



Campaign for Social Science Annual Sage Lecture 2025

20 November 2025 by The Honourable Julia Gillard AC

Lecture transcript

Good evening. It's a pleasure to be here and my thanks go to my valued colleague, Professor Bobby Duffy, for extending the invitation to me.

I want to begin by celebrating the enduring and vital work of the Academy of Social Sciences and its advocacy arm, the Campaign for Social Science. After all, if you can't get a pat on the back at your annual lecture event, when can you.

It was visionary of the founders in the 1980s to create the Academy and bring the UK's diverse academic, practitioner, and learned societies together.

Being connected and talking to each other is valuable in its own right. But what's even more powerful is your discussions gave rise to collective action.

In January 2011, the Academy dramatically amplified its impact by launching the Campaign for Social Science in January 2011.

This Campaign has reached beyond academia and now showcases to decision makers how social science disciplines can directly solve national challenges.

And the Academy has successfully demonstrated the power of social science in both words and deeds.

The Academy is owed huge thanks for the remarkable agility shown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Your rapid response work, including the immediate launch of a COVID-19 hub early in the lockdown, ensured that crucial societal research—on everything from behavioural change and vaccine uptake to economic modelling and social fragmentation—was immediately accessible to policymakers and the public.

This ability to swiftly convene and broker expertise demonstrates your dedication to evidence-led governance, not just in theory, but at a time of highest national urgency.

This focus on real-world impact is also visible in authoritative reports, such as *Vital Business: The Essential Role of the Social Sciences in the UK Private Sector*, released in September 2020.

This report directly countered the simplistic notion of a pure STEM-led economy by demonstrating that businesses across the UK, from tech giants to engineering consultancies, rely heavily on social science knowledge and skills, in areas like strategic planning, market awareness, innovation, and risk management.

Finally, the Campaign continues to shape the national dialogue with landmark publications like *Beyond the Ballot*.

This report represents a proactive, coordinated effort to embed social science research into the current government's missions.

If we pull back the lens from the work of the Academy and look more broadly, we can clearly see that, in a world defined by accelerating change, addressing the many challenges that arise requires more than just scientific ingenuity; it requires a deep, nuanced, and data-driven understanding of people, society, and place.

But – you kind of knew didn't you, that there would be a 'but' after my words of congratulations – despite all this good work, we are living in a time of peril for social sciences.

This evening, I want to explore the nature of the risks, what we can do about them and then end with some happier news about what it can look like when social science is truly valued.

Contemporary Challenges

Let's start our exploration in an unusual place but one that which I think elucidates our contemporary problems.

As you may recall, on the 29th of January 2025, there was a fatal mid-air collision between an American Airlines regional jet and a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter over the Potomac River in Washington DC. Tragically, all of the 67 people aboard both aircraft died.

President Donald Trump reacted almost immediately to the disaster and suggested that the crash was attributable to the diversity, equity, and inclusion policies at the Federal Aviation Administration.

When directly challenged by reporters on the source of this extraordinary claim, the President famously stated: "Because I have common sense."

Notably, the subsequent investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board did not bear out the President's claim.

His terminology 'common sense' channelled the wording of his inauguration address given just a few days before in which he promised 'a revolution of common sense'.

The administration has subsequently used the "common sense" argument to justify freezing or terminating federal grants which contain keywords related to social research topics, including "diversity," "equity," "gender," and "trauma," branding them as "woke" or "social engineering policies."

While social science disciplines are the primary generators of this type of research, we should note the Trump administration has also targeted science more broadly and especially the science of vaccines.

'Common sense' is a phrase that dismisses the complex, quantitative, and qualitative methodologies of social science in favour of simple, intuitive personal or community belief.

And in many ways, all this is just the next instalment in the age-old tradition of pitting universities against communities.

As long ago as 1963, William F. Buckley Jr, the noted American conservative theorist and activist, who is often cited as the intellectual father of the tradition that led to the Reagan Administration wrote:

"I am obliged to confess that I should sooner live in a society governed by the first two thousand names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the two thousand faculty members of Harvard University."

But in age where anti-intellectual populism can be turbo charged by social media, with ugly virality, the power of this long-standing threat is hugely magnified.

Additional layers of challenge come from the funding constraints facing universities here and in many other parts of the world.

We see a trend toward vocational courses and degrees that promise a direct line to employment, even though in a world of AI-driven labour market change such 'promises' aren't golden.

In research funding, there's a growing emphasis on what's profitable, what's patentable, what's measurable in quarterly returns.

So, the threats are ideological and fiscal. We should note that here in the UK we have seen a change in rhetoric between the former conservative government and the current Labour one.

Terminology like 'low value' degrees to describe social science qualification are no longer in regular use but acute fiscal pressures remain.

Campaign wise, what should we conclude and do in the face of these threats.

I don't have all the answers but would direct your attention to a useful information source.

Funded by Wellcome, last week the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) launched new qualitative and quantitative research on attitudes to research and development.

The findings include the overall sense of pessimism among the public, with 62% agreeing that the UK is in decline and just 39% saying they are optimistic things will get better.

Immigration is a prominent issue, but the top three priorities nominated by the UK community members involved in the polling are the NHS, tackling the cost of living and growing the economy.

Support for research and development would best be described as broad but not deep.

Around 40% said they had heard of the term “R&D” and know what it means, rising to 82% when “research and development” is spelled out in full. Initial associations with R&D tended to focus on consumer technologies and medical advances, rather than the arts or humanities.

R&D was most often associated with the private sector in focus groups, with universities rarely front of mind and seen primarily as education institutions.

The public struggle to understand the scale of the R&D workforce and, although viewed favourably, most do not consider researchers to be “like them” and stereotypes persist.

Asked about the importance of R&D in delivering benefits for them and their families, 80% said that it was at least somewhat important.

Some 88% said it was at least somewhat important for the Government to invest money into R&D, and 71% think the Government should either increase or maintain levels of R&D investment.

But only four in ten (41%) said that R&D was relevant to their life, and just 29% said they feel connected with R&D.

Around half (45%) said that R&D benefits some in the UK more than others, with the main beneficiaries seen to be the wealthy or elite, and the private sector.

There are troubling differences on voting intention, with those intending to vote Labour and Conservative tending to be more supportive of R&D across a range of measures, compared to those intending to vote Reform.

Labour or Conservative voters were more likely to think of lots of ways R&D benefits them or their family than Reform voters (66%, 55% and 39%, respectively).

Reform voters were more likely to think the UK has fallen behind on R&D (34% compared with 15% for Labour voters) and less likely to support an R&D laboratory being built in their area (50% compared with 71% for Labour voters).

Levels of distrust in researchers were also higher among Reform voters (16%, compared with the UK average of 11%).

I'm conscious I have hit you with a lot of numbers, but to summarise, what I think those numbers are trying to tell us is that a politically partisan campaign against research, especially 'woke' research, in the UK in current political circumstances would likely strike a chord.

We have work to do to explain the benefits of research and especially of the social sciences, the contribution of which is even less understood than research generally.

On the upside, I keenly noted the finding that charities, universities and researchers are the three most trusted sources for views on funding of research and development, with politicians the least trusted.

I'm glad I've jumped from that bottom category to the top by joining Wellcome and being here at Kings College London.

If we are to find the right strategies to campaign for more public support for research generally, and for social sciences in particular, we need to be self-reflective, indeed self-critical about what we have done well and what we have done badly to date.

I'm not equipped to offer that comprehensive analysis for all of social sciences, but I can at least offer you a case study.

GIWL

As you know, I have the honour of chairing the Global Institute for Women's Leadership here at KCL.

We also look to polling data. Each year, the Global Institute partners with IPSOS, the polling company, to look at attitudes to gender equality.

Our 2025 report was based on a survey of nearly 24,000 people across 30 countries around the world.

One of the questions we asked was whether people think women's equality has gone so far that it now discriminates against men. 44 percent agreed. Almost half.

And while men were disproportionately saying yes to this question, over a third of the women we asked also agreed with that statement.

This is not a revelation to us at the Global Institute. We have conducted this type of opinion polling for several years now and have seen a hardening of these kinds of attitudes over time.

But years of data shouldn't inoculate against us from feeling the impact of this startling statistic.

World Economic Forum research tells us we are much more than 100 years away from achieving gender equality globally, yet 44 percent of people believe that men are becoming victims of gender discrimination.

The bad news doesn't stop there, I'm afraid.

Asked whether a man who stays home to look after his children is less of a man, 28% of Gen Z men agree. Gen Z in our sample means those aged over 18 but no older than 27 at the time of the survey.

Among those ageing baby boomers, only 12% of men express the same view.

We should just pause for a moment and have that sink in. It means if you found yourself at a birthday party for a seventy-year-old with the celebrating crowd largely in the same age bracket, you are more likely to be among men supportive of gender equality than if you went to a 21st.

Why is that?

We thought these younger generations, growing up without the shadow of a cold war and in the age of digital technology, would become global citizens, able to see through the stereotypes ingrained in previous generations.

Of course, we thought there would still be political differences and varied appetites for the rate of change – but we assumed the trend would be progressive, not polarising.

The reality reminds me of a quote by the American humourist and poet, Ogden Nash: “Progress might have been alright once,” he said, “but it’s gone on too long...”

He was making a joke. But what happened to make so many young men begin to see progress and equality as a threat?

No one knows the full answer to that but there is now a huge drive to understand it.

This year’s acclaimed TV series *Adolescence* was one way of doing so and showed that the creative industries are now trying to grapple with and invite us to reflect on what’s happening.

At a more academic level, at the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership we are endeavouring to mount a major research project into attitude formation by young men.

It is always dangerous to posit an explanation before all the data and analysis is in. But intuitively, I would posit three potential factors.

One, young men are doing it tougher today. The statistics on comparative educational attainment and income generation capacity are truly concerning.

Indeed, here in the UK, for the first time, it is young men rather than young women who are more likely to be out of work and out of school.

Second, today’s generation has had more of their gender based attitudes formed online, with anti-women elements encompassing everything from early access to violent pornography, to the incel movement and the manosphere.

Third, today’s generation likely saw extra programs for girls when they were in school, an understandable response to the then existing educational disadvantages facing girls. Perhaps that has left the boys feeling undervalued.

And maybe there is just some old fashioned acting out against a more empowered generation of mothers who likely worked as well as cared for children and had a sense of their own equality.

Wherever the research takes us, as we have already noted the Trump administration has devoted itself to dismantling diversity, equity and inclusion policies, not only in federal agencies, but with intentional ripple effects on business, universities and organisations throughout the world.

In a bizarre turn of political doublespeak, equity is being painted as inequitable; inclusion policies as excluding and unlawful.

But we have to acknowledge this doublespeak is finding an audience and changing views.

I have urged you to be self-reflective, even self-critical. Let me practise what I'm preaching.

In gender equality campaigning, I believe we have made a central error.

Put starkly, we have failed to explain that a gender equal world will be a better world for everyone. We have allowed the impression to settle that gender equality is about benefits for women not for all.

Yet we know that men also benefit from living in more gender equal communities. The Global Institute for Women's Leadership launched a UK Gender Equality Index this year which breaks down gender equality measures to local government level.

We found communities that are disadvantaged but more gender equal – basically men and women were doing badly.

We found communities that are disadvantaged and highly gender unequal – men are doing badly and women are doing even worse.

We found communities that are advantaged and more gender equal – men and women are doing well.

What we didn't find is a single community that is gender unequal and advantaged.

What this research shows is when we rise, we rise together – men and women. Not a zero sum game but a virtuous circle of more advantaged circumstances and more gender equality.

When we look at the individual level, we also find that gender equality advantages men. Research shows that everyone who holds a gender incongruent role plays a price.

What do I mean by that? Simply, a women military commander has to prove herself better to be accepted because the stereotypes in our brains are screaming that we should be seeing a man in that role.

But the same effect plays out for a male nurse who has to do more to prove his competence and his caring attributes because – instinctively – he is not who we expect to show up.

Against this backdrop, in the fight for gender equality, I have been urging people to Resist, Reflect and Re-energise.

We must resist the roll back of measures to support diversity and in the UK particularly focus on those businesses and organisations who are using the cover of Trump's actions to quietly walk away from their own DEI work.

But we must also reflect on how to do better. We can't ignore the state of public support for diversity initiatives or gloss over the errors in our campaigning. And having done that reflection we must re-energise.

I hope that resonates with you – resist, reflect, re-energise – as you think about your own area of work.

Wellcome

Now to some better news. I have the privilege of chairing the board of Wellcome, a global philanthropic fund based here in the UK.

At Wellcome, we believe in science as a force for good. But we also know that science alone doesn't change the world. People do. And that's where social science comes in.

We want to improve health — not just for the healthiest or the wealthiest, but for everyone — so we need to understand the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which health is lived and shaped.

That's why Wellcome has always supported research beyond the lab bench and the clinic.

This evening, I want to share with you a few examples of how social science — supported by Wellcome — is making a real difference.

Not in abstract terms, but in the lives of individuals and communities around the world.

Let me start with a story that's unfolding right now — one that shows how humanities and social science are shaping the future of biology itself.

As part of Wellcome's £10 million investment in the Synthetic Human Genome Project, scientists across five UK universities are developing the tools to synthesise human DNA — starting with a single chromosome.

It's a bold step beyond genome editing, aiming to write a whole genome from scratch.

The implications for medicine and biotechnology are vast: targeted cell therapies, virus-resistant tissues, even new ways to understand how our bodies function at the most fundamental level.

Alongside the science, we instigated a parallel effort: a global social science programme called Carefull Synthesis, led by Professor Joy Zhang at the University of Kent.

This isn't just an ethics add-on — it's a full-scale investigation into the social, political and cultural questions raised by genome synthesis.

Through empirical research across Europe, Africa, Asia-Pacific and the Americas, the programme is asking: What does it mean to build human DNA? Who gets to decide how it's used?

How do we ensure this technology reflects diverse values and serves the public good?

Carefull Synthesis is setting the standard for responsible innovation — one that puts social science at the heart of scientific progress.

It's not just observing from the shore; it's helping steer the ship.

Of course, there is a long history of exploring the social, legal and ethical contexts of genomics – a lot of it supported by Wellcome over the years. This work has made significant contributions fostering more ethical and equitable practice.

However, wider humanities and social science fields were often under-represented; communities and other social partners were not centred; and their perspectives included only *after* key research decisions had already been made. This not only poses ethical challenges. It means the potential of earlier collaborations was reduced.

So Wellcome currently has a funding scheme open to support more research at the intersection of genomics, humanities, social sciences and bioethics.

Our Genomics in Context awards are looking to shift the focus away from specific ethical questions, often applied at the end of a research lifecycle, towards co-developing integrated, collaborative research from the outset.

The deadline is mid-March, and I hope some of you here will take a look.

Wellcome has also decided to make a £25 million investment in humanities and social sciences over the coming year.

We're looking at two major initiatives – the first, around social data.

You, me... most people, in fact – we now generate large amounts of digital data through our everyday activities and interactions.

On the commute, in the shops, online. These social data sources are increasingly used in health and wellbeing research around the world.

Wellcome commissioned a landscape review, published this month, on Social Data for Health, setting out how data from wearables, mobility patterns and social media can advance research on life, health and wellbeing — and what safeguards are needed to build trust.

So one of the initiatives we'll be supporting is a central hub to advance research and regulation around social data, from wearables to mobility patterns to social media. This is about enabling real-time responsiveness, innovative approaches to research, and rebuilding public trust in how data is used.

And then just this week, we released a second report, on how collections are used in research.

Archives, manuscripts and material culture hold profound potential for advancing knowledge about life, health and wellbeing.

Collections exist in analogue and digital forms, spanning oral histories of illness and care, hospital records, personal papers, visual and audio materials, physical artefacts and digital traces of lived experience.

Wellcome Collection is a wonderful example but by no means the only one.

Collectively, they offer unique and often under-explored perspectives on how health is experienced, understood, and structured across time and place.

We commissioned research to map how collections are used, and the barriers that limit their potential.

These findings are informing our second initiative: a shared digital hub to explore and preserve collections-based research in health and wellbeing.

Archives aren't just historical curiosities; they are spaces for creativity and cross-disciplinary experimentation that can generate transformative insights.

Both these major initiatives respond to urgent needs: how do we harness data responsibly?

How do we preserve knowledge for future generations? How do we ensure that innovation serves the public good?

You might also be asking, How do we ensure there are people who can do this work?

That's why Wellcome awarded £5 million to the British Academy to support early-career researchers in the social sciences, humanities and arts.

Their new Leadership and Advancement programme will offer training, mentorship and skills development — helping build the next generation of academic leaders.

Of course, social science isn't just about health — it's helping us understand the dynamics that shape equality, leadership and opportunity.

If we want to build a fairer, more inclusive society, we need to understand it first.

That's the power of social science. And that's the kind of work Wellcome sees as essential in our mission to support science to solve urgent health challenges facing everyone.

Let me end with this thought: social science is not just a discipline. It's a way of seeing the world — of asking the questions that matter, of understanding the forces that shape health, wellbeing and justice.

Without it, science risks becoming detached from society.

With it, we have a chance to build systems that work for people, not just in theory but in practice. A truly laudable goal.

As we look out at the world, I hope you share two emotions with me: hope and urgency.

Urgency because the challenges are real and pressing.

Hope because of the wisdom we hold, our ability to learn from mistakes, and the power of research to advance humanity.

While we might not yet have every answer, we can all find ways of pursuing change:

- Resist the rollback of progress.
- Reflect on how to do better.
- Re-energise for the challenges ahead.

Thank you.