

THE STANDING FOREST · CHAPTER SIX

A Government Changes What It Counts

Chapter Six of The Standing Forest

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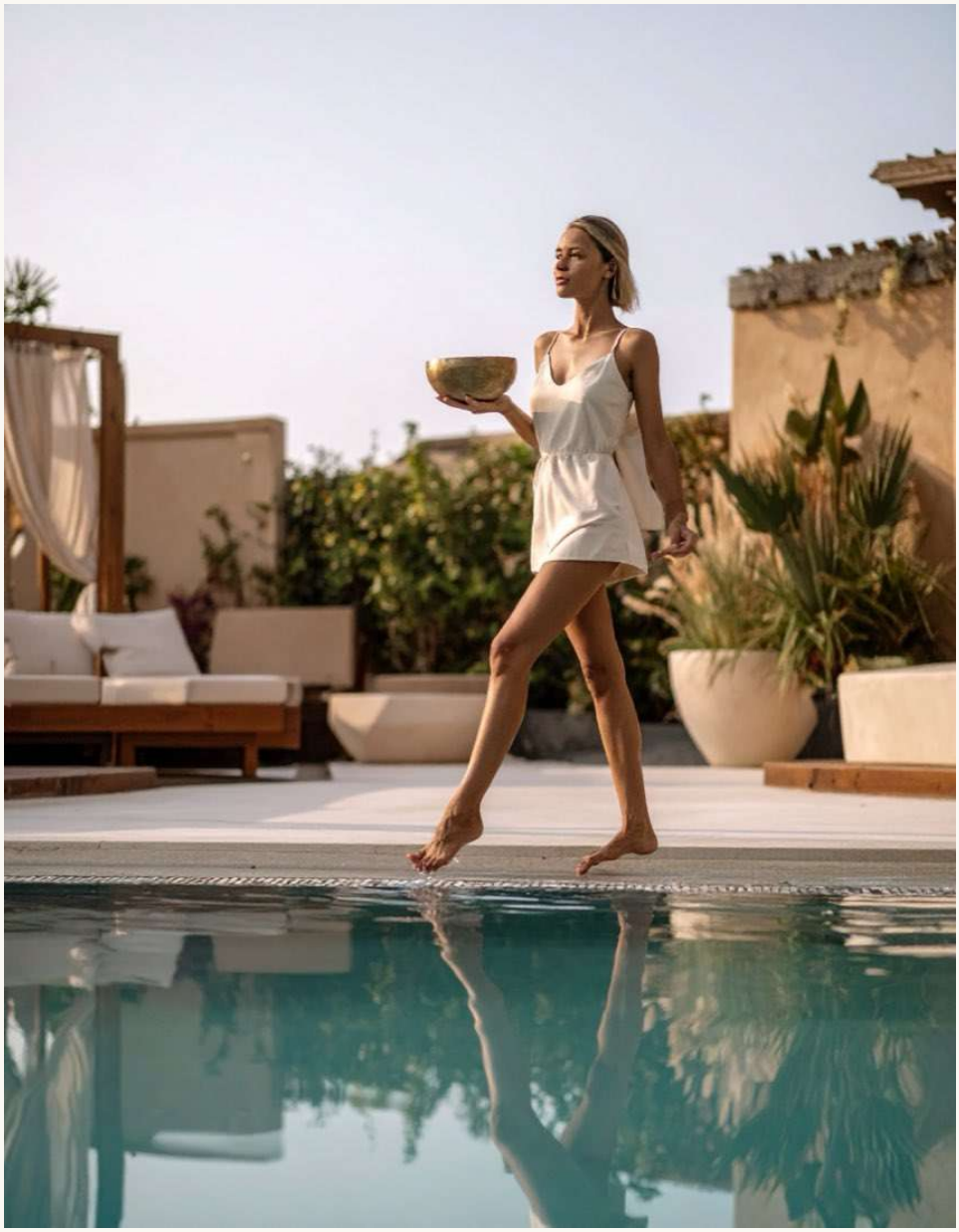
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ABSTRACT

A city can draw a portrait of itself. A national government has a harder task, because it holds the purse, the statute book and the measures by which everyone else is judged. When a government changes what it counts, every ministry, council and contractor below it eventually changes what it reports, and a little later, what it does. That is the hope. The record is more interesting than the hope, and this chapter reads it from two places that tried: Wales, which wrote the future into law in 2015, and New Zealand, which organised a national budget around wellbeing in 2019. Neither government used the word doughnut in its founding documents, and neither drew Raworth's ring. They belong in this book because they did the thing the ring asks of any organisation in its first year. They separated the size of the economy from its purpose, they named a floor of human needs and a ceiling of living limits in the same breath, and they built machinery to keep both in view after the speeches were over.

CHAPTER SIX

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A Government Changes What It Counts

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Two small countries and one large question

A city can draw a portrait of itself. A national government has a harder task, because it holds the purse, the statute book and the measures by which everyone else is judged. When a government changes what it counts, every ministry, council and contractor below it eventually changes what it reports, and a little later, what it does. That is the hope. The record is more interesting than the hope, and this chapter reads it from two places that tried: Wales, which wrote the future into law in 2015, and New Zealand, which organised a national budget around wellbeing in 2019.

Neither government used the word doughnut in its founding documents, and neither drew Raworth's ring. They belong in this book because they did the thing the ring asks of any organisation in its first year. They separated the size of the economy from its purpose, they named a floor of human needs and a ceiling of living limits in the same breath, and they built machinery to keep both in view after the speeches were over. A leader who wants to know what happens when an organisation changes its measures can learn more from their difficulties than from any manifesto.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* discusses both cases in its chapter on policy, and states their significance in one sentence: "the purpose of economic policy is not the production of more stuff but the flourishing of human life." It is also unusually frank about their limits, and that frankness is the right temperature for what follows.

Wales: the future given a seat

The National Assembly for Wales passed the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act in 2015. It received Royal Assent on 29 April that year, and its duties became binding on the public bodies it names from 1 April 2016.[55] The Act does three things that a leader can recognise from inside an organisation.

It names a purpose. Public bodies in Wales must pursue sustainable development, and the Act defines what that means through seven well-being goals: a prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language, and a globally responsible Wales. The bodies must pursue all seven, not choose among them. Read beside Raworth's ring, the list is recognisable. Prosperity, health, equality, cohesion and culture sit on the floor. Resilience, defined in the Act in terms of a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems, sits under the ceiling. And the seventh goal, a globally responsible Wales, is the city portrait's two global lenses written into statute: a small nation agreeing in law that its comfort must not be bought with someone else's.

It names a way of working. The Act's sustainable development principle is expressed as five ways of working that every decision must show: long-term thinking, prevention, integration, collaboration and involvement. They are not targets. They are a description of how a decision is made, and they can be checked

against the record of how it was made. For a firm, the transferable insight is that a change of purpose that does not change the meeting has not yet happened.

It names a keeper. The Act created an independent Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, whose role is to act as a guardian for the interests of people not yet born, to advise and challenge public bodies, and to publish a report on the state of things at regular intervals. Sophie Howe held the post from 2016 to 2023; Derek Walker holds it now.[55] The Commissioner cannot overrule a minister. The office's power is to ask, in public and on the record, whether a decision shows the five ways of working, and to keep asking.

Santa Anna's book reads the Act as "a legislative enactment of the Haudenosaunee seven-generation principle", which the book discusses in an earlier chapter and handles with care:

> *Seven-generation thinking doesn't mean we can predict the future perfectly.*[56]

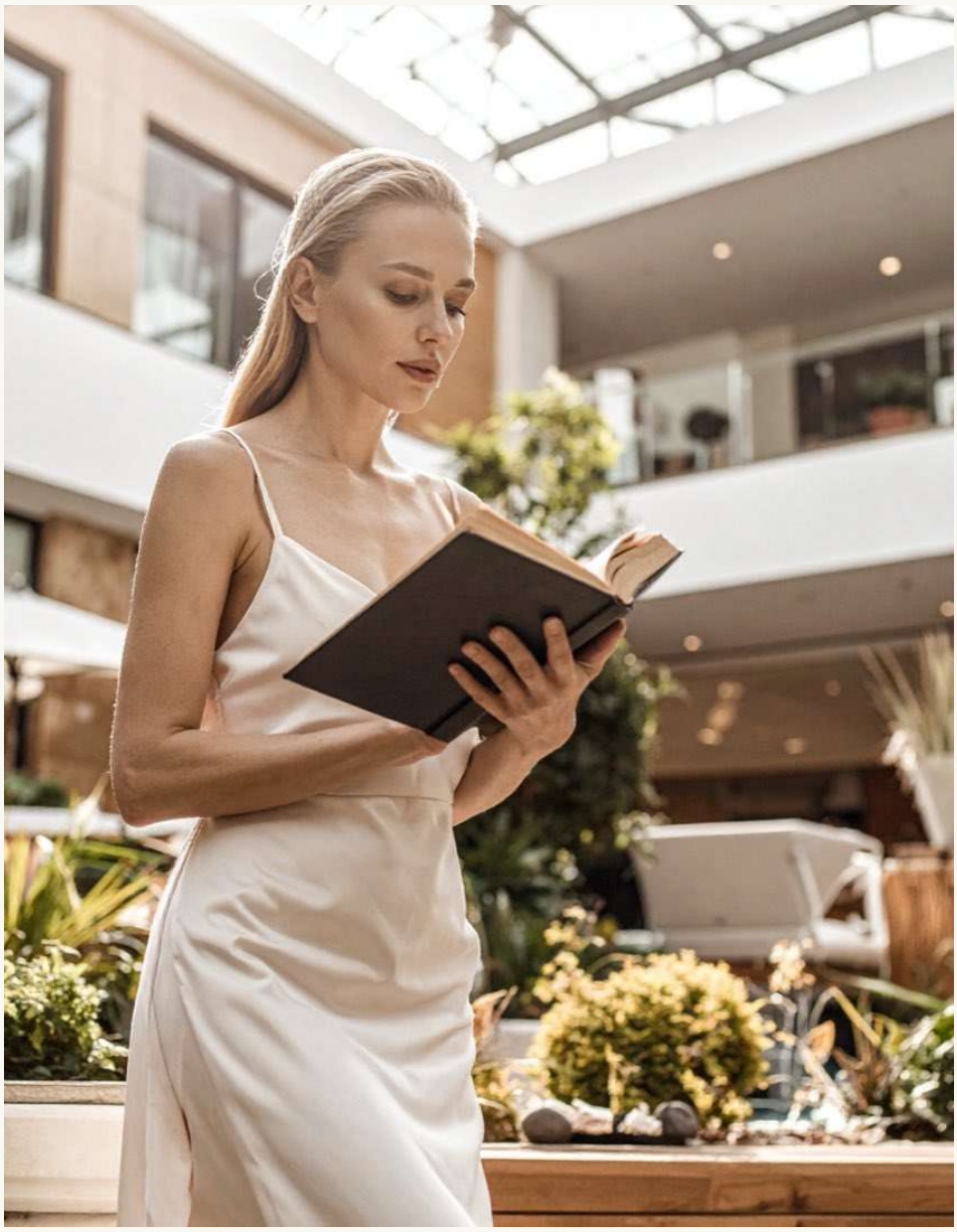
That is exactly the Act's logic. It does not forecast the Wales of 2075. It requires that the Wales of 2075 be represented, by an office and a principle, in the room where the decisions of 2026 are made.

What the Act changed, and what it did not

The most widely reported test came over a road. For years the Welsh Government had planned a relief road for the M4 motorway around Newport, a large project to ease one of the most congested stretches of road in Wales. The Commissioner argued publicly that the scheme was inconsistent with the Act, on grounds of cost, carbon and the long-term pattern of travel it would lock in. In June 2019 the First Minister, Mark Drakeford, announced that the road would not be built, giving its cost and its effect on the environment, including a protected wetland on the route, as the reasons.[57]

It would be easy to tell that story as the Act stopping a motorway. The record does not support quite that much. The decision was the First Minister's, the reasons he gave were cost and environment, and a different government might have weighed the same arguments differently. What the record does show is narrower and, for a leader, more useful. The Act gave a long-term argument a standing office and a legal vocabulary, so that the case against the road arrived in the decision with the same formality as the case for it. In the language of Chapter 4, it restored a feedback loop that a short budget cycle had cut.

The Commissioner's own reports have been candid about the rest. The Act's duties are on process; it does not let a citizen sue a council for failing to make Wales more equal, and the Welsh experience shows how easily the five ways of working can become boxes ticked in a report rather than habits in a room. Public bodies have produced well-being objectives that read like their old corporate plans with new headings. The Act changed what every body must say about itself. It has changed, more slowly and more unevenly, what every body does. Anyone who has watched a firm adopt a new set of values will recognise the gap.



New Zealand: a budget organised around wellbeing

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New Zealand: a budget organised around wellbeing

New Zealand came to the same question from the Treasury rather than the legislature. Its Treasury had been developing a Living Standards Framework since the early 2010s, a way of describing national well-being across several kinds of capital: natural, human, social and financial and physical. On 30 May 2019 the government of Jacinda Ardern presented what it called the Wellbeing Budget, the first national budget the government organised around priorities chosen from wellbeing evidence rather than around growth alone.[58]

The budget named five priorities. Santa Anna's book lists them as mental health, child wellbeing, supporting Māori and Pacific peoples' aspirations, building a productive economy, and transitioning to a sustainable and low-emissions economy. Each spending bid had to show how it served one of them, and ministries were asked to bid jointly where a problem crossed their boundaries. The following year Parliament amended the Public Finance Act so that every government must set out its wellbeing objectives alongside its budget, and so that the Treasury must report on the state of wellbeing in New Zealand at regular intervals.[58] As in Wales, the change of purpose was given machinery, so that it would outlast the government that made it.

The design has a feature a leader should notice. The Living Standards Framework places the natural environment among the capitals the country holds, as a stock whose condition matters in itself, not only as a flow of resources into production. That is Boulding's spaceship in a Treasury document: the measure of success includes the condition of what is held, not only the speed at which it passes through.

What the budget changed, and what it did not

Santa Anna's book is plain about the limits, and the plainness is worth quoting at length because it is the sentence most enthusiasts leave out:

> *The limitations must be named. Wellbeing budgets are still young. Their measurement frameworks are imperfect. They can be co-opted — used as public relations while the underlying fiscal priorities remain unchanged. New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget, while genuinely innovative, was not sufficient to prevent rising inequality or housing unaffordability. The framework is necessary but not sufficient.*[59]

That judgement is the book's, and it is consistent with what New Zealand's own commentators reported in the years that followed. House prices rose steeply in the period after 2019, child poverty measures improved on some counts and not others, and the share of the budget that changed direction because of the framework was a small fraction of the whole. The bulk of any national budget is committed long before a new framework arrives: pensions, schools, hospitals, debt service. A wellbeing lens can steer the new money. It moves the old money slowly.

None of that makes the budget a failure. It makes it a first year. The government changed the question each spending bid had to answer, and it wrote that question into the law that governs every future budget. A firm that changes the question its capital committee asks has done the same thing, and should expect the same pattern: the new question bites first on new spending, and only later on the commitments it inherited.

What the two cases share

Set side by side, Wales and New Zealand show four things that matter to a leader of any organisation.

A purpose that names both rings. Each named human needs and living limits in a single list, so that neither could be traded away quietly for the other. The Welsh goals put resilience and global responsibility beside prosperity. The New Zealand framework put natural capital beside financial capital.

Machinery that outlives its authors. Each wrote its change into law, with an office or a reporting duty attached. A purpose that depends on one minister, or one chief executive, ends when they leave.

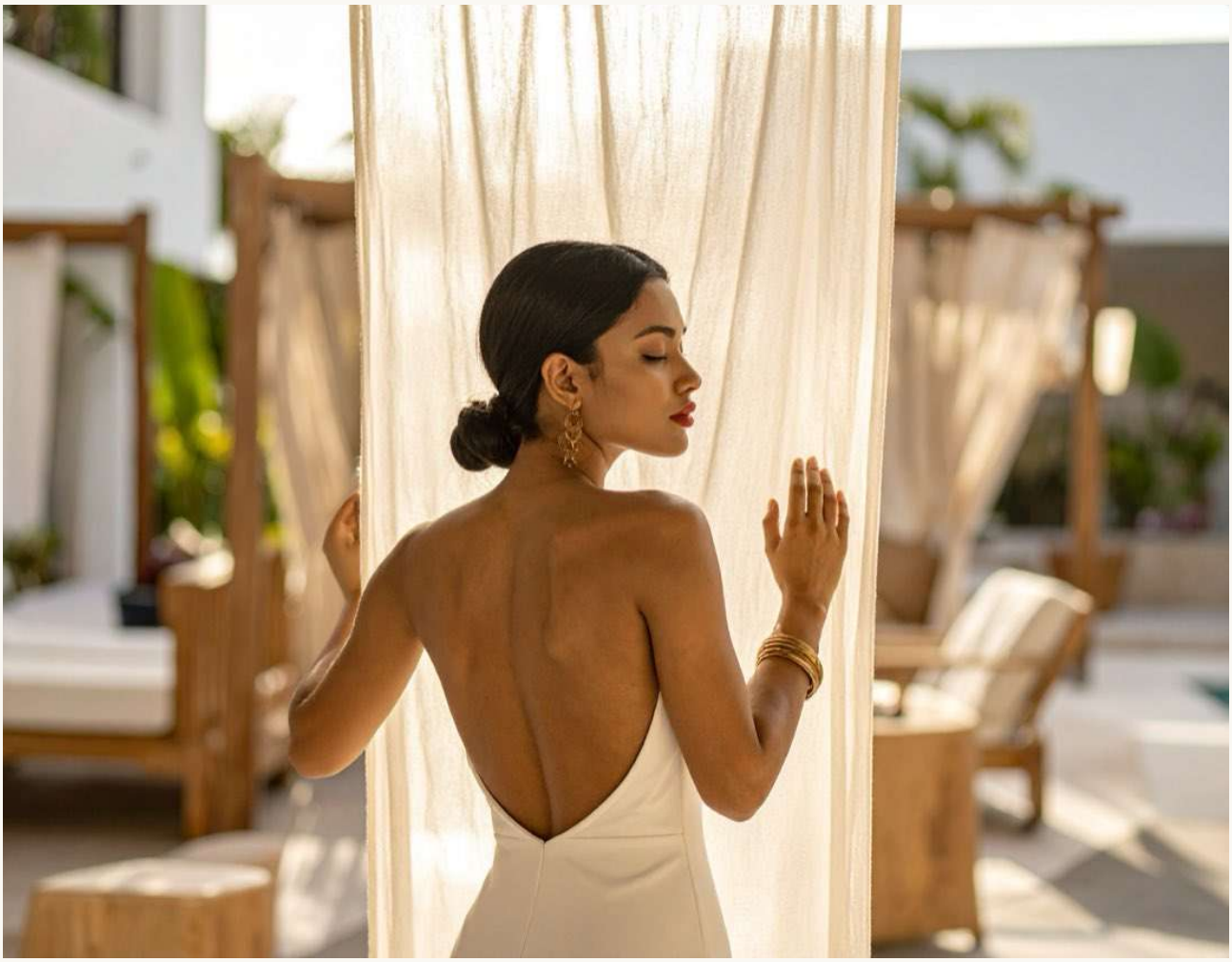
A keeper with a voice and no veto. The Welsh Commissioner and the New Zealand Treasury's wellbeing reports both work by making a long-term case visible at the moment of decision. Neither can force a result. That is a weakness and a strength. It means the change is real only when the people deciding take it up, and it means the keeper cannot be blamed for every hard trade-off, which is what lets the office survive changes of government.

A gap between saying and doing that closes slowly. In both places, what every body must say about itself changed within a year. What it does has changed over a decade, and unevenly. Anyone who expects a change of measures to change behaviour in a quarter will conclude, wrongly, that it has failed.

Santa Anna's book offers a reason the slow part matters, in its discussion of what such frameworks signal:

> *Trust, it turns out, is extraordinarily efficient. Suspicion is extraordinarily expensive.*[60]

The book's broader claim, that people who feel cared for by their governance produce more and trust more, is not shown by the evidence in this chapter, and the book does not offer controlled evidence for it. The narrower point stands on ordinary experience. A change of measures that is announced and then visibly ignored costs more trust than it earns. A change that is announced modestly and then kept, year after year, by an office that will not let it be forgotten, earns the kind of trust a later and harder decision can draw on.



The finer points, for a firm

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The finer points, for a firm

A board is a small government. It holds a purse, writes rules and chooses what to count. Five moves translate the two cases to an organisation of any size.

Write the purpose with both rings in it. One page. The needs the organisation exists to meet, for whom, and the living limits it will respect, in its own units. If the page could be read as a promise to grow sales, it has not yet named a floor or a ceiling.

Choose the ways of working before the targets. The Welsh five are a good starting list: long term, prevention, integration, collaboration, involvement. For each, write how a paper coming to the board will show it. A capital request might, for instance, have to state its effect on the organisation's largest flows over ten years, not just its payback in three.

Appoint a keeper. One non-executive, or one standing committee, whose job is to ask the long-term question at every meeting and to report once a year on whether the board kept its own purpose. Give the keeper a voice in the minutes and no veto. Chapter 10 has scripts for the hard conversations a keeper is likely to meet, beginning with the board member who calls the work a fashion.

Let the new question bite first on new money. Do not pretend the whole budget can be re-cut in a year. Apply the purpose to every new commitment, and set a date by which the largest inherited commitments will be reviewed against it.

Publish the gap. In the annual report, say plainly where the organisation's practice still falls short of its purpose. Wales and New Zealand earned credibility by letting their own offices report the shortfall. A firm that reports only its progress will be believed less, and it will learn less.

A keeper at work, in a firm

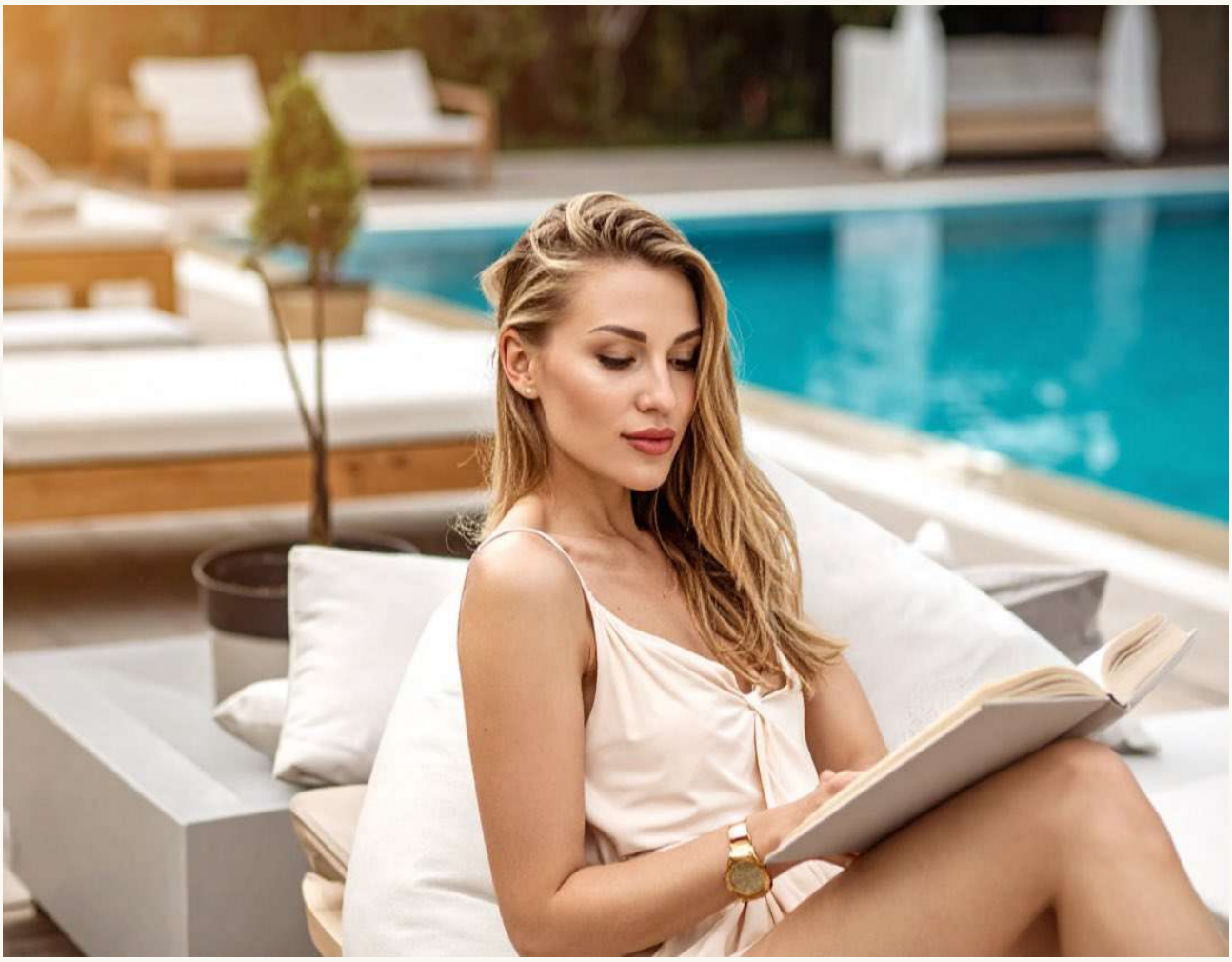
A short sketch shows what a keeper does in an organisation smaller than a country. The firm is a composite, built for teaching; its people and decisions were set by the writer.

A family-owned food manufacturer with three hundred staff adopts a Purpose Charter after a year of the work in Chapter 9. Its keeper is a non-executive director, a retired agronomist who joined the board for her knowledge of the firm's growers. At the first board meeting after the charter is adopted, the operations director brings a proposal to replace two ageing production lines with one larger, faster line, paid back in three years through lower labour costs.

The keeper does not oppose it. She asks the charter's question: what is its effect on both rings over ten years? The paper has no answer, because the template it was written on predates the charter. It comes back a month later with three new lines. The new line would use about a fifth less energy per tonne and somewhat more in total, because it is sized for growth the firm has not yet won. It would remove eleven jobs on the floor, all in the team the portrait had shown to be lowest paid. And it would lock the firm into one supplier of packaging film for the life of the line.

The board approves a smaller version: one replacement line sized to current volume, with the eleven people moved into the maintenance and quality roles the portrait had shown were understaffed. The payback is four years instead of three. The minutes record the keeper's question, the three new lines, and the board's reasons. A year later, the keeper's annual report names the decision as the one the charter changed most.

Nothing in the sketch required the keeper to know more about production lines than the operations director. It required her to ask, at the moment of decision, the question the charter had written down, and the board to have agreed in advance that the question would be answered before the vote. That is all the Welsh Commissioner does, at the scale of a nation.



What this chapter cannot show

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What this chapter cannot show

Two countries are not a sample. Neither case has a counterfactual, and both were shaped by events far larger than any framework: a pandemic, an energy-price shock, national housing markets. The Welsh motorway decision had several reasons, and the record does not let anyone say how much weight the Act carried. The New Zealand outcomes depend on which indicator is chosen and over which years. What the cases show is how a government behaved when it changed its measures, and what it built to keep the change. That is the part a leader can copy.

The Tool: The Purpose Charter

A two-page document for a board, a leadership team or a household council, drafted in one meeting and reviewed once a year. It is the organisational form of what Wales and New Zealand wrote into law.

Page one · The purpose.

1 · *We exist to meet these needs* (three to five lines, each naming a need and the people it is for).

2 · *We will respect these limits* (three to five lines, each naming a flow across the coastline, its unit, and the direction it must move).

3 · *We will not trade one ring for the other.* One sentence on what the organisation will do when a decision would improve one ring at the cost of the other. The usual answer is: the decision comes to the full board, with both effects stated.

Page two · The machinery.

1 · *Our ways of working.* Five lines, adapted from the Welsh five, each with one observable sign in a board paper.

2 · *Our keeper.* A name or a committee, the question they will ask at every meeting, and the date of their annual report.

3 · *New money first.* The threshold above which every new commitment must show its effect on both rings, and the date by which the five largest inherited commitments will be reviewed.

4 · *The gap, published.* Where the annual report will state the shortfall, and who writes that paragraph. It should not be the chief executive.

The annual review. Once a year, the keeper reads page one aloud, then reports three things: one decision the charter changed, one decision it should have changed and did not, and one line of the charter that needs rewriting. Record all three. They are the organisation's own evidence of whether a change of measures has become a change of practice.

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2. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, manuscript `ch02.md`, the Indigenous contribution, principle 3; the reading of the Welsh Act is from manuscript `ch08.md`, "Wellbeing Budgets". Luminous Prosperity Inc., 2026.
3. Welsh Government, statement by the First Minister on the M4 Corridor around Newport, 4 June 2019, as widely reported. The weight the Act carried in the decision is not established by the public record; the reasons given were cost and environmental impact.
4. New Zealand Treasury, *The Wellbeing Budget 2019*, 30 May 2019; the Living Standards Framework; and the Public Finance Amendment Act 2020, which requires wellbeing objectives with each budget and periodic Treasury reporting on wellbeing. Descriptions are of design, not of outcomes.
5. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*, manuscript `ch08.md`, "Wellbeing Budgets: When Governments Measure What Matters". Luminous Prosperity Inc., 2026. The judgement on inequality and housing is the book's, and is stated here as such.
6. Ibid.

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