

It Takes a Village to Grow Potential

(A citizen's reflection)

When I think about productivity, I don't picture charts. I think about the arc of a life—from birth to old age—and how potential emerges, changes shape, and keeps surprising us. We say it takes a village to raise a child; it also takes a village to keep raising each other, in every season of life.

A customer once said to me, years ago, while travelling the country in a van: "If you have a loving family and a home, you've already won the lottery of life." I've thought about that often. Belonging and security are not luxuries; they're the soil where talent takes root. Without them, potential withers. With them, it multiplies.

Australia often talks about a "labour shortage." I see something else: untapped human potential hiding in plain sight—people between roles, carers, older Australians with deep tacit knowledge, young people whose curiosity outruns their credentials, migrants still finding their footing, regional makers who learned by doing. Potential doesn't start after high school and it doesn't end at retirement. It is fluid, not siloed.

Nature offers clues. Healthy ecosystems waste nothing; they are modular, diverse, and circular. They adapt locally while remaining part of a larger system. If we designed our rules of engagement—in education, work, care, and enterprise—with the same intelligence, we would pair precision with flexibility. Automation would be a partner in a land of scarcity, used to reduce drudgery and waste so human attention can do what only humans can: judgment, care, creativity, coordination.

We learn in two streams: the unconscious (habits, culture, embodied know-how) and the conscious (formal instruction, certificates). We get the best results when policy respects both—valuing the wisdom that flows through families, workplaces and communities, as well as the training that lifts us to new frontiers. A system that recognises competence wherever it's found, and lets people move more freely across stages of life and types of contribution, will uncover capacity we currently overlook.

If productivity is about living standards, then we should measure not only output but how well we nurture and use human potential across the whole arc of life. That means removing needless barriers, recognising real skills (not just paperwork), designing modular pathways in and out of learning and work, and making room for people to contribute at different intensities over time.

We are not like other countries. We are small in number and vast in place. That should make us more—not less—precious about every person who is born here or chooses to live here. If we treat human potential as our scarcest and most renewable resource, we will discover we are not short of labour; we've just been short of imagination.

— Submitted as a personal reflection