

Lessons from the election

Written by John Hewson, Professor and Chair, Tax and Transfer Policy Institute, Crawford School, Australian National University

The major parties seem to be having considerable difficulty drawing lessons from the recent election campaign. Of course, there are many. The most obvious, but probably the most difficult for them to accept, is that the electorate has lost confidence and trust in them, and in the political process.

Basically, the electorate is sick and tired of the misrepresentation, in some cases straight out lies, they are told, to the point that they now mostly don't believe what is said or promised. They are sick and tired of the self-absorption.

They are sick and tired of the games played, at the expense of good government. Many feel isolated, disillusioned, and disenfranchised in and by the political process.

They are offended that the "end game" of politics has become "winning" the game itself, especially in the media. That politics has become increasingly short-term, opportunist, mostly negative, and sometimes very personal, where many of the principal players have never held down a "real job", in the "real world" outside of politics, but some end up managing very large portfolios.

That they don't listen to their concerns about, or even attempt to understand, the issues and challenges that matter to so many average Australians in the struggle that is their daily lives.

The clear lesson is the need to clean up politics, to re-establish the end game as good government, solving problems and creating opportunities, from both an individual and a national perspective.

This calls for leadership and action on many fronts. To begin, impose the same rules and standards of behaviour on politicians as imposed on the rest of us, all across society – for example, impose "truth in advertising" standards on political advertisements, and set and enforce standards in relation to "false and misleading conduct" by our politicians and officials.

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For example, as in the corporate sector, where company directors are required to meet standards for “continuous disclosure” of material facts and events, and can be held to account for misrepresentation. There is also a need to ensure that similar penalties are publicised and enforced.

Second, clean up election campaign funding and lobbying. At the very least, political donations should be limited to individuals, and capped at say \$1000, with all other donations and financial support from business, unions and other organisations and entities made illegal.

Details of individual donations should also be made public, immediately they are received, perhaps on line. If this can't be made to work then, reluctantly, we should go to full public funding of elections, with all other donations and financial support banned.

While it is the essence of our democracy that we can express our views and needs to our politicians and government officials, and to seek their support and to influence the development of policy, lobbying needs to be fully transparent and publicly accountable. It is important that the public is informed about who they meet, when, in what circumstances, and on what issues.

The public has every right to be concerned about the objectionable influence of vested interests in recent years, evident right across all three levels of government. It occurred in planning outcomes, mining, café, and other leases, and in relation to issues such as the mining and carbon taxes, to cite just a few examples.

While details of various meetings with politicians and officials can be made transparent, enforcement of standards will probably require a national independent commission against corruption.

Third, it will be fundamentally important to clean up the parliament and parliamentary processes. This process could begin with a truly independent Speaker, even possibly as a professional appointment.

As Question Time is key to public perceptions, it too should be cleaned up – say, with all

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questions directed by the opposition and independents to government ministers. No more Dorothy Dixers and with all answers limited to say two minutes. No ministerial statements in response, as there are other provisions in the Standing Orders for these. I would also like a requirement that ministers have to answer without notes, in the belief that they should be sufficiently on top of their jobs to do so.

The processes of parliamentary committees should be further developed and empowered to review all legislation and initiate reviews and inquiries on key issues and events. It should also be possible to dramatically improve the quality of parliamentary debate, far above what has become little more than the parroting of their focus group-driven slogans aimed to confine the debate to their desired “message”.

The bureaucracy and other “officials” also have an important role to play, moving back to giving “full, fearless, and independent” advice, rather than seeing themselves too as players in the game, as many have done. They are more inclined to tell ministers what they think they want to hear, rather than what they ought to hear, or worse, attempting to second-guess the political game by advising “what they think that they can get up”.

With vote collection and counting becoming an annoying, unedifying farce, consideration should be given to more electronic voting, and to the more effective application of technology. Many have commented that we can eat, travel, bank, and be entertained, and much more, but not vote, on our mobile phone, or laptop?

Finally, the media too has to clean itself up. Many now see themselves as players in the game, in some cases kingmakers when it comes to leadership, or personality contests. Others run agendas on particular policy issues and challenges. Objectivity and genuine news has been generally replaced by byline pieces that are much more about recording their opinions than on reporting and analysing the facts.

All this, and much more, will be required to significantly improve the standing of our politicians and our political processes. The simple lesson of the last election is that the electorate is rapidly giving up, with some one in four now voting for a minor party or independent.

It can and should be fixed but I’m sure, drawing on The Castle, I will be told I am just

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“dreaming”!

Disclosure

John Hewson is chair of the Asset Owners Disclosure Project, and was federal leader of the Liberal Party from 1990 to 1994.

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