



MAY 2021



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The Health and Wellbeing of Future Generations¹

Should we return to the way life was before COVID-19?

Summary of an article by Professor Fiona Stanley² AC & Dr Kate Lycett³.

This article asserts that children thrive best in a society which values (among other things) equality, diversity, trust, and working towards the collective good. The article also asserts that, in contrast, Australian society before the pandemic prioritised gathering material wealth, and was too accepting of inequality, violence, and environmental destruction. The needs of adults were placed above the needs of children and young people.

Whilst Australia leads in many fields, there is significant 'wealth inequality' in our country, and confidence in government is falling. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds struggle, falling behind in developmental milestones, while displaying poor health outcomes in areas such as obesity, tooth decay, and mental health. Public services such as health care are increasingly being outsourced to 'for-profit' organisations. This model has created vast inequalities in access to medical care.

Additionally, society is becoming more divided by factors such as the inequality between those with stable employment, and those working casual jobs without benefits. The media and lobbyists hold more sway over politicians than evidence-based science. Government avoids action on issues such as childhood obesity and climate change because it would impact their plans for the economy.

During COVID-19

Governments prioritised public health over the economy, acted on evidence provided by scientists, and started valuing medical professionals, teachers and child care workers as essential services. The pandemic 'exposed... the weaknesses in our systems' and 'the dire consequences of our rising inequities'.

After COVID-19: What should we do next?

1. **Urgently address the growing inequalities in wealth** by improving our unfair and unnecessarily complex taxation system and ensuring our welfare systems keep people out of poverty.

¹ The article is one of a number of articles in the book: *What happens next? reconstructing Australia after Covid-19*, edited by Emma Dawson (Emma Dawson is the executive director of Per Capita. and Janet McCalman Janet Susan McCalman, AC, FAHA, FASSA (born 1948) is an Australian social historian, academic, population researcher and author at the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne.

² Fiona Juliet Stanley AC FAA FASSA is an Australian epidemiologist noted for her public health work, her research into child and maternal health as well as birth disorders such as cerebral palsy.

³ Biography: Dr Kate Lycett is a co-funded NHMRC and National Heart Foundation Early Career Researcher. Her research interests span child mental health, sleep, obesity, cardiovascular health, epidemiology, public health, and well-being at both the individual and societal levels.

2. **Transfer our health and welfare systems back to the public system** to improve healthcare access and quality and create new jobs: economist Richard Denniss⁴ has pointed out that ‘capital intensive mining and construction projects... create far fewer jobs per billion dollars spent than spending on health and community services’.
3. **Fund universal free childcare** to reduce inequities in school readiness and ensure all parents who want to work have the opportunity. This could also help reduce the gender wage gap, enhance women’s superannuation and add to tax revenues.
4. **Value all workers and ensure they have fair conditions**, to end the ‘gig economy’ and help reduce inequities – for example, by ensuring all parents have paid carers’ leave to attend to sick children, and holidays to enjoy family time.
5. **Commit to zero emissions by 2050**. The existential threat of climate change is the biggest threat to the survival of our natural world and future generations, and to the health and wellbeing of all, particularly our children and young people.
6. **Ensure our citizens’ voices are heard**.
 - *Implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart*. This will enshrine the First Nations Voice in the Constitution. Such an act could improve the value and quality of First Nations’ services immediately.
 - *Implement citizen engagement strategies* to ensure that citizens’ voices are heard, rather than the voices of vested interests and lobbyists. The ‘Wales We Want’ initiative is a prime example of how successful such strategies can be.
7. **Make decisions based on evidence, and value science**. This will improve outcomes and transparency, thereby helping to improve trust in governments and our institutions.
8. **Measure societal progress via a wellbeing framework** (for example, a wellbeing budget). Many countries are trying various models of engaging their citizens to guide their national budgets based on wellbeing rather than on GDP as a singular measure. These models put human, social, natural and economic capital at the heart of budgeting.

This wish list needs an intergenerational lens to see the benefits – one where we put civil society ahead of profits. Yet if we could deliver on these wishes, there is no doubt that both children and society would thrive. Turning the juggernaut around is a major challenge, but as Rebecca Solnit says, ‘Shared calamity makes many people more urgently alive, less attached to the small things of life and more committed to the big ones, often including civil society and the common good.’

⁴ Richard Denniss is the Chief Economist and former Executive Director of The Australia Institute. He is a prominent Australian economist, author and public policy commentator, and a former Associate Professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia.