

The Crisis We Cannot Waste

“Never let a good crisis go to waste.” — Winston Churchill

This reflection takes its title from Churchill’s words, because the sentiment is as relevant now as it was in wartime. A crisis forces clarity. It reveals what holds a society together and what allows it to function under stress. Yet history shows we are quick to forget once the danger passes. If the lessons of the pandemic are brushed aside, the vulnerabilities will return, and the cycle will repeat.

Australia’s greatest strength during the pandemic was trust — in institutions, in collective action, and in one another. Without it, income supports would not have stabilised households, health measures would not have held, and the workforce would not have adapted. Trust was the invisible capital that enabled coordination, and it remains the most fragile asset we possess.

We also learnt that connection is survival. When the physical world closed, digital technology sustained work, education, and care. This made clear that universal access to secure digital tools is no longer optional; it is national infrastructure.

Adaptability was another lesson. Workers, businesses, and communities adjusted in ways that once seemed impossible. Flexibility in work is no longer an experiment but a lived reality, and it should be carried forward without sacrificing wellbeing.

We also saw the cost of fragility. Empty shelves and supply chain disruptions reminded us that resilience is not inefficiency but insurance. A truly dynamic economy is one with strength in depth, diversified supply, and sovereign capability.

Above all, we discovered that care is central. Health, childcare, and education were not peripheral services but the backbone of society. Investment in care is not a cost to productivity — it is productivity itself.

The same lesson applies to energy and climate. Just as the virus tested multiple systems at once, the net zero transformation will touch every aspect of our economy. Clean, reliable energy must be understood as the current that runs through all else, not as a single project.

These are not separate themes. They are interdependent strands of one fabric: resilience, adaptability, digital capacity, care, and trust. Productivity will not be secured by growth rhetoric alone. It will be secured when these strands are woven deliberately into daily life and measured as part of our national strength.

If we act on these lessons, the crisis will not have been wasted. If we forget, we will face the next test unprepared.