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30 September 2019

**RE: Submission to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy**

Dear Sophie Dunstone,

Many thanks for inviting Democracy 2025 to make a submission to what we hope will be a historically significant inquiry. This submission focuses on presenting evidence from Democracy 2025's research and practice programme on how Australians understand and imagine their democracy and the role of public trust in supporting or diminishing the relationship that citizens have with their politicians and political institutions. This will allow us to address the range of issues outlined in the Committee's thought provoking Discussion Paper, specifically:

- What is the issue?
- Why has the issue arisen?
- What challenges does the issue pose?
- What opportunities does the issue present?
- What action should be taken by governments or other relevant groups?

The contribution of this submission to the Senate inquiry is therefore threefold:

- 1) to assess whether the trust divide between government and citizens matters (*challenges*);
- 2) evaluate the range of measures taken to promote trust in government and politics internationally (*opportunities*); and
- 3) examine the views of Australian citizens and parliamentarians on various reform proposals (*action*).

This will provide the Committee with further insights into the nature of the problem that you are addressing and a proxy measure of Australia's desire for reform. The submission concludes by identifying some key gaps in public understanding of the present democratic malaise that we believe need to be bridged in this inquiry.

**About Democracy 2025**

The purpose of Democracy 2025 is to ignite and sustain a national conversation about how we strengthen our democratic practice and build a new generation of democratically engaged Australians. Democracy 2025 is based in the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) at the spiritual home of Australian democracy – Old Parliament House in Canberra. MoAD holds a unique position on the frontline of democracy, civic agency and change. We are a museum not just of objects but of ideas. We seek to empower Australians through exhibitions, schools' learning programs and events that both stimulate and inspire. Trusted by the public, government, public service and business alike, we are uniquely able to advance national conversations about democracy, past, present and future.

The Democracy 2025 initiative delivers applied research, analysis and interpretation of the challenges facing representative democracy, and identifies areas for potential innovation and renewal. Bringing together business, government, the public service and the community, we seek to bridge the trust divide by: 1) reviewing best-practice solutions to challenges facing democracies across Australia and the Asia-Pacific; 2) fostering active, engaged and informed citizens; and 3) promoting integrity leadership, and practice that enhances democratic governance.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction – what is the issue?

Australians *are* favoured and lucky.<sup>2</sup> We live in one of the most beautiful ecosystems in the world, with all the responsibilities that it brings. Most of us have enjoyed and expect to continue to enjoy good living standards and peaceful development. We have powerful allies watching out for us. And our geographical location and history provide us with comparative advantages when we look both East and West. We are a much governed people but have shown ourselves to be governable. In political terms, Australia is considered on the international stage to be a great, young democracy that ‘punches well above its weight’ (see Evans, 2018). Australian citizens are free; our parliament is a strong custodian of democratic values; our liberty is the envy of our region; and our system of justice is robust and fair. The guardians of our security—the police and defence service—are trusted and in the main, subject to democratic, legal control. We also have a world-ranked public service that is an impartial steward of public trust;<sup>3</sup> our cities are amongst the most liveable in the world;<sup>4</sup> against all the odds Australia’s Indigenous communities maintain a proud identity; and, our media is brave and honest.

These beliefs and practices, however, are increasingly threatened. Around the world, democracy is in decline. For the thirteenth consecutive year, the annual review by Freedom House (2019), *Freedom in the World*, recorded a decline in global freedom, in every region and type of political system, from mature democracies to authoritarian regimes. Australia is not immune. There is mounting evidence of the increasing disconnect between government and citizen reflected in the decline of democratic satisfaction and trust in politicians, political parties, media and other key institutions, and the erosion of public confidence in the capacity of governments (of whatever kind) to address public policy concerns. Academics and political commentators alike bemoan our inability to grapple with policy fundamentals and facilitate collaborative problem-solving across the federation.<sup>5</sup>

As the Senate inquiry Discussion Paper observes, we are witnessing a trust divide between government and citizen in Australia which has increased in scope and intensity since 2007.<sup>6</sup> In terms of the attitudes of Australian citizens towards democratic politics and practices, our 2018 survey evidence observes a pattern of decline and sustained negativity. Despite our world class governance processes (World Bank, 2019) and an independent Australian Electoral Commission, satisfaction in democracy has almost halved over the past decade, dropping from 86 per cent in 2007 to 41 per cent in 2018 (see Figure 1); although the most significant decline occurred between 2013 and 2016, in the aftermath of the leadership spill.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed understanding of our research and practice programmes visit our website at: <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Donald Horne’s ironic discussion in *The Lucky Country* (1964), evaluated by Ian Lowe (2016) and others in *The Lucky Country? Reinventing Australia*.

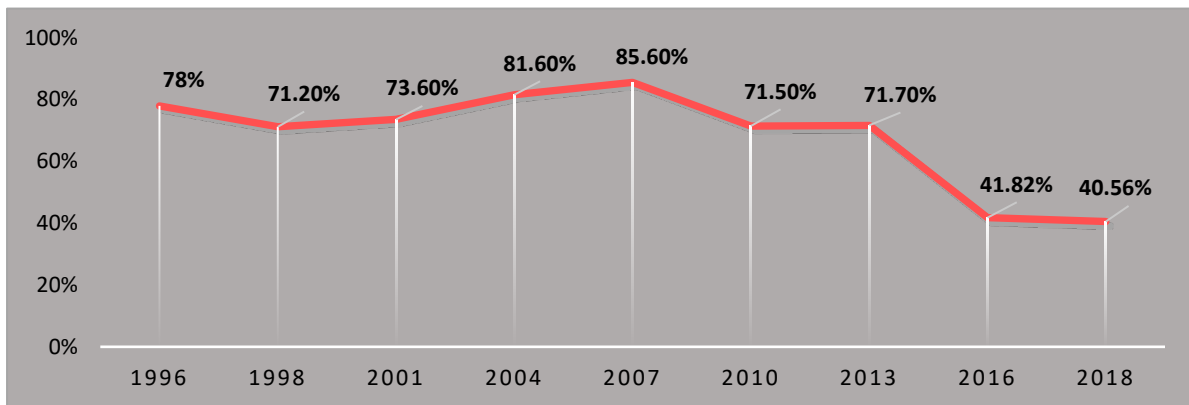
<sup>3</sup> Australia is ranked in the top 10 for four out of six of the *Worldwide Governance Indicators* of the World Bank (2019).

<sup>4</sup> See The Economist Intelligence Unit (2018). In the unit’s 2018 *Global Liveability Index*, three Australian cities feature in the top ten: Melbourne (2), Sydney (5) and Adelaide (10).

<sup>5</sup> See Brown and Bellamy (2007); Gallop (2011); Evans et al., eds (2019); Twomey and Withers (2007); and, Deem and Tiernan (2019).

<sup>6</sup> We understand political trust as a relational concept that is about ‘keeping promises and agreements’ (Hetherington 2005: 1). This is in keeping with the OECD’s definition where trust is ‘holding a positive perception about the actions of an individual or an organization’ (OECD 2017: 16).

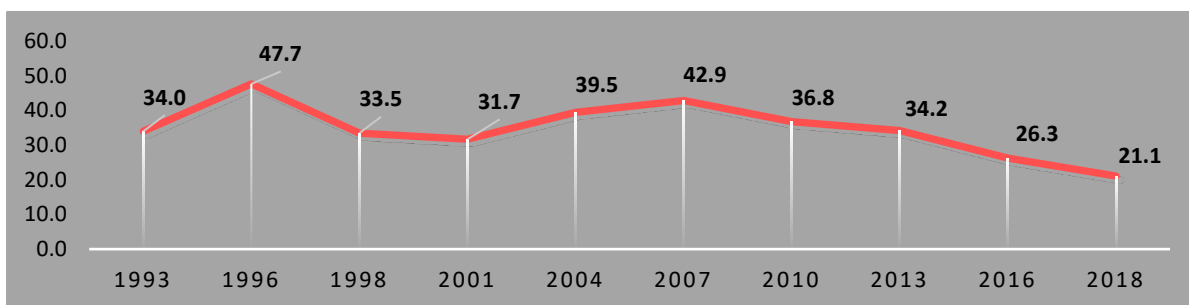
Figure 1. Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia (%)



Source: 1996 to 2013 Australian Election Study, 2016 and 2018, Democracy 2025

Only 21.1 per cent of Australians trust their politicians, down from just under 43 per cent in 2007 (see Figure 2). Government Ministers are distrusted by 48 per cent of respondents and only trusted to some degree by 23 per cent. The figures get slightly better when citizens are asked about their local MP (31 per cent indicating they ‘trust them a little bit’) and local councillor (29 per cent saying they ‘trust them a little bit’). Other actors are trusted to a much greater degree: GPs (81 per cent); Judges (55 per cent) and to some extent Public Servants (38 per cent). But notably there are other occupations that appear to be almost as distrusted as politicians such as business people (31 per cent), journalists (28 per cent) and trade unionists (26 per cent). As for trust in political institutions the attitudinal patterns remain just as gloomy. Approximately three in ten respondents trust federal government, one in five trust political parties, less than four in ten trust state or territory government or local government. Again, some institutions are much more trusted by the public such as the police (70 per cent), civil wellbeing organisations (69 per cent), the military (66 per cent) and Universities (62 per cent).

Figure 2. Trust in politicians in Australia (%)



Source: 1996 to 2013 Australian Election Study, 2016 and 2018, Democracy 2025

If trust is about a citizen’s sense about governments and politicians keeping promises and trying to do the right thing then it is worth investigating related perspectives on how they view the standards of honesty and integrity of politicians. The attitudinal pattern is again a negative one, only 11 per cent of citizens’ think that the standards are ‘very high’ or ‘somewhat high’ (indeed only 1 per cent think they are ‘very high’). Negative perceptions dominate: with 36 per cent viewing standards as ‘somewhat low’ and 25 per cent viewing them as ‘very low’. Leaving 27 per cent arguing they are neither ‘high’ nor ‘low’. Given that honesty and integrity are qualities that most citizens would highly prize in politics then we can conclude that 90 per cent of citizens have a negative view of the standards of honesty and integrity held by politicians.

Other attitudinal patterns equally as concerning and intriguing include:

- *Declining political trust impacts on social trust which is now at its lowest recorded level at 47 per cent (see Miranti and Evans, 2019).*
- *The lower your income the less satisfied with democracy you are.*
- *Women are more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy than men.*
- *The older generations are both the most and the least satisfied with democracy.<sup>7</sup>*
- *Supporters of established political parties are more trusting of political institutions but the size of this cohort is rapidly decreasing (from 72 per cent in 1987 to 36 per cent in 2019).*
- *Distrust (ironically) is more prevalent in areas featured by long periods of single party government (e.g. the ACT).*

## **How does Australia compare?**

The comparative standing of Australia can be judged by a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2017 by the European Commission. Among the 28 countries inside the European Union the median trust score for national governments was 40 per cent (European Commission, 2017). Sweden and the Netherlands have trust scores of 70 per cent. The only countries with a lower trust score than Federal government in Australia were Italy (27 per cent), Spain (18 per cent) and Greece (13 per cent). Crucially, despite 27 years of economic growth according to the Edelman Trust Barometer, Australia is characterized as a ‘distrusted country’ and sits below the median satisfaction rating when compared with other advanced industrial democracies (Edelman 2019).

In short, by 2025, if current trends continue, fewer than 10 per cent of Australians will trust their politicians and political institutions (Stoker et al., 2018). We need to understand why trust has declined, and what will need to be done to rebuild it.

## **2. Why the decline of political trust matters – challenges to Australian democracy**

If social trust captures relations between citizens; political trust goes more directly to the issue of whether citizens trust their political leaders when in government to do the right thing and as Donald Kettle (2017: 1) puts it, ‘keep their promises in a just, honest, and efficient way’. There is widespread concern among scholars and in popular commentary that citizens have grown more distrustful of politicians, sceptical about democratic institutions, and disillusioned with democratic processes or even principles (see Dalton 2004). Weakening political trust is thought to erode civic engagement and conventional forms of political participation such as voter registration or turnout (Franklin 2004), to reduce support for progressive public policies (Van Deth *et al* 2007) and promote risk adverse and short-termist government (Hetherington 2005) and to create the space for the rise of authoritarian populist forces (Norris and Ingehart 2018). There may also be implications for long-term democratic stability; liberal democratic regimes are thought most durable when built upon popular legitimacy (Almond and Verba 1963). The risks of democratic backsliding are regarded as particularly serious if public scepticism spreads upwards from core institutions of governance to corrode citizen perspectives about the performance of liberal democracy and even its core ideals. Some fear a flagging civic culture may potentially contribute towards what many observers see as a liberal democratic retreat around the world. Many observers express concern that weak commitment to the democratic norms and rules of the game is one of the conditions under which democracies fail or even die (see Diamond and Plattner 2015; Mounk 2018; and, Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Others counter that the picture should not be

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<sup>7</sup> 45 per cent of Australia’s Builder generation (1925 to 1945) are satisfied with democracy and 35 per cent are dissatisfied with democracy. And 50 percent of the next oldest generation of citizens, the Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964), are satisfied with democracy and 28 per cent dissatisfied with democracy. As a result, the average satisfaction rate with how democracy works across all generations is remarkably similar.

exaggerated, as anxiety about public trust in government usually ebbs and flows over the years (Norris 1999 and 2011).

In many discussions, it is often naively and automatically assumed that any erosion of social and political trust among citizens is inherently problematic, as it reduces the incentives for cooperation. Yet blindly trusting the malignant, taking the word of liars, or believing con-artists seeking us harm, would also be foolish and dangerous (Levi and Stoker 2000). *The twin enemies of democracy appear to be citizens that are either too cynical to engage or too naïve in providing support to the political system.* The Australian case is also distinctive in the sense that it is unusual to see such a crisis in political trust when the economy is performing so well. Despite an extensive period of economic growth, the majority of Australians have little faith in the system of government being able to do anything about the big problems in their lives or those facing society more generally. Declining political trust undermines public confidence in the ability of government to perform its core tasks and address the big public policy problems of our times (see Figures 3 and 4.) It impacts negatively on social cohesion at a time when we need more integrated communities (Miranti and Evans 2017), and makes it more difficult for Australia to lead on key geopolitical issues and champion liberal democracy when it is under threat globally (OECD 2017).

In sum, trust is integral to effective government. It is the glue that enables collective action for mutual benefit; and without trust our ability to make social progress is severely constrained. Arguably trust is even more important in a federated state where collaborative problem solving is fundamental to maintaining nation building efforts.

Figure 3. Effect of trust on public confidence in federal government to perform core tasks

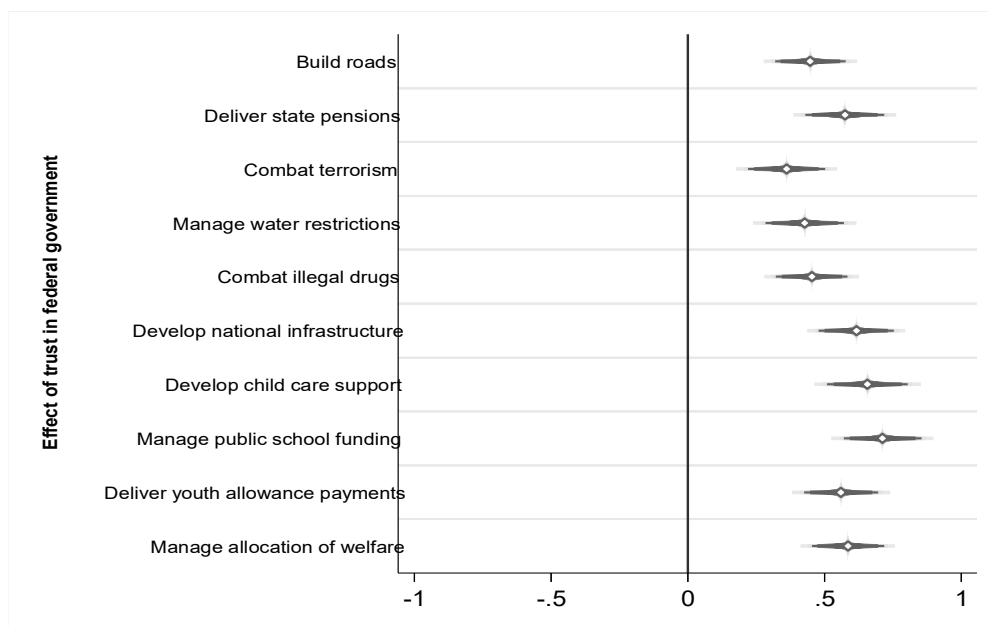
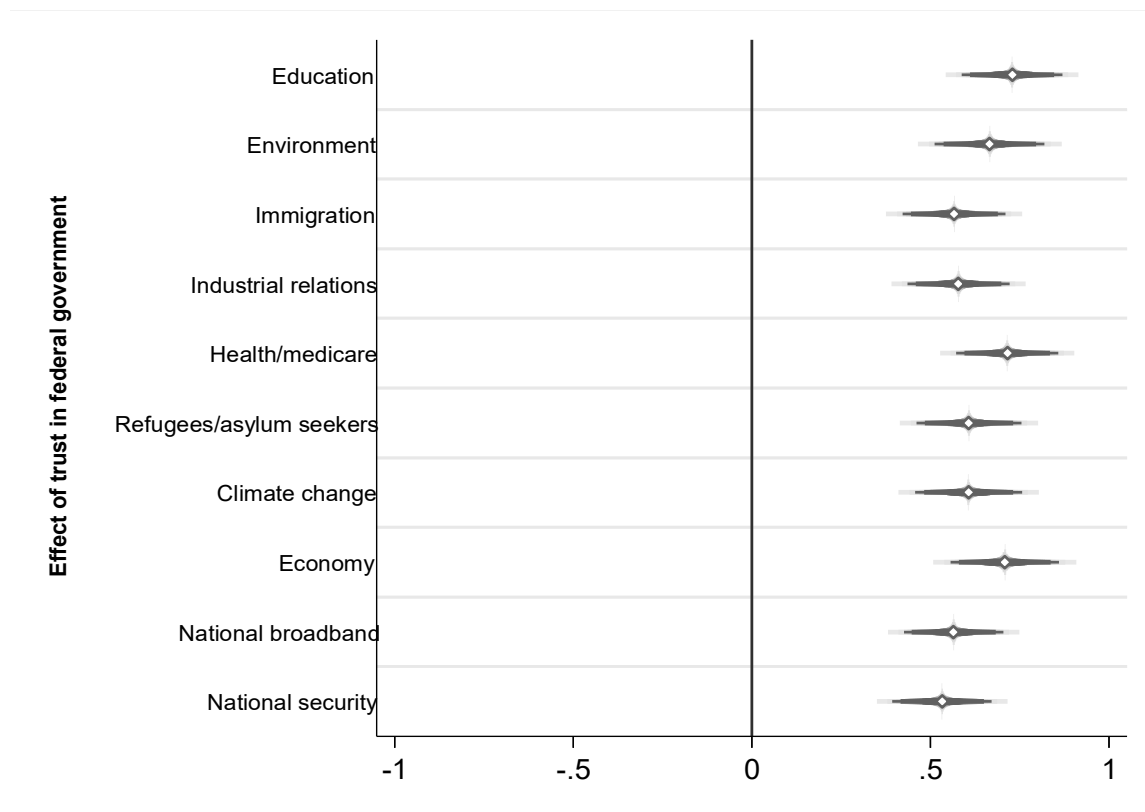


Figure 4. Effect of trust on public confidence in federal government to address big public policy issues



### 3. Why has the issue arisen? What drives distrust? And, how is it being tackled internationally?

How you tackle the trust divide depends on how you define the problem and our data and review of the international literature demonstrates that the problem is multi-dimensional requiring a broad range of responses. The literature can be loosely organised around demand and supply side theories of trust.

*Demand-side theories focus on how much individuals trust government and politics and explore their key characteristics.* What is it about citizens, such as their educational background, class, location, country or cohort of birth which makes them trusting or not? What drives the prospects for political engagement and what makes citizens feel that their vote counts? Or that their active engagement could deliver value? In general, the strongest predictors of distrust both in Australia and internationally continue to be attitudinal and are connected to negativity about politics experienced in different ways by different groups of citizens depending on their social, and economic circumstances and the relative power of their political voice. It is therefore unsurprising that the most marginalised members of our society are embedded in disadvantaged communities and are the most distrusting of government services.<sup>8</sup>

*Demand-side interventions therefore focus on overcoming various barriers to social, economic or political participation* through improved civic or adult education, labour market activation, public participation, and improved representation of marginalised groups, and other forms of institutionalised citizen empowerment (see Table 1). In our recently published edited volume *From Turnbull to Morrison: the Trust Divide* (MUP, 2019) various authors drew attention to demand side reforms that enhance social inclusion through place based service delivery and co-design, indigenous participation in policy development or progressive immigration policy aimed at addressing labor shortages in regional and rural Australia and enhancing Australia's knowledge economy.

<sup>8</sup> Note the average level of trust in Commonwealth government services stands at 29 per cent (2019).

*Supply-side theories of trust start from the premise that public trust must in some way correspond with the trustworthiness of government. The argument here is that it is the performance (supply) of government that matters most in orienting the outlooks of citizens, together with its commitment to procedural fairness and equality.*

*Interventions on the supply-side therefore seek to enhance the integrity of government and politicians, and the quality and procedural fairness of service delivery or parliamentary processes through open government or good governance (see Table 1). This includes mechanisms of transparency and accountability, enhancing public service competence and adopting anti-corruption measures. Performance legitimacy comes from the public's assessment of the government's record in delivering public goods and services like economic growth, welfare and security (Boswell 2018). If important, as commonly assumed, then public confidence should relate to perceptual and/or aggregate indicators of policy outputs and outcomes, such as satisfaction with the performance of the economy or the government's record on education and healthcare.*

Procedural legitimacy focuses on the way that officeholders are nominated to positions of authority through meritocratic processes, and the mechanisms of accountability for office-holders, and whether citizens' feel that these processes and mechanisms are appropriate, irrespective of their actions and decisions (Tyler *et al* 2017).

These issues of performance legitimacy also extend to the construction of representative politics, the representativeness of those elected, the community linkage role of political parties, the funding of election campaigns and broadly the way that representative institutions work and operate in terms of the conduct of the business of government and engagement with special interests and the general public (see Alonso, Keane and Merkel 2017).

Furthermore, communication through the news media often shapes public perceptions of government performance, with lack of confidence in government linked with exposure to negative news critical about politics, government, and public affairs, focusing on 'gotcha' scandals rather than substantive policy issues. These concerns have grown in an age of truth decay, social media bubbles, overseas meddling in domestic election campaigns, and suspicion of legacy journalism. Some argue (Zoizner 2018) that the media simply informs citizens or signals to them to pay attention to certain issues but on balance a review of available research indicates that the way that news is framed is having a negative impact and encouraging public distrust.

On the supply-side, authors in our recent volume paid particular attention to the importance of:

- integrity reform to socialise the behaviour of political and media elites and protect the public's right to know;
- the introduction of a federal ICAC to secure the broader integrity of the political system;
- authentic collaborative federalism founded on parity of esteem and power-sharing to burst the Canberra bubble;
- mechanisms to enhance the quality of public policy debate such as reforming the role of the federal budget so that it focuses more attention on assessing government performance rather than forward estimates and the latest tinkering to the tax and transfer system;
- various devices for extending public participation in service design and delivery through co-design, place-based approaches and use of various forms of deliberative forums with citizens and stakeholders; and,
- reforms to enhance the representativeness (in age, gender and ethnic terms) and working practices of the Australian Parliament (Evans *et al.*, 2019).

Table 1. A selection of demand and supply-side interventions to address the trust divide

Problem	Intervention	Design principles
<b>Demand side problems and solutions</b>		
Need to increase the political literacy and capacity of citizens	Relevant citizenship education co-designed with target groups	Input through programs of 'learning and doing' will build citizens who are confident and pragmatic enough to build trust
Citizens/stakeholders want more of a say as they become more challenging and critical	Quality participation that values citizen input (for example, mini-publics of various forms including citizens' juries/assemblies/panels) and the use of co-design methods in public service production Indigenous representation in policy development	Contingent on the purpose of the engagement but driven by a citizen centred approach and principles of parity of esteem and mutualism
Opportunities to exploit capacity created by new technologies	Internet politics that engages with citizens through their networks Using digital and artificial intelligence methods to transform government-citizen interactions	Build on surge and waves of interest to deliver rapid responses to public concerns and build trust
<b>Supply side problems and solutions</b>		
If government did the small things in service delivery well, this would improve levels of trust to tackle bigger problems	Improve the quality of service delivery through user-first and personalisation principles	User-centred design, using innovation and new technology to increase customer satisfaction and improve performance in measurable ways
Closed government and corrupt practices	Open government and indicative integrity, transparency and anti-corruption measures (e.g. Federal ICAC) Protect and promote the public's right to know	People trust processes that are clear, transparent and accountable. Focus on driving out even the appearance of corruption or malpractice
Representative democracy has lost legitimacy because of the financing of parties and elections, representative failings and poor practices of elected assemblies	Improved citizen-party linkages and representation of community and marginalised interests (for example, Indigenous and Asian Australian representation).	Regulation of election spending, reform of the party system, modernisation of parliamentary working practices
Politicians are losing their cultural authority and legitimacy due to perceptions of poor behaviour	Integrity measures (for example, codes of conduct, role design, performance review and accountabilities)	Simply align expectations with the contemporary working environment
The way that political choices and decisions are presented through new and traditional media creates a climate of distrust	Change communication dynamics Build effective working relationships between media and government	Encourage through soft regulation and influence, and support changes in communication to better manage the tension between freedom of media and a better governance context
The increasingly centralised nature of Australian federalism creates a climate of distrust between different jurisdictions	Decentralisation to states, territories and local governance	Introduce subsidiarity as the first principle of federal institutional design in line with international practice



#### 4. Action for democratic renewal

This penultimate section of our submission addresses the question – *is Australia ready for a period of democratic renewal and what action might be taken to reverse the trust divide?* It draws on attitudinal surveys focusing on the quality of democratic practice in Australia completed by Australian citizens (Stoker, Evans and Halupka, 2018a), federal parliamentarians in both the Lower and Upper houses of the 45<sup>th</sup> Federal Parliament (Evans, Halupka and Stoker, 2019) and young Australians. The third set of findings are presented to provide an insight into what next generation voters think about the present democratic malaise and future democracy.

##### **What Australian citizens think about democratic renewal?**

As Table 2 illustrates, there is very strong support among the Australian citizenry for democratic reforms that ensure greater integrity and transparency such as limiting how much money can be spent on election campaigning and how much political parties/candidates can accept from donors (73 per cent). There is also very strong support for democratic reforms that ensure greater political accountability of MPs and political parties to their electorates/members through free votes in Parliament (60 per cent), the right to recall local members (62 per cent) and internal party reform that emphasizes community preferences (60 per cent). In addition, there is strong support for reforms that stimulate greater public participation such as the co-design of public services with citizens (71 per cent) and greater use of citizen juries (60 per cent).

The least popular democratic reforms proposed were those that had to do with quotas for demographic representation (e.g. by age, gender, or ethnicity). Nine out of 15 proposed reforms had agreement rates above 50 per cent (i.e. support by the majority of respondents); suggesting significant appetite for reform. When broken down by party preference, Labour supporters tend to favour more community-minded reforms. Labour and Liberal views on reform are remarkably uniform except on community-minded reforms. The greatest differences between parties can be found between the Liberals and Nationals on reform ideas in general. There are other nuanced differences between groups. So, for example, men are less keen than women on co-design of public services; although the majority still support that option. New Australians (those that arrived after 2006) favour allowing dual citizens to stand for election.

##### **What federal politicians think about democratic renewal?<sup>9</sup>**

Australia's federal politicians (61 per cent) are more satisfied with the way democracy works than their fellow citizens (41 per cent), but are sufficiently concerned about evidence of a trust divide between citizens and politicians to favour substantial actions to improve confidence in our institutions. Comparative evidence suggests that parties and the politicians who represent them have three overlapping roles: 1) providing linkages to the community; 2) delivering effective government and, 3) supporting the principles of good governance.

Evidence from Australia and other democracies suggests it is the first role that is most in decline, but problems are also observed regarding the other roles. The survey evidence shows that elected politicians recognize these concerns and are prepared to do something about them. On balance their preference is not to rush to forms of participatory citizen-centred democracy but instead *to adjust and strengthen the way that representative democracy works*; to make parties better at performing their three roles in providing community linkages, effective governance and democratic integrity.

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<sup>9</sup> This report is based on the responses of 98 members of Parliament (out of 226) to a survey co-designed with the Joint Standing Committee of Electoral Matters (JSCEM). These responses are not representative of the 45th Federal Parliament as a whole, but they nevertheless provide a sometimes surprising and indicative set of perspectives from a substantial set of representatives (98 out of a possible 226 respondents, 43.36 per cent).

Table 2. What Australians think about democratic innovation?

Question	General	Australians	New Australians	Male	Female	Liberal	Labour
Parties and candidates should be limited in how much money they can spend on election campaigning and how much they can accept from donors.	73%	75%	66%	74%	71%	75%	73%
Public services should be co-designed with Australian citizens.	71%	71%	72%	66%	76%	70%	72%
Local communities should have the right to recall their Member of Parliament for a new election if they fail to provide effective representation during the parliamentary term.	62%	63%	60%	58%	65%	56%	65%
MPs should be allowed a free vote in Parliament	61%	59%	64%	64%	57%	62%	60%
Citizen juries based on the criminal jury system and comprised of a random sample of up to 15 Australian citizens should be used to solve complex policy problems that the Australian Parliament can't fix.	61%	61%	57%	57%	63%	61%	64%
Ordinary party members and voters should have more say in choosing party leaders and election candidates.	59%	59%	58%	59%	59%	57%	64%
Performance review for politicians should be conducted biannually by a panel consisting of a senior parliamentarian and four randomly selected members of the MP's constituency.	57%	57%	54%	54%	59%	58%	56%
Provisions should be made to allow Australian citizens the right to E-petition the Australian Parliament for public interest legislation to be debated.	55%	57%	51%	56%	55%	50%	58%
The committee system in Parliament should be used to consider legislation before it is introduced to try and find agreement.	52%	53%	49%	57%	48%	53%	57%
Postal voting should be used to resolve policy problems that the Australian Parliament can't fix.	46%	47%	40%	47%	45%	45%	47%
The size of electorates should be reduced to ensure that MPs are more responsive to their communities.	42%	43%	39%	39%	44%	39%	44%
Dual citizens should be able to stand for election without renouncing their overseas citizenship.	41%	38%	52%	39%	43%	42%	45%
To ensure that the Australian Parliament is representative of the people it serves a proportion of seats should be allocated on the basis of gender.	30%	30%	30%	27%	33%	25%	34%
To ensure that the Australian Parliament is representative of the people it serves a proportion of seats should be allocated on the basis of ethnicity.	28%	29%	26%	26%	30%	24%	32%
To ensure that the Australian Parliament is representative of the people it serves a proportion of seats should be allocated on the basis of age.	28%	30%	22%	27%	29%	28%	28%

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

### Likes and dislikes about Australia's democratic arrangements

Parliamentarians share similar “likes” about the nature of Australia’s democratic arrangements as the general public particularly “fair voting”, “stable government”, and “freedom of speech”. Citizens are more appreciative of Australia’s “good economy and lifestyle” and the quality of “public services” (Stoker *et al.*, 2018a: 40); the governance dimension of Australian democracy. Parliamentarians extol the virtue of the Australian political system in providing access for citizens to exercise their right to political participation.

Parliamentarians and citizens have certain differences in what they dislike about the nature of Australia’s democratic arrangements; *however they still have much in common*. Parliamentarians focus on the lack of public understanding of how government works and the disproportionate power of minority representatives in decision-making. Citizens focus on “not being able to hold politicians to account for broken promises”, politicians “not dealing with the issues that really matter”, and the disproportionate power of big business or trade unions in decision-making (Stoker *et al.*, 2018a: 40).

However, they have a shared concern with what they perceive as the conflict-driven nature of two party politics and the media focusing too much “on personalities and not enough on policy” (Stoker *et al.*, 2018a: 41). Concern with media misrepresentation and the pressure of the media cycle is considered by parliamentarians to be the major weakness in Australian democratic practice.

### *The reforms they would like to see*

Unlike Australian citizens (Stoker *et al.*, 2018a: 44) the majority of parliamentarians are against: the right to recall their Member of Parliament for a new election if they fail to provide effective representation during the parliamentary term (72 per cent); performance review for politicians (72 per cent); and, greater use of citizen juries based on the criminal jury system (64 per cent). Although parliamentarians recognize the importance of the community linkage role, they appear to have limited desire to open up the system to direct influence from the public.

At the same time parliamentarians embrace other reforms that enhance the community-linkage role including:

- ordinary party members and voters should have more say in choosing party leaders and election candidates (49 per cent);
- there should be provision to allow E-petitions to Parliament (54 per cent);
- dual citizens should be able to stand for election without renouncing their overseas citizenship (47 per cent); and,
- there should be less voting on party lines based on manifesto promises and more free votes (46 per cent).

When we asked parliamentarians what other reforms they would like to see, the responses highlighted a strong desire for improved publicly funded civics education and formal electorate forums for all parliamentarians.

The former idea is a reflection of the existence of different approaches to civics education across states and territories and different patterns of funding. The general perception is there is a need for a national framework and funding commitment to ensure that the Australian electorate is politically literate. The latter idea is about introducing an element of public accountability through the establishment of public forums with standing minutes and reporting requirements to ensure that parliamentarians remain responsive to the interests of their constituents.

Politicians appear to be genuinely concerned with the adverse impact of the professionalization of the party machine on its community-linkage role. Perhaps the most damaging outcome of this development has been declining public trust which in turn has weakened the ability of political parties to perform their educative function through communities.

The concerns about a weakening of the community linkage role are reflected in parliamentarian’s attitudes towards reform. Elected politicians want to focus on improving the way representative democracy works rather than leaning on citizens to take a bigger role. But there is also an interest in the reform potential of all three roles. For example, politicians are also concerned with the short-term nature of decision-making precipitated by the three year electoral cycle; which potentially undermines their role in democratic governance.

There remains room for debate whether the reforms favoured by politicians will work but it’s encouraging to see such appetite to address the problem. It may also be that there are major issues that are not yet as high up the change agenda of our politicians as they could be such as, perhaps, the impact of the digital transformation of society and politics; how to give citizens a stronger sense of empowerment over their lives, or re-examining relationships with, and the effectiveness of, the Australian Public Service.

## What young Australians think?

Over 88,500 school children attend our education programmes at MoAD every year and we have a structured conversation (including a survey) with them on how they understand and imagine their democracy. The following perceptions are particularly prominent in their thinking:

- In stark contrast to the findings of the Lowy Institute,<sup>10</sup> young people are champions of democracy (87 per cent are satisfied with their democratic arrangements).
- But they feel disconnected from Australian democracy with only 43 per cent feeling part of Australian democracy and 33 per cent feeling that they have a say.
- In contrast to the findings of the Lowy Institute, 64 per cent are interested in politics but not federal politics.
- They want to see a parliament that engages in collaborative problem solving and not petty in-fighting.
- They want to see a parliament that is more representative of the people it serves.
- They want to see a parliament that cares about the issues that will impact on their future and engages in future proofing (the most important being mental health, bullying, indigenous constitutional recognition, equal gender rights, unemployment and climate change).
- And, they want more opportunities to participate in their democracy.

## It's the mix that matters

Most of these reforms are not particularly new in the context of contemporary processes of democratic modernisation (Smith 2009). Indeed this very observation brings into sharp focus Amartya Sen's (1999) argument that 'formal rules are not enough without good democratic practice'. In other words, reform is as much about improving existing democratic practices than designing new ways of doing democracy. But there is a twist in the tale. Historically reform choices have been presented as a binary choice between reforms that strengthen the representative system of government and reforms that extend greater public participation. It is increasingly evident, however, that both Australian citizens and politicians think that participatory reforms can be used to bolster the legitimacy of representative democracy and enhance trust between government and citizen. It is the mix that matters.

## 5. Gaps in public understanding

Australians should rightly be proud of their hard-won democratic traditions and freedoms, and the achievement of stable government which has historically delivered social and economic wellbeing for its citizens. However, the gap between how Australians perceive their politicians and political institutions and how they would like their democracy to be has now widened to such a degree that we need to pause, listen, and reflect on what our political system needs to do to adapt to the realities of 21st-century governance. There are two particular gaps in public understanding of the present democratic malaise that we think need to be addressed in this inquiry.

### *A democratic audit of Australia*

We don't know, what we don't know! Successive royal commissions and inquiries have demonstrated fragilities in Australia's democratic institutions and practices. But should we be waiting for a crisis to alert us to problems in our democratic practice? We would argue that there is an urgent need to create a permanent and independent Democratic Audit of Australia to provide ongoing intelligence on the strengths and weaknesses of Australian democracy; funded by, but independent from Parliament. It would provide a cyclical report on the state of Australian democracy in the same way that Treasury

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<sup>10</sup> See the Lowy Institute Poll 2019 at: <https://lowyinstitutepoll.lowyinstitute.org/themes/democracy/>.

produces the Intergenerational Report and would operate in a similar manner to the Productivity Commission. Its fundamental role would be to champion liberal democracy, audit the qualities of Australian democratic practice, celebrate its successes and facilitate policy debate on its weaknesses.

International lessons in this regard can be drawn from the work of the Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom at the London School of Economics and Political Science (see: <http://www.democraticaudit.com/>), the Democratic Audit of the European Union (see: <https://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/people/aca/chrilor/democratic-audit/>) and the Hansard Society (see: <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/>).<sup>11</sup>

### ***Citizen-centred and designed civics education***

Much of the evidence suggests that declining trust is not just a problem for government to solve but requires active citizenship. But what does the ideal citizen look like in practice and how can this ideal-type be fostered through civic education and practice? As noted above, there is a genuine desire amongst federal politicians to improve the quality of civic education and enhance public understanding of government. However, we also know that traditional civics education has failed to capture the imagination of young Australians largely because the curriculum and methods of teaching delivery have been designed *for them* rather than *with them*. For civics education to facilitate the active culture of citizenship that we require to reinvigorate our great democracy, co-design must be adopted as a first principle of content development and delivery.

Cultural institutions can play an important role here. MoAD, for example, holds a unique position on the frontline of democracy, civic agency and learning. Research shows that, at a time of declining trust around the world, museums are trusted for having credible content and impartial voices. MoAD seeks to reflect the democratic traditions of debate and conversation through all activities, and new exhibitions and events incorporate carefully crafted opportunities for individual reflection and response.

The new permanent gallery *Democracy. Are You In?*, explores civic engagement and democratic values, and encourages audiences to interact directly with the exhibition. Since the exhibition's launch in August 2018, more than 2,000 visitors have provided detailed insights into what kind of democratic citizens they are and how they would improve Australia's democracy. The responses are analysed and shared with visitors, politicians and researchers on an ongoing basis.

The Museum's education programs are influencing the next generation of voters to be active citizens in their school, local and national communities. In 2018-19, 88,534 students and teachers participated in formal onsite programs and our online learning resources had more than 44,077 views. We partner with the University of Canberra and the Australian Electoral Commission to deliver a three-day series of onsite workshops for 120 pre-service primary teachers. The workshops provide resources and strategies for teaching about democracy, including ways to encourage student participation in the classroom.

In sum, the Museum's award-winning civic engagement activities are helping to educate tomorrow's leaders and build active, informed citizens and a cohesive society.

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<sup>11</sup> A Democratic Audit of Australia previously existed as a research project at the Australian National University and later at Swinburne University of Technology but it was never funded adequately to conduct a broad ranging audit of Australian democratic practice.

If you require any further information please don't hesitate to ask.

Yours sincerely,

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