



# Engaging citizens in defining national progress: the ANDI project

**Mike Salvaris**

Mike Salvaris is Chairman of the Australian National Development Index (ANDI) Limited. He began his career in the 1970s as a barrister and legal aid lawyer with Fitzroy Legal Service, co-founding the Tenants Union of Victoria. He went on to work with the Victoria Council of Social Service, and then as chief policy adviser to Victorian Premier John Cain in the field of strategic policy-making and social justice. He has been a research professor at Victoria, RMIT and Deakin universities. He has worked for over 20 years in the measurement of progress and wellbeing, at community, national and international levels. He has a particular interest in community wellbeing measures as a means for citizen engagement, community development, human rights and stronger democracy. He is a committee member of the International Advisory Group for the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and the OECD Global Progress Research Network.

The public interest is a concept with a long, deep history and special significance for social democracy, but not easily defined. It is inherently elastic and adaptable, and operates on at least three levels. Most literally, it means the interest of the collective versus the self-interest of individuals or groups.

Secondly, it connotes the broader notion of the common wellbeing or the public welfare (manifested in policy terms in fields such as defence, education and public health etc). But it also has a higher, and distinctly ethical and purposive, implicit dimension, going back at least to Aristotle and Confucius: 'the very

existence of the state as a collective would seem to prompt the formulation of basic common purposes' and these necessarily include the goals and values of the community as a whole. We might call this a shared vision.

Whichever element we use as a yardstick, there seems no doubt that the concept has been seriously weakened in modern democracies over the past 20 years, to the point where critics despair that the 'collective pursuit of the public good has been replaced by the solitary pursuit of private advantage', and the idea of citizenship has been 'hollowed out by the sweeping assault of neo-liberalism'.

Ultimately though, the erosion of the public interest is not an isolated event. It is only the most prominent symptom of a broader decline of democracy, and while neoliberalism may be the major culprit it is not the only one.

Certainly, 'the growing interpenetration of the worlds of politics and business' has been devastating for the idea of public interest – but even more so for democracy itself. Indeed, the maintenance of the market economy, rather than the public good, seems to have become the central rationale for government, to the point where the two are actually thought identical (and where GDP is considered the key measure of national progress). Globalisation has reinforced this trend culturally while at the same time reducing the power of national governments to deviate from this agenda even if they wished.

Along with this larger paradigm shift has come a suite of changes in government and politics: the privatisation or marketisation of key government assets and services and of the public sector; a growing culture of secrecy, justified by slogans like 'commercial in confidence' and often accompanied by a process of creeping corruption (in government contracts and appointments, political donations etc); and as well, the growth of a specialised and self-interested political class reared on the notion of politics as short-term management, electoral success and a well-paid

career, rather than the pursuit of the common good. Noel Pearson captured this distinction well when he said recently that Gough Whitlam personified the older idea that 'reform trumps management'.

These specific problems are all made worse by larger systemic flaws: low levels of public confidence in government and in the capacity of the political system to solve our problems; a failure of innovation and imagination in our democratic forms and practices; and a historical weakness in Australian political culture and debate, marked by apathy, complacency and ignorance.

Perhaps underlying all of these is our collective failure to identify and define clearly and concretely just what is our shared vision, the kind of Australia we strive for in the longer term. Such a shared vision could be very different from the politics of shared platitudes we have now, and could itself become a more precise and powerful definition or driver of the public interest.

To fully restore the concept of the public interest to its rightful place at the centre of Australian democracy will require different solutions and approaches over time, but the key must ultimately be citizen engagement. It has been rightly said that 'only the citizen can bring our political and governmental institutions back to life, make them responsible and accountable, and keep them honest'. And only citizens committed to the values and the concrete requirements of the public interest can bring it back to life.

One important way to engage citizens in redefining the public interest is by promoting a process of national debate about the kind of Australia we want. This should aim to identify a series of clear and concrete outcomes, and measures of our progress towards them, which together add up to our shared vision of the kind of Australia we want.

This is what the Australian National Development Index (ANDI) project aims to do, and in this it is part of a growing global and community movement to restate and reclaim the public interest in countries as diverse as Canada and Bhutan. ANDI is a long-term community and research initiative, established as a not-for-profit public corporation, with directors including Reverend Tim Costello and Professor Fiona Stanley and over 60 organisational members spread across many spheres: welfare, church, trade union, business, Indigenous, ethnic, human rights, environmental, local government, and philanthropic.

Over the next 3 years, ANDI aims to engage directly with 500,000 Australians across the nation, partnering with a team of universities to promote a national debate about what matters for Australia's future, our future common good. From this process ANDI and its partners will develop a set of clear and authoritative measures of progress beyond GDP and produce an annual index and status report of overall progress and progress in each of twelve key domains of wellbeing (such as health, education, the environment, work-life, Indigenous wellbeing, children's and youth wellbeing, justice and human rights, etc). Domain indexes will be released annually, but in different months to promote continuous discussion and awareness in the media and the public about the quality of Australian life and what Australians believe are the priorities for true national progress.

In this way ANDI hopes to make a significant contribution to the restoration – and better still, the clearer definition and understanding – of the public interest as the centrepiece of Australian democracy.