



Saying What We're All Thinking

Publish Date:

June 2017

The cosy Canberra consensus on issues from terrorism to immigration erodes the public's trust in politicians.

It took someone who's been in the federal Parliament for just over a year to say what was obvious and what everyone was thinking, but which his colleagues, some of whom have been politicians for decades, were afraid to admit.

James Paterson, the Liberal senator for Victoria, said last week that following Indigenous representatives calling for "substantive" not merely "symbolic" constitutional changes, a referendum to symbolically acknowledge Indigenous Australians in the constitution would now probably never be held.

Indeed, in the words of Paterson, "the loose Canberra consensus" that some form of constitutional recognition was inevitable, turned out to be wrong. In truth, this reality had become apparent some time ago, but no politician wanted to puncture the convenient groupthink on the issue. Further, no



one wanted to question why taxpayers were providing \$30 million for a government-sponsored “Recognise” campaign, when clearly “recognition” had been over-taken by more far-reaching claims.

There’s a loose Canberra consensus on many issues. A feature of such a consensus is that the major political parties and the political class agree between themselves, while the public doesn’t get a look in. It’s not a consensus between the elected and those who elected them.

Often the things on which there’s a Canberra consensus are things politicians don’t want to talk about with the public.

Opinion polls show only 37 per cent of Australians trust politicians. The feeling is mutual. Politicians don’t trust Australians.

When trust between the ruled and the rulers breaks down, democracy corrodes.

The maintenance of trust between the politician and the public is essential if Australia is going to overcome the challenge of Islamist terrorism.

There’s no surer way for the community to lose trust in the government and in the authorities charged with fighting Islamist terrorism than for officials to treat appropriate and legitimate questions about things like the relationship between terrorism and our refugee program with contempt and disdain.

Which is exactly what ASIO director Duncan Lewis did when replying to a question from Pauline Hanson. He said: “I have absolutely no evidence to suggest there is a connection between refugees and terrorism.” One suspects if Lewis has been answering a question from someone other than Hanson, he would have given a different answer. The loose Canberra consensus on Islamist terrorism is that it’s best if politicians don’t talk about the issue with the public. In this newspaper on Wednesday it was reported that Tony Abbott’s comments about “Islamophobia” had “annoyed security officials, who believe such comments only make it harder to thwart domestic terrorist attacks”. The piece de resistance from the security agencies was the quote, Abbott “should know better”.

The implication being that Abbott “should know better” than to say what everyone was thinking.

In 2014 one of the reasons Abbott gave for reneging on his promise to repeal section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act was that he’d received advice from the security agencies that if he did repeal the section, he’d upset the Muslim community.

Section 18c remains unchanged, and meanwhile the Islamic Council of Victoria is urging the creation of government-funded “safe spaces” where Muslim youth “could be radical”. To his credit, the Victorian Premier said yesterday: “There is no safe way to rail against the West” The Canberra consensus on immigration is in favour of a substantial immigration program. On the rare occasions when the consensus has been challenged, such as Julia Gillard did as PM in 2010, the Canberra consensus quickly prevailed.



Gillard declared she didn't necessarily support a "big Australia", and Tony Burke who under Kevin Rudd had been the "minister for population" had his title changed by Gillard to the "minister for sustainable population". Burke held this second title for just a few months.

The Canberra consensus on immigration has always been that politicians should only talk about its positives, not its potential negatives. Maintaining that consensus now risks damaging community support for this country's immigration program.

When politicians are unwilling or unable to engage in an honest discussion with the public about immigration then the public's trust in politicians is eroded even further.

Originally published in:

The Australian Financial Review