

Political vision required to spur a new kind of public spirit

Australia has something to learn from Bush's plan for an expanded AmeriCorps, writes Andrew Leigh.

IN A little-noticed passage of his recent State of the Union address, the United States President set out a policy that both the Left and Right in Australian politics should pay heed to.

Amid his much-reported references to global terrorism and the axis of evil, George Bush announced an expansion of the US volunteer program, AmeriCorps. When they look back in 10 years' time, Americans may conclude that this decision had greater long-term implications than anything else in the speech.

What is AmeriCorps? Founded by President Bill Clinton in 1993, the program is a response to the decline in civic engagement that has taken place in America over the past generation. Since the early 1960s, Americans have become less likely to join organisations, less trusting of their fellow citizens and less involved in government.

AmeriCorps represents a concerted effort to re-engage young Americans with communities, by offering participants a college tuition credit in exchange for a year of serving a disadvantaged community. AmeriCorps volunteers build low-income housing, provide computer skills training, work in health promotion programs, and teach literacy skills to new immigrants.

Each year, 50,000 young Americans take part in the program, and Bush has now agreed to expand that number fourfold. Amid some cries from the right wing of the Republican Party, both sides of US politics now believe that government can play a positive role in building social capital.

In contrast, the bipartisan consensus in Australia appears to run in the opposite direction. In the 1960s, Australians followed President Kennedy – who created the Peace Corps – by forming Australian Volunteers Abroad (AVA). Today, AVA continues to send 500 young Australians overseas each year. But neither major political party has ever proposed creating a domestic version of AVA, much less one that operates on the scale of AmeriCorps.

Yet as in the US, social capital in Australia appears to be waning. Many of the same trends that Professor

Thousands of young Australians would doubtless be keen to take up the challenge.

Robert Putnam documented in his recent book, *Bowling Alone*, can also be found in Australia – less trust in government and fellow citizens, fewer churchgoers, and declining membership of many voluntary associations.

The causes in Australia are similar to those in the US: more television, longer commuting times, and the loss of an older civic generation. Australians can still pull together during difficult times – as we saw in the Sydney bushfires – but the long-term trend in Australian social capital remains relentlessly downwards.

The Federal Government should tackle this civic crisis, by providing 5000 young Australians a year with the chance to volunteer for a year in exchange for a HECS discount, or

some other form of education assistance. Volunteers could work with local bodies implementing after-school programs, revitalising run-down community facilities, and assisting indigenous communities.

A major initiative on volunteering could help re-energise thousands of community organisations that are struggling to survive. Think of the many groups that do good works in your own area, and imagine how much more effective they could be with the assistance of an enthusiastic twentysomething, willing to provide new energy and a fresh perspective.

But the potential benefits go well beyond the community groups themselves. By providing a significant group of young Australians with hands-on experience in volunteering, we will help forge a new civic generation.

There is every indication that former AmeriCorps volunteers have continued to help the community, become involved in politics, and help build social bonds in their workplace. The same is likely to occur in Australia.

In recent years, Labor and Coalition politicians have spoken about social capital in Australia, but few policies have appeared to redress the problems. For the Coalition, the emphasis has been on encouraging corporate philanthropy, while Labor has been reluctant to propose new initiatives for the community sector.

Yet thousands of young Australians would doubtless be keen to take up the challenge. The question is: will our leaders be bold enough to make the call?

Andrew Leigh is a Frank Knox Scholar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, and a researcher for Professor Robert Putnam.