



 **the national
conversation**
development lab



Acknowledgement of Country



About

This report sets out the foundations and design of the National Conversation Development Lab, an 18-month, cross-sector initiative led by Foundations for Tomorrow to build and test a credible model for a large-scale National Conversation about Australia's long-term future. This work comes in response to growing community sentiment that Australia's current policy landscape is not fit-for-purpose and is failing to adequately consider our long-term needs.

This report consolidates the research, design logic, international evidence, and governance architecture that underpin the Lab, and sets out the principles and conditions that will guide its delivery across the 18 months ahead.

It is intended as an open invitation, articulating the aims and charting the course for an initiative that is comprehensive in its ambition and collaborative intent. It is addressed to the partners, communities, leaders and institutions who will shape the Lab alongside Foundations for Tomorrow, and to the broader public whose long-term future the National Conversation is ultimately designed to serve.

Foundations for Tomorrow

Foundations for Tomorrow (FFT) works to equip leaders, across sectors, communities, and generations, with the tools and insights to embed long-term thinking into governance, policy-design and decision-making.

FFT is driven by a Generational Vision of a resilient, inclusive Australia where leaders across communities, sectors, and generations, make decisions that safeguard the wellbeing and prosperity of current and future generations.

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We, Foundations for Tomorrow, acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Country and waterways on which we operate, and for which our livelihoods depend. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and we honour the resilience and strength embodied across generations of First Nations communities who have fought for their rights, their cultures, and their self-determination. We also acknowledge those who tirelessly strive to protect, preserve and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, leaving a profound legacy for future generations.

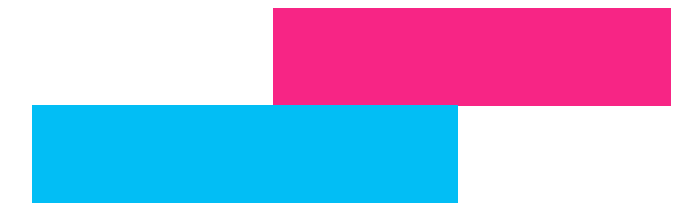
We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

We affirm that the Country now known as "Australia", always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

As an organisation committed to shaping a better future for Australia, we pledge to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, embracing self-determination, social justice, sustainability, equality, and reconciliation. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are diverse, with deep-rooted histories and rich cultures that continue to thrive despite past injustices. We deeply honour the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities, and we strive to amplify their sacred wisdom, knowledge and expertise as we work collaboratively to pave the way for future generations.

A note on Country

We use the term "Australia" throughout this report for clarity and consistency. This continent has been home to sovereign First Nations for tens of thousands of years, known across hundreds of distinct language groups whose names for their own Countries and places carry living meaning and authority, among them Naarm (Melbourne), Gadigal (Sydney), Lutruwita (Tasmania), Meanjin (Brisbane), and Boorloo (Perth), alongside countless others across the continent. These names predate the formal naming of Australia in 1824 and extend far beyond it. This continent has always been, and remains, a place of sovereign First Nations whose leadership, cultures and custodianship continue to this day.



Contents

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Foreword

The idea of a National Conversation has been part of Australia’s public vocabulary for decades. Governments of all persuasions have invoked it, advocates have called for it, and yet a genuinely open, substantive and nationally coherent conversation about where this country is heading is yet to happen. Without a shared sense of direction, we risk being adrift in a world that is changing faster than our institutions can keep pace with. The false starts share a common cause: the conditions that make such a conversation possible have not found suitable alignment with the political will and organisational capacity to see it through.

We believe that moment of alignment is now closer than it has ever been, and that Foundations for Tomorrow finds itself uniquely placed to help bring this vision to life. Not because we have all the answers, but because our independence from partisan politics, our focus on intergenerational wellbeing, and our rich network of partners allow us to offer a genuinely collaborative, yet neutral, ground for shaping a vision and path towards Australia’s future.

This report consolidates several years of research and movement-building, a body of international evidence on what works and what does not, and the findings of a First Nations Discovery Process that has fundamentally shaped how the National Conversation Development Lab should proceed.

We are under no illusion about the difficulty of what we are attempting. The design challenges are substantial, the risks are documented throughout this report, and the work of the next 18 months will require the kind of patience, honesty and genuine collaboration that is harder to sustain than ambition alone. But the conditions and the imperative for doing

it well have rarely been more aligned. The political momentum is growing, civil society is demonstrating its willingness to mobilise for this cause, and there is a public that is ready. As a nation, we can take the opportunity to plan for the future of Australia, or we can squander the moment and allow global events to determine what Australia looks like for future generations.

The Foundations for Tomorrow team and I have been genuinely moved by the support this idea has received. Our ambition has been met with more encouragement than we had even hoped for, and we are wholeheartedly dedicated to doing justice to the investment of precious time, focus and energy that so many have already made, at a moment when we know these things are stretched.

To those who have already joined the Lab: we are grateful for your trust and your investment in what we are building together. To those who are considering it: we would love the opportunity to build this with you.

Yours sincerely,

Managing Director, Foundations for Tomorrow

Executive

Summary

Australia has the civic foundations, the institutional experience and the public appetite to have a genuinely substantive National Conversation about its long-term future. What it has lacked, consistently, is the design rigour, genuine collaboration and organisational independence to make one happen. This report sets out how the National Conversation Development Lab (‘the Lab’) addresses that gap: what it is, why it is needed, what the evidence says about how to do it well, and what it will produce.

The proposal in brief

A National Conversation is a large-scale, structured civic process through which Australians across regions, generations and cultures come together to shape the country’s long-term future and produce a documented, cross-community mandate capable of sustaining reform across electoral cycles. It is distinct from consultation, summits or opinion polling: it is designed to generate the depth of shared understanding that durable policy change requires.

The Lab is the 18-month design phase that makes a full-scale National Conversation possible. Running from March 2026 to December 2027, the Lab will build, test and refine the model before it operates at national scale. Foundations for Tomorrow’s (FFT) leadership of this work, independent of government, is what enables a truly collaborative design phase that will safeguard the integrity required for a genuinely credible National Conversation and deliver a model that can be adopted with confidence across the political spectrum.

The Lab is addressed to the partners, communities, civic leaders and institutions who will shape it alongside FFT, and to the future governments and policymakers who will inherit its outputs. It is not a consultation seeking endorsement or a mass opinion gathering exercise. It is a collaborative design process to develop the structured civic reasoning capabilities for making necessary trade-offs. It is designed to attract genuine co-investment from communities and government in something this country has not yet realised but is entirely capable of building.

The structural problem a National Conversation is designed to solve

Australia's most pressing long-term challenges, including housing unaffordability, the energy transition, intergenerational inequality and declining institutional trust, are not due to lack of knowledge or technical expertise. The contours of reform are reasonably well understood. The constraint is structural: short electoral cycles create accountability but compress planning horizons, and without a civic mandate capable of sustaining reform across those cycles, difficult decisions are deferred and progress stalls. This report describes that pattern as policrastination: the systematic deferral of long-term decisions produced by the very mechanisms that make democracy responsive. Policrastination is not a failing of individual leaders but a structural feature of the system in which they operate.

The costs accumulate, and Australia has tried to break the pattern before. The 2008 Australia 2020 Summit demonstrated real public appetite for national dialogue but produced few durable outcomes, lacking institutional embedding and clear adoption pathways. The 1999 republic referendum brought a foundational question to voters without a participatory process capable of navigating its complexity. The 2023 Voice referendum showed what happens when First Nations-led and civil society processes develop in parallel for too long: by the time they converged, the shared understanding needed to hold the process together had not been built across the full breadth of the electorate. Each effort carried genuine ambition. What they could not supply was the design rigour that translates participation into lasting mandate.

What a well-designed National Conversation can deliver

The evidence from comparable countries shows what becomes possible when these processes are built informed by collaborative community engagement and genuine design rigour. Wales produced the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 through a national dialogue that embedded citizen-defined goals directly into legislation. Singapore engaged more than 200,000 participants through Forward Singapore, directly shaping major policy initiatives. Taiwan's vTaiwan platform saw more than 80 per cent of civic dialogue proposals lead to decisive government action.

What these examples share is consistent: a credible line between participation and decision-making, depth of engagement rather than consultation volume, and transparency that allows participants to trace their contribution to a concrete outcome. Where these elements are absent, even large-scale processes produce cynicism rather than mandate.

When those conditions are met, a National Conversation has the potential to produce four

interconnected outcomes. They require a multi-year, government-led process with sustained political commitment. The Lab lays the groundwork to make that possible.

1. Strong, connected communities:

Strengthened trust and relational networks across generations, regions and communities, built through structured dialogue that sustains disagreement without fracture and difference without disengagement.

2. Civic capability:

The civic literacy, cross-community perspective and collaborative practice Australians need to engage with complex national trade-offs, developed through participation in the process itself, and contributing to effective chains of engagement from locally-led dialogue to nationally coherent policy.

3. A community mandate for long-term reform:

A documented, cross-community picture of shared priorities and acceptable trade-offs that gives governments of any political tradition the authorising environment to pursue long-term reform.

4. A Policy Tool for durable decision-making:

A practical Policy Tool, grounded in process outputs, that helps leaders reason effectively through long-term trade-offs, surface synergies and co-benefits across policy domains, and sustain accountability to shared national priorities beyond any single term of government.

Why a design phase before national scale

Civic processes that skip design and testing are among the most reliable ways to set back the cause they are trying to advance. Each failed attempt leaves a more sceptical public and fewer options for whoever tries next. The Lab is structured as an 18-month prototype precisely to avoid that: stress-testing the model before it operates at national scale, and arriving at a design grounded in practice rather than assumption. Because Foundations for Tomorrow operates independently of government, we can hold the process integrity that electoral pressures make difficult to sustain. We take on the design risk, so that leaders across the political spectrum inherit a model they can adopt with confidence.

What this report contributes

This report makes three core contributions:

1. A diagnostic of why Australia's system struggles to deliver long-term reform:

The report maps the reinforcing loop of policrastination, fragmentation and trust erosion that prevents sustained reform, drawing on domestic and international evidence to identify the specific conditions required to break it.

2. An evidence base for what works and what does not:

The report analyses national civic processes across Wales, Ireland, Singapore, Taiwan, Finland and beyond, distilling seven design principles that characterise effective national dialogue alongside the failure modes that have undermined comparable efforts, including Australia's own.

3. The design of the Lab:

The report sets out the Lab's governance structure, six Development Tracks, staged rollout from March 2026 to December 2027, and the Shared Inquiry Framework that connects community engagement to policy impact. It includes the theory of change through which the Lab's outputs translate into durable reform infrastructure.

Understanding the Shared Inquiry Framework

The Shared Inquiry Framework (SIF) is the backbone of the National Conversation, the underlying methodology that gives the model its logic and structure. It pairs the rigorous, structured inquiry that policy-grade outputs require with questions and framing that are accessible and resonant to everyday Australians.

The Lab's 18-month design process is organised around developing and testing the SIF so that it is ready to operate at scale in the full National Conversation.

What the Lab produces

The Lab delivers two categories of complementary output. Neither is sufficient without the other: the model matters, and so do the relationships that will carry it forward.

1. Practical outputs:

A tested methodology comprising governance architecture, a Shared Inquiry Framework, engagement methods and a proposed Policy Tool, positioned for multi-partisan consideration and commitment prior to the 2028 federal election.

2. Relational outputs:

A national coalition of community organisations, civic leaders and youth networks, alongside enhanced readiness across community hosts and partners, prepared to sustain the National Conversation when it scales.

The window for this work is open, and it will not stay open indefinitely. Cross-sector alignment, growing public frustration with short-term governance, and a shifting demographic landscape are creating genuine traction for long-term reform in a way that has not existed before. The Lab is how we act on that traction carefully, rigorously, and in a way that leaves something durable behind.



Section 1

What Australia has built

A civic tradition worth protecting

This country has built something genuinely worth protecting, not only through luck or geography alone, but through deliberate, cross-generational decisions about the kind of society Australians wanted to live in. Australia has built a commitment to democratic governance so robust that it is among a small group of 25 countries classified as full democracies globally.¹ Australia pioneered several civic innovations, including the secret ballot, women's suffrage, compulsory voting and preferential voting², long before most comparable nations contemplated them. It has built institutions capable of earning and sustaining public trust at a time when such trust is declining across comparable democracies.

Australia's economic foundations are equally the product of intentional reform. From Menzies' decision to open trade with Japan,³ to Hawke floating the Australian dollar⁴ and Howard's introduction of the GST,⁵ these were difficult decisions taken with the national interest in mind by governments of both political traditions. The social infrastructure built alongside that economic foundation, of Medicare, superannuation, public education and welfare support for Australians across every stage of life, reflects something equally deliberate: a durable shared understanding and cross-partisan commitment to social stability and shared opportunity. This cross-partisan commitment has endured across changes of government, economic shocks and profound social transformation, underpinning nearly three decades of uninterrupted economic growth, disrupted only by Australia's COVID-19 recession.⁶ When Australians have faced acute crises, they have also demonstrated a capacity to act together with efficiency, solidarity and institutional competence. The responses to the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires⁷ and the COVID-19 pandemic⁸ were imperfect, but they drew on deep reserves of community trust and public-spiritedness that many comparable democracies have struggled to sustain. This capacity is a powerful national asset.

An unfinished national story

What Australia has built is substantial, but incomplete. Understanding the limits of these foundations requires an honest account of who Australia is, and how it got here. Identity, history and the future are not separate conversations to be resolved independently. A country cannot develop credible long-term direction while its foundational stories remain unsettled. These are interdependent dimensions of a single national reckoning that Australia has repeatedly deferred.

Since Donald Horne first called Australia the "Lucky Country, run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck" in 1964, Australia's prosperity has come

to be seen as shaped by chance and abundance of natural resources rather than deliberate design.⁹ The implications of this criticism still echo widely today. Horne's argument carries a warning that while Australia abounds in good fortune, its leaders lack ambition and have become used to coasting on our luck, rather than developing robust policy ideas. To move beyond this accidental luck, we need to become a deliberate Australia, one that consciously defines its identity, invests in education and inclusion, confronts difficult histories, and intentionally shapes a sustainable, forward-looking future.

Australia's national story is layered and unresolved. It comprises more than 65,000 years of First Nations sovereignty, British colonisation and the institutions it produced, and successive waves of migration that have brought new skills, cultures and perspectives, fundamentally reshaping who Australians are and what this country is capable of.¹⁰ Navigating the tension between these stories is the defining work of national maturity. It cannot be sidestepped by only having a conversation about the future. The terms on which that future is negotiated depend on how these stories are understood and reconciled together.

As the Chair of the Multicultural Framework Review has observed,¹¹ being a culturally diverse nation is not the same as being a successful multicultural society. The distinction is structural; diversity is a demographic fact and multicultural success is an institutional achievement. It requires deliberate and sustained investment in the conditions that enable people to build a shared civic life across difference. Australia possesses the first. It has not consistently built the second. Attempts to define or renew a shared national identity, whether through government initiatives or broader public discourse, have repeatedly surfaced tension without providing durable mechanisms for working through it. In the absence of institutional design capable of holding these tensions productively, the question of shared identity has too often been deferred rather than resolved. The issue has not been disagreement itself, but the absence of structured civic infrastructure through which disagreement can be navigated with legitimacy.

Rising anti-immigration sentiment and a broadly shared sense that Australia lacks a compelling contemporary account of itself point to a public seeking clarity about what this country is, without the institutional means to work that out together.

Research into contemporary experiences of Australian identity finds that for many, the concept itself feels exclusionary and that the dominant image of the nation does not reflect who they are or what they have contributed.¹² Identity is not merely narrative; it is experienced as belonging, fairness and recognition. When those dimensions remain unresolved, the national story faces risks of increasing fragmentation.

These tensions give rise to questions that cannot be deferred indefinitely:

- What does it mean to belong in Australia?
- How do we grapple honestly with the truth of our origins?
- How do we take care of each other across differences?
- How do we foster shared civic values while holding diverse cultures and knowledges?

In short, how do we honour our differences while building a common future from which we can all benefit?

The image of Australia that dominates national discourse – a prosperous, unified, egalitarian, land of the ‘fair go’ – is not experienced equally.¹³ For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, recent migrants, people living in outer suburbs and regional communities and younger generations locked out of housing and economic security, this image feels more like erasure than recognition. Any process designed to engage the nation as a whole, but grounded in a metropolitan or monocultural imagining of the country, will struggle to produce a mandate that holds across all of it.

Every Australian’s experience of daily life is shaped by intersecting structural factors. Like all societies, Australia’s institutions and opportunities are experienced differently depending on who they were historically designed around.¹⁴ Representation today is more diverse, and rightly so, but diversity in presence alone does not guarantee diversity in influence. Capturing the full range of lived experiences requires institutional structures capable of elevating perspectives that have been historically marginalised.

The demographic reality makes this urgency clearer still. More than half of Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas.¹⁵ The cultural richness of that diversity is a genuine national asset. However, diversity alone does not produce collective strength.¹⁶ The lasting benefits of diversity depend on the conditions that enable people to work together effectively across difference.¹⁷ Building those conditions, including the capacity to deliberate, negotiate and find shared direction across genuine disagreement, is not a soft aspiration; it is a structural requirement for any shared sense of national purpose to endure.

Australians are willing to engage seriously with hard national questions. What has been missing is the design rigour to translate that willingness into a direction that holds across electoral cycles and social difference. The foundations are strong, but the gap between what this country has achieved and what it is currently capable of delivering is widening, driven by domestic structural constraints that many Australians already recognise in their everyday lives.

Why our system struggles to respond

The challenges Australia faces are not new. Most have been named, debated and partially addressed for decades. The question is not whether Australians or their leaders understand the problems. It is why the system consistently fails to resolve them. The answer is structurally embedded, and understanding it clearly is the first step toward changing it.

A social fabric under disproportionate pressure

Australia’s strong foundations are now under stress in ways that cut across the political divide. Stagnant real wages,¹⁸ housing unaffordability¹⁹ and widening intergenerational inequality²⁰ are eroding the lived sense that the system works for everyone. These pressures are not confined to particular electorates or demographics.²¹ They are felt in cities, outer suburbs, regional towns and amongst the professionals, elderly and working families who experience, daily, the gap between what was promised and what they live.

This is the context in which structural reform must be built. Not in the abstract, but against a backdrop of communities already under strain, whose trust in the system’s capacity to deliver is weakening.

The structural trap: polycrastination

Australia’s most significant challenges share a common feature: they require coordinated, sustained responses over timeframes that transcend any single electoral cycle, financial quarter or generation. The system is not designed for this, and the gap between what is needed and what it can deliver is widening.

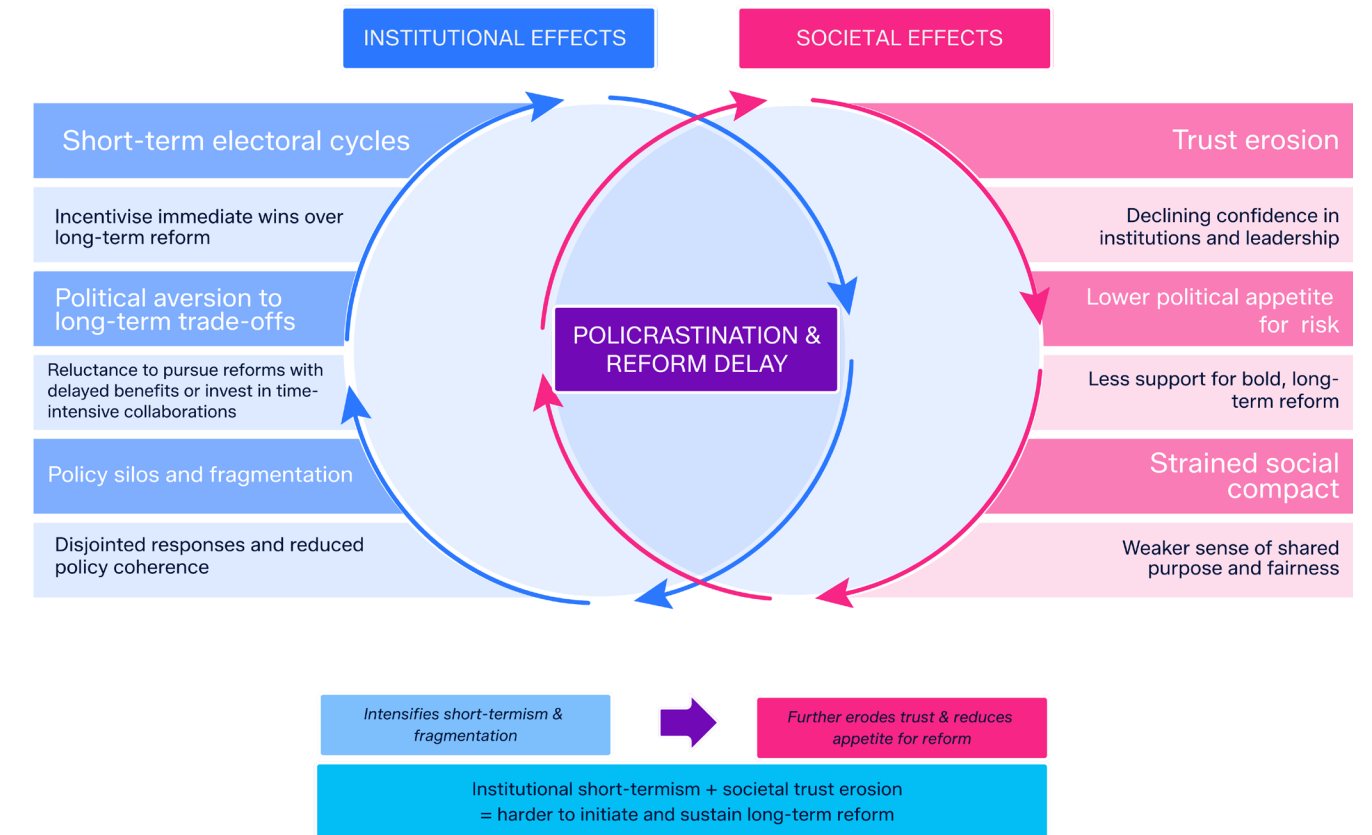
This gap is not a failure of individual leaders. It is a structural phenomenon, one that this report describes as polycrastination: the systematic deferral of difficult policy decisions beyond electoral cycles, produced by the very mechanisms that make democracy responsive.

Polycrastination is not new, and it is not unique to Australia. It is a natural byproduct of democracy’s greatest strengths. Electoral cycles create accountability but can limit planning horizons and long-term ambition. Political competition encourages new ideas, but it also rewards parties for standing apart from each other rather than building on what came before. Leadership turnover prevents the concentration of power but creates uncertainty about long-term implementation. Media scrutiny ensures transparency but rewards announcements over delivery. Each of these has a role in our democracy. However, combined, they create systematic pressure toward short-term thinking that no individual leader can overcome alone. As recent Australian analysis has emphasised,²² these pressures are not incidental. They are structural, built into the very design of electoral accountability itself.

A reinforcing loop of institutional and societal consequences

Polycrastination does not produce consequences in isolation. It generates a reinforcing loop of institutional and societal effects that, without deliberate intervention, feed on each other. The diagram below illustrates how these dynamics interact. What follows explains each element and why the loop does not self-correct.

Figure 1: The Reinforcing Loop of Polycrastination - Foundations for Tomorrow



At the institutional level, policy development across housing, energy, productivity and health remains largely confined to separate silos, despite the interconnected nature of the challenges each seeks to address. This fragmented approach reduces efficiency and impact and weakens the system’s capacity to generate long-term solutions. Without a strong civic mandate to sustain reform across electoral cycles, political ambition becomes risky and difficult decisions are repeatedly deferred. Over time, this entrenches a deeper incapacity: the inability to make the long-term trade-offs that are needed for serious reform. The cause is not a lack of understanding but the absence of a mechanism that supports citizens, institutions and leaders to overcome the limitations of short-term electoral cycles, build shared understanding of what those trade-offs actually involve, and develop the trust to navigate them together.

At the societal level, the consequences are equally acute. When citizens repeatedly experience participation that produces no visible change, trust erodes, not from apathy, but as a rational response

to a system that has not delivered in line with expectations. In turn, diminished trust increases citizens’ and leaders’ aversion to political risk, reinforcing short-termism and further weakening public confidence. The cycle becomes structural and self-reinforcing.

This cycle is supported by evidence from the OECD²³ which demonstrates that high institutional trust supports reform durability, investment confidence and crisis resilience. The Commonwealth Treasury’s Measuring What Matters²⁴ and the Productivity Commission’s Advancing Prosperity²⁵ reports similarly identify fairness, legitimacy and social cohesion as preconditions for sustained productivity. Declining trust is, therefore, both a civic and economic risk.

As intergenerational inequity sharpens and confidence in long-term progress falters, the social compact between generations, communities and regions becomes more fragile. Younger Australians face a structurally different set of prospects²⁶ in housing, job security, climate exposure and the weight of future fiscal costs compared to older

generations. This is compounded by a felt sense of underrepresentation²⁷ in the very decision-making processes shaping those prospects. This is not a generational grievance but a governance failure with far-reaching consequences.

Beneath these dynamics lies a more fundamental deficiency: civic infrastructure has not kept pace with the complexity of the challenges Australians face.²⁸ The tools, spaces, habits and skills that enable constructive engagement with hard questions are underdeveloped. The result is a growing desire for change without a clear mechanism to achieve it.

The trade-off problem

Australia's most pressing challenges are not due to lack of ideas or technical expertise. On housing, the energy transition, intergenerational equity and fiscal sustainability, the contours of reform are well understood. The constraint is the capacity to navigate the trade-offs that any serious response requires. Long-term investment inevitably asks some to bear costs now for benefits that will accrue later, and often to others. That is a political and social challenge, not a technical one. Sustaining those trade-offs across electoral cycles requires a mandate deeper than a single election victory.

This is the gap that the current system does not fill. Policy processes are designed to generate options, not to build shared understanding of the trade-offs those options entail. Without a mechanism to work through competing priorities openly and collectively, debate becomes cyclical and deferral becomes rational. The result is structural incapacity: there is no standing process through which Australians can deliberate on what they are willing to accept in pursuit of what they say they want.

A society struggling to talk to itself

Beneath the institutional failure sits a social one. Polarisation across political orientations, generations, regions and cultural experience is eroding the conditions necessary for the kind of sustained dialogue that hard collective decisions require. This is not ideological disagreement, which democracies have generally managed to contain. It is affective polarisation: where disagreement becomes identity, compromise becomes betrayal, and collective long-term decision-making becomes structurally difficult. This is not a concern confined to one side of politics as no part of the political spectrum is immune to it, eroding the conditions for durable reform regardless of which party holds office.

Australia has not yet reached the levels of polarisation seen in some comparable democracies, but warning signs are visible. One in five Australians²⁹ now report they would not be friends with someone holding different political views. Trust in institutions and perceptions of fairness are also weakening.³⁰

National pride and belonging have declined significantly over the past decade, particularly among younger Australians, those experiencing financial hardship, and migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds.³¹ Belonging is increasingly tied to perceptions of justice, opportunity and inclusion rather than shared symbolism.³² Declining belonging is, therefore, a governance problem as much as a social one.

This erosion is uneven. Despite broad symbolic support for diversity, Australians from Asian and African backgrounds continue to report significantly higher levels of discrimination and negative attitudes, revealing a hierarchy of acceptance beneath official narratives of inclusion.³³ The same research also shows that the experience of diversity itself remains contested. For many Australians, the word multiculturalism, though well-intentioned, carries associations with policies that have felt imposed rather than shared, or that have prioritised symbolic recognition over the material conditions of genuine belonging. For others, particularly in communities navigating rapid demographic change, questions of fairness, cohesion and shared values sit unresolved beneath the surface of official inclusion narratives. These uneven and sometimes conflicting experiences of belonging directly affect the credibility of national processes and the willingness of communities to invest in them.

The deterioration of civic infrastructure compounds these pressures. Traditional forms of participation have declined, while formal consultation processes consistently fail to meet public expectations.³⁴ Digital platforms have filled the vacuum,³⁵ but their design rewards antagonism over dialogue and expediency over reflection, amplifying division rather than supporting collective problem-solving. Without countervailing structures, the environment in which public reasoning occurs continues to degrade.

Research identifies three patterns that undermine democratic resilience: "us versus them" polarisation, exclusionary nationalism, and anti-institutionalism that frames institutions as inherently corrupt.³⁶ These narratives flatten complexity, weaken compromise and erode the foundations necessary for a mandate that holds.

Any solution that seeks to navigate this landscape cannot design its process as though these narratives are simply noise to be overcome. They are the environment in which the process will operate, and design must actively counter them.³⁷

The remainder of this report sets out what that intervention looks like and what it should be designed to achieve.

The opportunity for action

The structural consequences of policrastination are real. The identity questions are unresolved. And yet the conditions for Australians to act together, to shape a shared future, have rarely been better aligned. This section makes the case that the window is open, and that it will not remain open indefinitely.

Political momentum

Multi-partisan interest in long-term thinking and intergenerational fairness is growing and finding expression in concrete action. The introduction of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025³⁸ is one signal of that shift: a unified, cross-party commitment to embedding future-focused thinking into the architecture of Australian governance. The political constituency for this kind of reform is growing, and it is growing across traditional lines.

How the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill came to be

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill 2025 was a product of extensive civil society collaboration and alignment to champion the future generations agenda in Australia. It was informed by four years of research and movement building led by Foundations for Tomorrow, including:

- **2020-21 | Awareness to Action:** FFT consulted 10,000 young Australians on their vision for a just, equitable and sustainable future, generating one of the largest youth-led national consultations on intergenerational fairness. These findings shaped the Awareness to Action report, highlighting young people's calls for long-term thinking and proactive leadership.³⁹
- **2021-22 | Global mapping of best practice:** FFT then spent a year mapping global best practices for overcoming short-termism in policy development, a core issue identified through the Awareness to Action consultation. After identifying international leaders in long-term governance and future generations policy, the FFT team then consulted directly with these leaders to develop a localised impact strategy.
- **2022-24 | Comprehensive research and consultation:** FFT invested two years in facilitating dialogue, conducting consultations and strategic workshops, and leading research to inform the For Our Future Policy Brief⁴⁰ recommendations which served as the substantive contribution to the development of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill.
- **2023 | Establishment of the Parliamentary Group for Future Generations:** To build awareness and develop political championship for future generations thinking, FFT established the Parliamentary Group for Future Generations. This multi-partisan group, initially co-chaired by Dr Sophie Scamps MP, Ms Zaneta Mascarenhas MP and Mrs Bridget Archer MP, was established to facilitate constructive dialogue and foster a multi-partisan approach to policy innovation to protect the interests of future generations.
- **2023 | Co-founding of the Intergenerational Fairness Coalition (IFC):** To foster the civil society support required to drive change, FFT collaborated with Orygen, Foundation for Young Australians, Think Forward and EveryGen to form the IFC, which now has nearly 40 members taking joint action to advance future generations policy in Australia. The IFC hosted the first Intergenerational Fairness Summit in 2023.
- **2024 | Launch of the For Our Future Policy Brief:** The end of 2024 marked the conclusion of two years of intensive work to develop a robust set of policy proposals to safeguard the interests of future generations in Australia, and develop a network of champions across civil society, academia and the political landscape to advance the ambitions captured within the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill. The For Our Future Policy Brief was launched at the 2024 Intergenerational Fairness Summit.

2025 | Introduction of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill: On 10 February 2025, Dr Sophie Scamps MP introduced the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill, seconded by Mrs Bridget Archer MP.

Public readiness

The political momentum is matched by public appetite. Eighty-seven per cent of Australians now endorse stronger whole-of-government action to protect the interests of current and future generations, paired with growing frustration that this action is not being delivered.⁴¹ The will exists; the mechanism does not.

The demographic landscape is shifting in ways that make this appetite increasingly impossible to ignore. For the first time, Australians aged 18-44 now constitute the dominant voting bloc,⁴² representing approximately 43% of the electorate, according to enrolment data published by the Australian Electoral Commission for the December quarter of 2025.⁴³ This demographic shift fundamentally changes what is politically viable and what can no longer be deferred. Leaders who have historically been able to discount intergenerational concerns now face an electorate defined by them.

Crucially, the appetite for change is not confined to younger generations or to any particular political tribe. Research on social cohesion consistently finds that the most polarising voices represent a small minority.⁴⁴ The majority of Australians fall within what researchers describe as the “exhausted majority”: citizens fatigued by conflict, who express a clear preference for listening, cooperation and practical problem-solving over ideological confrontation. The 2017 Australia reMADE survey⁴⁵ found that across diverse communities, Australians consistently articulated shared hopes grounded in fairness, care, equality and belonging. What unites Australians is more substantial than what divides them. The constraint is not fragmentation, but the absence of a process capable of surfacing and organising that common ground.

Civil society alignment

Building on public readiness, the convergence across sectors and within civil society needed for a National Conversation already exists and is growing. The Intergenerational Fairness Coalition,⁴⁶ now approaching forty member organisations, reflects a level of cross-sector alignment around long-term governance that is unprecedented.

While traditional forms of civic membership have declined, other forms of participation, particularly digital and issue-based engagement among younger Australians, are increasing.⁴⁷ Civic energy has not disappeared; it has shifted form. The challenge is not generating participation but building the connective infrastructure capable of translating dispersed civic energy into coordinated national direction.

The cost of waiting

The reinforcing loop of plicrastination is not self-correcting.⁴⁸ Each cycle of deferral deepens institutional fragmentation, erodes social trust and increases the political risk of the reform that follows. The longer decisions are postponed, the narrower the available options become and the more expensive eventual action will be. Proactive investment now is materially less costly than attempting to repair weakened civic infrastructure under conditions of crisis, and the evidence on compounding costs is unambiguous.⁴⁹

Australia possesses the assets: civic energy, community networks, a demonstrated capacity for collective action. What remains absent is the connective infrastructure to translate that energy into sustained reform. Political momentum, public readiness and civil society alignment are converging. The question is whether Australia will act before that opening closes.

Section 2

What we're building



The conditions are in place. What they create is not an answer in itself but a genuine opportunity to make the kind of structural investment that transforms what is politically possible. This section makes the case for what that investment should be, drawing on evidence of how it is done well internationally, and explains what Australia is now building.

What intentional action looks like

Australia cannot rely on circumstance alone to carry it through the complexity ahead. The long-term challenges it faces will not resolve themselves, and the costs of continued deferral are no longer abstract. Meeting them requires intentionality; deciding together on the future Australia we want to create, and then proactively building the capacity to pursue.

That capacity requires a process that holds hope and trade-offs together, asks people both what they want and what they are willing to sacrifice, and that creates genuine conditions for working through difference. These capacities develop through practice and atrophy without it. Any serious civic initiative should treat building these skills as a core purpose. Doing otherwise risks the durability of what the process produces.

What breaks the reinforcing loop described in Section 1 is the genuine engagement of everyday Australians. Not just peak bodies, expert panels, or civic organisations alone, but ordinary citizens across regions, generations and lived experiences. It is their participation that transforms a political risk into a public mandate and contribution that no other initiative can substitute for.

Investing in the national capacity to decide together

Every generation faces a moment when the challenges ahead outgrow the tools available to meet them. The most successful societies have responded not just with new policies but investments in their collective capacity. In practice, this means investing in the relationships, institutions and shared understanding that allow people to make hard decisions together. Australia is at such a moment now, and the form that investment needs to take is more specific than the word “reform” typically implies.

What nations do when they need to find direction together

The investments that have had the most durable impact on shaping societies are those that built shared civic purpose. Singapore’s decades of structured National Conversation⁵⁰ have not produced consensus, but a population practised in reasoning together about their collective future, one able to absorb difficult trade-offs because those trade-offs have been worked through openly rather than imposed.

A common thread across these examples is that the capacity for shared decision-making is treated as

infrastructure, deserving of deliberate design and sustained resourcing like any road, hospital or school. When that infrastructure is strong, societies can navigate change without fracturing. When it is weak or absent, even prosperous and stable countries find themselves unable to act on what they already know.

Australia has made similar investments before. The Hawke-era Prices and Incomes Accord was not simply a wages policy.⁵¹ It was a civic architecture: a structured investment in relationships between government, business, unions and civil society that made hard trade-offs politically survivable across multiple electoral cycles. Its legacy was not only Medicare and superannuation, but proof that Australians, given the right conditions and process, can work through difficult collective choices. The question now is whether that kind of investment can be made at a broader civic scale, reaching not just peak bodies and institutional leaders but the full diversity of communities whose buy-in any durable reform ultimately requires.

The social infrastructure underneath everything else

Beneath every functioning institution is a layer of social infrastructure that rarely makes the news: trust, habits of cooperation and the shared norms that allow people to work through disagreement without it becoming destructive. This infrastructure is not self-sustaining, and it does not rebuild automatically once it deteriorates. It requires deliberate, sustained investment in strong relationships between people and communities and between local experience and national decision-making.

The most resilient societies are those where local action and national coherence remain connected – where what happens in a regional town, an outer suburb or a First Nations community is not separate from the national story but recognisably part of it. When that connection breaks down, national decisions are made without the knowledge and legitimacy that local experience provides, while local communities struggle to see their lives reflected in the direction being set. The result is a deepening estrangement that weakens governance and belonging.

Rebuilding that connection requires the spaces and relationships that enable shared inquiry, allowing people to move from lived experience to an understanding of the whole, and back again. Societies that invest in this capacity consistently demonstrate what researchers call collective intelligence:⁵² the ability to bring together diverse knowledge and lived experience, make better decisions, recover faster from shocks and sustain trust over time. This is not adjacent to the economic argument. It underpins it.

Why this investment is urgent now

The case for investing in civic capacity is not new. Australia has attempted versions of this conversation

before,⁵³ and the gap between recognising the need and acting on it is itself a form of policrastination. What is different now is the convergence of conditions that makes acting on it genuinely viable: multi-partisan political momentum, a public that is ready and growing impatient, and a civil society infrastructure with the scale and alignment to support serious work. Those conditions are real, but they are not permanent. Civic readiness, like all forms of social capital, depreciates without investment, and the reinforcing loop of institutional and societal distrust makes each subsequent attempt harder than the last.

What remains is a question of form: what kind of initiative, designed in what way, is best placed to translate this opening into durable action. The answer is a National Conversation. But not all National Conversations are equal, and the design will determine whether this one succeeds where previous ones haven’t. What the evidence shows about how these initiatives succeed and fail is where this report turns next.

The opportunity of a National Conversation

The term “National Conversation” is now used loosely to describe almost anything: a political speech, a media cycle, a summit that produces a communiqué and then dissolves. What this report means by the term is more specific and more demanding than those uses allow. The case for it rests on clear understanding of what Australia needs and what previous efforts have lacked.

Why a National Conversation, and why this kind

Among the range of investments a society can make in its collective capacity, a well-designed National Conversation occupies a unique position. It is neither a one-off event nor a permanent institution, but a structured process with a clear objective of bringing together all Australians, equipping them with the evidence they need, and creating the conditions for genuine reasoning about the country’s future. When done well, its outputs are far more durable than just a set of recommendations. A well-designed National Conversation is capable of shaping a public literate in grappling with complexity, and a mandate that reflects that grappling.

What distinguishes the National Conversation proposed in this report from its predecessors is its explicit orientation toward policy uptake and utility as a distinctive Policy Tool. The goal is not a vision statement or a set of aspirational principles, but a policy-ready mandate: a clear articulation of shared priorities and acceptable trade-offs that governments of any political tradition can use as the foundation for long-term thinking, planning and reform. This means

the process is designed from the outset with policy impact in mind, with structured inputs from evidence and expertise, clear documentation of reasoning and trade-offs, and institutional tools that translate civic voice into durable policy frameworks.

The shift from consultation to genuine civic participation is a categorical design difference. Research distinguishes between the following:

1. **Static one-way processes**, where government informs and consults,
2. **Consultative two-way processes**, where it involves and collaborates,
3. **Dynamic two-way processes**, where communities actively co-design and adapt outcomes in real time.⁵⁴

Most government engagement operates at the first level. A National Conversation is designed from the beginning to operate at the third. However, rolling this out at large scale before the model is solidified and tested, risks continuing to erode trust.⁵⁵

The Lab is an investment in the preconditions that make durable civic engagement possible. The tested methodology, process architecture and cross-sector relationships it develops do not expire when the Lab concludes. They become the foundation on which the National Conversation, and future civic processes, can reliably build.

When civic participation is well designed and genuinely responsive, the outcomes compound: trust increases, policy quality improves, and satisfaction with democracy strengthens. When it is poorly designed or unresponsive, the damage compounds accordingly, with each subsequent attempt to re-engage a disillusioned public carrying the weight of prior failure. The design of this process is not a procedural question. It is the question on which everything else depends.⁵⁶

The National Conversation will be designed to build enduring civic infrastructure that continues to function after the formal process ends. It produces the capacity for local action and national coherence to remain connected, and for the public understanding developed through the National Conversation to continue shaping decisions long after it ends.

What this produces

A well-designed National Conversation produces four interconnected outcomes that reinforce one another and compound over time:

The four nation-building outcomes of the National Conversation

- 1. Strong, connected communities:** Strengthened trust and relational networks across generations, regions and communities, built through structured dialogue that sustains disagreement without fracture and difference without disengagement.
- 2. Civic capability:** The civic literacy, cross-community perspective and collaborative practice Australians need to engage with complex national trade-offs, developed through participation in the process itself, and contributing to effective chains of engagement from locally-led dialogue to nationally coherent policy.
- 3. A community mandate for long-term reform:** A documented, cross-community picture of shared priorities and acceptable trade-offs that gives governments of any political tradition the authorising environment to pursue long-term reform.
- 4. A Policy Tool for durable decision-making:** A practical Policy Tool, grounded in process outputs, that helps leaders reason effectively through long-term trade-offs, surface synergies and co-benefits across policy domains, and sustain accountability to shared national priorities beyond any single term of government.

These outcomes are not sequential. They are produced simultaneously through the process itself, and each strengthens the conditions for the others.

The benefits of collective future visioning

The benefits of collectively envisioning the future together extend well beyond the content of any vision produced. Research on collective future prospecting demonstrates that when communities are supported to imagine positive alternative futures, they develop greater belief in the plausibility of change, stronger collective efficacy and more sustained motivation to act. In 2025, a scoping review⁵⁷ identified a direct link between access to shared visions of the future, hope, participatory efficacy and positive social behaviour across diverse contexts. Similarly, scholars on deliberative futures argue that multi-voiced, forward-oriented dialogue is a prerequisite for societal preparedness and resilience, not simply a byproduct of it.⁵⁸ The process of visioning the future together, when well designed, is itself generative: it builds the social bonds, shared frameworks and sense of agency that make collective action possible after the conversation concludes.

What shared direction actually requires

What is needed is not only unity in agreement, but also in shared process: a legible way of working through difference that people from across the spectrum can trust and participate in with dignity. The National Conversation is not designed to resolve Australia's most contested policy questions, but to create the conditions in which those questions can be held honestly, worked through together and translated into a direction that is legitimate because it has been genuinely shared rather than imposed.

What this makes possible

A policy-ready mandate changes what is politically possible. Leaders who can point to a genuine cross-community and cross-generational process that has worked through difficult trade-offs occupy a different political position from those relying on a single election result or a commissioned report. Such a mandate supports long-term commitment across electoral cycles because it was built by the public rather than by any single government, making reform durable and harder to reverse. Civic infrastructure created through the process of a National Conversation can also buffer against the backsliding that has historically followed government turnover, turning political progress into something publicly owned.

Australian precedent for this kind of mandate

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Measures of Australia's Progress framework (2002 - 2014) is an exemplar in community engagement and consultation to inform policy design. The ABS undertook a series of iterative public consultations to first develop, and then update the framework. In 2010 to 2012,⁵⁹ the ABS undertook a wholesale revision of the framework by engaging thousands of participants through a structured multi-channel model. The framework went on to influence national and international wellbeing measurement frameworks and left a legacy that endured despite the program later being defunded. This exemplifies how well-designed national dialogue can align public institutions with community values in ways that persist beyond the life of the process.

Theory of change

One of the deepest constraints on ambitious reform in Australia is not a shortage of good ideas or willing leaders. It is that Australians do not share a common picture of where the country is going, and too few feel genuinely part of building it. When the future feels like something that happens to people rather than something they are shaping together, the political conditions for bold, sustained action are difficult to create and harder still to hold.

A National Conversation addresses that gap directly. By bringing everyday Australians into a genuine, structured process of envisioning and building the future together, it creates the shared direction, public ownership and civic confidence that ambitious long-term governance reform requires. These are foundations that serve not only the governance agenda but the full breadth of reform that short-termism, polycratisation, fragmentation and trust erosion are holding back.

The diagram below maps how this works in practice.

Figure 2: Theory of change



Large-scale national civic processes are not a novel experiment. They are an increasingly documented feature of democratic renewal efforts worldwide, and enough have now been tried, tested and evaluated to build a substantial evidence base about what works, what doesn't and why. Every country operates within its own political, cultural and institutional context, and direct comparison has limits. But the growing body of international evidence shows that successful processes tend to share a common set of design principles that travel across contexts, while the failures tend to share a common set of avoidable mistakes; both offer practical lessons for Australia.

One further consideration shapes how this evidence applies here. We are not approaching the design of a National Conversation from scratch. A First Nations Discovery Process, outlined in Section 5 below, was undertaken before any design decisions were made, and has already refined the model design in ways that no international case study could anticipate or substitute for. How that process shaped the design is addressed directly in the following section. The international evidence establishes the foundation. The Discovery Process is where that foundation meets Australia's unique and local context.

Seven design principles for effective civic dialogue

The principles below draw on case studies from across Europe, Asia, the Middle East and beyond, summarised in Table 1 below. They are interdependent, and processes that honour some while neglecting others risk producing partial, trust-eroding outcomes.

A clear pathway to impact

The single most important design feature of any civic process is a visible and credible line of influence between participation and decision-making. Being heard is not enough on its own; what matters is embedding participation within formal authority structures so that outcomes are shaped, constrained or formally determined by public input. When people cannot see how their contributions affected a policy position, legislative proposal or institutional commitment, participation produces cynicism rather than investment, and trust weakens rather than builds. The strongest cases, including Wales' The Wales We Want process,⁶⁰ and Taiwan's vTaiwan platform,⁶¹ share a common feature: participation was institutionally mandated, politically authorised and linked to a predefined decision point. In the strongest cases, this pathway is anchored to a clearly articulated policy artefact that defines in advance how public input will translate into durable reform and enables participants to trace a direct line from their engagement to a concrete outcome. That pathway should be designed from the outset, with clarity about

scope, authority and follow-through, rather than retrofitted at the end when the hard decisions about institutional accountability have already been avoided.

Articulated policy artefact and translation mechanism

Successful national civic processes define, from the outset, the concrete policy instrument through which civic input will be translated into durable reform. This may take the shape of statutory goals as in Wales,⁶² constitutional amendments as in Ireland,⁶³ formal strategy frameworks as in the EU,⁶⁴ policy reporting and public values as in Singapore,⁶⁵ or codified Calls to Action as in Canada.⁶⁶ The presence of a clearly defined policy artefact clarifies public expectations, disciplines synthesis and creates a tangible bridge between participation and implementation. But values and visions alone are insufficient. The most effective policy artefacts do more than articulate aspiration. They create structured ways for societies to navigate trade-offs and shared sacrifice, providing a framework through which competing priorities can be weighed, long-term goals balanced against short-term pressures, and leaders supported to make difficult decisions with visible public mandate behind them. Without such mechanisms, artefacts risk remaining symbolic expressions of intent rather than operational tools for collective choice. Where they succeed, they help a country move from agreement on values to agreement on what those values require in practice.

"Reports alone, without a durable mechanism to ensure government and institutional response, tend to produce a strong conversation but limited systemic change." - Mike Salvaris, Australian National Development Index (ANDI)

Independent but embedded

Processes that are too close to government lose authenticity with citizens. Processes that are too distant from government lose their ability to meaningfully influence policy. The design challenge is to hold both in productive balance: independent enough that participants trust the outcome is not predetermined, and embedded enough that outputs have genuine policy-shaping impact. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly model,⁶⁷ with an independent chair and a government mandate to respond formally to every recommendation, is the clearest example of this balance achieved in practice. The independence was structural, not merely asserted, and the government's obligation to respond was not discretionary.

Section 3

How initiatives like this are done well

Inclusion from the outset, not as afterthought

Representative participation, intentional elevation of historically marginalised voices and culturally safe engagement formats are not features to be added once the core design is settled. They are structural preconditions for the process producing a mandate that the whole country owns rather than one that reflects only the communities already comfortable engaging with formal civic processes. A process that only reflects the perspectives of a portion of the population will produce a mandate that only that portion owns, and the rest will know it.

Quality of engagement over volume of participation

The evidence consistently shows that structured, well-facilitated engagement produces more durable and policy-relevant outcomes than large-scale opinion gathering. The goal is not to maximise the number of people who submit a response, but to create the institutional conditions for genuine engagement; expert briefings, well-facilitated small-group dialogue, time for reflection and iteration, and a process that supports movement from initial reactions to considered judgement. Ireland⁶⁸ and Finland's⁶⁹ processes, each prioritising depth of engagement with a diverse group over mass opinion extraction, demonstrate that meaningful insight is achievable at a representative scale without sacrificing rigour for reach. The two are not in tension when the design is coherent.

Iteration and continuity

One-off processes produce one-off mandates. The most durable civic initiatives are those designed from the beginning as ongoing institutional practice, building civic capability, trust and institutional memory over time rather than treating a single event as the destination. Each iteration builds on the shared frameworks and relational infrastructure of the last, producing a public increasingly capable of engaging with complexity rather than one that is rebuilt from scratch each time a difficult question arises.

Transparency and visible feedback loops

If the pathway to impact is about where influence flows, transparency is about how that influence is communicated, documented and institutionally accounted for over time. Trust is sustained not just by outcomes but by procedural clarity. Even where public input does not result in wholesale policy adoption, participants should be able to see how decisions were reached, what trade-offs were weighed and why certain proposals advanced while others did not. Meaningful transparency goes well beyond publishing a summary report months after the fact. It requires structured feedback at multiple stages: open reporting, documented reasoning, public tracking of commitments and explicit institutional responses to what was heard. Taiwan's real-time tracking of policy adoption and Singapore's explicit mapping of citizen proposals to government commitments demonstrate that transparency is accountability architecture, not a communications function. Without ongoing feedback loops, even well-designed pathways to impact can feel opaque to the people who walked them. With them, trust can endure even when outcomes are contested.

Table 1: International civic processes and institutional dialogue models

I. National civic processes with direct policy or cultural impact

Country	Initiative	Process type	Scale	Core design feature	Reported impact
Wales	The Wales We Want (2014-15)	National Conversation process informing legislation	6,474 participants; 100+ local conversations	Future-focused framing question; 150 'Future Champions'; synthesis into formal report	Directly shaped the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and established statutory Wellbeing goals
Ireland	Constitutional Convention (2013-2014) & Citizens' Assemblies (2016-2021)	Structured citizens' assemblies with mandated government response	100 member assemblies over a multi-year process	Random citizen selection combined with expert input; livestreamed sessions; formal government response requirement	The Constitutional Convention led to the adoption of a Citizens' Assembly model used to broker consensus on contentious parliamentary issues, referendums on gender equality and the age threshold for Presidential candidacy
Singapore	Forward Singapore (2022-23)	Government-led National Conversation exercise	200,000+ participants across 275 sessions and digital platforms	Thematic tracks; multi-channel engagement; direct policy translation	Influenced policy initiatives; creation of the Singapore Government Partnerships Office
Taiwan	vTaiwan (2014)	Hybrid civic-tech consultation model	Thousands engaged per issue; public mailing list of 200,000	Online/offline stages (Proposal, Opinion, Reflection, Legislation); consensus mapping (Pol.is); livestreaming	Over 80 percent of proposals led to decisive government action; informed legislation including FinTech Sandbox Act
Finland	Suomi 100 Dialogue (2017)	Nationwide decentralised civic dialogue	800,000 contributors; 170,000 events; 500+ mini dialogues	Timeout facilitation method; decentralised, locally led engagement	Strengthened democratic culture; institutionalised the Timeout Foundation
Canada	Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-15)	National truth-telling and reconciliation process	155,000 visits to national events; 6,750 survivor statements	Survivor-centred hearings; national events; Final Call report with 94 Calls to Action	Established National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation; ongoing tracking of Calls to Action
The EU	Citizens' Panel on Intergenerational Fairness (2025)	Structured citizen panel feeding directly into EU strategy	150 randomly selected citizens; EU-wide digital engagement	Intergenerational representation; multi-phase deliberation; embedded in strategy development	Recommendations directly informed the EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness released in March 2026

II. National civic processes with limited or ineffective policy translation

Country	Initiative	Process type	Scale	Core design feature	Reported impact
Iceland	National Forum (2010)	Constitutional deliberation forum	950 randomly selected citizens	Livestreamed deliberation; values-based drafting; advisory referendum	Draft constitution approved in referendum but not enacted by Parliament
Chile	Citizens' Dialogues and #TuConstitución (2015-16)	Multi-level constitutional dialogue	218,689 participants; national digital platform	Self-organised local meetings; regional cabildos; digital idea platform	Draft constitution largely ignored by Congress; constitutional reform process stalled
Yemen	National Dialogue Conference (2013-14)	Transitional national dialogue	National conference of 565 delegates	Elite-negotiation structure; complex design; two-year transitional mandate	Transitional period ended without constitution or elections
Scotland	National Conversation (2007-10)	Constitutional consultation	Limited participation data available.	Government-led White Paper published; limited cross-party collaboration	Perceived as partisan; limited translation into policy
Mexico	San Andrés Dialogues (1995-96)	Conflict resolution process	Limited participation data available.	Government-controlled negotiation; pre-determined outcomes	Partial implementation; reform process stalled
Cameroon	National Dialogue on Anglophone Crisis (2019)	Conflict resolution process	Limited participation data available.	Week-long process; exclusion of key separatist and opposition actors	Boycotts; limited impact on conflict resolution
Chad	National Dialogue (2022)	Transitional dialogue process	Limited participation data available.	Dominated by military-linked actors; representation gaps	Agreements largely ignored in post-dialogue implementation
South Africa	National Dialogue (proposed - 2024-25)	Ongoing national renewal dialogue	Limited participation data available.	Shift from citizen-led to government-led process	Credibility concerns; perceived as PR exercise

III. Permanent or institutionalised national dialogue models

Country	Initiative	Process type	Scale	Core design feature	Reported impact
Norway	Long-term governance mechanisms	Institutionalised dialogue structures	National	Parliamentary white papers; youth councils; Standing Citizens' Panel (12,000 participants)	Embedded intergenerational planning and public consultation norms
New Zealand	Waitangi Tribunal and Long-Term Insights Briefings	Legally mandated dialogue and foresight mechanisms	National	Treaty-based tribunal; public service stewardship principle; mandatory long-term insights briefings	Institutionalised Indigenous engagement and long-term planning; recent political scrutiny
Philippines	Citizens' Participatory Audit (CPA)	Permanent participatory oversight mechanism	National	Citizens embedded in Commission on Audit processes; Open Government Partnership framework	Improved transparency and accountability in public expenditure
Finland	Timeout Foundation and national dialogue infrastructure	Institutionalised civic dialogue model	National	National facilitation model (Timeout); decentralised dialogue networks	Government democracy frameworks coordinated by Ministry of Justice's Department for Democracy and Public Law; support for national dialogues and public participation mechanisms

What the evidence warns against

Understanding what makes these processes succeed is inseparable from understanding what makes them fail. The risk of a poorly designed National Conversation is not only wasted effort. When people invest time and hope in a civic process only to see their contributions ignored, diluted or instrumentalised, trust does not remain neutral. It deteriorates, and it takes the next attempt down

with it. The government that follows inherits a public primed for cynicism. The civil society organisations that supported the process carry the residue of its failure. A poorly executed national civic engagement process does not leave the landscape unchanged. It actively makes the next effort harder, and the one after that harder still.

This is why the non-negotiables outlined in the following section are preconditions for proceeding, not procedural caution. If those conditions cannot be met, not proceeding is the responsible course.

Elite capture and perceived partisan control

When a process appears to serve political rather than civic purposes, legitimacy collapses quickly and rarely recovers. Scotland's 2007-2010 National Conversation,⁷⁰ initiated by the SNP government to advance constitutional reform, became widely viewed as a partisan vehicle lacking cross-party buy-in or clear policy integration. Mexico's San Andrés Dialogues in 1995-96⁷¹ suffered from a narrow, government-controlled design with pre-negotiated outcomes that undermined trust before the process had a chance to build it.

Lack of follow-through

Perhaps more demoralising than elite capture is the failure to act on what was heard, particularly because it comes after citizens have already invested. Yemen's National Dialogue Conference⁷² produced extensive recommendations for constitutional reform that the transitional period ended without implementing. In Chile, a large-scale constitutional dialogue generated unprecedented participation but the draft was ultimately stalled in Congress.⁷³ Iceland's 2012 referendum⁷⁴ approved a citizen-drafted constitution that was never enacted, leaving a public that had engaged seriously with a hard question without a result to match that effort.

Scale without depth

International experiences reveal that there is no single 'right' scale for a National Conversation, but there are clear ways to get it wrong. Processes that prioritise reach over depth risk producing superficial consultation rather than genuine shared authorship. That is, scale without depth creates the appearance of participation without its substance, which is more damaging than a smaller process done well. The international evidence points instead toward hybrid models that pair broad participatory channels with smaller, richer engagements, combining reach and rigour. National Conversations that have delivered strong results have ranged in scale from approximately 7,000 participants in Wales⁷⁵ to more than 200,000 in Singapore.⁷⁶ This range reflects the influence of local design, context and population size, but given Australia's scale, an ambitious target would likely involve engaging several hundred thousand people.

Digital-only design

Online engagement alone reproduces existing inequalities rather than addressing them. Digital participation skews toward already engaged, time-rich and digitally literate populations, systematically excluding the communities whose voices a genuinely representative process most needs to hear. Chile's #TuConstitución platform generated significant online participation but struggled to convert input

into binding reform,⁷⁷ while Taiwan's experience demonstrates that even sophisticated civic technology benefits from complementary offline engagement to avoid the representation gaps that undermine a mandate's legitimacy.⁷⁸

The jurisdictional translation challenge

Most of the international evidence comes from jurisdictions much smaller than Australia or with governance systems that have limited resemblance. Wales has just over three million people, Ireland 5.3 million and Iceland roughly 400,000. Singapore operates as a city-state with a distinct relationship between government and society, and Taiwan's civic technology ecosystem is shaped by its particular political history. Acknowledging those limits strengthens rather than weakens the case for careful adaptation.

What travels across these contexts is not specific implementation models but the underlying design logic: how trust is built, how inclusion is structured, how feedback loops are made visible and how civic input is connected to policy outcomes. These are structural characteristics of well-designed processes that have proven effective across varied political and cultural settings. What requires genuine adaptation for Australia is implementation, specifically its federal architecture, geographic scale, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and multicultural context and the depth of its urban-regional divide.

Australia's scale is not only a constraint. A nation of more than 27 million people, with compulsory voting, high civic participation and dense networks of community organisations, local governments and institutions, has the foundations for a National Conversation of genuine depth and reach. As a middle-power with a growing economy Australia is uniquely situated to champion a model for genuine civic engagement and meaningful collaboration in advanced Western democracies. The challenge is building the connective infrastructure that links local energy to national coherence without flattening either.

The design principles are clear and the failure modes are well documented. What remains is to show how this evidence has informed the Australian design, and how the First Nations Discovery Process has refined the Lab's design in ways that the international evidence base, drawn almost entirely from non-Indigenous governance contexts, could not have produced. That is the focus of the next section.



Section 4

Lessons to learn from the Australian landscape

Australia's civic design landscape

The international evidence establishes what good design looks like in principle. What it cannot supply is an account of the specific civic landscape to design a uniquely Australian National Conversation. Australia's context carries features that no internationally comparable model fully anticipates. Understanding those features is itself the analysis, not a preliminary step before it.

Trust in government and political institutions in Australia is at a structural low, and it is unevenly distributed.⁷⁹ Communities that have been repeatedly consulted without visible results carry the accumulated weight of that experience into every subsequent engagement. They recognise extractive consultation when they encounter it. A process that repeats that pattern, even with better intentions and more sophisticated design, will not produce neutral results. To repeat the missteps of the past would risk deepening the existing cynicism, making any future attempt harder still. Success in this environment depends on whether people can trace their contribution to something tangible and shared.

The multicultural composition of Australian society is both one of the country's most significant civic assets and one of its most underappreciated design challenges. The communities that make up Australia's diversity bring different relationships to national identity, political and civic histories and distinct ways of engaging with democratic institutions. In some cases this reflects different understandings of what consultation is for and different levels of institutional trust. The 2024 Multicultural Framework Review found that for many Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds, the language of multiculturalism itself carries associations with policies that have felt imposed rather than co-created.⁸⁰ Cohesion data reinforces this,⁸¹ with Australians from Asian and African backgrounds reporting significantly higher rates of discrimination than those from European backgrounds, a hierarchy of acceptance operating beneath official narratives of inclusion. Linguistic diversity compounds this challenge. Processes that rely primarily on written English engagement will systematically exclude communities whose participation is constrained not by disinterest but by access. Reaching these communities requires working through the organisations and relationships where trust already exists.

The challenge runs deeper than access, however. Australia's policy and civic architecture has historically approached diversity through a multicultural lens, one that recognises and accommodates difference within a shared national frame. Multiculturalism, as policy and practice, has produced genuine gains: legal protections, institutional recognition, the gradual broadening of what counts as Australian. A multicultural process brings diverse communities

into a pre-existing design. An intercultural process, by contrast, allows diverse communities to shape what the design is, the questions it asks, the forms of knowledge it honours and the ways it understands progress and shared direction.⁸² The difference is between inclusion and genuine encounter: an exchange across difference that reshapes everyone involved, not only those being included.

This distinction has direct consequences for what a National Conversation can produce and who will trust it. Communities accustomed to being included on terms not their own recognise the difference between invitation and genuine participation in design.⁸³ That distinction determines whether they invest in the process, return to it and see the mandate produced as their own rather than something done in their name.

The Lab's commitment to interculturalism means the methodology, governance, facilitation and inquiry design should be genuinely open to different ways of knowing and different modes of civic reasoning. These are not elements added later as refinement; they must be built in from the outset. It also requires a willingness for the process itself to be shaped by the communities that participate in it.

The design of community touchpoints actively creates space for ceremony, story, place-based conversation and forms of expression that sit outside conventional survey or workshop formats. Where the design defaults to those formats, the Lab's prototyping process should revise it. That capacity for revision is the point.

Australia's geographic complexity introduces a further dimension. The lived experience of national life differs substantially between major metropolitan centres and regional, rural and remote Australia. While economic outcomes are more varied than a simple city-region divide suggests, concerns about distance from services and felt peripherality to national decision-making remain a consistent feature of regional experience that economic data alone does not fully capture.⁸⁴ A process designed from a metropolitan centre and extended outward risks reproducing exactly the dynamic it seeks to address. For this reason, the Lab builds from the local upward, and genuine community ownership of the design process is a structural requirement for the mandate to hold across the full breadth of the country.

Beneath these specific features lies a deeper challenge. Australia has not developed a settled shared account of what it is. For communities whose experience has been shaped by exclusion, dispossession or the gap between national self-image and daily reality, the invitation to participate in a National Conversation carries an implicit question that must be resolved before the conversation can begin: is this a process in which my story forms part of the national story, or one in which I am being asked to contribute to someone else's? That question must be answered through design. It is this challenge that the contributions below engage directly.

The journey to the Voice referendum

The 2023 Voice referendum provides one of the most significant examples of a national effort to work through questions of legitimacy, recognition and participation, offering lessons that are directly relevant to the design challenges outlined in this report. It shows what happens when parallel processes, each with genuine ambition, develop without the shared design and relational foundations needed to hold together at the moment of decision. The case study below traces how that gap opened, and what it means for the Lab's design.

Case study: ATSIC and the cost of late collaboration

Contributions by Jason Glanville, Executive Director, Ebony Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Institute

When the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was abolished in 2005, Australia dismantled not only its primary, and longest-running, Indigenous representative body but also the bridge that had connected First Nations voices with national decision-making for nearly fifteen years since its establishment in 1990.⁸⁵ The decision, made with minimal consultation, created "worrying gaps...and challenges that are yet to be grappled with adequately or appropriately" in Indigenous representation.⁸⁶ The years that followed saw a succession of government and community initiatives that were varied in their longevity and in the extent to which they enabled Indigenous leadership.

Based on stakeholder consultations, it appears that in the aftermath, two parallel processes began.

1. First Nations-led dialogues, engaging First Nations Peoples across the country to ask communities what a new representative structure should look like.
2. Civil society and government forums pursued their own agendas on reconciliation and national identity.

Consultation insights indicate that the two tracks evolved separately, without adequate early alignment on purpose or definitions. The delayed and, arguably, retrofitted integration of these conversations has been credited with underlying misalignment and disunity that went on to be insurmountable during the 2023 Voice referendum.

A slow rebuild without shared stewardship

In 2004, the government established the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OPIC), originally situated within the then Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, to supersede ATSIC, and eventually created the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) in 2019.⁸⁷ Both bodies centralised policy control on Indigenous Affairs within government, but neither offered the kind of independent Indigenous representation that had been provided by ATSIC.

After extensive consultations, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples was established in 2009 as the peak independent representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, representing a powerful act of self-determination.⁸⁸ But it was built without strong allyship from civil society. While thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participated in its formation, few non-Indigenous Australians were aware of this process.

When government funding was later withdrawn, the Congress had limited external support to sustain it.⁸⁹ It ceased operating in 2019, and this loss was met with little public protest.⁹⁰ The absence of sustained public response revealed something important: without shared stewardship, Indigenous institutions remain vulnerable to political will.

The ripple effects: from congress to the Voice

In parallel to these developments, the Gillard government established the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition in 2010, initiating what was in effect a National Conversation on how First Nations Peoples should be formally recognised.⁹¹ The Expert Panel's work gave rise to the Recognise campaign, a civil society movement that, while well-intentioned, focused on minimalist symbolic recognition rather than structural change. It was the most visible public outcome of that process, yet it sat at some distance from the more ambitious vision being developed by First Nations leaders themselves. The subsequent Kirribilli dialogue in 2015 and the Referendum Council's regional dialogues (2016-17) culminated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which called for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament and a Makarrata Commission for treaty and truth-telling.⁹²

When Indigenous leaders issued the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017, calling for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament, it reflected years of Indigenous-led consensus-building.⁹³ Yet once again, civil society and government had been moving in parallel, allowing further fragmentation in the support base for ambitious reform.⁹⁴

By the time the two visions met, the gulf was too wide to bridge. A divided support base left the referendum exposed to political partisanship, and when the referendum finally reached voters in 2023, public understanding and trust had never caught up.⁹⁵ Misperceptions about the Voice echoed the old misunderstandings about ATSIC, and misinformation gained traction in the absence of shared understanding.

The lesson: definitional co-leadership from day one

The ATSIC experience and its aftermath show that ‘co-design’ is not enough if it comes too late, even when the intentions remain to “ensure the maximum participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples”.⁹⁶ True partnership requires what might better be called definitional co-leadership, an agreement from the outset on *what success means, who defines it, and how it will be shared.*

The series of policy experiments between 2005 and 2023 (OPIC, Congress, NIAA, and ultimately the Uluru process and Voice referendum), illustrate the continuing challenges of sustaining Indigenous representation in the absence of shared authorship and bipartisan support.⁹⁷

Had First Nations leaders and civil society partners built this shared foundation in the 2000s, Australia might have entered the Voice referendum with decades of trust and mutual understanding already in place. Instead, each generation has had to start again, rebuilding dialogue, trust, and institutions from the ground up.

The cost of failing to collaborate early is not just institutional collapse or referendum defeat, but the loss of continuity in collective purpose. To avoid repeating history, future national initiatives should begin not with consultation, but with shared authorship based on terms of reference established by First Nations leaders and centred on Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being, such as those presented in the Koomargii Gadhaba (Rising Up Together) framework developed by the Ebony Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Institute.

Building on Australia’s efforts to articulate shared national priorities

Contributions by Mike Salvaris, Australian National Development Index

Australia has undertaken multiple efforts over the past three decades to articulate long-term national priorities and broaden how progress is understood. These initiatives span constitutional reform, national dialogue, wellbeing measurement and civic innovation. Together, they provide important lessons for the design of any future national civic process.

Australia has attempted to forge a shared direction before, with mixed results. The 1999 republic referendum brought a foundational constitutional question to the public without a deliberative process capable of navigating its complexity, resolving little in its wake.⁹⁸ The 2008 *Australia 2020 Summit* demonstrated genuine public appetite for long-term national dialogue, generating significant civic energy and some tangible outcomes.⁹⁹ However, it lacked durable institutional embedding and clear adoption pathways, leaving most of its recommendations unimplemented.

In parallel, successive governments and civil society actors have advanced measurement and future-oriented reform agendas. Since the publication of the Brundtland Report in the late 1980s,¹⁰⁰ there has been a sustained international movement to broaden how national progress is measured, recognising that economic growth alone does not capture long-term social and environmental wellbeing. Australia has been an early contributor to this shift through the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Measures of Australia’s Progress¹⁰¹ and Treasury’s Wellbeing Framework.¹⁰² While political attention to these initiatives has fluctuated, the underlying insight remains: narrow economic metrics reinforce short-term incentives, while broader wellbeing measures are better aligned with intergenerational stewardship.

Meanwhile, civic initiatives such as the Australian National Development Index, launched in 2012,¹⁰³ the 2017 Australia reMADE process,¹⁰⁴ and the Centre for Policy Development’s (CPD) 2024 paper on Measuring What Matters¹⁰⁵ have repeatedly called for a structured, nationwide process to define shared priorities. In particular, the CPD’s hub-and-spoke collaborative model anticipates key features of the Lab’s own architecture.

Across these waves of reform – constitutional, deliberative, measurement and civic – a consistent pattern emerges. Measurement frameworks, civic reports and policy reforms cannot by themselves define what kind of future a society wishes to build, nor can they generate enduring public legitimacy for long-term decision-making. What has been missing,

largely, is a trusted, cross-societal process through which citizens, communities, experts and institutions can collectively define shared long-term priorities and provide broad legitimacy for future-oriented decision-making – a gap both the Lab and National Conversation seek to iteratively address. Fragmented infrastructure, limited coordination and insufficient institutional embedding have prevented these reform efforts from translating into durable civic architecture. The repetition of this pattern is itself a form of the policrastination diagnosed in this report: recognition without integration and aspiration without sustained authorisation.

Across these initiatives, four recurring patterns help explain why past efforts to articulate shared national priorities in Australia have struggled to translate ambition into durable change.

- 1. Vision without institutional embedding:** Many initiatives succeeded in articulating compelling visions or developing technically rigorous frameworks but lacked durable institutional embedding. Government-led strategies often depended heavily on political leadership; when governments changed, frameworks faded. Locating ownership primarily within government left reforms vulnerable to electoral turnover.
- 2. Technical credibility without civic legitimacy:** Measurement-focused initiatives strengthened technical credibility but were frequently criticised for limited citizen participation or depth of engagement. Consultation processes were often expert-driven, with limited traceability between public input and final outcomes. Participation alone did not translate into public ownership or narrative authority.
- 3. Participation without depth:** Engagement processes were sometimes broad but shallow. Large numbers of participants were consulted, yet opportunities for structured deliberation, where citizens engage with evidence, confront trade-offs and collectively refine priorities, were limited.
- 4. Conversation without adoption:** Many initiatives lacked clear adoption pathways. Reports were produced, but mechanisms ensuring institutional response or policy integration were weak. Strong conversations were followed by limited systemic change.

The recurring pattern is not failure, but fragmentation. Previous efforts tended to excel in one domain: narrative, measurement or participation. But rarely have efforts effectively integrated all three within a design that connected civic legitimacy to institutional durability. This pattern mirrors the lessons drawn from international experience. The design features that have enabled durable civic processes overseas, such as clear pathways to impact, institutional embedding, depth of engagement and transparent adoption mechanisms, are precisely those that Australian reform efforts have most often struggled to integrate simultaneously. The convergence of domestic and international evidence strengthens the case for treating these elements not as optional refinements, but as structural requirements.

Civic infrastructure already in motion

Australia is not designing a National Conversation from scratch. Across civil society, elements of the relational and methodological infrastructure required for one are already emerging. These initiatives demonstrate that the foundations for national dialogue, encompassing trust-building, community coordination and futures-oriented inquiry, are already being developed in practice. The role of the Lab is not to replace this work but to connect, scale and give national coherence to efforts that remain dispersed.

The National Futures Initiative

Contribution by Claire Marshall, Lead of the National Futures Initiative, TACSI

Within the broader pattern of reform fragmentation described above, important elements of civic infrastructure are already being prototyped.

One example is the National Futures Initiative led by The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) and seed funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation.¹⁰⁶ Drawing on six years of experience facilitating Impact Networks, the National Futures Initiative is developing capabilities that enable diverse communities to practise futures thinking, coordinate across difference and generate locally grounded visions for long-term change. Its work across networks exploring the Future of Childhood, the Future of Communities and the Future of Human-Machine Collaboration is cultivating key capabilities a National Conversation depends on: futures literacy, distributed leadership and non-partisan civic legitimacy.

This work speaks directly to one of the recurring lessons identified above. Durable reform requires more than technical frameworks or episodic consultation; it needs standing relational capacity. Legitimacy should be built from the ground up, through just processes that deliberately centre equity, plural futures and historically marginalised voices. These are not procedural refinements. They are structural preconditions for democratic authority.

Initiatives like this do not substitute for a National Conversation process. They show that the foundations for one are already emerging. The task of the Lab is distinct but complementary: to connect, extend and scale these efforts into a nationally coherent process capable of generating shared mandate and institutional uptake. The aim is not to replace existing civic work but to weave it into a durable architecture of long-term national stewardship.

Long-term ambition

If a National Conversation is to succeed where earlier attempts have struggled, it needs to integrate these elements – vision, deliberation, legitimacy and adoption – intentionally and structurally. That requires separating and connecting three distinct functions: independent stewardship that provides continuity, structured civic engagement that generates authority and institutional pathways that enable uptake. When these roles are clearly distinguished yet structurally linked, reform frameworks can survive political change while remaining useful to governments.

The longer-term ambition is not simply to convene a moment of national dialogue, but to establish standing civic infrastructure; the kind through which Australians can periodically convene to renew shared priorities and sustain long-term national direction.



Section 5

Designing the Lab

The international evidence and Australia’s own reform history point in the same direction: the design of a national civic process is not a procedural question. It is the question on which everything else depends. A process that repeats the patterns this section has diagnosed will not produce a neutral outcome. It will deepen the cynicism that makes the next attempt harder. What follows sets out how the Lab has been designed to avoid that, and what it must be capable of producing.

What makes the Lab most distinctive is that its very design is itself an investment in national civic capacity. The relationships, trust and shared understanding built through the Lab are not inputs to the National Conversation. They are the beginning of its outcome.

Table 2: The Lab vs the National Conversation

What the Lab is →	What the Lab delivers
<p>The Lab is a collaborative design process, bringing together communities, institutions and leaders over 18 months to prototype and pilot how Australians can participate in shaping long-term national direction, and how those insights can be translated into durable decision-making and reform.</p> <p>It is not the National Conversation itself, but the development stage to design and test a durable model for that initiative.</p>	<p>The Lab aims to produce two complementary outputs: practical outputs that articulate the shared direction and findings emerging from the process, and the relational infrastructure needed to carry those insights forward.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Practical outputs (tangible, implementation-ready): A tested methodology comprising governance architecture, a Shared Inquiry Framework, engagement methods and a proposed Policy Tool, positioned for multi-partisan consideration and commitment prior to the 2028 federal election. Relational outputs (networks, trust and participation infrastructure): A national coalition of community organisations, civic leaders and youth networks, alongside enhanced capability across community hosts and partners, prepared to sustain the National Conversation when it scales.
↓	
What the National Conversation is →	What the National Conversation delivers
<p>A National Conversation is a large-scale, structured community-led process, not a one-off event or a government-driven survey, that brings together everyday Australians across generations, communities and regions to explore what matters most, identify what we share, and build a shared direction for where we are headed as a nation.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Strong, connected communities: Strengthened trust and relational networks across generations, regions and communities, built through structured dialogue that sustains disagreement without fracture and difference without disengagement. Civic capability: The civic literacy, cross-community perspective and collaborative practice Australians need to engage with complex national trade-offs, developed through participation in the process itself, and contributing to effective chains of engagement from locally-led dialogue to nationally coherent policy. A community mandate for long-term reform: A documented, cross-community picture of shared priorities and acceptable trade-offs that gives governments of any political tradition the authorising environment to pursue long-term reform. A Policy Tool for durable decision-making: A practical Policy Tool, grounded in process outputs, that helps leaders reason effectively through long-term trade-offs, surface synergies and co-benefits across policy domains, and sustain accountability to shared national priorities beyond any single term of government.

How we got here

The idea of a Lab began with a question: whether a National Conversation is the right response to the challenges identified in the preceding sections, and if so, what form it would need to take to be genuinely effective.

Building on years of advocacy, research and convening, which culminated in the introduction of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill in February 2025,¹⁰⁷ FFT undertook a twelve-week research sprint to map experts, stakeholders and international case studies and to understand best practices and governance for a process of this kind in Australia. The sprint produced a clear finding: a National Conversation should not be designed by specialists

and handed to communities. It would have to be built collaboratively, and that collaboration would require its own dedicated infrastructure.

That insight gave rise to our concept of the Lab: a dedicated design phase through which the National Conversation could be collaboratively built.

A three-month public engagement phase followed, bringing together partners, organisations and communities to refine and strengthen the Lab’s direction. Running alongside and foundational to this entire approach was a First Nations Discovery Process conducted between November 2025 and February 2026 to determine whether the Lab should proceed and if so, under what conditions.

Figure 3: The Lab Overview



The First Nations Discovery Process

The Discovery Process involved a series of in-depth interviews with respected First Nations leaders whose work spans governance, law, health, storytelling, design, data sovereignty and intergenerational thinking. Interviews were structured around genuinely open questions: whether a National Conversation is appropriate at all; whether it is appropriate for a non-Indigenous-led organisation to drive this project; what conditions would need to be met for First Nations participation to be meaningful rather than extractive; and what would it mean to honour First Nations leadership as a structural design principle rather than an inclusion metric.

The questions were intentionally framed to surface risk, tension and potential for harm, not to gather affirmation of a predetermined model, but to establish

the conditions under which this work could proceed with integrity.

Across all conversations, the premise of the Lab was affirmed as positive and valuable. The risks identified were equally real, however no participant recommended the initiative should not proceed. What they provided was foundational guidance about how it should proceed, and the parameters within which it would remain worthwhile. Those insights have reshaped the Lab’s foundational design in concrete and substantive ways, documented throughout this section.

The full report on the First Nations Discovery Process, which will continue to shape the Lab’s design and implementation, can be accessed at www.thenationalconvo.org.

Portraits of Our Future

The Portraits of Our Future project paired the stories of fifteen everyday Australians with deep policy analysis across a range of policy areas, from housing, aged care, energy transition to marine conservation, running simultaneously as research and proof of concept.¹⁰⁸ It demonstrated that the knowledge needed for better long-term decisions often already exists in communities, in families, in the lives of people navigating the real consequences of short-term decision-making every day.

That finding directly shaped the Lab. Portraits proved that everyday Australians can engage seriously with complex, long-term national challenges, but engagement alone is not enough. The Lab is the mechanism for ensuring those voices and that knowledge are systematically heard, synthesised and translated into durable policy and decision-making.

The Lab's distinctiveness

What makes the Lab an Australian-first is not its ambition alone. It is the deliberate, sustained choice, across all stages of the work so far, to design collaboratively, transparently and with genuine commitment to inclusion, independent of government and free from partisan persuasion. Many initiatives of this kind are designed by specialists and delivered to communities. The Lab inverts that. Communities, organisations and leaders are not being asked to participate in someone else's design. They are being asked to be the designers, to bring their knowledge, their relationships and their lived understanding of what Australia needs into the architecture of the Conversation itself.

The tensions and opportunities the design holds

This section is not exhaustive but attempts to highlight the tensions and opportunities we are navigating which have been significantly shaped by the guidance and contributions of the leaders who participated in the First Nations Discovery Process.

The international evidence establishes what good design looks like in principle. Applying that logic in Australia requires navigating a set of considerations specific to this country, this moment and our history. These are not problems to be solved by selecting one end of a false binary; they are tensions to be held. The Lab's central design task is to navigate them with enough care and integrity that what sits between the extremes becomes the foundation for something genuinely new. Handled well, each tension also carries a genuine opportunity that a uniquely Australian model can unlock.

The Lab will hold itself to the same standards it aims to embed in the National Conversation. These tensions will not be resolved in advance; they will be actively navigated throughout the Lab's 18 months, tested through real design decisions and real relationships. That experience will directly inform the National Conversation model, producing a design grounded in proven practice rather than untested principle.

Hope as the entry point to hard conversations

Hope is the most accessible entry point, but aspiration alone is not enough. A process that begins with what is broken risks alienating participants before trust has formed. The Discovery Process deepened this understanding, with First Nations leaders framing imagination not as creative ornamentation but as an operational necessity; the elasticity that allows people to experiment with possibility which enables long-term thinking where rigidity would otherwise take hold.

In response, shared aspiration will be used as the entry point to tackling the harder work of trade-offs, structural reform and shared accountability. Done well, hope becomes not an avoidance of difficulty but the precondition for engaging it.

Future, identity and history

Australia's future is shaped by its past, and a National Conversation that sidesteps questions of identity, history and belonging is an incomplete conversation that risks repeating the mistakes of the past. Contributors of the Discovery Process were clear that the risk is not that questions of identity surface through this process but that they surface without structure. The Lab must create space for the full breadth of Australia's story to be grappled with while investing in the skills and capabilities needed to address this further over time.

In response, the Lab's launch will include a dedicated session establishing a shared purpose and common ground for the National Conversation. It will serve as an intentional space to kick off a three-month relationship building stage and surface the challenging and unresolved questions of Australian identity, without assuming responsibility for delivering answers to them. This will ensure that they are named early and carried forward through the work of the Lab from the outset, rather than deferred or avoided.

The Lab's insertion of an additional three-month relationship-building period is another direct response to the Discovery Process. Beyond this period, the Lab will also maintain regular, transparent communication with Discovery Process contributors about how their involvement is shaping the design, and it will treat that accountability as a relational commitment rather than a reporting obligation.

Safety, structure and the conditions for honest engagement

Hard national questions inevitably generate discomfort. The challenge is not eliminating that discomfort but actively creating conditions that allow disagreement and tension to be engaged productively rather than becoming harmful or silencing participation. The Discovery Process brought precision to what the Lab had held more broadly: how people are inducted into a space shapes behaviour more fundamentally than facilitation in the moment.

In response, the Lab will prepare citizens for engagement through a curated onboarding process establishing a shared understanding of the expectations for engaging with disagreement and the mindsets required for complex intercultural dialogue.

From multicultural diversity to intercultural practice

Beyond the conditions for honest engagement lies a second design challenge: ensuring that the diversity of Australian society shapes the process itself rather than simply being represented within it. The design question is whether the National Conversation activates that civic asset or merely reflects it back. A process that allows those communities to shape the design itself produces genuine ownership.

In response, the Lab's design will be supported by expertise in intercultural practice and a culturally responsive framework, alongside a commitment to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property principles that recognise communities not only as participants but as contributors to the design itself.

Community-led design and national coherence

An effective National Conversation needs to balance local leadership with national coherence, enabling locally-led delivery that is responsive to varied contexts while contributing to a nationally coherent output and remaining viable without placing unsustainable resource demands on local partners. The intent is to be nourishing, not extractive. Australia's jurisdictional complexity, and the distinct governance rights and principles of First Nations communities, create a design requirement that is not comprehensively addressed by other international models. Actively prototyping how civic input moves across those boundaries is what will see a uniquely Australian model developed.

In response, the Lab's foundational design prioritises surfacing the needs of local leadership and building a nationally spread coalition of community-driven organisations able to speak to the realities of local delivery. Engagement methodologies will be designed to offer enriching experiences, with visible feedback loops embedded as a core design requirement.

Scale, depth and process integrity

The credibility of a National Conversation rests on the integrity of its process as much as the scale of its reach. Large-scale participation produces the breadth that supports a national mandate, while structured, immersive and thoughtful engagement produces the depth that gives it credibility and political durability. These two imperatives exist in genuine tension. Civic technology and other tools that enable greater scale should, therefore, be deployed with purposeful consideration, ensuring they expand genuine participation rather than create the appearance of it. The most durable national engagement initiatives build scale over time through layered engagement, enabling low-context, high-scale touchpoints in tandem with low-scale, high-context.

In response, the Lab will leverage prototyping and piloting to test possible combinations of engagement modes and methods, establishing the boundaries within which scale can be pursued without compromising quality and credibility. Where integrity of process and scale cannot both be held, integrity will be prioritised.

Government buy-in and community ownership

A process too closely associated with a single government risks the cross-sector legitimacy that gives a national mandate its value; too distant from government, it loses its capacity to produce meaningful policy change. This is not a tension that can be resolved through framing alone; it requires structural and relational pathways that enable genuine cross-sectoral partnership. Achieving it requires government partners who are engaged early enough to trust the process and distant enough to let it breathe.

In response, exploring government engagement pathways will be a priority during the relationship-building stage, with dedicated attention given to how government partnership is structured, governed and communicated. Government engagement will also be specifically represented in the Development Tracks, ensuring that the conditions for durable policy uptake are being actively designed rather than assumed.

Section 6

The collaborative model, sequencing and outputs



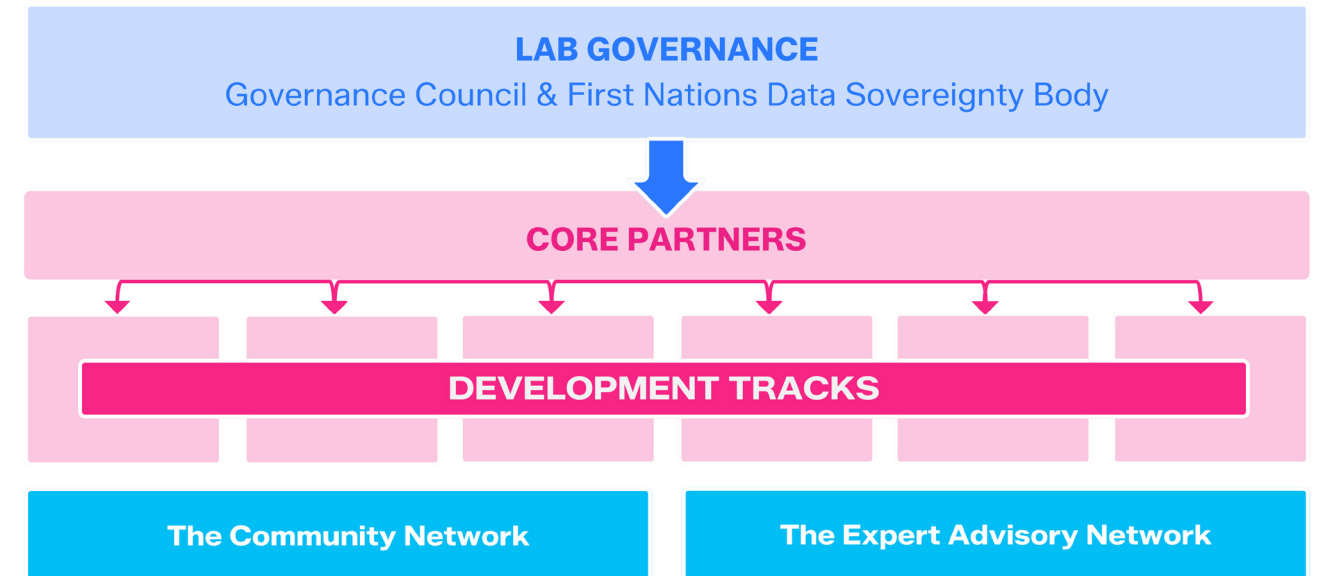
Australia has the civic energy, the political conditions and the public appetite for a National Conversation. This section describes how the Lab translates this potential into a collaborative platform for impact. The Lab model described is a product of inputs to date and is subject to the ongoing relationship building and design work that will be undertaken between the Lab's opening in March 2026, and the launch of the Lab's operations and Development Tracks in June 2026.

Leadership and engagement structure

The Lab's structure reflects a deliberate design choice: that the governance of a National Conversation cannot be concentrated in a single organisation, without reproducing the very dynamics it is designed to move beyond. Foundations for Tomorrow serves as lead convenor and secretariat, holding the process, maintaining design integrity and ensuring accountability to the principles established throughout this report. While FFT provides the governance backbone to ensure project cohesion and integrity, the success of the project is guided by a collaborative governance and leadership structure that draws from a range of perspectives and expertise.

The structure comprises four interconnected layers:

Figure 4: The Lab leadership and engagement structure



The **Governance Council** exists to ensure the Lab remains accountable to something larger than any single organisation's priorities. It provides strategic oversight. A designated body will also operate alongside the Council to hold specific responsibility for overseeing First Nations data sovereignty across the project.

First Nations Data Sovereignty Body provides dedicated oversight of how First Nations data is collected, interpreted and used throughout the project. It operates with independent authority, ensuring that First Nations voices and knowledge are handled with cultural integrity at every stage of the Lab's work.

Core Partners are the Lab's active builders. They contribute collaboratively to the design, prototype and pilot elements of the model across six **development tracks**, and champion the initiative within their

networks. Partners can scope their engagement according to their capacity and are not confined to a single development track.

The **Expert Advisory Network** provides strategic perspective at key points in the design process, briefed on progress and emerging findings, and invited to offer reflections that test assumptions, strengthen methodology and ensure alignment with best practice. This is a light-touch but substantive role.

The **Community Network** is the backbone of ensuring the ambitions of the Lab remain grounded in pragmatic realities of community engagement and delivery. Community organisations, youth groups, councils and local leaders will be invited to test the model in varied contexts and form a growing base of trusted local leaders to be activated in delivering the National Conversation that the Lab will design.

FIRST NATIONS DISCOVERY PROCESS

Data sovereignty, from compliance to design principle

How knowledge is collected, governed, used and protected within the Lab is a foundational design question, and one that must be answered before design begins rather than retrofitted after the fact.

The Discovery Process was clear on why this distinction matters. The language of “data” implies something collected, processed and held by institutions. “Story” implies relationship, purpose and reciprocity, locating meaning with the people the knowledge belongs to. That distinction shapes not only how information is governed, but how the entire process is experienced by those who contribute to it.

At national scale, the stakes are amplified: without Indigenous data governance from the outset, large-scale processes risk compounding existing patterns of extraction rather than disrupting them.

The Shared Inquiry Framework

Developed with guidance from Iain Walker, Executive Director, New Democracy Foundation

Most attempts at National Conversation fail at one of two points. The first is legitimacy; community values are gathered but never meaningfully translated into actionable policy. The second is scale; frameworks designed for policy experts don’t work for everyday Australians, and formats that work in one context collapse in another.

Broad public questions surface shared values but rarely produce guidance on hard trade-offs. Processes confined to experts produce technically coherent recommendations that carry no democratic authority. Current governance tends to oscillate between the two without resolving the tension. The Shared Inquiry Framework is designed to hold both at once, across three levels of inquiry, providing a practical roadmap for how the Lab will test ideas and refine the model for the National Conversation. It establishes a consistent set of standards for what good decision-making requires regardless of the policy domain. Each standard has its own criteria designed to assess whether a decision actually meets the standard. Lastly, those criteria can be further broken down into three levels of inquiry so that the same framework produces both democratic legitimacy and policy rigour.

Core objectives of the SIF

- 1. Surface shared principles:** To surface shared principles for navigating difficult trade-offs, while building the civic skills and relational networks needed to sustain the hard conversations that long-term decision-making requires. This means developing collective clarity about what Australians value most, explicit and agreed rules for how competing priorities are weighed, fair distribution of burden and sacrifice, systemic ambition in how standards are set, and institutional designs durable enough to outlast the political moment in which they are built.

- 2. Enable flexibility across contexts:** To provide genuine flexibility across varying levels of context, capacity and complexity, including the ability to host cause-area specific dialogue focused on housing, climate, health or other domains, while ensuring all contributions feed into a cause-area agnostic national synthesis. Participants engage with what is recognisable and immediate to them, and the framework ensures those conversations connect to something larger.
- 3. Support structured prototyping and iteration:** To provide sufficient structure and clarity that prototyping and pilot testing can generate robust, actionable feedback, enabling the design logic to be rigorously iterated toward a final model that is both practically deliverable and nationally coherent.

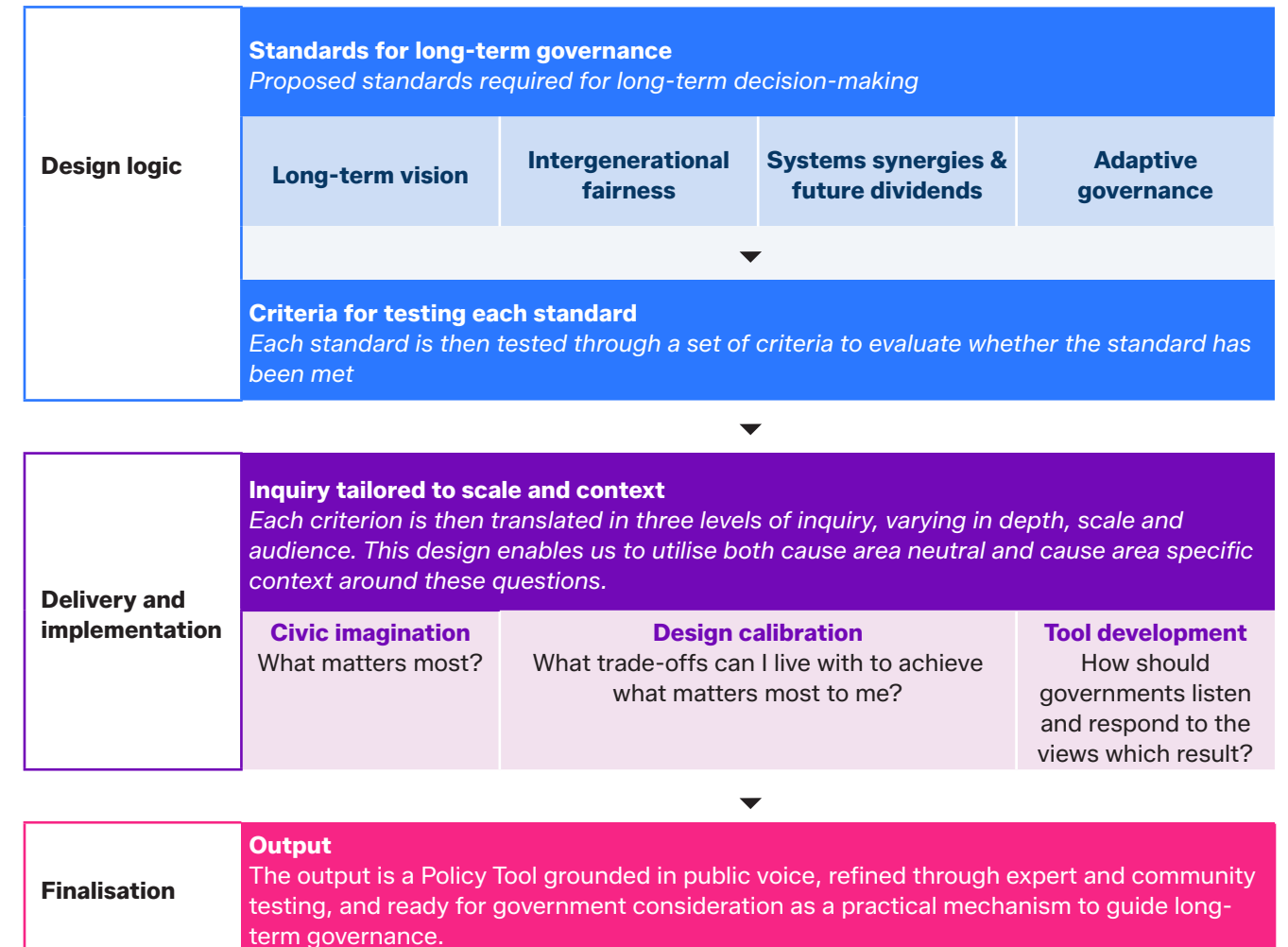
The design presented here is comprehensive and informed by sector-leading practice, but it is expected to evolve substantially through the Lab’s collaborative development process.

Understanding the Shared Inquiry Framework

The Shared Inquiry Framework (SIF) is the backbone of the National Conversation, the underlying methodology that gives the model its logic and structure. It pairs the rigorous, structured inquiry that policy-grade outputs require with questions and framing that are accessible and resonant to everyday Australians. Critically, it is designed to enable flexible implementation across diverse communities and contexts while maintaining fidelity to the initiative’s objectives and the national coherence of its outputs.

The Lab’s 18-month design process is organised around developing and testing the SIF so that it is ready to operate at scale in the full National Conversation.

Figure 5: The Shared Inquiry Framework



Defined standards for long-term decision-making

The SIF is anchored in four decision standards that define what good long-term decision-making requires. Each standard names a dimension of governance that short-term political cycles routinely neglect. Together they define the shape of a decision-making culture capable of thinking across generations.

Criteria for testing the standards for long-term governance

Each standard is tested through a set of practical criteria. These criteria specify what should be examined when a policy, reform or national priority is being assessed. For example, long-term vision may be tested against criteria such as how sensitive it is to

trade-offs or how intergenerational its time horizon is. Similarly, adaptive governance may be tested against how accountable it is long-term or how responsive it is to feedback and iteration.

The proposed structure below is intended to provide a starting point for the Lab’s prototyping and pilot process. The criteria have been developed from the existing SIF design logic and from the research foundations of this report, but they are not fixed. Refining them in collaboration with communities, experts and First Nations governance is itself one of the Lab’s core design tasks.

Table 3: Criteria for testing the standards for long-term governance

Long Term Vision	Intergenerational Fairness	Systems Synergies and Future Dividends	Adaptive Governance
<i>Policies that reflect shared societal aspirations, ethical responsibilities, and cultural wisdoms.</i>	<i>Policies that avoid shifting harm or costs forward, and support fair outcomes over time.</i>	<i>Policies harness the potential of collaboration across portfolios or departments and amplify benefits across all generations</i>	<i>Policies that are designed for adaptability and long-term relevance.</i>
Indicative Criteria	Indicative Criteria	Indicative Criteria	Indicative Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trade-off sensitivity Intergenerational time horizon Protection of non-negotiables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Burden distribution Precaution in the face of irreversible harm Restoration and remedy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-system integration Compounding value and future dividends Resource stewardship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-term accountability Feedback and iteration Civic legitimacy and participation

The four standards and their criteria are not a checklist. They are a reasoning architecture, which, applied consistently, enable comparison of insights across regions, generations, policy domains and communities, and synthesis of those insights into a coherent Policy Tool for national decision-making. Importantly, they are the shared standards that any government, regardless of political persuasion, would need to apply consistently for the framework's legitimacy to hold.

Three levels of inquiry

The three levels of inquiry are the SIF's most distinctive design feature. They address a seemingly impossible challenge surfaced in many Australian and international examples of efforts to drive national engagement: go broad and lose depth, or go deep and lose legitimacy.

These three inquiry levels are tested systematically throughout the Lab.

Table 4: The Shared Inquiry Framework's three levels of inquiry

Inquiry level	Core function	Context	Scale	Depth	Audience & engagement formats
Civic Imagination	Defines what matters most	Low	High	Low	Suitable for surveys, community touchpoints, digital engagement, schools. Appropriate for low-context responses based on lived experience and values, no policy expertise required.
Design Calibration	Identifies the tensions and trade-offs in pursuit of what matters most	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Facilitated workshops, immersive forums, scenario exercises. Questions that are suited to extended exploration, but accessible to the everyday Australian, inviting participants to test how principles hold under real trade-offs and practical tensions.
Tool Development	Defines the mechanisms for making long-term decisions	High	Low	High	Designed for policy specialists and subject-matter experts. Translating principles into practical policy implementation proposals and shaping the foundational premise for the National Conversation Policy Tool output.

Level 1 | Civic imagination: What matters most?

The first level surfaces collective values, aspirations and tensions. It asks what kind of future Australians want to build, what they believe must be protected and what trade-offs feel acceptable. This stage is designed to be widely accessible: participants do not need policy expertise and respond drawing from their own lived experience and values. Engagement methods are high-scale and light-touch, such as surveys, community touchpoints, school programs and digital participation. The purpose is participation and direction, not technical design.

At this level, the SIF also embodies its intercultural commitment most directly. Questions at Level 1 are not framed within a single tradition of what counts as valid response. Community touchpoints can involve story, ceremony and place-based conversation as readily as structured survey formats. Civic imagination is not a technical category. It is an invitation to every Australian, in whatever form of reasoning they bring, to contribute to a shared picture of the future.

Level 2 | Design calibration: What are we willing to sacrifice or trade-off in pursuit of what matters most?

The second level translates what is valued most into acceptable trade-offs and tensions. Participants explore what constitutes disproportionate burden across generations, what level of risk justifies precaution, what should override short-term economic gain, and what must be protected regardless of political pressure. This level requires more context and facilitation. Workshops, scenario exercises and sector-based deliberations help participants test how their principles hold when they come up against recognisable real-world tensions.

Calibration does not design the final Policy Tool. It defines the conditions under which decisions should change, the thresholds and triggers that any future governance mechanism will need to honour. This is the level in which aspiration is stress-tested, and in which the Lab's commitment to holding hope and pragmatism together is most visible. Participants are not asked to abandon their values. They are asked to work out what those values actually require when they are in conflict with other things that also matter.

Level 3 | Tool development: What institutional mechanisms will ensure these standards endure?

The third level moves into institutional development. Once values and trade-offs have been clarified through Levels 1 and 2, this level specifies the architecture required to enforce agreed standards. Participants at this level, policy specialists, subject-matter experts and senior practitioners, explore what legislative clauses, fiscal rules, impact assessment requirements, oversight bodies or reporting cycles would be necessary to embed long-term thinking into decision-making.

This stage is smaller in scale and deeper in focus. The aim is coherence and practicality rather than representation. But it draws its authority directly from Levels 1 and 2. The institutional mechanisms produced at Level 3 are not technocratic inventions. They are translations of what the wider public worked through, made durable in governance form.

The relationship between the three levels is what makes the SIF's theory of change credible. The chain from civic engagement, to political mandate to durable policy outcomes does not rest on hope or aspiration alone. It is built into the methodology: structured civic engagement at Level 1 produces genuine public understanding of trade-offs at Level 2, which produces the calibrated design inputs at Level 3 that translate into an institutional framework capable of surviving electoral cycles. Each step is designed, not assumed.

Example Question Set

To implement the SIF in practice, questions will be developed to apply each set of criterion against the standards for long-term governance.

The questions are indicative, to be refined through the Lab's prototyping and pilots, but they demonstrate the consistency and portability the framework is designed to achieve.

The example below develops questions applying trade-off sensitivity as a criterion against the Long-Term Vision standard. The neutral column shows the principle in its purest, most portable form, the foundation from which all domain-specific questions are then derived.

Table 5: Example of the Shared Inquiry Framework in practice

EXAMPLE OF SIF IN PRACTICE					
Standard: Long-Term Vision Criterion: Trade-off Sensitivity					
Level of Inquiry	Cause-Area Neutral	Housing	Climate	Health	Emerging Technology
Civic Imagination <i>High scale, low context</i> <i>What matters most?</i>	When Australian leaders make long-term decisions, what matters most to you and what should never be compromised to protect the wellbeing of future generations?	To what extent should property investment be limited in order for everyone in Australia to have a fair chance to own or rent a home?	What should Australia be willing to give up today to protect the natural environment for future generations?	Should Australia invest more in preventing illness and building long-term health, even if it means less money for hospitals treating people right now?	What should never be compromised when it comes to new technology, even if holding firm has a cost?
Design Calibration <i>Moderate scale, facilitated</i> <i>Under what conditions should decisions be constrained?</i>	When two things you value are in conflict, how would you decide which takes priority?	When housing affordability for renters and first home buyers conflicts with protecting the asset values of existing property owners, which should take priority, and under what circumstances?	When the economic cost of a climate transition falls disproportionately on particular regions or industries, what obligations does the rest of the country carry, and who decides what is fair?	If investing in long-term prevention consistently produces better health outcomes but is harder to demonstrate in a single term of government, what governance mechanisms would ensure it still happens?	When new technology offers clear economic benefits but carries meaningful risks to privacy, democratic integrity or employment, how should those competing interests be weighed, and by whom?
Device Design <i>Low scale, high context</i> <i>What institutional mechanisms will ensure these standards endure?</i>	Should national decision-making include a standing requirement to explicitly state what is being deprioritised or forgone, with a published rationale that can be scrutinised over time?	Should housing policy be legally required to assess its impact on generational access before implementation, and if so, what threshold of harm should trigger a mandatory review?	Should Australia establish an independent body with the authority to reject policy decisions that would breach agreed ecological thresholds, and what democratic accountability would that body require?	Should major health budget decisions be required to publish an explicit account of what long-term prevention capacity is being traded off against short-term service demand, and who would audit that assessment?	Should national technology legislation include a standing impact assessment requirement for democratic integrity and data sovereignty, with enforceable remedies when those thresholds are breached?

The same principle, trade-off sensitivity, is tested at every level and across every domain. The questions change. The standard does not. **The cause-area-neutral column shows the principle in its purest form, the foundation from which all domain-specific questions are derived.**

Flexibility to engage across mediums

The Shared Inquiry Framework is designed to meet Australians where they are, not where civic processes have traditionally assumed them to be. Genuine national participation requires more than open doors, it requires multiple pathways in, each designed for a different context, capacity and cultural register. The same inquiry that anchors a structured workshop in a regional town hall should also be expressible through a voice memo sent from a kitchen table, a child's drawing pinned to a library noticeboard, or a thirty-second response at a supermarket checkout. The

framework's portability across these mediums is not a concession to convenience. It is how the National Conversation reaches the full breadth of who Australia is, and how it ensures that the mandate produced reflects voices that structured civic processes have historically failed to include.

Methods for engagement

Suitable to support the spectrum of large-scale, low-context as well as enriched local dialogues to provide the foundational insights at scale for the National Conversation.

Table 7: Methods of engagement

Method	Depth	Reach	Commentary
Voice memos or messages via WhatsApp or SMS	Low	Medium	Highly accessible and authentic, particularly for those less comfortable writing or without internet access. Automated structured prompts could support comprehensive analysis.
Short videos under a shared national hashtag	Medium	High	Builds visibility and momentum online, engaging younger demographics and influencers. Less inclusive for those without digital literacy or social media access.
Drawings and letters from children ("Postcards of Our Future")	Medium	Low-Medium	Creative and symbolic, offering intergenerational perspective and emotional resonance. Requires facilitation through schools or community spaces for broader reach.
Music, artwork, poetry, and storytelling	Medium	Low	Deep cultural expression capturing identity, emotion, and values. High richness but requires curation and community partnerships to ensure representativeness.
Handwritten notes collected at community consultations	Medium	Low	Builds local trust and tangible participation in physical spaces. Depth depends on facilitation quality; transcription adds operational load.
Deliberative Polls	High	Medium	Combines representative sampling with structured deliberation, producing informed and considered public judgement rather than surface opinion. Strong legitimacy signal for policy design. Resource-intensive and requires careful recruitment to ensure representativeness and trust.
Micro-engagements in everyday life (polls at checkouts, service points, apps)	Low	High	Extremely scalable and inclusive for mass participation, though low depth and limited narrative richness. Useful for trend-spotting and validation of broader findings.
Interactive local events and immersive workshops	High	Medium	High insight and dialogue quality, ideal for meaningful engagement and co-creation. Resource-intensive, so best to be deployed strategically within a broader engagement plan.

From national principles to cause-area application

A key strength of the SIF is its portability across the breadth of national decision-making. The four standards provide the benchmark that decisions across policy domains should strive for. This means the same governance standards can be applied consistently across housing, energy, health, technology and any other domain the National Conversation engages, without requiring a separate framework for each.

For example, in housing, the framework tests whether generational access should outweigh capital preservation. In climate policy, the framework tests whether ecological thresholds should override short-term economic gain or whether the need for renewable energy means some of the existing regulatory layer needs to be surrendered. In emerging technology, it explores what risks justify precaution and what oversight prevents institutional harm. In health, it asks whether prevention should be weighted differently from crisis response. The principle under examination is consistent across all of these. Only the context changes, and that consistency is what makes national synthesis possible without sacrificing the relevance that local engagement requires.

This portability also means the framework can absorb cause areas that are not yet visible. The challenges shaping Australia's future across the next generation will include some that are not yet fully defined as policy questions.

A framework built around how decisions should be made, rather than what decisions should be made, is resilient to that uncertainty in a way that domain-specific frameworks are not.

Sequencing the process

The SIF follows a deliberate sequence across the life of the National Conversation, balancing scale with depth and legitimacy with design. The sequence is iterative: insights from Level 1 are returned to participants before Level 2 is finalised, and insights from Level 2 are tested before Level 3 institutional design begins. Citizens are not consulted once and forgotten; their contributions are made visible, stress-tested and carried forward.

This sequencing reinforces the legitimacy of the eventual Policy Tool in a way that a single-round consultation cannot. The public can trace the journey from what they said, to what was tested, through to what was built. In this context, the traceability is not a transparency measure added at the end but a design principle built in from the beginning.

Why this matters

Without shared standards, long-term policymaking becomes fragmented and vulnerable to short-term distortion. Different governments apply different criteria to the same decisions without acknowledging the consequences. Communities engage in processes that produce no visible connection to the decisions that follow. Trust erodes not through malice but through accumulated disappointment and misunderstanding of the trade-offs they are asked to bear.

The SIF addresses that problem structurally. It aims to build clarity about what matters across the community, fairness in how the burden of difficult decisions is shared, ambition in how the standards are set, and durability in how those standards are embedded in governance. It enables Australia to move from aspiration to architecture, from good intentions to governance with real weight, where trade-offs are named, consequences are real, and the design can outlast the moment that inspired it.

The SIF's intercultural commitment requires that the framework be genuinely porous to different ways of knowing. Level 1, Civic Imagination, is where this commitment is most practically expressed: the design of community touchpoints actively creates space for forms of expression and reasoning that do not fit within conventional survey or workshop formats. Where they default to those formats, they will need to be revised through the Lab's prototyping process.

This is not only a First Nations design consideration; it applies wherever communities have ways of organising, reasoning and understanding the world that differ from the dominant civic format. The intercultural ambition of the SIF is that the framework itself is changed by the communities that use it, not only that communities are given access to a pre-designed framework. That revision is not a risk. It is the point.

Lab sequencing and rollout

Sequence is design. The order in which things happen, who is engaged first, what is built before what, when integrated spaces are created and on what foundation, is not logistical. It is substantive. The Lab's sequencing reflects both the international evidence and the specific insights of the First Nations Discovery Process.

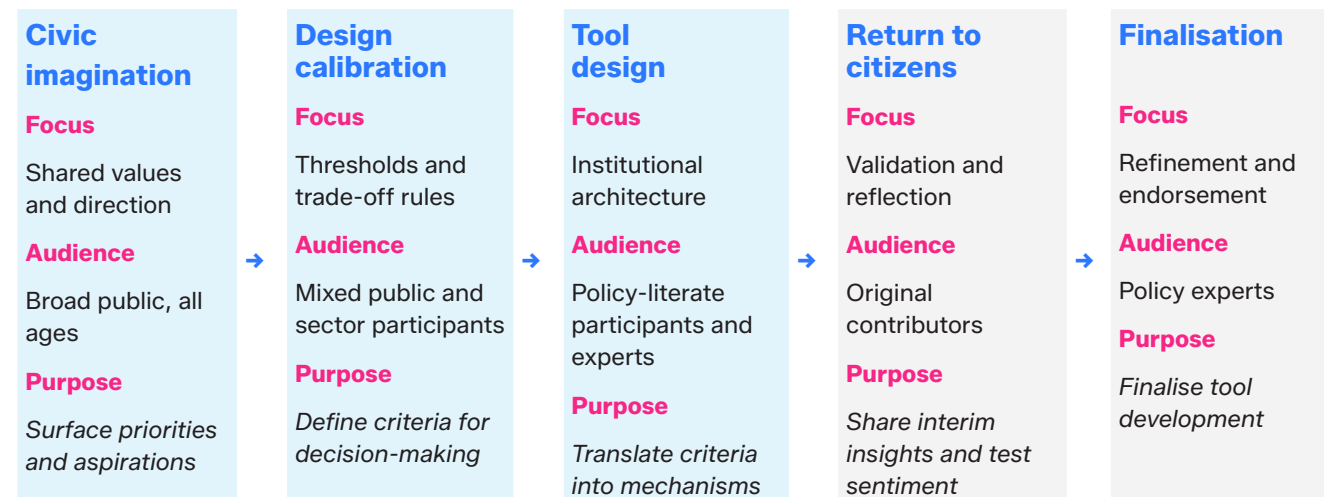
Stage 1: Building the foundations (March–June 2026)

The Lab will formally open at the end of March 2026. However, before moving into substantive design and prototyping work, it will take three months to properly build the relationships and shared understanding that this work depends on. This pre-launch stage is not about building the model; it is about building the conditions under which the model can be built well.

Stage 1 focuses on establishing the trust, inclusion and political readiness the rest of the Lab requires. This includes cultivating balance and representation across political persuasions, geographies, communities and generations; proactive outreach to First Nations and historically marginalised communities; and strategic cross-sector coalition building across civil society, business, research institutions, community leaders, senior public servants and federal parliamentarians.

A Lab introductory Workshop will accompany the Lab's opening, establishing shared purpose and agreement on the ways of working that will guide participants as they shape the model together. Critically, Indigenous-only and non-Indigenous-only spaces will be created in this stage. These dedicated spaces are intended as the Lab's pre-work, not parallel tracks, and are the essential preconditions under which integrated dialogue can function with integrity.

Figure 6: Sequencing a National Conversation



FIRST NATIONS DISCOVERY PROCESS

What must come before the design

One of the most consistent insights emerging from the Discovery Process was the primacy of relationship-building and sequencing. In direct response, the project timeline was extended to include a dedicated three-month pre-design stage. This was not a procedural adjustment. It was a substantive one.

The Discovery Process was explicit on participant onboarding: contributors cannot enter this work without shared expectations, capabilities and commitments. The Lab will include a curated onboarding process establishing: a shared understanding of this conversation as a truth-telling process, not only a policy exercise; agreed terms of engagement including cultural responsiveness and active reflection on positionality and bias; and the mindsets and skills required to engage in complex, long-term and intercultural dialogue. Contributors will be expected to actively agree to these terms before entering the substantive design process.

Stage 2: Collaborative design and prototyping (June 2026–June 2027)

For 12 months, six Development Tracks will run concurrently.

The launch of six Development Tracks marks the move of the Lab from relationship building and purpose finding into structured prototyping and testing of core elements of the National Conversation model. Tracks will run in parallel, supported by monthly Lab-wide sessions and four in-depth workshops per track. This approach is intended to accelerate progress while maintaining coherence across the Lab's second stage.

Four workshops structure the development arc of the Lab:

- Workshop 1 will be about gap mapping and identification of design priorities
- Workshop 2 will focus on assumption testing and early insights review
- Workshop 3 will focus on integration and model refinement
- Workshop 4 will finalise design alignment and handover to Stage 3

Six development tracks

<p>1. Government and policy integration</p> <p>Defines how the National Conversation connects to government and policy processes while maintaining independence and public trust. It establishes clear outputs and pathways so civic input can translate into credible institutional response and long-term impact.</p>	<p>2. Research design, data capture, privacy and ethics</p> <p>Ensures the process is rigorous, transparent and ethically sound. It governs how insights are collected, analysed and protected, balancing qualitative depth with quantitative rigour while safeguarding privacy and data sovereignty.</p>
<p>3. Technology and experience design</p> <p>Designs the digital and offline infrastructure that enables accessible, trustworthy and scalable participation. It focuses on user experience, feedback loops and coordination systems that support inclusion without unnecessary complexity.</p>	<p>4. Community-led design and localisation</p> <p>Ensures engagement is grounded in local relationships and lived experience. It enables communities to adapt the model to their context while contributing coherently to the national process.</p>
<p>5. Accessibility, inclusion and representation</p> <p>Addresses barriers that prevent meaningful participation and influence. It focuses on ensuring diverse voices, lived experiences and knowledge systems shape how insights are interpreted and used.</p>	<p>6. Narrative, framing and social cohesion</p> <p>Shapes how the National Conversation is communicated so it resonates widely and strengthens social cohesion. It grounds the process in shared civic values while allowing space for difference and respectful disagreement.</p>

Stage 3: Finalisation and delivery (June–December 2027)

In Stage 3, the Lab will move into a period of strategic advocacy, positioning the National Conversation model it has developed for multi-partisan consideration and incorporation into 2028 federal election commitments. This stage will include targeted briefings with federal parliamentarians, parties and senior officials; cross-sector coordination to build broad support; and publication and delivery of final Lab outputs to government and key partners. While the preferred outcome is multi-partisan commitment prior to the 2028 federal election to progress a National Conversation model in the subsequent term, the institutional pathway to government uptake of the

Lab's work will be refined and determined through the work of the Government and Policy Integration Development Track.

Importantly, government engagement spans the full 18 months of the Lab, not only its final stage. It involves ongoing testing of how the proposed model and Policy Tool can be integrated within existing parliamentary and executive processes, identification of alignment with current reform agendas, and exploration of implementation options across federal and, where relevant, state and territory contexts. The aim is to position the Lab's outputs for tangible institutional adoption, whether through a formal National Conversation commitment or through multiple aligned reform pathways.

Lab outcomes

What the Lab produces

The Lab produces two categories of complementary output: practical outputs that articulate the shared direction and findings emerging from the process, and the relational infrastructure needed to carry those insights forward.

- 1. Practical outputs** (tangible, implementation-ready): A tested methodology comprising governance architecture, a Shared Inquiry Framework, engagement methods and a proposed Policy Tool, positioned for multi-partisan consideration and commitment prior to the 2028 federal election.
- 2. Relational outputs** (networks, trust and participation infrastructure): A national coalition of community organisations, civic leaders and youth networks, alongside enhanced capability across community hosts and partners, prepared to sustain the National Conversation when it scales.

Both categories matter, and neither is sufficient without the other. A Lab that produces a model but not the networks to sustain it will have underdelivered. A Lab that builds relationships without translating them into a tested, implementation-ready design will have missed the point.

Building evaluation into the process from the outset, not as an accountability measure but as a genuine investment in national learning, is both an ethical obligation and a strategic one. The Lab is not only building a model; it is contributing to Australia's long-term capacity to understand and strengthen its own civic infrastructure. FFT will provide regular public updates to Lab contributors and partners, tracking how the initiative is embedding intercultural practice, cultural responsiveness and First Nations leadership across the life of the project. Without visible feedback loops, participation risks feeling like extraction. With them, the process remains a living influence on the work rather than a one-off consultation.

Conclusion

The reinforcing loop of policrastination, institutional fragmentation and eroding public trust has been building for decades, and each cycle of deferral makes the next harder to break. However, conditions that make a serious response possible are emerging: growing multi-partisan political will, a demographic shift that is changing what is electorally viable, a civil society that is organised and ready, and a public that has not given up. That convergence will not last indefinitely.

The international evidence is unambiguous about what becomes possible when challenge is met with substantial investment in national engagement. Wales, Singapore, Taiwan and several others have each demonstrated that well-designed national civic processes produce durable mandates, strengthen institutional trust and translate public reasoning into government action.

Previous national processes carried genuine intent. However, for a variety of reasons, ranging from resourcing, to partisanship, to collaboration barriers and the absence of an effective translation mechanism from intention to action, these initiatives did not achieve the full ambitions of a National Conversation. The Lab is a direct response to the lessons from these efforts, designed to mitigate these risks at every step of the process.

A National Conversation that is genuinely intercultural produces something qualitatively different from one that is merely representative. Representation brings more voices into an existing process. Interculturalism allows those voices to change what the process is. The Lab is designed to demonstrate what Australia looks like when it draws on the full depth of its diversity, moving from aspiration to a working practice of intercultural collaboration. This approach will also define the difference between a mandate that holds across the full breadth of this country and one that reflects only part of it.

Australia has the foundations, the civic energy and the political conditions to consciously shape our future, rather than drift into it. The Lab is how that begins: not with a grand announcement, but with the committed, rigorous work of building the capacity to decide together. What the 18 months ahead will produce is a tested model, a connected coalition, and a credible path toward the kind of governance this country has not yet realised, but is entirely capable of building.

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