency, as all the expertise provided by these firms is commercial in confidence. Therefore, these projects or initiatives are not subject to audits from the Auditor General, or to public scrutiny (as the public service is), nor are they peer reviewed for rigour and accuracy (as in academia).

> "No one ever gets blamed for bringing in a McKinsey or a PwC, or an Accenture into a business problem or a government problem, because they're seen as a safe pair of hands… So, it's almost like they're safe to go to, you won't get judged for going to them. Yet they have zero accountability if something does go wrong, because the owning party will get the blame. They've got themselves into a really strong, highly insured place of safety where they've become part of the system. They are the system. They're not advising the system. They are the system; they create the system." 043

> "[Third party consultants are] often more selling advice to clients than specific expertise, in the way that you would expect it from someone who's a researcher or a doctor or legal scholar." 017

### 7.3.4 Business seen to be filling the gap by some

While politics and the public service are seen as stagnant or complacent, many interviewees view the private sector as far more innovative and long-term in their approach. For example, interviewee 002 expressed that the most positive and ambitious reforms in Australia (including the introduction of tourism industries, developments in mining, and agriculture) have been driven by businesses taking advantage of opportunities, not political decision-making:

> "Is the expansion of the education system or the tourism industry in Australia a result of government decisions? No, it's been, you know, corporate opportunity, and people in those industries embracing those opportunities, with some government facilitation." 002

Regarding big challenges such as climate change, we are seeing the market "ultimately taking the lead in terms of innovation," which "the Federal government is being dragged [to] kicking and screaming (045). Interviewees said they are starting to see "evolutions in the private sector about where they invest their money" (032). Many also commented that business has been constructively collaborating with communities, non-profits, and philanthropists to "work together, create momentum, and apply pressure to transform what government does" (032).

## 7.4 A disconnected system

### 7.4.1 Silos and disconnection abound

> "I think that there are a few different systems working in parallel, sometimes intersecting like a Venn diagram, other times, just not talking to each other." 011

The future-making system in Australia is categorised as a complex-adaptive system, meaning that it consists of multiple complex and interconnected structures that adapt, mutate, and self-organise in reaction to changing environments. However, a key issue noted by numerous interviewees is that there is a lack of interconnection and collaboration across the system – particularly in politics and the public service. As one interviewee explained, in government "bodies are disassociated from another, and there's barriers between them that need to be broken down to create coherent ecosystems where all parts can interact and exchange information freely" (013).

Likewise, in academia and sciences, silos have been perpetuated "over many decades by funding processes and evaluation metrics used to progress one's career. It's easy to evaluate professionally within a silo than to have cross-silo evaluation" (040). However, this doesn't mean that collaboration and the breaking down of silos is not taking place across the expert-sphere. For example, there is a growing movement of transdisciplinary research happening in Australian universities and institutions such as the CSIRO (040; 044).

> "Collaboration and transdisciplinary research are becoming more common. But it's still very rare. And that's unfortunate. But look, I think the momentum is moving in the right direction. And that's being led by researchers, as well as being pushed by incentivisation of the funding options we have available to us. And I think that's all a good thing." 044

### 7.4.2 Disconnection across the Federation

Many interviewees also questioned the structure of Australia's system of Federation. In particular, they questioned the role and value of state governments in their current form. As some interviewees lamented:

> "One of the massive problems is the three layers of government. So, you know, if we could torch the state government, that would be [a] good start. New Zealand functions without a State Government, so I say, why can't we? Having a direct line between the Commonwealth and local areas would get more practical policy going" 005

> "I suppose it's not to say that we, you know, that we should change or remove them [state governments], it's just that they need to perhaps be more open to working together to be more collaboratively." 003

> "What's been clear in the last six months is that the distribution of powers between federal and state is now out of kilter. It doesn't serve us well. If you can't have a national strategy in a health crisis, then what's the point of a federation?" 023

However, COVID-19 has had a notable impact on how many perceive the role and value of State governments, in particular, the role they have in managing the health system and responding in a public health crisis. As two interviewees reflected:

> "State governments are currently having a positive influence on the future of Australia, regardless of their political affiliations. Their relevance has been highlighted in the last year - they have a different emphasis to Federal Governments. They're responsible for hospitals, play a big role in health issues, and they're taking the lead on health care and climate policies." 050

> "The introduction of the National Cabinet is a clear recognition that State governments have control of the health system. So, it forces everyone to work together, because one government can't do it alone" 018

However, these structures also reveal the differing priorities and incentives guiding different levels of governments. As interviewee 003 states, "we have a sense of competition between different levels of government as each one has their own agenda, and they're not working together" (003). Discord is seen in interactions between the Victorian State government and the Federal government, where "there's different agendas based on left and right politics" that "creates more conflict than it needs to" (003). This is of particular concern when "there is an outdated distribution of powers and responsibilities, where the State government runs the health system, and the Federal Government has the Department of Health" (023).

### 7.4.3 Expertise often siloed

Broad attitudes of distrust, disconnection, and aversion towards academia and experts were noted as significant challenges to entering a future where we need expertise now more than ever.

This aversion has been linked to growing inequality, uncertainty, and complexity in society, with people looking for answers and perpetuating a desire to blame the "elite". There is a sentiment that this is part of a broader worldwide trend, "a movement towards rejection of knowledge" and

"resentment towards the perceived elite" that academics are seen as falling into (009; 032). An ideological tilt is also occurring with declining support (both in funding and public sentiment) for universities, which are "really being sidelined as sort of leftist institutions" (009; 020).

Alongside this is the difficulty academia and experts have in communicating what can be very complicated information, especially in an environment of online sensationalist personalities and dissemination of misinformation. While there is recognition that academia can sometimes be a bit esoteric and exist in a bubble, there is also a sense their messages do not "pierce the veil" (032). Interviewees often pointed to climate change as an example, saying that science can be a foreign language to many, much like when Catholic church services were in Latin (020).

### 7.4.4 A breakdown between politics and expertise

The lack of engagement with experts and incorporation of expertise was perceived to be particularly prominent in politics. The role, power, respect, and recognition of the professional expert advisor has diminished (009; 040) to the point where there are fundamental fractures in the relationship:

> "There seems to be a breakdown in relationships between our elected parliamentarians and experts, particularly on the conservative side of politics, in that there seems to be a distrust of people, of experts." 050

In terms of when and who this started with, one interviewee pointed to Tony Abbott as beginning the "denigration of experts" in a "major way" (050). Since then, there has been a "reversion to right wing politics" and self-interest, rather than broader community or public interest, with:

> "A decreasing reliance on expert opinion to underpin decision making and an increasing adoption of business interests, or financial drivers, polluting the decision-making process. And that's dangerous." 044

Whether due to changing attitudes toward expertise, or the decreasing diversity and experience of our elected leaders (see lack of diversity and professionalisation in politics, Section 7.6) interviewees said they felt disappointed toward political leaders for being so poorly informed (017). This was especially felt toward ministers who have little knowledge or education on the portfolios that they are assigned, which again places the politicised process before the representation of the community (026).

There is also a note of caution, that political leaders who look for and always talk about the evidence (eg, Bill Shorten) can miss the more human side of people, "if you miss where people are at in terms of their values, their feelings, you can't get to their emotions, on whatever issue it is, it's so much harder. So, you might use evidence, but you can't ignore values" (008). As another interviewee pointed out, science or the economy, for example, cannot tell us who we want to be as a society, or what our priorities are. But nevertheless, they are useful tools to help us get there (020).

Where expertise is brought in, there was cynicism that it can be (and has been) manipulated and cherry-picked to suit a specific agenda. This practice is exacerbated by the combative nature of our two-party politics. Rather than guiding or informing decision making, expertise is used as a "justification for governments on their positions" (002). It then becomes "PhDs at 20 paces" because a credentialed expert can always be found to support a view, no matter what it is.

### 7.4.5 Experts and COVID-19, a pathway forward?

Despite this distrust towards expertise and its diminished capacity and role within politics and government, the past two years have shown a break in the status quo and the immense benefits of decision-making informed by experts (004; 005). COVID-19 has enabled us to "put expertise back at the table" (022) "in a really positive example of Australian leadership" (013), which has heightened our trust in politicians. It has been essential in our response to the pandemic and shown to be incredibly valuable, especially compared to other Western nations like the US and UK that took different approaches:

> "Expertise, was disregarded. Ironically, the success with which we've dealt with COVID has come about because we have [had] to listen to the experts. The interesting thing, in all of this, is the personal approval ratings of the Prime Minister, the Chief Ministers, [and] the Premiers. The public is actually putting more trust or faith in government at the moment than it's done in a very, very long time. The question for me is, could we maintain this on the other side?" 022

> "Twenty-twenty was unusual in that sense, because we did see … a return to listening to scientific experts. It was obvious, globally, that those who did listen to the science and made science-based decisions have come off exceptionally well. And those who didn't listen to the science have been badly torched. Sadly, the UK is a horrible example of that right now, as is the US. Luckily, we were able to ignore that the federal government and [allow] the states [to take] the lead in most of this, which I think is fantastic." 044

As a country, we have become more aware of the role and importance of professional public servants. For example, our medical officers, who have become "heroes" (040) and the sentiment that "experts are really, really important" (023). On the difficulty of communicating complex scientific information mentioned earlier (Section 7.4.3), COVID-19 has encouraged increased awareness of and reflection toward science. Additionally, the pandemic has shown not only how powerful science can be communicated, but also that it can be done in a way that people respond to (020; 040). Decision making has been perceived as more balanced, with less cherry-picking. We did not "stop using experts as a convenience when they haven't suited our argument" (023) and were able to handle complexity on multiple fronts, understanding the "parallel with the health of the economy and the health of people" (020). Interviewees expressed a hope and desire that this approach of listening to experts and acting quickly would be applied in addressing climate change (006; 020; 021).

## 7.5 Pockets of public engagement

### 7.5.1 Desire for more genuine engagement and bottom-up decision making

Several interviewees expressed desire for more genuine community engagement and greater, more diverse avenues to enable public participation within the decision-making process. Some interviewees described it as their utopia, or perfect world, that strengthens connections between communities and political representatives. They also said it could offer a model for bigger, broader systems change:

> "In my perfect world, it's the bottom-up approach." 018

> "It's a bit of a utopian idea, it comes back a little bit more to local councils interacting with their constituents … gathering some data and ideas and taking that up the line … it's using the resources that the council has and allow[ing] them to interact as state members to get the community's opinions and ideas promulgated." 003

> "How do we make our future? It's for smaller individual communities … when there's a bushfire, they will get together and help each other by pooling their resources and looking after individuals, land, properties, etc. Then you hope … government or business will see how a community has helped itself and they can adopt or incorporate some of those ideas or systems into bigger broader systems [and] extended to a wider level." 003

> "I don't know if all of our community structures have caught up with how to engage people meaningfully… So where do they find their sense of community? And how do we build structures where they still experience [a] sense of belonging and those things?" 012

There is desire for more experimentation with different models outside of the status quo that break us out of "this pervasive sameness" (028) and enable citizens to be brought back into the political process (025). Currently, parliamentary entry or participation in major interest groups are the clearest routes to policy influence, but "a large part of the community has already self-selected out of that process" (025). These are not options for everyone and nor should they be expected to be. Providing an alternative route that still enables citizens to engage in a meaningful way while maintain their current lives is important and engenders trust and legitimacy:

> "If we have much better structured and legitimate deliberative processes, then we're much more likely to get a much broader group of people being involved in the policy process, because there's an alternate route. I think [this] does a couple of potential things. One is, it's much more likely to engender trust in the process, in an outcome that you disagree with. So, it creates legitimacy … both of which are in short supply, [in] Australian policy decision making." 025

Interviewee 025 also notes that there are a number of aspects required to enable the full potential of legitimate deliberate processes. One, that there needed to be a commitment to run multiple and repeated deliberative approaches, not just one offs. Two, that the profile of these instances needs to be raised. And three, a need to institutionalise the use of these deliberative processes.

> "One of the repeated things that ordinary citizens say is they really like the aesthetics of deliberation. [It's] actually really attractive to people because it looks very, very different, actually watching people change their minds, discussing things civilly. Deal[ing] with issues of importance is something that people like to watch." 025

Citizens juries, assemblies, and forums were popular proposals put forward by a number of interviewees (007; 008; 012; 021; 025). Seen as the opposite to parliament, where there is mainly one dominant voice, citizens assemblies are a great way to involve a more diverse range of people, including those who are young, old, and from non-English speaking backgrounds aided by interpreters (021). Such forums can break down divides on challenges that have been politicised, like climate change (007). Further citizens juries are independent, unbiased, and can have an educative role where juries are presented with the relevant facts for the decision at hand (008). One interviewee also pointed to the possibility of institutional reform, where the senate could be

replaced by a citizen's assembly, although they note that this would require constitutional change (025).

There is a "huge amount to be done by community. There's a huge amount that government should do, but I am really afraid that they're going off the rails, so I think part of that is community has to get into that space" (020). Throughout our interviews, numerous examples of local decision-making were mentioned that demonstrate the value of lived experience. These are instances "where engagement has made a real difference [and] has resulted in better outcomes for communities and deeper understanding by experts, particularly in terms of social and environmental issues" (026). Some instances interviewees spoke of where community engagement has resulted in positive outcomes include:

- NewDemocracy Foundation's pilot studies: "are examples of really phenomenal ways decision-making has been changing" and offering something different. The foundation uses participatory democracy to decide things like water prices, noting that it is always going to be on a case-by-case basis (012; 019; 025).
- Victoria's citizen juries for water policy: as an example of institutionalising public engagement and lived experience, citizens juries are being used in the regulatory process for water authorities (025).
- A place-based approach: the way communities have rallied during the pandemic, designing their own COVID-19 response when government resources were lacking or slow. It is a great example for those with limited agency, who are "all of a sudden being forced into doing something on their own and realising the power of that is also going to hopefully be a driver of enduring change" (009).
- Braidwood newspaper: some in Braidwood just set up a community newspaper and it was already changing the community (020).
- Voices of Indi: A community run campaign that selected and successfully voted in two independents endorsed by the community of Indi (020).
- Indigenous fire practices: "There's a lot of history of our First Nations people who lived comfortably on this land for thousands and thousands of years, and they did low-level burning, and it was very, a very successful. We didn't have the presence of those experts and adopt their expertise" (003).

Interviewees also spoke of examples from overseas:

- France's engagement on climate change: "The process run by Macron in terms of climate change, that there was a clear, strong route to policy now …what was very clear was the level of really deep engagement you got from people involved" (025).
- Local councils in the UK: driven by lack of central government input due to Brexit and huge austerity budget cuts, "local councils in the UK are doing really, really amazing experimental work." Donna Hall also led reforms in Wigan. "She was like, what are we going to do? How do we continue to deliver services to citizens, and she said … we need to actually start engaging with citizens and say, this is your end of the bargain. This is our end of the bargain. We need to work together to make this happen, which completely transformed relationships between state and citizens" (009).

### 7.5.2 Existing mechanisms and attitudes toward public engagement

A prevalent concern expressed by interviewees is that quality public engagement is lacking. Today, some believe there are "fewer mechanisms whereby people are brought into a political process"

(025), despite a strong appetite from the community to contribute to decision-making (Next25, 2021). Whether it is a form to fill out or a didactic handing down of information with minimal interaction (020; 026), failing to engage the public adequately can lead to despondency, people not feeling heard, and fears arising over the unknown:

> "They didn't feel like they had a voice, like they weren't being heard. And they said, we want the government to talk to us, like you're talking to us, just ask us what we think. Don't make us fill in a form." 020

> "The approach to community engagement has always been about telling people what we know and feel comfortable telling them, and then asking them questions. It's not responsive. People are looking to understand things more than this. Fear is a driver for people to want to understand, it's also a driver for people to want to act and do things that protect themselves. I don't think we're getting that information at the moment. It's not because it's not available. It's just hard to find." 026

It can be difficult to successfully carry out public engagement and consultation, as well as being genuinely open to the information and suggestions that arise. Beyond minimal mechanisms for public engagement and a lack of interaction to adequately address people's fears, a number of limitations were identified in the scope and approach of public engagement. First, engagement can be "gatekeepery", where "the language is so inaccessible … having these conversations, you need a set vocabulary to be heard in those spaces" (049). Second, it is perceived as a customer relationship [with] management focused on complaints management and service provision rather than proactive stakeholder management (026). Third, consultation [is] generally undertaken "after the government has decided what it wants to do" as a "tick-box exercise" or it does an "announce and defend type style" and accepts submissions on it (010):

> "So, it's not actually a genuine consultation … you have an open conversation when you have not yet decided what you want to do. You might have an idea or strawman approach, but it's actually a genuine two-way conversation. Government does not have [this] on both sides of the Parliament, and at both the state and federal level, government is not particularly interested in meaningful dialogue." 010

Finally, it is used primarily for "very specific, very local concerns [where] it's less about big policy issues". Although, when it is about big policy issues, it can often be done in a very performative way with no clear route to actual policy decisions, resulting in negative consequences for the public:

> "I think one of the ways in which we can actually disenfranchise citizens from wanting to be involved is that, if you run deliberative processes that are largely performative, they don't have a strong influence on policy [and] there's not a route to that process becoming part of a strong decision-making outcome." 025

### 7.5.3 Lack of faith in ordinary citizens

Interviewees also spoke of other factors beyond limited mechanisms for public input that are impacting public engagement. Varying degrees of faith in the general public is also underpinning the disconnect between politicians, public service, and the public themselves. Even among interviewees there were vast differences in the perceived ability of "ordinary citizens" to participate in the decision-making process, or to determine it. Some pointed to our representative

democracy model, which allows big thinkers to guide our decisions for the nation. Those in government are seen as "think[ing] they know best" and failing to see the value in spending time or money in a process they don't think anything useful will come out of" (026).

> "When I talk to senior bureaucrats, there's a strong suspicion of what they might see as the qualifications or the ability of a broader citizenry to make good decisions." 025

> "It's the same reason we have representative democracy, because some people are trained to understand what the hell you're talking about … [but] they're not trained to understand economic structures and trade-offs, and trying to have that conversation with the broader populace is just really hard. It's going to be simplified to a point of being ineffective versus engaging with the Gonskis and the Catherine Livingstones of the world and getting them to get this is a far bigger multiplier." 027

However, others said this was a "technocratic assumption about ordinary citizens, an offshoot of the hubris that ordinary citizens are unlikely to be able to contribute much" beyond voting once every three years (025). Multiple factors are attributed to driving this belief, such as ego, superiority and hubris, no experience of legitimate deliberative processes (more detail in Section 7.5.2), and the bias within our system toward predetermined or controlled outcomes (025; 026):

> "So, you hear often people say, 'oh, we wouldn't want to let go of the policy pen too much'… When you have a legitimate deliberative process, you need to have given up your ability to control an outcome. We have a system that's very strongly biased towards wanting to run processes where the outcome can be predetermined or controlled. Whether that be a political process, or places influenced by an interest group." 025

> "Talking to senior decision-makers who have been involved in the deliberative process they often go, 'Wow, that was not what I expected, I expected that we'd have a whole lot of ridiculous debate, and the experts will be ignored.' I think there's a degree of hubris around this, 'I have been a secretary of department for many years, I went Princeton, what does someone who left school at grade 10 have anything to contribute to this process?'. But people who have been involved in that process uniformly seem to step back and go 'Actually, people made really reasonable decisions'. People with knowledge that is place-based, or occupation-based, that kind of tacit knowledge that comes from being part of a particular sector of society, were able to offer insights that I wasn't aware of, that stopped us making silly mistakes." 026

### 7.5.4 Valuing lived experience

Decision-making that is inclusive of lived experience and recognises its value is greatly important to many interviewees. Knowledge gained through lived experience can be just as valuable as traditional knowledge obtained through education or professional experience. It is "an ingredient that's being missed in a big way" but has great participatory potential (032):

> "A key part of this equation is participatory futures, actually leveraging and activating the expertise of lived experience and seeing it as an equally valid way of knowing as intelligence ... Because that's what happens when we tap into those ways of knowing in the context of specific communities to design different solutions. I just feel like that's a way out of some of this." 032

> "What we want to engage with is the collective intelligence and knowledge of someone who is not living a life that's largely insulated from the rest of Australian citizens, but

> someone who's living among the rest of Australian citizens to be involved in those decision-making processes. That's where I think a whole series of deliberative structures are much more likely to broaden the base of those engaged in politics." 025

It is about finding balance in the value we attribute to different experiences, "people's experiences are just as valid as where they went to school" (019). Those everyday Australians who are not necessarily a philanthropic donor or a board advisor have perspectives and opinions that must be captured, including in-depth community knowledge (011).

> "A person that has come from a different background … perhaps they're a refugee … a migrant … they may not have had the same educational opportunities, but they have incredible depth of knowledge that they want to share [and] represent, and they're passionate. Is that person even getting a go? Versus the person that went to a private school or Uni Melb, practiced as a lawyer [and] is now trotting a well-trodden path. Now, both of those people have merit, they obviously have different ideas that they want to bring, but how are we actually balancing that?" 019

> "This other cohort of people worth capturing … ordinary people who've got thoughts and great ideas, but also great currency in the tier [of] society which they currently operate. They know what's going on in their community [and] in their neck of the woods. If we only speak to people who are in our three circles … We're not going to capture everything that's happening in the day-to-day lives of ordinary Australians." 011

> "A hydrologist will understand how a river flows, but they won't understand exactly how it flows in a community and the impact of drought and flooding in those communities." 026

### 7.5.5 Engaging with young people

Valuing lived experience and engaging the public more deeply in democratic processes means engaging everyone, including young people. Young people have valuable perspectives that should be included in decision making. They may be less wedded to the existing institutions and structures, allowing them to see things differently and question the status quo:

> "People in decision-making spots have been there for a long time. The system is what they grew up in, maybe [it's] all they know … They haven't seen it done in a different way…I feel that's where young people can be quite helpful, because we haven't been corrupted [or] work[ed] in the system. We're like, well, why can't things be different? Why can't it be like this? That's where people who've been working in the space, can say, 'Oh, actually, it couldn't be like this, because of this reason' … and then that's where we could partner together and use both of our expertise to create this new system and what it could look like." 046

Young people were also highlighted for their understanding of systems thinking and their ability to harness collective action. "That's another thing about millennials ... they do things quite structurally, they're not thinking 'I'll just recycle' … they understand collective action, [and] they know [recycling is] not enough" (012). Which can also feed a lot of anxiety and a sense of powerlessness to influence the people with decision making power (012).

While recognising the importance of involving young people in decision-making is increasing, as is the uptake, it is still "very tokenistic and it's also not done meaningfully" (046). Another interviewee noted how, much like public engagement broadly, youth engagement is "a bit of a tick box, [politicians] are not doing it in a way that is consistent with actual good policy outcomes, genuine deliberate consultation, multiple consultations, co-design, all of the good things we expect with policy" (019). Rather, youth consultation is seen as speaking to a couple of young people, a ten-minute discussion with a youth reference council in their electorate, or a discussion with a niece (019).

## 7.6 Non-representative system

### 7.6.1 Decision-makers, leaders not representative

> "The biggest blocks are up the top. It's around how we do diversity and inclusion. And right now, I really feel like it's very one dimensional. It's very tick boxy. But it's also a lack of understanding around class and race in this country, and how it really festers into all of the systems and processes that we embody in our work, and how it keeps certain people out, and therefore, means cultures aren't shifting at all." 032

A strong sentiment expressed across many interviews is that people in positions of power are not representative of the Australian public. To many interviewees, Australia's leadership is perceived to be resoundingly "old, white, and male", much like our approach to telling Australia's history (see Section 6.4.26.2.46.46.4.2). This homogeneity is seen as "seriously harming" our ability to make good decisions for the nation, which keeps Australia stuck in the "same old" status quo and unable to move forward (015; 021). Moreover, the lack of diversity leaves leaders disconnected from the experiences of Australians, so as a whole, leaders "aren't in touch with what's going on" (049). An example that stood out to one interviewee is the corporate advisory group on transitioning Victoria out of lockdown:

> "There's six crusty, old blokes sitting on it, that are all rich, all massively entitled, that wouldn't really know what was going on for the owner of the $2 shop in the city. That [have] no idea what the Chinese cafe owners [are] going through in Chinatown. How can [these] six blokes be advising the government singlehandedly on how to bring us out of COVID?" 015

Creating and enabling a more diverse system, which includes addressing all levels of leadership, will involve sharing power and spending privilege and risk. As one interviewee states, "power is shared, it's innately finite" (018). This means that for leadership to be more representative, many of the current powerholders will need to cede power to provide the space for others to become leaders.

This involves challenging the "traditional approach of how people come into power, [where] you have to be male, in your mid 40s, [and] white, there's no space for anyone outside of that" (049). Breaking away from this mould is difficult, especially as many influential people are seen to be "desperately holding onto their power and staying in their jobs and roles far too long" (015). Moreover, the approach to sharing power doesn't need to be so fixated on loss, as there is so much to be gained from representation of the real world and not just a small minority (032).

Taking real steps and actions towards addressing diversity and inclusion beyond tokenism is vital to create a representative system. For interviewee 032, how CEO's "spend their privilege and risk" involves two components: First, involves a deep reflective capacity to ask, "looking at an intersectionality[2] framework, what's the power that I have? What do I have to do to share some of that power through taking risks and spending my privilege, [in a way that] has to be very actionable, that can't just be through words?" Second, is "building meaningful and deep relationships with marginal communities, to then translate what you're doing at this level through what they're telling you on the ground, but also, even more importantly, to be able to create, transformation in systems so those people can move through and up" (032).

Creating more representative leadership involves individuals, especially those who are leaders in their fields, educating themselves to shape their organisations' decisions and actions. Interviewee 017 reflected on their own personal journey of sharing power and spending privilege through taking risks:

> "I was over 40 before I really confronted my lack of having ever really cared enough to do anything about Indigenous disadvantage, and that the complacency of being not racist, sure I give money to Tranby every now and again, I go to demos. But what are you prioritising, at least as much as you prioritize your hobbies? Or your kind of recreation? The answer was not very much. I had a very confronting experience with some young Aboriginal and non-white colleagues. My attitude at the time was very much like, but I'm here to help, I'm here to help you tell me what you need. Let's fix this together. And I came at it unwittingly from a very privileged and patronising point of view, which is that we all have to kind of make an effort to get what we want, and to go hands off to be included and things like that. And this young woman said to me, it's not my job to help you be a better white person, 'you're in charge of this organisation, you fix it'… And I had to confront the fact that she was right and that it was my job to fix it. And I didn't know how and so that had to stop. And I went through a process of doing a lot of training and a lot of talking to people and introduced cultural awareness training, both at my work where we did sessions for dozens and dozens of people, and it's the blind spots, I guess. Partly, our overconfidence in our egalitarian and democratic institutions and governance means [that] there's a bit of a sense of 'how bad could anything really be here?'" 017

### 7.6.2 Lack of diversity in politics

Overwhelmingly, politics has been identified by interviewees as the area of leadership most lacking in diversity of representation. Structures, processes, professionalisation, and other barriers to entry, such as resources, are having a detrimental effect and "increasingly, politicians are coming from a smaller pool" (030). Even though we have a representative democracy, and theoretically people from any background can get elected (011), what we see in reality is very different. Interviewees pointed out how difficult it is for "ordinary" Australians to enter politics, and how most who do - and are successful at it – are well resourced:

[2] Intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

> "These systems reveal the same problem over and over again, that people who are the most under resourced, [those] people in our society don't even have time to be thinking about this stuff, even if they would make the most perfect leaders in our communities … this elitism that kind of runs through the DNA of so many institutions in this country is the thing that needs to be contended with first…What's the calibre of people that are even able to enter into these rooms? Why are they rising to the top? And pretty much every single person, they are resourced." 032

The pre-selection process is particularly seen as reinforcing the status quo, where "our parties attract people like themselves, predominantly" (021) and the two major "parties choose candidates, so there is a very limited pool" (019). This homogenising effect is strengthened by our two-party political system, a culture where "only certain kinds of people can work their ways into those parties" (032).

> "I don't think they want to change because they want people like themselves, otherwise it becomes difficult for them. If you've got someone in there who's not going to agree with your position, threatened across the floor, that's really destabilising…the way our system is structured is that we just get more and more of the same sort of thinking." 021

Further, politics is noted as becoming increasingly professionalised. The increase in career politicians means politicians are becoming even more detached from the real world. Alongside this, very few members of the public are involved in political parties in meaningful ways (012), which interviewees have linked to a distrust in politicians and disempowerment of the voting public:

> "We have too many people who are career politicians, who come out of a very limited section of society and set themselves to be politicians and are therefore very concerned to stay there …I'm not saying every politician, but on both sides of Parliament, there's a preponderance of professional politicians." 030

Although it was not always this way. One interviewee reflected on John Button's 2002 quarterly essay, *Beyond Belief: What Future for Labor?,* which compared the structure of the Whitlam and Fraser Cabinets to the Latham Cabinet. "You had this incredibly broad mix of people from a really wide range of backgrounds. You have ex police officers, ex academics, public servants, union officials, etc. The Latham Cabinet was almost 100% ex staffers" (025), which is a trend that has continued today. Another reflected on the much stronger three-party system in the 1980s, where previously, in both the LNP and ALP, politicians "would have done something and had a career beforehand" (022). Now, on both sides "they mostly play student politics," going from a junior advisor role to a senior advisor role, to pre-selection.

> "They are individually much narrower and come out of a much more homogenous machine now. They lack either the personal breadth that you saw in the past, and as a collective [lack] the diversity of experience that you've seen." 022

> "It's visible across both parties where the route to that office tends to now track through the internal machinations of a particular party. So, I think that creates a problem." 025

Interviewees spoke of multiple barriers, not only to getting into politics, but also to reaching a position of power. One interviewee discussed the pressures of maintaining office and toeing the party line while holding onto ideals and diverse thoughts (009; 019; 029). For Parliamentarians in the major parties, "the big thing is [that] you do what you're told" (029). "Politicians within parties have to follow party platforms and policies" (019), not only to align with the party, but to align to

the faction of the party you belong to. This can result in weakened party power overall, limited cohesion, and reducing politics to deal making and "owing others".

> "To get to a leadership position, you need to battle and have your nail claws out … and suck up to people and do all the things that corrupt you. You might enter politics as this really aspirational idealist young person, but by the time you've gotten to the position, either you drop out… because the compromises they have to make [are] too great… or the compromises that they are willing to makeshift them away from the person who they were when they were entering politics. So, I think it's really, really tough. And I think all the systems and structures work against it." 009

> "If you're a member of a certain faction, you vote for the people you're told to … there's certain things that you're allowed to follow. If you don't do that, you tend to be expelled from the faction, [then] you don't get on to any of the committees… So, you've got two split major parties, and if anything, that makes them less powerful and less likely to change because they spend most of their time worrying about what the other factions doing. You've got a real problem with that, and just changing leadership and changing modes … it's very hard to move anything because you've got this locked-in thing where Albanese is terrified the right is going to check him out … because the Labor Party's based on who you owe and how much you owe them. So, they back you for this, you back them for that, it's that sort of trading type thing. It's very hard to get ideas up." 029

### 7.6.3 Political disconnection from the public, desire for something different

A consequence of the professionalisation of politics, the "limited pool" of politicians, lack of diversity within politics, and limited public engagement (see Section 7.6.27.5), is that politicians are disconnected from the community they serve. This is further enabled by Canberra's distance from constituencies:

> "[Politicians] are also further away from the community, like their decisions don't have as much direct impact … they don't have to walk down the street … past somebody who's not happy with something, that their house has been taken away for a highway, half of a garden being taken away for a highway or a dam … The impact of not engaging is less on those elected officials. It's easier for them to lose touch, especially when working on a portfolio that doesn't have that much to do with their community that they hypothetically represent." 026

Interviewees expressed "an appetite for a different type of politics and a different type of conversation in Australia" (014). There is also a strong sentiment that we need to make it appealing for people to put their hands up (021) and attract people of calibre in order to harness the "best and the brightest" in Australia (027).

> "Big picture thinkers and decision-makers [need to be] in roles where they can consider very complex, difficult decisions, simplify them, articulate them clearly, create the case, and make things happen. Australia [has] those kind of people … they're [just not] running the governments around the country." 002

Having more independents and community elected members in parliament is also seen as a way of enhancing diversity - particularly, diversity in thinking - given the two major parties would be required to work with them by engaging in debate and compromise (021). Some interviewees see politicians who can appeal and resonate with the public as a breath of fresh air, and commend those like Jackie Lambie for their relatability:

> "She [Jackie Lambie] speaks the language of people, just regular people. She helps people break down policy, really complex policy issues, so they can understand it. And she is, at least, truthful. You just see so many people flock to that style … it's actually less about ideology and more about how it's being delivered to people." 032

> "What I've been trying to tell everyone [is], 'We've got an election coming up, are you going to run? Are you going to run? … Ordinary people can run for parliament.' [They tell me] I'm not camera beautiful. I'm not this. I'm not that. But like, have you seen Barnaby Joyce? How come he can do it?" 020

Although, there is a sense of caution in the optimism towards independents and the rise of micro parties. Often "to make a name for yourself", these micro parties distinguish themselves through "radical" or often divisive politics (025; 032).

However, interviewees are excited about some emerging diverse voices and within politics, with the examples of Penny Wong and Jordan Steel-John mentioned previously (see Section 6.2.4 on success as diversity6.2.4). The 'Voices for Indi model' was highlighted as a successful community movement, supporting candidates aligned with Indi's values and priorities to stand in parliament. The bottom-up, community approach means that leaders like Cathy McGowan and Helen Haines, "can be the courageous strong women that they are because they've got a whole community behind them, they're not about to be hung out to dry. Their campaigns run on values and integrity" (020).

> "We're also seeing this new wave of more traditional, grassroots politicians who are using the kind of classical social drivers to push agendas [that] really speak for the people they represent." 018

### 7.6.4 Diversity in business, non-profits, public service, and the media

While politics was most widely referenced for lacking diversity, this lack of representation also pervades throughout society. The "overarching ideology blocking it is white supremacy … [which] keeps particular people who are profiting off that system at the top" (032). At the moment, "what we've got is a homogenous, white, male, dominant everything and that certainly doesn't help" (009). Often, "you get a lot of strong lip service about supporting diversity" and it might be seen at the bottom of the organisation, but not at the top (036).

- Business: is seen by interviewees as having a lack of diverse leadership in the private sector. The ability of influential leaders in positions of power to make improvements is also recognised. These leaders can put their "deep reflective capacity" into practice and look "at an intersectionality framework" to examine the power they can share through a spending of privilege, which is in fact "very actionable". They're in the position to "create transformation in systems so those [marginalised] people can move through and up, advocating on the behalf of others" (032).

- Non-profit sector: “conforms to the status quo with most of the senior management or CEO positions held by white men with ridiculously small numbers of people of colour in our leadership” (032). Although, increasingly more white women from middle- and upper-class backgrounds are rising to power, which indicates how hard it is for marginalised people to rise up into a “dominant system that silences them inside of it” (032).
- Public Service: is described as quite diverse from the bottom up, but less so further up the chain. “The more senior you go, the more tight and conforming it becomes… you're squeezed into these kinds of little spaces where there's just really not much room to move. The higher you go, the less room there is for diversity, certainly diversity of expression, diversity of ideas and approaches, it gets really narrow very quickly” (036).
- Media: is described as having a challenge on two fronts. First, in telling a diversity of stories that reflect our multicultural audience. And second, having a “pretty well documented problem that diversity is pretty lacking in newsrooms,” which is low on the list of media executive’s priorities. Public broadcasters, the ABC in particular, are noted as having a more diverse group of people appearing on screen (028).

## 7.7 A system beholden to vested interests

### 7.7.1 Vested interests influence politics

Interviewees are overwhelmingly concerned about the influence of money and big business on Australian politics.

> “Sometimes progressive people might overstate the importance of organised money, [but] it is still incredibly important and influential.” 017
>
> “I strongly believe that most of the influence is in the hands of vested interest and powerful corporations. While they might not all be bad, there is an enormous amount of influence they have across government that cannot be ignored.” 015
>
> “It's sad, but money, unfortunately, money buys an opinion, which often translates into policy in Australia, and I think that’s really scary.” 018
>
> “I just can’t see how any level of government can be trusted, due to the way it interacts with business, it’s essentially large-scale corruption” 044

Many interviewees expressed concern that vested interests and big business have too much influence on decision-making for the future. In particular, “those with protected access to lucrative sections of the economy, such as industries part of the coal supply chain” have had an “enormous amount of political impact” (006; 014; 017; 018; 050). Additionally, the “mining and petroleum type industries seem to have a disproportionate sway over the conservative side of politics” (050). The influence of these groups is often perpetuated through “the very clear influence of lobbyists” (021). As interviewee 014 states, “People who are influential in the process are being so transparently and ridiculously self-interested in their contributions, particularly business lobby groups, who have argued for short-term self-interests that have been extremely damaging to the national conversation.”

> “Australian politicians are still beholden to lobby groups in a way that's quite unacceptable, and so business does wield significant influence.” 009

> "Any big lobby groups that have the capital and the political drive can really squeeze politicians to make certain policies and set certain agendas." 018

Furthermore, there is a sense that politicians, lobbyists, and journalists are "cross pollinated between those three industries" (028). For example, in "public political offices, there are numerous ex-lobbyists. And, all these politicians go to lobbying, all these ex-journos go to political offices, and vice-versa. It's a very incestuous group of people" (028). It is not only money that enables their influence. For example, many are seen to be "super connectors", being "people who may or may not have a lot of money, but they're listened to and therefore drive a lot of decision-making" (011).

However, as another interviewee explained, there is "an ecosystem challenge" that has enabled the influence of such interests (012). They point out that "most people aren't involved in a political party, and on top of that, most won't change how they're going to vote in an election. So, who is influencing decision-making? It's like lobbying groups and these big businesses are the only ones with the resources to do so" (012).

This "ecosystem challenge" also leads to what was described as "a strong gravitational pull around the existing status quo, because for those of whom there is a strong motivation for having an interest in the process, there is an equally strong rationale not to move the process away from where it is because it currently works for them" (025). As interviewee 036 said, "We still have some very entrenched and hard to move sectors because they're so wealthy and they have so much power – they're constrained by the systems they're in" (036). Additionally, these conditions can also lead to "good politicians" who end up "dropping out because the compromises they have to make are too great. The systems and structures in politics work against different forms of leadership" (009). Therefore, this keeps "the particular people who are profiting off that system at the top (032) while perpetuating stagnation and a "really strong inertia that is difficult to shift" (025).

### 7.7.2 Bad behaviour and a lack of accountability

To some interviewees, bad behaviour by leaders in the political and business sphere is not only the result of vested interests having influence, but also a lack of true accountability. For example, as interviewee 019 explained, politicians have limited accountability "because there's very limited ways to actually hold them to account. It happens once every three years and it's very hard to vote out an incumbent" (019). And, where there are other mechanisms including "Royal Commissions into every bloody thing" (005) they can "tend to go nowhere and further erode citizen trust in politics" (005).

> "I certainly think things like the banking Royal Commission have had a significant impact on the perception of the finance institutions in Australia." 015

The business community is also perceived as "lacking credibility with the broader community" due to a slew of "real or perceived scandals, even before the Hayne Royal Commission" (022). Further, many interviewees also recognised the broken incentive structures in business that enables negative behaviour (042). In this context where the public perceive sectors of the economy (such as banking and mining) as "running over consumer interests in favour of profit and shareholders" (008), interviewees noted that it is not only politicians who are experiencing an erosion of trust with the community (018).

> "One of the people that presented to the Royal Commission said, 'They showed me no compassion.' So, my question was, 'can we expect compassion from banks and is that what they're there for in the first place?' They won't be able to ever address these issues if they can't see the suffering that they are causing in the first place. And so, seeing sufferings not just about seeing it, but wanting to see it, because… if you're a banker and your KPIs are how much money you bring in, your focus is on selling, not seeing the suffering. And so, **organisations have to really get that if your employees are being rewarded and paid on these particular set of circumstances,** don't expect that they're going to tell you that what I'm doing is causing anyone harm. They're not going to do it." 042

The media's ability to act as the Fourth Estate by holding leaders to account has been undermined by the threat of the emerging media business model over the past decade. In Australia, "media is a business" (027), however, "the media is far less resourced today, so it can be easier to not be held to account" (008). The media environment has changed in the past ten years due to "hanging consumer habits, people moving away from print, and the loss of their advertising dollars" (023). This change in environment means that not only is the media not as resourced to practice accountability, but there is also a decline in the number of experts working with journalists, including "economic teams, legal writers, social writers, Aboriginal affairs writers. All of their expertise is gone". At the same time, media is "more business driven than it has ever been" (028). It is "completely driven by the commercial need to remain relevant" (007) and "there to sell" (041). Meanwhile, there is a "decline" in "journalistic quality, where facts aren't checked, and nothing is scrutinised" (018). Stories are often "sensationalised", "incomplete", or merely "half-truths" (027). These conditions undermine the media's ability to play a constructive role as the Fourth Estate and hold vested interests to account appropriately.

## 7.8 A polarised system

### 7.8.1 Societal divides and lack of constructive conversations

The rapid pace of change within Australia, particularly in relation to our diverse population and the multitude of challenges we face, were noted as contributing to "a more divided society" (008). In comparison to more homogenous populations like Japan or the Scandinavian countries, "it's harder [with a] larger, more ethnically diverse, more experienced, diverse economy or community", it can "cause a discombobulation in different parts of our community" (012). Shifts to the status quo, with certain communities being left behind was seen to be driving feelings of fear, despair, and anger towards others:

> "People are so threatened by just how quickly the status quo [is] shifting and that they're not being brought along in the conversation and [that] means you go … one of two ways: despair, or resentment. You just get really, really angry at these strange people … around gender, and race, and class, all of the things that their generation has been told to keep a lid on. And they're probably very frightened." 032

Progressive ideology is also seen as being somewhat divisive and alienating. In comparison, populist right wing groups and leaders are perceived as being able to connect to those who may be disadvantaged or disenfranchised:

> “The ideology of many progressives is so offensive to poor people …there's this progressive kind of imagination and agenda that takes a certain level of education, and theoretical understanding, to be able to grasp. You think about people in the underclass, and how resentful they must be about that… people who are poor just really resent people who are in minorities going further than them … So that feels much easier to like someone as despicable as Donald Trump. Because what they're thinking is, well, at least I can understand him, he speaks my language, I understand his values.” 034

> “The most fervent supporters of Trump are people who are from working class areas, and former strong supporters of Democrats. You can look at the same thing with one nation. Right?” 034

Increasing intolerance in Australian society and a decreasing ability to have constructive or empathetic interactions was widely noted (015; 023; 034; 042; 051) as one feature of a more divided society. It is characterised by an “increasing partisaness” across right and left ideologies and toward groups of people (like First Nations, or lower socio-economic status people) that is tied to a genuine lack of understanding (015; 034), and a “victim mentality phase” to persecute, attack, and destroy views we do not agree with (051):

> “There's an increasing partisaness and I don't just mean left and right politically, but an increasing, ‘poor people are poor because it's their own fault’. ‘They're all on drugs and they’re lazy’ … these really hyper partisan points of view. Social media has driven a lot of that, the lack of social commentary has driven a lot of that. There's no genuine understanding of it. You'll hear [on the] internet and people in cities say ‘the Aboriginals deserve it because they're all drunks’, and they've never visited an Aboriginal community in [their] life. So, I think we're becoming richer and more ignorant almost at the same time.” 015

> “We [are] increasingly seeing people screaming at each other. And there seems to be an intolerance for the other person's view, which I find depressing … We can't let that happen; we have to be robust enough to hear what the other person has to say.” 023

> “The problem is partisanship. But underneath the problem is [that] we have lost our ability to argue, we’ve lost our ability to debate, we’ve lost our ability to disagree, but still remain respectful of each other…. We all carry unconscious bias. I say to my students, we all have unconscious biases. No one here is an island. [It] could have been something your parents said when you were five, it could have been something your teacher says, what you see on TV, it could be a personal event you might have experienced, we all carry prejudices, right? That's true. But the problem is not having those prejudices. The problem is how to respond to those prejudices.” 034

Two contributing factors leading to this intolerance and limited ability to have constructive dialogue include the media (more in Section 7.8.47.8.4), and a cultural aversion to difficult or intellectual conversations. The media, including social media, is criticised for driving intolerance (015; 023; 034; 051), by blaming and labelling people without considering nuance, which is also reflected in debates about policy:

> “Media, again, plays a role in this. Too quick to sort of point the finger, too quick to label people, everyone’s got to be put in a box, oh that person is sexist, that

> person's racist, that person is an economic rationalist, that person is a socialist. It's kind of like, until we put someone in a box, we don't seem to be happy. Most people are not like that. I mean, I have a very broad range of views on a whole lot of things … some would be to the left, some would be to the right, but that doesn't define me. The whole ideological debate is not as clear as it used to be. You can really care about the environment, and really want things to happen, and you can also be very pro-market? They're not mutually exclusive. This idea that you have to be one or the other of everything. We['ve] got to stop throwing labels at people, it's really bad." 023

> "The problem is that the perfect becomes the enemy of the good, because we take these ideological positions. That coal is evil. Well, no, it's not evil. It's a resource that built Sydney. Do you want to end coal? Yeah. Is it anti-miner? What happens to the communities that rely on coal? … That's where the education system needs to think about how we get that back." 034

With regards to our culture, it is considered "a bit of an un-Australian thing if you [are] critically engaging with something, I think there's like a cultural cringe factor there" and we are conditioned against being too outspoken or having a lot of opinions (012). Another interviewee tied it to our approach to education and the tall poppy syndrome, comparing conversations we are willing to have in Australia to those overseas: "I spent quite a long time living in Europe, and particularly, when we were living in France, there was nothing wrong with talking politics … having intellectual conversations. Here, if I try and do that, beyond my immediate friendship group at a barbecue, it's challenging" (044). It is a sentiment that young people have also internalised, where a fear of being shut down and not having the relevant expertise is driving disengagement:

> "I ran this series of global civil civics or citizenship training with more than 100 uni students … we had an anonymous survey and a conversation about what's the single biggest thing stopping you take action on something you care about. And by far, [it's] fear of being shut down… that culture of two things, don't be too outspoken and also the pile-on culture of social media has created this feeling that if you have a different opinion or perspective and you're not an absolute expert on the matter, then you risk having this conflict situation." 012

### 7.8.2 However, conflict can be good and necessary

There was broad consensus that conflict, debate, and being challenged is good and necessary (012; 014; 018; 021; 034; 042) and must be developed going forward:

> "The task of the maintaining discourse is, in a sense, to understand where there are conflicting views, to examine them, to try to reset a dialogue. So, where there are tensions and conflicts, that is actually really good usually in a discourse, because that's the source of something." 018

Although not all conflict is helpful, and a certain type is required. One interviewee pointed to Chantal Mouffe's (2014) distinction between agonistic and antagonistic debate, the former being "debate where people present their views, [it] may be that not all views survive" but they are considered (018). Such debate allows each of us to be challenged on what might be long held beliefs or positions, which can be quite "enlightening." As one interviewee reflected upon, "I've seen people react when [someone else has said] 'but what about this'? And they say, 'oh I've

never thought about like that … maybe you're right'. Maybe I am, or maybe I'm not, so I think a lot of people form their opinions with less information" (021)

> "It is challenging, and it is uncomfortable, but discomfort and its educational power can be good" 034

> "What I can say is that the main way we make policy is through our [internal] 'threat' and 'reactive' systems, and not through our 'soothing' system. And the sooting system needs training in humans from a young age." 042

Part of increasing acceptance and enabling constructive debate, is equipping people with the necessary skills and creating conducive environments. It is about going beyond safe spaces, to brave spaces, where we can leverage the educational power of discomfort and acknowledge our prejudices to work through things together (034):

> "We need to be able to ask clumsy questions and be forgiving of each other." 034

> "There has to be a political will and mandate to provide the space for different conversations, even at a national level." 014

> "We need to equip our people, our communities, to have divergent conversations in constructive ways and feel competent to do that without feeling like it's going to turn into a situation of conflict." 012

### 7.8.3 Adversarial party politics

Politicians are commonly described by interviewees as both embodying and fuelling divides, particularly via the culture and practice of adversarial party politics, which is noted as breeding self-interest and short-termism (more in Section 7.37.3.2). With politics revolving around election cycles, big policy issues were perceived to be overly simplified and almost tribal in nature.

Politicians, even from those within politics, were perceived as having a self-interested "win at all costs" attitude and a lack of willingness to work together for the good of the nation. It is "the nature of the adversarial political system that we operate in… So, we'll do whatever it takes to get into power" (021). Both on an individual level and at a party level, "politicians [are] more concerned about keeping their jobs than they are about trying to persuade the public of the things that might be the right thing to do" (050). The impetus of our political system is then based on "winning or losing to stay alive, rather than working together for the betterment of the entire country" (037).

Such an approach is seen to breed short-termism, result in simplistic communications and approaches to complex policy issues, and reduce politics to a series of "gotcha moments" (014; 022; 023; 025).

> "One thing I find incredibly frustrating is the world is full of really big, complex problems. And the level of the political divide, it's been reduced to a series of gotcha moments." 022

> "We need to look at the whole adversarial system that our politics is based on, the whole short-termism that it's based on." 023

Attached to the short-termism within politics, is that our political system revolves around the electoral cycle. “Winning the next election” is ingrained (021), where the election cycle process is just “what will get us elected?” rather than engaging thoroughly with clear policies (013). “Voting irregularly means that politics becomes deeply symbolic”. And in a two-party dominant system, the focus is on “manufacturing symbols” to tilt the undecided voter, which are often periphery to the common good and the longer-term (025):

> “We've almost constructed a system that encourages us to spend large amounts of energy on things that are actually really immaterial to the understanding of the broader common good. To deal with long-term futures, they focus on the short term, they focus on the symbolic. That again, circles back and maintains that gravitational pull of the inertia of the existing system.” 025

A symptom of this adversarial conflict, short-termism, and symbolism means that policy issues have become “tribal” or possibly perceived as too hard to tackle and incompatible with winning (021). The real cost of this is “we get suboptimal outcomes for people” (010). Climate change and energy policy were pointed to as two examples of this, that lacked evidence-based considerations and had become so ideological that it is difficult to get traction:

> “What I would like to see is more fact based and databased consideration of future policy settings …that is sadly lacking in the national debate, particularly in the energy sector. The politics of energy means that it's become a very ideological discussion and almost tribal, which means we get suboptimal outcomes for people.” 010

Interviewees perceive going beyond party politics towards multi-partisanship and constructive policy debate, decoupled from election cycles, as highly desirable. There is also a need to set long term approaches, such as Finland’s multi-decadal education policy was pointed to as a positive example of structural continuity with adjustments around the edges over the years (021).

> “There might be a way into this through trying a couple of bigger picture things, where you genuinely strive [for] some sort of cross-party effort to actually talk something through in more detail. I think that's extraordinarily difficult to do because of the strength of adversarial conflict in our system, and an understandable lack of trust on both sides of this. But is there some possibility of trying to sit down and pick a couple of topics …and work it through in a public and slightly different way and hold the space for that?.” 014

> “Some people would say that they shouldn't progress that [policy] until they go to the next election. I think it's a bit contentious. I don't think we should be revolving around elections. We should be having policy discussions all the time, there needs to be the contest of ideas … I think it'd be a lot more effective if both [major parties] could just agree on the principles and then work on [it] around the edges." 021

### 7.8.4 Polarisation in the media

Media, both traditional media and social media, is another key player that reflects deepening divides and is blamed for fuelling polarisation. In part, this is driven by the media’s commercial model, but “the biggest driver would be newsroom culture” that has been built up over decades. It is about the stories that are rewarded with awards or front-page coverage that continues this

“self-perpetuating system” (028). Polarisation in the media is acknowledged as having always existed, but it is becoming increasingly worse:

> “It’s [polarisation] always existed… But I do think it's worsening [and] increasing. Whereas the Australian might have been previously a little bit centre right, and the guardian and centre left, I think they're drifting further and further apart. The people who read one or the other are finding it increasingly difficult to agree on anything or even not agree on the outcome, but even agree on the question, or the frame of reference … you look to the US, as the centre of a lot of these trends, and it's pretty concerning. I think they [can] barely agree on facts.” 028

> “[It’s] surprising in a lot of ways how much, the media has been able to kind of polarise and sway modern society.” 018

The media is seen to enable echo-chambers that reflect our own opinions and strengthen them. Social media is also viewed as enabling this, as “a lot of us [are] able to operate within our own spheres and talk to a lot of people that agree with us … we are all becoming stronger in our own opinions”, which can make it more difficult to find common ground (047).

> “People live in an echo chamber of their own creation because they only talk to people on social media that look like them, talk like them, believe the same things like them. On one hand, it's helped marginalised people find their tribe. And on the other hand, it's allowed bigots to find their tribe. So, not all of that has been good … I do believe that these echo chambers continuing to exist, through Google algorithms and Facebook algorithms, you only get served up the content that you want. You don't get challenged. I think that's a major travesty for our society.” 015

Both media as an institution and the individual are seen as contributing to these echo chambers. The decreasing diversity of information was noted, as was the acknowledgement that “Australia needs to do a lot more to have a truly independent and diverse media” (006; 047). On a personal level, our self-selected news consumption may be inhibited by societal and psychological factors, such as availability of time and confirmation bias:

> “Now we’re more likely to pick up newspapers or social media that supports the views we have. So, we’re getting more into our own little bubbles.” 008

> “I am not purposely looking for stories that counterbalance my perspective, I am as much to blame for confirmation bias as Rupert Murdoch is for supplying confirmation bias …So we're as much to blame for amplification as the media is because we're struggling with time [to read multiple news sources].” 034

> “My personal belief is that everyone already has these innate ideological beliefs that they then would [put] through that lens [when] they read the media. So, for example, I read the Guardian much less critically than I read the Australian. I'm sure the opposite is true for others.” 006

Alongside the proliferation of echo-chambers, interviewees highlighted the rise of misinformation as a factor that further emphasises polarisation (028; 032; 033). A worsening decline in journalism over the past decades means information may not be checked or scrutinised, and people then digest and perpetuate misinformation as fact (018; 048).

> "When I started [in the political system] in 2001, you couldn't just get the story in the paper, because the journalist actually wanted to make sure it had currency and had validity. By the end of my time, the cycle was that rapid that the journalist had no journalistic ability, they were essentially copywriters. It was very frustrating, because your opponent could basically say anything … so you spent your whole-time defending crap, which wasn't true … the frustrating bit now is there's no sort of filter, there's no one that says, 'That's crap,' and [it] just gets printed and then you're defending crap. And I give this advice to people all the time, you're not defending your issue or your policy or what you've done. You're defending how your opponent portrays your policy." 048

Sitting alongside this is a perceived limited ability to critically analyse information, a blind trust in news outlets or personalities that reaffirm our bias, and a "severe lack of trust" in institutions whereby anything can become possible:

> "It's very hard for the average citizen to differentiate between what they're told by a One Nation video here or a Greens video there. There's no interrogation, there's no assumption of knowledge that someone's brought up and being able to challenge things that aren't right … that's where it gets scary, where you get QAnon conspiracy theorists … if [people] lose complete faith in the mainstream media and in politicians, then anything's possible." 028

This has transcended into a more insidious information warfare, which is perceived as equal to traditional warfare, or as even being more powerful. "In military situations you couldn't beat the US in a fair fight, there's no way you could. You don't bother to target them that way. You just say, so the NRA campaign costs about $20 million … it costs [a hell of a lot more] for an F35 …no one really fights against F35. But you can take out a society by restructuring with social media. That's Twitter, running conspiracy theories or 5G. Just run a 5G conspiracy theory, everyone goes bananas" (033).[3]

### 7.8.5 Media and politics combined, brewing polarisation

Politics and the media have been largely identified by interviewees as the most influential relationship in Australia's future-making system, mainly due to the heightened role of the two institutions in creating polarisation across society. Dynamics within politics and the media are seen to bring out the worst in each other, perpetuating a negative feedback loop.

It is a relationship characterised by a number of features:

First, the power of media and private interests (including lobby groups) can outweigh public interests in the eyes of politicians (028; 039). "Most politicians feel constrained in what they're able to do, because of the power of the media and private interests that will come down on them hard if they don't take the kind of action that is consistent with what people behind those media organisations and firms are looking for" (039). The level of scrutiny politicians are understandably under, makes the government "always see everything through the prism of how it will be reported in the media" (028).

Second, the media sets the agenda, where specific outlets and politicians' media monitoring have significant influence:

[3] For reference: National Rifle Association (NRA), F35 is a type of fighter jet

> “The media plays a very heavy role in shaping public opinion and political outcomes. Unfortunately, our political system has deteriorated over time into a system that is increasingly influenced by the availability of news and conflicting views.” 002

> “I tell people, if you don't read about it in The Australian, it's not happening … But what people miss is that … every decision maker gets they're media monitoring delivered to them with about five minutes to 10 every night. If it's not in their media monitor, that's not an issue … the best way to [run a campaign] is to get it somewhere in the front 10 pages in the Australian newspaper.” 048

Finally, both institutions are driven by outrage, conflict, and negative politics (see Section 7.8.3). One interviewee pointed to the outrage algorithm and the example of New York Times, who made a record profit of $280million last year because of Donald Trump (034). Just as “it’s a lot easier to run a smear campaign than it is to come up with meaningful policies” in politics, the media is largely driven around conflict and negativity (028):

> “It’s human nature [that] we’re instinctively nervous about change … People always mourn something they’ve lost more than the benefit they get from something they might potentially gain … So basically, there’s a huge benefit to running negative politics … The media cycle is driven largely around conflict, and it's also been driven a little bit on negativity. I don't think there's been enough responsibility on the media to date, for actually not necessarily coming up with solutions, but being part of working towards a constructive solution.” 028

> “Journos have got the job to do … negative stuff sells better than good stuff. So, we used to work really hard on getting enough good stuff … when I was a minister [we got] criticised all the time for want[ing] to publicise the opening of an envelope if you had to, to try and mitigate that negative stuff.” 048

Information echo-chambers (as outlined in Section 7.8.4) are seen to exist among decision-makers also, particularly within political parties. Linked to a disconnection with the public, “the echo chambers inside of these parties are just so thick. I really don’t think they understand or deeply empathise with what the people want. If they do, they almost have a disregard for it” (032). Another interviewee pointed to the limitations of social media’s “revolutionary" power, in that it largely replicates traditional power dynamics, “In terms of the powerful decision-makers … in the end, the people who could have the biggest voice on social media are the traditional people” (006).

As one interviewee described, “Basically, social media's impact on the political process has been wholly bad,” particularly in channelling conspiracy theories (031). Comparing the media and social media, “you might say of the media that it promotes the interests of a small number of people, [and] social media destroys the interests of most people” (031). Alongside this sits the view from politicians that “social media and technology is a hollow form of activism, a hollow form of support [that]’s too easy to throw your weight behind” (019). Therefore, it is seen as not representative of the public. By reflecting negative politics and conflict, “social media has made it really, really easy to organise and articulate what you’re against. It hasn’t made it any easier at all to organise and articulate what you’re for” (022). On one hand, when peoplepower is mobilised, it is not taken into account. “Politicians aren’t necessarily influenced by the sheer weight of numbers”, for example, when five million young people were outraged at the approval of the

Adani mine (019). On the other hand, it has become increasingly difficult to discern true broader public concern from a few very noisy people:

> "Social media has created a megaphone for people and the politicians don't understand, and can't understand, how many people are at the small end of the megaphone yelling at them, because all they hear is just this massive amount of noise. I can't tell, if I'm a politician, whether I've got 100,000 people screaming at me down a megaphone, all I know is the amount of noise." 022

## 7.9 A lack of agency across the system

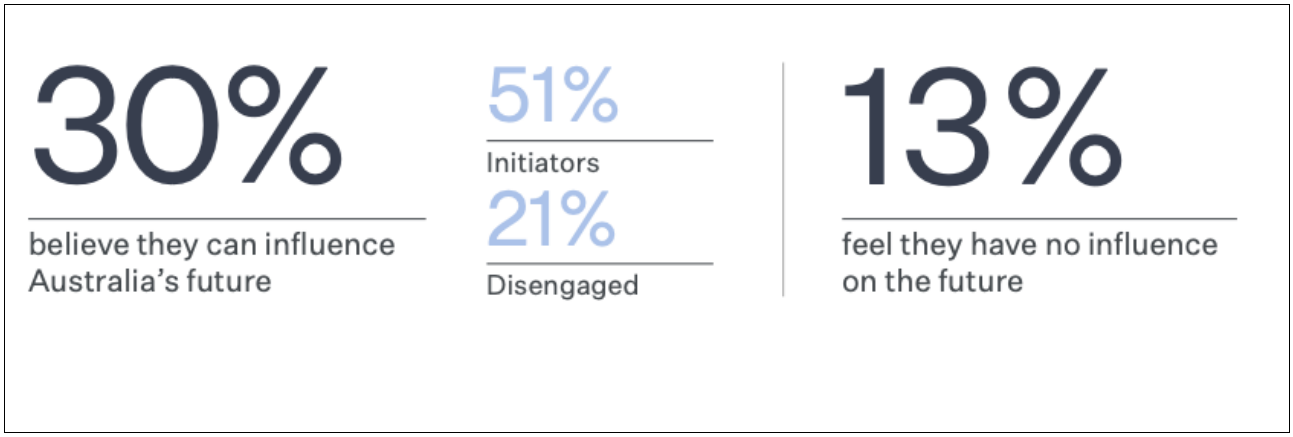
### 7.9.1 The public and leaders feel they cannot influence the future

> "If you look at the generation that came back from World War II, there was this real sense of faith in the state because…the state had done a big thing that they're involved in. And also, a sense of agency about 'We're going to make this country the country that we fought and died for,' and a sense of ownership about that … a generation saying, 'We nearly lost this, and we value it' … in this time, **no one has that sense of ownership of the system**."007 – emphasis added

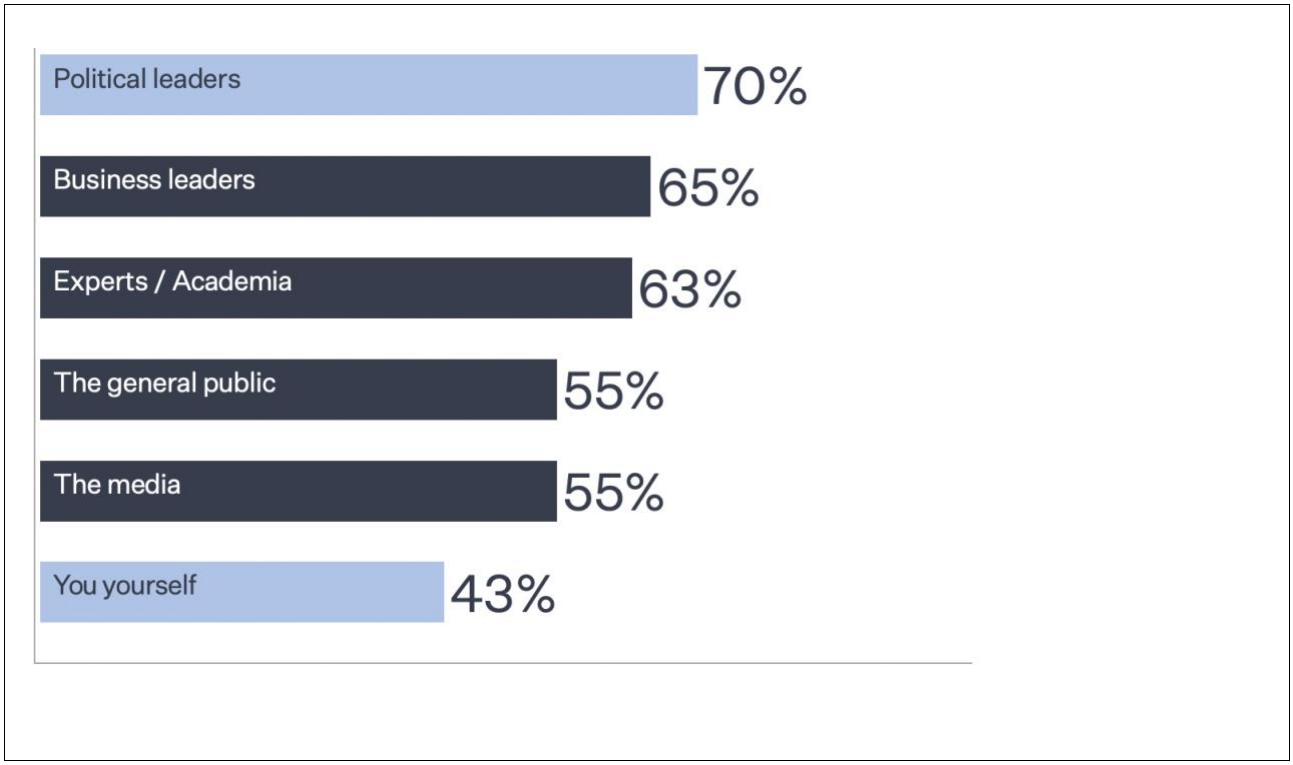
Many interviewees commented that, today, Australians do not feel a sense of ownership over the system or agency to influence their desired change. This diminished agency is seen as connected to the lack of representation by leaders (Section 7.6), limited quality engagement between the public, industry, experts, and government (Section 7.4; 7.5), and the elevation of special interests in decision-making (Section 7.7).

While there is a strong desire from leaders (including interviewees) and the public to improve Australia, Next25's research has found that many in both groups feel they lack the agency and influence to do so. For example, Navigator (2021) found that 30% of Australians feel confident that they can influence the future (Box *4*). Furthermore, when asked who can contribute most to improving Australia, 70% see political leaders as most influential, while 43% believe that they themselves can contribute to improving the country (Box *5*).

Box 4: The public's perceived ability to influence the future

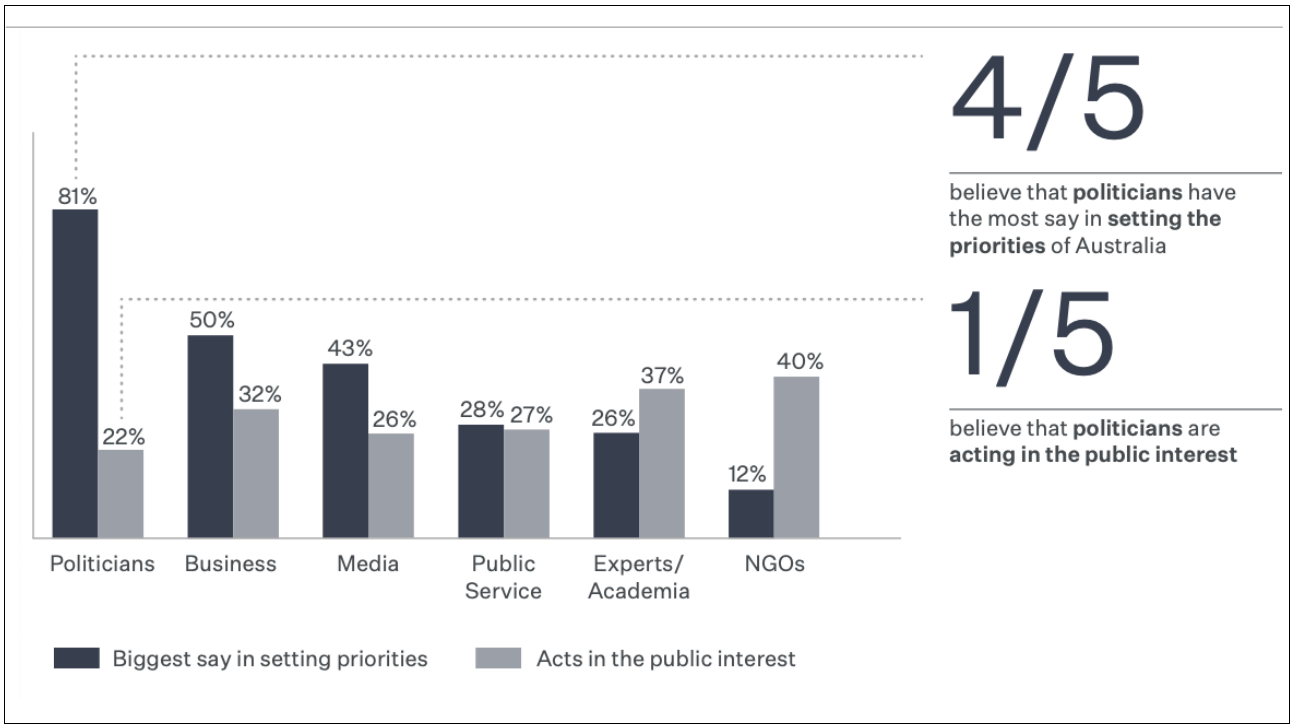


Box 5: Public perception on who can most contribute to improving Australia




When comparing data from Navigator on (a) how institutions score on the Public Interest Index, and (b) the extent to which the public believe each institution has a say in setting the priorities for the country, an interesting trend emerges. The institutions perceived to have a stronger influence are more likely to perform poorly on the Public Interest Index. For example, four out of five Australians believe politicians have the most say in setting priorities, while one out of five believe politicians are acting in the public interest (Box *6*).

Box 6: Public Interest Index and public perception on who has the most say in setting priorities



In contrast to this public sentiment, Next25 has found many politicians, business leaders, and other influential members of the aforementioned institutions also feel powerless to improve the system – despite feeling a strong personal desire for change. Next25 refers to this group as "the powerless powerful". For example, many Recoded interviewees said they felt powerless to stop negative cycles in the system. Despite any of their "noble ambitions", many expressed how the system is likely to beat individuals down:

> "You go in with all these noble ambitions to be different. Then, the system somehow beats you down and you're told you're naive. Then, your self-survival kicks in and you think you're trying to change the system from the inside, but really, you're just frittering at the edges, and you've kind of turned into the system." 043

> "It's just banging your head against the wall, fighting that fight, and that moral outrage of fighting a fight unsuccessfully for many years is very discouraging for anyone who sees it." 007

> "No one person, no one group, can stop it. The media can't just stop reporting and solve the issues, the politicians can't stop. It's a cycle, and everyone feels powerless. They feel like the system is set up against them." 028

### 7.9.2 Other conditions preventing the public from participating in decision-making

Often, structures that "are meant to enable people to make their voice heard", such as political party membership and compulsory voting, will result in people feeling that "their voice doesn't matter anyway" (012). These conditions perpetuate a perceived mismatch between the priorities of the public and those who lead us, and feelings of disempowerment and disenfranchisement. As multiple interviewees reflected:

> "We need to find ways of bringing citizens back into the political process. We're in a position where a lot of people feel very divorced or alienated from the political process, or it's not part of their day-to-day life." 025

> "If people don't have a sense of agency, and they've been oppressed and poor, their capacities to think of solutions is remarkably crippled by the fact they don't have a sense that they ever get listened to have any influence over society." 029

> "We don't have any influence really, unless you've got a very, very, very big megaphone and a chequebook … it's almost reached a tipping point where the common person doesn't want to know about the future, [they have] no influence in this country. So why think [about] the future when no one listens to you? You have no influence. So, what's the point? That's the issue." 051

> "People do feel pretty disempowered, to be honest with you … there's a huge disconnect between the priorities of majority of Australians and the priorities of the people who lead us [in the public and private sector, and the media]. I don't think the disconnect has ever been greater." 023

> "The school strikers, for example, they really have set the agenda and it hasn't filtered down to the people in power. So, there's also that difference between … what's the public agenda versus the government agenda?" 020

On the disconnection of the public, there is also concern over the "basic lack of civil capabilities," where people of all ages may have a broad understanding of democracy, but not enough knowledge to feel confident to stand up against what is going on (012). Interviewees from politics similarly reflected on how citizens interact with politicians, noting the need to build this relationship and the difficulty in doing so. They explained that there can be unrealistic expectations from the public about what will eventuate from minimal engagements (048), especially in an environment of increasing instant gratification (012):

> "How do we expect our individuals in the community to participate if they don't even know anything beyond the vague idea of what a democracy is? So, I think it's not that the avenues aren't there, [but] how well equipped are people to participate? And then, what are the structural barriers to doing that meaningfully?" 012

> "Everyone thinks, 'I wrote one letter to the Prime Minister, why didn't something happen?' …The Prime Minister gets 400 letters in a minute. I said, 'You need to know who his chief of staff is, who the up and comer is'…It's understanding how government works and what it does." 048

Social media platforms are seen as "giv[ing] people a sense of personal agency and an opportunity to speak out" (019). However, it is also acknowledged that these online environments are not conducive to accountability, nor is action online guaranteed to transfer into the political sphere (019). Likewise, while social media is highlighted for its accessibility to young people (046), more traditional avenues for engagement, such as community town hall meetings, are unlikely to attract a diverse crowd (019). For example:

> "One of the great debates that we sort of watched play out recently was the franking credits debate, and they had these town hall meetings. It's these white-haired pensioners that are rocking up and discussing this really, really intricately detailed tax policy. You would never get young people turning up to something like that, because it's not well understood, they don't get the 'What's in it for me' factor. And I don't even think I would know where to find when a town hall was being held by my local minister … so there's all these structural barriers that seem to be in the way of young people participating. And I think there's potentially a level of apathy and lack of interest in some of these topics as well." 019

When we think about the system and our ability to instigate change – it is worth recognising that we are all part of the system and have a role in shaping our society, our culture, and our institutions. There is an intuitive relationship "between the individual taking action, and the society and culture which shapes that action" (039), including the recognition that, "Well partially, I created the system" (034). As individuals join together in collective power, we all have a role in creating the future we want.

> "Through our individual actions, we're constantly recreating the culture, the discourse, the narrative, the societal structures around us, and then they're constantly shaping us. So, it's not like we are beholden to those structures all the time and can never shape them. We're constantly recreating them and reproducing them. But there's a lot of stability in that system, so it takes a lot of people moving for that system to move. And that doesn't diminish the importance of individual power in subtly moving those social structures. But it

does mean that you need to get quite a lot of collective power before you're going to move them enough that it makes a difference.” 039

“Who created the system? Well, I partially created the system, as an academic, I helped build the thinking and the structures that make people feel excluded, and we've told people that they should feel guilty, and they should feel terrible, and they should feel that they haven't earned it.” 034

# 8 Perspectives on Change Required for Australia's future

*Is change required in Australia's future-making system? If so, what kind is needed, for example, revolutionary versus evolutionary change?*

Interviewees responded to this question with answers ranging from saying little to no change is required, to a desire for incremental / evolutionary change, and a desire for dramatic revolutionary style change. We examine these perspectives in Sections 8.1 - 8.3 below.

## 8.1 Is any form of change necessary?

While none of the interviewees stated that absolutely no change is necessary in Australia's future-making system, many did reflect that, as a nation, we are doing well compared to the rest of the world. For example, interviewee 051 said that Australia has a great track record in delivering on social, community, and population outcomes. As interviewee 017 stated, "We're reasonably healthy, safe, [and] less crooked than most other countries."

> "[If] the people's balance sheet is the government's balance sheet – in the long-term, you manage that to get social, community, and population outcomes, then for the last 110 years, we've done a very good job... as a nation, we do that very, very well." 051

However, an alternative perspective is provided by interviewee 052. They believe that regardless of how well things are going, until we address the "many things that are still going wrong", and "until there is fairness and equity across the board, it's hard to celebrate what's going right,"

> "I'm speaking to a lot of disadvantaged youth and we're seeing a lot of problems… it's very difficult to think about the things that are going well, when there's so many things that are still going wrong…. Because there are obviously spaces that are going right. But until there is fairness and equity across the board, it's hard to celebrate what's going right." 052

Furthermore, another interviewee reflected on how they find it shocking that anyone could "believe the system is good enough,"

> "I can't imagine that people believe the system is good enough, I mean, they're not getting it." 027

## 8.2 Incremental, evolutionary change

> "I think there's a lot we can do with the existing system to improve it … I don't think we have a better living system." 012

> "The system we have built, it is closer to what it needs to be than many other systems in the world." 017

While interviewees recognise to different extents that "self-evidently no, the system is not working" (027), multiple incremental changes to the system are favoured more so than revolutionary style change. While it might be tempting to "dream of a revolution", evolutionary style change is seen to be more enduring and realistic.

By “incrementally moving the needle” (012) in a complex system, there is “great[er] capacity [for change] to stick and endure.” Taking time is important in any change process, as you don’t want it to unravel (012; 026). Furthermore, by using the existing structures within the current system, evolutionary change is a more realistic pathway towards improvement. As interviewee 031 states, “The reality is that you have to do it within the framework of what you’ve already got.” However, the distinction between different types of change can be blurred. For example, one interviewee referenced the Indian fight for Independence, “There may be revolutionary moments in the evolutionary journey,” but complex systemic change unfolds over generations of resistance (027).

> “The idea that a single switch can be pulled and tomorrow, we're working differently in something as complex as what we're talking about, is naive. [The fight for India’s independence] was an evolution, it was generations of resistance. But history, as it's written, tends to normalise complex systemic change.” 027

Finally, as outlined in Section 8.1, interviewees understand that Australia is doing well compared to other countries around the world. While this does not mean there are not important areas in the future-making system that need to be addressed, we do have a relatively good basis to evolve from. This position means that, in the eyes of many interviewees, we can “work things through without a revolution” (003).

> “I think we're really lucky … we have the foundations … a really good public service, ICAC … You can see it working. The way we know that we're doing ok is because we're in a pretty good place globally.” 034

## 8.3 Immediate, revolutionary change

However, some see significant change as a requirement to address the flaws of our current state. While others go further, arguing that we need a “fundamental shift” (027), especially considering the magnitude of challenges Australia is facing now and into the future.

> “I believe significant change is required to the way decisions are made in this country. Definitely.” 015

> “I don't think [our system is] operating terribly well … we're almost in time for someone to rewrite Donald Horn’s The Lucky Country.” 025

> “No chance. It absolutely needs to change…. I can't imagine that people don't believe the system now is good enough…I mean, then they're not getting it. It needs a fundamental shift.” 027

To these interviewees, evolutionary change is no longer an option as it has not addressed the challenges we face today. As one states, “The time for working around the edges [of the system] is over” (023). They see a need to be “really shaking things up and tipping things on their head” (049).

> “It’s all or nothing right now.” 020

The immediacy in their desire for change is often linked to concerns regarding climate change, where “the chance of failure, if we don't take revolutionary change, is 100%. It's absolute, we will fail, and we will fail spectacularly” (044). Even though it is recognised that “evolutionary change

[is] preferred," addressing climate change requires "the initial change to be revolutionary, it has to be short, and it has to be sharp" (044).

> "With revolutionary change, you don't have time to look at all the alternatives, you're not sure if your solution is right, you have to take far more risks. The chance of success is higher, but the chance of failure is also higher. But the chance of failure, if we don't take revolutionary change, is 100%. It's absolute, we will fail, and we will fail spectacularly. We will fail spectacularly if we try an iterative, evolutionary type of approach because we don't have enough time. So, the only solution we have is revolution. And how do we achieve revolution? And how do we get it to bite? And how do we get it to stick with the societal constraints we have at the moment? That is the question that keeps me up at night." 044

Many spoke of the desire for large scale "revolutionary" changes to the system. However, "whether that requires a revolution to get there, or is something that can be approached more gradually, is unclear." 039

## 8.4 How we think about change

Furthermore, some interviewees reflected on a need to think about and approach change differently. They spoke of moving away from "a very binary business world" (049), zeroing in on single issues for political power and minimal action (028), and the narrow conceptions of reform tied to the 80s and 90s (014). These approaches "fail to grapple with the really different now" (014), which requires developing different thinking and "cultivating an appreciation of collaboration" (035).

> "People say there's no appetite for reform … they actually mean in a Hawke-Keating micro economic reform kind of sense, whereas I see enormous energy and appetite for change … It doesn't map to micro economic reform [and] we're kind of stuck around a narrow conception of reform. We need to start with a broader conception of, 'what is it that people have such hunger for'? How do you conceptualise that better? … We are too often rigid and inflexible when thinking about change or reform. I do think the 80s 90s kind of rhetoric is not helpful, because they just measure against a so-called Golden Age." 014

> "We need a new way of thinking about change and a new way of approaching change. That's what needs the revolution … [An approach which would address] this current entanglement between politicians using issues to gain power, but then they can't actually solve the issue." 028

## 8.5 Remaining optimistic in an often-pessimistic world

Perspectives on change also extend to how optimistic interviewees were that their desired changes could be realised. Much of what is outlined in this report can seem daunting and terrifying, but there is also a strong case for hope and optimism.

As one interviewee pointed out, it cannot be all "we need to change things, doom and gloom, we need to find joy and 'dancing in the story' – in the words of Emma Goldman "**if there's no dancing**

**it's not my revolution**" (020 – emphasis added). So here are a few snippets of what keeps our interviewees going:

> "I'm really confident that there's an appetite for it [change]. If you picked most people off the street, they would [say] we need more participation in democracy, we need to clean up politics. I'm 100% confident most people in this country are on that page. I think that's really heartening." 020

> "I think we've got nothing to lose, you've got everything to gain." 020

> "I do, I completely do [think change is possible]. I do think this year provides an inflection point. If you'd asked me a year ago, I would have thought it was going to take longer, but …if you can speak to people in a way that is refreshing and doesn't sound like the same old bullshit, [then] there's real appetite for it." 007

> "I'm hopeful, and I'm optimistic, and I think that what's going to happen it's almost inevitable. Because we're trying to make this structure that's literally hundreds of years old … We keep tweaking it, adjusting it, and trying to make it work for a world that looks completely different … it's inevitable because the system is groaning and desperate for change. It's just about what tips us over the edge. I think COVID is starting to do that, it's starting to widen the fractures. And hopefully we're shifting towards a tipping point." 009

> "I'm a very cynical person. But I'm also hugely optimistic … because I work with some of the most courageous, intelligent, incredible young people who I see actually shifting the systems immediately around them, just by the ways they show up, how brave they are, the ideas that they have, the cultures of care that they want to embed. Yes, it is possible, I guess my only concern is that change can sometimes look possible at a superficial level." 032

## 8.6 Perspectives on COVID-19 as an inflexion point

Opinions on whether COVID-19 could catalyse systemic change were varied, especially as time wore on throughout the pandemic. There is hope that the moment of crisis has presented a unique opportunity (009; 017; 021; 023), particularly in the change of pace that has occurred and in prompting us to think long-term with vision and imagination. Especially as some people were experiencing loss and grief for the first time (032; 045), the pandemic has been able to show us what is really important (020).

> "One of the really positive outcomes of the COVID crisis is that people can see that change is possible. And change can happen quickly. I actually think it creates a bit of an appetite for revolution… I don't want to go back to normal [after the pandemic]." 002

> "[For] most of us, the easiest option is always whatever we're currently doing, and however things currently are. When something like COVID happens, that takes away the baseline, the old normal is gone. So, there's only the different ways forward … But I think there are moments like that where the conditions somehow change and you go, 'oh we can't go back' …We can't go back to this normal where it's normal for that to happen, and suddenly, there's an abundance of possibility going forward." 047

> “The other thing probably is being touched by grief and loss. So many people … But as systems are collapsing, more and more people are having to go through the pain that marginalised people have been going through for centuries … people who would never be touched by any of these sorts of issues, all of a sudden having their freedoms taken away, having to think about what they're doing, because it could affect the person next to them … So now that's entering into the imaginations of people, you've got to start thinking like, ‘oh, my God, if [it] was so hard for me, what could it be like for that person on the street or for that young person in care?’ I would hope that compassion [and] empathy for those people just becomes a little easier to dig into.” 032

> “The fires have shown us that we love places … we're breathing in the ashes of places we love … COVID has shown us, we suddenly know what we love and what matters in here. It's really that simple thing, just giving someone a hug, or having a random chat with somebody in a coffee shop. Why is government here and also, hey, we just radically changed how society worked. We could do that, for climate change. Like I think, there's this great excitement of like, when everything changes so radically, you have to invent and you have to be creative, and you can't do what you used to do… people want a say, and people are starting to think, about what's important. People are also starting to realise how much there is to lose and how close we are to losing it. And maybe those two things coupled is really quite exciting…there really is a moment here … we've got nothing to lose, you've got everything to gain.” 020

At least in the early stages, Australia’s approach to the pandemic was seen to address many of the flaws in our current state and embody what interviewees defined as success. Three examples were highlighted: that COVID-19 “disrupted” our debt and deficit model (007; 045), enabled virtual interactions and working online (002; 008; 049), and there were some examples State and Federal collaborations and multi-partisanship (021; 050). Australia also demonstrated an ability to act for the common good at a community level (016; 036; 037) and at a leadership level (028; 032; 037):

> “We’ve actually seen leaders ask people to make sacrifices for the greater good and most of the time people have gotten on board.” 028

> “You had the Federal government pushing down saying, ‘you're costing us billions of dollars a week closing down’, and you then had a leader stand up and say, ‘the wellbeing of my people is much more important than the money that we'll be able to get back eventually.’” 032

Politicians were noted as being more collaborative (021) with “a willingness to work together and collaborate, [and] cooperate for the greater good” (037). Government was seen to be “operating differently, really differently, very quickly” (009), and relying on and incorporating expertise (004; 005; 013; 020; 022; 023; 040; 044). The media was also noted as being temporarily more forgiving (048). Although optimism had diminished in our later interviews, there was still hope that pockets of progress would remain:

> “Over the last few months, [those] voices of, hey, let's hold on to something different, have started to be a bit more drowned out. I'm still optimistic that some things will carry through … with different community groups on community energy, for example. They've been able to connect with each other like never before …There's possibility there, there's possibility for new narratives to start to emerge, just because so many people are more connected with like-

minded folks that are sharing a narrative [more] than they were before. So that's the positive side of it.” 038

“I really feel like we're too sticky. But what I do believe in, is that there's going to be patches of people who [are] working probably in spaces we can't see yet. I guess what I'm excited about is even though things may appear to go back to normal, there's going to be clusters of people all over the world who have been transformed by this experience.” 032

# Part 3: Transforming the System

## 9 Transformative Leverage Points to Improve the System

These discussions have unearthed and highlighted multiple places throughout the future-making system that could be improved. Through iterative sense-making and synthesising of the findings in this report, we have identified four potential leverage points, and a corresponding challenge statement for each to enable further exploration (detailed in Sections 9.1-9.4):

- **Articulating and embracing an inclusive Australian identity**
  How might we embrace a national identity and story that is honest, inclusive, inspiring, and values the contributions of all people?
- **Authorising and embracing success paradigms beyond GDP**
  How might we embrace a success paradigm that goes beyond economic growth to also include social and environmental factors?
- **Enabling and embracing constructive discourse**
  How might we enable more constructive discourse across Australian society?
- **Engaging with and embracing public wisdom in decision-making**
  How might we enable all people in Australia to contribute to, and feel represented by, the decisions made on their behalf?

As Recoded continues, Next25 will conduct further research and engagement with the system to identify and develop a solution that addresses one of these leverage points. In late 2021, Next25 will engage with the system to select one leverage point to explore further (see Box *8* for more explanation on using leverage points to intervene in complex adaptive systems). In 2022, we will continue to engage with the system to further explore the challenge of the chosen leverage point and work to identify and develop a transformative solution (see Section 3 for more).

Part of exploring the challenge and solutions of the selected leverage point involves gaining a deep understanding of the context around it and work already being conducted by others. While providing a comprehensive picture of the leverage points is beyond the scope of this report, each subsection in Section 9 concludes with a brief overview pointing to select research, commentary, sections of this report, and findings and experiences from Next25's other programs. We look forward to engaging with readers and the system in the next phase of Recoded to expand this understanding of the selected leverage point.

Box 7: Leverage points in complex adaptive systems

| **Leverage points in complex adaptive systems** |
| --- |
| Making changes in a complex adaptive system requires an understanding of where and how it might be possible to influence the nature of these interactions. "Leverage points" is a term often used to describe these places that intervene in a system. Well known models for identifying leverage points include the Iceberg Model (Gerber, 2012) and the work of Donella |

**Leverage points in complex adaptive systems**

Meadows (Meadows, 2009). These form the basis of our approach in identifying challenges and solutions that have catalytic potential to improve how Australia makes its future.

While change in the future-making system is desired, finding effective points of intervention is a challenge. Determining possible leverage points requires thinking beyond current "symptoms" of the problem in question by getting to the deeper causes at play. General wisdom says the leverage points that work on shifting mental models and widely held assumptions have the greatest transformative potential. That being said, all areas of intervention can be powerful, and addressing structural and relationship aspects of a system can be a pathway to shifting mindsets over the longer-term.

It is also worth remembering that changes in one part of the system can cause counterintuitive and unpredictable changes to emerge in other parts. No single person can know the whole system or have the whole answer. This is what makes continual collaboration, action research, and adaptive learning so important in any effort to create systems change. This is why Next25 endeavours to conduct continual engagement with individuals from across the system to frequently attain knowledge about how the system is working. In addition, we explore challenges and leverage points that can improve how Australia makes its future.

## 9.1 Articulating and embracing an inclusive Australian identity

Challenge Statement 1

**How might we embrace a national identity and story that is honest, inclusive, inspiring, and values the contributions of all people?**

### 9.1.1 The power of a national story and identity

Themes surrounding Australia's national identity were front of mind for over one-quarter of interviewees. As one reflected, a national story that resonates is important, as "we need to have a tribe to belong to…**humans can't process in blocks of eight billion, they have to process in smaller blocks**" (043 – emphasis added). There were deep discussions around how we narrativise our story and tell our history as a country. Many interviewees feel that without knowing, understanding, grappling, and celebrating the past, "our future has no fundamental basis" (051).

> "I think Australians are unsure of our future. The key is that we don't know our past … we've really got to ask ourselves, if we don't understand the past and celebrate the past and know the history, our future has no fundamental basis. [There is] no foundation for the future." 051

> "The only way that Australia can really move forward with a plan for the next 200 years is if we face what's happened in the past 200 years." 015

A country's national story can enable improvements or significant changes to system structures, while maintaining the most important values and aspirations. Interviewee 043 explained the influence of a national story on policy outcomes in Sweden:

> "The national story is such a powerful thing. For example, the national story in Sweden is that they're all equal, they look after each other, they pay high taxes. But it's such a great national story because they brought in capitalism, but they've done it in the most egalitarian way than we've seen it anywhere in the world, because they've reinforced trying to live to their national story, that they're the most progressive nation on Earth. And therefore, when they brought the capitalist model to town, they really managed to create a friendlier, more supportive, capitalistic model than pretty much anywhere else …what's the mechanism that sits above that? What's the condition that made it so different in the UK to Sweden? It's the national story." 043

### 9.1.2 Challenging the current Australian identity

In the eyes of some interviewees, the mainstream version of the Australian identity fails to "grapple with our identity of the past" (014). However, there is a strong sense of opportunity from interviewees for Australia to embark upon "civic, big picture, vision conversations" that interrogate how First Nations reconciliation and healing "sit with respect to our British heritage and our multicultural present and future" (014).

This broadening, challenging, or "disrupting" of "the dominant narrative of Australia and what it means to be Australian" (047), requires us as a nation to reconcile with the lasting impact of "a traumatic and terrible history of colonisation." The impact continues through biases still embedded and perpetuated today throughout our telling of history and understanding of our national identity (014):

> "Unless we deeply reconcile with Indigenous Australians in the process, I think we're just going to be perpetuating all of the same problems that we have in the past." 015

> "I've been thinking a lot about First Nations activists and leaders and the conversation around Australia Day next week, and people really challenging the narrative of Australia and what does it mean to be Australian. What does it mean to celebrate the beginning of colonisation, or to mourn and resist it?" 047

> "I think there is not enough education on how problematic some of the history is, and then how that informs some of the problems for society today" 051

Furthermore, to interviewees, the current narrative surrounding Australian identity is linked to a telling of history that is often "whitewashed" (018), and centres upon men (051; 020). This "outdated" (024), "slightly racist, slightly misogynistic" "larrikin" / "Bruce and Sheila" trope pervades (043). However, this version of our national story is ignorant to the richness and diversity of past, present, and future Australia. As interviewees reflected:

> "What we need is a national story about what Australia is going to be. And that should include Indigenous, but also gender, multicultural, and environmental issues…It's not enough to say 'the fair go' or something. Nobody in Australia even knows what that means anymore... It's the lowest common denominator, a very thin idea of what the nation is." 045

> "I'd like to see a more common view about what it is to be Australian. I think we're still dining out on something that was probably appropriate before the First World War." 024

> "I think it's no question that the mainstream media is increasingly out of touch with Australia. Just because of the sheer amount of immigration we've had over the last couple of decades. Not everyone shares the same national pastimes of cricket, AFL and rugby league." 028

### 9.1.3 Harnessing the opportunity

Interviewees expressed a strong sense of opportunity in broadening our understanding of Australia's story and identity. Whether it be embracing First Nation wisdoms, our democratic feats, multiculturalism, or the efforts of everyday people like the Rural Fire Service. For example:

> "I just feel like we have such an opportunity in this country, to tap into the wisdom of our First Nations people. And they have this beautiful concept called the dadirri in their culture, which is deep listening. And it's deep listening to the land, and it's deep listening to each other. And I get really emotional thinking about the potential that lives everywhere in this country. For us to have First Nations wisdom leading in everything we're doing, and just how much reprieve I know that I've gotten when I have First Nations methodologies built into projects and culture and everything, they just get it. Wouldn't it just be amazing if we were one of the first countries to show that we could do this to show that we're not going to make tokens of our First Nations people, we're going to have them leading our culture. I just think that would be so incredible." 032

> "We need to return to more to understanding our relationship with … nature, or the inhuman, or the non-human in the Anthropocene. And Australia's in a unique position to be able to understand that, obviously, because if we were first hit by the fires, and we knew that was going to happen, sort of in 2020. So, we're going to have to move to a much more adaptive response, much more hybridised form of culture. And perhaps, the visions of our Indigenous people, and their understanding of the nonhuman world, will become part of that form of hybridisation. The notion of country is going to be something that we [are] going to[wards]. So, Australia might have some unique ways to understand our role in the planet." 033

> "Australia has some really incredible democratic history…. the secret ballot, women getting the vote and running for parliament, the way we've played with that is extraordinary in the context of the world. We should be really proud of that. I would love to see us tap into our national story more strongly. We're not talking about a radical future, we're talking about taking the best bits of what made us who we are, and kind of rebuilding them and remaking them. I think there's something important about that story and that history." 021

As interviewee 018 states, re-examining and re-framing the Australian story and national identity "is not about guilt tripping white people" but rather it is about embracing the richness and diversity of Australia's people, places, and history.

### 9.1.4 Further context

Questions around Australian identity, "what is Australia", "who is Australia", are ever present (Lewis, 2021; Beck et al., 2019; Crabb, 2019; Szoke, 2012), and have been reignited in the context of COVID-19 (AAP, 2021). This contestation resonates with findings of this report around a current lack of representation within the system and increased dividedness in society (Section 7.8.17.6;)7.8, alongside a desire for egalitarianism, particularly reconciliation and diversity (Section 6.2.1; 6.2.46.2), and a desire to embrace a common view of what brings us together as Australians (Section 6.46.4). Tensions between how different demographics value Australia's First Nations, Anglo-Saxon, and multi-cultural immigrant identities were also revealed in Navigator (2021), as was the importance of aspirations like "providing a fair go for all".

## 9.2 Authorising and embracing new success paradigms beyond GDP

Challenge Statement 2

**How might we embrace a success paradigm that goes beyond economic growth to also include social and environmental factors?**

### 9.2.1 Growth is the "dominant common sense"

Since the 1980s, our current system has operated under a paradigm of neoliberal capitalism (007; 009; 016; 025; 029; 039; 043; 045; 047) where economic growth is prioritised above all. It is the "dominant common sense" (046), the "dominant discourse" (039) that shapes Australia today, and a "universal truth that wasn't very true" (043), characterised by small government, market forces, competition, individualism, and privatisation that is disconnected from society and the environment.

> "We only measure things which are measurable in financial terms. They're the only things that count or have importance." 029

> "The dominance of that narrative of neoliberal capitalism … gives no room to have these other kinds of conversations … it's not a narrative you can tackle head on, it's too powerful. So how can you find leverage points … where you can insert different kinds of language and thinking into that existing narrative?" 039

> "The stories we tell and the narratives we co-create have an impact on the collective values and mindset of a society. Most Australians believe in the stories that we tell and the narratives we buy into align with the neo-liberal agenda. People need to fight, step on others, and elbow their way to succeed. Instead of 'we're all in this together, let's trust each other." 009

In this environment, where we assume that "endless economic growth and free markets will find us the solution we need" (039), numerical value is elevated and power can be skewed toward business and lobbyists (006). Which allows these groups more ability to exercise their interests and influence decision-making (see more in Section 7.77.7).

> "There's so many things in the system that are biased towards using the market, when we know the market doesn't work. Basically, neoliberalism failed around the global financial crisis." 029

> "We're stuck in this story that had some value for a time but has now outlived its usefulness." 039
>
> "The other aspect is just to keep pointing out the absurdity of aspects of the current narrative and the impossibility of growing forever." 039

### 9.2.2 The continuous growth mindset is not aligned with what Australia wants

The consequences of this continuous growth mindset, as identified by interviewees, include: driving unbalanced outcomes and wealth inequality (009; 011; 047; Section 7.17.1); environmental degradation (041; 045); and a system "where all our economic structures drive precarity" and risk (025), in a way that "rips [the] heart out of communities" (034) and pushes us toward unsustainable consumption, capital accumulation, and materialism (007; 030; 037).

> "Instead of these big peaks and troughs of huge wealth and immense poverty … [it is finding] the better off overall position that is the line of best fit, as opposed to massive economic growth being [the] measure of success [for the] country." 011
>
> "I'm a free market, right-of-centre person. But I think that we're becoming too materialistic, that we are relying on avarice and conspicuous consumption to motivate our people." 030

The origins of our growth-driven system and the driving of unbalanced societal outcomes have both been explored in-depth in this report. (See Sections 7.1 and 7.2 for greater detail). Many of the themes articulated in the current state overlap, contribute to, and serve to reinforce a growth paradigm. This is particularly prevalent in our system's orientation toward siloes, where the economy is separate from other elements; in how stagnation maintains the status quo of neoliberalism, despite the emergence of its flaws (see Sections 7.4.1; 7.3; 7.2.37.4.1); and the way the system is beholden to vested interests (see Section 7.77.7).

The need to go beyond the economy and GDP growth to consider society and the environment was explicitly mentioned by interviewees as a key element of success for Australia (Section 6.3.16.3). Further measures of success included egalitarianism, fairness, diversity, reconciliation, renewal, and a need to prioritise the "common good" and the delivery of the public interest to guide decisions (Section 6). No interviewee mentioned unfettered economic growth as being success for Australia. Where the economy was discussed, it was with the caveat that prosperity must be sustainable and consider intergenerational wellbeing (027; 045; Section 6.2.5).

### 9.2.3 Movements for change have emerged

Interviewees spoke of alternative paths forward and new ways of defining success beyond economic growth, including: Kate Raworth's doughnut economics (039; 044); New Zealand's wellbeing budget (032); measures of happiness (006; 009; 028); valuing non-market contributions, such as care (028; 045); valuing, building, and maintaining relationships (007; 047); notions of degrowth (039); and a commons narrative as an alternative to the dominant neoliberalism:

> "So, when somebody asks, '**What's in it for me?', to sort of flip that question a little to say, 'What's in it for us?' instead.** [It] is a subtle change, but something that can start to bring new kinds of thinking, looking for those opportunities to shift towards a more commons narrative … it's not about entirely abandoning the current dominant narrative. There's lots of valuable aspects of it. It's about evolving that in the ways that we can so

that it is **more collective, sensitive to the needs of the planet and to the needs of people**." 039 – emphasis added

The shift toward embracing a more holistic version of success is already beginning in Australia. More incremental changes are reflected in the elevation of ESG guidelines and stakeholder capitalism within the business world (see Section 7.2.47.2.4). A number of groups and coalitions within Australia are also undertaking significant revolutionary changes to imagine a different economic system that values people and planet. These include the New Economy Network Australia (part of the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance) and Next Economy.

Many interviewees pointed to Australia's initial COVID-19 response as an example of embracing social and economic considerations (although not environmental) and focusing on the common good and societal wellbeing (more in Section 8.6). They also spoke of how the COVID-19 response has challenged neoliberalism's focus on individualism through an increased awareness of our interconnection and need to act with regard for others. Much like many of the challenges facing Australia, the pandemic is "a collective issue and it requires a collective response" (036). With the incorporation of expertise, our leaders' approach, especially at the beginning, balanced health and population wellbeing with the economy. It stressed the importance of working together for the common good:

> "The lesson that I hope will come out of COVID is the importance of society and communities working together, and building, being more cohesive and inclusive rather than being atomistic. If that happens, I think the next 10 to 20 years could be a major departure from the way we're heading. Towards the rat race, every bastard for himself and climbing up the greasy pole … which, to me, is really dystopian. Where people are only concerned about making an extra dollar for themselves and to hell with everybody else. That's the exact opposite of where I'd like to see Australia." 037

### 9.2.4 Further context

As interviewees themselves pointed out there has been a number of approaches such as doughnut economics, wellbeing budgets, and happiness indexes to name a few (Sections 6.3.1; 7.2.4) which recognise flaws of an economic-focused, growth-driven paradigm and the need to move away from it. Other frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Taskforce for Climate-related Financial Disclosures, and work conducted by the OECD (2020b), Sachs (2015), and the World Bank (Lange et al., 2018) highlight movements for change on the global scale. Findings from our report reinforce this, where our current growth-driven system is seen to result in unbalanced outcomes (Sections 7.2; 7.1), and there is a desire to define success for Australia beyond economic growth (Sections 6.1-6.5). The importance placed on non-monetary aspirations is also found in Navigator (2021), where – for example – access to quality healthcare and caring for our natural environment are first and fourth most important for Australians.

## 9.3 Enabling and embracing constructive discourse

Challenge Statement 3

**How might we enable more constructive discourse across Australian society?**

### 9.3.1 Australia is becoming more divided

Interviewees often discussed how Australia is seemingly becoming more divided, or polarised, and that national discourse also seems to be increasingly degraded. This "increasing partisaness" across both right and left ideologies extends to groups of people, such as First Nations and those of lower socio-economic status (015; 034).

> "There's an increasing partisaness [not just] 'left' and 'right' politically, but an increasing, 'poor people are poor because it's their own fault' … There's no genuine understanding of it. You'll hear people in cities say 'the Aborigines deserve it, because they're all drunks', and they've never visited an Aboriginal community in life. So, **I think we're becoming richer and more ignorant almost at the same time."** 015 – emphasis added

> "We increasingly seeing people screaming at each other. There seems to be an intolerance for the other person's view, which I find depressing … We can't let that happen; we have to be robust enough to hear what the other person has to say." 023

The rapid pace of change within Australia, particularly in relation to our diverse population and the multitude of challenges we face, was noted as contributing to "a more divided society" (008; 012). Shifts to the status quo, lack of agency, and limited influence over the future (Section 7.97.6) are also seen as driving feelings of fear, despair, and anger towards others:

> "People are so threatened by just how quickly the status quo [is] shifting and that they're not being brought along in the conversation, and [that] means you go … one of two ways: despair, or resentment. You just get really, really angry at these strange people … around gender, and race, and class … And they're probably very frightened." 032

### 9.3.2 The role of media and politics in perpetuating division

Interviewees perceive the relationship between media and politics as one of the most influential in Australia's future-making system, primarily due to the heightened role of the two institutions in enabling and creating division across society. The adversarial nature of politics, with a perceived self-interested "win at all costs" attitude linked to election cycles, is seen to enable short-termism and a lack of willingness to compromise and collaborate. Alongside this is the proliferation of simplistic communications and approaches to complex policy issues, which often become very symbolic, tribal, and peripheral to the common good (See Section 7.8.3 7.8.3for more detail).

> "It's a lot to do with the nature of the adversarial political system that we operate in. That the only way to implement your policies is to be in government. So, we'll do whatever it takes to get into power." 021

> "Political systems have become one of winning or losing to stay alive rather than working together for the betterment of the entire country" 037

> "The world is full of really big complex problems. [With] the level of the political divide, it's been reduced to a series of gotcha moments." 022

> "We've almost constructed a system that encourages us to spend large amounts of energy on things that are actually really immaterial to the understanding of

> the broader common good [and] to dealing with long term futures. They focus on the short-term, they focus on the symbolic." 025

The media was noted for its lack of diversity and independence (006; 028; 047); and its role in enabling echo-chambers that reflect our own opinions and strengthen them (006; 008; 015; 034; 047); the rise of misinformation (018; 028; 032; 033; 048) and poor journalistic quality.

> "I am not purposely looking for stories that counterbalance my perspective, I am as much to blame for confirmation bias as Rupert Murdoch is for supplying confirmation bias …So we're as much to blame for amplification as the media is because we're struggling with time [to read multiple news sources]." 034

> "When I started [politics in] 2001, you couldn't just get the story in the paper, because the journalist actually wanted to make sure it had currency and had validity. By the end of my time, the cycle was that rapid that the journalist[s] … were essentially copywriters, it was very frustrating because your opponent could basically say anything … so you spent your whole-time defending crap, which wasn't true." 048

> "The Australian might have been previously a little bit centre-right, and the Guardian centre-left, I think they're drifting further and further apart. The people who read one or the other are finding it increasingly difficult to agree on anything or even not agree on the outcome, but even agree on the question, or the frame of reference." 028

Drawn together, the dynamics within politics and media are seen as bringing out the worst characteristics in each other, which perpetuates a negative feedback loop. Wherein the power of media and private interests can outweigh public interests for politicians (028; 039); the media sets the agenda and specific outlets, and politicians' media monitoring are highly influential (002; 048); and both institutions are driven by outrage, conflict, and negative politics (028; 034). (See Section 7.8.5 for more detail).

> "Most politicians feel constrained in what they're able to do, because of the power of the media and private interests that will come down on them hard if they don't take the kind of action that is consistent with what people behind those media organisations and firms are looking for." 039

> "The media plays a very heavy role in shaping public opinion and political outcomes. Unfortunately, our political system has deteriorated over time into a system that is increasingly influenced by the availability of news and conflicting views." 002

> "I tell people, if you don't read about it in The Australian, it's not happening … But what people miss is that … every decision-maker gets their media monitoring delivered to them with about five minutes to ten every night. If it's not in their media monitor, that's not an issue … the best way to [run a campaign] is to get it somewhere in the front ten pages in the Australian newspaper." 048

> "It's human nature, we're instinctively nervous about change … People always mourn something they've lost more than the benefit they get from something they might potentially gain … So basically, there's a huge benefit to running negative politics … The media cycle is driven largely around conflict, and it's also

> being driven a little bit on negativity. And I don't think there's been enough responsibility on the media to date, for actually, not necessarily coming up with solutions, but being part of working towards a constructive solution." 028

Social media is also perceived as having a negative impact on politics (006; 019; 022l 031) by channelling conspiracy theories. Interviewees also spoke of the difficulty in discerning genuine broader public concern from a few very noisy people:

> "You might say the media … promotes the interests of a small number of people, social media destroys the interests of most people." 031

> "I can't tell, if I'm a politician, whether I've got 100,000 people screaming at me down a megaphone, all I know, is the amount of noise." 022

### 9.3.3 Engaging in more constructive discourse

Pathways forward might involve using what we have in common as a starting point and using broad ideas of success or visions for the future as a means of connecting with other another. Interviewees specifically pointed to success as encompassing: social cohesion, diversity, valuing all contributions and experiences, engaging in discussions to articulate the common good, and creating an Australian story that embraces all our difference (see Section 6).

Interviewees acknowledged that the right kind of conflict is needed and can be constructive (Section 7.8.27.8.2). The path to success may involve taking a new approach and challenging beliefs that conflict should be avoided, or that being outspoken, critically engaging, or having intellectual conversations is "un-Australian" (012; 044). There is broad consensus that constructive conflict, debate, and being challenged is necessary (012; 014; 018; 021; 034) and must be developed going forward. Part of decreasing intolerance, increasing acceptance, bridging divides, and enabling constructive debate is equipping people with the skills to do so and create spaces conducive to such exchanges.

> "The task of maintaining discourse is, in a sense, to understand where there are conflicting views, to examine them, to try to reset a dialogue, so that they're talking. So, where there are tensions and conflicts, that is actually really good usually in a discourse, because that's the source of something." 018

> "It is challenging, and it is uncomfortable, but discomfort and its educational power can be good … We need to be able to ask clumsy questions and be forgiving of each other." 034

> "We need to equip our people, our communities, to have divergent conversations in constructive ways and feel competent to do that without feeling like it's going to turn into a situation of conflict." 012

Being forgiving and openminded may also involve accepting that we will not have all the answers. As one interviewee reflected from their interactions teaching citizenship at university:

> "[I asked what is] the single biggest thing stopping you take action on something you care about? By far [it's] fear of being shut down… the culture of social media has created this feeling that if you have a different opinion or perspective and you're not an absolute expert on the matter, then you risk having this conflict situation." 012

Being “an absolute expert on [any] matter” is difficult, especially in a context where there is an aversion to experts and the “elitism” of academia (009; 020; 032; Section 7.4.3), and diminished engagement with expertise in politics and the public service (Section 7.4.4). Expanding our conception of expertise recognises the value of lived experience being just as valuable as more conventional knowledge gained through education or professional experiences (Section 7.5.47.5):

> “A person that has come from a different background … perhaps they're a refugee … a migrant … they may not have had the same educational opportunities, but they have incredible depth of knowledge that they want to share [and] represent, and they're passionate. Is that person even getting a go? Versus the person that went to a private school or Uni Melb, practiced as a lawyer, is now trotting a well-trodden path. Now, both of those people have merit, they obviously have different ideas that they want to bring, but how are we actually balancing that?” 019

Examples from interviewees’ own experiences reflect the potential of deliberation, and of meeting across divides to have difficult conversations:

> “One of the repeated things that ordinary citizens say is they really like the aesthetics of deliberation. [It’s] actually really attractive to people because it looks very, very different, actually watching people change their minds, discussing things civilly, deal[ing] with issues of importance is something that people like to watch.” 025

> “I'll give you a perfect example. This guy that I know, he sent me an abusive email once because I was on The Drum, and he got really angry. Every time I get a hateful email, I always respond to it ... I ended up having coffee with him, and that was a really interesting conversation, one of the things he said to me was, ‘You said, there's no problem with immigration, but I'm worried about Chinese migration … I sort of went through different waves of migration in the 50s 60s 70s 80s 90s, in the noughties’ … And he said, ‘I don't have any problem with any migration phase. The problem I have with the Chinese migration phase, is not the Chinese, it's that they all come in with wealth.’ And so, our program now is excluding those who, he said, ‘It's not a race thing, it's an economics thing’ …I had no idea that was his position [from] his emails, right... We ended up having this quite intense debate about it, but in the end, we kind of acknowledged the fact there are different positions on migration and how complex that was, that he agreed to it as well. But that was a messy exchange, like I left there having sweated. I think part of the challenge really is, it's not only the ability to communicate complex ideas. It's also the fact that it's messy.” 034

### 9.3.4 Further Context

Increasingly, society is becoming more polarised at individual, community, and institutional levels because system structures, processes, beliefs, and actions reinforce polarisation (DemocracyCo, 2021; Klein, 2020; Muller, 2019). Increased polarisation, division, and conflict is also a trend in our current system that is identified by this report (Section 7.87.8). Further, interviewees acknowledged a need for more constructive debate and dialogue (Section 7.8.27.8.2), and a desire for social cohesion and using concepts like the public interest and common good as terms to initially bridge divides and guide decision-making (Section 6.3.26.3.2). “Being willing to talk out our

disagreements" and "accepting those with different views" were also highlighted as two top priorities for Australia's future, as identified in Navigator (2021) by those under 30. Through Next25 Leadership, we have also experienced first-hand the positive impact that being able to connect across ideology, party lines, and beliefs can bring.

## 9.4 Engaging with and embracing public wisdom in decision-making

Challenge Statement 4

**How might we enable all people in Australia to contribute to, and feel represented by, the decisions made on their behalf?**

### 9.4.1 A lack of agency

One of the most prominent topics discussed during Recoded interviews is a concern that most people in Australia, often including themselves, do not feel that they have a say in the decisions that impact them. There are today "fewer mechanisms whereby people are brought into a political process" (025), despite a strong appetite from the community to contribute to decision-making (Box *8*). Whether it is a form to fill out or a didactic handing down of information with minimal interaction (020; 026), not engaging the public adequately can lead to despondency, people not feeling heard, and arising fears over the unknown:

> "They didn't feel like they had a voice, like they weren't being heard. And they said, 'We want the government to talk to us, like you're talking to us, just ask us what we think. Don't make us fill in a form.'" 020

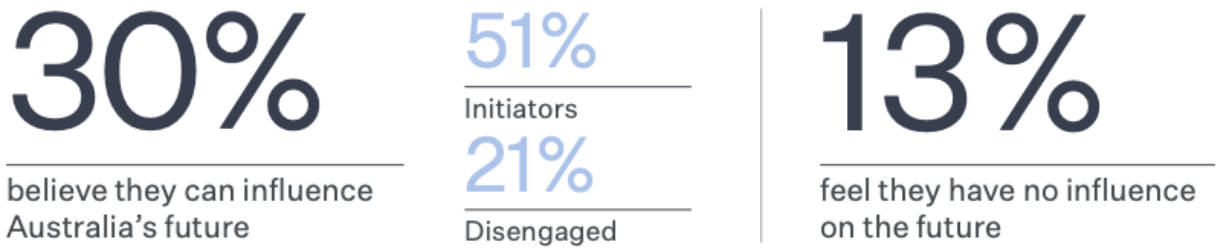
> "The approach to community engagement has always been about telling people what we know and feel comfortable telling them, and then asking them questions. It's not responsive. People are looking to understand things more than this. Fear is a driver for people to want to understand, it's also a driver for people to want to act and do things that protect themselves. I don't think we're getting that information at the moment. It's not because it's not available. It's just hard to find." 026

Box 8: The public feel powerless

**The public feel powerless**

While the public has expressed a strong desire to improve Australia through systemic change, leaders and the Australian public strongly perceive they lack the power to do so. For example, Navigator (2021) found that 30% of Australians feel confident that they could influence the future. Furthermore, when asked who can most contribute to improving Australia, 70% see political leaders as most influential, while 43% believe they themselves could contribute to improving the country

**The public feel powerless**




The structures that "are meant to enable people to make their voice heard", such as political party membership, town-hall meetings, or compulsory voting, can be alienating and will often make one feel that "their voice doesn't matter anyway" (012). These conditions contribute to and perpetuate the perceived mismatch between the priorities of the community and those who make decisions on behalf of the community, as well as increasing feelings of disempowerment and disenfranchisement across the system:

> "We need to find ways of bringing citizens back into the political process. We're in a position where a lot of people feel very divorced or alienated from the political process, or it's not part of their day-to-day life." 025

> "We don't have any influence really, unless you've got a very, very, very big megaphone and a chequebook … it's almost reached a tipping point where the common person doesn't want to know about the future, [they have] no influence in this country. So, why think [about] the future when no one listens to you? You have no influence. So, what's the point? That's the issue." 051

> "People do feel pretty disempowered, to be honest with you … there's a huge disconnect between the priorities of majority of Australians and the priorities of the people who lead us [in the public and private sector, and the media]. I don't think the disconnect has ever been greater." 023

> "One of the great debates that we sort of watched play out recently was the franking credits debate and they had these town hall meetings. It's these white-haired pensioners that are rocking up and discussing this really, really intricately detailed tax policy. You would never get young people turning up to something like that, because it's not well understood, they don't get the 'What's in it for me?' factor. And I don't even think I would know where to find when a town hall was being held by my local minister … so there's all these structural barriers that seem to be in the way for young people sort of participating. And I think there's potentially a level of apathy and lack of interest in some of these topics as well." 019

Often, when attempts at public engagement do take place, it is most likely to focus on "very specific, very local concerns" rather than "big policy issues" (010). And when big policy issues are examined through public engagement, it is often performative and rarely results in a clear route to policy decisions (025). Consultation and public engagement have also been described as "gatekeeper-y", where "the language is so inaccessible … [when] having these conversations, you

need a set vocabulary to be able to be heard in those spaces" (049). Further, there is an embedded mindset of public engagement being about customer relationship management, focusing on complaint management rather than service provision or proactive stakeholder management (026). Likewise, current practices are also sometimes seen to be nothing more than a "tick-box exercise" that is "not genuine consultation" (010).

> "So, it's not actually a genuine consultation … you have an open conversation when you have not yet decided what you want to do. You might have an idea or strawman approach, but it's actually a genuine two-way conversation, and government does not have on both sides of the Parliament, and both the state and federal level government is not particularly interested in meaningful dialogue." 010

> "I think this is one of the ways in which we can actually disenfranchise citizens from wanting to be involved, being that if you run deliberative processes that are largely performative, they don't have a strong influence on policy [and] there's not a route to that process becoming part of a strong decision- making outcome." 025

### 9.4.2 Connecting people to the decisions that impact them

Many interviewees see decision-making processes that are inclusive of lived experience voices as greatly important. These voices have been "an ingredient that's being missed in a big way." However, Australia has great potential to "tap into those ways of knowing" and "see it [lived experience] as an equally valid way of knowing as intelligence" (032).

> "What we want to engage with is the collective intelligence and knowledge of someone who is not living a life that's largely insulated from the rest of Australian citizens, but someone who's living among the rest of Australian citizens, to be involved in those decision-making processes. That's where I think a whole series of deliberative structures are much more likely to broaden the base of those engaged in politics." 025

Citizens juries, assemblies, and forums are popular proposals put forward by interviewees to improve community contribution to decision-making (007; 008; 012; 021; 025). Seen as the opposite to parliament where there is mainly one voice coming out, citizens assemblies are a great way to involve a more diverse range of people, including the young, old, and those with non-English speaking backgrounds aided by interpreters (021). Such forums can break down divides on challenges that have been politicised, like climate change (007). Further, citizens juries are independent, unbiased, and can have an educative role where juries are presented with the relevant facts for the decision at hand (008). Read more in Section 7.5.

### 9.4.3 Disconnect between the public and decision-makers

A major contributing factor underpinning this disconnect from the public is a prevailing lack of faith in ordinary citizens, prevalent in some circles of decision-makers. For example, often "senior bureaucrats" tend to be of the assumption that government "knows best" and see little value "spending time or money in a process they don't think anything useful will come out of (025; 026). Interviewees see this hesitation to "let go of the policy pen" (025) as an embedded assumption linked to "hubris" and a desire to pre-determine policy outcomes (025; 026):

> "When I talk to senior bureaucrats, there's a strong suspicion of what they might see as the qualifications or the ability of a broader citizenry to make good decisions." 025

> "So, you hear often people say, 'Oh, we wouldn't want to let go of the policy pen too much' … When you have a legitimate deliberative process, you need to have given up your ability to control an outcome. We have a system that's very strongly biased towards wanting to run processes where the outcome can be predetermined or controlled." 025

> "Talking to senior decision-makers who have been involved in deliberative process – they often go, 'Wow, that was not what I expected, I expected that we'd have a whole lot of ridiculous debate, and the experts will be ignored.' I think there's a degree of hubris around this, 'I have been a secretary of department for many years, I went [to] Princeton, what does someone who left school at grade 10 have anything to contribute to this process?'. But people who have been involved in that process uniformly seem to step back and go, 'Actually, people made really reasonable decisions.' People with knowledge that is placed based, or occupation based, that kind of tacit knowledge that comes from being part of a particular sector of society, were able to offer insights that I wasn't aware of, [and] that stopped us making silly mistakes." 026

Also contributing to this sense of disconnect between decision-makers and the public is that often, decision-makers and leaders are not representative of people in Australia – particularly in the political system (see Section 7.6).

Similar to our approach to the Australian story and identity (see Section 6.4.2), much of our country's leadership is perceived to be resoundingly "old, white, and male" (015). This lack of representation can mean that leaders do not resonate or empathise with the experiences of Australians, and they therefore "aren't in touch with what's going on" (049). Structures within the two major political parties including membership and the preselection process that tend to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo. This means that increasingly "parties [are] attract[ing] people like themselves" (021), leading to candidates coming from "a very limited pool" (019), resulting in a homogenised culture where "only certain types of people can work their way into those parties" (032). These conditions make it far more difficult for "ordinary" people in Australia to enter politics. And those who do, are more likely to be well resourced (032).

> "They [politicians] are individually much narrower and come out of a much more homogenous machine now. They lack either the personal breadth that you saw in the past or, as a collective, [lack] the diversity of experience that you've seen." 022

> "It's visible across both parties, where the route to that office tends to now track yourself through the internal machinations of a particular party. So, I think that creates a problem." 025

In addition to political parties' leadership becoming more homogenised, interviewees are concerned about how this tends to push politicians "further away from the community" (026). They believe this has led to a desire for a "different type of politics" in Australia (026) that elevates diverse community voices that resonates with the general public (032; 025; 051; 020; 019; 021). Politicians such as Jacquie Lambie, Jordan Steel John, Helen Haines, and Penny Wong were all mentioned as those who successfully resonate with the communities they represent.

The desire for a "different type of politics" (026) extends beyond embracing different types of politicians to embracing structures and practices that enable more bottom-up decision-making. Providing an alternative route, that still enables citizens to engage in a meaningful way and maintain their current lives, is important and engenders trust and legitimacy (025).

> "In my perfect world, it's the bottom-up approach." 018

> "It's a bit of a utopian idea, it comes back a little bit more to local councils interacting with their constituents … gathering some data and ideas and taking that sort of up the line … it's using the resources that the council has and allow[ing] them to interact as state members to get the community's opinions and ideas promulgated." 003

> "How do we make our future? It's for smaller individual communities … when there's a bushfire, they will get together and help each other by pooling their resources and looking after individuals, land, properties, etc. Then you hope … government or business will see how a community has helped itself and they can adopt or incorporate some of those ideas or systems into bigger broader systems [and] extended to a wider level." 003

> "I don't know if all of our community structures have caught up with how to engage people meaningfully… So where do they find their sense of community? And how do we build structures where they still experience [a] sense of belonging and those things?" 012

> "If we have much better structured and legitimate deliberative processes, then we're much more likely to get a much broader group of people being involved in the policy process, because there's an alternate route. I think [it] does a couple of potential things. One is, it's much more likely to engender trust in the process, [and] in an outcome that you disagree with. So, it creates legitimacy … both of which are in short supply [in] Australian policy decision making." 025

> "One of the repeated things that ordinary citizens say is they really like the aesthetics of deliberation, [it's] actually really attractive to people because it looks very, very different, actually watching people change their minds, discussing things civilly, deal[ing] with issues of importance is something that people like to watch." 025

### 9.4.4 Further context

In 2018, less than 41% of Australian citizens were satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia, down from 86% in 2007 (Stoker et al., 2018). This is also illustrated in our report findings of the current state, characterised by a lack of agency (Section 7.9) limited public engagement mechanisms (Section 7.5.2), lack of faith in ordinary citizens (Section 7.5.3), and disconnection between the priorities of leaders and the broader citizenry (Section 7.6.37.6.3). As Box *8:* The public feel powerless outlined, this sense of powerlessness is also reflected in Navigator (2021), where 30% of respondents felt they could influence the future, despite 66% saying the ability to have a say beyond voting is important. This report also finds that there are pockets of public engagement and deliberative democracy noted for their achievements and potential (Section 7.5.2). Interviewees also recognise the value of lived experience and a need for diverse inputs into decision-making in a way which is truly democratic (Sections 6.2.4; 7.5).

# 10 Where to from Here: for Next25 and for Individuals, Organisations, and the System

**Each one of us plays a role in ensuring intergenerational success for Australia**, and there are steps individuals, organisations, and institutions can all take to help ensure the future-making system has what it takes. We have outlined some potential next steps below.

## 10.1 For Next25

Recoded is designed to continually identify and explore system challenges and solutions that have catalytic potential to improve how Australia makes its future. The findings in this report can be harnessed by the individuals, organisations, and institutions that make up our future-making system. Next25 will also continue to play its role.

As Recoded continues, Next25 will conduct further research and engagement with the system to identify and develop a solution that addresses one of these leverage points. In late 2021, Next25 will engage with the system to select one leverage point to explore further (see Box 7 for more explanation on using leverage points to intervene in complex adaptive systems). In 2022, we will continue to engage with the system to further explore the challenge of the chosen leverage point and work to identify and develop a transformative solution.

For full detail on Recoded's modules, activities, and long-term plan, see Section 3.

## 10.2 For the system and all its actors

From anyone reading this report, Next25 is eager to hear your thoughts and ideas. We are committed to working with the system to identify and explore the lever we will take forward. We want to know from you:

- What you think of the leverage points?
- Which leverage point you think has the most potential?
- Is there something missing?

We would welcome any feedback through this survey.

## 10.3 For organisations, groups, and institutions

We are eager to support and collaborate with organisations, groups, and institutions in the future-making system to help make the future Australia wants. We encourage you to:

- Share the report and use its insights to inform your strategic planning
- Engage us to present the findings and facilitate discussions about their impact for you and for Australia
- Work with us to help understand and articulate your role in the system and what actions you can take
- Partner with us or sponsor us to explore a leverage point in detail, including identifying and developing a solution

Please contact us if your organisation is interested in pursuing any of the above options.

## 10.4 For individuals

We invite you to read, reflect, share, and engage with Recoded and Next25's broader activities:

- Read and share the report with your networks
- Sign up to our mailing list or follow us on social media: LinkedIn, Twitter, and/or Facebook
- Invite others to engage as well!

We cannot do this work alone. We rely on our supporters, Board, Research Committee, and donors for their generous support. If you are an organisation or individual interested in supporting, sponsoring, or partnering with Next25 for future Recoded activities, please reach out.

Get in touch with Jessica Fuller, Next25's Research Manager and the Program Lead for Recoded to engage further with Recoded at: jessica@next25.org.au

# Glossary

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Actor** | A participant in an action or process. |
| **Belief** | Something one accepts as true or real; a firmly held opinion. |
| **Complex adaptive systems** | Complex adaptive systems are dynamic, self-organising, and constantly adapting to change. They exist within other interdependent systems. They are driven by interactions between components in the system and governed by feedback. Changes in one part of the system can cause changes in other parts of the system, often in nonlinear and unpredictable ways. People both shape the system and are influenced by the system (Ashton, 2013). |
| **Equality** | The state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities. |
| **Equity** | The quality of being fair and impartial. |
| **Future-making system** (defined by Next25) | The Australian future-making system is defined as a complex adaptive system. This means it is dynamic, self-organising, and constantly adapting to change and feedback from other components and independent systems (McKenzie 2014; Ashton 2013). The future-making system in Australia is not limited to just government or politics. It includes media, business, non-government organisations, experts, academia, and more. The system encompasses numerous actors including institutions, organisations, groups, and individuals, who all have degrees of influence on Australia's future. Decisions made by these actors are influenced by relationships, structures, processes, resources, and mental models. |
| **Intergenerational** | Relating to, involving, or affecting several generations. |
| **Institution** | An organisation founded for a religious, educational, professional, or social purpose. |
| **Intersectionality** | The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Leverage point** (Meadows, 2009) | Places within a complex system where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything. |
| **Mindset / mental models** | Deeply held assumptions and beliefs that ultimately drive behaviour. |
| **Paradigm (Meadows, 2009)** | Paradigms are the sources of systems. The mind-set out of which the system, its goals, structures, rules, delays, and parameters arises. |
| **System** | An assemblage or combination of things or parts forming a complex or unitary whole. |
| **Systemic** | Of or pertaining to a system. |

**All definitions sourced from Oxford Languages (2021) unless otherwise specified.**

# Detailed Research Method and Limitations

## I Detailed methodology

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the interview method as they allow for the collection of in-depth information without pre-determining results and enable participants to explore issues in-depth in a way which suits them best (Yin, 2015; Cook, 2008). Interviews were one hour in duration, with majority conducted online via Zoom and four conducted in-person. The 50 interviews analysed in this report were conducted between September 2020 and February 2021.

All interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed using Otter.ai with manual corrections. Qualitative content analysis was undertaken using NVivo 12, which allowed for the systematic analysis of the frequency of the text's themes and characteristics (Maier, 2018).

When conducting any research there are inherit limitations that must be acknowledged and addressed to the extent that is possible. Outlined below is an overview of the research limitations associated with (i) the research methodology and (ii) the research participants, and how these limitations will be addressed.

## II Systems theory to understand the future-making system and identify catalytic leverage points

Systems theory underpins the approach for this process. This means that our approach understands future-making in Australia to be made up of a complex arrangement of elements, including formal and informal institutions, individuals and their beliefs, and the interactions that are governed by elements such as relationships, structures, processes, resources, and also the mental models or paradigms that sit beneath it all.

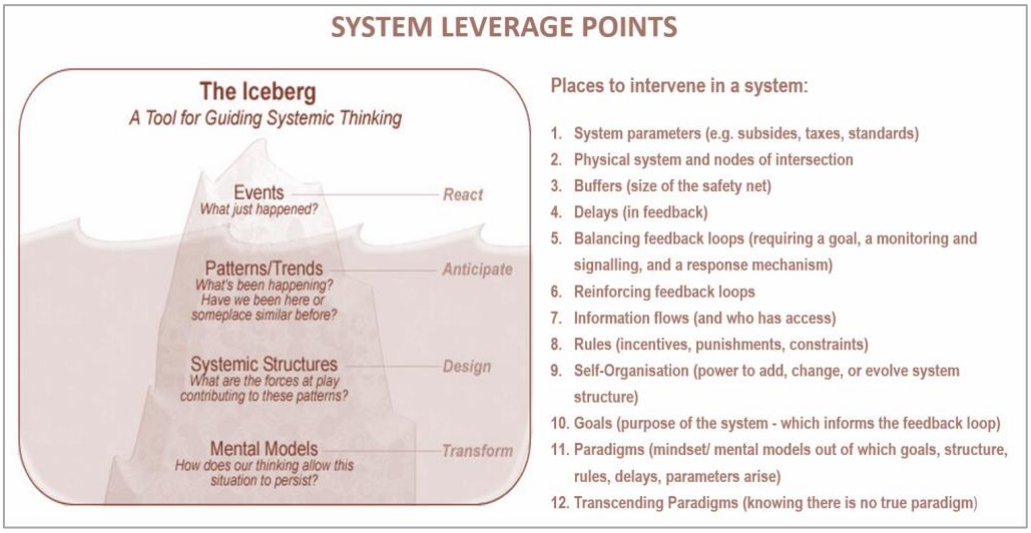
The future-making system is complex, dynamic, and self-organising. It can be categorised as a complex-adaptive system. The complexity comes from interactions and feedback between system components, as it encompasses all levels of government, industries, and numerous research disciplines.

To make changes in a complex adaptive system requires understanding where and how it might be possible to influence the nature of these interactions. "Leverage points" is a term often used to these places to intervene in a system.  Well known models for identifying leverage points include the iceberg model (Gerber, 2012) and the work of Donella Meadows (Meadows, 2009). This forms the basis of our approach to identify challenges and solutions that have catalytic potential to improve how Australia makes its future. See Figure 9.

While change in the future-making system is desired, finding effective points of intervention is a challenge. Determining possible leverage points requires thinking beyond current 'symptoms' of the problem in question and getting to the deeper causes at play. General wisdom is that leverage points that get closer to shifting mental models and widely held assumptions are of the greatest transformative potential. That being said, all areas of intervention can be powerful and addressing structural and relationship aspects of a system can be a pathway to shifting mindsets over the longer-term.

It is also worth remembering that changes in one part of the system can cause counterintuitive and unpredictable changes to emerge in other parts. No single person can know the whole system or has the whole answer. This is what makes continual collaboration, action research and adaptive learning so important in any effort to create systems change. And why Next25 endeavours to

conduct continual engagement with individuals from across the system to frequently attain knowledge about how the system is working, in addition to exploring challenges and leverage points that can improve how Australia makes its future.




## III Action research to unlock a shared understanding and collaboratively build improvements

In addition to systems theory underpinning the approach for Recoded, Action Research is also applied to encourage deep reflection, collaboration and a shared understanding of the system.

Action research is defined as generating knowledge through combined research and practical work. The process aims to achieve transformative change by linking critical reflection to the process of taking action and undertaking research. By facilitating a methodological action research program, embedded in a system thinking approach, Next25 will unlock and generate a shared understanding of the future-making system.

Vitally, our process will engage broadly with a diverse array of individuals who represent a cross section of current and emerging decision-makers and leaders in the future-making system. See Section 4.3 for our targeted breakdown of research participants.

Through careful community engagement strategies, we create an open environment that provides participants with the safe space for critical reflection. A democratic sharing of voice can be established that forms a deep understanding of what can be transformed through collective reflection and action. By linking this critical reflection to action, the process itself enables transformative change first at the individual level – from exposure to new networks, information, and inspiration - and then at the systems level.

## IV Interview question guide

1. **Defining success for Australia** – What do you define as success for Australia and why?
2. **Understanding how decisions about the future are made in Australia** – Who (individuals, organisations, sectors, groups etc) or what (factors such as markets, geopolitics norms etc) plays the most influential role in determining Australia's future and why?
3. **Improving how we make decisions about the future** – Do you believe significant change is needed to improve how Australia makes decisions about its future? Why/ why not?
4. **Lessons we can learn** – What relevant lessons can Australia learn from other countries, or out own past? Why is this lesson relevant?

5. **Broadening engagement** – Anything else you would like to add? Is there anyone you suggest we interview, or specific materials you suggest we engage with?
6. **Evaluation** – What inspired you to accept our invitation to be interviewed? Is there anything we can do to improve the interview process?

## V Method limitations

The qualitative nature of the method could not eliminate respondent bias. In fact, the interviews intentionally sought to take a causal layered analysis (see more at Inayatullah, 2021) approach to examine mental models and beliefs. As an organisation we are non-partisan, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with interviewees. The purpose was to listen, understand, and delve into interviewees' perspectives, which also limited research bias in the interview process. To ensure a rich understanding and truly enable a shared understanding a large number (n=50) of diverse interviewees (see Section 4.34.3) were interviewed.

In undertaking an open-ended semi-structured style, we were guided by interviewee's responses and did not seek specific answers. To mitigate these limitations and maintain continuity and consistency, the same broad, key questions were asked of each interviewee (see Annex IV). Further, at the end of the interview, interviewees were prompted "is there anything else you would like to add, or feel you have missed?" However, beyond the core questions used by the interviewer, the responses of the interviewees guided what was discussed.

Further, unless an interviewee mentioned a specific perspective or belief, it was not recorded. Meaning that, for example, while one quarter of interviewees may have said that reconciliation is important, it does not mean that three quarters of interviewees do not believe reconciliation to be important.

To further maintain consistency all of the research activities were conducted by a core research team (Jessica Fuller and Hollie Cheung). The research activities include interviews, construction of the coding sheet, coding of the interview transcripts in NVivo, and report writing. Ralph Ashton, Chloë Spackman and David Clark occasionally supported in interviewing. We recognise interpretation and analysis of data is subject to researcher bias, and by anonymising interviewees and using NVivo as a tool to support content analysis are used to mitigate this.

By the nature of the questions we asked, it is possible interviews were influenced by key events and current affairs at the time of interviews (September 2020-February 2021). While the aforementioned measures such as continuity of questions and interviewers were employed, it was not possible to eliminate all bias related to events. Therefore, we provide a concise list of contextual factors which may have influenced interviewees responses, including, but not limited to: prior Black Summer bushfires 2019-20; murder of George Floyd in Minnesota in May 2020 and sparking of a global Black Lives Matter movement; outbreak of COVID-19 in China December 2019, Australia closing its international borders in March 2020, nationwide lockdown from March-May 2020, further Victorian lockdown in July-October 2020; provision of direct economic support in response to COVID-19 ; establishment of national cabinet; delivery of the delayed federal budget in October 2020; Australia entered its first recession in almost 30 years in September 2020 (noting that interviewees were conducted prior to complications with the vaccination rollout, the introduction of the Delta variant, sexual harassment, abuse and rape allegations in parliament).

## VI Participant sample limitations

Next25 reached our target for each sector of politics, public service, community, media, business, and experts/academia (See Section 4.34.3 Table *1*). The community sector is slightly overrepresented (6% higher than our target), although this sector is incredibly broad, and it may be segmented in further releases. For future interview rounds, we will be aiming to increase engagement with people from politics, public service, and media.

Comparing Recoded's first 50 participants with ABS data (see Table *2*) reflects a relatively even gender representation, with a slight overrepresentation of men. However, state and territory data is less representative, with overrepresentation of interviewees from ACT and VIC, and slight overrepresentation in TAS and WA. Although noting that many public servants reside in Canberra, which is reflected in ACT's figure. No interviewees were sourced from NT, QLD or SA, this will be a priority for future interview rounds. Another priority going forward is engaging with First Nations peoples.

## VII Interviewees by gender and location

Table 2: Interviewee breakdown by demographic

| | Gender | | | State/Territory | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Women | Men | Non-binary | ACT | NSW | NT | QLD | SA | TAS | VIC | WA |
| ABS | 52% | 48% | 0.005% | 2% | 32% | 1% | 20% | 7% | 2% | 26% | 10% |
| Achieved | 49% | 51% | 0 | 12% | 33% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4% | 35% | 16% |

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For further information or to enquire about engaging Next25 to deliver a tailored keynote presentation, interactive strategy workshop, or bespoke advisory service based on Next25 Recoded, please contact:

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