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## The culture gap

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IT'S the political buzz word du jour: infrastructure. We all know we need to build more of it; to identify bottlenecks in it; and to find ways to fund it, despite the political buck-passing about who is responsible for it.

All the talk so far has been about economic infrastructure: roads, rail and ports, and the need for trained people to build and run them. But in an analysis commissioned for the upcoming Future Summit conference in Melbourne, Australian National University political scientists Andrew Leigh and Glenn Withers suggest there is a deeper cause of Australia's slowing momentum: atrophied political infrastructure.

The unruliness in parliamentary question time and the apparent institutionalisation of short-term thinking, they say, are as much to blame for Australia's malaise as physical capacity constraints. This provocative view comes in just one of six papers commissioned to prompt debate at the second Future Summit, a conference organised by the Australian Davos Connection.

The summit will bring together present and future leaders in business, politics and the community, from Australia and the region, to look beyond the political cycle at national identity, biosciences, sustainability, leadership, the economy and community.

"There is a real sense that somebody hasn't been thinking about the future far enough," says Australian Davos Connection chairman Michael Roux after talking to some of the speakers who will attend the conference early next month.

"There's just extreme frustration and irritation about the federal political system ... All they see is the fighting going on all the time. It's getting in the way of progress, it's the reason things don't happen.

"So they see that affects infrastructure, it affects dealing with health, it affects dealing with education. The whole picture is emerging that issues which are important for the next 10 to 20 years are political footballs between federal and state governments, and between the Opposition and Government."

Leigh agrees, saying "the question time issue is particularly damaging. It matters in terms of what leaders can achieve and the stance from which they speak, and it equally hurts John Howard and Kim Beazley. Every time a voter turns on the TV and sees them shouting at each other in question time, they're just a little bit less likely to believe that these people are serious about presenting a vision for the future."

To Leigh, the most important bottleneck in the country's political culture is short-term thinking.

"I'd like to hear more politicians talking about visions for the future and more journalists in election campaigns saying, 'Paint us a picture of where the country should be in 20 years,'" he says. "It's important if we're going to solve a raft of issues from physical infrastructure to early childhood."

Leigh and Withers present a policy prescription to kick off the discussion. It includes lifting the superannuation contribution to 15 per cent and obliging super funds to invest in Australian infrastructure; signing a treaty with the indigenous population; regularly reviewing the Constitution; and instituting a system of US-style primaries to select parliamentary candidates.

Another key theme of the conference will be Australia's place in the region. At last year's summit in Sydney, Noordin Sopiee, the chief executive of Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies, said Australia's economic relationship with Asia was strong but not yet emotional.

Philip Flood, a board member of the University of Melbourne-based Asialink and a former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, says the Boxing Day tsunami changed that.

"In a way [that] has never happened before, Australians emphatically declared that our future is inextricably linked with our Asian neighbours," he says in his paper for the conference.

Asked about this, he says: "I've been observing foreign affairs for well over 40 years and I think it was a quite remarkable response ... The Government response was fabulous and it built on people's reaction."

As for our emotional attachment to the region: "I wouldn't say we're totally comfortable. I'd say we're getting there."

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