Good governance for planetary and the public's health

A 21st century agenda for supporting and re-energising the public's health
The extended version of the keynote address given to the Australian Public Health Conference 2021

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In opening, I want to acknowledge the Indigenous nations on whose countries we are and pay my respects to those peoples.

I would also acknowledge that beneath these Indigenous lands are the ecosystems that protect, provision, support and sustain us, and to also pay my respects to the other beings who share the Earth's ecosystems with us. Respect for these relations of ours is fundamental to the way we conduct ourselves. Without them, in functioning ecosystems, neither a well society nor well people is possible.

The two parts to this paper are:

First, to define planetary health and list some of the elements that sit under its umbrella;

Second, and more importantly, to answer the question: what must the public health community do to protect and promote our planet's health?
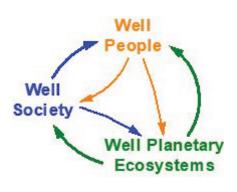
What is planetary health?

The Lancet Commission, who promotes the term, defines planetary health as "… the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends".[1] That is, we are not referring to the health of the inanimate rock that is hurtling around the sun, but to the planet's physical, chemical and ecological systems which enable life and human civilisation.

The Commission acknowledges that while humanity is the wealthiest it has ever been, this has come at the cost of destroying the fabric of the natural systems on which we depend.[1]

Their third important point is that this is entirely due to human behaviour. It is what we are doing, collectively and individually.

This is not to ignore that this is also a systems issue; as individuals, we are caught up in our

political-economic system. But as individuals, we have a role in either maintaining or changing that system. I will return to this point later in this talk.

One Health, environmental health, human ecology, eco-health, are all aspects of planetary health. All, important in their own way, reflect an aspect of the broader term 'planetary health'.

Is the planet well?

As a planetary community, we are in strife. The February 2021 UN Environment Program report, *Making Peace with Nature*, is blunt: "Humanity's environmental challenges have grown in number and severity … and now represent a planetary emergency".[2]

The first instalment of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report[3] on the climate catastrophe has the climate science community politely saying, 'Guys, ACT NOW or we are all effed'.

Our planet is not well; our society is not well, and people and other species are not well.

What are the implications for the public's health?

On our current economic and political trajectory, the survival of our species, and many other species, is in dire jeopardy.

Additionally, immeasurable suffering will be experienced by people born today along the path toward extinction. We cannot let this happen.

What are we to do?

There are three steps: identifying the situation, responding appropriately as individuals and responding appropriately as public health professionals.

1. Identify the situation accurately

To use a clinical analogy, to correctly treat, one must have an accurate diagnosis. I am using a political-economic diagnostic lens here because I think this most accurately frames the situation we find ourselves in and therefore what action to take.

In summary, leaving out most of the nuances, one can summarise the cause of our unwell planet as the adverse effects of the behaviour of large, poorly regulated corporations; consequent to government failure; brought about by the influence of said large unregulated corporations promoting a politico-economic ideology that shapes our expectations, beliefs and behaviour, individually and collectively to an individualistic, greedy, consumption-focused, nature-disrespecting culture.

Governance failure is deliberately created by the active influence of the corporations; the so-called corporatocracy.

We now are operating in a political system where politics has become about winning office *to not govern* for the public good.

Examples abound of buying influence to get elected: sports rorts, carparks, premiers shredding documentation and unselfconsciously saying rorting is to be expected, the recent attempt to chill charities out of advocacy, and so on, all show that the MPs, however well-meaning they might have started out, are caught up in this corrupt system. We see this too when neither major party supports, and indeed votes against, many of the provisions for good government. MPs are constrained to vote along party lines.

Our political leaders' responses to COVID-19 and climate disruption show science is always bent to corporate needs – not for the public good and the public's health. MPs choose when they will accept the science and when

they won't. Some of the COVID-19 pandemic response, JobKeeper, robodebt and the NT Intervention shows that when they want to, politicians will act. The Uluru Statement from the Heart, funding an adequate public health workforce, and addressing the climate catastrophe show that when they don't want to, they don't.

These decisions are corporate not community-driven, for corporate not community benefit.

No longer is presenting evidence or being a critical friend sufficient to get the policy and legislative outcomes we want for a healthy planet and society.

In playing the game only this way, we are losing.

An important note of caution: how we talk about the situation is vital to understanding and getting the outcome we want. If we talk about government as the problem, we sing from the corporatocracy's hymn sheet. The corporatocracy aims to trash government; we cannot afford to contribute to the trashing of government by repeating their language and the narrative that disparages and sidelines government. As public health people, we realise that we need and want good government to deliver on its promise to protect and promote wellbeing.

We need to describe a political system being run by and for the corporatocracy and identify that it is the politicians, the members of parliament, who are the ones behaving badly. It is the MPs who have become unaccountable, dishonest, without integrity – who are serving the interests of big business. We need to identify that this is driven and abetted by the mouthpieces of the corporatocracy, the news media (in the anglosphere especially News Corp).

Instead, we need to consciously promote a narrative of good government for the public's good. We need to demand good government and MPs with integrity who are accountable to their communities.

Our situation is both a systemic issue and a human behaviour issue; the system is built to deliver outcomes that advantage the corporates and destroy the planet's wellbeing, through our elected representatives *and* it is the behaviour of the MPs co-opted by this system, that allows these detrimental outcomes. And it is our behaviour as community members and citizens that either allows this system to continue or to change.

2. What to do? We transform our political-economic system so it works for us. But how?

The main game, personal and professional, must be political, because only political action can change the system to create structures that ensure good governance for the public's good.

Why governance?

Core to generations of public health theory and practice has been recognition that good governance is important. In the Alma Ata Declaration, the governance focus is on participation in health care planning and implementation (Article IV).[4] The Ottawa charter puts it "… to achieve better health … [communities need] … ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies".[5]

The WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health recognised the necessity of both political empowerment (democracy; chapter 14) and good global governance (chapter 15).[6] The *Lancet*–University of Oslo Commission on Global Governance for Health focuses on global governance for health, recognising that the commercial and political determinants of health operate at that level.[7] The United Nations Development Program identifies the importance of governance across the scale from local to global in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.[8] Indeed, the Goals identify the components of good government "effective, accountable and inclusive institutions" and "democracy, good governance and the rule of law as well as an enabling environment at national and international levels, are essential for sustainable development" (Goal 16).[9]

There is an extensive literature that identifies a positive correlation between good governance defined in several ways and good health or wellbeing outcomes.[10-12] Even the type of electoral system contributes to social and environmental wellbeing outcomes.[12,13]

So there is a reasonable evidential foundation for the public health movement to focus on governance.

Current political developments have increased this imperative. To paraphrase Richard Denniss, the response to neoliberalism is democracy. So effective political action is about strengthening democracy.

The two aspects of strengthening democracy are:

1. work with other organisations to improve the institutional structures supporting and promoting good governance, such as integrity commissions, caps on donations and election spending; and

2. improve representation in parliament by promoting active community participation in electing MPs who will govern for the public good.

I am focusing on these actions because both are immediate, practical and focused actions that we can all take as citizens, personally and professionally, to change the system within the very short time we have left to rescue our planet's health.

I like the analogy used by Hendricks and co-authors in their recent work *Mending Democracy*. One of their themes might be paraphrased: our system is tattered but functioning; our best option is to mend the system, not divert time and effort to fashion a new one.[14]

What are the implications for the public health movement?

Action 1 – Improving the infrastructure of government

It's not like we don't know what to do. The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has a policy, *Unhealthy political influence*,[15] that formalises the actions PHAA is already taking and extends the scope of action. This is necessary, but insufficient.

Action 2 – Improving representation as the way to improving good governance.

I want to spend the remainder of this paper discussing why good representation is important and how we can achieve that with personal and professional action.

The theory of change behind this approach

It is MPs in parliaments who make the decisions that determine our future.

So, getting the 'right' MPs into parliament is a practical and immediate means to mend the current representative electoral political system, to change how parliament and government work, making it work for the public good.

The right MP is one who:

- has the necessary skills and knowledge to undertake the job of an MP
- demonstrates the necessary integrity to hold the position
- votes for measures that structurally strengthen good government
- actively works with and is directly and personally accountable to their electorate communities, and
- systematically seeks input from their electorate communities on policy and law making.

Personal electorate level action

The key to getting the right MP is for us to become active citizens. This can range from being part of an electorate group that regularly meets with the MP to discuss and advise them (explained in more detail at Active Democracy Australia: https://activedemocracy.org.au/), through to voting tactically at election time, informed not only by party policy positions, where these exist anymore, but more importantly by the quality of the candidate. Our power as voters rests in who we vote for and how we assign our preferences. This is a new way of thinking about how to vote. It is about thinking of candidates as job applicants coming for interview, not as political party faces.

Being an active citizen enables communities to take back the power to choose the representative who will work in their collective best interest and then work with them to enhance the public good.

This is not saying we get rid of political parties. It puts pressure on parties and candidates to change how they approach and work with the community.

Box 1 lists a few sites that help voters monitor how their MPs and the political system is working.

In parallel, we need to advocate for structural change and promulgate to our families, neighbourhoods and workplaces this new narrative about how politics can work for us.

If you think that electorate level action is fanciful, consider that over 30 electorates around Australia already have 'Voices for' or equivalent groups. They demonstrate that people want and are prepared to work for a community selected MP who is responsive and accountable to the local electorate and to vote them in over a party-selected candidate.

Professional action

We can act through our professional associations such as PHAA.

If PHAA and other health organisations are to be effective in achieving our vision of well people in a well society on a well planet, we have to change how we play the game. Humanity is at a crossroads. Doing more of the same alone isn't going to cut it. We must do differently. We must play the long game.

Facilitating good government needs to become a central focus for PHAA and the broader public health movement. Having good government is the unifying factor in achieving our objectives across all topics of concern: obesity, substance use, road safety, climate disruption, diabetes, heart disease, other non-communicable diseases, communicable diseases, biodiversity loss … the list goes on. If human civilisation collapses, these issues become irrelevant.

I invite PHAA, as our professional organisation, to put more resources into campaigning and advocating for better democratic institutions as a core component of public health action – enacting our new policy. Further, I invite us to promote and support electorate level initiatives and to more widely promote the new story of how a democratic society is necessary for the public's health.

I acknowledge this presents some difficult choices for PHAA's leadership and members. It means changing our priorities and operating strategy. But, this coming decade, it comes down to deciding if we want to keep losing our habitable planet and seeing the public's health trashed, or whether we accept the difficult and indeed courageous challenge to help change the way politics is played in Australia, and indeed internationally, to ensure a well future for our species.

Political economy needs to be better understood and more prominently featured within public health theory and practice for us to stop losing. Box 2 lists a tentative set of actions that such a program would entail.

PHAA members, Board and staff need to have a conversation to work out how we can do this.

Conclusion

In the current political economy, we are losing; that is, failing to adequately protect and promote the planet's and the public's health.

To stop losing, we have to 'change the game'. This means focusing more on a political-economy approach to our work and putting more resources into changing the political system so it delivers good government for the public good.

Time is short. We need good government now for planetary health. Political change needs to be our supporting and re-energising public health agenda.

Box 1: Political behaviour monitoring sites.

They Vote for You a site where you can discover how your local MP votes, to assess if they are voting for the public good – https://theyvoteforyou.org.au/

The Perfect Candidate site measures how closely aligned an MP is with their electorate's views – https://theperfectcandidate.org.au/

Political Gadgets reports a vast array of information about politics and MPs – https://politicalgadgets.com/

Box 2: A Political Economy Action Plan for Planetary and the Public's Health.

1. Build the political economic literacy of the public health sector in Australia as a necessary step towards richer policy analysis and more strategic policy development;

2. Promote as a core public health principle the idea of addressing the local, specific and immediate challenges we face in ways which also contribute to redressing the structural dynamics which reproduce those patterns of need;

3. Promote recognition of the crisis of contemporary transnational capitalism; the roots of the crisis (the rising disjunction between productive capacity and effective consumer demand); the effects of the crisis (including widening inequality and insecurity); the consequences of the crisis (including our inability to confront global warming and the rise of neofascism);

4. Promote a recognition of Australia's role in the neoliberal project (which is directed to shoring up transnational capitalism in the face of this crisis and in the interests of the transnational capitalist class) and the consequences globally (including in Australia but egregiously in the countries of the global South, and including galloping environmental degradation);

5. Promote research into whether the current political economic system has the capability and capacity to address the existential crisis and if not explore and promote alternative political and economic systems that might;

6. Promote a recognition that a meaningful and inclusive, participatory democracy will be critical in addressing these challenges; including informed democratic control over the depredations of the corporate sector and the parasitism of the financial sector;

7. Build a recognition within the public health community in Australia that our job as public health practitioners does not stop at the edge of the officially defined public health domain; ethics and integrity demand that we fulfil our roles as citizens (informed by our public health expertise) as well as 'public health practitioners'.

8. Establish a Centre for Governance for the Public's Health which would offer a place for research and programs to promote public health through the implementation of good governance practice.

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