



In Government, Less Is So Much More

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According to the results of an international opinion poll released a few days ago, there's an "implosion of trust" around the world.

The findings of the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer reveal just 37 per cent of Australians trust the government. The comparable figure in the United States is 47 per cent, and 36 per cent in the UK.

Despite all the business bashing of recent times, Australians have more faith in business than their government, as 48 per cent of Australians say they trust business.

Only 32 per cent of Australians trust the media. To put that into perspective that's only one point higher than the trust Russians have in their media, and it's 15 points lower than that for America.

Social researcher Hugh Mackay is right when he says: "The big picture for Western societies, but especially Australia, is that respect and trust for institutions in general is in decline."



But he's being unduly pessimistic by concluding: "That's not a healthy attitude for any society."

In fact, there's a lot to like about the poll results.

It's pleasing to know nearly two-thirds of Australians realise the limits of government. It might start to dawn upon advocates for government that if they want more people to trust government then government should do fewer things, better. The libertarian moment might be at hand sooner than we think.

The Edelman poll confirms what we already know about the state of Australian politics. If people were satisfied with the established political parties, a third of the electorate would not have voted for minor parties in the Senate at the last federal election.

## HARDY PERENNIALS

The change a significant proportion of Australians are seeking goes beyond the day-to-day policies of the parties. If as the Edelman poll indicates 59 per cent of Australians truly believe the system "is broken", proposals to fix our democratic system must be a lot more substantial than the two golden oldie ideas the current crop of politicians recycle.

Australia becoming a republic with a directly elected head of state would certainly break our system of politics as we know it. But in the current political climate there wouldn't be a sitting Coalition or Labor MP who would favour the chances of a factional hack nominated by their parties as President of Australia against a Pauline Hanson or Derryn Hinch. In any case it's not obvious how Australia as a republic would restore trust in our system of government.

The other hardy perennial thought-bubble for change is abolishing the states. Only a former Labor prime minister like Bob Hawke could imagine giving Canberra even more power would restore the reputation of the political class. In fact we should do the opposite of what Hawke advocates – Australia should have more states, and state governments should have more power, not less.

Once we start a discussion about how to restore a measure of democratic control and accountability to government and its institutions, we'll be on the path to restoring trust in the system.

"Recall elections" which give the electorate the chance to vote out members of parliament in-between general elections is the sort of change we should be debating.

Nineteen states in America allow for recall elections, and they also occur at the provincial level in countries such as Canada, Switzerland and Germany. The United Kingdom now has recall elections too. In 2015 in the wake of the parliamentary expenses scandal the British parliament passed the Recall of MPs Act. In certain circumstances a petition signed by 10 per cent of eligible voters can trigger a by-election. The Liberal Democrats were the main proponents of the measure.

Here in Australia the introduction of recall elections was part of the ALP national policy platform



until 1962. In New South Wales the Coalition went to the 2011 state election with a promise to hold an inquiry into the feasibility of recall elections. As it happened a majority of inquiry members supported the introduction of recall elections in some form.

The “democratic deficit” is the name political scientists give to the phenomenon engulfing liberal democracies. As government has got bigger, the accountability of government to the people has declined – democracy is in decline.

Until politicians of all sides confront this essential fact trust in government will continue to fall.

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