Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales, vol. 156, part 1, 2023, pp. 162–171. ISSN 0035-9173/23/010162-10

Session V: Summary and Solutions

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Julianne Schultz: What we want to do in this final session is to talk about some of the pathways to activating this sort of energy, which is on the ground, and trying to find ways that that might resonate and give us some pathways forward. Some optimism about change. In coming to this point, at the end of the day when we've heard so many grim stories as well as inspiring ones, I am reminded of the process that I went through when I was writing my book, *The Idea of Australia*. I was doing a lot of historical research and thinking of how the tendrils of the past played through into the present.

I was writing it during the period of COVID and I took to regarding COVID as an X-ray that showed where the strengths and weaknesses of society were. At times I got quite depressed. I thought, "Goodness, I've got to write this in a way which isn't like, this is all hopeless and we've always opted for the less optimistic and outward-looking, engaged and generous response." There were plenty of signs of that but it's hard to hold onto that optimism a lot of the time when you look at the detail of the history of this country and the way that we've behaved. In the end, where I got to with that, which is a bit where we are coming to today, was that I looked at the things that were happening on the ground.

There's been some talk today about the strengthening of neighbourhood links. For instance, during the COVID period when people were connecting, I know there was a lot of bad, but there were some good things. That people were connecting in their local communities quite often in a way that they hadn't done before. We saw that in the movement of the independents campaign, then during the election campaign, which was very much a locally based set of political actions. We saw it in the activity around women advocating for their rights during that 2021 year, with Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins and the others really saying we are not going to be shamed for past stuff that we've been made to feel victims for. We saw it very much in the beginning of the truth-telling process as a result of the Uluru Statement, that people are deeply curious about First Nations history of the areas in which they live. They really want to know, and they're trying to find that out.

That was where I landed in the book. I said, "Okay, there is a movement on the ground which is happening, which may be transformative and marshalling that energy to be a bit bold about what the future might be is a really important step to be taken." The good examples we've heard today are all about that energy. The bad examples are, "Oh, gosh, it's so complex, we can't do

1 This is an edited version of a transcript of the presentation.

anything about it. Let's write another report and put it on a shelf." I think in many ways the big examples — and this is why I want to draw you both into this conversation — the big examples are around a different form of engagement. The Uluru Statement is a spectacular example of deliberative democracy in action. Because what came out of that process was not what the people who were sent out to do it expected was going to come back.

They came back with a different, very much more considered and layered response. I'm interested in teasing that out. Ariadne, in your work, you've written so much about the way the digital tools and the forms of networked engagement actually change how things get done. It's a free conversation. It's up to you. I'm just interested in how you think about whether this energy and this possibility of things moving in a way that maybe they've felt stalled for a long time.

Ariadne Vromen: Okay, I must admit — and I can say it because he's not in the room — when we started the day with Andrew Leigh on the screen telling us that there was no community anymore and there was no volunteering anymore, I was a bit despondent and I thought, "Well, I don't agree with that." There's lots of evidence to counter that and it really depends on the way that you look. Today's been a fascinating day. It's hard to come to the end of the day and we've all had lots of data thrown at us and lots of big ideas. But where I was left with was thinking about what the big ideas are we need to be taking away and thinking about. We've talked a lot about material difference and material inequity today.

That speaks to my heart that we are talking about core issues, about equity and health, education, housing, the different experience of climate change, but I think we need to get bigger than that. We need to talk about what kind of society do we want to live in. How do we start a conversation about what the common good is? What do we want Australia to look like? How do we create the language? I do think — and Lisa, I hope we'll talk more about this — we have that opportunity right now to be talking about the kind of country we want. But it's also some of the other points that were being made. Peter Shergold made this point quite strongly: that we need to move away from discourses that are based on deficit and disadvantage and how do we focus more on capabilities and how we want to see the world.

But then there was another interesting contradiction: we can't criticise some of the big egalitarian Australian myths around wealth creation and multiple home ownership, as was being pointed out by Tone. We can't really focus on — one thing that I don't think we've talked about today — the vast varieties and experiences of the workplace and of work and growing precarity and so on. We just need to question some of these big myths of Australian society. To come up with beyond Andrew Leigh's story of what community looks like right now, where people find it in moments of political expression and political togetherness and that kind of solidarity as well.

Lisa Jackson: I've got a lot to say. The fact is that almost 50% of Australia's population today is first- or second-generation Australians. That means nearly half of us either weren't born here or one of our parents weren't born here. It's a very different nation today than it was in 1901 when the Australian Constitution was formed. For those of you who are historians — and this

is an important piece of work that was done right — it was primarily white Anglo-Saxon guys who put together the foundation document of this land. It didn't start on the 26th of January. It was something that commenced on the 1st of January, 1901. When you look at the Constitution then it basically excluded Aboriginal people from it as being here or with all of the stuff around missing links, Terra Nullius, et cetera.

And we look at our proud dynamic Australian population today and the extraordinary diversity of us, to interrogate this kind of problem, this kind of issue, and still not have a treaty and still be one of the richest nations in the world. I don't know about you, but I feel deeply ashamed of my nation. At the same time, I'm incredibly proud of it because of all of the possibilities. I'll just do a quick dance through history.

1901 was the Constitution of Australia. In the years subsequent to that, by the 1930s there was a very strong Aboriginal movement where people were wanting to have rights to be able to get education, people wanting to have rights, to have health, they want to have rights of freedom of movement. Yet many of our capital cities had a night-time curfew for Aboriginal people. At the same time, my grandmother was part a domestic servant just around the corner in the Hyde Park Barracks.

We had this extraordinary situation that many non-Aboriginal Australians of the day just didn't know, didn't understand, turned a blind eye. There were children being removed *en masse*. There were people who were constructing railway trains to be able to take them from Central Station in Sydney to all parts across the state in the New South Wales experience. Yet people didn't know. It was only in recent decades, in the 1990s that people — Henry Reynolds and a few other people — started writing these documents that really brought that stuff to the fore. Sir Ronald Wilson, of course, did his absolutely landmark piece of work *Bringing Them Home*.[2] And still people were shocked and surprised and felt unable to put a language to how they felt and their grief as good Australians about how could this possibly happen to others in our nation. Of course, we know the 1967 referendum was a huge thing and we're going through all of that debate again and hopefully getting a successful referendum for the next question that gets posed.

In the 1970s, we saw the construction of the Aboriginal Medical Services, 52 years ago. Because people would rather die on the steps of a church than go off to the RPA hospital or to the St. Vincent's Hospital of the day. And these are urban people. We had the start of the Aboriginal Legal Services, real community movement, real community of partnership where non-Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people got together and made something profound happen. Both of those services are still existing and very, very strong across Australia. Both of those services are best-practice exemplars to other places in the world. Then, of course, by the time we got to 1990s, there was the people's movement of reconciliation. We were talking about Treaty. Yothu Yindi was singing it, and I bet you could even remember half the words.

But something happened by the time we got to 1995, we then started to go down practical reconciliation "because we can't

2 Australian Human Rights Commission (1997), *Bringing Them Home*, https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997

go off and privilege Aboriginal people over others." This was some of the language that was being used. Aboriginal people were then continued to be vilified, continued to be the victim, continued to be blamed for their own circumstances. These were terrible times. A very, very dark part of our recent history, which most of us from the look of you — except for our gorgeous young lady over there — were alive and responsible in those times. Then of course, by the time we got to the 2000s, the world changed significantly through circumstances overseas. But we still have not been able to have a discussion about Treaty. We still haven't been able to have a discussion that was pragmatic and real about how on earth can we conclude the unfinished business of this land.

When you look at us as an Australian nation with our demographic shift of nearly 50% of us being first- or second-generation, but also many of us being quite a lot older, we are pushing onto a smaller proportion of younger people problems that we haven't wanted to deal with. We haven't been courageous. We haven't been brave, we haven't been consultative, we've gone off and stuck so much stuff in the too-hard basket. But Angelica's generation, they're going to be dealing with the climate, they're going to be dealing with housing, they're going to be dealing with food insufficiency, water, they're going to be — things that are changing our world forever and we can't even get our acts together and talk about the Voice and get that across. We just have to think about what we can deal with now because there's going to be a lot for the future.

I feel confident in our youth, especially when I see deadly young ladies — like you up here, talking from your heart with strength, courage, and passion. But where's our voice? How can we be more like her and be brave enough to use our incredibly strong learned voices to make the changes that many of us have been in conversation about for a long, long time. That's what I'd really love to leave with you fellas today. We've got a lot to do, and we cannot conscionably leave it to the next generation to do because it'll be far too late and it'll be on us.

Julianne Schultz: You're absolutely right. One of the things that I think is so important and that we really need to break this log-jam — I said at the beginning that the day that I use that Linda Colley line about three-score years and ten being the period that it generally takes for change to be embedded. In relation to First Nations people, we have Jeremy Bentham in 1803 saying in a rhetorical flourish that failure to come to a treaty with the people who were here would be an "incurable flaw" on this land.[3] He was no supporter of the people who had always been on this land. But here we are 2022 and it's looking pretty incurable. Bentham was right. But one of the things that I think is particularly important in your recap of that historical frame is so powerful, is that at every point along the way, it has been contested. At every point, there has been argument.

You talk about some of those examples of First Nations activism. But go back and look at the foundation, the debates around the creation of the Federation. There were people arguing for a very different federation. Not

3 There is some debate about what Bentham meant. [Ed.]

just in terms of there being 17 states and not six, but in terms of a different body politic, which was very much more locally grounded, that was engaged, included a statement of rights, included different electoral systems. There were debates that were held at the time and the people with ideas that we would probably now regard as pretty mainstream were the ones who were marginalised. Critics would say it was just as well there wasn't a rights bill that was built into the Australian constitution because it would've been pretty ghastly — excluding people by "race" in the constitution, rather than just by legislation. But, nonetheless, I think that one of the really important things that we need to hang onto in these conversations is that the debates have always been there. It is now time for the other side in a sense that's been sitting there, having that discussion to get a chance to assert its confidence and not to be. I think that when you talk about the grief of Australians in thinking about the history, I think it's a sort of grief.

That is not a bad word. There is also a scarcely articulated sense of shame. It's not so much guilt, it's shame. That's been the big controlling emotion that's been used very powerfully. That's part of the reason why the movement around the Voice and the movement of those young women especially was saying, "We cannot be shamed anymore. It's not our fault." That is something which connects in the way that people engage more directly and intimately in a sense, through their online activism. Because those things which were barriers, which forced silence, actually don't work in this new space.

Ariadne Vromen: Thanks for throwing to me on that one. We're in a moment and have been at least for 10 years or so in where we are reimagining the idea of what collective action really looks like. We could talk about it as the culmination of the networks that we have in our everyday lives, and that social media is an intrinsic part of that for bringing those connections between people. Part of it is reimagining what that looks like. When I walked in here today, I walked past the Harbour Bridge. I noted that the Aboriginal flag now flies permanently atop the Bridge. That happened not because of some benevolent government, it happened because of a long-term petition campaign that started on the website change.org that then became a broader media campaign. It was very much from the local. If we want to know how people participate and want to have their voices heard these days, it's through online petitions.

It is the act beyond voting that most people have engaged in. Two-thirds of us are likely to have signed an online petition — to have that kind of expression of what we want to see changed. It's not always aimed at government, it can be aimed at local government, state, or federal government, it can be aimed at a corporation, it can be aimed at a school. It's how we imagine how we have our voices heard and it builds on those networks that we have that are predominantly digital. Our discussion today about the importance of local and place-based services is really important, but it's a limited imagination of what community looks like now. People have shared senses of community in different spaces. They'll often find the people who are more like them online. Disability activists congregate online. That's where they find people that they organise with to create policy-oriented campaigns and political change.

Young people — when they think of how they're going to get active or how they're going to make a statement about something — will start online. An anecdote: When I was binge-watching the new TV series of "Heartbreak High" two weeks ago — it tells you something about education in schools as well — there was a particular moment where one of their favourite teachers was sacked because of a rumour and smear campaign that went around. The students decided to get active to get that teacher reinstated. Again, the campaign started, aimed purely at the school, to a lesser degree at the New South Wales Department of Education. First thing they do is they start an online petition. Second, they start their social media campaign, they prepare their memes that they're going to share around. The third thing they do is organise a sit-in in the school.

I just thought this was a lovely little bit of the kind of normalisation of particular forms of how you get voice, how you express yourself, and how you ensure that you're actually heard. Also nicely, their parents support them in this act as well. They're standing in the school yard while they're doing their sit-in overnight. I just think we need to think more about those ad hoc moments of political collectivity or community and meaning making more than the long-term movements for change and the 70-years process are really important, but let's celebrate those smaller wins too.

Julianne Schultz: Yes, it's interesting. That process of the immediate engagement around those issues and how they can galvanise people and give them confidence. One of the things that came through in the research of yours that I was reading, Ariadne, was that sense that people didn't want to engage with politicians because they felt that politicians didn't listen. That they'd go and do a consultation, but they knew what they wanted to take away from it. They didn't want to actually hear anything. This environment we're in now, it's still possible that still happens, but people expect to be heard in a way which is much different from the way it used to be.

Ariadne Vromen: Yes, totally. Governments need to catch up and they need to learn from people. They need to learn how to actively listen to people, not within the sort of constraints of their consultation exercise, and governments also need how to actually demonstrate that they've acted based on that listening. It's not enough to just give people a space for voice or to appear that you've listened. Something needs to change as well. And you need to give people a sense of hope or belief or trust in that process. That change is really possible. We're a long way from that. We can encourage voice in the small sense or encourage that engagement, but they haven't figured out that process. There was even talk this morning around government collaboration and co-design. I just think we need to unpick that more and more and demonstrate where that is genuine processes of co-design, collaboration, co-governance that actually leads to change that does change those entrenched inequities that we've been talking about as well.

Lisa Jackson: But there is a caution, I think.

Julianne Schultz: Yes, sure.

Lisa Jackson: A lot of the dependence on the internet is by having smart technology but some people just can't afford it. There's a degree of literacy and there's all of that

sort of stuff. That being said, there are a lot of things that we can do to make sure that people are able to be heard. In our world, we call lots of things "yarning circles" or "yarning." It's really good sometimes to put the technology away and look at someone and be with them physically and not be distracted by the many things that we do. A lot of people that I get to work with find it uncomfortable to have a recording device or to be photographed in a particular context.

Rather, they want you to learn from them in a different way and then help them translate that. The mixed work is what's going to be really important. But the activism, that's quite important. But I've seen some of the most atrocious racism of late online. I've seen some of my dearest colleagues being pulled down by invisible people who are using weirdo names on these websites that are then being used against them in the most tragic ways. People are becoming sick, unwell, unhinged, and I worry about — we've heard stories of people dying as a result of that kind of cyber bullying. I see the power of it, but I also see another side of it, which I think is not what we are meant to be doing as a community, is it?

Ariadne Vromen: Sure. And I think that's the discussion that we as a community need to have about that broader public good. Online is not a neutral space, but it is the space that we are all in now, whether or not we're accessing services online, we're engaging with other people online, we're getting our news online. It is the ubiquitous space, but we should have a discussion about how we want to manage that, about how we want to engage civilly with other people on it. I would always condemn hate speech that happens online, of course.

Julianne Schultz: One of the things that I think is really striking is to look at how countries change and what the triggers are that make it possible for them to reinvent themselves. There's been quite a deal of research done on this. In some ways the most striking example — and given the ties between Australia and Ireland are so strong, and Ireland's independence from Britain was about the same time as our federation — is Ireland. There's a good reason to look at that. The process that's gone on in Ireland over the last 20 years or so is something quite remarkable. It's a country which was the most Catholic. It was an impoverished society, if beautiful, but what you've seen over this last 20 years or so — and it's not perfect — but what you've seen is something which has managed to challenge the old institutions and the old frameworks and the old ways of doing things in a way that it is now an extremely progressive. The religious dimension of Ireland is now a personal thing, not a state matter in the way that it once was. That's happened in part because of changing economic circumstances: by being in the EU, it got to have more money than had once been available, and partly as a result of resolving the seemingly intractable virtual civil war known by the bland title, "The Troubles." But since then, the very active process of deliberative democracy exercises there has provided a framework which has made it possible for what would've been once unimaginable changes to have occurred. Ariadne is that something that you've —

Ariadne Vromen: Yes, sure. I totally agree with you to see what quite radical change in a conservative Catholic country like Ireland. But I guess what's important is the politics that embodies. It's a politics that's not the

toxic adversarial politics that we still have in this country. That is very much that kind of partisan arguing that has turned off most people in Australia. When we ask people why they don't trust politicians, it's their image of bickering politicians who don't always follow through on what they may promise that is resonant with people.

This is a different model, of doing deliberative polls that are driven by consensus, that are driven by discussion that are shared: it's usually a hundred people in a room talking about an issue, engaging with experts over a period of time, and then being asked how they want to — the famous ones were on abortion law reform and marriage equality. That Ireland had marriage equality before we did is not what people would've expected, but it was driven by that deliberative process amongst citizens that was then shared. But, also, there was a commitment to government to take up what people decided in that process. I think those kinds of processes is important, but that commitment to creating change and creating politics in a different way and doing it differently that is responsive to what people think and feel is the big shift as well.

Lisa Jackson: I love the way how politics does evolve and how nations do evolve. I think Australia is sitting right on a precipice of an evolutionary leap, because I think most Australians now are just absolutely over talking about Aboriginal people in the abstract and recognising that they've chosen Australia as home and there's a whole myriad of reasons for that. But we call this joint home and we all belong here no matter whether we came last week or 60,000 years ago. We all belong here and we all have a responsibility and we have a really unique culture in Australia. You go overseas and you hear the *yidaki*[4] being played, you know exactly what the instrument is and you know exactly where it's from. You know you can characterise our indigenous art beautifully. People recognise that from a mile away.

That is characteristically Australian, along with our accent and along with all of the other stuff that we have. We are an incredibly diverse nation and one of the most multilingual nations on earth. These are astounding things. We're just at that point now of having these sorts of discussions where we're going to eventually say to our politicians, "We are the people of Australia, and if you don't do what we ask you to do, what you vote you in, get away from this party-political stuff or this thing that they all have to abide by the leaders' rules. We are going to get nowhere fast because the politics will just change." The closure of ATSIC, for example.

In the 1990s we had this extraordinary organisation called the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Commission. It was the only place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could vote for how an organisation ran. When John Howard got voted in, one of the first things he said was he wanted to abolish it, and he just removed it because it wasn't part of the Constitution. There was no Voice, there was no place for it to be. This is why the Voice is so important for us to all get behind, regardless of whether or not we agree with the model. We'd still agree with the principle, right? This is the bickering that's happening out there at the moment. This is the wedge that's dividing us. We as

4 C.J. Nichols (2017) The remarkable yidaki (and no, it's not a 'didge') *The Conversation*, April 7 https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-remarkable-yidaki-and-no-its-not-a-didge-74169 [Ed.]

the Australian people, all who belong here now really need to do something and put a line under this and we can fuss about the how, but we need to get that thing across the line no matter what. Because if we don't —

Julianne Schultz: Heaven help us.

Lisa Jackson: — we're all going to be dead and buried. It's going to be that young lass's grandkids are going to bring them in. And that's not okay. We can't keep pushing this off.

Julianne Schultz: Yes. The attempt to undermine the Voice argument is to say to white Australia, "Oh you've got to pass judgment on the detail of this program." That's not what it's about. It's about addressing a moral failure and making that right and meaningful and then the detail will be resolved. It's pretty simple, really. One of the things that's coming through in what both of you are saying is that there's a threshold question, and that is, what sort of country do we want to be? What sort of society do we want to be? That was a discussion that has gone through various phases in the life of this nation of being an active discussion, one that gets resolved, moves to another layer and then closes down.

But one of the other things that John Howard said very early in his prime ministership was that we were sick of the endless conversation about national identity. He might have been, but actually there was an appetite that was still there. He slowed it down a bit, but what we've had now for the last 25 years is that that national conversation hasn't been happening. It's been happening in atomised groups and in little community sections and all various other areas, but the national conversation has been shut down. That makes it very difficult to articulate what it is that we want to be if we've not had the means for having that formal conversation. That's, in a way, what the question is that you need to ask that makes that something that we can take quite seriously with a serious openness to different outcomes, not just more of the same.

Lisa Jackson: There's two things to that. Firstly, most of us in this room, and most of our ancestors were not at the table when the Australian Constitution was built. If you're a female, seriously, if you come in the last few generations, you are not represented in the Constitution. That has to change. We have to grip up what the birth of this nation is about. We have a real opportunity now of saying, "All right, we are going to develop a way of being the proper place that is so proud of being on a country that's had 60,000 years of continuous and evolving civilization. And we all belong here now as part of that story." The second thing is that the conversations have been happening. They've been happening in Aboriginal communities and you've got the Uluru Statement, and that was done by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

That was not something that came out of the clear blue sky out over two weeks. That is something that's come out of many clear blue skies over decades, and some would say hundreds of years. What you have is a distillation of generations of thought and knowledge and of almost a million people. It's a lot of people, a lot of thought, and there might be a bit of squabbling around the edges, but, ultimately, we need to have a place in this land because we've looked after it for 60,000 years and you are expected to look after it for the next 60,000 years, right? There has to be that reckoning, there has to be that place where we say the conversations have gone on, they've been happening at

your kitchen tables, they've been happening at all of your places as well. They've been happening in our universities.

That's why we're so committed to growing Aboriginal capability. I'm a graduate of the 1990s, that's only recent decades. Stuff has been happening and we have to own that and we have to be proud of that. That's not a deficit approach, that is absolutely looking at accentuating what we have done. But now's the time for us to really push on and do what it takes, and the power of the pen is important and how you engage with your politicians, how it is you engage with the media, your letters to the editor, to your respected professional journals and to various royal societies. This is the power of your voice and this is where you can really get something happening because, seriously, we are at a precipice in Australia. How we act now and where we'll go to in the next 10 years depends on people like you and me in this room doing something.

Julianne Schultz: But it is that thing about pushing it from those small local conversations to that next level? I don't know, Ariadne, you are an expert in all this space. How does that happen?

Lisa Jackson: That's an easy question.

Ariadne Vromen: I don't know if I want to talk about national identity, but I'd rather talk about the common good, but even I was thinking about that. There are still conversations around there that iron out differences in how we actually talk through, and with difference and with our diversity to come to what are the common things that we think are important. Which means valuing our deep history. The small to the large, the obvious example is what's happened with the kitchen table, or kitchen cabinet, conversations in more formal politics that did lead to independent MPs standing, particularly in rural parts of Australia. I'd differentiate them now from the inner-city Teals. They're motivated in quite different ways, although they used some of those similar local organising techniques, where they were having conversations with people not based on traditional political ideologies but based on what kinds of things people wanted to see change. Then they kind of scaled from there. It also became seamless between the way they used online organising and the offline community organising, as well. Again, it's what's: your theory of change? What do you want to see happen? How do you build to getting there on the way?

Julianne Schultz: Thank you very much. I think we're right on time. It's five o'clock, so thank you very much.