Social Capital in the Capital

Full Report from an IAP2 discussion with Dr Andrew Leigh MP,
held 27 Nov 2013 at Entry 29, Acton, Canberra

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**How connected are we in our communities? And how has this changed over time in Australia? Is Canberra the insular, disconnected place it’s made out to be? Or is there more social capital here than meets the eye? And how can we create more?**

These were the questions addressed by a small group of citizens and Andrew Leigh, academic and local MP, in an informal gathering last November. The discussion focussed on the decline in social capital over time, which Andrew had documented in his 2010 book, Disconnected (UNSW Press). The group worked on ideas for reversing the decline, particularly in Canberra. The event, sponsored by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) and Double Arrow Consulting, particularly focused on how public participation contributes to social capital.

In Disconnected, Andrew considered a number of measures of participation (membership of associations, religious groups, sporting activities, unions, volunteering, political parties and voting) which indicated declining social capital (trust, reciprocity and social interactions within communities) since the 60s. Participants wondered whether these measures were outdated, with participation now taking different and more varied forms, including a variety of cultural activities (e.g. choirs, community fairs, gardens and markets) and online socialising and civic participation. Andrew’s ongoing research suggests that these developments have not outweighed the decline in the other measures. A paradox of the digital age was noted, with increased connectivity broadly combined with negative impacts of computer use on ‘real’ social life and local community participation, reflecting a need to learn to ‘switch off’.

The discussion explored political participation more broadly than straightforward measures of party membership and valid voting. Potential was seen in new forms of civic participation through community engagement and deliberative democracy initiatives, although it seemed that there was a low awareness of these and how they can contribute to political decision-making, particularly at higher political levels. Some spoke of the importance of these developments in the context of increasingly adversarial political (and public) debate and increasingly complex public policy issues.

This led to an interesting discussion of the role of government in relation to social capital and whether it’s largely the responsibility of citizens and communities. Participants pointed to multiple ways in which government decisions affect social capital. In his book, Andrew noted that relatively high levels of social capital in Canberra were associated with its urban structure and low commuting times. There was also discussion of how the decline in social capital may reflect general trends in society, such as increasing emphasis on the individual and on consumerism, or whether trust was something deeper that could be a feature of any society. The group also discussed how class and gender relations affect social capital and capacity.

The discussion ended with a workshop in which participants explored ideas and suggestions for increasing social capital, with a focus on Canberra. The group considered initiatives at multiple levels, including for individuals, neighbourhoods, communities and networks, urban planning and policy. The suggestions are summarised below.

**Individuals** can help build social capital by:

* Introducing yourself to neighbours and inviting new people to social functions
* Volunteering
* Random offers of help
* Trying a new sport and inviting others to play
* Joining and maintaining memberships of groups and associations
* Being more positive about social events (eg work Christmas parties!)
* Developing listening skills and good attention
* Seeking ways to confront racism, sexism etc (in ourselves and each other)
* Studying, organising and/or lobbying for the suggestions below

Ideas for **networks and ongoing initiatives** to build social capital include:

* Services for new Canberrans – information and meet-ups
* Network groups/organisations to share resources/talents, a ‘freecycle’ scheme
* Develop online communities, focussing on building ‘real’ interactions
* Support for a platform for Canberra groups to list and share
* Employers support employees to spend time on community activities/projects
* Office blocks organise walking groups, lunch in the park and coffee clubs
* Unions organise events that are simply social

In **neighbourhoods and communities**, social capital can be built by:

* Street parties, either at Christmas or other times of year
* Events at local shops
* Use of schools and other community spaces (eg YMCA) for community events eg film nights, all-age dances, community gardens
* Other events such as parties, meet-and-greets, door-knocking weeks, ‘bring-a-dish’ suppers, trick-or-treating
* Community conferences/carnivals involving a range of community groups sharing information and celebration
* Support of activities such as Sunday Assembly

**Urban planning** and **public transport** initiatives to support social capital include:

* Community spaces and cul-de-sacs
* Urban infill to reduce sprawl and commuting times
* Stronger social criteria in urban and infrastructure planning
* More development and use of public transport
* Free or low cost bus passes for pensioners, coordinated bus timetables
* Car pooling
* Safe bike routes and showers at work

Suggestions for **policy**:

* Pay for parenting and other forms of care
* Legislate for 45 hour working weeks
* Public discussions/dialogues that bring diverse people together, to talk about the future together
* New forms of participation
* Collaborative approaches driven by the imperative of complex problems eg climate change, ill health, war

# Full Report

This public discussion, organised by the ACT network of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) explored the issue of social capital, particularly focussed on the ACT. It began with a presentation by Andrew Leigh summarising research on the decline of social capital from his book, Disconnected (UNSW Press, 2010). This was followed by discussion and questions. Attendees then participated in a workshop, facilitated by Wendy Russell, to consider how social capital can be built in the Canberra region.

## Attendees

Andrew Leigh

\*Wendy Russell

\*Nicki Mazur

\*Janet Salisbury

Janet’s cousin, Jane

\*Kim Barton

\*Cat Murray

Jacky Schirmer

Edwina Loxton

Dennis Heath

Kim Grey

Jane Maze

Louise Keightley

\*Craig Thomler

\* Volunteers who assisted in organising the event

## Andrew Leigh presentation and discussion

Andrew, drawing on his 2010 book, Disconnected, prefaced his discussion by pointing out that social capital is not, in normative terms, a good thing in and of itself and gave the example of criminal gangs who have high levels of social capital associated with their criminal activities. He then talked about the evidence indicating a decline in social capital in Australia over the last century, particularly since the 60s. This evidence includes downward trends in membership and participation in:

* associations
* religious groups
* sporting activities
* unions
* political groups and processes
* volunteering

Andrew talked about the drivers of these changes, remarking that most of them represent positive developments, that most people, himself included, would not want to see reversed. These drivers include:

* Impersonal technologies – TV, computers
* Ethnic diversity (people tend to hunker down in the face of difference)
* Gender equality (women at work have less time for community activities)
* Work hours

In terms of what to do about the decline, Andrew pointed to evidence that Canberra tops the list of Australian capital cities in terms of social capital. His research suggests that this is not just because of higher incomes and education levels, but is also related to Canberra’s civic structure and low commuting times. Commuting not only takes time away from social activities, it also makes people more unfriendly towards one another.

**Discussion**

Several people asked whether traditional measures of social capital were failing to capture new trends, activities and avenues. Movements such as farmers’ markets, choirs, community gardens and new institutions like Sunday Assembly were suggested as reflecting non-traditional social capital. Andrew agreed that these were not necessarily captured in his research but didn’t feel that they accounted for a significant proportion of the people who had left traditional groups and activities.

Andrew had described political involvement in terms of membership of political parties and valid voting. It was pointed out that many people now participate in political debates and campaigns through online discussions and groups. The example given was the recent campaign to support the National Broadband Network. This seems to point to a trade-off between connection and engagement facilitated by the internet, and the disconnection that comes from overuse of technologies. Andrew suggested that it was important to harness IT, and cited the example of ‘Meet-up’, which facilitates ‘real’ social connections, but that we need to know when to turn these technologies off. He mentioned a recent psychology study that found that checking email and the use of pokies were similar in inducing addictive behaviour, largely because of ‘variable interval rewards’ associated with them.

The prospects for participatory or direct democracy were also raised, where citizens have a more direct involvement in political decision making. Models for public participation and deliberative democracy have been developed and promoted by academics, practitioners and organisations like IAP2. Andrew felt that there were some interesting and useful models but very little uptake currently, making it difficult to see what contribution tools of participatory engagement might make, particularly at higher levels of government. The issue of the complexity of political and societal problems, and the challenges that this creates for political decision-making and representation were also discussed.

Andrew was asked about his interest in Canberra urban planning and whether he integrated his concerns about social capital with his political work. Andrew responded that he was influenced by his interest in social capital, including in his personal choices and activities. However, he suggested that many of the changes needed were the responsibility of individuals and community, not the role of government. Others pointed out government interventions or funding that had made a critical impact on raising social capital, through institutions such as Landcare. Participants didn’t seem to agree with Andrew about the role of government, and felt that this was an important issue for debate.

Someone commented that a culture of consumerism and individualism had contributed to the problem, and initiatives such as WWF’s Common Cause could help to shift the culture back to a more convivial one. Andrew commented that criticism of modern capitalism often neglected the role of social dimensions such as trust, as noted in Adam Smith’s work on moral sentiments. His example was the importance of trust between Gold Traders in New York.

Others felt that increasingly adversarial political debate - politics becoming ‘scratchier’ (Laura Tingle) - had contributed to growing alienation. There was also some discussion about gender and the fact that even though better represented in the workforce, women still tended to participate on men’s terms and that if women had more genuine power, they might bring a more caring, convivial culture to politics and society.

There was also some discussion of class and structural barriers. The issue of long working hours, and to what extent they were driven by employee’s choices vs employer expectations was considered. Andrew pointed to the issue of leisure inequality (leisure being lowest among higher socioeconomic groups) as opposed to money inequality. The question of recognising and rewarding ‘care’ was also raised. Andrew pointed to considerable improvements over recent years, in pay for childcare workers, and parental and carer allowances, for example, but it was recognised that this remained an issue.

## Workshop on social capital in the capital

The presentation and discussion were followed by a workshop, in which participants worked together to come up with and develop ideas for building social capital in the Canberra region. The first session was a card-storming session on ideas for building social capital. This was followed by an Open Space session to further discuss these ideas, giving attention to how they would work, how they’d be sustained, what needs to be done and by whom. A summary of the workshop is below.

**Individuals** can help build social capital by:

* Introducing yourself to neighbours and inviting new people to social functions
* Volunteering
* Random offers of help
* Trying a new sport and inviting others to play
* Making and maintaining memberships of groups and associations
* Being more positive about social events (eg work Christmas parties)
* Developing listening skills and good attention
* Seeking ways to confront racism, sexism etc (in ourselves and each other)
* Studying, organising and/or lobbying for the suggestions below

In **neighbourhoods and communities**, social capital can be built by:

* Street parties, either at Christmas or other times of year
* Events at local shops
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* Community conferences/carnivals involving a range of community groups sharing information and celebration
* Support of activities such as Sunday Assembly

Neighbourhood and community social capital is often built on commonality, which creates a challenge for developing ‘bridging’ capital – connection across difference. Social connection seems to be best stimulated by ‘doing something’, ie joining in a common effort or purpose, or a common activity such as making music, with social connection as a ‘side effect’. This may be related to the development of interdependence, which is undervalued but a key ingredient of social capital. In these contexts, the whole is greater than the parts, allowing people to feel a part of something which they give to but which gives back. This can be quite transformative. Neighbourhood/community social capital is best built through ‘organic’ processes, and can be inhibited by formal schemes and red tape.

A general lack of time and energy in modern society has contributed to the erosion of social capital. This means that new initiatives need to provide benefits to all participants in order to be sustained. Initiatives are most likely to be successful if they save participants time or money or giving them new energy or support.

Ideas for **networks and ongoing initiatives** include:

* Services for new Canberrans – information and meet-ups
* Network groups/organisations to share resources/talents, a ‘freecycle’ scheme
* Develop online communities, focussing on building ‘real’ interactions
* Support for a platform for Canberra groups to list and share
* Employers support employees to spend time on community activities/projects
* Office blocks organise walking groups, lunch in the park and coffee clubs
* Unions organise events that are simply social

A discussion of how to best use social media to build ‘real’ connections emphasised the need to consider what was working well, why and how to build on success. Canberra Meet-up and Barcamp were amongst initiatives that worked well, but this was based on informal assessment and there had been little evaluation, which would be valuable to build on their success. Making people aware of existing opportunities was also considered an important way to build, and could be done using existing popular sites such as RiotACT. Another suggestion was to provide support to people who want to use the internet to organise social activities.

The idea of a platform for Canberra groups was to allow them to promote and share their work. The platform could be sponsored by the ACT gov’t or a large local company such as ACTew AGL. It was pointed out that this already exists in Canberra Connect, highlighting once again the need to build on existing activities to make them more effective, connect them up and extend their reach, rather than reinventing the wheel.

In relation to people new to Canberra, it was suggested that a “New to Canberra” care pack could be developed, that could be easily googled and downloaded, and could provide people with useful advice about settling in a new place (eg administrative matters) as well as providing social connections.

**Urban planning** and **public transport** initiatives to support social capital include:

* Community spaces and more cul-de-sacs
* Urban infill to reduce sprawl and commuting times
* Stronger social criteria in urban and infrastructure planning
* More development and use of public transport
* Free or low cost bus passes for pensioners, coordinated bus timetables
* Car pooling
* Safe bike routes and showers at work

Cul-de-sacs are an example of urban planning that benefits social connections, but Canberra is moving away from them. Streets with low traffic levels can also have this effect. There is a need for criteria for rating streets and urban areas in terms of their social ‘friendliness’, and for these criteria to be formalised in laws and regulations to create shifts towards greater social capital.

There are many transport initiatives that can build social capital, most focussed around reducing individual car use. Better bus services and facilities such as bike racks, accessible toilets and subsidised tickets are important, particularly for older people and services such as wifi and community singing can encourage people to use buses. Car pooling and car sharing schemes build capital as well as reducing other impacts of car use, and can be facilitated by eg dedicated car sharing lanes, sharing tools such as websites. Cycling can be encouraged by provision of good infrastructure (cycle lanes and routes) and by information campaigns. Walk to work/school days and initiatives like ‘walking buses’ also help shift the culture, particularly amongst kids.

Suggestions for **policy**:

* Pay for parenting and other forms of care
* Legislate for 45 hour working weeks
* Public discussions/dialogues that bring diverse people together, to talk about the future together
* New forms of participation
* Collaborative approaches driven by the imperative of complex problems eg climate change, ill health, war

The suggestions about public discussions/dialogues and collaborative approaches raised the question of what these might look like. There has been considerable work on new approaches to community engagement by academics and practitioners in other parts of the world particularly Europe and the US. It would be worth drawing on these examples and experimenting with innovative approaches here. These approaches, as well as building social capital and people’s capacity to collaborate around important issues, also provide valuable input to decision making, particularly about complex problems and challenges that have social dimensions. Exploration needs to research and evaluate the effective of new methods and to consider what gets in the way of their development.

The discussion about policy highlighted the need to be clear about the normative basis of wanting more social capital. There is a need to discuss what kind of social capital is being called for and on what basis (what values, purposes etc). This clarity should inform policy aimed at increasing social capital.

# Appendix – notes from the workshop

## Post-it notes - How can we build social capital in the Canberra region?

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| INDIVIDUALS |  |  |  |
| Try something new for several weeks – like archery | Learn to play soccer and ask people to play – esp. children and parents | Leave a funny note on a stranger’s car | Offer to help someone at the supermarket |
| Go to the Xmas party at work that you really don’t want to go to – and have fun | Keep up membership/contributions to professional associations | Introduce yourself to your next-door neighbour – and the one across the street | Volunteer to be a ‘companion’ in your area |
| Do more volunteer work when I eventually start to do less paid work | Regularly invite ‘new’ people to participate in some social function I know of/am attending/ being part of (widening social networks) | Join a group and support it over at least two years |  |
| NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTIVITIES |  |  |
| Arrange a Xmas street party | Have an annual street party – meet your neighbours | Hold more street parties | Have/host a neighbourgood/street party before next winter |
| Organise your own street party, but not at Christmas or New Year | Weeks that encourage ppl to knock on their neighbours’ door | Improve relations with other ethnic groups by having a ‘bring a dish’ supper | Local neighbourhood park, parties, meet & greet |
| Neighbourhood – social movements that encourage real interaction | Have more activities centred on local shops | Have days when suburbs are encouraged to have gatherings at the shops (as for Centenary parties) | Rotating party at the shops – community info provided, music, activities |
| COMMUNITY EVENTS |  |  |  |
| Commit to Sunday Assembly group and to ensuring it stays smart, unheirarchical and a place of integrity | Regular information days – like a fete, but with community organisations | Community Group Conference/networking event; ALL Canberra groups come together to discuss – build social capital | Canberra Carnival event- all community groups involved |
| Fully use the local school for local events in the evenings | Encourage use of schools for non-school events for community members e.g. community gardens, local film nights, all-age dances | Meet for lunch Thursday to end all oppression | Make better use of community facilities (eg YMCA halls) |
| WORK |  |  |  |
| Employers – sign up to having workers spend x hours on community activities | Office blocks- walking groups- coffee mingling- lunch in the park | Encourage local businesses to support local needs by giving workers time to help on projects | Arrange more events within my union that are simply about building social connection |
|  |  |  |  |
| NETWORKS AND ONGOING INITIATIVES |  |  |
| Get to know Canberra – for newcomers/transient residents | New Canberra groups welcome to Canberra | Develop a platform for matching Canberrans by interest | Support different organisations to share resources/talents |
| Create specific funding for social events for non-social focussed groups e.g. money to local SES for Christmas party | Online community network- build on what’s been done- make more interactive‘tier [??] Canberra | Start connecting others with groups that may interest them aiming to connect 10 people per month | Start a freecycle scheme where people give away no longer needed items to others who will collect them |
| Get community groups and business groups more connected | Organise a letter pick [??] in your locality – increases local pride | Start a group and commit to running it for five years, organising an event every month | Work to better link online to achieving meaningful outcomes in terms of social support, face to face interaction |
| Build on things that already work to support them instead of too many new initiatives – help existing stuff reach people it isn’t reaching | Build up IAP2 in Canberra |  |  |
| URBAN PLANNING |  |  |  |
| Community spaces where groups can meet – where are they? | Allow more urban infill | Build more cul-de-sacs | Urban and infrastructure planning – push for and adopt stronger social criteria |
| PUBLIC TRANSPORT |  |  |  |
| Car pooling | Start a doctor’s run whereby car drivers take those without cars to medical appointments (for a small fee to cover petrol) | Get more people to use public transport rather than cars. | More public transport |
| Give pensioners free or low cost bus passes | Create safe cycle routesand showers at work | Co-ordinate bus timetables |  |
| POLICY |  |  |  |
| Organise for the work of parenting to be paid for | Lobby for laws limiting the working week to 45 hours | Provide opportunities for public discussions that include diverse range of people | Advocate with ACT gov’t /ACTew AGL/similar large org’n based here to create a platform where Canberra groups can list and promote themselves |
| Make more opportunities to talk about the future together | Discuss, declare the normative basis of ‘more’ social capital (what kind of social capital, for what values, purposes etc) |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| CULTURE SHIFTS |  |  |  |
| Teach listening skills and start groups of people to share the resource of good attention with each other | Learn, experiment, improve continually ways for us to confront our own and each others’ racism, sexism etc | Collaborative approaches driven by complex problems – experiment with these | What sort of SC do we want to build?Political engagement – need to address the disenfranchisement people feel. Encourage the new forms of participation to work better (e.g. direct democracy) |

## Butchers paper notesDescribe your idea. How will it work? How will it be sustained? What needs to be done? By whom?

**Neighbourhood**

* Sustainable house network
* Bridging capital?
* Intergenerational connections
* Purpose, Social ‘side effect’
* Social works best when you’re ‘doing’ something (good)
* Commonality (but bridging?)
* Interdependence
* Group with purpose, benefit each other
* Neighbourhood ‘helping’
* ‘building’ groups
* ‘working together’ eg music
* whole greater than parts
* transforming
* red tape a problem for ‘organic’ events

**Urban planning**

* Parker Palmer Healing the Heart of Democracy
* Promote cul-de-sacs – very beneficial to connection between neighbours – but Canberra is moving away from them in planning
* Streets with low traffic levels can be like this too
* Organise with others to lobby for this
* Official rating of houses/streets by their social friendliness
* Sustain by making laws and regs about ensuring this is taken into account

**Public Transport**

* Adelaide – O Bahn – guided bus
* Car pools
* Car sharing (lanes)
* Lots of accessible toilets – helps older people get about
* Walk to work/school days
* Decrease use of cars – improve shared transport (meet more people)
* Promote cycling – health and environmental benefits
* Improve evening services
* Taxis
* Plan good cycle routes
* Wifi on buses
* Make bus travel cheaper/free for over 65s
* Community singing on the bus
* All buses need bike racks
* Logistics for bike routes
* Pavements to promote walking and ‘walking bus’

**Policy**

Advocate with ACT gov’t /ACTew AGL/similar large org’n based here to create a platform where Canberra groups can list and promote themselves

* Already exists i.e. Canberra Connect

Provide opportunities for public discussions that include diverse range of people

* What might this look like?

Collaborative approaches driven by complex problems – experiment with these

* Needs/requires initiatives that build understanding of what collaboration is and how you facilitate/enable it and what gets in the way

Discuss, declare the normative basis of ‘more’ social capital (what kind of social capital, for what values, purposes etc)

* Needed to inform any ‘policy’ aimed and increasing social capital

**Social media –> real connections**

* Things working well: Canberra meet-up (difficulty of cost and people don’t show up), Bar Camp
* Need to better know what is working well -> currently informal, little evaluation
* Raise awareness of existing opportunities – many people unaware of them
* More support for people who want to organise social activities via social media e.g. online
* Use popular websites e.g. RiotACT to point people to other initiatives
* “New to Canberra” care pack – that can be googled and downloaded and targeted to peple who are doing the things new peope do (eg getting a new medicare card…)