

Political breakthroughs come from public engagement



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Lead Editorial

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Government MP George Christensen's committee has endorsed a national development bank.

national development bank is firmly back on the political agenda in Australia, and it's due in no small part to the Citizens Party supporters and collaborators who made submissions to George Christensen's "Diversifying Trade and Investment" inquiry. If you were one of them, take pride that you are helping to steer history by shaping the policies that will put Australia back onto a productive development path.

George Christensen's report recommending a national development bank, which acknowledged the Citizens Party, is a landmark economic finding. Australia lost its way 40 years ago when both major political parties swallowed neoliberalism and abandoned the pro-development public investment policies that had transformed our economy from an agrarian backwater into an agro-industrial powerhouse; now, like the freighter *Ever Given* stuck in the Suez canal, it is being tugged back in the right direction. The Christensen report is just one of the tug boats; the tireless efforts of the Citizens Party and other die-hards like Bob Katter are others. The outspoken LNP Senator Gerard Rennick, who seizes every opportunity he can to promote a national infrastructure bank, is another sign of the momentum to correct Australia's national economic course (as is Labor's new policy of a \$15 billion National Reconstruction Fund to invest in manufacturing).

Public engagement is the way politics is supposed to work; indeed it is the only way it can work. If the public give up on politics through demoralisation or cynicism, they vacate the field to vested interests who then have all the say. It is the responsibility of the people to enforce democratic accountability, and not just at the ballot box. The thinkers who shaped democratic history always knew this to be true. When Ben Franklin was asked what sort of government had been formed by the US Constitutional Convention, his reply—"A republic, if we can keep it"—meant that it would be up to each generation to take responsibility for maintaining its principles. In the late 19th century Australian Workers' Union founder William Guthrie Spence led the union movement to leave behind what he called the "old unionism" of focusing on wages and conditions, and embrace the "new unionism" of everyday workers fighting for national policies that can benefit workers by improving the entire nation. "Let us agitate, educate, organise", Spence appealed, rallying workers to engage permanently in the political process by establishing the Australian Labor Party. (Until it lost its way completely in the 1980s, the ALP was the party that drove the economic development of Australia, especially through its historical fight for national banking which achieved the Commonwealth Bank.)

The 17 March 2021 AAS analysed another extraordinary report, from the Senate inquiry into "Nationhood, national identity, and democracy" chaired by Labor Senator Kim Carr, which was blunt about the disconnect between the political process and the public. Carr noted the collapse of public

trust in political leaders, which he rightly sheeted home to the way governments lied on big issues like the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2008 GFC, and he revealed how laws are increasingly being made through so-called “delegated legislation” which have no mechanism for democratic accountability whatsoever. To his credit, Senator Carr concluded that the solution lies in what the Citizens Party has been demonstrating: public engagement with Parliament, particularly through the Committee process. Parliamentary committees are supposed to drill deep into policy issues, to shape the final form of legislation, and are the main avenue for public input into the process, but too few people avail themselves of the opportunity. In the four or so years the Citizens Party has actively encouraged committee engagement, we have exposed the “bail-in” policy of seizing bank deposits to prop up failing banks, helped to stop the cash ban, and now influenced a government report to propose a national development bank. The Christine Holgate inquiry is the next fight—please sign and share the new change.org petition.

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