



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*

Wendy Russell
Double Arrow Consulting

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 Participants wondered whether these measures were outdated, with participation now taking different and more varied forms, including a variety of cultural activities (e.g. choirs, community fairs, gardens and markets)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

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

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

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