Observatory PASCAL

Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions

Beyond Community Capacity Building: the Effect of Government on Social Capital

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Preface: Continuities

In the first *Hot Topics* paper in May 2004, Jim Cavaye ('Social Capital: a Commentary on Issues, Understanding and Measurement') promised to explore 'what we know about social capital and what issues and questions remain'. Given the immensity of the current discourse on social capital, this undertaking was impossible to fulfil. The resulting paper is much more modest. It follows the particular understanding of social capital propagated by the celebrated authority on the topic, Professor Robert Putnam. This is the North American approach almost universally adopted by governments and their advisers. It is also a view that is the subject of extensive and vigorous critique, something that many who enthuse about the value of social capital, including Cavaye, fail to acknowledge.

Cavaye declares that a major focus of his paper is measurement of social capital. Here too, Cavaye's slant is restricted, excessively so I will argue. Cavaye says that there are 'two broad contexts for measurement'. One of these he calls 'absolute measurement'. This 'involves assessing levels of social capital and community wellbeing'. The other context he labels, 'goal oriented measurement'. This 'involves evaluating changes in social capital resulting from a project or intervention.'

Whichever context or form, Cavaye says that measurement involves 'gaining insight' into the factors that contribute to the prevalence of networks and trust in particular communities. In other words, 'to what extent can measurement identify the social capital levers in communities that most influence community building?'

Like so many who write about social capital, what Cavaye is interested in then is assessing local level interventions or activities specifically 'aimed at fostering social capital'. Cavaye's interest in measurement does not extend to the effect of the myriad of other things (beyond the local) that may influence social capital or levels of social trust and cohesion in major ways. Prominent amongst these are broad government policies that are not intentionally 'aimed at fostering social capital'. These include those policies that affect the distribution of power, privilege, opportunity, wealth and income. These policies may be declared openly or covert, or implicit through inaction.

By only considering measurement of local level interventions and community building, Cavaye directs attention away from policies and programs that may be far more consequential for social capital. This is

convenient for governments that may wish to sidestep accountability for the effects of all their actions or failures to act (inactions). It also reinforces the idea that, because social capital is formed at the interpersonal and local level, individuals, families and communities have primary responsibility for dealing with the social problems that social capital helps remedy. They may even be considered liable for declining social capital in the first place, a point to which we shall return.

Introduction: Aims

In this essay, I challenge the orthodox and over-narrow approach to social capital generally applied by politicians and governments. This is the school of thought led by Robert Putnam. Contrary to the predominant thrust of the Putnamian perspective, I argue that the concept of social capital in public policy should be understood as linked to the broad range of state policies, rather than the very limited interventions at the local level most often styled as community building.

Because orthodox approaches mostly fail to explain or contextualise their perspective it is necessary to begin with a brief review of the rise to prominence of the dominant meaning of social capital, that developed by Robert Putnam. After setting out its main features, I examine the way in which political leaders eagerly embrace the Putnamian thesis, often without recognizing Putnam's own reservations, or acknowledging the Putnamian concept's limitations and its alternatives.

My examination extends to a review of, and commentary on, how governments selectively and normatively apply the concept of social capital. Using examples from the Australian (federal) and Victorian (state) governments, I examine the way in which the public discourse around social capital is shaped in accordance with the Putnamian paradigm.

I demonstrate that by focussing on consensual community building programs as the prime means for generating social capital, governments divert attention from the implications of more substantial forces and policies, especially those at more macro levels such as that of economic change and management. They also do this by restricting their interest to only some aspects of the measurement of social capital. There seems to be little interest in assessing how wider state

policies affect social capital. For the concept of social capital to be taken more seriously in public policy **the idea of social impact assessment**, relatively undeveloped to this point, should be pursued.

'the man with the Big Idea … "social capital"'

When the respected Australian newspaper and radio columnist Michelle Grattan (2003) wrote about 'the man with the Big Idea … "social capital"' she meant Peter Costello, the Federal Treasurer in the current Australian conservative (Liberal Party) government. However, her words best fit Harvard University's Robert Putnam. 'Great man' explanations of history are normally flawed, but Putnam is the figure who has done by far the most to elaborate on the concept 'social capital'. Putnam first brought 'social capital' to public attention in his efforts to account for the social, political and economic differences between the north and south of Italy. Social capital was his key explanatory concept. However, Putnam's 'big idea' was not original. Its conceptual roots lie considerably earlier and in more diverse places than Putnam acknowledges (Farr, 2004).

Through prescience and opportunism or just fortune, Putnam adopted and embellished a notion with astonishing political and policy resonance. In turn, influential people who shape public agendas and policy makers acquired an appealing concept with substantial data already aimed at topical problems in the fields of health, education, employment, crime, security and welfare. Most alluring perhaps was the thrift of the associated line of attack. According to the Putnam stratagem, a focus on creating social capital would not be expensive for government.

Perhaps because of such lure, there may be no other academic term that has had such a meteoric rise. Like an escaped laboratory virus 'social capital' swiftly 'spread from Harvard's school of government to the think tank world, and then to politicians, civil servants and beyond' (Rogers, 2003).

This observation was relevant also in Australia, where Putnam's claims first came to public attention through the periodical of the country's oldest free market think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). In the *IPA Review*, Putnam contended that 'Communities don't have choral societies because they are wealthy; they are wealthy because they have choral societies' (1994:34). By this, Putnam meant that northern Italy was richer than the south as a result of it having a

greater store of social capital, demonstrated through historically higher levels of associational membership. It was not, as his critics have charged, a result of colonization and state building (Tarrow, 1996) or of political struggle (Navarro, 2002).

The declining social capital thesis strongly corresponds with the longstanding notion of a community lost. As Raymond Williams has demonstrated so well (in *The Country and the City*, 1975), this idea of a happier and more communal way of life before the advent of modern social problems has very deep cultural and literary roots. Into the established attraction of the idea of a vanishing community, Putnam injects a strong alarmist element, what O'Hara (2004:281) terms a 'narrative of doom'.

Putnam's fame and influence mostly arises from his argument that over the last 40 years, civic life in the US has declined to such an extent as to threaten the economic and social well being of the nation. 'Sometime around 1965-70 America reversed course and started becoming both less just economically and less well connected socially and politically' (Putnam, 2000:359).

The initial surge to prominence of this 'neo-Tocquevillean' (Putnam, 1995:66)[1] idea came with the 1995 paper 'Bowling Alone: America's declining social capital'. Very soon one commentator was able to write that the 'slender article … spawned more commentary than *Hamlet*' (Pollitt, 1996) and another:

> 'Seldom has a thesis moved so quickly from scholarly obscurity to conventional wisdom. By January 1996 the *Washington Post* was featuring a six part series of front-page articles on the decline of trust, and Beltway pundits had learned the vocabulary of social capital' (Galston, 1996).

Putnam himself frankly acknowledges that having published 'scores of books' that had not 'attracted the slightest public attention', he remained obscure until publishing his paper 'Bowling Alone'. Then he was 'invited to Camp David, lionized by talk-show hosts' and pictured on the front page of *People*. Putting aside the manifest attraction of his ideas to persons of power and influence, Putnam too humbly accounts

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[1] Putnam refers to the French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville's 1830s observation that 'Americans' propensity for civic association' was the 'key to their unprecedented ability to make democracy work.' Putnam labels analysts who point to the effect of civic or community engagement on social, economic and governmental variables, Neo-Tocquevilleans (Putnam, 1995:66).

for his overnight 'canonization' as having 'articulated an unease … in the minds of many ordinary Americans' (Putnam, 2000:506).

Despite what he admits was 'limited evidence' in need of confirmation (Putnam, 1995:67; 2000:506) Putnam's declining social capital thesis was already a worldwide hit by the time he published his bestseller on the topic, also called *Bowling Alone*. This ambitious tome, with its labyrinthine citations, is probably the most popular social science monograph in generations. Reviewers (see Putnam, 2000:1-3)declare that its significance rivals classics such as *The Lonely Crowd* (David Riesman, 1950), *The Power Elite* (C.Wright Mills, 1956) and *The Affluent Society* (J.K.Galbraith, 1958).

In 2003, with co-author Lewis Feldstein, Putnam followed *Bowling Alone* with a book of case studies about how to recreate stocks of social capital, through community building. It is most unlikely that any other book concerning community development was ever greeted with as much fanfare as Putnam and Feldstein's *Better Together*. As one US columnist wrote last year,

> Since the book came out in September, Feldstein has been travelling the nation giving talks to crowds as large as 500 in Seattle and 300 in Chicago, sometimes on his own, sometimes with Putnam. . . . The book tour is going 'superbly', Feldstein said … 'the book has crossed over into being a news story, as the subject of lead edits (editorials) in a number of papers: the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the Portland *Oregonian*, the *Santa Clara Union*'. (Charpentier, December 2003)

Though dispute over the accuracy and adequacy of Putnam's evidence about declining civic engagement flared in isolated parts of academia, such controversy has hardly occurred elsewhere (Galston, 1996). This is despite often-indiscriminate projection of claims about the US to other societies, including in Europe, Australia and the third world nations. A remarkable and instructive feature of the orthodox usage of social capital is the customary disregard for the many serious criticisms of the Putnam approach (eg Tarrow, 1994; Skocpol, 1996; Muntaner, Lynch and Smith, 2000; Fine, 2001; Harriss, 2002; Mayer, 2003; Muntaner and Lynch, 2002; Navarro, 2002; Schuurman, 2003).

Evidence of the pandemic 'social capital movement' (Putnam, 2000:510) is easily found. On the Internet, a hub of social capital

websites, Capitale Sociale,[2] links 35 other home pages. These include those of the World Bank, the OECD, Harvard's BetterTogether, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 'Social Capital Theme Page'.

The Putnamian thesis

The essential features of Putnam's thesis about social capital centre on (1) his particular definition, (2) the alleged implications of declining social capital for people's way-of-life, (3) the reasons for this, (4) why it matters and (5) what should be done. I will deal with these features in the next few paragraphs.

Definition

For Putnam 'Social capital refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 1994:34; 2000:19). Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital, 'bonding' and 'bridging'. The first is concerned with group integration, 'a kind of sociological Super Glue'. The second is about facilitating inter-connections, 'a sociological (penetrating oil) WD40' (Putnam, 2000:23; Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:2). In the wider Putnamian usage 'social glue' becomes a synonym for social capital. Putnam also uses various other terms as synonyms, such as social cohesion, social connectedness and even fraternity (Putnam, 2000:326-29; 351). Terms incorporating the word 'together' are closely associated and emblematic, as in *Better Together* (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003) and the BetterTogether website.[3]

Others such as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) have used 'social capital' in contrasting ways. Rather than seeing social capital as an integrative or cohesive resource, Bourdieu employed the term to help explain the perpetuation of class and the differential distribution of power, privilege and economic domination. Clearly, Putnam's approach with its emphasis on togetherness is more useful for those who prefer to overlook or downplay fundamental conflicts of interests in social institutions, localities or nations (Siisiäinen, 2000:23). Assisting this, the Putnam definition is usually taken as the only one, and sometimes the impression is given that Putnam actually coined the term (see Giddens, 1999).

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[2]   Capitale Sociale, University of Rome. (http://w3.uniroma1.it/soccap/eng-websitessocialcapital.htm)

[3]   BetterTogether website (http://bettertogether.org/).

For Putnam, social capital, can take very tangible forms. For example, he refers to volunteer ambulance squads, bridge clubs and Rotary clubs as forms of social capital (2000:21). He also refers to religious communities as 'very important repositories of social capital', many of which he laments are declining (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:120). The 'most fundamental form of social capital is the family' (Putnam, 1995:73). In contrast, Putnam does not regard mass organizations, such as Greenpeace as manifesting social capital. Curiously, this is partly because he sees their 'direct mail recruits' as holding 'more extreme and intolerant political views' than members of organizations recruited through social networks (2000:158).

Lost social capital and its causes

Putnam's contention, widely accepted as having international applicability, is that social capital has declined to such an extent as to endanger our welfare and way-of-life. The 'civic-minded trends that characterized the first two thirds of the twentieth century' have reversed since and 'the fabric of American community life' is unravelling (Putnam, 2000:180-84).

In his review of a range of possible factors responsible for undermining civic engagement Putnam identifies the main culprits and estimates their relative contributions to its decline. These are; first, 'pressures of time and money' – 10 per cent. Second, urban sprawl – 10 per cent. Third, electronic entertainment, especially television – 25 per cent. Fourth, and most importantly, the replacement of the 'unusually civic generation', whose 'social habits and values' were substantially shaped by 'the great mid century global cataclysm' of World War II, by several (postcivic) generations … less embedded in community life' – 50 per cent (Putnam, 2000:255, 275, 283). Putnam makes these causal connections after cursorily exonerating the state, business and the market from blame (Putnam, 2000:279–283).

'So what?'[4]

According to Putnam, this matters because social capital can reduce transaction costs, and a 'society that relies on generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society' (Putnam, 2000:135). He

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[4]   Putnam's title for Section 4 of *Bowling Alone* on the consequences of social capital.

continues his play on the economic side: 'where trust and social networks flourish individuals, firms, neighbourhoods, and even nations prosper' (Putnam, 2000:319). Later, drawing on Francis Fukuyama and pursuing the nationalist theme too, he writes 'economies whose citizens have high levels of social trust – high social capital – will dominate the twenty-first century' (Putnam, 2000:325).

In addition, Putnam points to numerous personal benefits from higher levels of social capital, ranging through greater happiness, better health, higher income and levels of educational achievement, and lower rates of child abuse and other crimes against person. Putnam casts many of his claims in flamboyant terms, in what he calls 'stylized generalizations' (Putnam, 2000:399). For example, social capital goes with family life (Putnam, 2000:278) and 'in round numbers, getting married is the "happiness equivalent" of quadrupling your annual income' (Putnam, 2000:333). Putnam loosely cites an Atlanta study's finding 'that each employed person in one's social network increases one's annual income by US$1,400' (Putnam, 2000:322).

A third example, with equal disregard for the crucial distinction between causation and association and the problem of inferring from aggregate data to individuals, is one used here in Australia (in Victoria) as locally valid.

> As a rough rule of thumb, if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half. If you smoke and belong to no groups, it's a toss-up statistically whether you should stop smoking or start joining. (Putnam, 2000:331; see Moodie, 2003; Delahunty, 2003; Pike, 2003[5]))

'possible therapies' or 'what is to be done' [6]

The final element in the Putnamian thesis concerns his answer to the question 'what is to be done?' Putnam concludes *Bowling Alone* with a chapter 'Towards an agenda for social capitalists'. The central message is that US citizens should all resolve to participate more 'not because it

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[5] A variation on this claim appears on the VicHealth website. Perhaps moved by the (ten pin) Bowling Alone metaphor, it suggests that persons who are not a member of a (lawn) bowling club but decide to join one cut their risk of dying over the next year by half.

[6] Putnam's term for approaches to renewal of 'civic engagement and social connectedness', set out in Section 5 of *Bowling Alone*, 'What is to be done?', p.28.

will be good for America (USA) – though it will be – but because it will be good for us' (2000:414). Essentially, Putnam's call is to citizens. Even for the sphere of politics and government, Putnam urges 'government officials, political consultants, politicians and (above all)' citizens 'to find ways to ensure that by 2010 many more Americans will participate in the public life of our communities' (Putnam, 2000:412). Remarkably for a professor of public policy, Putnam displays virtually no interest in power and politics (Navarro, 2002:427) or any fundamental political or economic policy reforms.

Though Putnam rejects the view that 'civil society alone can solve public issues' (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:273) this caution or caveat is overshadowed by the body of Putnam's work. As we shall now see, it is also incidental to the way in which Putnam's concept of social capital is applied in Australian political discourse.

'Nothing could be safer than a speech about social capital'[7]

In mid 2003 social capital hit the national headlines after conservative (Liberal Party) Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced his intention to stay in office after his 64th birthday, having once hinted that he might step aside. His disappointed heir apparent, the federal Treasurer Peter Costello, moved to affirm his own aptitude for the Prime Ministerial office. Keen to parade his more human qualities, Costello said he would speak out on issues beyond the economic (McMurray, 2003). Through a newspaper column 'Costello, the social capitalist' in *TheAge,* Michelle Grattan heralded the topic on which Costello was about to expound. She began 'Get ready for Peter Costello, the man with the Big Idea … "social capital"'. Costello, Grattan said, saw 'the social capital idea' as a means by which he could appear innovative and progressive – 'to dance around the floor, nimble on his feet, touching the shoes of a few colleagues without treading on them.'

In addresses to a national private welfare provider, Anglicare (Costello, 2003a) and to a conservative think tank, the Sydney Institute (Costello, 2003b), Costello expounded his newfound enthusiasm about social capital and the need to restore our lost community. In the absence of any Australian replication of Putnam's findings, Costello said that 'all the anecdotal evidence' he had gathered confirmed what

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[7] Adele Horin, 2003.

Putnam reported in *Bowling Alone* - 'social capital is running down' (Costello, 2003b). On one hand, Costello's approach entailed repeated reference to trust, tolerance, voluntary association, charity and mutual obligation. On the other, and pointedly juxtaposed, was reiteration of the importance of a residual state.

In the 30 minute Sydney Institute speech, entitled 'Building social capital', Costello mentioned trust 22 times, tolerance 28 times and voluntarism 17 times, all in positive terms. He mentioned government 10 times pejoratively, with the intent of delimiting its legitimate role. In both papers, Costello accentuated his point that building social capital is a duty that lies 'outside government'. Government, he insisted, had the residual responsibility to 'do no harm'. On this principle

> a Government should be careful not to usurp the voluntary sector. It should not take away those things which people can and want to do for themselves. But where it can support the voluntary sector, without smothering it, it should do so. (Costello, 2003b&c)

'Social capital is a term that lends itself easily to opposing ideologies'[8]

Media interest in social capital escalated. Two days after running an extract from one of the speeches (Costello, 2003c), the Melbourne *Age* newspaper editorialized (19 July 2003) that Costello's contribution was 'straight-up-and-down Howard style political conservatism'. Like Grattan before, *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Adele Horin described Costello's speeches, as not simply politically conservative, but cynical. 'Is there anything easier in politics than to praise a volunteer? Is there anything safer than to exhort people to get involved in their communities?'

Apparently anxious to share the political kudos associated with the invocation of 'social capital', Labor Party MPs immediately countered with displays of their own commitment to the idea. In a speech to the Victorian Council of Social Service's 2003 congress the Victorian Minister for Victorian Communities, John Thwaites, insisted that

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[8] Hawe and Shiell, 2000:18.

governments did have a role in helping communities to build social capital, but only a supportive one (2003a; also 2004).

The Australian Labor Party's leader, Mark Latham agreed with this. He said that government's role is to enable or facilitate to give 'people more opportunities to work together'. Latham added that this did not just mean 'campaigning for better services'. 'I want people to be running them – the community housing, the community banks, the civic education, the parks, the recreation programs' (Latham, 2003). This was also the message in Latham's book, *From the suburbs*, published a few months earlier (Latham, 2003:87; see also Mowbray 2004a).

Despite some very slightly different nuances in allusions to the facilitative role of government, the extent of the political convergence between the major political parties justifies the comment that despite their political rivalry Latham and Costello sang from the same song sheet (Maiden, 2004:2). However, both sides avow their own special affinity with the concept.

The chief-of-staff to the federal Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations joined the media debate in an effort to pursue this. Kevin Donnelly claimed that the Labor Party's 'belief that social capital is a natural part of its turf' was an attempt to appropriate a concept 'more attuned to Liberal philosophy and the conservative side of politics' (Donnelly, 2003). One time Australian Democrats leader and former Labor Party frontbencher, Cheryl Kernot responded in the *Age* 'Don't think so!' Amongst other things, Kernot thought that the Howard conservative government was too divisive to be true social capitalists.

Prominent Australian 'social entrepreneur', Vern Hughes, expressed his position in the context of a call for a new 'revolutionary politics'. In the *Financial Review* this campaigner for low taxes, small government and strong community wrote that the diminishing stocks of social capital can only be rebuilt within 'civil society'. Governments needed only to do no harm to 'our tenuous bonds of association and reciprocity' (Hughes, 2003a & b).

Government and social capital

What is the proper role for government in relation to social capital? The state government in Victoria, Australia, has answered the question

by pronouncing a wholehearted commitment to the importance of the concept, defined in true Putnamian terms as 'glue that holds society together' (Department for Victorian Communities, 2003:9).

Drawing consciously on the Putnamian emblem of togetherness, the government's major policy direction statement, launched in 2001, is entitled Growing Victoria Together (www.growingvictoria.vic.gov.au).[9] There, the overwhelming theme is community (mentioned 38 times) building, participation and cohesion. One of its sources was the (2000) 'Growing Victoria Together Summit', a trumpeted cross sector seminar featuring an integrative message (Adams and Wiseman, 2003).

According to the Minister for Community Services, Sheryl Garbutt, 'one of the most important objectives of the Bracks (Victorian state) Government', and 'the core of our *Growing Victoria Together* framework', is building stronger communities – 'where people support one another more naturally' (Garbutt, 2004:3). In 2003 VicHealth began its 'Together we do better campaign' to encourage community participation for its positive effects on health.

Speaking on the state's 'agenda for building stronger communities' Candy Broad, the Minister for Local Government, enthused that building stronger communities and generating social capital 'is now a front and centre issue for modern governments' and at the 'heart of the State Government'. She boasted of a state-wide 'explosion of community strengthening' 'in what is the biggest effort by any Australian Government to elevate community strengthening to the centre of the public policy agenda' (Broad, 2003:2,6,12; 2004). Broad's audience also heard community strengthening candidly referred to as a cost saving government 'investment' which holds 'out the promise of reducing the rate of growth in demand for expenditure on high cost support services' (Broad, 2003:4).

The Minister for Victorian Communities, John Thwaites, boasts that his government has taken a 'bold step' and established 'a whole new department to build social capital in our communities' (Thwaites, 2003b:2).[10] His message on the government's Community Building

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[9]   There is also a Tasmania Together program, operated by the state Government of Tasmania.
http://www.tasmaniatogether.tas.gov.au/index.html

[10]   This is a point reinforced by CEO Yehudi Blacher: 'The Department for Victorian Communities was created in December 2002 to give effect to the government's objective of strengthening communities'. (*Corporate Plan 2003-2006*:2).

website is that 'Community building lies at the heart of our approach to government in Victoria. It is about harnessing the energy of communities so that they can shape their own futures.'

In announcing a plan to divert resources to volunteering, and in line with Putnam's claims, Thwaites referred to research evidence to show 'that in communities where social cohesion is high - where there are high levels of community participation and volunteering - there are better social outcomes'. The latter included 'students staying longer at school, lower rates of imprisonment, lower unemployment, better health outcomes and less child abuse.' Like his ministerial colleague, Thwaites also celebrated the thrift of the idea. 'Small amounts of money combined with the efforts of dedicated volunteers can often produce great results' (Thwaites, 2004).

Community, the site for creating social capital

Putnam's view is that social capital's 'conceptual cousin' is 'community' (Putnam, 2000:21) and that community building is the operational dimension of social capital. Putnamian discourse fuses the idea of diminishing social capital with the much older notion that community (life) is vanishing.

The Secretary of the Department for Victorian Communities reports the Victorian state government's approach on how to increase social capital in plain and frank terms:

> The role for government in generating social capital is to create the opportunities for individuals to establish relationships and shared values; that is, to facilitate the creation of networks. The site for network creation is the local community, and community strengthening is the means to do so. (Blacher, 2003)

In other words, the government's job is to assist individual citizens in their local environments to form relationships and shape mutual values. In another place, the Department for Victorian Communities (2003:9) tells us that 'Increasingly, community strengthening strategies are being understood in terms of their role in building social capital'.

This is all consistent with the assertion in Putnam and Feldstein's *Better Together* that 'social capital is necessarily a local phenomenon' and is generally formed 'through local personal contact' (Putnam and

Feldstein, 2003:9). Cvetkovich and Löfstedt (1999:5) note, the 'trust of Putnam occurs in small communities' where 'there is an expectation of help given to other personally known community members'. They contrast this with 'the trust of individuals personally unknown', which covers eg public trust in government or policy-makers. Little attention has been given, however, to what Putnam does acknowledge occasionally as the 'dark side' of social capital (Putnam, 2000:350-363), which might result in 'repugnant purposes' being served (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:2).

Social capital as a alternative to state welfare

Vigorous backing for the Putnamian position comes in a recent book attacking the welfare state and advocating measures designed to dislodge welfare dependency modelled in the United States. In *Australia's welfare habit and how to kick it* Peter Saunders[11] seeks to challenge the 'argument that the modern welfare state fosters social cohesion'. This argument, he claims, rests on the erroneous idea that the welfare state 'is an altruistic system that encourages people to care for each other'. Instead, Saunders says, in reality the welfare state 'is more likely to generate self-interest, hostility and suspicion from recipients and donors alike' (Saunders, 2004:64-5).

One problem with Saunders' argument is his assumption that the welfare state is constituted only by the social welfare transfers he alleges so paradoxically foster social inequality. Saunders conveniently forgets the fact that other state provisions guarantee inequalities. In part, these come about through taxation (through eg tax shelters) and employment (through inordinately disparate incomes and working conditions). Such provisions are part of what, in a landmark contribution to understanding social policy, Richard Titmuss (1974) respectively termed fiscal and occupational welfare. Saunders fails to recognize that social cohesion might reflect real and perceived inequalities or injustices whatever their source. These may arise from the whole range of state or other interventions, not simply government social welfare programs.

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[11]   There are two Peter Saunders, both of whom have English accents and publicly comment on similar realms of social policy. Both are Sydney based and have the title of professor. The author of this book is Social Research Director at the Centre for Independent Studies, a prominent right wing think tank. The other is Director of the politically centrist Social Policy Research Centre in the University of New South Wales. In his Endnotes, the author of this book refers to himself as P.R.Saunders, and his counterpart as P.G.Saunders. Regrettably, both Peter Saunders generally overlook such a convenient distinction.

According to Saunders the 'real source of social cohesion or "social capital" comes not from government largesse (by which he only means social welfare) but from the self-activity of the "little platoons" of civil society'. In accord with Putnam's prescription for restoring social capital, Saunders contends:

> It emerges when families, workmates, neighbours or friends come together in formal or informal organizations and networks to share common interests and to solve their shared problems. … The best advice for any government seeking to build social cohesion is to stop doing so much and (as far as possible) to get out of the way so that people can do things for themselves. (Saunders, 2004:65)

Case studies in creating social capital

As noted above, under the heading 'what is to be done', Robert Putnam bases his strategy for change on a call to citizens to liven up and participate more in the community. Putnam conceives the challenge for reforms as a matter of individual resolve to be pursued at the local level. For him, there is nothing wrong basically with political and economic arrangements. No redistribution of power or access to resources is necessary. Nor are race, ethnic and gender relations in need of significant change. Similarly, international relations are unproblematic or even irrelevant.

This position continues in *Better Together*, 'the hopeful flip side of *Bowling Alone*' (Charpentier, 2003). Funded by many philanthropic funds, including the Ford and Rockefeller Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation (ix), *Better Together* is an uncritical commendation of community building as the key means for effecting social change. The twelve very lightly researched but wholly triumphant case studies of projects with more or less participatory dimensions make up each of the book's chapters, bordered by an introduction and conclusion. The case studies focus on:

1. Inter-church based organizing to build civic engagement and improve regional services.

2. A management led reorganization of a local library service to make it more responsive to its increasingly gentrified neighbourhood.

3. A top led community arts initiative to improve relationships between a naval dockyard and its newly gentrified urban environment.

4. The establishment of a civic association to connect and integrate a neighbourhood socially.

5. Community building through local business enterprise - a story about how a county became 'bustling and prosperous' and a national model by following the participatory approach to economic development of a visionary leader.

6. Church congregation building. How, by creating congregations out of crowds through integrative organizational activities, churches build social capital.

7. A program to encourage civic involvement amongst young people. Following a national template, civic activism and leadership amongst youth is promoted through involvement in local networks.

8. Non-conflictual union organizing. A model of 'alternative' and inspired integrative, industrial organizing that avoids the 'usual union tactics' entailing aggression and confrontation.

9. A volunteer school tutoring program. A story about the selflessness and civic values of groups of volunteers 'helping to raise the ambitions and improve the skills of kids from impoverished backgrounds' through tutoring.

10. A story about the success of a participative occupational community' in the form of 'a no-nonsense, results oriented company, with a fervent emphasis on efficiency and focussed hard work'.

11. An account of the facilitation of communication between residents of an urban region through the internet.

12. How activists influenced a state and local government to encourage citizen participation.

In their conclusion Putnam and Feldstein note that the 'case studies focus on the actions in the foreground, not the structural conditions in

the background' (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:271). Not only are the case studies about 'modest and fragile' activities (Blake, 2003), they are also almost totally devoid of material featuring advocacy. *Better Together*'s case studies are overwhelmingly of the 'consensus organizing' variety (Stoeker, 2004:61), so much favoured in government sponsored community building programs (see, for example, Mowbray, 2004b).

Though Putnam and Feldstein clearly acknowledge that the role of the state is also critical (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:271-275), this important caveat appears as an afterthought. Nevertheless, given their caveat about the importance of wider political and economic policies, it is indeed odd that references to wider social advocacy are almost entirely missing from the case studies. This is the more so considering that *Better Together* is intended as a guide to the 'broader revival of social capital' (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:5). Advocacy as an activity only appears in the occasional reference to very low key and localized examples, such as where a group of schoolchildren manage to convince authorities to make a railway crossing safer by installing warning lights (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:142).

Putnam and Feldstein select each case to make the preconceived point that 'the community can do it'[12]. They describe the selected processes to further the general thesis that effectively organized communities can resolve the problems or challenges that confront them, and everyone benefits.

Accordingly, the accounts are descriptive, rather than analytical without any serious critique. They are essentially exultant, overlooking the inevitably encountered problems and even failures from which lessons of one kind or another are to be drawn. The authors do not acknowledge, let alone address, the problems and 'dilemmas that suggest no satisfactory solution' (Miller, 2004:201) which inevitably accompany complex programs. Politics is not an issue, and readers see little sign of disagreement or difference, let alone debate. The overwhelming flavour is of consensus.

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[12]   *The community can do it* was the title of an Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) handbook for listeners, 1945, published as part of the government's post-war reconstruction program.

An Australian case study

A glimpse[13] of the three-year pilot, $3 million[14] Community Capacity Building Initiative program (CCBI) provides an example of how the Victorian state government goes about its enabling role in trying to increase social capital. This, we will see, reflects key features of the Putnamian approach, including a predominantly local frame of reference, an inward focus and consensual activities, albeit with relatively grandiose ambitions for achievement.

Launching the CCBI in 2001 the state Premier proclaimed it as 'not the usual "top down" approach to services – it's about communities working out their own needs, and developing solutions to turn around their fortunes' (Phillips and Oxley, 2002:8). The government issued an invitation to small rural communities with developed 'social capital' to participate. Selection criteria included proof that the applicant communities were already 'self starting and innovative' with 'entrepreneurial flair and plenty of enthusiasm, good networks and a broad cross-section of people willing to work together' (CCBI website). Eleven such localities, where high levels of social capital were already evident, were selected.

The professional facilitators for each project were state employees, directly accountable to the program's overall coordinator. This central manager oversaw matters as small as petty cash and as sensitive as public comment. Community advocacy over anything contentious was discouraged. State government control was also facilitated by a state-wide implementation plan. This entailed scripting and publishing a glossy set of look-alike Community Action Plans, one for each local pilot project

The planned activities were of the type commonly undertaken within communities anywhere, and long before the advent of this particular program initiative. These included contributing to the enhancement of public amenities and civic design; organizing civic events; promoting business initiatives; enhancing local communication and supporting local educational opportunities. Rather than 'taking risks – by giving power to local people' (Thwaites, 2003b) or (as the Premier said) communities shaping their futures, the program was designed

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[13]   For a detailed analysis, see Mowbray, 2004b.

[14]   For comparative purposes, the Victorian Government anticipated over $1357m in gambling tax revenue in 2003-2004 (Budget Paper No.3:493).

substantially to bolster the standing of the state. It became evidence that government really cared.

Rather than communities 'campaigning for better services', the activities of the CCBI were low key and overwhelmingly consensual. Community activism about, for example, social justice issues was invisible. While there has been some discussion about the measurement of social capital, there has been no assessment of the specific impact of the interventions in relation to creating new social capital. Because it was so short term there would be little to show. More importantly, wider government policies might have overwhelmed the impact of such a small-scale intervention.

The Victorian approach has relied on community building programs as the means of addressing the social capital idea. This is thoroughly in keeping with the unsubstantiated Putnamian idea that 'social capital is necessarily a local phenomenon' and is generally formed 'through local personal contact' (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:9).

However, Putnam fails to show how trust developed in local associations can affect societal trust, and it may just as well be *vice versa* (Harriss, 2002:37-43, 114). In any case, the local genesis of the trust thesis is rather inconsistent with another Putnam formulation that building social capital also depends on 'key enabling structural conditions in the broader environment'. However, Putnam and Feldstein do not dwell on this issue. In *Better Together*, they concede that the 'case studies focus on the actions in the foreground, not structural issues in the background' (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003:271).

What else may determine levels of social capital?

Complementing the passing caveat that civil society alone cannot solve public issues, Putnam and Feldstein (2003:273) offer other observations about how social capital is otherwise affected. One of these, also noted in passing, is that 'misguided public policies can weaken or destroy social capital' (2003:273). For the Putnam school, and those others who prefer to see social capital as a function of community level activity, this point is a source of trouble. It is a Pandora's Box that should be opened if the 'government must do no harm' principle is to be taken seriously. This is also the case if we heed another of Putnam's caveats that appears to contradict the idea that

social capital is itself causal. This is that social capital is, in part, a consequence of public policy (Putnam, 2001:14).

In pursuing the issue of what caused the decay of civic engagement, Putnam raises a corresponding issue. This is that governments may also do things that though not necessarily meant to influence social capital, nevertheless do so in powerful ways. Deciding on war is an obvious example. Putnam's analysis of the role of World War II in the USA leads him to point out the 'practical implication' of finding 'the moral equivalent of war'[15] for civic renewal (Putnam, 2000:276). Obviously without prescience about the impending events of 11 September 2001, he warily ventured:

> Creating (or recreating) social capital is no simple task. It would be eased by a palpable national crisis, like war or depression or national disaster, but for better and for worse, America at the dawn of the new century faces no such galvanizing crisis. (Putnam, 2000:402)

This is consistent with O'Hara's (2004:178) observation: 'In the absence of a tangible enemy, our siege mentality dissipated, and we were able to turn our gaze inward'.

Putnam might baulk at endorsing the transparent motives of the likes of (Argentine) President Galtieri and (UK) Prime Minister Thatcher in starting a war over tiny south Atlantic islands for their own domestic advantage. Certainly, armed conflict has served many political leaders in their quests to quell political disaffection and kindle national integration. Maybe a 'war on terror' beat-up is a desperate substitute for Putnam's 'moral equivalent of war'. Its impact may be measurable at least in part through its impact on a nation's level of public trust. Putnam and Feldstein (2003:285) state that 'In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, trust among Americans of all races and ethnicities shot up'. (How they reconcile this with widely reported discrimination against US Muslims is not at all clear.)

Quite obviously, many types of policies apart from war will critically influence issues central to the Putnamian conceptualization of social capital. Government policies that bear on the distribution of wealth (including land) and income, opportunity and influence; political

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[15] 'The moral equivalent of war' is the title of William James' 1906 essay about the challenge for the state of sustaining political cohesion without resort to war-making.
http://www.constitution.org/wj/meow.htm

accountability; public infrastructure and access to services; corporate greed; the integrity of the criminal justice system, and international tensions are all likely to affect levels of societal trust and social cohesion.

Inequality and social capital

While Putnam argues that US civic engagement declined in the decades after the Second World War, he also associates this trend with a declining level of economic equality. The high point in civic connectedness, Putnam argues, was in the 1950s and 1960s, when the USA was 'more egalitarian than it had been in more than a century'. 'Sometime around 1965-70 America reversed course and started becoming both less just economically and less well connected socially and politically' (Putnam, 2000:359). This is a crucial hypothesis about what most affects social capital.

Others also cite 'fairly strong evidence, both at national and local level, that rates of civic participation are greater in places with higher and more equal incomes' (Johnson, Headey and Jensen, 2003:38). They also report that participation – particularly political participation – is highest of all in the West's most egalitarian countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands. A British study suggested that a post war drop in trust is coincident with 'sharply growing inequality' and the 'changing nature of working life' (Grenier and Wright, 2003:24).

Kawachi, Kennedy and Lochner (1997) report a positive correlation between levels of cohesiveness and economic inequality. They suggest that rising income inequalities are associated with declining trust and that an 'egalitarian distribution of wealth and income seems to imply a more cohesive, harmonious society'. They relate this to government policy which, 'in recent years … has tended to reinforce growing inequality'.

This leads seamlessly into the association between economic inequality, social capital and health, a theme deeply entrenched in the health literature, as Hawe and Shiell (2000) and Szreter and Woolcock (2002) demonstrate in their detailed reviews. The Victorian Minister of Health also recognizes this association, drawing attention to the implications for health services of the 'widening gap in income levels in Australia'. Similarly, she reports that 'death rates tend to be higher in countries and regions where income differences between the rich and

poor are larger'. Tellingly, the Minister says, the 'sharp end comes', 'when we ask how we can make use of this information'.

Predictably enough, the Minister quickly retreated and plumped for a communitarian approach. Her risk-free and anodyne conclusion is that at least until 'all the important factors in determining people's health' are better understood she backs the value of building community and togetherness as the most efficacious solution (Pike, 2003:9).

Carson suggests that this sort of political deflection of responsibility from the state to 'non-governmental collectivities and individuals' is not far from 'blaming the community for its own woes' (Carson, 2004:15,17). Alcock makes a similar point, as well as drawing attention to the argument from urban sociology that concentration on area-based explanations of problems obscures their 'fundamentally structural' origins (Alcock, 2004:93-94). Quite obviously, government policies that affect the distribution of income, as well as those concerning international conflict and questions of national security, are likely to have a far greater impact on social capital than low-budget, short-term, localized and fragmented community building programs located at the margins of government.

More fundamental to the question about the genuineness of government commitment to enhancing social capital is its interest in assessing the ramifications of its policies. Though there is distinct interest on the part of government in measuring social capital (eg ABS, 2004) and its association with issues such as health (for example, Cullen and Whiteford, 200), there is no commensurate concern for assessing the impacts of government policies on social capital.

Measuring government impacts on social capital

It might be thought that the advocates of the concept and application of social capital would be trying to lead the way on the issue of measurement, the more so since concern for an evidence based approach is repeatedly declared. Curiously, this is not the case. As Marston and Watts (2003) point out, the construction of evidence and its connection with policy is not simply an empirical matter and is open to manipulation by elites.

Amongst the ocean of literature on measuring levels of social capital, an extremely small proportion deals with the problem of policy outcomes, other than limited evaluations of community building

programs. However, some writers clearly recognize the issue. In her nationally broadcast (Australian Broadcasting Commission) Boyer Lectures in 1995, Eva Cox advocated development of a social capital impact statement[16] before governments sold public assets (Cox, 1995:77-78).

Towards the end of *Bowling Alone*, Putnam also fleetingly suggests that new government programs be preceded by social capital impact statements that are 'less bureaucratic and legislatic (sic) than environmental impact statements have become, but equally effective at calling attention to unanticipated consequences' (Putnam, 2000:413; see too 1995:76). The kind of programs Putnam had in mind were about urban renewal or freeways. Harvard's Saguaro Seminar (closely linked to Putnam) has evinced interest in the idea, but has not gone beyond local impacts. It published several short papers on the topic (eg Feldstein and Sander; Sander).

Cox and Caldwell have extended usefully the application of 'social capital accounting' to specific policies. Policies should be 'assessed for their likely impact on trust and community cohesion'. They provide a list of 'initial questions' for such assessment. These are generally about the way in which people experience certain policies. How, for example, would they affect social skills, values and attitudes? (Cox and Caldwell, 2000:68-70).

The Australian Productivity Commission reproduces Cox and Caldwell's 'checklist' and takes the idea a bit further providing a list of 'government policies with possible side-effects on social capital. These include, for example, 'certain labour market policies' which may be directed at equity but which 'price unemployed people out of jobs'; or welfare payments which may 'reduce incentives to work, create dependency and displace private charity, thus harming social capital' (Productivity Commission, 2003:4.2).

Tellingly, the Productivity Commission generally confines its discussion to the realm of social policy, and categorically avoids other politically divisive policy fields such as corporate accountability or economic policies that directly affect the distribution of income and wealth. As is the paradoxical but ingrained norm in the Australian discourse on

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[16] Using Google (on 9 June 2004) I searched on 'social capital impact assessment' and 'social capital impact statement(s)' and found 10 and 31 results respectively, some overlapping. Given the immensity of the social capital literature, this appeared as a remarkably small number. Several results were about measuring social capital in general, rather than the impact of particular policies.

social capital (see eg ABS, 2004; Alston, 2000; Winter 2000; Johnson, Headey and Jensen, 2003; Pope, 2003[17]) the Productivity Commission disregards issues central to relations with Indigenous people. Little is more fundamental to questions about national cohesion and trust and than the issue of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

The Productivity Commission almost totally ignores the extensive and vigorous critical discourse, just as it sidesteps Bourdieu's use of the term social capital (Productivity Commission, 2003:6). This is despite its stated intention of informing public discussion through a review of the concept of social capital and its policy implications. Rather than signifying any retreat from economic fundamentalism as some suggest (Gittins, 2003; Adams and Hess, 2001:15-17) the Productivity Commission acts to cast social capital discourse within safe limits.

Predictably, the Australian Bureau of Statistics provides a similar account of social capital as the Productivity Commission. Employing Nelsonian finesse,[18] Indigenous people are unseen and the sweep of the literature fails to deal with divergent and troublesome viewpoints. This is even though the Australian Bureau of Statistics at least notes in passing that Bourdieu 'represents social capital as reproducing a structure of privilege and power relationships' (ABS, 2004:81).

Though its intervention is ostensibly about measurement of social capital, the Australian Bureau of Statistics also manages to overlook a fundamental issue that the Productivity Commission does raise. This is measuring the impacts on social capital of givernment policies. The Australian Bureau of Statistics says that measurement of social capital is required for three purposes: establishing (1) national and sub-national social capital profiles or benchmarks; (2) the effects of social capital on wellbeing, (such as health, employment and education); (3) and the success of projects meant to 'nurture' social capital. (ABS, 2004:11).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics also provides a list of examples of government 'programs involving social capital' across Australia. Most

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[17]   This last two papers are literature scans commissioned by the Commonwealth's Department of Family and Community Services and Department of Health and Ageing, respectively.

[18]   In 1801 during the Battle of Copenhagen Vice Admiral Nelson put a telescope to his blind right eye as if to receive a message - with which he did not agree and intended to ignore. This led to victory and Nelson's elevation to Viscount.

of these are localist or community building type programs, and all fall within the realms of social and health policy. None focus on issues concerned with governments' major policy portfolios, concerning the economy and business, criminal justice, transport and communications, the environment, defence or international relations (ABS, 2004:10).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics then lists a selection of 'government surveys with questions relating to social capital'. Again, all of these fall within the realms of social and health policy (ABS, 2004:11). Here again, we have an example of a government agency expounding on the virtue and importance of social capital, but declining to recognize most of the administrative and policy domains likely to have the greatest influence on social capital.

Conclusion: Towards social capital impact assessment

The public interest in social capital is generally in line with the approach of Robert Putnam. However many of Putnam's reservations or caveats are overlooked, often expediently. Alternative definitions of social capital are also generally ignored, as are the numerous problems with the Putnamian approach identified by its critics. So that social capital can be presented as a totally positive phenomena, even the negative aspects of social capital conceded by Putnam (and labelled the 'dark side') are mostly unacknowledged. Responsibility for the maintenance or protection of social capital is largely seen as a matter for civil society or community, making it easier to insinuate or conclude that the origins of problems are also localized. The role of the state is generally portrayed as a residual one, or facilitative at most. The chief means for strengthening social capital is presented as being in the realm of social policy, especially through family support or community (re)building schemes. Moreover, these typically have an integrative and consensual character. Finally, while there is pronounced government interest in measuring levels of social capital, this is in 'snapshots' or in the effects of community building interventions of limited scope, time and resources. There is virtually no government interest in assessing the ways in which wider state policies might affect social capital, negatively or positively, for better of for worse.

The literature on social capital is immense, and almost certainly some of its innumerable contributors have elaborated a more satisfactory approach to assessing the impacts of policies on forms of social capital

than I have been able to locate. In any case, there is no reason why some of the more flexible and penetrating tools for unravelling public policy, such as that of David Gil (1992), could not be readily adapted for assessing policy impacts on social capital. The fundamental point is, however, that governments are reluctant to examine the impact on social capital of their most important policies, such as those that affect the distribution of income.

While there is much that is problematic with the notion of social capital, it is well established. Social capital is currently a vogue concept with a good deal of momentum in public policy. The challenge for policy makers is to put it to as good a use as possible. One such means is for the concept, or variations on it like trust, to be applied in shedding more light on the often-unseen implications of government policies.

Despite widespread expressions of concern about trustworthiness in government and persistent bids for our trust, politicians are reluctant to encourage careful analysis or auditing of the relevant effects of their policies. This paradox is, according to an analysis of post-war UK polls, accompanied by another; 'perceived trustworthiness rarely swings an election' (O'Hara, 2004:23; 274).

To demonstrate their genuine and often repeated concern about levels of social capital, we should expect that policy makers assiduously assess the impact of all major policies, explicit and implicit, on social capital. To verify their often-professed interest or commitment to the importance of social capital, as a matter of course governments should undertake the following: They should enable independent and wholehearted public analysis of the effects of all policies with a potentially significant effect on social capital, or its associated concepts such as social cohesion or public trust. Such analysis might be termed social capital impact assessment, though the name is not important. Amongst other things, the process should take into account policies that, however indirectly, affect the distribution of income and wealth; access to opportunity including health, education and employment; the integrity of the criminal justice system; race, ethnic and gender relations; and corporate behaviour.

There is no reason why, in the absence of cooperation, governments should not conduct such assessments of the impacts of other governments. These would range across formal jurisdictional boundaries, municipal and regional, federal and international.

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