

A YEAR IN REVIEW, ANOTHER IN PROSPECT



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On the cusp of 2015, Australians are engaged in more major debates over a broader range of issues than for many years.

From education and health, where proposed reforms are in the marketplace, to taxation and the nature of the federation, on which white papers are coming, future directions are in contention. Climate change policy has already been on an extraordinary journey; this country moved to the policy forefront internationally, only to take a leap backwards in 2014. It will stay as a strongly disputed area as we move towards the 2016 election.

Australia is once again participating in a faraway war, having only just left the last one. The heightened threat of terrorism is producing contentious new security measures at home, with greater powers for agencies and plans to force the retention of metadata for an extended period. These have opened arguments from civil libertarians and sections of the media about the balance that should be struck between protection and freedoms, and where the line should be drawn between advocacy of terrorism and promotion of an ideology.

The change of federal government in 2013 has triggered some of these debates; in other cases they would have come anyway, the result of budget circumstances, international and local developments, and new thinking.

We remain an open and, for the most part, a tolerant society, but 2014 has seen strains emerging over the government's plan to change the *Racial Discrimination Act*, a move it later dropped. The government prosecuted its case in the name of free speech; ethnic communities pushed back, fearful a licence would be given for racism.

The conflict in the Middle East, as the insurgent Islamic State asserted itself in Iraq and Syria, and the local involvement of a minority of radical Muslim youth have put some pressures on our multiculturalism. These could get worse as we go into 2015. The strains are manageable, but they will need to be handled with sensitivity by political and community leaders.

On a more positive side, hopes have been raised that we can give constitutional recognition to Australia's first people, but the path remains a long and fraught one, given the poor record of referendums. We have as yet made little progress towards the goal. Hopes it could be achieved as early as 2015 have been dashed.

In the coming year we should get a better idea about the extent to which the current debates will lead to serious changes.

The future of deregulation of the universities, the introduction of a user pays element into Medicare and the recalibration of the welfare system are in the hands of the Senate. How far to push a reworking of federal-state relations and the tax system will in the first instance be fundamentally the call of the federal government although, especially with federalism, the states' attitudes will be crucial. What decisions are made about Australia's post-2020 climate change target and policy will be influenced, though not determined, by the stance of other countries as the world approaches the next milestone — the international climate conference in Paris next year.

In these various debates, principles, imperatives and pragmatism contend.

The national budget needs to be made sustainable. But should this be an urgent or long-term priority? How should the

burden be distributed? How necessary is it that decisions be “fair” and how is “fairness” to be measured? Is achieving a more equal society a priority?

This year, the people-smuggling trade to Australia was stopped, but in ways that raised questions about ends and means and the nation's values, as it sent its unwanted human cargo to inhospitable places and turned its face away from human desperation, misery and rights. Without fresh arrivals some of the heat will be out of this issue in 2015, but the plight of those on Manus Island and Nauru will remain, while the proposed reintroduction of temporary protection visas will mean many thousands of people continue to live in limbo in Australia.

As a country we signed up to an international obligation to combat Islamic State but we backed away from some of our previous commitment, in the form of foreign aid, to fight poverty and disease around the world. We're making a modest contribution to the world's effort to try to contain Ebola, but a much smaller one than we should.

As in other Western countries, our democracy suffers from a high degree of public disillusionment with politics and politicians, as well as a lack of engagement, especially among many young voters. Unlike some of the other big debates, this is one of the hardest issues to tackle.

It's a problem and a paradox. An affluent society can't meet the (often politically hyped) expectations of many of its citizens; voters frequently see their free and mature political system in negative rather than positive terms. Political leaders across the spectrum, who have trashed the precious commodity of trust at multiple levels, fail to rise to the challenge of setting better examples.

One question, as we move towards 2015, is whether we are becoming better or worse placed to undertake the great debates that confront us.

Our media, in particular print media, is highly concentrated. The industry of journalism might not be in the same boat as the

nation's car industry, but it is not going forward. The newspaper world is in straitened circumstances. The national broadcaster is under pressure from financial cuts and faces concerted criticism driven in large part by ideology and commercial rivalry.

The voices in the nation's universities are increasingly important if the choices facing Australia are to be identified and options properly analysed and evaluated. In an era when policy discussion in many areas is significantly dominated by "spin", there is a greater need than ever for academics to step forward, not just via their journals but into the wider public domain, writing and informing an interested general audience.

The role of *The Conversation* is to seek out, encourage and publish this writing. We approach academics, and academics with ideas and information come to us. We are interested in the big societal issues and arguments, but equally in new research, for which the site is a national and global channel to a popular audience. *The Conversation* covers arts and culture; business and the economy; education; environment and energy; health and medicine; politics and society; science and technology.

When *The Conversation* celebrated our first birthday in March 2012, we had 300,000 users a month reading articles on the site. As this book was going to press, our monthly audience had climbed above two million users on site, about 40% of those from outside Australia, and a reach of more than 10 million through Creative Commons republication.

Most of our top 10 best-read articles since the site launched have been published in 2014, including articles in this edition, such as the Health Check on supplements that may help with depression (more than 900,000 readers), which has been republished in outlets as varied as *The Washington Post*, the UK's *Daily Mail* and global science site I F***ing Love Science.

This collection of articles from 2014 is arranged into nine themes: Questions of Leadership; Country and Conservation; Thinking about Tomorrow; The Next Generation; What Ails Us;

Games People Play; The Scientific Explanation; Weighing Words and Values; and Us and Them.

Under Questions of Leadership, you will find both sides of the universities deregulation debate, as the community weighs the relative values of higher education as a public benefit and a private good. With student costs set to rise in the university sector, there is also more questioning of the benefits of private schooling, explored in The Next Generation.

The dreamtime and dreaming feature in Country and Conservation, as do the iconic areas of the Barrier Reef and the Antarctic. Thinking about Tomorrow takes us to subjects as varied as climate science and superannuation. What Ails Us has all those must-read health topics, such as the “fat nation”, hypochondria and vitamin supplements. Games People Play includes not just the Winter Olympics, the Tour de France and the World Cup but a piece warning parents that “the app trap” can lead to children spending thousands of dollars online.

In The Scientific Explanation are discussions of “false balance” when reporting on science, metadata and what your smart phone reveals about you, as well as “explainers” of subjects far away (“How does our sun shine?”) and close to home (“How much sleep do we need?”)

Weighing Words and Values ranges from an examination of free speech to the evolution of language. The final section, Us and Them, includes contributions from the “Class in Australia” series. Such marquee series on particular topics are a feature of The Conversation, as are the Explainers, FactChecks and Podcasts.

This collection can only offer a taste of the thousands of articles published in 2014. But we hope it will whet appetites for what’s to come in 2015. All articles in this book originally appeared at theconversation.com/au

Thanks to all the authors whose articles appear in this book, and to John Watson, Debbie Dickinson and the editors at The Conversation.