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THE TRUST DEFICIT

COLLEEN LEWIS
MONASH UNIVERSITY

SPEAKING NOTES ONLY
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My presentation is not highly theoretical in that it does not deal with conceptual issues surrounding trust. That is a deliberate approach given the time constraints surrounding conference presentations. I refer people interested in such debates to the literature on political trust, the trust deficit and the concept of trust more generally. See for example: van der Meer 2017; Zmerli & van der Meer (eds) 2016; Cosby 2016; Norris 2011; Dalton 2004 (to name but a few sources).

Following on from my abstract, I am arguing there is a declining trust deficit between elected representatives and those who elect them to power. This is certainly the case in Australia, which is the primary focus of my research to date. As the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer's section on Australia puts it "Trust Free-Falls in the Land Down Under".

This sentiment is reflected in a longitudinal study conducted by researchers (Ian McAllister and Sarah Cameron) from the Australian National University (Australian Election Study 1987-2016). Importantly, this survey has asked the same questions and used the same methodology for the past 30 years. Its 2016 survey found "... record low levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in government".

A University of Canberra survey, also conducted in 2016, found that trust in Australian politicians and the broader political system is at its lowest point in 20 years, with only 42% of the population satisfied with the way Australia's democracy is working (Evans & Stoker 2016).

Of course, these findings are not peculiar to Australia. Similar, equally disturbing findings are reflected in the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer. It shows that "trust is in crisis around the world" and the lack of trust extends to four crucial institutions: Non Government Organisations (NGOs), business, media and government. This is the first time such a phenomenon has been reported since 2012, the year the Edelman Barometer started tracking levels of trust with these particular segments of society.

Clearly we have a problem and one that needs to be addressed and quickly, for as van der Meer (2016) reminds us "... political trust is considered a necessary precondition for democratic rule...". If the trust deficit continues to widen, the "quality of representative democracy" could suffer. The consequences of this are likely to be severe for citizens, who understand the value of the institutions that deliver representative democracy, but increasingly do not trust them.

When analyzing the trust deficit, it is important to keep in mind that in 1975 (over 40 years ago), Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki were pointing to the "increasing delegitimation of authority" and were arguing that in the preceding decade there had been "a decline in the confidence and trust the people have in government, in their leaders" (Crozier et. al. 1975, p. 162). The authors note that the level of distrust was not so much about the "rules of the game" but rather

that citizens have certain expectations about what they wish to achieve when they agree to play the game.

As the above surveys reveal, citizens are getting increasingly angry about their expectations not being met. They perceive that all too often members of parliament and the political parties to which they belong push the public interest to the back of the queue, well behind personal and party interests.

As I only have 15 minutes to cover a topic that could be the focus of an entire conference, I can only highlight key factors that are contributing to the trust deficit. Before I do, I need to make a couple of qualifying remarks. First, when I refer to the misbehaviour of members of parliament (MPs), I want to stress the words **some MPs**, as many of our elected representatives, work incredibly hard and in many circumstances they do so in the public interest.

The second qualifier is when I speak of declining trust, I am not referring to skepticism. It is as old as democracy itself and is a healthy reaction by citizens toward members of parliament and the political system more generally.

What I am concerned about, and what has motivated me to begin undertaking research in this area, is what happens when healthy skepticism becomes destructive cynicism. We seem to be reaching a point where the distrust virus is taking hold. If it continues to spread, what are the consequences?

The following are some of the key factors influencing the trust deficit. Their impact varies from country to country but all, in one form or another, are affecting citizens' perceptions of their elected representatives, democratic institutions, other key societal players and the political system more generally.

I am starting with ministerial advisers. It was not on my initial list but after discussing elements of the trust deficit with a respected former state premier, I have included it here, as he believes ministerial advisers are having a negative impact on public policy decision-makers and hence public policy decisions.

Ministerial advisers

They have existed in Australia since the early 1970s, with their numbers increasing since then.

Ministerial advisers are the principal confidants of prime ministers, premiers and ministers. They are often the people these senior politicians trust the most.

Their advice is sought and often acted on. A former Australian prime minister thought his advisers were more important than his own department in terms of policy advice.

The chief of staff to another former prime minister attended Cabinet meetings and vetted the appointment of ministerial staff.

The problem is, there is no requirement for ministerial advisers to be politically neutral in their advice, which is usually about the interests of the party and/or individual minister rather than the public interest.

Another problem is that ministerial advisers are largely unregulated and unaccountable.

The demise of frank and fearless advice

This has been brought about in part by the influence of ministerial advisers.

The move to short-term contracts for senior members of the bureaucracy has the potential to stymie the giving of frank and fearless advice by public servants.

The sacking of department heads by incoming governments can also curtail frank and fearless advice. The sackings occur not because of incompetence but rather because senior members of the incoming government believe some department heads have been too close to the previous government, which was from a different party.

The media

A free media is an essential element of any democratic political system yet it is one of the most distrusted institutions.

In Australia trust in the media is plummeting. In 2016 it was at 42% and in 2017 only 32% of people reported trusting it. Causes for this include concentration of media ownership and ongoing and severe staffing cuts in "old media" corporations.

The shift from reporter to commentator by too many journalists is also impacting on the reputation of the media, and that of parliamentarians when the commentary is clearly biased for or against a parliamentarian or the party to which he/she belongs.

The rise of the 24/7 "insomniac" media is another factor. This shift has come at the expense of fact checking and time to think.

The shift to "infotainment" accompanied by the rise in the number of radio and television "shock jocks" is affecting trust in the media and parliamentarians, as the sensational is what is repeatedly reported.

The influence of social media is also having a detrimental effect on the reputation of governments, Oppositions and individual parliamentarians. The 2017 Edelman Barometer pointed to the growing belief by many that a search engine delivers more reliable and credible information than "old media". This is fuelling the rise of "fake news" as social media comes without a filter or any fact checking, yet is often believed; as the search engines people visit tend to

reinforce their prejudices. The fake news often extends to governments, parliamentarians and to other key societal players.

The state of the economy

The economy is a crucial issue, for when the economy is in poor health trust in governments, members of parliament and political institutions declines.

The Global Financial Crisis (not Australia) has impacted on trust. Who paid the greatest price and are still paying the price? Not the so-called “elites” but rather members of the general population. This accounts for the fact that elites report greater levels of trust in the political system and its players than the general population.

Community expectations

Does the community demand too much of government?

Do they expect governments to deliver more services while simultaneously not wanting to pay more taxes?

Both these issues need to be researched further.

Community obligations

Low voter turn out at elections (not relevant in Australia – compulsory voting) raises questions about community obligations as politically disinterested citizens complain about elected governments.

Are citizens living up to their obligation to inform themselves about the political system and the public policy promises many vote for?

Community obligations also require further research.

The behaviour of political parties.

Political parties “whatever it takes” approach to winning power is turning distrust to disgust.

In the Australia context, the domination by particular factions within parties in the selection of candidates to run for office and to fill senior positions within a party is also a factor.

The practice of parties and their parliamentary members and administrative staff soliciting donations from big business, trade unions and others is criticized strongly by citizens, who express the view that such donors exercise a privileged position with political parties and their parliamentary members. This distorts any notion of a level playing field in terms of access to and influence on political decision-makers.

For those interested in the Australian party system, I can recommend a 2016 edited collection *Party Rules? Dilemmas of political party regulation in Australia*, Anika Gauja and Marian Sawer (eds.), ANU Press (www.press.anu.edu.au).

Behaviour of some members of parliament

MPs who engage in conduct that is at best unethical and at worst criminal is arguably the most crucial factor in the trust deficit. Unfortunately, the dark shadow cast by these self-serving members of parliament influences people's opinion of them all.

Conduct that clearly demonstrates that some members of parliament have forgotten the public office-public trust principle, which demands that the public interest takes precedence over all other interests, is increasingly fuelling citizens' anger, as members of parliament and the political system are not seen to be responding to their needs.

Parliamentarians introducing policies designed to make themselves the exception to the rule is viewed as hypocrisy – the do as I say not as I do approach to public policy and to accountability issues.

The common almost daily practice of insulting members of their own profession is another key factor in declining levels of trust. By this I am referring to the language parliamentarians constantly use when referring to each other. It sends a very negative message to the electorate about the character of other parliamentarians who belong to the same profession. The message is usually that MPs in other political parties are a bunch of liars and cheats who will do anything to win power. They accuse each other of having no moral compass and using any means, no matter how unscrupulous, to achieve their ends. Why then should MPs be disappointed or surprised by their poor reputation? After all, they create the narrative about their profession.

So where to from here?

Distinguished Professor, Andrew Markus responding to a question when delivering his 2014 Senate Occasional Lecture, raised the possibility that “the business of government has become more complex ... and difficult than it was in 2001”. He points to the state of the economy and the global financial crisis as factors that are making it “more difficult for politicians in Australia [and elsewhere] to deliver on people's needs”. He acknowledges there is another view that maintains the money is available; the problem is that governments need to spend it better. This Markus finds is an “overly simplistic” view.

Markus notes that we do have a level of understanding about the factors “that determine approval above a base level”. He refers to the Edelman organisation's strategy for business to build trust. As he says, many of those strategies have “direct applicability to governments”. They include:

Listening to people's needs and giving them constructive feedback.

Communicating often and being honest when doing so, particularly on issues of national importance.

Having elected and appointed public servants act ethically when making decisions.

The introduction of public policies that are seen to be ethical and in the public interest.

Greater levels of transparency and accountability.

Being responsive to people's social needs by introducing policies that will have a positive impact on people's lives.

Adopting a holistic approach that places citizens' needs at the centre of all decisions.

The rebuilding of trust requires all political actors to engage with the broader community, not just particular groups they believe are most relevant to them and their ambitions.

Members of parliament need to act according to the public office-public trust principle, which requires them to always place the public interest well before the interests of their party and personal interests.

If we are to start closing the trust deficit, we will **all** have to step outside of our "comfort zone", be willing to listen with an open mind and when necessary to let go of the usual ways of doing things. We must be willing to embrace fresh ideas. We need to adopt a new way of governance and governing, one that focuses on addressing people's anger, disappointments and fears and restoring their trust in their elected representatives and the democratic political system. The consequences if we don't may not be pleasant.

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