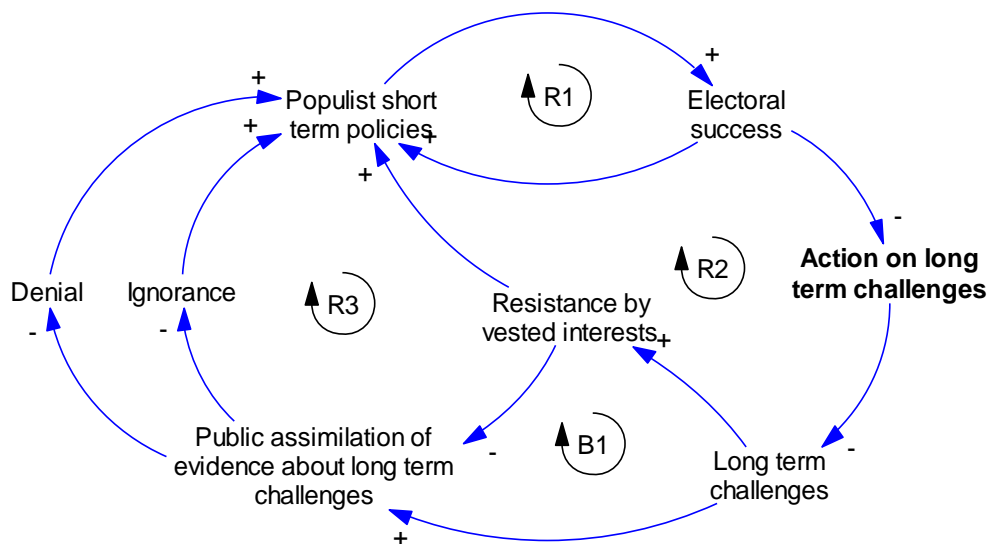


Breaking the cycle of short term politics

The big loser in the recent election is not the ALP, it is our grandchildren. Electoral success based on populist short term policies (tax breaks and coal jobs) act as a brake on action to address the long term challenges the country faces (climate, indigenous disadvantage). This success is not a function (purely) of Bill Shorten's unpopularity, it arises because of the ignorance and / or denial of a (small) majority of voters about the nature and importance of those long term challenges and the urgency required to deal with them. The dynamics of the situation can be described as follows¹.



R1 – when on a good thing

If populist short term policies win elections, why not adopt them? We are currently seeing the ALP debate whether to move down this pathway. Result – tendency to adopt more short term policies.

R2 – good investments

Addressing long term challenges leads to resistance from vested interests (e.g. oil and coal industry) who influence politics and tend to drive parties away from adopting the necessary policies. Result – tendency to adopt more short term policies.

R3 – confuse the public

Resistance from vested interests also impedes the public's collective understanding of the need to address those challenges by promoting alternative narratives and sowing confusion and doubt (Rudd's mining tax fiasco). Result – tendency to adopt more short term policies.

B1 – a better informed public

The only thing that can balance these reinforcing trends is for the population to assimilate the evidence and listen to the available expert advice about our long term challenges, which in turn will reduce ignorance and denial and reduce the tendency for populist short term policies to be electorally successful.

In a world where the Game of Thrones finale gains far more attention than the latest news about melting glaciers, the level of denial and ignorance about our challenges is perhaps not surprising. We are surrounded by entertaining diversions that reduce the amount of attention given to the real issues

¹ This is known as a causal loop diagram. The arrows identify the positive or negative impact of one variable on another over time. The loops identify either reinforcing (R) or balancing (B) feedback.

affecting our lives and those of our children and grandchildren. So, what can we do to deliver a better informed public?

Political leadership is obviously important, but in the current situation that is not being rewarded. The media is also obviously important but is divided into packs that either support or downplay (or even sneer at) the need for action on issues like climate change. Because of confirmation bias (i.e. we tend to favour information that confirms our existing beliefs), the media alone is unlikely to be able to break the cycle. Educating our young people more holistically about how the world works will also obviously help, but a) that is not happening and b) would take a generation to take effect. Here's an idea I think could work more quickly.

Knowledge about our key challenges and the available policy options required to address them is widespread in our country. We have globally acknowledged expertise in the social and physical sciences, engineering and agriculture. However, politicians can safely ignore this expertise while the public is either uninformed or misinformed. Imagine a statutory body independent from government that has a mandate to advise the parliament and the people about the social, economic and environmental issues confronting the nation and their impact on our collective wellbeing, now and in the future. Let's call it a Sustainability Commission. The work of the Commission would be based on sustainability principles, i.e. recognition that our collective, enduring wellbeing requires:

- maintaining the integrity of the ecological systems that underpin all life on earth; and
- continuous improvement of social quality, i.e. equality, justice and social cohesion.

The Commission would collect and assimilate evidence about the issues from the best minds in the land whether in academia, business, non-government organisations, thinktanks or the community. It would not propose specific policies (that is the role of government), rather it would identify broad policy options based on the evidence. The output would be a set of internally consistent policy green papers on key social, economic and environmental issues, updated from time to time. By internally consistent I mean each policy option must address all its implications (e.g. acknowledgement that economic policies have environmental effects and vice versa). The Commission would engage other independent government agencies such as the Productivity Commission and Infrastructure Australia, and hold public meetings to air their deliberations.

The independence of such a body from government or other vested interests is of paramount importance to its effectiveness. Many models are possible but I favour one that is based on a citizen's jury approach, e.g. individuals selected through stratified random sampling, according to a number of criteria, including location, gender, age, socio-economic background, ethnicity etc. Members would have (say) 3 year terms with a third replaced each year to ensure continuity. The members would elect the chairperson, and be supported by a secretariat with the required expertise to administer the Commission and its operations.

The basic objective here is to use the best available evidence to inform core policy options, mediated not by politicians or vested interests but by well advised citizens. If successful, this would make it much harder for political parties to get away with avoiding or denying the evidence for short term electoral advantage. Or at least mitigate that tendency.

We have to live with the political institutions we have but if we can better deploy the available expertise to direct the policy debate we have a chance to improve outcomes in the public interest.

Bill Grace

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