



Fixing the Trust Deficit to Restore the Social Contract

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Australia has multiple and growing trust deficits. This lack of trust shows up in a range of polls and reports leading up to recent by-elections, including the five held on 'Super Saturday', July 28, 2018. (Six by-elections have been held in the first seven months of 2018, [AEC](#).) Irrespective of the outcomes, voter feedback was largely negative. But this has done little to convince political parties or commentators on the political system that there is a need to fix the trust problems so evident in the community.

At the same time, CEDA released its first nation-wide poll of community attitudes to growth and development. Its [Community pulse 2018: the economic disconnect](#) looked at Australians' attitudes to work, education, health, community and the economy. But while it offers further evidence of 'voter economic disconnect', it misinterprets the solution.

It says: "Australians are concerned about how 26 years of sustained economic growth has translated to the issues that matter to them. Not surprisingly, many Australians are disconnected from economic reform agendas justified simply on the need to sustain strong growth. The growth equals prosperity message is simply not cutting through."

However, CEDA fails to address the lack of trust as the issue. Instead, it suggests it's the voters' failure to *understand* the economic benefits that is the problem.

This is despite their reporting: "Survey respondents were asked to rank the importance of a range of factors that impact quality of life at a personal level and then rank the importance of factors reflecting the future direction they would like Australia to take."

The responses clearly show that the focus for most Australians is on the provision of core services that help to keep them healthy, comfortable and safe throughout their lives. And they want government to provide those services.

In short, the compact between the community and government as the provider of services fundamental to the quality of life in Australia remains strong.

Trust in our government and politicians is at an all-time low

An Ipsos survey earlier this year, commissioned by the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) and the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), looked at the relationships between trust in the political system and attitudes towards democracy.

In reviewing its findings, [MoAD asks](#): "When the budget reckoning is over and Australian households have made marginal adjustments to their spending plans, one fundamental question will remain – who do you trust to run the country?"

Responses showed only 5% of Australians really trust their governments. While there's a slight improvement with 25% trusting government ministers, 72% trust the police and 56% the judiciary.

Essential Research's September 2018 [report](#) on trust in institutions saw political parties at the bottom of its list, with 44% of respondents recording no trust, 35% a little and a combined 15% affirming "some" or "a lot" of trust in political parties. Federal Parliament fared a little better with a "total trust" rating of 28%, which is a fine, if slightly despairing, distinction drawn between the institution and its inmates.

Given the basis of healthy democracy is the legitimacy of its processes, this is not good.

Trust relationships: citizen v customer

These levels coincide with an identified rising distrust of the both most democratic systems and those currently elected into power. The net result is that fewer people see any positive evidence of their elected representatives meeting general voter needs, instead serving the pushy elites' economic demands.

Voters currently identify democratic models as failing to address social wellbeing. What they see is a preoccupation with GDP growth due to the prevalence of policies based on the market model and its assumptions on individuals' self-interest and materialist exchanges.

Most policies on our political agendas are devised to count only those exchanges that are monetised transactions that encourage growth of GDP. People have become customers of the state and lost their citizen status. Elected governments no longer honour traditional, implicit, and mutually obligatory contracts.

Liberal social democracy works best when it is trust based, as voters give legitimacy to those they have elected to represent them. Simple majority representative models tend to see many minorities feel excluded if power is not limited by protective legal rights for all. So, models that work have power limited by legal and administrative structures that protect the whole populace. These make sure that decisions made by elected representatives protect minority rights and broader goals.

Viable alternatives to the market model needed

But what plummeting levels of trust and voter negativity show, is that the last few decades' market-based policy directions have undermined trust and the systems many rely on and also identify as central to our wellbeing as a society. As this model fails to deliver for many less powerful groupings, social capital – as a measure of trust – is falling, fed by evidence of increasing inequities.

These discontents need to be countered by viable alternative policies designed to remedy the growing distrust and lack of social cohesion. Otherwise, simplistic scapegoat-blaming and excessive nativism/nationalism become attractive means of assuaging anxieties. Rising populist views, on both the left and right, allow voters to focus on simplistic blame games and solutions.

Those in power and their main centrist opponents are still drinking the neo-liberal Kool-Aid, so don't even recognise the social deficits that need fixing. Instead, they assume the problem is voters' failing to realise the benefits of economic growth and believe minor money redistributions will make things better. They rarely mention the social aspects of life or policies that could deliver positive changes.

Political parties need to address social goals to counter the over emphasis on economic goals and stop blaming their constituents for failures to meet these.

The need to end advocacy “self-silencing” and reactivate policy making

The level at which current policy and party options are failing to address the trust deficit was made clear in the 2018 Budget and responses to it. The debate is not offering serious shifts in policy options or addressing structural inequities, but much of the same mixture as before, like tax cuts and some extra spending in existing areas.

Debate has also been limited by factors that exclude past advocates from active policy making. This is clearly shown by NGO advocacy for social wellbeing which is both limp and very limited. Changes over the past few decades have linked ever more of their funding to outsourced government contracts, and competitive tendering has cut their accountability to their socially deprived constituencies.

A [report](#) by Pro Bono Australia and the Human Rights Law Centre *Civil Voices: Researching Not-For-Profit Advocacy* found: “The relentless pressure of the last few decades means that, to a greater or lesser degree, civil society organisations are now engaging in various forms of what we have called “self-silencing” treading very carefully in their advocacy work to avoid the risk to financial security and of political retribution.”

This prompts the question, why won't politicians listen to evidence and polls when the results don't suit them? Data from a series of post budget polls show that most did not want tax cuts but more reduction of deficits and extra spending on health and other services.

Looking at polls following the Budget, The Sydney Morning Herald political editor Peter Hartcher [wrote](#): “Today's poll proves anew something that only politicians refuse to believe. Voters generally care more about the health of the nation than about themselves. It's a fact that political scientists have long known. In this particular case, the Fairfax-Ipsos poll shows that a clear majority of Australians would have preferred the Turnbull government to pay off the national debt than to give them tax cuts.”

That almost half of Australian voters are actively considering, or have already given up, on the major political parties, was shown in recent unpublished Labor research by Bruce Hawker, a long-term strategist, on the effects on voters.

Hawker presented these findings in his [speech](#) for the annual 2018 Frank Walker Memorial Lecture in May. The poll found 47% of Australian voters were not prioritising the major parties, with some strongly held views about the dismal state of politics. The most commonly-held belief – 87% of voters – was the need for a “strong leader who will govern for everyone”. More than three quarters (78%) said the Labor and Liberal parties were

“failing Australia”. Asked what it would take to draw them back to a major party, the voters highly rated “acting first in the interests of the broad public”, “greater vision and leadership” and “more honesty and accountability”. Most wanted the government to spend more on health, pensions and education, and opposed private ownership of essential assets, such as electricity. They are concerned that jobs and their standard of living are less secure.

However, Hawker’s findings and works like academic and author [David McKnight’s](#) recently published *Populism Now!* reveal the same voters want traditional populist policies like: immigration control; less resources for aid, unemployed people and Indigenous people; and tougher action on crime.

These are recurring themes in most anxious and distrustful populations and need to be addressed by improved trust levels rather than giving in to common prejudices. A return to higher trust creates resilience and results in fewer retreats into scapegoating particular groups.

So we need to look at what needs to be done via a Trust Factor lens.

We need to offer policies that re-create perceptions that those we elect are seriously committed to addressing anxieties by creating possibilities for a more civil society. We need to shift from market goals and limited financial bribes to setting more social equity goals and wider respectful social inclusions. These would be key components to addressing the trust deficit.