




reMAKER MEMO #4, Feb 2021

An Australia reMADE primer to leadership in the season ahead



Introduction: The Age of Uncertainty

Last year, we wrote reMAKER memos around clearly defined “moments” – the bushfires, the onset of coronavirus, the federal budget. But we start this year in Australia stuck in a feeling of uncertainty: immensely grateful to be living life relatively normally compared to so much of the rest of the world, quietly [hopeful about this year and the vaccine roll-out](#), and juggling the human desire to get back to normal with the deeper need to build a new and better normal than before.

2020 was a year that revealed both the cracks and strengths in our individual lives, workplaces, communities and countries as we reinvented business as usual. What happens next? Our federal government has its agenda going forward: vaccines, budget, election. That’s their ambition in a nutshell. What’s ours?



We offer this memo as a bird’s eye view of the landscape ahead, with these recommendations:

1. **Celebrate success: own your strengths to own your story.**
2. **Embrace the helm where you can, the resistance where you must.**
3. **Aim higher than ‘normal’.**

We know from behavioural science and other fields that people are more open to change and new ideas while new patterns are being set; it’s on us to make the case for them and how they’ll benefit society as a whole.

In a recent conversation, historian and professor Frank Bongiorno reflected that, “big change in Australia tends to occur when people converge from a range of political positions and redefine what the centre looks like”. We’re well-poised to do this. [Polling last October found](#) nearly 80% of Australians agreed with the statement: “*The pandemic has exposed flaws in the economy and there is an opportunity to explore new ways to run the economy*”.

reMAKERS, if you’re feeling the pressure to run at a million miles per hour to seize this window or simply make up for lost time, you’re not alone. But if we don’t just want to go back to normal, then we probably can’t just do our normal work at high speed.

Yes, we’re eager to move on from 2020, but we don’t just want to go back to 2019. The invitation at hand is far more exciting: to raise our collective ambition, jettison that which was not serving us before, and make both our individual and collective goals not just *change*, *recovery* or *adaptation* but *really good lives*. Let the newfound wisdom borne of experience embolden us, that we can indeed do big and hard things. **So let’s do what needs to be done, and do it well.**



As we find ourselves on the cusp of this bold (and sometimes terrifying) new world, we're grappling with how to connect big issues together to more effectively bake justice into the next system. We don't want to settle for just greening up capitalism, trading in critique and despair or arguing amongst ourselves from the sidelines.

Yes, the world feels very uncertain. But on so many things, the tide is with us, we just have to direct it.

Australia could choose to see itself as a minnow of little influence in a much bigger ocean. But we made our own decisions about covid and now we're leading the world. We're starting to push back on the profits and power of Big Tech, and other countries may soon follow suit. And PS, we've done it before: Big Tobacco and plain packaging, gun control and buy-backs, universal healthcare and compulsory voting. [We have a history of governing for the public good](#): being a bit unconventional in rolling out big things that challenge the status quo, empower and care for our people and [set an example](#) for others to join.

In this period of uncertainty there is still much to be certain about: we can do big and hard things. We can avert the worst impacts of damage to our climate. We can put people before markets. We can end poverty and build equity. We can come together and look out for one another. So now is not the time to wait and see what the new post-pandemic world looks like. Business has its own agenda; government its political ambitions. We have our role to play: to make the case for big ideas and core values, to bring people together and help shape this new world, rather than just fighting the old one.

We offer this memo as a bird's eye view of the landscape ahead, with these recommendations:

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1. Celebrate success: own your strengths to own your story.

Take-away: We can indeed change systems, not just treat symptoms. But to bring others with us, we need to stop only focusing on what we have not won yet and start owning our successes as further evidence for 'yes, we can'.

Australia is well-placed to build on our strengths going forward. We've fared far better than most countries out of COVID-19. [Voters' trust in government rebounded](#) last year as politicians showed they still knew how to [listen to the experts, work together and put people first](#). We've responded favourably to the elevation of politics above bloodsport and self-interest. There's been widespread appreciation for the social solidarity, social capital and public infrastructure which has seen us through not only covid but the bushfires and other challenges. **We can write the next chapter of our story, and inspire the world while we do it, but we have to get bolder about highlighting our strengths and successes, not just our failings.**



The activist's natural inclination is to focus on injustice, on the gaps between our values and our reality, in order to double down on the work still to be done. Ditto the progressive side of politics. That's important and essential work, but must be coupled with celebration, belonging, validation and aspiration... Otherwise we cede these equally essential things to those who would clench them selfishly or weaponise them against others. It's also self-defeating if we under-communicate all that is good, improving and beautiful (essentially telling our audience they should replace any sense of gratitude with guilt/outrage), while calling only and endlessly for 'change'. As messaging expert Anat Shenker-Osorio memorably says, we tend to open with 'boy have I got a problem for you!' – an approach unlikely to resonate with a weary public this year.

There is a great deal in Australia to celebrate, acknowledge and be grateful for right now. Don't let this become the territory of only one side of politics, especially with an election on the horizon. Not to pick on any particular political party, but recently [Labor decided to take on the Prime Minister's framing of 'how good's Australia', in order to rebut him with statistics.](#) (What's that message? 'Australia is actually awful! Vote for us and we'll make it less awful?')

Yes, we have a long way to go to address the long tail of covid; as well as pre-existing conditions of inequality, damage to our climate, systemic racism, colonialism and patriarchy – to name a few. All the more reason to acknowledge the strengths we're building from. Often we're afraid of sounding insensitive, oblivious, arrogant or ignorant if we focus on the good without immediately pivoting to our failings. If we're honest, we can be afraid of being criticised by our own tribe or base. There are those who believe that everyone in Australia is outraged, or should be. But we know the persuadable public are generally far more optimistic and less polarised. A message of 'everything is terrible, join us' won't entice them. We must learn to name and own the good stuff, too.

Narrating our story is powerful. It shapes not only how we see the past but what's possible for the future.

In a decade's time, will the accepted wisdom be that it wasn't a groundswell of people demanding climate action that turned the ship, but the invisible hand of the market? What will be the lessons learned out of the pandemic: put people first during times of crisis only, then pivot back to ideology? We hope not.

We can indeed change systems, not just treat symptoms. But to bring others with us, we need to stop only focusing on what we have not won yet and start owning our successes as further evidence for 'yes, we can'.

2. Embrace the helm where you can, the resistance where you must.

Takeaway: There are many different ways to both resist and lead. Some can play defence, some can play offence. There's room for all kinds of personalities, strategies, skills and approaches: insiders, outsiders, partners and provocateurs – our theories of change and strategies will be different. But let's make sure all bases are covered.



People want [active hope](#) and pathways forward. To quote Shenker-Osorio again, “If you want people to follow you, you have to say that you’re the leader. You have to say this is the winning way and give demonstrations this is happening.” That means going out on a limb and [leading with solutions and values](#), not just more problems and critique.

There will always be a role for standing up to injustice, revealing corrupt systems and working diligently to stop bad things from happening. **But don’t become so attached to the resistance that you miss opportunities to take the helm: to seed new ideas, forge new partnerships, reframe old debates and creatively circumvent old barriers.**

Last year, despite federal government inaction, Greenpeace Australia Pacific enjoyed staggering success on a series of climate campaigns. Their target: major corporations.

“[A]ll of the big breweries, Telstra, supermarkets Woolworths and Aldi and even Australia’s most trusted brand Bunnings have all committed in recent weeks to using only 100 per cent renewable electricity by 2025 or earlier,” [wrote Greenpeace CEO David Ritter](#). These corporate CEOs even sat down with Ritter to talk about why they were making this change, and openly acknowledged the role of Greenpeace in their decision. (The wins keep coming: [Coca-Cola just signed on this week](#).)

Does this mean that Greenpeace is now in the pocket of Big Retail? Of course not. They may align on renewables and have profound disagreements or critiques on other things. But Greenpeace, an organisation which knows full well how to resist when needed, saw an opening to take the helm.

Similarly, witness the growth, [led by young people](#), of Australians moving their money into fossil-free banking and investments, and pressuring more traditional financial institutions to lift their game. Money is outpacing Australia’s national political leadership in the climate space, not because a few boards independently woke up and saw the light, but because a critical mass of people are finding their power to lead from where they are ([School Strikers 4 Climate](#) are another great example).

We’ve seen it in other spaces as well – in Australia’s [Voices4 movements](#) springing up around the country, and in the global rise of movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter.

When it is time to resist, there are a few points to keep in mind.

- **Talking about bad government all the time reinforces the idea that government is bad** (government can’t be both the problem and the solution).
- **What you fight, you feed** (myth-busting doesn’t work, people mostly remember the original myth more than the fact that’s meant to rebut it).
- **We need both defence and offence, otherwise we never move the goalposts.**

So to take a current example: **the government’s latest JobSeeker rate** is not good enough, clearly. Moreover, **their new ‘dob-in’ hotline feels like a trap**. The risk is that we only say how woeful the rate rise is. We only say how horrible and unnecessary the hotline is. The Morrison Government responds with scary dollar figures about the cost of welfare to the taxpayer, and Murdoch tabloids chime in with stories of people rorting the system.



Now hopefully, our chorus reaches a crescendo, amplified by others including business groups in the mainstream media, and the Morrison Government is forced to back down. Surely a do-b-in hotline when [one million Australians are out of work](#) fails the pub test.

But even if we win, we're only playing defence. At worst, we don't win and we've just had a debate all about how welfare is expensive and there must be cheaters.

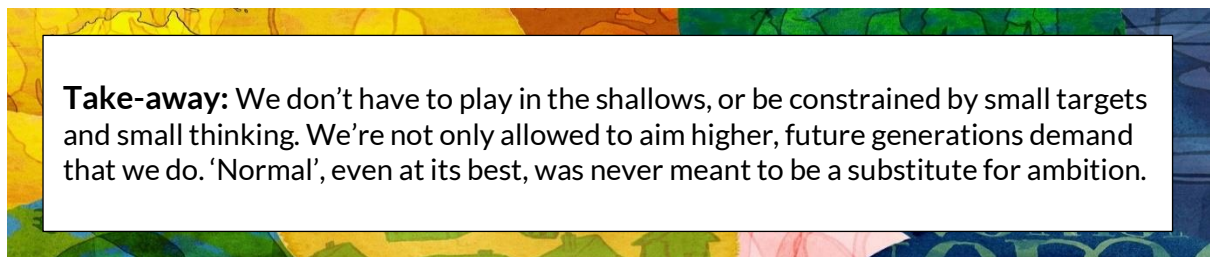
So in public-facing messaging especially, we need to also play offence. Emphasise what we actually want. **What is it that good government can and should be doing right now?** To pick a few examples going around:

- *Good government would appoint an independent body to set the rate of income support for Australians looking for work, and take politics out of it.*
- *Good government would truly reform our tax and income support system, rather than bullying Australians locked out of paid work.*
- *Good government would give young people free education, knowing how this pandemic has interrupted such an important time in their lives and made it that much harder to find entry-level jobs, so they can at least learn and graduate without being saddled with debt.*
- *Good government would step up where the private sector cannot, and set a national target for full employment like we had in the post-war era.*

There are many different ways to both resist and lead. Some can play defence, some can play offence. There's room for all kinds of personalities, strategies, skills and approaches: insiders, outsiders, partners and provocateurs – our [theories of change and strategies will be different](#). But let's make sure all bases are covered.

As you experiment and try new things this year, don't be afraid to embrace the helm when you can, and the resistance where you must.

3. Aim higher than 'normal'.



Take-away: We don't have to play in the shallows, or be constrained by small targets and small thinking. We're not only allowed to aim higher, future generations demand that we do. 'Normal', even at its best, was never meant to be a substitute for ambition.

Ah, the sweet seduction of normal. Even as global experts line up to tell us there's no going back to the pre-pandemic world, we're still human. Normal may not have been perfect, but it had its comforts. Dangling 'normal' in front of us in Australia may work just long enough to win an election, until people remember that normal had its problems, too.

Normal is we'd privatised stress, risk, insecurity and anxiety. Normal is coming to work sick, being exhausted all the time, finding ourselves too busy or tired to show up for our families, communities, health, friendships. Normal is burning and subsidising fossil fuels. Normal is mounting inequality. Normal has been revealed to be deeply problematic, built on unstable foundations.



We're juggling a surface-level desire to return to normal, with the deeper need to get at something far more profound.

Part of the role of the reMAKER – whatever hats we wear – is to lift our gaze higher. **Not to settle for what is, but to strive for what can be. It doesn't require everyone, but a tipping point of people, to take the conversation and the culture in a new direction.** The next decade likely shapes the future of democracy, capitalism, the environment, the economy, energy, work, housing and more. Maybe for only a handful of years, maybe for a generation. **What do we want this world to look like?**

For instance, do we just want to push for an expanded role for the public sector, or do we want to ignite entire new conversations about the [public good](#)?

At Australia reMADE, we've been doing just that: setting out on a bold venture to build, collaborate, listen, contest and reclaim the public good. **We're supporting people and networks to dig deep into shared values and aim high to "change the air we breathe," so that rather than pushing for more funding for a hospital here, a change in pollution laws there, and a community consultation on the side – we're actively shifting the collective common sense.**

It's hard to prioritise this kind of important work when there are always other urgent things to be done. But as we've again begun listening to people across the country, asking 'what public goods are important? Who should provide them and how?' we're gathering a picture of what is significant and how we might achieve it. We've heard about the importance of the 'things' of public good (schools, hospitals, healthcare, physical infrastructure). We've heard about the importance of collective rules and agreements (safe climate, clean air, democracy). We've heard about the importance of capacities for participating and maintaining our public good (community, culture, time, creativity, faith). Most loudly of all we've heard the call for new public squares. Not just a vision, but spaces for vision to be created, contested and loudly and heartily reclaimed by communities. From these public squares (whether those nurtured by Australia reMADE or many others) come the confidence and solidarity to reMAKE a new normal that is good for us all.

Vision has to come from somewhere and be backed by all of us. In his review of a [new book](#) by Professor Ross Garnaut, economics editor Ross Gittins [argues](#) that if normal is all we desire it's because we've been "beaten into submission – forced to lower [our] expectations of what life should be bringing us, and our nation's leaders should be leading us to."

It can be scary to raise our expectations as we experiment with new ways of doing things. In our work on thinking about a [covid recovery](#), we set out a framework for thinking about the needed drivers for systemic change (**democratise, de-carbonise, de-monopolise, de-marketise, decolonise**) and six criteria for ensuring that change is indeed transformational. A summary of this is available at australiaremade.org/criteria-for-transformation.

Embrace the helm, but if your ambition is big enough, don't be surprised if you find yourself building a whole new ship.

We don't have to play in the shallows, or be constrained by small targets and small thinking. We're not only allowed to aim higher, future generations demand that we do. 'Normal', even at its best, was never meant to be a substitute for ambition.



Conclusion

Crises have a way of focusing our attention on what matters, and cutting through the crap. Many people are eager for the return of boring competence over swagger and entertainment value in our world leaders this year. **From the US election down to our daily lives, there is hope – not only for a global recovery, but a global reset; a desire to build a new and better normal than we had before.**

Like an analogue photograph slowly forming in a dark room, life beyond covid will take time to emerge. But times of flux are times of transformation, and the invitation before us is great. There is a great deal to celebrate, embrace and aim for. **Let's do it well.**



About Australia reMADE

Australia reMADE promotes [a vision of the country we're aiming for](#), and the systems change needed to create it.

We're an independent, non-profit leadership network for reMAKERS at all levels of society. We are funded by a range of civil society organisations and philanthropy. To get in touch, contact info@AustraliareMADE.org.

Living, loving and working across this country, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to elders both past and present.