

## A Post Howard-Costello\* Scenario: Australia 2026

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*Drawing inspiration from the recent Australian Association for Environmental Education conference, this essay paints a different possible scenario for the future of Australia.*

It has been almost twelve years since the Howard-Costello run was dramatically defeated. Australians, while enjoying economic rise, tired of the social and environmental divide that followed. The Liberal party had been great at economic growth within the industrial paradigm but the digital era demanded far more flexibility and creativity than a 1950s childhood could give leaders.

Since the new leadership – a coalition of new labour, Green and recently created political parties – there have been dramatic changes.

Some have been visible changes, one can see while walking around in cities, others have been systemic changes, but the major shift has been one of worldview – from the politics of fear and exclusion to the ethics of inclusion and a version of sustainability. As well, the story Australians told about themselves had changed – it was not about "children overboard" or "interest rate hikes" but about the confident but ethical Aussie, certainly punching above one's weight but not boasting about it. On the contrary, more and more Aussies took a personal pride in quietly, working with other cultures to meet the global challenges.

Of course, the obvious happened. Australia signed Kyoto, the Prime Minister apologized to indigenous communities, a republic was created. And: the first Australian president was aboriginal, providing (as with Nelson Mandela in South Africa), moral leadership and direction.

The rise of cultural creatives - a mere five per cent of the population a generation ago but now almost 30 per cent has been the driver of change. Their values of ecology, spirituality, gender partnership, concern for future generations and globalism (freedom of movement of culture, ideas, labour and capital but protection of local communities) have had dramatic impacts throughout the world. They were central in the dramatic rise of a culture of engaged caring.<sup>1</sup>

But there were many other changes. The first time home buyers grant was increased. However, part the deal was a stipulation that the house purchased with the grant used green technologies –

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\* I am thankful for comments and additions by Sue Lennox <slennox@ozgreen.org.au> of Oz Green Australia and many others.

rain water tanks, solar energy, to begin with.<sup>2</sup> This was not so difficult as state level building associations throughout Australia had already agreed to lift their standards ensuring that all houses were designed with sustainable, cradle-to-cradle principles.<sup>3</sup>

Universities received dramatic improvements in their budgets. However, they were not exempt from structural change – they too had to dismantle the worst of the industrial era – i.e. steep hierarchy, with the professor above, the lecturer below and other staff and students way below. Universities were regeared to meet the challenges of aging, sustainability, and the dramatic revolution in nano-, genetic- and digital technologies.

Internationally, the image of the arrogant Aussie, the deputy Sheriff had disappeared. Australia was now regarded as a unique mix of British, European, indigenous and Asian cultures. Multiculturalism has become stronger but it too has been challenged. Culture is not used as an excuse for gender or nature discrimination. Australian's many cultural traditions are fine with this as they have been given their dignity – with strength negotiation is possible. Muslim communities have continued to play a vital role, as with all migrant communities, but as Australian has become more gentle, so have they – the synergetic sufi dimension taking its rightful place among the many other strands of Islam.

But while grand debates of culture continue to take place throughout the world, the small things are what really matter. For example, day care centres are fully funded – indeed, salaries of day care workers have jumped. Schools too have changed – they are fully digital, far more flexible toward the unique talents of individual learners – the one-size-fits-all model has been thrown out. Children co-manage schools, design curricula with adults. Peer to peer mediation is used to resolve conflicts. Education truly is for sustainability. Research from brain science – the many ways we learn – and from meditation (enhancing our capacity to learn and think) has been integrated into schools.

Cities too have changed – from being a nation of faceless suburbs, the healthy cities movement has ensured that community-work hubs, walk and bike ways have become the norm in Australia. There are real travel choices – cars, light rail, bus, bikes. Buses as well are far less mass based – they smell better, allow for individuality, arrive and leave on time and are linked to other transport modes, that is, they are integrated, tailored, efficient and seamless transport.

Demand for local food production has seen the return of the backyard veggie patch and urban community gardens. Around the gardens people have rebuilt their local neighbourhood, with a resultant dramatic decline in urban crime.

Better travel choices have dramatically helped reduce the obesity crisis, as has a change in diet. The rise of the vegetarian movement, with consequent savings on water, savings on energy, savings on health and longer life, has also played an important part in reshaping Australian values and behaviour. As with tobacco consumption, meat consumption continues to decline. Organic food production continues to soar in Australia.

The health sector has been reconfigured to be multi-door – doctors work with other allied health professionals, not just to treat patients but also to advise them and to empower them. "Take charge of your health, or she won't be right" is the catch cry.

With Australians living longer, active aging and grey power have been important movements, ensuring that the latter years of life are happy and productive ones.

Australia did not become the nuclear super power as Howard had hoped. Instead massive funding for green energy has made Australia a hotbed of creativity – every Asian city is learning from Australia's systemic changes and its green technologies. As with the Kennedy's image of a "man on the moon", the new leadership vision of clean, green, transcultural communities has sparked a wave of innovative technologies. Businesses are doing well, especially those that are based on triple bottom line performance measures. Along with businesses, cooperatives have boomed as legal changes have allowed them to grow and become a dominant feature of the organizational landscape.<sup>4</sup>

The Howard-Costello years, while somewhat of a dark era socially, are seen as an example of what can happen when leadership dishonestly pretends to have no ideology; when it leads from fear instead of possibility; and when it focuses on the short term instead of the long term. Of course, many remember that era with fondness – there was less ambiguity, less debate – but generally, while Howard was seen as a great manager and an astute politician, it was increasingly recognised that he was not a great leader who enabled citizens to be better than themselves.

There are endless problems today as well:

- Sea level rise is still likely to change the coastal areas,
- Challenges of peacekeeping still challenge governments throughout the world,
- There are new health crisis as individuals adapt to a post-industrial world and
- New infectious diseases are rampant because of global warming ...

Nonetheless, humility and dignity have ensured that innovation and creativity are here to stay.

Or perhaps not!

What if it is now 2026 and Prime Minister Howard remains on top? What if he has managed to coopt new ideas while not watering down his core conservative ideology? His exercise regime, anti-aging genetic breakthroughs and new brain drugs could have helped him keep up abreast of all these issues. Costello may be still waiting for him to resign, with the rest of us wondering how things could have been so, so different.

Which future do you wish for?

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## Notes

1. <<http://www.wellbeingmanifesto.net/>> was instrumental in this change.
2. I am thankful for Greg Hunt of Waterkeepers Australia for this idea. See: <[www.waterkeepers.org.au](http://www.waterkeepers.org.au)>.
3. William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. New York, North Point Press, 2002. Cradle to cradle, a concept developed by the architect McDonough includes but goes beyond recycling to include design that is nature inspired intelligent design and creates a restorative footprint. See: <<http://www.mcdonough.com/>>.
4. Colin Russo adds these words: The other Costello, Tim has announced today that the forecast temperature rise of .5 to 2 degrees is becoming a reality and will create more refugees than Australians are able to comprehend and accept at this time. The rise in Malaria and other diseases is the real threat. As Australia is the world's highest producer of waste per person (we each produce 8 times more than for each Chinese person) Australians are morally in debt to the situation. Australia would have to embrace more than one million new refugees from its regional neighbourhood if the trend continues. On another angle, new thermal energy sources were identified and geo-sequestration pollution measures helped to quell the nation's pollution problems. Innovative water solutions include Tasmania's new billion dollar a year water shipping industry. Water which previously flowed into the ocean is now being sold by the shipping container load to Victorians. "Colin Russo" <[communityconsultant@hotmail.com](mailto:communityconsultant@hotmail.com)>.