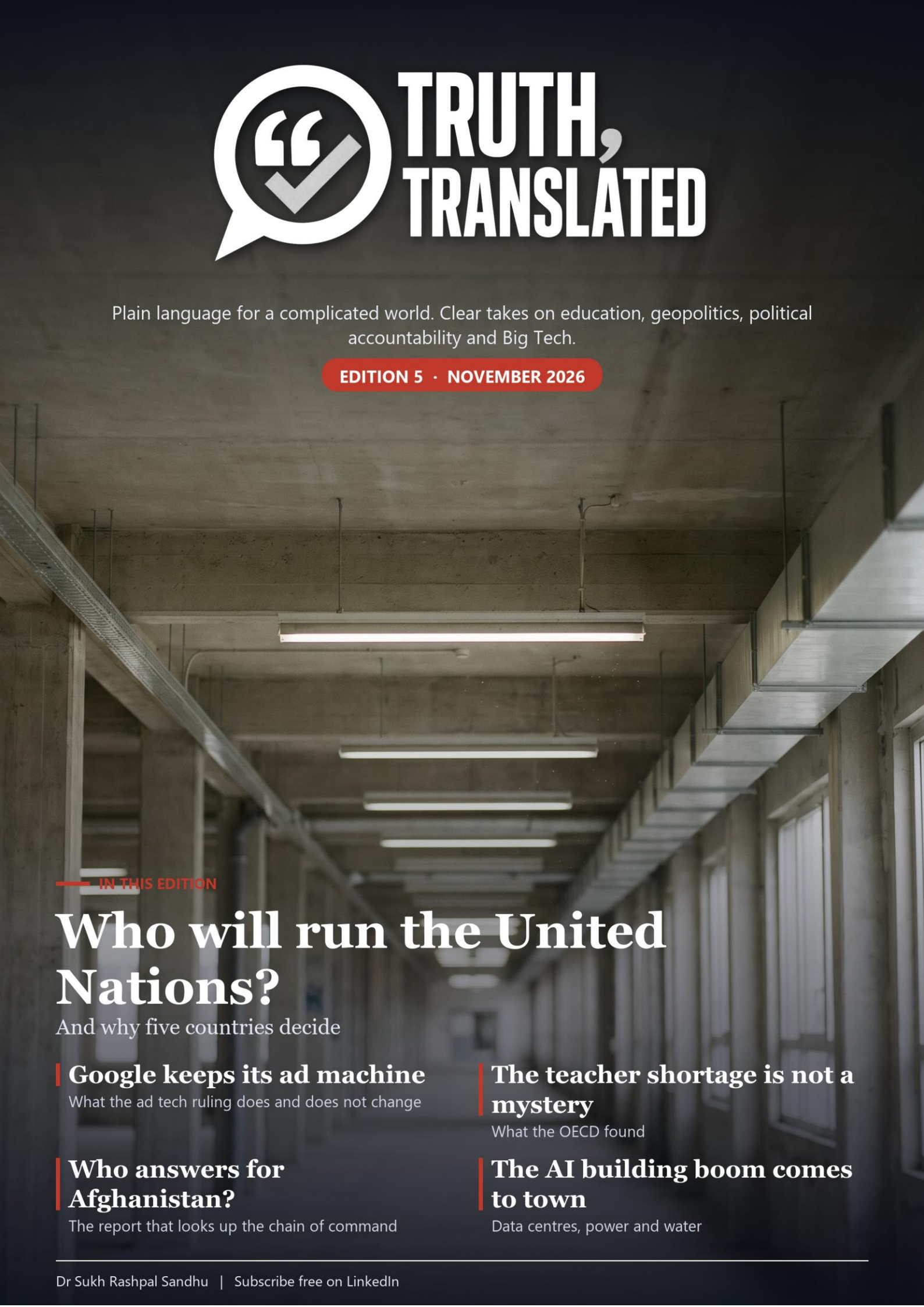
# TRUTH, TRANSLATED

Plain language for a complicated world. Clear takes on education, geopolitics, political accountability and Big Tech.

EDITION 5 · NOVEMBER 2026



IN THIS EDITION

## Who will run the United Nations?

And why five countries decide

### Google keeps its ad machine

What the ad tech ruling does and does not change

### The teacher shortage is not a mystery

What the OECD found

### Who answers for Afghanistan?

The report that looks up the chain of command

### The AI building boom comes to town

Data centres, power and water

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EDITION 5 | NOVEMBER 2026

# Contents

Truth, Translated: November 2026 ..... 3

Truth, Translated: Who Will Run the United Nations, and Why Five Countries Still Decide ..... 4

Truth, Translated: Google Was Found to Be a Monopolist. Why It Still Gets to Keep the Machine ..... 12

Truth, Translated: The Teacher Shortage Is Not a Mystery ..... 20

Truth, Translated: Who Answers for Afghanistan? The Report That Looks Up the Chain of Command ..... 28

Truth, Translated: The AI Building Boom Comes to Town ..... 36

Follow us on LinkedIn ..... 44

About Truth, Translated ..... 46

INTRODUCTION

# Truth, Translated: November 2026

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition 5 of Truth, Translated: 5 pieces for November 2026.

Plain language for a complicated world. Clear takes on education, geopolitics, political accountability and Big Tech.

This edition brings together 5 new features written for this edition. New features are marked "Written for this edition".

## In this edition


- Truth, Translated: Who Will Run the United Nations, and Why Five Countries Still Decide
- Truth, Translated: Google Was Found to Be a Monopolist. Why It Still Gets to Keep the Machine
- Truth, Translated: The Teacher Shortage Is Not a Mystery
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- Truth, Translated: The AI Building Boom Comes to Town


Thank you to every reader who subscribes, shares and responds.

Warm regards,
**Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu**
Author, Truth, Translated

TRUTH, TRANSLATED

# Truth, Translated: Who Will Run the United Nations, and Why Five Countries Still Decide

**By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition**

Seven secret ballots in three months, a frontrunner who keeps topping the count but cannot clear the final hurdle, a former president who walked away after a collapse in support, and a late entrant who changed the shape of the race. The contest to replace António Guterres has entered its decisive stretch. Here is what is actually happening, translated out of diplomatic code.

## The job nobody votes for in public

The Secretary-General of the United Nations is often described as the world's top diplomat. That description is generous and also misleading. The person in the role runs a vast administration, presents the budget, appoints senior officials, travels to war zones, and speaks for an organisation of 193 member states. But the Secretary-General commands no army, sets no national law, and depends on the same governments that chose them for money and permission.

António Guterres, the former Prime Minister of Portugal, completes his second five-year term on 31 December 2026. His successor is expected to start on 1 January 2027. Whoever it is will inherit an organisation that, in Guterres' own words earlier this year, faced "imminent financial collapse", along with a list of conflicts that includes, in the words of coverage by The National, the war involving Iran, Sudan, Russia and Ukraine, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The formal rule for choosing a Secretary-General is short. Article 97 of the UN Charter says the General Assembly appoints the Secretary-General "upon the recommendation of the Security Council". In practice, the real decision is made by the 15 members of the Security Council, and within that group by the five permanent members: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Any one of them can block a candidate.

That is the first thing to understand. The selection of the world's most visible international public servant is still, at its core, a negotiation between five governments.

## How the straw polls work

Since the 1980s the Security Council has used a device called the straw poll to test the field before a formal vote. Each of the 15 members marks each candidate on an anonymous ballot as "encourage", "discourage" or "no opinion". The results are not

officially published, but they are routinely leaked to journalists within hours, as they were in 2016.

To win the formal recommendation, a candidate needs at least nine of the 15 votes in favour and no veto from a permanent member. A straw poll can show a candidate reaching nine "encourage" votes while still carrying a "discourage" from a permanent member. That is the trap the current frontrunner keeps falling into.

The 2026 process formally opened on 25 November 2025. The Council held its first straw poll on 30 July 2026 and has held six more since, according to the tracking of the 1 for 8 Billion campaign:

| Straw poll | Date |
|---|---|
| 1 | 30 July 2026 |
| 2 | 21 August 2026 |
| 3 | 18 September 2026 |
| 4 | 29 September 2026 |
| 5 | 7 October 2026 |
| 6 | 16 October 2026 |
| 7 | 30 October 2026 |

When Guterres was chosen in October 2016, the Council needed six straw polls to agree. This year's race has already gone to seven without a clear winner.

## The frontrunner: Rebeca Grynspan

Rebeca Grynspan of Costa Rica is a former Vice President of her country and now heads UN Trade and Development, the body formerly known as UNCTAD. She has led almost every round.

Reported results trace a steady but stalled lead:

- **Poll 1 (30 July):** first, with 10 "encourage" votes.
- **Poll 3 (18 September):** first, with 9 "encourage" votes.
- **Poll 4 (29 September):** 10 "encourage" and 3 "discourage", the only candidate to reach 10.
- **Poll 5 (7 October):** 9 "encourage".
- **Poll 6 (16 October):** 9 "encourage" and 5 "discourage". Diplomatic sources reported that two of those "discourage" votes came from permanent members.
- **Poll 7 (30 October):** 11 "encourage", 4 "discourage" and none with no opinion, the highest "encourage" tally of the field, according to The National.

That seventh result is the best Grynspan has recorded. It is also not the same thing as winning. Ballots in the seventh round did not distinguish permanent from elected members, so the public cannot tell whether the four "discourage" votes include a veto power. The National's own assessment was that her victory remained "far from assured". Mariea Sekijima, a UN analyst at the International Crisis Group, pointed out that the results did not show whether the two permanent members who had opposed her earlier still did.

## The rest of the field

The field has changed shape repeatedly since mid-September, with two withdrawals and two late nominations. Alongside the candidates below, María Fernanda Espinosa (nominated by Antigua and Barbuda), Ivonne Baki (nominated by Tonga) and Olara Otunnu of Uganda remain in the race but have trailed in every poll.

**Rafael Grossi** of Argentina heads the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog, which gives him unusually direct experience of the most dangerous file in world politics. In the sixth poll he recorded 8 "encourage" and 6 "discourage". In the seventh, The National reported 9, 4 and 2. Panama's President José Raúl Mulino has said Panama's vote would go to him.

**Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett**, nominated by Guyana, has been the most consistent second-tier performer. She recorded 9 "encourage" votes in the first poll, 8 in the third, 8 and 6 in the sixth, and 8, 6 and 1 in the seventh.

**Michelle Bachelet**, the former President of Chile and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, withdrew on the weekend after the third poll. Preliminary figures reported by PassBlue had her at 1 "encourage", 11 "discourage" and 3 "no opinion", down from 6 "encourage" votes in July. Her own government had withdrawn its support in March after the change of president in Santiago. In her farewell video she said she did not regret "having taken on this great challenge" and that the campaign had helped place on the global agenda the idea that the next Secretary-General should be a woman from Latin America.

**Macky Sall**, the former President of Senegal, formally withdrew on 17 October, after the sixth poll.

**Lana Nusseibeh** of the United Arab Emirates, a former UAE ambassador to the UN, was nominated on 21 October and entered the seventh poll with 7 "encourage", 6 "discourage" and 2 "no opinion". Sekijima's reading was that Nusseibeh had entered expecting she "could win the support of all five permanent members", and that the first result suggested a longer road than anticipated.

**Feridun Sinirlioğlu**, a former Turkish foreign minister and secretary-general of the OSCE, was reported to have been formally nominated by Turkey at the very end of October, too late to appear in the seventh poll.

Two numbers matter more than all the others in that list. Grynspan has the broadest support. Nobody, so far, has shown the combination of nine votes and no veto that the Charter process actually requires.

## Translation: why a candidate can lead and still lose

This is where the plain-language version matters most.

A straw poll is a temperature check, not an election. A candidate who receives 11 "encourage" votes and one "discourage" from a permanent member is, for practical purposes, blocked. A candidate with only nine "encourage" votes but no permanent

member opposed is in a stronger position. The headline number and the decisive number are different numbers.

That is why the argument over ballot colours matters. In the sixth poll, members used colour-coded ballots for the first time in this race, so permanent members' votes could be seen separately from those of the ten elected members. That is how the public learned that two veto powers had marked Grynspan "discourage".

Before the seventh poll, according to a diplomat quoted by The National, Bahrain, Russia and the United States pushed to keep the coloured ballots, while most Council members favoured returning to ballots that do not separate the two groups. The seventh round's reported results did not distinguish them.

Reasonable people can disagree about which format is better. Coloured ballots give candidates honest information early, so a candidate who faces a veto can withdraw rather than waste months. Undifferentiated ballots reduce the pressure on permanent members to show their hand, which can leave room for quiet bargaining. What should not be lost is the basic point: the process is designed so that the most important information, which permanent member objects and why, is the information least likely to be made public.

## The first woman question

In 81 years, the United Nations has had nine Secretaries-General. All of them have been men.

This race was always likely to test that record. In 2016, when the UN first held public interactive dialogues with candidates, seven of the 13 candidates were women and the job still went to a man. Campaigners such as the 1 for 8 Billion group, which tracks every poll, have argued since then that a qualified field of women made that outcome harder to justify.

In 2026, the field again includes several women, and the two candidates who led most rounds through September and October, Grynspan and Rodrigues-Birkett, are both women. Nusseibeh is a woman. When Bachelet withdrew, the race still had four women and three men.

It is worth separating two claims that are often blurred together. One is that the next Secretary-General should be a woman because it is long overdue. That is an argument about fairness and representation, and it has broad support among member states. The other is that the selection has been rigged against women in the past. That second claim is harder to prove from the public record, because the decisive bargaining happens in private. What can be said plainly is that the process has repeatedly produced a man from a field that included strong women, and that nobody outside the Council can see exactly why.

## The regional question

The UN has no written rule that the job rotates between regions, but there is a long-standing expectation that it should. Latin America and the Caribbean has held the post only once, through Javier Pérez de Cuéllar of Peru, who served from 1982 to 1991. Many

states argued that 2026 should be the region's turn, and most of this year's field has come from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Nusseibeh's entry complicates that expectation. A late candidate from outside the region is a reminder that the convention is only a convention. If the permanent members cannot agree on a Latin American or Caribbean candidate, there is nothing in the Charter to stop them looking elsewhere.

## What the permanent members are really weighing

Because the votes are secret, any account of each permanent member's motives is partly informed speculation. Some reports suggested China and Russia may have cast two of Grynspan's "discourage" votes in the third poll. That has not been confirmed, and it should be treated as an unconfirmed report rather than a fact.

What can be said, without guessing at specific votes, is what the five governments generally look for in any Secretary-General:

1. **Predictability on their core interests.** Each permanent member wants a Secretary-General who will not use the office to embarrass it on the issues it treats as vital, whether that is Ukraine, Taiwan, the Middle East or sanctions policy.
2. **Management credibility.** With the UN under severe financial pressure, a candidate's record of running large organisations and cutting costs carries weight, especially with the largest funders.
3. **A voice, but not too loud a voice.** Permanent members tend to say they want a strong leader and then choose someone they believe they can work with. The job description and the selection incentives pull in opposite directions.
4. **Bargaining value.** Support for one candidate can be traded against other appointments, such as the heads of major UN departments, which are often filled from the permanent members' own nationals.

None of this is unique to 2026. It is how the system has worked since 1946. What is different now is that the UN's money problems, and the scale of current wars, make the choice harder to treat as routine.

## What a Secretary-General can and cannot do

Before judging any candidate, it helps to be clear about the limits of the role, because public expectations often run well ahead of reality.

A Secretary-General **can**:

- Bring any matter that threatens international peace and security to the attention of the Security Council, a power set out in Article 99 of the Charter and used only rarely.
- Appoint the senior leadership of the Secretariat, which shapes how the organisation works for a decade.
- Propose the budget and decide where cuts fall when money is short.
- Act as a go-between in conflicts, often quietly, through envoys and personal diplomacy.

- Speak publicly for principles such as human rights, humanitarian access and the laws of war, even when major powers would prefer silence.

A Secretary-General **cannot**:

- Order any country to do anything.
- Deploy peacekeepers without a Security Council mandate and contributions from member states.
- Override a veto.
- Raise money without the agreement of the governments that pay.

This is why the personal qualities of the person chosen matter so much. With few hard powers, the office depends on credibility, persistence and judgment. A Secretary-General who is trusted by both large and small states can achieve things no formal power would allow. One who is seen as weak, or as the choice of one bloc, quickly finds that the role has little weight at all.

## Why an Australian reader should care

It would be easy to treat this as a distant ritual in New York. It is not.

Australia is a middle power that relies heavily on a rules-based international order: trade rules, maritime law, nuclear safeguards, peacekeeping and humanitarian access. The Secretary-General shapes all of these, through who gets appointed to lead UN agencies, which crises receive attention, and how hard the office pushes when major powers break the rules.

Consider just three files:

- **Nuclear safeguards.** A Secretary-General with deep experience of nuclear inspection, as Grossi has, would bring a particular lens to non-proliferation at a time when nuclear risk is rising. A candidate with a development background, as Grynspan has, might prioritise trade, debt and the finances of poorer countries.
- **The UN budget.** If the organisation's financial crisis deepens, programmes that matter in the Pacific, including climate adaptation and disaster response, compete for shrinking money. The next Secretary-General will decide much of that triage.
- **Credibility.** When a Secretary-General is seen as the choice of one bloc of great powers, smaller countries trust the office less. When the office is trusted, it can broker pauses in fighting, prisoner exchanges and humanitarian corridors that no single government could arrange.

These are not abstract questions. They affect whether aid reaches people in a famine, whether inspectors get into a nuclear facility, and whether small states have a referee when larger ones push them around.

## What happens next

The next steps are fairly clear, even if the outcome is not.

1. **More straw polls, if needed.** The Council can keep polling until a candidate emerges with nine votes and no permanent member opposed. New candidates can still enter, as Nusseibeh's late nomination showed, and Sekijima noted that the field "remains open".
2. **A formal vote.** Once a consensus forms, the Council adopts a resolution recommending a single candidate in a private meeting. No date had been set as of the latest reporting.
3. **The General Assembly.** The Assembly then appoints the recommended candidate. In modern practice it has not rejected the Council's choice, though the Assembly has pushed for more transparency in the process over the past decade.
4. **Transition.** The new Secretary-General takes office on 1 January 2027.

The timetable is tight. If the Council has not settled by late November, the pressure to compromise will rise, and compromise candidates sometimes emerge from outside the leading pack.

## What reform would look like

For years, civil society groups and many member states have argued for changes to make the process fairer and more open. The most common proposals are worth stating plainly, because they are often discussed in jargon:

- **A single, longer term.** One non-renewable term of about seven years, instead of two five-year terms, so that a Secretary-General is not tempted to keep permanent members happy in order to win reappointment.
- **More than one name.** The Council would send the General Assembly a shortlist instead of a single name, giving all 193 member states a real choice.
- **Published results.** Straw poll results would be released officially, instead of leaked, so that the public does not depend on anonymous diplomatic sources.
- **Clear criteria.** Published expectations about experience, management record and independence, so that candidates are judged against a standard rather than a private negotiation.

None of these reforms requires amending the Charter. All of them require the permanent members to give up some control, which is why progress has been slow.

## The plain-language verdict

Here is the short version.

The race to lead the United Nations is being run under rules that let five countries decide the result, using secret ballots that are leaked rather than published. Rebeca Grynspan has led nearly every round and posted her best result in the seventh poll, but at least two permanent members opposed her in the sixth, and nobody outside the Council knows whether that opposition has softened. Rafael Grossi and Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett remain close behind, Lana Nusseibeh has entered late, and Michelle Bachelet and Macky Sall have withdrawn.

The outcome will tell us something about the United Nations itself. If the Council produces the first woman Secretary-General through a process that most people can follow, it will strengthen trust in an institution that badly needs it. If it produces another last-minute

compromise from a private bargain, it will confirm what many people already suspect: that the most important international job in the world is still filled in a room most of the world cannot see into.

My view is simple. The person chosen matters. The way they are chosen matters almost as much.

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TRUTH, TRANSLATED

# Truth, Translated: Google Was Found to Be a Monopolist. Why It Still Gets to Keep the Machine

**By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition**

In September a United States federal judge declined to break up Google's advertising technology business, even though the same judge had already ruled that Google illegally monopolised key parts of it. Instead, the company will live under six years of court-supervised rules that apply worldwide. Here is what was decided, why it matters well beyond America, and what it tells us about the limits of courts in taming Big Tech.

## The case in one paragraph

Every time you load a news site, a recipe blog or a sports page with advertising on it, an auction usually takes place in a fraction of a second. Software working for the website offers the ad space. Software working for advertisers bids for it. An exchange in the middle runs the auction. Google owns leading tools at each of these stages. In April 2025, Judge Leonie Brinkema of the US District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia found that Google had illegally monopolised two of those markets, the publisher ad server and the ad exchange, and had unlawfully tied the two products together. The question for the second phase of the case was what to do about it.

On 2 September 2026 she gave her answer. Google will not be forced to sell anything.

## What the judge decided

The decision came in two parts. On 2 September Judge Brinkema entered a short order rejecting the structural remedies sought by the US Department of Justice and the states that joined the case. Her full reasoning, a 106-page memorandum opinion, was filed under seal for 14 days so that confidential business information could be redacted. It was made public in mid-September.

The Department of Justice had asked for three structural remedies:

1. **The sale of AdX**, Google's ad exchange, where publishers pay Google a fee of 20% to sell ads in instant auctions.
2. **Open-sourcing the final auction logic** of DFP, Google's publisher ad server, so that rivals could see and use the rules that decide which ad wins.
3. **A contingent sale of DFP itself** if competition did not return.

Judge Brinkema refused all three. According to detailed coverage of the opinion by PPC Land, the court found that no viable buyer for AdX had been identified, and that the case for a forced sale rested largely on distrust of Google's future compliance.

Instead, she ordered a long list of behavioural remedies, meaning rules about how Google must operate rather than what it must own. In her words, as reported by Reuters, those remedies "will be sufficient to effectively pry open to competition the ad tech markets".

## The new rules, translated

The behavioural remedies are technical. Here is what the main ones mean in plain terms.

**No more tying.** Google may not require websites that use its ad server to also use its ad exchange. This goes straight to the heart of the liability finding. If a publisher wants Google's ad server but prefers someone else's exchange, Google cannot punish that choice.

**An end to special auction advantages.** The court barred Google from reintroducing practices known as "First Look" and "Last Look", which historically gave Google's exchange privileged positions in the auction sequence. Google must also stop applying a set of rules called Unified Pricing Rules to indirect transactions, so publishers can set different minimum prices for different exchanges.

**Opening the door to rivals.** Google must build a way for Prebid, the open-source "header bidding" system that many publishers use to run auctions across multiple exchanges, to request real-time bids from AdX. It must also connect its ad server to Prebid. In addition, AdX must be able to bid into rival publisher ad servers, not just Google's own. In simple terms, Google's demand must be available to publishers whichever tools they choose.

**Publishers get their data.** Publishers will be able to take their historical and configuration data from Google's ad server, along with AdX bid data, and export it to rival ad servers. That matters because switching providers is hard when your history is locked inside someone else's system.

**Transparency instead of open source.** Rather than publishing the auction code, Google must document how DFP's final auction logic works and provide a per-ad data file showing candidate prices and adjustments.

**No discrimination by ownership.** Google may not vary AdX's revenue share, speed or bid handling depending on whether a publisher uses Google's ad server, a rival's, or Prebid.

**A monitor with real access.** The court will appoint a Monitor, chosen from a slate of three candidates, with broad access to Google systems and staff, paid for by Google. A three-member Technical Committee will also be formed. Google must appoint an internal compliance officer, and until the Monitor is in place, senior executives must sign compliance affidavits every 30 days.

**Six years, worldwide.** The remedies will last six years, not the 15 years the government and states sought, and the court can extend them if it is not satisfied. Because the

relevant markets were defined as global, the final judgment is to apply worldwide, not only in the United States.

The parties were directed to file a jointly proposed final judgment within 30 days, and to show competing versions of any provisions they could not agree on.

## How online advertising got this way

It helps to understand how the market reached this point, because the remedies only make sense against that history.

In the early days of the web, websites sold advertising much as newspapers did: directly, through sales teams, at agreed prices. As the number of sites and advertisers exploded, that model could not keep up. Software emerged to automate the process, first to manage which ads appeared where, and then to run auctions for each individual ad space in real time.

Over the following years, Google built or acquired tools at each stage. It offered advertisers a simple way to buy space across millions of websites. It offered publishers an ad server to manage their inventory. And it ran an exchange connecting the two. Each tool was useful on its own. Together, they gave one company unusual visibility over both sides of every transaction and the power to set the rules of the auction in the middle.

Publishers responded with workarounds. The most important was header bidding, a technique that lets a website invite bids from several exchanges at once before its ad server makes the final decision. Prebid, the open-source framework that grew out of that movement, is now widely used. It is no accident that so many of the court's remedies focus on making Google's exchange work properly with Prebid. The court is, in effect, strengthening the tool publishers built to reduce their dependence on Google.

That is the larger significance of the decision. Instead of replacing the market structure, the court is trying to make the existing alternatives viable.

## Who said what

Reactions split along predictable lines.

Google called the government's proposed breakup "extreme government overreach" and argued that splitting the business was not technically feasible. Lee-Anne Mulholland, a Google executive, said the company was "very pleased" that the court had rejected the proposal to break apart tools that help small businesses reach customers. Google has said it will appeal the original April 2025 liability ruling.

The Department of Justice said on X that it was pleased the court had "ordered substantial relief", and that it was evaluating next steps.

Critics of Big Tech were less satisfied. Sacha Haworth of The Tech Oversight Project said the rulings "prove that the courts alone will not save us from Big Tech." Lisa Macpherson of the advocacy group Public Knowledge, writing in Tech Policy Press, described the order as disappointing, while noting that strong enforcement of the new rules could still reduce some of Google's advantages over publishers.

Markets barely moved. Google's shares pared gains slightly after the ruling but were still up 0.6%, according to Al Jazeera.

## The numbers that explain the case

To understand why this case was brought at all, a few figures from the court record help.

| Measure | Figure reported from the opinion |
|---|---|
| AdX fee charged to publishers | about 20% |
| Estimated fee without Unified Pricing Rules | about 16.6% |
| AdX share of global open-web display exchange transactions, 2018 to 2022 | 63% to 71% |
| AdX size compared with nearest rival | about nine times larger |
| DFP share of the publisher ad server market, 2022 | 91% |

Those numbers describe a company that sat on both sides of the market and ran the marketplace in the middle. That is the structure that led the court, in 2025, to find illegal monopolisation.

## Why the judge chose rules over a breakup

It would be easy to read this outcome as a win for Google and a loss for the public. The reasoning is more interesting than that.

Breakups are slow. A forced sale of AdX would have required finding a buyer able to run a system that, according to the record, handles millions of ad requests and tens of millions of bid requests per second at peak. It would have involved years of transition, and Google's likely appeal would have delayed it further. The court treated the likelihood of an appeal as relevant when weighing how long a forced sale would take.

Behavioural rules can start sooner. The Monitor and Technical Committee are to be set up immediately, and the main technical changes are expected within roughly 12 to 15 months.

The market has also moved. The opinion noted that indirect open-web display had fallen sharply as a share of Google's advertising impressions over recent years, as money shifted toward search, social media, video, apps and retail media. A breakup aimed at the ad tech of 2018 might have arrived just in time to matter less.

None of that answers the core objection, which is that behavioural remedies depend on the monopolist complying in good faith with rules it opposes, under the watch of a monitor it pays for. History offers mixed lessons on whether that works.

## A pattern, not an exception

This is not the first time US enforcers have tried and failed to break up a Big Tech company. Al Jazeera described it as the third time in recent years.

- **Google search.** In September 2025, Judge Amit Mehta in Washington, who had ruled that Google held an illegal monopoly in search, rejected the government's request to force the sale of the Chrome browser. He pointed to competition from generative AI

companies such as OpenAI and instead ordered measures including sharing some search data with rivals. Google has appealed the search liability finding.

- **Meta.** Last year a federal judge in Washington rejected the Federal Trade Commission's bid to force Meta to sell Instagram and WhatsApp. The FTC has appealed.
- **Google ad tech.** Now this case, where liability was proven but divestiture refused.

The pattern is consistent. Courts are willing to find that Big Tech companies have broken the law. They are much less willing to order the companies to be split, preferring detailed rules and supervision.

## The rest of the world is not waiting

Outside the United States, regulators have taken a different path. Rather than relying on long court cases under old competition laws, they are writing specific rules for digital gatekeepers in advance.

On 23 July 2026 the European Commission fined Google a combined €890 million (about US$1 billion) under the Digital Markets Act, for favouring its own services in search results and for restricting app developers on Google Play. On 17 June 2026, the UK Competition and Markets Authority ordered Google to improve transparency for its search services, after British businesses complained that its ranking practices were neither fair nor transparent.

That difference matters. The American approach says: prove the harm in court, then fix it. The European and British approach increasingly says: set the rules first, then enforce them. Each has costs. Court cases are slow but tested. Rulebooks are faster but can be blunt and slow to adapt.

## Why this matters in Australia

Australian readers might wonder why a court in Virginia should concern them. There are three reasons.

**First, the remedies are global.** Because the court defined the markets as worldwide, the final judgment is expected to apply outside the US. Australian publishers who sell advertising through Google's tools should, in time, gain the same rights to use rival exchanges, move their data, and see more about how auctions work.

**Second, news and advertising are linked.** Much of what Australians read online is paid for by display advertising. When an intermediary takes a large share of each advertising dollar, less money reaches the newsroom that produced the story. Macpherson argued that Google's control of the ad tech chain left advertisers paying more while seeing less, and pushed publishers toward higher paywalls. If the new rules lower the cost of selling ads even modestly, more of that money stays with the people who make content.

**Third, it is a test case for policy.** Australia has spent years debating how to deal with the power of digital platforms, from news bargaining to scam prevention and age limits. The Virginia decision is a live experiment in whether behavioural rules, supervised by a monitor, can change how a dominant platform behaves. If it works, it strengthens the

case for targeted rules. If it fails, it strengthens the case for structural separation in future.

### A note on fairness to Google

It is worth recording Google's side fairly. The company argues that its tools are popular because they work, that many small businesses and publishers rely on them, and that splitting them apart would have disrupted services millions of people use. The court did not accept that Google's past conduct was lawful. But it did accept that a forced breakup carried real practical risks, and that a buyer capable of running AdX had not been identified. A reader can disagree with the outcome and still recognise that the judge weighed genuine trade-offs.

## What to watch next

The next year will show whether this decision is a turning point or a paper victory.

1. **The final judgment.** The jointly proposed final judgment and any disputed clauses will reveal how tightly the rules are drafted. Vague rules are easy to work around.
2. **The Monitor.** Who is appointed, and how much access and independence they have in practice, will determine whether problems are caught early.
3. **The technical deadlines.** The Prebid and rival ad server connections are the core of the remedy. If they arrive late or work badly, publishers will see little change.
4. **The appeal.** Google is appealing the liability finding. If it wins, the remedies fall away. If it loses, the case for stronger measures grows.
5. **Publisher behaviour.** The real test is whether publishers actually move business to rival tools once they can. Competition on paper only matters if it becomes competition in practice.

## What this means for ordinary internet users

Most people will never log into an ad server or run an auction. So what changes for them?

In the short term, very little that they will notice. The web will look the same. Ads will appear in the same places.

Over time, though, the effects could be real. If publishers keep a larger share of each advertising dollar, smaller news sites and specialist publications have a better chance of surviving without putting everything behind a paywall. If advertisers can see more clearly where their ads appear, less money flows to low-quality sites built only to capture ad revenue. And if competition in ad technology revives, rivals may compete on privacy and quality, not only on price.

None of this is guaranteed. It depends on the remedies being enforced firmly and on publishers using the new freedoms they have been given. But it is a reminder that competition law, which can seem remote and technical, shapes the information environment everyone lives in.

## The plain-language verdict

Strip away the technical vocabulary and the story is straightforward.

A court found that Google broke the law by dominating the tools that sell online advertising and by tying them together. The court then decided that the fix was not to take those tools away, but to force Google to open them up, share data, stop favouring itself, and accept a monitor for six years, everywhere it operates.

That is a meaningful outcome. It is also a cautious one. It assumes that a company which was found to have used its position illegally will now operate fairly under supervision. Some experts think that is realistic. Others think it is naive.

My view is that both sides are partly right. The rules are detailed and, if enforced, will make the market more open than it has been for a decade. But the larger lesson is the one critics drew: courts working case by case, years after the conduct occurred, are not enough on their own to keep pace with platforms that reshape markets faster than the law can respond. Clear rules, set in advance and enforced quickly, will have to do more of the work.

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TRUTH, TRANSLATED

# Truth, Translated: The Teacher Shortage Is Not a Mystery

**By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition**

On 29 September 2026 the OECD published its annual Education at a Glance report with a single special focus: teacher shortages. The findings are blunt. Most developed education systems are struggling to staff classrooms, especially in mathematics and science and in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities, and official vacancy numbers hide much of the problem. The causes are well understood. The question is whether governments are willing to act on them.

## Why this report matters

Education at a Glance is the closest thing the developed world has to a shared report card on schooling. Each year the OECD compiles comparable data from its member countries and partners on participation, spending, attainment and the teaching workforce. Ministers quote it, unions quote it, and newspapers turn it into league tables.

This year's edition chose to look hard at one issue. That choice is itself a signal. When the OECD makes teacher shortages the special theme, it is saying that this is no longer a local staffing problem in a few unlucky countries. It is a structural pressure across most systems.

The report's headline message, as summarised in the OECD's launch materials and national government briefings, is that teacher shortages affect most OECD education systems to varying degrees, with recruitment especially difficult in mathematics and science and in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities.

## The numbers, translated

Some of the most useful figures from the report and related OECD survey work are set out below.

| Indicator (OECD, 2024 to 2025) | Figure |
|---|---|
| Primary and secondary teachers not fully qualified | 9.1% |
| Fully qualified primary and secondary teachers who left the profession | 6.4% |
| Secondary teachers aged 55 or older | about one in four |
| Teachers satisfied with their job | 85% |
| Teachers who feel society values their profession | 22% |
| Lower secondary teachers who are second-career entrants (average) | 8.4% |
| Lower secondary teachers in Australia who are | more than 15% |

| Indicator (OECD, 2024 to 2025) | Figure |
|---|---|
| second-career entrants | |

Each of these numbers tells part of a story.

**Nearly one in eleven teachers is not fully qualified.** When schools cannot find a qualified teacher, they do not usually leave the class empty. They fill it with someone teaching outside their specialty, or with a person who has not completed the required training. The 9.1% figure is a measure of how much the system is already improvising.

**About one in sixteen qualified teachers leaves in a single year.** A leaving rate of 6.4% might not sound dramatic. But every teacher who leaves must be replaced, and those who leave early in their careers take years of training investment with them.

**A quarter of secondary teachers are 55 or older.** That is a retirement wave waiting to happen. Even if nobody else left early, systems would need to recruit heavily over the next decade simply to stand still.

**Teachers like teaching. They do not feel valued.** The gap between 85% job satisfaction and 22% feeling valued by society is perhaps the most important finding of all. It suggests that the work itself is not the main problem. The status, the pressure and the conditions around the work are.

## Why official vacancy numbers mislead

One of the report's more subtle points is easy to miss. In all 20 education systems with available data, unfilled posts made up less than 4% of the combined primary and secondary teaching workforce in 2024 and 2025.

At first glance, that looks reassuring. If fewer than four in every hundred posts are empty, how bad can it be?

The OECD's answer is that official vacancy counts understate the problem, because shortages are concentrated in particular subjects, schools and regions. A national vacancy rate of 3% can coexist with a remote school that has had no qualified physics teacher for two years, or a disadvantaged suburb where every mathematics class is taught by someone trained in another subject.

In plain terms: averages hide the children who are worst affected. The shortage is not spread evenly. It falls hardest on the students who already have the least.

## The pay question

Teachers are often told that they did not enter the profession for the money. That is true for most of them. It is also not a reason to ignore pay.

OECD figures cited in coverage of the 2026 report put teachers' actual earnings, on average, at between 87% and 95% of the earnings of other tertiary-educated workers, depending on the level of schooling. Starting salaries for lower secondary teachers average 61% of the earnings of similarly educated workers. That gap at the start of a

career matters most, because it shapes who chooses to train as a teacher in the first place.

The OECD's teacher survey, TALIS 2024, adds a further layer. Across OECD systems:

- Only 39% of lower secondary teachers are satisfied with their salaries.
- 68% are satisfied with their other employment conditions.
- Teachers who are satisfied with their salaries are 25% less likely to want to leave teaching within five years.
- Teachers who are satisfied with their non-salary employment terms are almost 40% less likely to consider leaving within five years.

That last pair of findings is important. Pay matters, but conditions matter even more for retention. Workload, administrative burden, support for student behaviour, job security and professional respect are not soft extras. They decide whether a good teacher stays.

## What this looks like in Australia

Australia features in the report in a specific and partly positive way. It is singled out, alongside the Netherlands, as a system where more than 15% of lower secondary teachers are second-career entrants, nearly double the OECD average of 8.4%. The report describes these countries as having flexible pathways that recognise prior experience and combine training with employment.

That is a genuine strength. Engineers, scientists, nurses, tradespeople and accountants who move into teaching bring knowledge of how subjects are used in the real world. In shortage subjects such as mathematics and physics, career changers can be one of the fastest ways to put qualified people in front of students.

It is not, by itself, a solution. Career changers need proper training, mentoring and support in their first years, or they leave quickly. And recruitment pathways only help if the job is attractive enough to keep people once they arrive.

Australian governments have recognised the problem. In December 2022, federal, state and territory education ministers agreed the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, a package of measures covering recruitment, retention, initial teacher education, workload and the status of the profession. Since then, the debate has shifted from whether there is a shortage to whether the response is working, and how quickly.

The OECD report gives that debate a useful outside reference point. Australia is not unusual in struggling. It is also not exempt from the same pressures: an ageing workforce, competition from better-paid professions, and the concentration of shortages in regional and disadvantaged schools.

## The early childhood warning

One part of the picture deserves more attention than it is likely to receive: the early childhood workforce.

Early childhood education is where the foundations of language, numeracy and social skills are laid. Participation is high across the developed world: on OECD figures, 90% of

children aged three to the start of primary school were enrolled in early childhood education in 2024, on average. Yet the workforce that delivers it is often paid less and supported less than school teachers.

When early childhood educators leave, children lose continuity at exactly the age when stable relationships matter most. Families lose services. And the pressure feeds into school classrooms a few years later, when children arrive with gaps that a more stable early years workforce might have prevented.

Any serious national plan for teachers has to include early childhood educators. Treating them as a separate, lower-priority workforce is a false economy.

## What the report does not tell us

Good analysis is honest about its limits, and the OECD figures have several.

- **Averages hide variation.** OECD-wide figures combine very different systems. A leaving rate or salary ratio for the whole OECD may not describe any one country well.
- **Definitions differ.** Countries define "fully qualified", "vacancy" and "leaving the profession" in slightly different ways, which makes precise comparisons difficult.
- **Satisfaction is self-reported.** Survey data on job and salary satisfaction tells us how teachers feel, which matters, but it does not by itself show what causes them to leave.
- **Data is missing for some systems.** The finding on unfilled posts covers only the 20 education systems with available data, not every OECD country.
- **The report describes, it does not prescribe.** It shows patterns and associations. It cannot tell a particular state or territory which policy will work best for its schools.

None of this weakens the main message. The pattern of shortages, ageing staff and weak status is consistent across many measures and many countries. But it does mean that national and local data, collected honestly and published openly, are essential to turning the OECD's picture into effective policy.

## The wider picture: where the system is working

It would be wrong to read the report as a story of decline. Across the OECD, it records real progress on several fronts.

- **Participation in early learning is high**, at an average of 90% for children aged three to the start of primary school.
- **Fewer young adults lack a senior secondary qualification.** The share of 25- to 34-year-olds without upper secondary attainment has been declining, and stood at about 12% internationally in 2025.
- **Tertiary education keeps growing.** Across the OECD, 43% of 25- to 64-year-olds have completed tertiary education.
- **Most young people are engaged.** On average, 13% of 18- to 24-year-olds were neither in employment nor in education or training in 2025, which means the large majority were.

These gains were delivered by teachers. That is precisely why the shortage matters. The progress of the past two decades depends on a workforce that is now under strain. If the workforce weakens, the gains are at risk.

## Five myths about the teacher shortage

The public debate about teachers often runs on assumptions. Here are five common ones, tested against the evidence.

**Myth 1: "There just aren't enough people who want to teach."** *Verdict: Misleading.* The OECD notes that teacher numbers have grown faster than student numbers across the OECD in recent years. The problem is less a total lack of teachers than a mismatch: the wrong subjects, the wrong places, and too many people leaving early.

**Myth 2: "It's all about pay."** *Verdict: Partly true.* Pay matters, especially starting salaries, which average 61% of what similarly educated workers earn. But satisfaction with non-salary conditions is linked more strongly to staying in the profession than satisfaction with pay.

**Myth 3: "Vacancy figures show the problem is small."** *Verdict: False comfort.* National vacancy rates under 4% conceal severe shortages in particular subjects, schools and regions.

**Myth 4: "Teachers are unhappy with their jobs."** *Verdict: Mostly wrong.* 85% of teachers say they are satisfied with their job. What they lack is respect and support: only 22% feel society values their profession.

**Myth 5: "Fast-track pathways lower standards."** *Verdict: Depends on design.* Well-designed second-career pathways, which combine training with paid employment and recognise prior experience, help fill shortage subjects. Poorly supported ones lead to early exits. The design, not the idea, is the issue.

## Why shortages hit the most disadvantaged students hardest

It is worth stating the equity problem plainly, because it is the part of this story with the most serious long-term consequences.

When a school in a well-resourced area advertises a mathematics position, it usually receives several qualified applicants. When a school in a remote town or a disadvantaged suburb advertises the same role, it may receive none. The OECD's finding that shortages are especially acute in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities describes this pattern.

The result is a quiet compounding of disadvantage. Students who already face the greatest barriers are more likely to be taught by teachers who are out of field, newly arrived, or on short-term contracts. Those students then have fewer chances to reach advanced mathematics and science, which narrows their options for university, skilled trades and better-paid work.

That is why teacher shortages are not only an industrial relations issue between governments and unions. They are a question of fairness for the next generation.

## What actually works

The OECD and a large body of research point to a fairly consistent set of responses. None of them is surprising. All of them cost money or require political will.

1. **Raise starting pay, not only top-end pay.** The gap at the start of a career is the one that shapes who enters training. Increases concentrated at the top of the scale do less for recruitment.
2. **Cut non-teaching workload.** Administrative tasks, duplicated reporting and compliance paperwork take time away from planning, teaching and recovery. Reducing them is one of the most direct ways to improve the non-salary conditions that predict retention.
3. **Support new teachers properly.** Structured mentoring and reduced teaching loads in the first years reduce early exits, which are the most expensive kind.
4. **Target incentives where shortages are worst.** Higher pay, housing help and career progression for teachers in remote and disadvantaged schools, and in shortage subjects, put resources where the gaps are.
5. **Build serious second-career pathways.** Australia already does this better than most. The next step is ensuring these pathways come with strong training and support so career changers stay.
6. **Restore professional respect.** This is harder to legislate, but it matters. Clear standards, genuine professional autonomy, and leaders who defend teachers in public rather than blaming them all affect whether people stay.
7. **Measure the problem honestly.** National vacancy rates are not enough. Systems need public data on out-of-field teaching, early-career attrition and shortages by subject and region.

## Questions worth asking your local school system

For parents, school boards and community members who want to understand how the shortage affects their own area, these questions help turn a global report into local accountability:

1. **How many classes are taught by teachers working outside their subject area**, especially in mathematics, science and languages?
2. **How many teachers leave within their first five years**, and is that number rising or falling?
3. **How long do hard-to-staff positions stay vacant** in regional, remote and disadvantaged schools?
4. **What support do new teachers receive** in their first two years, including mentoring and reduced teaching loads?
5. **What has been done to reduce administrative workload**, and how is that being measured?
6. **How are early childhood educators included** in workforce planning, pay and professional development?

Governments hold most of this information already. Asking for it to be published regularly is one of the simplest ways to make sure the response to the shortage is judged on results, not announcements.

## A word on respect

One final point is harder to measure but easy to understand. Only 22% of teachers across the OECD feel that society values their profession. No funding package can fix that number on its own.

Respect is shaped by how political leaders talk about teachers, how the media reports on schools, and how communities treat the people who teach their children. When teachers are blamed for every problem in education, from test scores to student behaviour, the message to potential recruits is clear. When they are treated as skilled professionals doing demanding work, the message changes. That is something every reader can influence.

## The plain-language verdict

The teacher shortage is not a mystery. The OECD's 2026 report shows that it is widespread, uneven and getting harder to manage as experienced teachers retire. It shows that teachers mostly love the work but do not feel valued, that starting pay lags well behind other graduate jobs, and that conditions around the job are closely linked to whether people stay.

Australia has one clear strength in its high share of career changers, and a national plan that names the right problems. What matters now is whether governments fund the solutions at the scale required, and whether they direct help to the schools where shortages hurt children most.

My view is that we should stop describing this as a crisis that arrived suddenly. It is the predictable result of asking a profession to carry more responsibility, more scrutiny and more paperwork without matching pay, support or respect. The good news is that predictable problems have known solutions. The question is whether we will choose them.

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TRUTH, TRANSLATED

# Truth, Translated: Who Answers for Afghanistan? The Report That Looks Up the Chain of Command

**By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition**

In late October 2026, the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force published the executive summary of an inquiry that had been kept from the public for years. Its subject was not what individual soldiers did in Afghanistan, but the culture in which they did it, and whether the officers above them saw, ignored or enabled it. Its language is unusually blunt: an "uncontrolled warrior culture", an "inversion of authority", and a possible "abandonment of curiosity" among some commanders. Here is what it says, what it does not say, and why it matters for accountability in a democracy.

## Where this story starts

Australia sent special forces to Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks in 2001, as part of a commitment to support the United States. Over the following years, soldiers from the Special Air Service Regiment and the Commando Regiment were deployed again and again on high-intensity operations, many of them in Uruzgan Province.

In November 2020, the public release version of the Afghanistan Inquiry, led by Major General Paul Brereton for the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force, changed how the country understood that deployment. The inquiry, covering the period from 2005 to 2016, found credible information that Australian special forces personnel had unlawfully killed 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners. It made recommendations for criminal investigation, compensation for victims' families, and cultural and structural reform.

The Brereton inquiry placed responsibility mainly at the level of patrol commanders, the junior non-commissioned officers who led small groups of soldiers on operations. It did not find that more senior commanders knew of the killings. That conclusion left a question that has never gone away: how could conduct on that scale happen without anyone further up the chain noticing?

The newly published inquiry was set up in the wake of the Brereton report to look at that question. According to the ABC, its report was handed to former Chief of the Defence Force Mark Binskin in 2022. It has taken until now for the public to see even a summary.

## What the new inquiry was asked to examine

The executive summary is titled *Inquiry into the Cultural Context in which Command over SOTGs or Special Forces Personnel was exercised in Afghanistan*. SOTG stands for Special Operations Task Group, the formation through which Australian special forces were deployed.

In plain terms, the inquiry asked: what was the culture of command around these units, and did the people in charge exercise the control and oversight that their responsibilities required?

Only the executive summary has been published. The ABC reports that the full report will not be released because it contains sensitive evidence from the original Brereton inquiry. That limits what the public can assess, and it is worth keeping in mind throughout.

## The key findings, translated

According to Murdoch University historians Dean Aszkielowicz and Paul Taucher, writing in The Conversation, the summary contains 42 findings. Liberal MP Andrew Hastie, a former SAS captain, referred to "almost 50 findings". The report makes no formal recommendations. Instead, it identifies nine overarching issues that could inform reform.

Drawing on reporting by the ABC and The Conversation, the central findings can be grouped into five themes.

### 1. A culture that had escaped control

The report describes an "uncontrolled warrior culture" within Australian special forces in Afghanistan. It concluded that the system of governance, risk and compliance had been "significantly degraded" within Special Operations Command generally and the Special Air Service Regiment specifically, and that the failure to intervene suggested "an absence of effective leadership at various levels."

Some operators, the report found, came to believe that "ordinary norms and standards no longer apply." It referred to a "tendency to arrogance" and a belief among some that they were "untouchable". The ABC reported that the culture was likened to a "bikie gang".

### 2. Authority turned upside down

In any military, orders are supposed to flow down the chain of command. The report found that in parts of the special forces in Afghanistan the reverse had happened. It described an "inversion of authority", in which tight-knit groups of experienced non-commissioned officers made decisions normally reserved for senior personnel, and junior officers were "effectively subservient" to them.

This matters because the officer is the person legally and professionally responsible for what happens under their command. When the officer cannot or will not exercise that authority, the system of control breaks down.

### 3. Warning signs that were not followed up

Perhaps the most uncomfortable finding concerns information that was available at the time.

The ABC reported that the inquiry examined "enemy killed in action" figures, which showed growth and spikes, a lack of wounded insurgents (only deaths), and a lack of Australian casualties. By historical standards, the report said, this pattern was "most unusual". It called it "extraordinary that no effective action was taken" on rumours about SAS conduct, while stating that there was "no suggestion that those aware of rumours were specifically complicit in the misconduct".

Some commanders were alert to the data and the rumours; others were not, which, the report said, "may suggest an abandonment of curiosity". And it described an "extreme limitation" in the flow of information from SAS units to higher command.

In plain language: the numbers looked wrong, the rumours were circulating, and the system did not ask the obvious questions.

### 4. Awards, alcohol and discipline

According to the ABC, the report found that operational decisions were influenced by "a desire to secure awards". It also found that senior officers knowingly allowed alcohol consumption, including at a dedicated drinking establishment at Camp Russell, the Australian special forces base. These are not minor matters of etiquette. They go to whether commanders were maintaining the discipline that the law of armed conflict requires.

### 5. Too much, too often

The report also criticised the over-use of special forces and their isolation from the wider Army. Elite units were deployed on repeated, intense rotations over many years. Aszkielowicz and Taucher note that, as a smaller military power, it is often Australia's most highly trained units that appeal to its partners.

The ABC noted that the report acknowledged cultural reform efforts already under way within Defence.

## What the report does not do

It is important to be precise about the limits of this document, because reports like this are easily misread in both directions.

- **It does not name individuals as guilty of crimes.** It is an inquiry into culture and command, not a criminal trial. Its findings about leadership failure are not findings that any particular officer committed an offence.
- **It does not make recommendations.** It identifies issues. It does not set out what Defence or government must now do.
- **It has not been published in full.** The public has only the executive summary. Readers cannot test the evidence behind the findings.
- **It does not replace the courts.** Criminal allegations arising from the Brereton inquiry are being dealt with through separate investigation and prosecution processes.

Equally, the report should not be read as minimising what happened. Hastie, who served as a junior officer in the SAS, said the report "confirms there was unlawful conduct, that's not in dispute." His other observation is the key to understanding the document: rather

than focusing on individuals, he said, it "spreads responsibility throughout the chain of command."

## Why command responsibility matters

This is the heart of the issue, and it is often misunderstood.

Under international humanitarian law, commanders are not only responsible for the orders they give. They are also responsible for taking reasonable steps to prevent and punish crimes by those under their effective control, when they knew or should have known such crimes were being committed. The International Committee of the Red Cross identifies command responsibility as a rule of customary international humanitarian law.

The principle exists for a reason. Soldiers operate under intense pressure, with lethal weapons, far from public view. The only reliable safeguard against abuse is a chain of command that sets standards, asks questions and acts on warning signs. If commanders are never held responsible for failing to do that, the incentive to look away becomes overwhelming.

Aszkielowicz and Taucher suggest the new report may lead to investigations of some commanders. Whether it does, and whether any such investigations lead anywhere, will be a test of whether accountability in Australia reaches beyond the people who pulled the trigger.

## The accountability gap so far

Since 2020, the public story of accountability for Afghanistan has followed a familiar pattern.

**Investigations and prosecutions have focused on individual soldiers.** The Brereton report led to the creation of the Office of the Special Investigator to investigate alleged war crimes. According to the ABC, charges have been laid against former SAS personnel, who are contesting them. Those allegations are untested in court, and every accused person is entitled to the presumption of innocence.

**Senior leaders have largely avoided direct consequences.** Brereton's conclusion that responsibility lay mainly at patrol-commander level meant senior officers were not the focus of the criminal process. There was public debate in the years after 2020 about whether medals and commendations awarded to commanders for their service in Afghanistan should be reviewed, but the question of command accountability has never been fully resolved.

**Political leadership has stayed outside the frame.** Governments of both major parties sent special forces to Afghanistan repeatedly over many years, approved the rotations, and received the operational reporting. No inquiry so far has examined whether ministers and their advisers asked the right questions about how these units were being used and what the pattern of results suggested.

That pattern troubles many people across the political spectrum. It sends the message that the risk of accountability falls on those with the least power in the system.

## The secrecy problem

There is also a democratic question in how this report reached the public.

According to the ABC, the report was handed to former Chief of the Defence Force Mark Binskin in 2022. Its executive summary was published in late October 2026, roughly four years later. The full report will not be released.

There are legitimate reasons for some secrecy. The report draws on evidence from the original inquiry, some of which may relate to ongoing criminal matters. Publishing it in full could prejudice trials, identify witnesses, or compromise operational security.

But there is also a cost. A four-year delay in publishing even a summary of findings about leadership failures inevitably raises suspicion that institutional reputation is being protected. The longer a report is held back, the more its eventual publication looks like damage control rather than transparency.

The better practice, in my view, is to publish as much as possible, as early as possible, with redactions explained. Defence should state clearly why the full report cannot be released, what parts could be released after current prosecutions conclude, and when that will happen.

## Why this matters to every Australian

It is tempting to see this as a story about a few units, a long time ago, in a distant country. It is much more than that.

**It is about the people who were killed.** The Brereton inquiry found credible information that 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners were unlawfully killed. Behind that number are families who lost sons, fathers and brothers. Accountability is owed to them first.

**It is about the soldiers who did the right thing.** Many special forces personnel served with courage and integrity, and some of them spoke up about misconduct at great personal cost. A culture that protects wrongdoing betrays them too.

**It is about future deployments.** Australia will send its forces into danger again. The lessons of this report, about oversight, rotation, information flow and command, are directly relevant to how that is done.

**It is about trust in institutions.** Democracies give their militaries extraordinary power, including the power to kill. That power is only legitimate if it is subject to law and to genuine accountability, including for the people at the top.

## Fairness in two directions

Reports like this invite strong reactions, and it is worth holding two commitments at the same time.

The first is fairness to people who have been accused. Former soldiers facing criminal charges are entitled to the presumption of innocence and to a fair trial. Commanders whose leadership is criticised in an inquiry are entitled to have their side heard, and to

have any question of personal responsibility decided through a proper process rather than through headlines. A culture of accountability that ignores due process is not accountability at all.

The second is fairness to those who were harmed, and to the institution's own honest members. The Afghan families whose relatives were killed deserve the truth and a remedy. The soldiers who refused to take part in misconduct, or who reported it, deserve to know that doing the right thing was worth it. And the many veterans who served lawfully deserve not to have their service shadowed by a failure to deal properly with those who did not.

These commitments are not in tension. Both are served by the same things: thorough investigation, transparent process, and decisions based on evidence.

## How to read reports like this

Inquiry reports are often reported in fragments, so a few habits help readers make sense of them.

- **Read the exact words.** Phrases such as "credible information", "finding" and "issue" have specific meanings. A finding about culture is not a finding of individual guilt.
- **Check what was published.** An executive summary is a distillation. It may leave out evidence, qualifications and dissenting views contained in the full report.
- **Note the dates.** This report was delivered in 2022 and summarised publicly in 2026. Some of the conditions it describes may have changed since, and Defence says reform is under way.
- **Look for the response.** The most important document is often not the report itself, but the formal response that says what will change, who is responsible, and by when.
- **Follow the money and the time.** Reform that is not funded, or that has no deadline, rarely happens.

These habits apply well beyond defence. They are useful for reading any official inquiry, from royal commissions to regulator reviews.

## Five plain-language questions the report leaves open

1. **Who knew what, and when?** The report says warning signs existed and were not acted on. The public still does not know which levels of command saw which signs.
2. **Will any senior officer be investigated?** Command responsibility is a legal principle, not only a moral one. Whether it is applied will show whether accountability is real.
3. **What will Defence do with the nine issues?** Without formal recommendations, there is a risk that the report is acknowledged and filed. Defence should publish a response to each issue with timelines.
4. **What did governments know?** Ministers approved repeated deployments of the same small units. A full account of accountability should include the civilian decisions that shaped how special forces were used.
5. **When will the full report be published?** A clear commitment, even if publication must wait for court cases to conclude, would strengthen trust.

## What good accountability would look like

Drawing on the report's own themes, a credible response would include:

- **A published, issue-by-issue Defence response** to the nine overarching issues, with named owners and deadlines.
- **Independent assessment of command responsibility**, so that decisions about whether senior officers should face investigation are made transparently and at arm's length from the chain of command.
- **Limits on rotation tempo** for special forces, so that small units are not exhausted by repeated deployments.
- **Stronger information channels**, so that unusual patterns in operational reporting automatically trigger scrutiny rather than relying on individual curiosity.
- **A timetable for fuller publication**, once legal processes allow.
- **Continued support for victims' families**, including through the compensation the Brereton inquiry recommended.

## The plain-language verdict

The short version is this.

In 2020, the Brereton inquiry found credible information that Australian special forces unlawfully killed 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners, and placed responsibility mainly on patrol commanders. A follow-up inquiry into the culture of command, completed in 2022 and only now released in summary, has found an "uncontrolled warrior culture", authority inverted so that junior officers deferred to experienced soldiers, and senior headquarters that failed to act on warning signs that were "most unusual" by historical standards. It names no individuals and makes no recommendations, but it shifts the focus of accountability up the chain of command.

My view is that this report should be a turning point. A country that prosecutes soldiers but never examines the failures of those who commanded them has only done half the work of accountability. Fairness to the accused, justice for the victims and the integrity of the Australian Defence Force all require the same thing: that responsibility is followed wherever the evidence leads, including to the top.

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TRUTH, TRANSLATED

# Truth, Translated: The AI Building Boom Comes to Town

**By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition**

Artificial intelligence feels weightless. You type a question and an answer appears. But every answer is produced in a building somewhere, full of servers that draw electricity, need cooling and occupy land. In September and October 2026 that physical reality became one of Australia's most contested public questions, as debate grew over the national grid, local water supplies, and a planned A$7 billion share market float that was pulled days before listing. Here is what is happening, in plain language.

## What a data centre actually is

A data centre is a building, or a campus of buildings, filled with computers that store data and run software for other people. The idea is not new. Researchers trace the origins of data centres back to the 1940s, when early computers needed dedicated rooms. In the 1990s, "co-location" facilities grew, where many customers rent shared space. In 2006, Google opened its first hyperscale data centre and Amazon Web Services launched its first cloud services.

What has changed is scale. Data centres used to be measured in floor space. Now they are measured in megawatts and gigawatts of power. A hyperscale facility typically houses at least 5,000 servers and can draw more than 100 megawatts, enough, according to a City of Ryde council document, to meet the annual electricity needs of more than 50,000 households. Hyperscale operators accounted for 48% of global data centre capacity in 2025.

The reason for the recent surge is artificial intelligence. Training a large AI model can take weeks or months of continuous computing, and answering billions of user questions afterwards, known as inference, is a fast-growing share of AI's energy demand. Industry analysis cited by University of Sydney researcher Johanna Lim projects that AI will account for about 70% of data centre demand by 2030.

## Australia's numbers

Australia is now one of the most attractive places in the world to build data centres, thanks to political stability, strong legal protections, good connectivity and plenty of land. That attraction is creating pressure.

| Measure | Figure |
|---|---|
| Operational data centres in Australia | over 160 (one estimate 165) |

| Measure | Figure |
|---|---|
| Additional data centres in the development pipeline | at least 90 (another estimate: 225 proposed or under development) |
| Share of main-grid electricity used by data centres, year to June 2026 | about 3% |
| Projected share by the mid-2030s (AEMO) | about 13% |
| Estimated spending on data centre buildouts by 2030 | A$150 billion |
| Data centre demand operating now | 2.2 GW |
| Extra demand if every proposed project were approved | 67 GW |

Two of those figures deserve a pause.

The first is the jump from 3% to 13% of the main grid's electricity within about a decade. According to the Australian Energy Market Operator's forecasts, cited by Australian National University's Associate Professor Michael Vardon, that would put data centres on par with aluminium smelters, historically the largest industrial users of power in the country.

The second is the gap between 2.2 gigawatts operating today and 67 gigawatts if every proposal were approved. Not every project will be built. More than a third of the projects listed in 2025 were cancelled, according to reporting cited in the same analysis. But the scale of ambition shows why energy planners are nervous.

## One project, 52 rugby fields

The single largest example is the proposed Mamre Road data centre in western Sydney. According to Lim's analysis, it has a proposed capacity of 1.2 gigawatts and a footprint equal to about 52 rugby fields. At full capacity it would become Australia's largest single user of electricity.

Projects like this are why the debate has moved from technology pages to local council meetings. A building of that size changes traffic, land use, noise, local power networks and the character of a neighbourhood.

## The water question

Water is often the first concern people raise, and the facts are more nuanced than the headlines suggest.

Vardon's rough estimate is that data centres currently use a fraction of 1% of Australia's water, far less than agriculture. In Sydney, data centres draw about 3.5 billion litres a year, less than 1% of the city's supply.

The future is much less certain. Sydney Water has estimated that data centre demand could reach up to 25% of supply within a decade. Industry modelling suggests about 2% by 2030. A tenfold gap between two forecasts is not a small disagreement. It is a sign that nobody has the data needed to plan with confidence.

Local timing matters too. A facility drawing 100 megalitres a year could be a serious issue in a drought and barely noticeable in a wet winter. Technology helps: advanced liquid cooling can cut water use by up to 50%. But only if it is required or rewarded.

## Heat, noise and the things we do not count

Data centres have other local effects that rarely make the news. Field measurements show air temperatures downwind of data centres averaging 0.7 to 0.9°C warmer. Residents near some facilities have raised concerns about constant low-frequency noise, and The Conversation published a September explainer on whether data centre noise is a health risk.

Vardon argues that a full picture would also count lifetime greenhouse gas emissions, land clearing, noise and electronic waste, and proposes that the Australian Bureau of Statistics collect the data needed to track these impacts. At present, many of these effects are not measured nationally at all.

## What governments are doing

The policy response is beginning to take shape.

- **National standards.** In August 2026, National Cabinet reaffirmed plans to legislate nationally consistent mandatory standards for large data centres, covering energy, water and land use, by early 2027.
- **Clean power.** The federal government wants new data centres to match their electricity demand with new renewable generation rather than simply drawing on the existing grid.
- **A gas dispute.** Queensland and the Northern Territory want data centres to have the flexibility to use fossil fuels such as gas. That disagreement had not been resolved as of the September analysis.
- **Local scrutiny.** Large proposals are increasingly contested through council and state planning processes.

Other countries offer warnings and models. In Ireland, data centres now use 23% of the country's electricity, close to the 28% used by all households combined. Ireland has responded by limiting new grid connections and requiring renewables to meet 80% of data centre demand. In Virginia, the world's largest data centre market, local authorities have rewritten zoning rules and lowered noise limits.

## The Firmus moment

Then, in October, the financial side of the boom delivered its own lesson.

Firmus Technologies, an Australian developer of AI data centres, planned to raise A$7 billion on the Australian Securities Exchange at A$11 a share. The company and its backers claimed a value of about A$43.7 billion. Had it listed, it would have been the second-largest float in Australian share market history, behind Telstra in 1997. It was promoted as the biggest initial public offering in a generation.

Days before the listing, bankers said investor interest was "well in excess" of what was needed. By the morning of Friday 9 October 2026, the float had been withdrawn.

According to Adelaide University finance lecturer Marta Khomyn, writing in The Conversation, the warning signs were visible:

- **Firmus was loss-making.**
- **Only two of its data centres were operating.** About 5% of its planned capacity was running. The remaining 95% was not yet built.
- **The valuation had soared.** A private funding round in November 2025 valued Firmus at about A$6 billion. By August 2026 it was more than US$10.5 billion, about A$15 billion. The claimed float valuation of A$43.7 billion was almost eight times the figure from less than a year earlier, and close to the market value of Woolworths.
- **The full prospectus never appeared.** A draft was circulated to institutional investors, many of whom declined to buy at A$11.

The Australian Financial Review raised concerns about the scale of order withdrawals and whether communications had created a misleading impression of strong demand, and called on the Australian Securities and Investments Commission to look at it. That is a question for the regulator. No finding of wrongdoing has been made, and it should not be assumed.

Khomyn's own reading was measured. She compared the episode to the dot-com era, when companies listed on valuations based on projected demand, but cautioned that Firmus's problems were specific to the company and should not be assumed to apply to every AI or data centre business. In her view, investors walking away from an overpriced float was the market working as intended.

## Translation: two booms that are easy to confuse

The Firmus episode helps separate two things that are often blurred together.

**There is a real infrastructure boom.** Demand for computing is growing. AI use is spreading through organisations: a 2025 McKinsey survey found 88% of organisations regularly used AI in at least one business function, up from 78% a year earlier. Someone has to build the buildings, the power connections and the cooling systems.

**There is also a financial boom built on expectations.** Valuations can rise much faster than the physical assets they are supposed to represent. When a company with 5% of its capacity built is priced as if the other 95% is guaranteed, investors are paying for a forecast, not a facility.

Both can be true at once. The danger is when enthusiasm for the first is used to justify the second, and when the costs of getting it wrong fall on ordinary investors, superannuation funds, or electricity customers.

## Who pays, and who benefits

The most important questions about data centres are not technical. They are about fairness.

**Who pays for the grid?** If large data centres require new transmission lines, substations and generation, the cost of that infrastructure has to be recovered somehow. If it is spread across all electricity customers, households may help subsidise private computing capacity. If data centres pay their own way, the economics of some projects change.

**Who gets the clean energy?** Australia is trying to replace ageing coal power with renewables. If new renewable generation is contracted to data centres, it may not be available to decarbonise the rest of the grid as quickly.

**Who benefits locally?** A large data centre employs relatively few people once built. Communities that host one carry the land use, noise, heat and traffic. Without clear benefits, such as local jobs, community funds or shared infrastructure, opposition is predictable. Lim identifies community opposition, mainly over land, power and water, as a significant risk to new developments.

**Who holds the data, and where?** There is also a sovereignty argument for local data centres. Australian data stored onshore is governed by Australian law. That is a genuine benefit, and part of why governments want the industry to grow here.

## Why this matters beyond Australia

Data centres are not only an economic and environmental story. They are becoming a geopolitical one. In October, The Conversation reported on Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian data centres, a sign that computing infrastructure is now treated as a strategic target in war. Countries that host large amounts of the world's computing capacity will face questions about security, foreign ownership and resilience that used to be asked only about ports, pipelines and power stations.

For a country like Australia, which hopes to be a trusted regional host for computing, that means planning for security as carefully as for power and water.

## A short timeline of the debate

The data centre argument has moved quickly. Here is the sequence of recent events, drawn from public reporting.

| Date | Event |
|---|---|
| Late 2022 | Launch of ChatGPT accelerates demand for AI computing |
| 2025 | More than a third of Australian data centre projects listed that year are cancelled |
| November 2025 | Private funding round values Firmus at about A$6 billion |
| July 2026 | Prime Minister Anthony Albanese gives a speech on AI at the University of Sydney |
| August 2026 | National Cabinet reaffirms plans for mandatory national standards for large data centres |
| August 2026 | Firmus valuation reported at more than US$10.5 billion |
| September 2026 | Public debate intensifies over power, water, noise and land use |
| 9 October 2026 | Firmus withdraws its planned A$7 billion float |
| Early 2027 | Planned legislation for national data centre standards |

## Questions to ask about a proposed data centre

If a large data centre is proposed near you, or in your state, these questions cut through the marketing:

1. **How much power will it draw at full capacity**, and where will that power come from? Is it adding new renewable generation, or drawing on what already exists?
2. **How much water will it use**, in an average year and in a drought? What cooling technology will it use?
3. **Who pays for the grid upgrades** needed to connect it?
4. **How many permanent local jobs** will it create once construction ends?
5. **What will it do about noise and heat** for nearby residents?
6. **What happens if demand falls** and the facility is underused or abandoned?
7. **Who owns it**, and under which country's laws will the data it holds be governed?

None of these questions is hostile. A well-designed project should be able to answer all of them clearly. A project that cannot is telling you something.

## What good policy looks like

Drawing together the evidence, a sensible approach would include:

1. **Measure first.** Publish national data on data centre electricity, water use, emissions and local impacts, so that decisions are based on evidence rather than competing forecasts.
2. **Make large users bring their own clean power.** Require new large facilities to fund or contract additional renewable generation rather than drawing down what households and existing industry need.
3. **Set water efficiency standards.** Require efficient cooling technologies, especially in water-stressed regions, and link approval to local water conditions.
4. **Share the benefits.** Make community benefit arrangements a normal part of approval for very large facilities.
5. **Be clear on who pays for the grid.** Ensure network costs triggered by large data centres are not silently passed on to household bills.
6. **Watch the money, not just the buildings.** Regulators should look closely at how capital-raising for speculative infrastructure is marketed to investors, so that public enthusiasm for AI does not become an easy route to overpriced risk.

## A note for investors and superannuation members

Most Australians are investors whether they think of it that way or not, because their superannuation funds buy shares and private assets. The Firmus episode carries lessons that apply well beyond one company.

- **Ask what is built and what is planned.** A company with a small fraction of its capacity operating is mostly a promise. Promises can be valuable, but they should be priced as promises.

- **Watch the speed of revaluations.** An almost eight-fold rise in claimed value within a year is not proof of wrongdoing, but it is a reason for careful questions.
- **Read the prospectus, or wait for it.** A float that asks for commitments before the full prospectus is public deserves extra caution.
- **Separate the theme from the business.** Believing that AI will grow is not the same as believing a particular company will profit from it.

These are not investment recommendations. They are simple habits of scepticism that protect ordinary savers when a popular theme meets a large capital raising.

## The plain-language verdict

The short version is this.

AI runs on buildings, and Australia is being asked to host a lot of them. Data centres use about 3% of the main grid's electricity now and could use about 13% within a decade. Their water use is small today but forecasts for the future differ tenfold. Governments have promised national standards by early 2027. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Firmus float showed that the financial excitement around AI infrastructure can run far ahead of what has actually been built.

My view is that Australia should welcome the industry on clear terms. Data centres can bring investment, keep Australian data under Australian law, and support the technologies that will shape the economy. But they should pay their own way on power, prove their water use is sustainable, share benefits with the communities that host them, and raise money honestly. A boom built on those terms can last. A boom built on hype and hidden costs will be paid for by everyone else.

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