

# Stop using innovation as a meaningless buzzword

Jesse Adams Stein

17 comments

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With the [appointment of Arthur Sinodinos as minister for industry, innovation and science](#) in the cabinet reshuffle, Australia can look forward to more government promotion of innovation and entrepreneurialism.

Sinodinos released a [statement](#) about his appointment, reaffirming his “keen appreciation of the importance of science and innovation policies”, and his view that innovation emerges when government steps back and allows “workers, entrepreneurs and risk takers [to be] at the centre of the economy”.

This chimes with Sinodinos’ [previous statements](#) on the importance of innovation in the Australian economy: “I have often said that Australia has an imperative to innovate ... It’s no longer just an interesting phenomenon – it’s an everyday reality. No area of society can be insulated from it.”

By framing market-led innovation as an inevitable way of helping the economy, Sinodinos effectively shrugs off any direct responsibility for government involvement, instead putting the onus on entrepreneurs.

While the language of innovation may have once soothed fears and inspired confidence, the term’s overuse means it now operates as clichéd husk – a fashionable accessory that politicians begrudgingly don when they want to convey a particular message.

So is it time we ditch the term and be done with it? Perhaps, but bear this in mind: innovation is now formally embedded in Australian government policies in relation to trade, science, employment and research. We will be dealing with the consequences of these policies for years to come.

The [National Innovation and Science Agenda](#) states that: “Innovation is important to every sector of the economy – from ICT to healthcare, education to agriculture, and defence to transport. Innovation keeps us competitive. It keeps us at the cutting edge. It creates jobs.”

This is an extraordinary statement because it places great faith in one particularly nebulous concept.

While it suits government to be vague about innovation’s meaning, a plethora of academic disciplines have worked hard to specifically define it and explain how it can be achieved. Unfortunately this has actually resulted in an even broader collective understanding of innovation. Put simply, innovation is often defined as [successfully applied ideas](#) (and the concept is

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no longer limited to technological change).

But innovation is more than a harmless catch-all term. It could actually do great damage. This is because the most influential interpretation of innovation remains tied to free market economics.

In Australian politics, innovation specifically operates as code for economic efficiency and entrepreneurship, and its use naturalises a way of thinking that valorises profit-making over other social, ethical and environmental considerations. It also operates as a handy excuse for government to step back and allow the market to dictate outcomes.

Take for example the [National Innovation Map](#), which records instances of entrepreneurship and business activity (for example: new businesses, patents, research and development expenditure). This understanding of innovation does not capture the activities of not-for-profit initiatives, community groups, much of the arts, and a great deal of critical and scientific research.

For example, a start-up company that sells plastic mobile phone covers would be understood as “innovation”, but the activities of [Makerspace & Company](#), [Freecycle](#) or [OrangeSky Laundry](#) (to name but a few) would likely be left out. Makerspace & Company is a space where people can access tools, machinery and training in industrial design skills. Freecycle is a grassroots movement of people who reuse and distribute resources in local communities. OrangeSky Laundry provides shower and laundry services to homeless people.

With so much emphasis on entrepreneurship, a great deal of positive human activity is easily ignored and left unsupported.

As innovation scholar [Benoit Godin](#) states, the current positive understanding of innovation is relatively new. In the Middle Ages, to be an innovator meant questioning religious doctrine, a heretical act.

For much of the 17th and 18th centuries the term was intended as an insult. Innovators were excessive and evil.

Harvard economist Joseph Schumpeter is often credited with bringing innovation into a positive category. Schumpeter’s work on “creative destruction”, published in the early 1940s, tied innovation to the idea of getting products onto the market.

Clayton Christensen drew upon Schumpeter to develop his own concept of “[disruptive innovation](#)” in the early 1990s. Christensen’s version of innovation involves the utter disturbance of the status quo.

Start-ups sneak in, new products are constantly released, destroying whole industries and opening new markets. Disruptive innovation was snapped up with enthusiasm, first by Silicon Valley, then by the broader business community.

Disruptive innovation does not play by the rules. In its relentless push forward, whole categories of jobs, identities, social structures and technologies are abandoned without a thought.

Is this the exciting future that the Australian government has in mind?

If we take Sinodinos at his word, then yes. Sinodinos [has argued that](#): “We live in an era of disruption. Think of innovative disruptors like Uber and Airbnb. Disruption is our friend. It undermines markets dominated by monopolies or a few big firms and empowers small business and

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consumers ... These businesses overwhelmingly invest in Australia and employ locals.”

The notion that multinational corporations such as Uber and Airbnb are small businesses (who create large numbers of local full-time jobs) is highly questionable. But beyond that, this quote points to a deeper problem at the heart of the government’s faith in innovation.

When we hear that up to 40 per cent of Australian jobs could disappear in the next 10 to 15 years, the most predictable solution is that innovation will be “critical to generating the jobs of the future” (repeated during Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s announcement of the 2017 cabinet).

But under the market logic of innovation, organisations are encouraged to embrace new technologies, to restructure, to hire “flexible” labour, and to relocate. Any negative impacts stemming from these changes (for example business failure, job losses) are easily explained as the result of too little innovation. It’s this line of thought that led to the gutting of the CSIRO, where 20 per cent of jobs have disappeared over the past two years, including some of the nation’s best research scientists.

With this kind of circular thinking, perhaps it is time for innovation to regain its former bad reputation.

This is not a call for the complete abandonment of innovation, as a word or a practice. After all, there is nothing inherently wrong with the desire to make things better.

But innovation’s ideological connection to free market economics, and the contradictory manner in which it is hurled at all manner of problems, means that it cannot and should not operate as the only way to transform our society and its institutions.

One thing we can be sure of: the future will bring extreme environmental, social and economic challenges. Yes, innovation will help us survive. But here are a few less fashionable verbs we must embrace: maintain, rebuild, care, reform, tolerate, make, salvage, repurpose, help and repair.

Jesse Adams Stein is a chancellor's postdoctoral research fellow at the [University of Technology Sydney](#).

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

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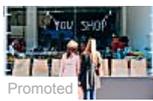
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**chapmaan** QCT, Jan 23 2017 at 9:11am

Problem 1: lumping Innovation, Industry and Science in a single portfolio.

Problem 2: Innovation is something that sometimes happens in Industry and whilst performing Science. It is not a practice in itself.

Solution: invest in Industry and Science and you're bound to get Innovation.

[REPLY](#)

**John** Gemba, Jan 23 2017 at 10:27am

Problem 3: Don't get rid of manufacturing because it breeds innovation and is where most of the automation technology come from. Oh dear, it's gone already.

I watch a 4 corners program (from July last year) on jobs of the future, on iview. They were teaching kids how to code robots. Wow, how revolutionary! Me, and thousands of others, have been coding computerised automation for decades. But, I guess, people who wear work clothes don't count.

**DukeofWoyWoy** Central Coast NSW, Jan 23 2017 at 1:29pm

Thank you Jessa

Thank you Jesse,

The present Government plainly has another interpretation of innovation and their simplistic interpretation is that we, the mug punters, should start to realise that innovation is a combined word that, when boiled down, means, just try something additional to what you are presently doing and 'Hope For The Best'.

Should they, the Government, get off their backsides and start actively showing signs of governance, now that'd be innovation at its best, but don't hold your breathe waiting for that type of innovation to occur.

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**Bruce** Sydney, Jan 25 2017 at 12:16pm

Good comment John.

Yep kids coding robots probably seems futuristic to politicians and the media. Also, attaching short term dollar producing requirements will kill innovation dead.

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**logic** Jan 23 2017 at 12:26pm

A lot of people nowadays conflate innovation and progress. Things go wrong when innovation is deemed necessary and gets an important status by being coupled to economic growth. Innovation in itself is meaningless. First aim should be progress, which is not aimed at improving the economy, but at improving society. Innovation can then be used to realise progress.

The latest version of an iPhone for example is innovation, meaningless innovation. Not progress.

[REPLY](#)

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**Tony McIntyre** Lower Mitcham SA, Jan 24 2017 at 11:12pm

I am not sure how you get "innovation and jobs" because most of the innovation I have witnessed over the past 30 plus years has been about getting rid of jobs. Perhaps they mean employing three new jobs for innovators to enable them to work out how to get rid of twenty jobs.

[REPLY](#)

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**Squeaky wheel** Jan 25 2017 at 7:29am

I would be much impressed with the innovation agenda if it was attached to say a pure research science agenda. As it is now the Innovation is just an agile slogan. Means nothing and has no substantive policy behind it.

The only innivative thing about the program is the novel use of innovation as a buzz word.

Failure is a better description. The failure to do anything policy.

[REPLY](#)

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**Steve** Melbourne, Jan 25 2017 at 7:35am

Innovation in Australia means offshoring jobs or importing a 457 to do it. It also means finding more ways to push up house prices. Scomo is on holiday in London right now finding out how they 'innovated' their extremely high house prices and will come back all triumphant as to how First home buyers will be able to buy a 10% share in their new home while still paying a landlord just like they do in London. Now thats innovation.

[REPLY](#)

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**Irene** Jan 25 2017 at 7:44am

Sinodinos the treasurer and board member who knew nothing about key financial transactions in his organisations is in charge of innovation. This is a joke, please tell me this is a joke.

[REPLY](#)

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**Utopian** Melbourne, Jan 25 2017 at 8:07am

Innovation is a completely meaningless term if it is not attached to. A priority activity or goal. Our government's mandate of 'I innovate therefore I am' is used as a comforting dummy amidst not much else happening. And, to add insult to injury, the term is also wedded to hipster start ups or boffins which, as the article eloquently outlines, misses the tram on many diverse ways that organisations, individuals and consortiums add value to our economy.

[REPLY](#)

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**Avid reader** Queensland, Jan 25 2017 at 8:19am

When is a journalist going to pin down politicians and ask "tell me what you mean by innovation"? Will we have to wrestle him to the floor to get a straight answer? I wonder if anyone in Government actually knows. Stephen Hawking was right to call robots the greatest threat to humanity. Keep all your fancy words Mr Turnbull, we just want jobs, secure and meaningful jobs.

[REPLY](#)

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**Dumb Australia** Jan 25 2017 at 8:45am

Wonderful piece, the implication that ideas are 'innovative' based purely on how much wealth they generate must be challenged. How our government can talk innovation and at the same time destroy the CSIRO is beyond me. Our best thinkers are leaving are leaving the country or being poached by big business.

[REPLY](#)

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**JR** Jan 25 2017 at 9:26am

The first step is to end GDP and economic growth as the measure of societal success. Develop new measures and emphases that lead naturally to a better use for innovation.

Quality of life is the best target, though its quantification remains a big difficulty. A job for a grown up government.

[REPLY](#)

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**Trevor** Hampton, Jan 25 2017 at 11:17am

Absolutely agree 'Innovation' has given us: Call centres, botched public transport ticketing systems, self service checkouts, 'take a number', have to do it on line, ridiculous voice activation systems that don't work, longer wait times on all public services, closure of small business, bloated internet software, cars that have so many electronic features they are dangerous, cold delivered pizzas, a different credit card machine in every shop, packaging that wont open, "Smart" cards that are dumb. open plan offices which proved a failure, remote controls and mobile phones which are so complicated they are chucked across the room, etc etc. There is a movement starting in the US called 'Why don't things work anymore'? and one of the answers is innovation.

[REPLY](#)

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**Bruce** Sydney, Jan 25 2017 at 12:20pm

There's a quote from Yes Minister where Humphrey says "dispose of the difficult bit in the title; it does less harm there than in the text."

I'm sure there's a similar trend here.

[REPLY](#)

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**Dyskolos** Melbourne, Jan 25 2017 at 2:39pm

Innovation and entrepreneurship really just boil down to new ideas, solutions and inventions, and (usually small) businesses, sometimes governments, putting those things into practice. The problem is our politicians are neither innovative nor entrepreneurial. They don't have any new ideas and even if they did they don't have the capabilities to put them into practice. Solution? Transfer the responsibility to the people who elected them. "We're in charge. You fix it!"

[REPLY](#)

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**Peter Krohn** Highett, Jan 25 2017 at 5:31pm

Can we knock over nimble and agile while we're at it? For example Fagin  
(fictional character in Oliver Twist) was nimble and agile, so should we all

(fictional character in Oliver Twist) was nimble and agile, so should we all become pickpockets too?

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