

# Unravelling + reMAKING the public good

## Part 1: Introducing the public good

*Unravelling and then reMAKING the public good is not something to be done alone or at high speed. Over the coming months we'll be releasing a series of papers that both aim to unravel the public good (what is it, what is getting in the way of us having more of it) and the reMAKE it (where does it exist, where is it being reclaimed, what would it look like if we went bigger and bolder?). We'll be talking to people, building on existing work and sharing and testing ideas.*

### Why do we do what we do as a country?

We're at a crazy time. We've been talking to activists and leaders around the country.


We're excited. We're tired. We're overwhelmed by the possibility of a great re-set and reMAKE and worried we'll screw it up.

We've been in conversations about shared values and shared vision, about different time frames and different approaches (do we work with the people who currently have power, or do we want to find new pathways for who has power and how it works?). There has been an incredible amount of collaboration and sharing of resources, ideas, people, and confusion.

We've seen the same conversations and questions asked in so many different forums. And underlying everything is the biggest question of all – how do we collectively scoop up all the issues we care about and use this one big moment of disruption to put us on the path to a world where people and planet survive and thrive?

We're facing multiple tensions in our attempts to do this.

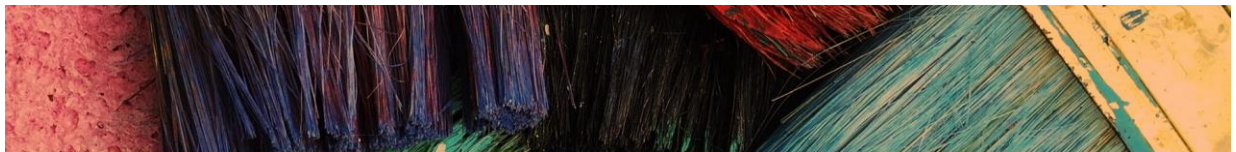
- **Covid has been a relatively positive experience for some, while a very traumatic experience for others.** Some people are finding the pleasure of more time with family, a re-prioritisation of what is important and a re-localisation and connection to place. Others are trapped in difficult domestic situations, financially broken, desperately lonely and facing the future with huge uncertainties. Some people are experiencing elements of both.

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- ④ **We need to act in both the short term and the long term.** There is immediate work to be done to alleviate some of the most immediate pain. At the same time anything we do now will lay the ground for the world we create and so we need to be thinking and planning long term as well.
  - ④ **Our public goods are at once saving us and poorly run and provisioned.** Do we celebrate the wonderful institutions like the ABC, our public health system and our welfare infrastructure; or do we point out the fraying edges of these services, the long-term attacks and the reality that the welfare system is a nightmare for so many?
  - ④ We have thus far weathered the covid storm well, in part because of our **incredible history of providing the public good, yet it has (and still does) exclude many and is built on stolen land.**

We know that action on covid, climate and social justice must be linked. We know that most Australians want a country where decisions are made for real human people and their real human loved ones and the incredible, wonderful natural environment that sustains us – rather than boring and discredited political posturing that simply increases the numbers clicking over in the profitable spreadsheets of the [uber wealthy](#).

All of us who dream of an Australia reMADE, whether we're in paid leadership roles or leaders in our local communities, know that whatever happens we need to find new and energising ways to collectively tackle the challenges we face. And that we need to do this in a way that grounds us in the best of who we already are.

**We think Australia is ready for a conversation about public good.**



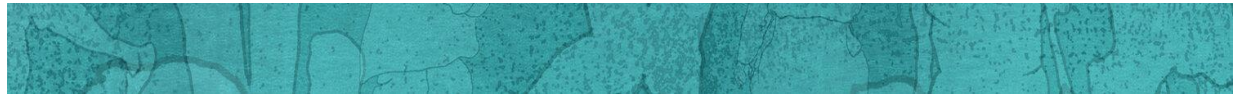
## A brief history of the public good in Australia

The exciting thing about public good as a concept for bringing things together is that we don't need to entirely reinvent the wheel.

The Australian state has a history and culture of providing for the public good and a high level of support for its universal provision, likely stemming from some early experiences (such as the introduction of a living wage, the 8-hour day and the pension) and from the political thinking popular at the time when colonial Australia was establishing its institutions. It was a time when the role of government, as provider of services such as roads, railways and laws, came before individuals and their rights. This is a very different type of thinking to that which underpinned the colonisation of the United States some several hundred years earlier, when the rights of the individual were seen superior to the rights of government.



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The idea of public good in Australia was also shaped by the fact that the most powerful collective of Australian colonisers were primarily from the [middle classes](#) rather than the aristocracy and thus more willing to experiment with different types of democracy (from secret ballot, to votes for women, to representative democracy) and to participate in conversations about purpose of government and civil society. As a young colonial nation Australia had strong bipartisan support for the role of the state in providing the public good. While this radically shifted by the end of the 20th Century as neoliberal ideology took hold and bipartisan support shifted to be in favour of privatisation, these foundations still have a strong legacy.

*In reflecting on the history and provision of public good it is important to recognise that in many cases Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were not included in the definition of public, and were intentionally excluded from benefiting from the public good. We write and think about public good on stolen land where the very social fabric of the First People's public good has been systematically undermined by colonisation. A new conversation on the public good is an opportunity to acknowledge this, to make reparation and explore the intersection with First Nations self-determination and the call for voice, treaty, truth.*




Today, examples of the public provision of goods and services for the needs of people and planet are everywhere. Some of them are so normal that we fail to see them. Many of these examples have been starved of funding for maintenance or resourcing that would allow them to modernise and grow. Many of these examples are not universally accessible or equally distributed and the gap between those who have access and those who don't is growing. Yet despite their limits, the fact that so many of these services seem invisible to us and are taken for granted, means that we have a strong basis for building and enlarging. In fact, it is their very normality that makes them both vulnerable and strong – many of us assume we will be taken care of without understanding the infrastructure and frameworks that support this care.

So let's shine a light on some of the key examples in Australia of the provision of the public good:

- As early as 1907 white Australian men won the right to a '**fair and reasonable wage**' in what became known as the [Harvester Decision](#). The Harvester Decision instituted, against employer opposition, a living wage with the implicit assumption that "an agreement between an employer and an employee could only be fair if bargaining power was relatively equal and that the outcome was not an 'unequal treaty' imposed on the workers because their only alternative was poverty. [And thus] The State might have to intervene to ensure fair treatment."
- In 1909 a [means-tested pension](#) was introduced for male workers over 65 (60 if permanently incapacitated), laying the groundwork for various pension schemes over the following century.

- ⑩ We have a **history of strong worker organisation and rights**. In 1856 Victorian stonemasons became one of the first trades in the world to win the [eight-hour day](#). Workers in Victoria and New South Wales won this right in 1916 and in 1948 the Commonwealth Arbitration Court approved a 40-hour, five-day working week for all Australians.
- ⑩ During the Second World War the Australian government created the [welfare state](#) by introducing: child endowment (1941), widow's pension (1942), a wife's allowance (1943), additional payments for children of pensioners (1943), and unemployment, sickness and special benefits (1945).
- ⑩ After being elected in 1983 the Hawke Labor government introduced new laws and regulations that [protected the Franklin River](#) and paved the way for other World Heritage sites in Australia. The decision to save the Franklin River is often looked to as a key moment in recognising the value of nature for nature's sake.
- ⑩ In 1984 [Medicare](#), a universal health scheme, was introduced guaranteeing all citizens (and some visitors) free or cheap access to a range of healthcare. Although somewhat battered, this scheme must still look practically utopian to those in the US afraid to go to hospital for fear of huge medical bills.
- ⑩ Just two years after the discovery of the hole in the ozone, Australia played a key role in negotiating the [Montreal Protocol](#) and was one of the first to sign the international agreement in 1988. As the then-Minister for the Environment and Arts said, "This is the first time there has been a commitment by countries around the world to control emissions of harmful chemicals before serious environmental damage becomes apparent." Thanks to strong legislation and a willingness to work collaboratively, Australia achieved its Montreal targets in half the expected time in order to protect the public good of a safe environment.
- ⑩ Australia has had a courageous and playful relationship with [democracy and democratic innovation](#). One example of how this is supported in Australia is via compulsory voting. While Australians might be distrustful of government, we find weird joy in elections. Federal elections are held on Saturdays, in public places (such as schools, churches, sports halls) and voting is compulsory. Compulsory voting is supported by more than 70% of the population resulting in a greater than 90% turnout at elections (in comparison voter turnout is low in places like the USA (40%) and the UK (67%) where voting is not compulsory).
- ⑩ In 2016 Australia introduced some of the toughest [gun laws](#) in the world as a result of courageous leadership by then-Prime Minister John Howard and bipartisan support for his reforms. At the time 85% of voters believed that Australian gun laws were 'about right' (45%) or 'not strong enough' (40%). Perhaps more importantly was Howard's conviction that the role of government is to facilitate freedom from harm, rather than freedom to harm. Again to [contrast to the USA](#), in 2019 there were 41 incidents of mass shootings causing 211 deaths. Parents think about [bullet proof backpacks](#) and teachers



drill children about what to do in the case of a schoolyard gunman – preparation that seems utterly awful and entirely preventable to most Australian parents.

- And the twin crises of bushfires and pandemic have further highlighted the value of **public broadcasting**. During the 2019/2020 bushfires the ABC was the [most trusted source of information](#) and the number one digital news source in Australia. People around the country have relied on the ABC not purely for entertainment during smoke and virus filled days but to access life-saving information. Independent news sources are also key to democratic debate and oversight, enabling informed participation.

And the list could go on: public toilets, council-backed mothers' and parenting groups, public libraries, paid leave, advertising bans, seatbelt laws, national parks and marine protected areas, national immunisation programs, health services... etc.

The point is that there is plenty to be proud of in our history in terms of the way we have, and still do, look after each other.

The list above is full of love: the active decision by the Australian population to share resources and wealth in a way that aligns with the [values of Australia reMADE](#): the values of equality, interdependence and community, and unity with nature and the assumption of responsibility to leave the social and physical world in increasingly better conditions for generations to come. Creating the public good then means making decisions that prioritise the needs of people and planet rather than the wants of money and markets. It means ensuring that the things we decide are important are available and accessible where they are needed, regardless of whether or not they turn a profit.



## The imperfections of the public good

Despite these strong foundations, so many of us are disconnected from a sense of ownership of the public good and find it difficult to be proud of what it is that we have. Much of this work excluded, (and in some instances continues to exclude, intentionally or otherwise) women, First People, people of colour, temporary visa holders etc, as well as nature (most significant environmental regulations have been gutted in recent years). And leaving this exclusion unacknowledged and unremedied will limit our ability to truly create public good for all our people and our planet.

It is not only a history of exclusion that challenges our ability to reclaim public good. It is worth noting the intentional attacks on the public good. A key neoliberal strategy has been to continually run down, financially and reputationally, the ability of government and the non-marketised collective to provide for the public good. As a result, for example, we have underfunded health services, a punitive and inadequate welfare system, and the shrinking capacity of our public broadcast network.



Of course there is no silver bullet, or silver net, for catching all of our issues at once and public good is not without its limitations. While Australia has an incredible history of public good and therein lies potential for the building of a new shared narrative, it also exists on top of and beside a history of traumatic colonisation. Colonial history has excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the “public” for whom public good serves. Indeed in Australia today many First Nations People as well as other marginalised communities are far too often excluded.

So is there still room to be proud of our history of providing the public good? Well we’re seeing the legacy of even our run-down public good infrastructure coming to the fore during the current crisis (the power of the ABC, nurses, welfare etc). It is far from perfect, but unlike the USA we won’t have to totally rethink our social contract; we know that as a nation we’re capable of looking out for each other. We know that working together means benefits for all. And we know that we need to continue to expand our definition of “all”. For us to achieve an Australia reMADE it can no longer be conscionable to exclude anyone or any living thing from any of the benefits of public good.

## Where to from here: expanding the public good

For us to build on the vision for an Australia reMADE and run with public good as something to celebrate and something to build on, we’re going to need to do a couple of things. First we need a commitment to ensuring that everyone truly does mean everyone and that “public” doesn’t just mean Australian citizens, or the wealthy, or those in cities, or those with white skin or able bodies. We need to embrace our commitment to an inclusionary public. And second, we need to expand and articulate what we think could, and should, be considered a public good. To that end, what follows are some “thinking handles” to help us reclaim this space.

### Types of public good

So what is the public good? What isn’t it? Where do we find it? How is it implemented?

Quick sidebar: in law and economics, the public good and associated ideas have rather narrow, technical definitions (which in the right context can be very helpful – you can explore them more [here](#)). We’ve deliberately chosen a more expansive conversation here, because we found that the narrow definitions tend to reinforce an assumption that the economy is a proxy for the public good and that’s just boring, unhelpful and untrue.

We’ve realised that we tend to focus very much on the public good as those things we can see, touch, smell and feel. So for example the material things like hospitals, schools, libraries and sewerage systems. But public good is so much more than that as seen above. It is also the contexts in which we exist as a society. It is the rules and regulations that help us to exist as a community, not just individuals. It is our right to organise as workers; it is our environmental protections; it is our gun laws and it is our democracy. And finally, we have public goods that enable us to participate well and wholly in society, in order to maintain and pursue our own lives, but also other public goods (yes, that unsexy thing of maintenance that we all need to do!). We need capacities like time, and imagination and trust, free thought, diversity of voices, creativity and imagination.



## Public good as material

Material public good is the tangible provision of public good in the form of infrastructure and services for delivering a healthy society and planet.

Examples include hospitals and healthcare, schools and universities, libraries, sewerage systems, the fire service and the ABC – all of which can be seen and touched and improve life.

Material public goods, like all public goods, need collective will behind them however they can be provided in a myriad of different ways. The current delivery mechanisms for material public good are via government (national, state, local), private enterprise, public private partnerships, civil society and cooperatives (*how we deliver public goods requires further unravelling and reMAKING*).

## Public good as context

Contextual public good is the social and environmental context we need to develop and maintain for a healthy society and planet.

Examples of contextual public good include population health, privacy, democracy, clean air and water, and a healthy climate.

More so than material public good, contextual public good requires an enforceable collective agreement. Contextual public goods are what economists consider non-rivalrous (my use of a resource doesn't stop your use) and non-excludable (it is impossible for me to stop you accessing the resource).

The current delivery mechanism for contextual public good is via government (national, state, local) regulation and propped up/held accountable by strong (and potentially dissenting) voices of civil society.

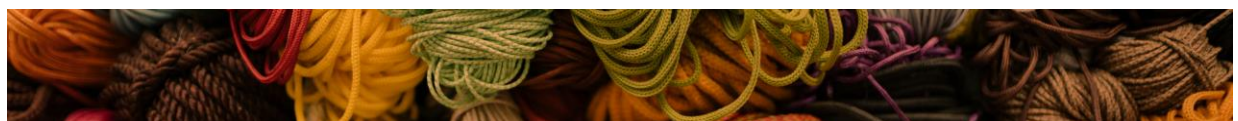
## Public good as capacity

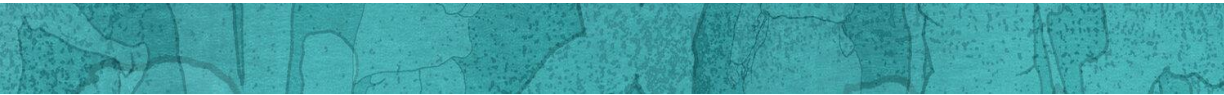
Capacities for public good are the individual and collective capacities we need as a part of community life to enable us to be fully involved in providing, maintaining and creating material and contextual public good.

Examples of capacities for public good might include creativity and imagination, time (for work, rest, play, care, participation in activities for the public good), trust and community.

The category of capacities for public good is intended to push our thinking and find a language about talking about and valuing parts of community life that might enable us to be fully involved in the other two categories.

The current delivery mechanisms for public good capacities are a mix of cultural expectations, government (federal, state, local), private enterprise and civil society.





We're proposing the three categories above as ways to help order thoughts and shape how we answer questions like, 'who should provide the public good and what should they provide?'

And then there are also questions about how the public good is delivered. Is public good only deliverable through not-for-profit options? Should profit be derived from public goods? How should public goods be overseen and assessed? The list goes on!

These are big questions and we need to be asking them of each other.

What were once considered radical propositions (paid leave, universal suffrage, a public healthcare system, the Montreal Protocol), now seem so normal. Imagine what we could do if we not only rebuilt and reclaimed the existing social and physical infrastructure of our public good, but we pushed the boundaries even further! **We could use an expanded and ambitious definition of the public good to care for each other, to connect with each other, to protect each other and our environment.**

There are [examples all over the world](#) of ambitious projects succeeding in reclaiming and reinventing the public good to create a world where people and planet come before money and markets. Spain has nationalised its healthcare system. Chile has reduced drug prices by creating 40 new public pharmacies. Public-owned providers have introduced telecommunications into previously unserved areas of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

And then what if...

What if we thought about physical space, emissions, a safe climate as public goods? What if the safety of women was recognised as a public good? What if we recognised mental health as a public good? Participation and purpose as a public good? We'll be delving into these questions and more in the next few papers in this series.

Public good is an exciting new way for us to think about an Australia reMADE. It is a concept that is not limited to left or right; and one that allows us to start from the shared values of equal worth of all people, interdependence and community, as well as unity with nature. It helps us to begin to prioritise cooperation over competition, wellbeing over economic growth, power that is shared not concentrated, collective rules rather than freedom to harm, sharing instead of self-interest and respect for nature rather than exploitation.

There is an opportunity here. A huge one, and public good might just be the vehicle to help us make the most of it.

**Living, loving and working across this country, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to elders both past and present.**