



GOVERNMENT & DEMOCRACY FEDERAL

Turbulent times demand fresh ideas

OPINION | Public policy shaped for another era can't solve today's challenges, so we need new frameworks for inclusive governance and security.



HELEN SULLIVAN • JAN 22, 2026 • 6 MIN READ

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The world appears to us more uncertain and unstable. 'Democratic backsliding', populism, and our daily diet of disinformation are undermining the social contract between citizens and the state and so-called 'elites' risk losing the battle of ideas about what the future should look like.

Established public policy prescriptions designed in a different era are insufficient to meet the challenges we face. We need to think differently.

Public policy is the key means by which nation-states demonstrate their effectiveness in three fundamental areas for human flourishing — governance, prosperity, and security. Policy content for each is shaped by ideas about the desired future and the means to get there, and these set the rules for what is possible.

Preferred ideas reflect political choices and change with changed circumstances. However, ideas can become so pervasive that they achieve ‘taken for granted’ status. Unchallenged, these ideas become detached from their context and are adopted as universal mental models for policy practice. ‘Responsive governance’, ‘economism’ and ‘securitisation’ are emblematic ideas that have dominated public policy making for decades, but whose time may have run out.

‘Responsive governance’ seeks greater involvement of non-state actors in public policy-making. Embraced enthusiastically in the 1990s under the labels of participatory governance or user engagement, it has adopted new nomenclature over time, such as co-design or co-governance. It is the most contested and studied idea of the three, as it deals directly with power relations in decision-making. However, it is the least influential over public policy.

‘Economism’, by contrast, is the most consequential of these ideas. The 1980s ‘New Right’s program of reforms brought economism into the heart of public policy making, privileging market fundamentalism, and normalising economic assessments of value as the primary basis for decision making. The prevalence of economism was such that it was hard to conceive of alternatives, and generations of public policy bureaucrats were trained as if there were none. While economism no longer has the power it once did, its legacy remains in the preoccupation with attaching economic value to any and all policy issues.

‘Securitisation’ is the most recent idea to enter the public policy lexicon. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’ repositioned security as a key shaper of public policy, articulating it as the security of nation-states against non-state-based threats, including from amongst their own populations. It demanded an array of actors and activities be securitised beyond the established realm of national security.

Decades later, policy securitisation is now firmly established in bureaucratic discourse with regular references to human security, energy security, resource security, and food

security. Ironically, its success in colonising public policy may in fact be a limiting factor as its usage is performative rather than material.

The power of taken-for-granted mental models is that exclusions are also taken for granted. Economism's focus on efficiency crowded out other values upon which to base public policy, including solidarity or equality. Securitisation's focus on threats constructed whole populations as 'at risk' or 'risky'. Responsive governance assumed that state invitations to engage would be welcome.

One reaction to these exclusions is collective organising to transform public policy in its entirety. Movements focus on the promotion of rights denied to people because of their race, class, sex, sexuality, gender, disability, age, or citizenship status. Such movements have intermittent traction in public policy debates.

As indicated above, dominant mental models do give way to new ideas. The question is: what might a future public policy settlement for governance, prosperity, and security look like?

One plausible scenario is that accelerating geopolitical instability puts governance and prosperity at the service of national security, illustrated via governmental commitments to 'sovereign capability' and action against foreign interference ('Future Made in Australia' is one example). Another is that global corporations take advantage of what the late Susan Sell calls the 'new capitalism' to protect their economic interests, avoid regulation, and promote their own security outside the nation state.

Neither does anything to address the exclusions described above.

Ideas of sustainability, sovereignty, and justice offer an alternative framework for public policy-making. They address the limits of responsive governance, economism and securitisation, such as a decline in social solidarity, a diminution of holistic thinking and a disregard for acting for the long term directly. These ideas engage productively with governance, prosperity, and security, and they are also inclusive of a wider variety of 'voices' previously excluded.

Sustainability is possibly the most obvious and least contentious idea to introduce. Without a healthy planet, human beings will neither thrive nor ultimately survive.

Sustainability places demands on all of us — individuals, corporations, governments — to take responsibility for our actions and be accountable for them. It supports an idea of prosperity that meets the needs (environmental, economic, and social) of the present without sacrificing those of future generations. It also offers the possibility of security for all, including the most vulnerable, as it requires the minimisation of harm and damage in all areas of activity, including war-making.

Sovereignty is an idea that manifests in important if divergent ways: the increasing attention paid by nation states to 'sovereign capability'; the movements to acknowledge First Peoples' right to self-determination and the contributions their knowledges, traditions, and practices make to our human flourishing; and the increasing profile of 'sovereign citizens' — individuals who regard all existing systems as illegitimate and whose existence and grievances are amplified by social media.

The example of data sovereignty illustrates the idea's importance. Data sovereignty is essential for 'sovereign capability' as it protects knowledge essential to a country's interests. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' data sovereignty is identified as an important marker of self-determination as well as protection of indigenous knowledges from exploitation. Finally, data sovereignty can be used to mitigate the disinformation that circulates around sovereign citizen movements.

Justice reflects the failure of previous ideational frameworks to deal fairly with specific communities, leaving them underserved by public institutions and overrepresented in statistics relating to poverty and incarceration. The 'abolition' movement calls for defunding and disestablishing the criminal justice system in response to the over policing of particular communities. It demands a radical reappraisal of how communities are governed, how security is understood, and what determines and defines prosperity.

A different though no less radical interpretation of justice refers to the call for a more emphatic commitment to securing the wellbeing of all communities in a global context of growing inequality and the seclusion of elites. This emphasises strengthening global, national, and local institutions in support of shared positive outcomes such as the Sustainable Development Goals. The *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* is one example.

Evolving conversations about reparative public policy also fit here. Both demand new ways of thinking about governance (inclusive), prosperity (moving away from a 'growth' mindset) and security (prioritising poorer communities' access to key resources).

Situating these ideas at the heart of a new policy framework demands a more holistic approach to public policy-making — acknowledging the interdependence of governance, prosperity, and security, and thinking across binaries such as foreign and domestic policy. However, it also offers an opportunity for policy renewal equal to our turbulent times.

About the author



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