THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Sydney Policy Lab

Civic Leadership Project

Exploring leadership for the common good in a polarised age.

Applications close: 4th December 2026

The Civic Leadership Project is a new collaboration between the Sydney Policy Lab and members of Sydney Public Law, bringing together 25 students from across the University to explore what it means to lead for the common good in an increasingly polarised society. It will explore what virtues and methods, skills, and foci of concern civic leaders should develop and promote.

The project is structured as four-day long sessions spread across Semester 1, 2027.

Students will participate in seminars exploring politics and leadership for the common good; discuss face-to-face with senior politicians and civil society leaders the problem of polarisation, how leaders respond, and what the goals of leading are; examine stories of the common good, and how particular communities contribute to it, through on-site conversations with leaders of religious communities; and learn from media commentators, specialists and writers how to develop rigorous and beautiful writing for a divided public audience.

The sessions will include required pre-reading (readings and recordings). The goal is not to explore the common good or what good leadership is comprehensively (akin to a University unit or degree program). Rather, the project aims to start a conversation on what these are, provide stories for critical reflection in aid of that conversation, introduce students to experienced civic leaders, and begin to develop some of the needed skills for leadership directed at the common good. The readings and recordings will be selected to aid in that preliminary endeavour.

All meals, morning teas, and afternoon teas related to the project are included without charge. Funding for transport for the two on-site sessions (in Western Sydney and in Central Sydney) will be provided, costed at a standard return train fare. There is no enrolment cost for the project.

This project does not contribute credits for any degree or other University-based program. It does not provide any form of accreditation. Following successful completion of the program (including the writing component), students will receive a certificate indicating completion from the Sydney Policy Lab.

The draft programme is as follows (and is subject to change):

Welcome Dinner – Thursday 4 March	
Session 1 – Friday 5 March (all day) ***Morning session****: Polarisation & Politics for the Good* (9am – 12:30pm with a morning tea break) **Lunch** ***Afternoon session***: *Leading in a Polarised Age* (1:30pm – 5pm (with an afternoon tea break)	Group discussion Guest speakers: University of Sydney senior leadership, and a senior politician
Session 2 – Friday 19 March (all day) ***Morning session****: Communities and the Common Good, Part 1* (9am – 12:30pm with a morning tea break) **Lunch** ***Afternoon session*****:** *Lessons in Political Leadership* (2pm – 3:30pm, followed by afternoon tea)	Group discussion + discussion on-site at a local mosque with Imam On-site at electoral office with local MP.
Session 3 – Friday 16 April (all day) ***Morning session*****:** *Communities and the Common Good, Part 2* (9am – 12:30pm with a morning tea break) **Lunch** ***Afternoon session:*** *Communities and the Common Good, Part 3* (2:30pm – 4pm, followed by afternoon tea)	Group discussion + discussion on site at a synagogue with rabbi Discussion on site at a cathedral with bishop
Final Dinner – Thursday 20 May	
Session 4 – Friday 21 May (all day) ***Morning session****: Writing and the Good* (9am – 12:30pm, with a morning tea break) **Lunch** ***Afternoon session:*** *Truthful Writing (Navigating the Media)* (1:30pm – 5pm, with an afternoon tea break)	Group discussion Discussion with guest media specialists and commentators and journalists

Session Participation

Each session will entail required pre-reading (readings and recordings). Students will be expected to engage with the readings and recordings and participate in free-flowing conversation led by the academic facilitators and guests.

Students applying to the project must be prepared to commit to attending in-person ALL of the sessions. You should confirm your availability for all sessions before applying. Two of the sessions entail off-campus site visits within Sydney, accessible by train. The project will provide any needed train tickets.

Morning teas, afternoon teas, and meals will be provided by the project. There is no enrolment cost.

Throughout the discussions, site visits, and shared meals, students will be encouraged to engage seriously and respectfully with other participants and guests across differences. By enrolling, students note that they are bound by the University's Student Code of Conduct and all applicable University policies. If necessary, the project administrators will exclude students who are unable to act respectfully towards other participants or who are unable to follow University policy and conduct requirements. The program entails on-site visits to an electorate and places of religious worship. The expectation is that participants will respect the rules and guidelines of the host organisation, including any security requirements and standards of dress with respect to places of worship.

Project Capstone – Writing Project

For the project capstone, participants will write an op-ed (e.g. a piece for the Sydney Morning Herald) or essay (e.g. a piece for ABC Religion & Ethics) for a public audience addressing a policy challenge, political or legal issue, or societal question in line with the themes of the program. This is a condition of enrolling and of completing the program (receiving the certificate of attendance from the Sydney Policy Lab).

The specific topic will link with the Research Programs at the Sydney Policy Lab, or a topic of the participant's choice, with permission. Those Research Programs are:

- CARE – Championing Australia's Relational Economy
- A Good Childhood
- Advancing Rural Health Equity (name is currently being confirmed)
- Inequality & Poverty

Two further Research Programs are currently being considered for establishment at the Sydney Policy Lab and may, therefore, provide two further thematic areas.

Specific guidance on questions that may be adopted will be provided nearer to the program start date.

Participants will collaborate with the Lab's academic membership to refine their ideas and will be mentored by the project facilitators on their writing.

Prizes will be awarded to the two best pieces of writing, along with the opportunity to present at one of the Policy Lab's flagship "Policy Bites" lunch seminars in the following semester. The best pieces will be published by the Sydney Policy Lab or else their authors will be encouraged to submit them to an appropriate venue or platform.

Meet the team

Dr Kate Harrison Brennan



Kate is Professor of Practice and Academic Director of the Sydney Policy Lab. She is a graduate of the University of Sydney (BA (Hons I) and LLB (Hons I)) and the University of Oxford (MPhil with Distinction (Development Studies) and Dphil (Politics), where she studied as a NSW Rhodes scholar. She was awarded a Fleet Fellowship to complete her doctoral studies at Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs.

Kate served as Advisor to former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, after having served previously in her office when she was Deputy Prime Minister.She has held roles as Director of Global Affairs and Strategic Communications at the Australian Consulate-General in New York, the CEO of an Anglican women's foundation, and Head of Policy & Design at the Paul Ramsay Foundation. Kate currently serves on the Board of World Vision Australia, where she is Chair of the Governance Committee, and on the Board of World Vision International. She is the editor of *Making Global Institutions Work* and engages regularly in the media on issues related to public policy.

Dr Joel Harrison



Joel is a Senior Lecturer at Sydney Law School where he convenes Federal Constitutional Law and teaches Public Law and Statutory Interpretation, and he is the co-Director of Sydney Public Law, the Law School's research centre for public law. He holds degrees from the University of Auckland (BA and LLB (Hons)) and the University of Oxford (MSt and Dphil (Law)) and has held teaching positions at Oxford, Columbia Law School, Macquarie University, and Sydney.

Prior to academia, he was a judge's clerk ('Associate') at the Court of Appeal of New Zealand and worked for the New Zealand Law Commission. His writing focuses on religious liberty, constitutionalism, rights, and the relationship of these to the common good. He is the author of *Post-Liberal Religious Liberty: Forming Communities of Charity* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and enjoys writing occasional essays.

Dr Lukas Opacic



Lukas is a Lecturer at Sydney Law School where he teaches Federal Constitutional Law, Public Law and Statutory Interpretation, and Jurisprudence. He previously convened and lectured Constitutional Law and Jurisprudence at Macquarie University. He holds degrees in Pure Mathematics and Law from the University of Sydney, as well as an LLM and PhD from Sydney Law School. His research concerns the relationship between law and religion, the role of the common good in constitutional theory, and the nature and role of legislative intention in statutory interpretation.

He has worked for a number of think tanks, writing on religious discrimination and constitutional law, as well as at the Australian Parliament as the principal advisor to the chair of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee and as an advisor to the

Shadow Minister for Education. In a former life, he was a concert pianist, studying piano performance in Moscow, Russia. He is an enthusiastic (though by no means competent) chess player.

Dr Antone Martinho-Truswell



Antone is a behavioural biologist, Research Affiliate of SOLES, and Operations Manager for the Sydney Policy Lab. He holds degrees from Harvard University (AB (Neurobiology and Behaviour) and the University of Oxford (MA and DPhil (Zoology/Behavioural Ecology). Antone was formerly a Fellow by Examination in Biological Science at Magdalen College, Oxford and Dean of Graduate Students at a residential college in Sydney.

His academic work has focused on behavioural ecology, the origins of behaviours, and how they impact the way we live together. He is especially interested in bringing an empirical lens to human fundamental needs, so that policy can serve the common good. He is the author of *The Parrot in the Mirror: How Evolving to be Like Birds Made Us Human* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and an essayist, with publications ranging from *Science* to the *Sydney Morning Herald.*

Applications

The project is open to all undergraduate (and Juris Doctor) students enrolled in a degree program at the University of Sydney, of any background, who have completed their first year of study.

Applications must be submitted at the link below by 5pm on Fri 4th December 2026. Applicants will be informed of the outcome of their application by 14 December 2026. Please note, a short interview may be used during the application process.

Please provide a CV and statement of not more than 500 words addressing why you are interested in the project and its themes and what you think leaders need to address (or cultivate) in order to pursue the common good. You will be asked to certify that you did not use AI to write your statement.

Application form: Civic Leadership Project - Application – Fill out form

Further questions

If you have any questions about the Civic Leadership Project, please contact Dr Antone Martinho-Truswell (**antone.martinho-truswell@sydney.edu.au**).