

On public trust and The Conversation's fifth birthday

Written by The Conversation USA

The Conversation celebrated its fifth anniversary last night with a party at RMIT University.

The event was hosted by RMIT Vice-Chancellor Martin Bean, with speeches from Victoria's Deputy Premier and Education Minister James Merlino, Universities Australia Chief Executive Belinda Robinson and Conversation founder and Editor-in-Chief Andrew Jaspan. Around 100 guests attended, including authors, readers, staff, funders and university partners.

Mr Merlino delivered the keynote speech, reflecting Victoria's decision to invest in The Conversation and the role of trust in media and public debate. A full transcript is below.

Belinda Robinson, chief executive of Universities Australia and TC board member, read out a message from Universities Australia Chair Barney Glover, who described The Conversation as "a great example of ingenuity and innovation, and the fact that we can export clever ideas to the world".

On Public Trust

Delivered by Deputy Premier James Merlino, 7 April 2016

Distinguished guests. Ladies and gentlemen

I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered – the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation — and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

I also want to thank Andrew Jaspan and the staff and supporters of The Conversation for inviting me to speak at this 5th Anniversary celebration

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As you know, last September the Andrews Government became an investor in The Conversation.

The total amount we committed was \$3 million over three years.

In the interests of transparency, let me tell you what that \$3 million investment does not mean.

It does *not* mean The Conversation is published by the State Government.

It does *not* mean The Conversation writes what Spring Street likes.

It does *not* mean anything other than this:

A truly independent voice in a sparse media landscape will continue to flourish and be heard.

And I believe that is important. Now, let me tell you why.

If you follow public affairs in this country — or any developed country — there are some words that just keep coming up.

Mandate... we've all heard that one.

Promises... both the core and the non-core kind.

Here are a few more: innovation, reform, productivity, leadership, disruption, transition, prosperity, austerity.

But – other in very glib one liners - one word you don't hear very often is trust.

There are three reasons for the absence of trust:

First, trust can only be earned;

Second, trust is not an action — it's not something you can say you're 'committed to implementing' — but a virtue ... and therefore above and beyond retail politics;

Third, trust is hard to quantify but easy to lose—you never know how much you have, but you sure know when it's gone.

And, ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to say that public trust is at an all-time low.

We are in the midst of a crisis of trust — and that crisis is dangerous.

It's dangerous because without trust it's impossible for us as a state and a federation to come together and find common ground — let alone reach agreement on issues of importance.

If you don't believe me, just look at the vilifying of climate change scientists.

Look at the Daily Telegraph's page one assault on universities for having the temerity to state the obvious — that European settlement in Australia was, for Indigenous Australians, an

invasion.

In my own portfolio of Education, look at the gross distortions that were turned into headlines during the 'debate' over the Safe Schools program.

And also in my portfolio, the astounding proposal by our Prime Minister last week that the Federal Government stop funding public education.

Increasingly, what we are seeing — instead of politics with purpose — is moronic populism and blind partisanship.

I would like to spend a moment — and bear with me, this is a long quote — but it struck a chord with me and I think it's as relevant in our context as in America. The quote is from President Obama speaking last month — and he is referring the popularity to of Donald Trump and his bid for presidency.

He asked the rhetorical question — "How can you be shocked?" to people surprised at his support.

I quote -

What is happening in this primary is just a distillation of what's been happening for more than a decade.

The reason that many of their voters are responding is because this is what's been fed through the messages they've been sending for a long time — that you just make flat assertions that don't comport with the facts. That you just deny the evidence of science. That compromise is a betrayal. That the other side isn't simply wrong, or we just disagree, we want to take a different approach, but the other side is destroying the country, or treasonous.

So they can't be surprised when somebody suddenly looks and says, you know what, I can do that even better. I can make stuff up better than that. I can be more outrageous than that. I can insult people even better than that. I can be even more uncivil. Conservative outlets have been feeding their base constantly the notion that everything is a disaster, that everybody else is to blame, that Obamacare is destroying the country. And it doesn't matter whether it's true or not. It's not, we disagree with this program, we think we can do it better – it's, oh, this is a crisis!

So if you don't care about the facts, or the evidence, or civility, in general in making your arguments, you will end up with candidates who will say just about anything and do just about anything.

In other words, the public interest is being ignored — or forgotten — and, therefore, public trust is being squandered.

It wasn't always like this.

Back home, there was trust in the 1940s, when John Curtin and Ben Chifley drew up the plans to create a new kind of Australia after the War.

There was trust in the 1980s, when Bob Hawke and Paul Keating opened up the Australian economy.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not whitewashing history.

I know there were clashes and strikes, there were mistakes and hard debates.

People disagreed about the direction of change, but the vast majority agreed on the need for change.

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People trusted in the future of this country.

They trusted in the institutions of Australian democracy.

Both sides of politics stepped up to the plate and with respect for the intelligence of the voting public, presented their public policy arguments.

On today's world we are also facing an unprecedented convergence of geopolitical, social and environmental change.

Geopolitical change — with the rise of China and India creating an Asian middle class projected to number 3.2 billion by 2030... and that mega-sized middle class will shape and drive the global economy.

Environmental change — with the accelerating impacts of climate change making concerted global action on carbon-heavy industries more and more likely...

Social change — with the need to not just educate our growing population, but keep our ageing population healthy and productive... and bridge skills gaps created by retiring Baby Boomers.

And as Education Minister I feel the pressure of this last change particularly keenly — the responsibility of ensuring our kids are equipped for jobs and a future that hasn't even been imagined yet; and that no-one is left behind, no matter what their postcode or circumstances.

Connecting all of these changes is digital disruption.

Smart networks, smart devices, personal apps and the mountains of data we are creating — the Big Data that can be analysed to find new ideas and predict future behaviours — are literally

changing the ways we live and work.

The forms and channels of information we receive are as numerous as the millions receiving them – as 'data personalisation' becomes the catch-cry.

The point I am making is this:

The challenges we face are more like a spaghetti junction than a crossroads;

Our democratic institutions — the bureaucracies and the parliaments — need the equivalent of GPS navigation to find a pathway through this maze;

And, yet, the navigation system that is our national media is becoming about as relevant as a 1970s Melway.

The mainstream media is facing its existential moment.

The Age may well cease to be a print publication within the next few years.

And, as the Party I belong to demonstrated in November 2014, the support of the Murdoch press is no longer a vital ingredient in winning an election.

The ABC is under constant attack from reactionary conservative forces.

Jobs for journalists — who, at their best, are the agents of independence and the guardians of democracy — are disappearing.

But alongside the challenges, this new paradigm presents many opportunities.

For me, one of our biggest opportunities is the power of education

As a government it's how and where we invest and how ambitious we are that will make the difference.

The best education systems in the world – those that are fostering the best minds – didn't get there by chance. They stretched themselves, they measured themselves and they invested in their young people.

And we are doing just that – we have set ambitious targets – challenging ourselves to do better and to be publicly judged against those goals

We have to recognise that we are moving into a new era – an era where critical and creative thinking and resilience are as important as the usual suspects of numeracy and literacy.

And we mustn't shy away from the opportunity to address the inexcusable link in our nation between disadvantage and poor student outcomes.

We have to win the argument about the power of education and the need for sustained and targeted investment in both excellence and equity.

We all recognise that opportunities to win back the trust of the public have been squandered in the past.

One of the best ways to win back trust is to establish and maintain informed, quality debates about the defining issues of our time.

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I'm talking about debates based on evidence — rather than prejudice.

I'm talking about debates that are nuanced — rather than black and white.

I'm talking about debates that are concerned with the future well-being and sustainability of this city and this state and this nation.

I'm talking about The Conversation.

Now, I'm not suggesting that one website is the answer to our crisis of trust or the spaghetti junction of challenges we face.

But it is a start.

We have to argue against prejudice — and argue for a more informed and tolerant and progressive society.

We have to argue for sustainability — and argue against the flat-Earth mentality on issues such as climate change.

We have to argue for the future.

We have to rebuild trust.

I am optimistic by nature. So, too, is the Government that I represent.

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We trust in the better angels of the Victorian people.

We trust that, if given the chance to make an informed choice, people will make an informed choice.

We trust that one of the best ways to ensure people have the information they need to make informed decisions is to invest in a media outlet that delivers stories based on broad, peer-reviewed academic research.

And we believe that Victoria — as the progressive capital of Australia — has a responsibility to be the centre for new ideas and informed debate.

And that is why we have — on behalf of the Victorian people — made a \$3 million investment in The Conversation.

The cost to individual Victorian taxpayers is miniscule — a fraction of a cent a day — but the benefits are incalculable.

After all, you can't put a price on public trust.

Thank you.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/on-public-trust-and-the-conversations-fifth-birthday-57479>