

Why Australia needs a post-Covid-19 consensus to remain a lucky country

By Mark Kenny and Professor Mark Evans

America had just emerged from its third recession in seven years in 1962 when John F Kennedy asked Congress to approve significant economic reform.

“The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining” he famously said.

Ironically, as Australia girds for its steepest slump since the Great Depression, there’s a sense that the sun is shining on us now, if not economically, then at least politically.

Or more precisely, democratically.

Which is to say that after years of what has often felt like a Kabuki play of mock-representation, suddenly Australian politics is delivering again. Voters are paying attention too.

Clearly the horrendous economic dislocation of Covid-19 will worsen in the months ahead, yet Australia’s social and political fabric seems to be rising to the challenge.

A key cause is the rediscovery by politicians of their *raison d’etre* which is problem-solving, while listening to the science, respecting expertise.

And a key effect is the surprising prospect of a new government-community partnership.

Forged in novel circumstances and by no means permanent, this emergency mechanism has not merely begun restoring hope in our system of representation, it has – if we look closely – also illuminated the path out of the infernal maze of low political advantage-taking, and its corollaries of voter suspicion, rising populism and general democratic decay.

It may not have been predicted – especially after the faith-destroying debacle of the bushfires, but Covid-19 has reminded voters that national governments are necessary and that with systemic renovation, they can be made to work.

Australian citizens clearly like the collaborative, consensual, courteous and evidence informed politics of crisis management.

So thinking of roof repair, could this be the moment for some new ‘galve n gutters’ on the democratic house – or better still, a few well-positioned (and obviously hail-proof) sky-lights?

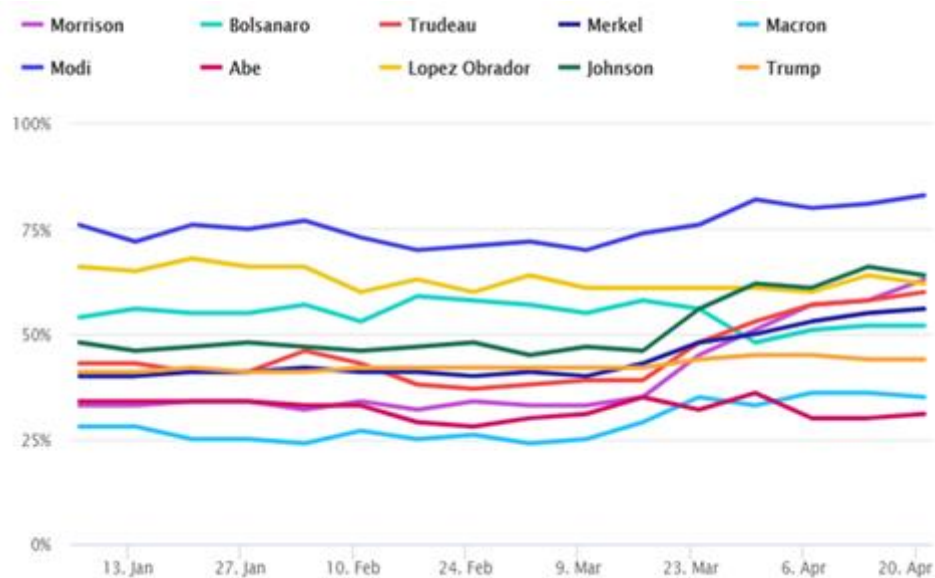
Can Australia’s electoral machinery which has been falling further and further behind community expectations through a combination of hyper-partisanship and outdated institutional norms, be adjusted to arrest corrosive disengagement?

There is reason to be optimistic even if it is dangerously naïve, because politicians too can see the benefits.

The latest polling from [@MorningConsult](#) shows that where national leaders have not completely bungled their pandemic response (exceptions include the US and Brazil) the popularity of elected leaders has risen. This has been markedly so in Australia, where Prime Minister Scott Morrison's approval rating has soared on the back of effective handling of the threat, facilitated by strong political bipartisanship from Labor, and by atypical coordination of state and federal governments via the national cabinet.

It is worth remembering that just a short time ago, the 2019 Australian Election Study (AES) and the latest wave of the World Values Survey 2017-20 (WVS) recorded the lowest levels of trust in "people in government" (AES, 2019) and "trust in federal government" (WVS, 2017-20) on record at 25 per cent and 29 per cent respectively.

This incremental decline in political trust began in 2007 triggered by successive leadership spills and mounting public distaste for adversarial politics. Social trust in Australia – trust between people – was also reported at an all-time low in 2019 at 49 per cent (WVS, 2017-20).



Scott Morrison and his ministers have begun talking about new thinking on the other side of the pandemic. Earlier references to a "snap-back" have given way to a realisation that what is needed is a much more root-and-branch approach, to taxation, transfer payments, industry policy, regulation, and across all of these areas, the relative roles of governments and markets.

Moreover, the argument in support of driving a national conversation on democratic renewal when public trust is strong and before austerity bites is a great one.

Of course, a note of caution is appropriate here. Old politics is not dead and will make a strong bid for return.

There are many ways this could go awry.

An obvious form of this would be an attempt by the Coalition to pursue harsh budget repair measures.

While the leadership is sounding more inclusive and conciliatory than usual, replete with suggestions of a much-improved relationship with the ACTU after this crisis, enlightened cooperation is anything but assured.

Nobel prize winner Paul Krugman in *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* argued that those countries that introduced austerity measures too quickly in the wake of fiscal stimulus such as Italy, Greece, the UK, Portugal, Spain or the US paid for it in terms of declining political trust and social cohesion and the rise of populism.

The key lesson was don't introduce austerity measures until you know that the economy has stabilised as it has a lasting negative impact particularly on attitudes towards the political class.

“Austerity mania” as Krugman calls it, fatally damaged elite credibility because ordinary working families no longer believed that they cared about people like them.

In Eastern Europe, white nationalist parties came to power after centre-left governments alienated the working class by letting themselves be bullied into austerity policies. In Britain, support for right-wing extremists is strongest in shrinking communities hit hardest by fiscal austerity. And would we now have Trump if years of austerity hadn't delayed economic recovery under Barack Obama?

Although it is heartening to see expert advice driving policy responses to the pandemic; it would be wrong, as Krugman suggests, to view post-Covid 19 recovery as a simple fix between political and technocratic elites in Canberra. The lessons from the debacle of the Murray Darling Basin Plan provide recent evidence of the failure of taking that strategic direction – implementation through community matters.

The Australian citizenry not only needs to be brought back-in but will expect to have a say as the key agents of change in the recovery process. Waiting until 2022 for a federal election to legitimate a Coalition or Labor vision for the future will be too late. By 2022 austerity measures could well have fractured the country and the walls of our democratic house.

The case is clear – economic recovery needs to be anchored in an inclusive process of democratic renewal to ensure good outcomes for all Australians.

But how can we imagine this process of recovery and renewal? There are two instruments of change that have emerged during the crisis that have proved invaluable to Australia's Covid 19 response; the National Cabinet and digital technology.

We could begin by making the creation of a post-Covid 19 consensus the task of the National Cabinet in which the PM is first amongst equals and where the interests of Australian citizens in every state and territory are weaved into a national recovery plan.

Then let's underpin the decision-process with a representative (and if still in lock-down) digital deliberative assembly in every state and territory with the twin tasks of formulating the priorities for a recovery plan and addressing the cracks in our democracy and federation that

have emerged over the past decade of democratic decline. In addition, given the historic claim of right of Australia's first peoples, special representation should be accorded to Indigenous nations in each state and territory assembly.

The evidence from the remarkable success of the Irish Constitutional Convention, which delivered radical change to the Irish Constitution, suggests that the make-up of the assemblies should be a one-third, two-thirds mix of politicians and randomly selected lay citizens and chaired by the state premier or territory chief minister to ensure political as well as public buy-in.

At the end of each deliberation myGov should be used to conduct on-line citizen polls on recovery priorities identified by the deliberative forums to test the recommendations with a broader audience.

The outcomes from the state and territory assemblies and citizen polls would then be forwarded to an in-person nationally representative citizen-politician assembly for further deliberation with the mandate of presenting a set of recommendations to the federal government and parliament. Once again, special representation should be afforded to Indigenous nations to ensure that Indigenous rights and interests are protected and fostered in future democratic governance.

In sum, use participatory democracy and the world's best deliberative designers that we have in Australia to bolster the legitimacy of our representative system of government and forge a post Covid-19 settlement that all Australians can subscribe to.

So there we have it; a roadmap to a post- Covid-19 economic and political settlement anchored in democratic renewal.

As a new economic and political settlement, this might sound radical but don't be fooled.

The real danger lies in a return to theatrical politics which kills interest, ducks problems, and imperils the very future of the federation.

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