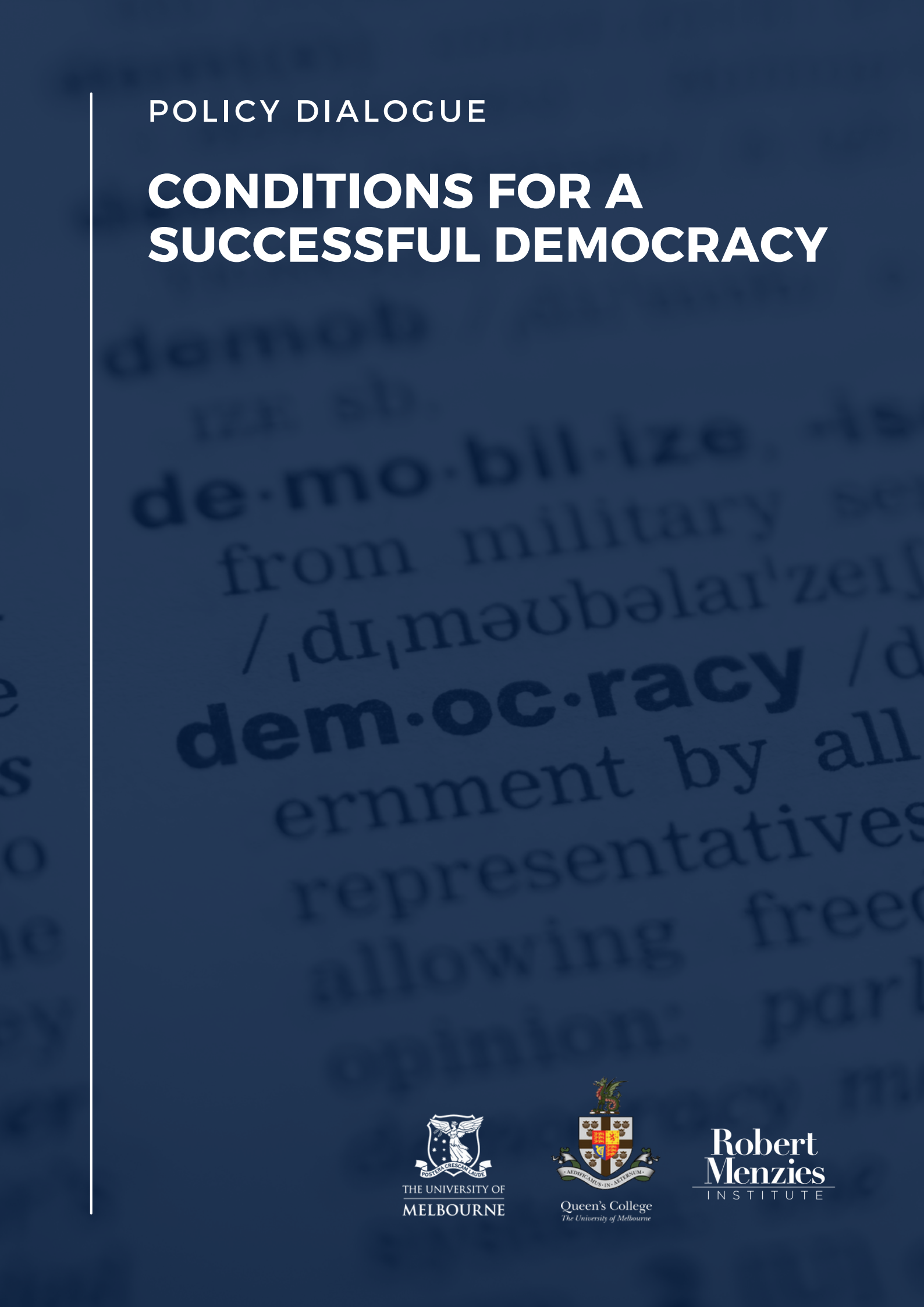
POLICY DIALOGUE

CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRACY



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Overview

Marking the 125th anniversary of the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia, this policy paper examines the current state of Australian democracy through a historic lens which seeks to unpack the conditions through which it has and can continue to thrive. Drawing on Sir Robert Menzies's *Forgotten People* broadcasts, it argues that democracy is not merely a structure of government but a *living spirit*, sustained by civic virtue, moral equality, and a sense of shared responsibility. The paper is the result of a Dialogue convened by the Robert Menzies Institute in June 2025, which gathered over thirty of Australia's foremost historians, policymakers, and thinkers to assess our democratic strengths, weaknesses, and prospects for renewal in an age of disillusionment and global instability.

1. Defining Democracy

Menzies saw democracy as resting on three interlocking foundations: government by the people, equality before both the law and the ballot box, and the liberal protection of minority rights to offset the potential 'tyranny' of majority rule. Democracy's health depends on culture as much as institutions — it requires a people who value civic duty, self-reliance, and respect for others. He warned that democracy decays when citizens treat it as a mechanism for personal or sectional gain, arguing that 'government of the people by my party, for me, is not democracy.' True democratic strength comes from individuals who 'lift' rather than lean, achieving self-actualisation while contributing to the common good.

2. Australia's Historical Strength in Democracy

Australia's democracy inherited a centuries-old British tradition of parliamentary democracy and liberty under law, but quickly developed distinctive characteristics such as the secret ballot, compulsory voting, and universal suffrage. Its egalitarian ethos, reinforced by pluralism and voluntary civic life, built a remarkably stable society. Menzies lauded democracy's fruits — social progress, improved living standards, and expanded opportunity — but cautioned that extended prosperity can produce its own drawbacks. A healthy democratic culture requires constant cultivation, but the historic fortune of the 'lucky country' has often begat complacency and the potential for disillusionment when economic progress stagnates.

3. The Sickness/Health of Democracy

Trust in political institutions has declined sharply, with only 26 percent of Australians expressing confidence in political parties. Political engagement is low, and economic pessimism, especially among younger generations priced out of housing and family formation, threatens the optimism on which both democratic progress and the laying down of roots depend.

The growing expectation that government should solve every problem risks hollowing out civic initiative and creating a culture of dependence at the expense of active citizenship. Polarisation, identity politics, and social fragmentation further erode the shared civic 'spirit' that underpins Australian self-government.

4. National Sovereignty vs Global Integration

A key theme explored in the Dialogue was how to reconcile sovereignty – as a fundamental prerequisite of democratic accountability - with ever growing imperatives towards international engagement. Menzies supported international cooperation and the 'globalisation' of trade, yet warned that surrendering too much power to supranational institutions weakens democratic legitimacy. Contemporary debates over trade and migration have led to a populist backlash in part because democratic leaders have failed in their duty to make the case for their benefits and to offset their potential trade-offs. Ultimately, the success of internationalism is predicated on a spirit of voluntarism, and attempts at coercion are likely to damage the very ends that are sought.

5. Attacks on Democracies

Authoritarian regimes, digital interference, and the weaponisation of information pose renewed dangers to Australian democracy – yet we must be wary of cures that grant our opponents a 'free-hit' on our democratic liberties. The lesson of the 1930s is how difficult it can be to convince a democratic electorate to look beyond domestic policy and cost of living issues, towards growing existential threats that can only be met with great expense. But the more immediate problem of information warfare and attempted interference in the democratic process is not as unprecedented as it seems, and Australia's democratic institutions remain well-placed to meet it. The rise of 'echo-chambers' has been damaging, however they are driven as much by the preferences of individuals shaping digital algorithms as by the algorithms themselves, hence the problem is as much cultural as it is mechanical.

6. Protection and Censorship of Free Speech

Free debate and the 'untrammelled clash of opinion' is the essential process through which democracies arrive at objective truth and progress beyond the deficiencies of a reflexive majority opinion. Hence the greater threat to Australian democracy may lie internally rather than externally, in our willingness to censor, conform, or retreat from open discussion. Menzies held that free expression, even when abused, remains the essential safeguard of liberty. Attempts to regulate 'misinformation' or 'hate speech' risk repeating the errors of the past, when crises alleged to have imperilled democracy led to the curtailing of the fundamental freedoms that are the lifeblood of the system. Human beings are not naturally predisposed towards tolerating opinions with which they disagree, hence upholding a respect for free expression is an essential element of a healthy democratic culture, that cannot be adequately substituted by the simplistic provision of a Bill of Rights.

7. The Future of Democratic Governance and Policy Recommendations

The paper contends that democracy's revival requires more than institutional reform, it requires cultural renewal. Australians must rediscover habits of civility, mutual respect, and moral independence. Menzies likened the democratic system to a musical instrument: even the finest instrument will produce 'crashing discords' unless citizens learn to play it with skill and spirit. In order to foster that renewal, the paper recommends that governments:

1. **Invest in Civics and Australian History Education** – Strengthen understanding of democratic origins, rights, and responsibilities among students and new citizens through curricula, museums, and cultural institutions.
2. **Expand the Federal Parliament** – Increase the number of representatives to improve engagement, reflect communities of interest, and reduce over-centralisation.
3. **Pursue Policy Settings that Foster Family Formation** – Support families and reverse demographic decline, fostering generational continuity and civic responsibility.
4. **Audit Government Programs to Prevent Dependency** – Ensure welfare policies empower independence rather than entrench reliance.
5. **Reintroduce National Service with a Community Focus** – Build civic unity and resilience by involving young Australians in public and community projects across social divides.

8. Expert Reflections

- **David Kemp** argues that democracy's vitality depends on the health of our political parties, a spirit of public service and the cultivation of positive habits — with both good governance and bad governance tending to self-perpetuate.
- **Greg Melleuish** warns that democracy's recurring flaws — demagogy and bureaucratic overreach — must be countered by strong cultural and institutional checks.
- **Tim Lynch** examines the enduring tension between national sovereignty and internationalism, urging Australia against pursuing international engagement at the expense of national unity.
- **Chris Berg** cautions that censorship regimes born of fear inevitably overreach, making freedom of speech the indispensable pillar of liberal democracy.
- **Lorraine Finlay** stresses that democracy's strength lies in our capacity to disagree well — rebuilding trust and practising civility in an age of polarisation
- **Aruna Sathanapally** highlights Australia's robust institutions but warns of complacency and the 'slow-burn' erosion of trust, urging vigilance, inclusion, and open debate.

Conclusion

The Conditions for a Successful Democracy paper concludes that Australia's institutions remain sound, but their survival depends on the moral and cultural energy of its citizens. Menzies's enduring lesson is that democracy cannot be sustained by law alone — it requires citizens who are self-reliant, intelligent, and generous in spirit. The challenge for Australia's 125th year of nationhood is to rekindle that spirit: to govern ourselves not merely by rules, but by conviction, confidence, and civic grace.

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Introduction

The first of January 2026 will mark 125 years since the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia. While this is undoubtedly an occasion to celebrate, there are reasons to believe that after five-quarters of a century, the health of our democracy is not as robust as it once was.

Across Australia and the Western world, democracy is facing an acute crisis of confidence, function and delivery. Governments have significantly expanded their reach into economic and social life, consolidating power in ways that challenge liberal democratic norms. New electioneering techniques and the ability of people to broadcast their views across a variety of media platforms have given rise to efforts aimed at regulating misinformation that risk curtailing open debate. Conversely, legal and technological developments have enabled new centres of unaccountable private power. Respect for institutions — parliament, the courts, the public service — appears to be waning, sometimes even among those who serve within them. Failures of due process, politicisation of governance, and the erosion of institutional impartiality undermine public trust. Perhaps worst of all, for the first time in decades the democratic West is assailed by a formidable coalition of authoritarian regimes, which claim, and sometimes even appear, to offer a viable, however undesirable, alternative to our way of life.

Such a crisis of both Australian and Western democracies is not without precedent. In the early 1940s, with the liberal democratic system assailed by fascism to its right and communism to its left, Robert Menzies dedicated much of his landmark 'Forgotten People' radio series to analysing the nature, achievement, sickness and task of democracy. He identified that democracy was not so much a system of governance, as it was a 'living spirit' which owed its success to being embedded in the broader culture and winning the buy-in of individual citizens. Citizens who would not 'lean' on the efforts of others, but instead make their own individual contributions towards 'lifting' the broader Australian polity. In doing so, Menzies helped to lay the intellectual platform for a period of post-war renewal that would help to create the modern and prosperous Australia that we have since known.

That is why in June of 2025 the Robert Menzies Institute convened a group of over 30 of Australia's leading historians, political scientists, commentators, former politicians, journalists, pollsters and policymakers to take inspiration from Menzies in conducting a health check on Australian democracy. The purpose of the policy dialogue was to draw on Australia's rich democratic history, to assess both the strengths and vulnerabilities of our system of democratic governance and find ways to improve it for future generations.

Defining Democracy

Robert Menzies identified that a belief in democracy was one of the great unifiers in Australian national life, as it remains today. But he equally saw that this very ubiquity could be one of the sources of our democratic weakness. When people repeat phrases so often that they cease to think about what they mean, their words become hollow as does the concept which they aim to describe.

Menzies defined democracy in several ways. In a most basic understanding, it is government by the people, something that can be defined against its autocratic or aristocratic alternatives. Even if we have long since abandoned the ancient Athenian practice of literally having the people govern, in favour of the more practical and to some extent elitist system of representative democracy, it is still ultimately the people who empower their representatives through the ballot-box. And so we speak of our elected officials as having a democratic mandate which is the ultimate source of their validity.

This brings us to another definition, which Menzies referred to as an 'attitude of mind - a civic sense of men's equality in the eyes of the State'.[1] Democracy is ultimately based on the inherently equal value of each individual person, as embodied in the principles of 'one man, one vote' and 'one vote, one value', not, and this is important to note, the equal talents of individual people. The very nature of representative democracy serves as an acknowledgement that people can be manifestly unequal in their capabilities, education and even in the legitimacy of their philosophical viewpoint. But in the democratic mind, this does not give any one individual the right to think of themselves as inherently above others. In an Australian context, we would describe this as having an egalitarian culture. Menzies linked it to the 'Christian conception that there is in every human soul a spark of the Divine; that with all their inequalities of mind and body, the souls of men stand equal in the sight of God'. While in our more pluralist modern society we may no longer want to ground democratic equality in religion, it is important to recognise that it remains in some respects a matter of belief. It is not self-evident or universal; it is an ideal that must be cultivated to ensure that it remains a normative value.

A third definition is majority rule. Once you accept that decisions should be made by 'the people' and that those people should each have an equal say, then it is ultimately going to be a numbers game as to which viewpoint wins out. But while this is fair, or at least fairer than any alternative, it is important to recognise the inherent danger of a tyranny of the majority. Public opinion may from time to time favour impractical, unjust or even undemocratic policies, but majority support does not inherently make such opinions right. When we are conceptualising democracy as an ideal, what we ultimately mean is a liberal democracy: a system where the majority will rule, but not such that they can trample on the rights of minorities or dissenters.

One of the main ways in which the liberal element of a liberal democracy is maintained is through the rule of law, which prevents government acting according to the arbitrary whims of the executive. Hence Menzies's proclamation that 'the law's greatest benefits are for the minority man - the individual'.[2]

But for all his belief in the value of law, Menzies explicitly rejected empowering judges to be the final arbiters via a Bill of Rights, as to do so would represent a fundamental shift of power away from elected officials and towards an unelected judiciary.[3] Instead, Menzies favoured trusting Australia's democratic culture, informed as it was by centuries of struggle to achieve individual liberties inculcating a broad understanding of their value, to strike a sound balance between protecting the minority and majority rule. However, in a modern context, with indicators suggesting a poor knowledge of civics and history in general, there are worrying signs that this cultural restraint has eroded over the past 80 years.[4] In any case there is an inherent tension, or balancing act, baked into the system and, as Australia's repressive response to covid showed, without sufficient cultural and institutional ballast it can quickly become unbalanced.

This is why Menzies thought that it was an error to view democracy in purely mechanical terms as a system that may have been heroically wrested from reluctant kings and tyrants, but which once in place, would run smoothly without constant and meticulous calibration. He explained this through the metaphor of a musical instrument:

> 'I may have the most expensive and perfect piano in the world, but it will give out only crashing discords unless I learn to play it. And when I have learnt the mere mechanics of playing it, my knowledge will be no more than a curse to my neighbours and my friends unless I catch something of the spirit of music, and learn that subtle magic which converts ordered noise into celestial harmony.'[5]

This 'spirit' of democracy is crucial. Since it is the people who ultimately rule through their choice of governors, it is the responsibility of every individual voter to rule well. It is not enough to shift the blame onto the character flaws of our elected representatives or the corruptions present in the system, because we are the ones who elect the representatives and we are the ones who collectively control the system and therefore have it within our power to reform it. In sum, the flaws of Australian democracy represent an accumulation of the flaws and selfishness of the individuals who comprise that democracy:

> ‘If, as a voter, I am concerned only with my own advantage and am indifferent to the cost to others, I am simply corrupt. I am selling my vote for an individual mess of pottage. Government of the people by my party, for me, is not democracy. [6]

Hence what Menzies understood is that democracy is ultimately a culture as much as it is a system. It needs people to buy into the idea of a public or national interest that is bigger than themselves, and it has no real ability to compel them to do so. It must persuade and more than that, it must inspire.

Taking Stock of Australia’s Historical Strength in Democracy

So how good has Australia historically been at achieving this inspiration and buy-in? Well, we started with a distinct advantage in that Australia was founded as an outpost of the British Empire, and therefore inherited a culture that had venerated liberty and an ever-expanding conception of political rights since Magna Carta in 1215, if not before. Moreover, the intellectual leaders who made the long journey to the antipodes, whether enlightened governors or imprisoned agitators, tended to be landed Whigs or working and middle class Chartists - those most likely to believe fervently in a narrative of freedom.

While Australians obviously did not live up to such ideals in the brutal dispossession of First Nations peoples – who, it is worth noting, had their own democratic means of handling certain disputes that help to reinforce Australia’s democratic culture[7] – that the ideals were baked in from the beginning is of the utmost importance. Chartism for example was, in Britain, a fringe movement that had been brutally repressed, yet in Australia it succeeded in getting most of its program adopted with remarkable rapidity. Within a few years of the advent of responsible government, the Australian colonies had achieved the Chartist goals of manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, frequent (though not annual) elections, and soon afterwards the payment of members. Equal representation (through equal electorates and equal qualifications for voting) took a little longer, but were always at the forefront of public debate. Then having developed a taste for democratic reform, Australians would embark on our own experiments such as female suffrage, compulsory voting and compulsory preferences.

Meanwhile, any attempt to transport the cornerstones of British Toryism: a landed aristocracy and a legally privileged Church of England, met with failure and even derision. Governor Richard Bourke’s 1836 decision to fund all Christian denominations based on the size of their congregations stands out as an early and far-sighted embrace of pluralism and religious freedom, albeit one that was somewhat undermined by the subsequent imposition of ‘free, compulsory, and secular’ education.

Compulsory secular education was denounced by Australia's minority Catholic population, who were openly villainised by politicians such as Henry Parkes and John Dunmore Lang, ushering in decades of sectarian division. It was seven decades before Menzies cut through this gordian knot of prejudice with his re-introduction of State Aid for independent schools. While Australians therefore failed to fully put the divisions of the old world aside, that ideal was at least present from an early date, and an implied commitment for new migrants coming to our shores.

Nor was religion the only element of society subject to a discriminatory majoritarianism. The desire to protect the emerging nationalism of the Anglo-Celtic majority manifested itself in the White Australia Policy and its ideology of deliberate exclusion primarily of Chinese migrants. As Greg Melleuish notes, there is even a recorded incident of the Legislative Council of New South Wales being opposed on moral grounds to a piece of Chinese immigration restriction legislation, but letting it through because it had the support of the more 'democratic' Legislative Assembly and with it the mandate of the people.[8]

Similarly, the disenfranchisement of vast sections of Australia's Indigenous population prior to the 1962 Commonwealth Electoral Act shows how boasting of our 'egalitarianism' provided no inherent safeguard of minority rights. By welcome contrast, however, when manhood suffrage was introduced in the 1850s, Indigenous men in the South Eastern colonies were included in the electorate, and even when White Australia was dominant as an immigration policy, Indigenous women voted in South Australia. So even in the darkest days of discrimination, the light of Australia's democratic culture still shone through in certain areas.

While White Australia is a clear blot, neither should it obscure the otherwise remarkable democratic achievement of federation. Australia can proudly boast that its constitution was framed at conventions elected directly by the Australian people, and that its ratification required endorsement at referenda which individually transformed each of the six Australian colonies into states of a unified whole.[9] It is equally a foundational democratic principle that our constitution can only be altered by the express will of the Australian people given at further referenda. Although the propensity of the High Court to expand the powers of the federal government by altering its constitutional interpretations has arguably usurped what was intended to be the exclusive prerogative of the democratic majority.

The Australian people's historical propensity to reject unnecessary constitutional change at these referenda can be interpreted as a healthy Burkean instinct for favouring the proven good over abstract reasoning. An instinct that also prevailed amongst the constitution's framers, which may partly account for the enduring utility of the document they authored.[10]

And while some have complained that the double majority requirement of the referendum mechanism places an unnecessary stumbling block in the path of change, this simply serves to place the burden of proof on its advocates, who have to mount a case that the alteration will do nothing to undermine 125 years of political stability. The double majority also reflects the idea that democracies need to represent communities as well as individuals, a concept that is baked into both the state-based Senate and the system of dividing states and territories into electorates for the House of Representatives, which are intended to reflect real-world communities of interest. It is this tangible sense of community and shared civic interest which helps transform democracy from a numerical matter of head counting abstracted individuals, into something more cohesive and animated.

While we need to recognise the propensity of democracy for flawed majoritarian policies, and be vigilant in safeguarding the liberal element in our liberal democracy, past imperfections should not form the basis for disillusionment. For a system built on 'spirit', disillusionment is death. For this reason, when Menzies set about identifying the defects of Australian democracy, he felt it essential to first highlight its achievements:

> 'The [last] hundred years... have been the golden age in the improvement of the condition of mankind. Ten or fifteen years have been added to the average life of man. Public health and hygiene have so improved that we take cleanliness and sanitation for granted. Adequate water supply, pure food, clean drains, a sewerage system which has practically destroyed typhoid fever, immeasurably better houses, domestic security backed by an honest and intelligent police, an educational ideal which has given to the average man a degree of knowledge undreamt of a century ago, the substitution for self-help - frequently red in tooth and claw - of a new ideal of responsibility for the weak and unfortunate and aged and unemployed, the cheapening of entertainment, the vast accretion of books and periodicals, the abolition of child labour, the carving out of a new province for law and order by the compulsory fixing of wages and industrial conditions on a civilized basis, the abolition of slavery, the opening of places of power and authority to the man or woman who is rich only in ability, the new conception of the status of women, free speech, religious tolerance - all these and a thousand other things have marked the progress of democracy. No system of tyranny, however benevolent, ever produced so much.' [11]

What comes out clearly from this passage is how liberal democracy is intimately linked with an expectation of progress in the standards of life for all. The coincidence of democratic reform with the industrial revolution and the growth of capitalism provided the technical and economic underpinnings for the massive improvement in living standards we have since experienced. Menzies was firmly of the view that 'individual initiative [provides] a driving quality, a motive power, an instrument of progress which is of such great value to mankind that to destroy it would be to inflict almost untold hardships upon future generations.'[12] Hence, if democracy were to demand too much of government, such that people were encouraged to depend upon the state, rather than strive for their own achievements, progress itself might halt - a lesson to bear in mind at a time when we have seen a widespread growth of the public sector simultaneous with flatlining productivity.[13]

Menzies recognised that liberal democracy is partly a victim of its own success. People not only take improvements in their standard of life for granted, but when there is any significant pause in material progress – evident at a time of rapidly rising costs of living or housing shortages and costs – there are some ready to blame democracy itself. The expectation that every generation will have a better life than their parents would have seemed bizarre to a medieval peasant, but it is one that has had widespread currency for decades in the democratic West. It is an expectation that is arguably stronger in Australia than elsewhere, because the liberal democracy established in the 19th century achieved world-leading living standards so early into our post-settlement existence and, though interrupted by recessions or depressions, has generally experienced an exceptionally stable level of prosperity across two centuries.[14]

Another source of the historical strength in Australian democracy is our distinctive democratic institutions. Australia was and is a pioneer of compulsory voting, which is often credited with pulling Australian politics to the centre and ensuring that political programs cater for the median voter. For what it is worth, Menzies appears to have been a supporter of this system, calling for the extension of compulsion to cover Legislative Council elections during the campaign which first secured him a seat in Victorian Parliament.[15] As mentioned above, however, he felt that getting people to vote was not enough to sustain democracy if they were willing to sell that vote for the 'mess of pottage' that presented itself when narrow selfishness or sectional interests were given priority over the national interest.

Australia has often had a hard time overcoming such intrenched interests, as reflected in the long endurance of the 'Australian Settlement' on tariffs and industrial policy. A counterpoint to the much-touted benefits of compulsory voting may be that it fosters political inertia. Since low-engagement voters tend to decide electoral outcomes, political parties are given a motive to prioritise risk aversion over the potential for bold platforms, which may have been required to attract voluntary voters.

With these narrowed horizons and falling membership numbers, our political parties are arguably the most vulnerable of the institutional frameworks of Australian democracy. Both the Liberal and Labor parties are in origin authentically Australian manifestations and vehicles of the democratic will, each having a set of traditions and values that have evolved directly out of Australia's unique historical circumstances. Yet despite this indigeneity and adaption to local conditions, trust in political parties today sits at just 26%, the lowest of all public institutions covered in the 2023 'Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy' national survey.[16] As covered in detail in a previous Robert Menzies Institute policy paper, the systemic issues with Australia's major parties are one of the greatest threats to Australian democracy, as the parties are the vehicles through which the ordinary voter can most readily determine how they are governed.[17]

If people are turning away from the major political parties and the 'political class' defined by them more broadly, Australia does at least have a safety valve in our system of preferential voting for the House of Representatives and proportional representation for Senate elections. Both these voting systems allow people to deliver 'protest votes' and push for significant changes to the system, without feeling that their votes are made effectively worthless by doing so. In contrast to the effective disenfranchisement of the disaffected seen in the first past the post systems of the United Kingdom and the United States, Australia has historically been quite good at accommodating disaffection. While both the current Australian and UK governments were elected in parliamentary landslides despite historically low primary votes, Australia's has more inherent legitimacy because of the preference system. Although some complain that compulsory preferencing may exacerbate disillusionment, since it forces people to give their tacit endorsement to one of the major parties, despite how objectionable they may find both to be.

Since federation, disaffection from the Australian political system has only ever come close to a boiling point once, during the Great Depression, when the Nationalist Party was challenged by mass non-party movements such as the All for Australia League, and the Labor Party expelled Jack Lang's NSW Division for its extremism. The reconstruction of the political parties on the centre-right into the United Australia Party, Lang's acceptance of his dismissal as premier by the NSW Governor, and Labor's readmission of the NSW Division, stabilised political life.

Australia has also greatly benefited from both the real and perceived independence of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). According to the same Trust and Satisfaction survey, the AEC maintains a 62% approval rating which, while not overwhelming, is notably higher than that of the courts and the legal system. This suggests that people view the AEC as a fairer adjudicator than its judicial counterparts, and are therefore less likely to go down the destructive path of excessively challenging electoral results.

The Sickness/Health of Democracy

Indices of global democratic health abound, although what they purport to measure varies and their interpretation is therefore uncertain. Whether the number of people enjoying democracy is on the wane globally is a judgement that can come down to subjective interpretations of highly-populated democratic countries such as India.[18] However, surveys of trust and satisfaction in democracy can still reveal people's perceptions about the health of democracy. In a system based on 'spirit' and buy-in, such perceptions are a key element of political reality.

The 2023 survey referred to above offers both positive and negative implications for the state of Australia's democratic culture. On the positive side, 57% of people expressed their satisfaction with the working of Australian democracy, which was 6 points higher than the Pew Research Centre's 19-country average. Even among those who indicated their dissatisfaction, 77% still believed it is worth trying to fix the problems they perceived, suggesting that few were completely disillusioned about the potential of a democratic system to produce satisfactory outcomes, though critical of its short-term failure to do so.

Areas for concern include low levels of participation in civil society and social organisations. Just 7% of people in Australia directly engage with a political party – one of the essential drivers of the democratic system. Individuals with low participation rates are significantly more likely to be dissatisfied with how democracy works.

This suggests a level of cultural erosion for which we need to find solutions. But it is important to recognise that it is always more difficult to build (or rebuild) something than it is to conserve something that exists. Culture comes from the same root word as agriculture, and it likewise needs to be cultivated if it is to survive and thrive. Hence such statistics serve as a warning against complacency and for the need to jealously maintain what is left Australia's democratic culture, as much as they are a spur to reform and regrowth.

This complacency has been most self-evident in Australia's approach to social cohesion, which until recently was treated as almost an assumed fact, rather than as something that has to be tirelessly worked at, as it was during the initial disruptive wave of post-war migration. No survey is needed to highlight the destructive rise in antisemitism and ethno-religious tensions we have recently experienced, as international conflicts call into question the time-honoured Australian commitment to leave ancient hatreds in the old world. This fraying of social cohesion is also expressed in a rise in anti-immigration sentiment, which historically has been more prone to expression whenever economic conditions take a turn for the worse. As our pluralist society comes under ever greater strain, politicians are ever-more tempted to try to protect it through anti-democratic means.

These include restrictions on freedom of speech and the direct imposition of secular values in a manner that contradicts a commitment to religious freedom.

Australia's ballooning generational divide in politics seems to owe much of its force to recent government policy failures, which in turn seem to have weakened the younger generation's faith in democracy to produce satisfactory outcomes. The percentage of people aged 25 to 43 who think that Australia is a land of economic opportunity fell from 80% to 51% in the 10 years between 2013 and 2023, even though the former date was just a few short years after the Global Financial Crisis. [19] The ability to buy a home and raise a family, the very things that Menzies maintained were the bedrock of a healthy society, are now out of reach for a huge swathe of young Australians.

Inflation reflected in higher mortgage rates, rents and income tax bracket creep have put severe financial pressures on many families. Real wages of millennial households have fallen 9.4% between 2022 and 2024. In the past 24 years, the average price of a home has grown 363%, well above incomes at only 152%.[20] Decline in the birthrate from an historic high of 3.55 in 1961 to 1.5 in 2023 might possibly reflect a pervasive sense of insecurity and pessimism about the future, even when shifts in societal expectations are factored in. [21]

Having defined the core resilience of democracy as residing in its values and culture, Menzies was inclined to judge its wellbeing according to the Australian public's willingness to live out those values. To the extent that the values of a nation reflect a democratic spirit that sees participation in government as an honourable public service, and a public morality that demands integrity of its governors and respect for fellow citizens as the road to a harmonious and free society, the behaviour and purposes of government are likely to reflect these values.

It is often said that in a democracy, people get the government they deserve. If this holds true, Australian voters receive the democratic governance of their own choosing, and its defects therefore reflect defects in what voters seek from their elected representatives.

Political parties unable to recruit the participation of the most capable and democratically minded, captured by selfish activists, and pursuing policies that centralise power and thereby encourage corruption, inevitably suggest the erosion of a democratic spirit. Governments formed by parties that cannot draw on such democratic values are unlikely to govern wisely, and policy directions that erode security and prosperity will ultimately undermine trust and confidence in democracy. Regrettably, a significant proportion of young people give expression in surveys to that erosion of trust.

An issue Menzies identified which remains one of significant contemporary relevance is the ability of the Australian Parliament (let alone State Parliaments) to attract talented individuals willing to bear the heavy burden of public criticism – a burden which grows significantly if they take on the task of persuading voters to abandon their short-term thinking or knee-jerk prejudices. For Menzies, such a burden was something of a moral vocation, which he took up partly to atone for any perceived failure in his familial decision to eschew wartime service. But such a sense of sacrifice and public duty remains exceptional, particularly when the blaze of the public spotlight is contrasted with the financial reward available in both the private sphere and higher-level public service appointments. That said, merely increasing the remuneration available to elected representatives alone is an inadequate solution, as a harmonious democracy demands even voters look beyond their immediate self-interest. Menzies instead suggested that parliamentarians needed to be treated with the level of dignity and respect the position demanded, and that this in turn would help to attract those people worthy of such dignity and respect to the office.

In contrast to modern concerns over whether parliament is sufficiently representative of the diversity of modern Australian society, Menzies maintained that as of the 1940s it was a 'perfect cross-section' of Australia as it then was.[22] But while this may have made it sufficiently equipped for jury-duty, it was not an adequate basis for governance. Since 'the world's progress depends in the first instance not on the average man, but on what Confucius called the "superior man"', parliament needs to attract leaders of merit, consciously shaping the popular will towards higher ideals and long-range views, rather than merely reflecting its base instincts.

One can only imagine what Menzies would have thought of the current practice of designing policy according to focus groups, or responding to an electoral hiding by going on a 'listening' tour. He instead followed Edmund Burke in rejecting any notion of parliamentary representation as delegation, in favour of a model of trusteeship, in which MPs brought their own 'mature judgement' to issues and were willing to invest time and energy in persuading their electorates to agree with their opinion.

Such an act of meticulous and consistent persuasion requires not only talented and dedicated politicians, but also an engaged electorate and a sufficiently broad 'public square' in which ideas can be debated. Neither of these conditions are as readily available in 2025 as they were 80 years ago when Menzies was already lamenting their deficiencies. But if a nation is an 'imagined community', Australia at least has the advantage of remaining small enough for that community to have a considerable amount of tangibility. Our media landscape may be fragmenting, our political partisans retreating into echo-chambers, and generational divides becoming ever wider, but the smallness of the polity means that the task of stitching things back together again is at least more achievable than it would be otherwise.

In some respects, it should be easier to have a mature political discussion in 2025, for one of Menzies's greatest legacies is the expansion of tertiary education to become a ubiquitous part of Australian national life. Whether higher education increases political rationality rather than simply the ability to manipulate ideas is debateable. But a better educated electorate should theoretically be better placed to discuss complex ideas, and the current rise of long form media like podcasts and online journals suggests that there is at least some appetite for a return to the depth of political debate that once saw speeches of several thousand words reported verbatim in Australian newspapers.

Political participation in the form of active membership of political parties has declined in line with a decline in civil society more broadly. But a rise in political activism and online campaigns shows that the underlying desire for civic engagement and to reshape society for the better is just as prevalent as it has ever been. Its contemporary manifestation is just being directed down less constructive and more divisive channels. The focus has moved away from what is happening in our local communities increasingly towards what is happening globally. And this has led to a rise in frustration and disillusionment with politics, because not only are we exposed to more problems than we were previously, but their distance and scale means that we are less likely to be able to impact them in any meaningful way.

National Sovereignty vs Global Integration

If democracy as 'rule by the people' is to have any practical effect, then you must place at least some boundaries on who the people are. The political community must have capacity and logistical meaning. In ancient Athens, democracy was not only confined to a single city-state, but even within that polity, women and slaves were excluded.

In modern times, the shift towards a representative model of democracy has allowed the system to accommodate far larger societies and grant political rights more universally within them. But if the criticisms of India's alleged democratic deficiencies prove anything, it is that increasing strains and constraints are imposed on the system as it balloons in size.

The model of individual nation states that first emerged in Europe from the Treaty of Westphalia is a product of historical contingencies, but it has proved remarkably enduring because of its inherent utility. If the people are sovereign, then that sovereignty is best exercised within a community where the elector's vote bears some weight. The smaller the electorate, the more powerful a voter's say in how they are governed, whereas a global franchise of 7 billion people would in effect be no franchise at all.

However, this does not mean that a vote in a polity comprised of a small village of a couple of hundred people would necessarily be more impactful than in a national election of 27 million. Economies of scale mean that the latter government to which the elector is giving a mandate can accomplish far more than the former. The nation state might be seen as a compromise between extremes, with different sized polities representing different levels of compromise, and federal systems attempting to further harmonise the pros and cons of each.

It is this desire to enlarge cooperative capability and economic production that has given rise to supranational groupings like the European Union and the United Nations, which have tended to grow steadily in size and scope since their inception. Menzies observed that in any federal system, centripetal and centrifugal forces were always competing with each other to either concentrate power in the centre or disperse it more broadly, but in his experience the centripetal centralisation tended to win out.[23] Supranational groupings have exhibited a tendency to increase the control they exert over their members, in a manner that threatens to thwart the local democratic will and which has given rise to an inevitable populist reaction against globalisation.

The United Nations is not a democracy because its members are states, not individuals. The European Union, despite its establishment of a parliament and the creation of European 'citizenship', has no government elected and accountable to the voters of Europe. In Europe accountable governments exist only within the nation states whose policy authority is now diminished, and which are only accountable for the policies they control. The tendency to centralisation of power in the European bureaucracy and courts has occurred without effective democratic authorisation, with national electorates increasingly showing disillusion.

There is little doubt that whatever the benefits of supranationalism and globalisation, and in economic and social terms they have been many, the transfer of policy beyond democratic nation states has reduced the scope of policies subject to the processes of democratic control and accountability within nation states, while being unable to construct international or supranational institutions with democratic accountability.

Menzies was conscious of the risks to Australian sovereignty from globalisation, especially as the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Nations extended their claims to influence the domestic policies of member states. He drew a clear distinction between what we would now call globalisation, in which authority over decisions was exercised beyond the control of a nation state, and internationalism, in which sovereign nation states were the driving partners. It was in pursuit of internationalism that he oversaw a record high immigration program, and worked tirelessly to grow Australia's export markets, including with controversial trading partners like former wartime adversary Japan and a Chinese Communist Government to which Australia had yet to give official diplomatic recognition.[24]

But he realised that there were always trade-offs involved, and worked to reassure the electorate that their jobs and wages would not be negatively impacted, but rather would benefit as international co-operation between sovereign nations extended.

In his Forgotten People broadcast on Roosevelt's 'Freedom from Fear', Menzies considered the argument that nation states may need to cede a certain portion of their sovereignty in order to secure such a freedom, noting that 'it is only in a state of anarchy that men claim absolute sovereignty for themselves'.[25] But his commitment to democracy led him to declare that 'the individual is basic to any world order that is worthwhile', hence that any international system that sacrificed national autonomy and freedom in the name of utility and security could not be democratic and was in the long run bound to fail. Once back in office in a post-war setting, Menzies would be a fierce defender of Australia's right to develop policy settings based on the will of her own people, rather than bowing to the expectations of foreign governments and diplomats.

In contrast, there has been a certain hubris in the way in which 21st century governments have tried to shut down debates surrounding immigration and trade, rather than honestly making the case for their benefits. At a time when the demonstrable economic gains from immigration observed during the Menzies era are no longer self-evident, it is politically negligent for proponents to fail to argue their case or attempt mitigate the trade-offs.

The argument has been made that climate change represents an unprecedented challenge to human existence and therefore justifies overriding a regular respect for national sovereignty in order to combat it. Yet while the scientific basis for a human impact on climate exists, the basis for claims of an impending apocalypse does not, and the purported 'threat' is unpersuasive when compared to the clear precedents of existential threats posed by both World War II and the Cold War. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that alarmism over global warming is motivated more by the pursuit of power by selfish interests, national and international, rather than global conditions. If the Cold War taught us anything, it is that even the might of a superpower seeking to extend its international control cannot easily overcome the desire for sovereign peoples to achieve self-determination. Hence any attempt to combat climate change through coercion rather than persuasion is bound to backfire.

Attacks on Democracies

The fact that the Forgotten People broadcasts were delivered at the height of World War II highlights the fact that democracies have always had to guard themselves against external threats. Ever since the military victory of Macedonian King Philip II brought an end to Athenian democracy in the 4th century BC, democracies have had to stand guard lest they meet the same fate.

History suggests that democracies seldom go to war with one another,[26] in part because large scale war tends to benefit the few and hurt many, hence the majoritarian preference often opposes it. Further, the rise of democracies has generally correlated with the rise of capitalism and trade liberalisation, demonstrating that nations can acquire wealth, goods and power through effective peaceful means. Considering such correlation, the revival of tariff protectionism may heighten the prospect that nations will feel the need to fight to access markets through the use of force, which was partly the justification Japan used for its entry into World War II.

While democracies seldom go to war with one another, they have frequently clashed with non-democratic regimes, and this should be a cause for concern amidst a trend of 'democratic backsliding'. The Economist Intelligence Unit's 'democracy index' recently concluded that 39.2% of the world's population now live under authoritarian governments.[27] In any conflict between such a regime and a democratic power, the democracy tends to start at a disadvantage, for as Menzies explained:

> '[Democracy] concerns itself first and foremost with the domestic well-being of its people. It occupies itself with political and social and industrial reform. The very reason why it begins war "behind scratch" is that it has preferred preparations and expenditure for peace to the provision of great armaments. In the grim struggle between guns and butter, it prefers butter.'[28]

Getting democracies to invest in their defence is thus a significant political problem, as was the case in the 1930s. Despite the clear military build-up of the Axis powers, the democratic West somewhat understandably prioritised alleviating the Great Depression over matching Germany and Japan in the arms race. Today, amidst cost of living and housing crises, we face a similar dilemma. The electorate is likely to demand relief for its immediate and pressing problems over security measures which aim at preventing attacks in an unknowable future (however dire that may be). Such circumstances highlight the role of democratic leadership in convincing people to take 'long range views', and also the centrality of economic well-being to the overall health and survival of a democracy.

In 2025, much as in the Cold War, attacks on democracies are not limited to open warfare. Through the 1940s and 1950s, the Soviet Union engaged in a systematic effort to infiltrate the Australian diplomatic service and other key decision-making bodies. This resulted in the Chifley Government founding ASIO, and the Menzies Government holding a Royal Commission on Espionage in the wake of the shocking Petrov defections. These days, malicious actors are once again likely to stem from Russia, but also China and Iran. They are empowered with new digital tools to not just collect sensitive information, but also to attempt to manipulate Australia's democratic processes.

But while technology has raised the stakes of the game, the attempt itself is not new, with World War II notable for its propaganda radio stations and leaflet dropping designed to spread 'disinformation' and undermine morale. This was information warfare in which Australia actively participated, with Menzies setting up the multilingual 'Australia Calling' service to broadcast across the Pacific – an effort which outlasted the war and has since evolved into the modern 'Radio Australia'.[29] This highlights the fact that while there is a need to be vigilant, and bring to light any coordinated campaign for which concrete evidence can be found, we should not over-react. Any policy which involves restricting the ability to create or share information within a democracy can easily prove more damaging than the illness it purports to cure – insofar as that the free exchange of ideas is essential to democratic life. Curtailing that integral exchange would grant malicious actors a 'free-hit' against our liberal democracy that would be difficult for them to achieve through their own efforts.

The most basic element of Australia's election process – the ballots themselves – are thankfully immune to technological attacks. Unlike some other Western democracies, Australia has maintained the time-honoured tradition of voting with pencil and paper. Recent debates over whether a tick counting as a yes vote in a referendum but a cross not reciprocally counting as a no vote could skew the result, are reassuring in their comparative triviality highlighting the underlying strengths of our electoral processes.[30]

A less direct but still impactful 'attack' on our democratic culture has been the rise of digital algorithms, which tend to lead people into echo chambers that expose them only to content that favours their pre-existing biases. In some ways these are similar to the extreme partisan newspapers from the Menzies era that survive on the National Library's *Trove* digitisation archive (such as the Communist Party's *Tribune*), but the growing pursuit of information online means that the impacts of such algorithms are far more pervasive.

The impact of algorithms, however, is as much a cultural problem as it is a technological one. Much as Menzies argued that democracies reflect the flaws in the motivations of the voting public, so do algorithms reflect a distaste for alternative views that trained the algorithm in the first place. A pressing need becomes the revitalisation of civil society, ensuring that people are meeting and conversing in real life where such extreme political 'silos' are more difficult to maintain. Australian democracy also requires an adequate public square in which people can debate directly and openly, rather than relying on selective reporting and opinion pieces presented as news.

Another argument that has been made against tech companies is that they represent concentrations of power that could easily tilt political outcomes towards a desired result. This is an accusation most frequently levelled at Elon Musk, who purchased X (formerly Twitter) and openly campaigned for the election of Donald Trump. However, it is important to note that he did so in response to the platform's previous efforts to directly censor Trump. Hence not only does the issue cut both ways, but its highly public nature makes it easy for people to decide for themselves whether they wish to use a platform that has a particular political leaning, with many opting for the progressive alternative in BlueSky. So there is a marketplace of ideas and informed decisions evolving, even if at times it leads people further into echo chambers.

Australia has faced issues of media concentration for a long time, and a similar argument can be mounted that people are aware of the leanings of a given newspaper and purchase accordingly. Any media business which prioritises propaganda over the interests of its consumers is in the long term likely to suffer significant financial ramifications, and some have even suggested that this is partly behind a recent fall in Hollywood's financial performance. [31] The impartiality of the ABC is far more essential to maintain, given that it is funded by taxpayers and that public funding gives it an immunity from market discipline.

Protection and Censorship of Free Speech

As touched on above, discussions surrounding 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' are a classic example of our propensity towards historical amnesia – where we do not realise that an apparently 'new' phenomenon has been an issue which democracies have faced for centuries. The 1800 US presidential contest between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson saw a massive proliferation of falsehoods, in what is still regarded as one of the most bitter political struggles in the history of the American republic. Menzies himself was subject to a concerted disinformation campaign in the 'Brisbane Line' controversy, in which he was falsely accused of planning to abandon northern Australia in the event of a Japanese invasion. The claim was found to be a falsehood by a Royal Commission appointed by the Curtin Labor Government, although conveniently its findings were not released until after Labor had won the 1943 election. [32]

Despite enduring this ordeal, Menzies remained a fierce proponent of freedom of speech, because he thought that it was the essential part of the process through which 'truth is to emerge and in the long run be triumphant'. [33] In support of this he quoted from John Stuart Mill's classic work *On Liberty*:

> ‘Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action: and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right.’

Menzies accepted that the voting public may at times all too easily buy into falsehoods that could be propagated under a system of free expression. But he nevertheless argued that the only solution to the despotic tendencies of majoritarianism was the ability of individuals to reject the established position and persuade others why they should do likewise. This is the main vehicle through which progress can be achieved, since original or progressive thinkers express what initially is an inherently minority opinion. Nor should we assume that ‘progress’ travels in one direction; that there is a teleology to the development of human societies such that one can speak of being on the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ side of history. The ability to express minority opinions against a popular change, that one perceives to have damaging long-term effects, is an equally essential aspect of democratic discourse.

Menzies recognised that there is a ‘primitive’, almost tribal instinct in human beings to shut down those they disagree with, such that without a cultural commitment to freedom of expression progress could cease. Even in the area of more objective scientific ‘facts’, such a tendency towards majoritarian censorship cannot be discounted. Much that was once denounced and censored as disinformation during the covid pandemic has since come to be recognised as having at least an element of truth, such as there being little scientific justification for lock-downs.[34] Far from eliminating conspiracy theories, the attempt to police such discussion has arguably only served to exacerbate their prevalence and undermine the public’s faith in experts. When facts are known to have a ‘half-life’ and regularly get superseded, any regulatory framework to try to uphold them is likely to prove cumbersome at best and outright dystopian at worst. [35]

Efforts to censor speakers in the name of social cohesion, such as revoking visas, deplatforming from venues, or complaining to government tribunals, are likewise likely to inflame rather than alleviate division. The frustration that one is not allowed to be heard is a potential road towards political violence, while sober debate allows one to be refuted, and in an ideal world even have an opposing viewpoint changed. A ‘censored’ view is immediately given the legitimacy associated with martyrdom, whereas fallacious arguments can be readily picked apart when they are aired in public view.

While resisting attacks on freedom of speech, Menzies was equally opposed to upholding the freedom as a constitutionally enshrined human right – something that was proposed by the Curtin Government in the 1940s, ironically at the very moment it stood accused of wielding wartime censorship as a weapon against its critics.

This was because Menzies felt that once any cultural commitment to free speech had eroded such that the parliament was attempting to pass laws directly abridging that right, the battle had already been lost. This was of course before the High Court 'discovered' an implied right to freedom of political communication in the Australian Constitution.

Menzies also observed that even in places like the United States which had constitutionally enshrined free expression, this had not been held to be incompatible with laws on libel, defamation, sedition and even blasphemy. Being a lawyer rather than a libertarian, he had no problem with certain existing limitations on freedom of speech, and when it came to the media, he was keen to emphasise that as important as a free press was to a democracy, rights come with corresponding responsibilities.

The current debate over freedom of speech should likewise not be fought in absolutist terms. In common law democracies, certain limitations on speech have existed for centuries, and they have arguably proven their worth over that time - such as how defamation cases allow for a process of public exoneration. However, any suggestion that we should go beyond these time-honoured limitations and impose new restrictions carries with it a considerable burden of proof, recognising that inciting direct violence has long been illegal.

The example provided by the Menzies Government's own attempt to ban the Communist Party of Australia in peacetime (it had been banned in wartime) should prove case in point. A peacetime ban was something that Menzies originally opposed – even in the face of Country Party and considerable backbench support. But he later reversed his position on such a ban because of demonstrated attempts at subversion by the Communist Party, and a widespread concern that Soviet expansionism could lead to the outbreak of World War III, in which the Communist Party might act as a traitorous 'fifth column'.

While often viewed as an attack on free expression, the attempted ban was more akin to the proscribing of terrorist groups, since it did not focus on the advocacy of ideas, but rather on the organisation's deliberate subversion of democratic government. Nevertheless, like so many 'emergency'-based restrictions on freedom (in this case, of association), the emergency proved to be not so dire as first imagined, and had the legislation not been overturned by the High Court and subsequently defeated at a referendum, the liberal element of Australia's liberal democracy may have been permanently diminished.

Calls for new 'hate speech' or disinformation laws appear to be based on 'emergencies' with significantly less reality or at least magnitude than the likelihood of a new global conflict breaking out in the early 1950s.

The inherent subjectivity of such laws not only risks empowering judges to impose their own world view through their privileged positions – potentially precipitating a demand for American-style politicised judicial appointments, but they also empower activists to bring forward frivolous claims, knowing full well that the process of exonerating oneself can itself serve as sufficient punishment to act as a deterrent to free expression.

The Future of Democratic Governance and Policy Recommendations

In concluding his extensive reflections on democracy, Menzies suggested that if the democratic system was to thrive after the war it must do two things: 'recapture the vision of the good of man as the purpose of government' and 'restore the authority and prestige of Parliament as the supreme organic expression of self-government.' [36] He elaborated that the first did not mean the state providing all that a person needs, but rather empowering them such that they were able to provide for themselves and for their communities:

> 'You cannot have a strong State made up of weak men, or a generous State in which nobody has worked and saved so that there is something to give. The best and strongest community is not that in which everybody looks to his neighbour hoping for something from him, but that in which everyone looks to his neighbour, willing and able to do something for him.'

Similarly, we might conclude that much of what ails modern Australian democracy consists of the state being overburdened, because with each passing year we have expected the state to do more and more for us, while we do less and less for it. The taxbase is shrinking and even contentiously high immigration is struggling to prop it up, social services like the NDIS are producing unsustainable budget blowouts, the younger generation has been actively discouraged from making a contribution to society, civil society has eroded such that there are now less alternatives to government provision, sectional interests are able to manipulate the political process to achieve subsidies and regulatory frameworks in their favour, and we have allowed our political discourse to become so divisive and detached from reality that politicians have run away from having frank conversations with the community.

Restoring the dignity of parliament requires making it a place where we can once again have honest debates about what government can, should and must do, because it cannot do everything. This is not to suggest that there is not a positive role for the state to play, for there could be no nobler goal than 'the good of man'. But the good of humanity is not their own narrow self-interest or excessive comfort, it is enabling them to strive, to contribute, to raise a family, and to look after one another. Democracy is at its best when leaders and voters keep such ideals in mind.

The gritty detail of policy will always form the bulk of the debate, but it must not be allowed to get in the way of the big picture of what we are actually trying to achieve – and more importantly are achieving - through the sum total of those policies.

While Australian democracy continues to demonstrate strong institutional foundations, we should be careful not to discard what works well in pursuit of an unattainable ideal. Given Menzies's warning of the 'error of viewing democracy in purely mechanical terms' rather than as a 'spirit', this policy paper's recommendations aim at revitalising that spirit by sparking a renewal of Australia's democratic and civic culture. They include:

1.Invest in Civics Education and Australian History
Education in civics and Australian history should be expanded for both students and recent migrants. The goal is not only to teach the mechanics of our democratic system, but also to foster an understanding of its evolution, the sacrifices that secured our freedoms, and the responsibilities of citizens – both as voters and contributors to society.

This education should extend beyond classrooms and migrant programs. A thriving democratic culture requires ongoing cultivation across society. Therefore, investment is needed in institutions that explore Australia's democratic heritage through accessible mediums such as books, documentaries, podcasts, museum exhibits, and more.

2.Expand the Federal Parliament
To ensure electorates reflect genuine communities of interest and allow MPs to maintain contact with constituents, the size of the Federal Parliament should be increased. This would enable representatives to better engage with local concerns, explain their policy positions, and focus more on strategic, long-term issues.

Due to the Nexus Clause in the Constitution, this expansion would require a proportional increase in the Senate and a reduction in Senate quotas. While this may lead to greater minor party representation and more complex legislative negotiations, it would also amplify minority voices and reduce the influence of individual crossbenchers leading to more balanced policy outcomes.

3.Pursue Policy Settings that Foster Family Formation
The Menzies era's record birthrate reflected a healthy democratic culture in which a large proportion of people had a clear 'stake' in society, felt confident in laying down roots and planning for a future that stretched beyond their own lifetimes. The government directly invested in this outcome by introducing child endowment, but it was ultimately a combination of numerous factors including housing affordability, steady employment and low inflation (mitigating the cost of living, ensuring savings kept their value and even allowing for single-income households).

While achieving such positive economic outcomes is the purpose of all good government, governments need to be more conscious of the numerous and long-term benefits of family formation, particularly at a time when the immediate self-interest of an ageing voting public may lay elsewhere.

Studies have shown that previous Australian schemes like the baby bonus have had a positive impact on birthrates,[37] although the long-term success of such policies is open to debate. As an alternative to further investment in childcare subsidy schemes - which only benefit those desiring an immediate return to the work force – targeted tax reductions or payments facilitate choice and therefore reach the widest possible range of potential parents.[38] While no single policy change can be expected to increase the birthrate in isolation, a coordinated approach to achieving this outcome would also benefit social cohesion in easing our exclusive dependence on immigration – as opposed to the balanced approach through which Menzies sustainably grew our population and economy.

4. Audit Government Programs to Prevent Dependency Cultures
Government programs should be regularly audited to ensure they empower individuals rather than entrench dependency. The aim is not to reduce the safety net, especially during cost of living and housing crises, but to reinforce the principle that assistance should lead to independence for those without disabilities or chronic conditions. Where possible, welfare services should be delivered locally, tailored to community need, and designed to reinvigorate civil society.

5.Reintroduce National Service with a Community Focus
A modern national service program could enhance both military preparedness and civic awareness. By bringing young Australians together across political and social divides, it could foster resilience, communication skills, and a sense of shared purpose.

Rather than focusing on combat readiness, the program would emphasise adaptability to military discipline and contribute manpower to civilian community projects. Inspired by early 20th century local training schemes, rather than the selective conscription of the 1960s and 70s, this initiative would aim to rekindle the civic spirit that characterised the Menzies era.

Dialogue Participant Reflections

1. David Kemp
The resilience of democracy depends on many things: democratic habits, the integrity of its leadership and institutions, a supportive culture, reinforcing policies and public-spirited leadership. A long-established democracy has the advantage of habitual practice, established expectations, and a history of public policies that on balance have been supportive.

All these are helpful when resilience is demanded. But the survival of any democracy depends ultimately on current political circumstances and practice. Bearing primary responsibility for the management of these is its party system: the performance of its major parties and its capacity to grow new parties when major parties fail. Political parties are the principal dynamic element of a functioning representative democracy, and on them lies the major responsibility for its health and future. Let me explain.

Democracy provides no guarantee of good government, but good government is not possible without democracy. These seem to be the conclusions of experience and reasoned thought. A third proposition can be offered also based on experience and analysis: good government strengthens democracy; bad government weakens it. To enjoy democracy and good government together is to create a virtuous feedback cycle, but the efforts to set such a virtuous cycle in motion can be complex and easily disrupted. Given that poor or bad government undermines democracy the task of ensuring the stability and good functioning of democracy over time can therefore be said to be intimately connected to the problem of achieving good government.

The feedback loop from good government to democracy is not difficult to understand, on any reasonable definition of good government. To take the best model, if good government expresses in its policies the equal human dignity of all people, and empowers individual people to control their own lives in ways that satisfy them, provides justice and creates a secure environment, domestic and foreign, it will not only produce social harmony, but it will reinforce the cultural and social basis of mutual respect on which a well-functioning democratic system can be based. Bad government tends to favour the interest of the powerful at the expense of the many, is corrupt, discriminates and divides, and poorly represents the values and desires of the people. But experience tells us that good government is not easy to produce, even in a democracy, and the reason for this lies in the nature of modern representative government itself, and in the dynamics of its politics.

Every nation that has accepted the idea of democracy has realised it through institutions that have been similar but not identical. The absence of any guarantee that democratic institutions would produce good government has been common to all. Two key concepts that largely explain why no such guarantee can exist are the distribution of power and self-interest. The rules that define democratic institutions all allocate a vital power to the people: the power to choose amongst freely competing candidates who may form a legislature. In parliamentary systems this is also the choice of those who will form the executive. In presidential systems (such as the United States), the executive may be chosen separately from popular voting. Choice of who will govern is more powerful than many believe. Nevertheless, the limitations on the power of the popular vote before and after the election are clear.

By definition the powerful in relation to policy are those who decide, and beyond the choices made through electoral processes in which all participate equally, power is always unequally distributed. The inequality may be acceptable, or it may effectively destroy the impact of the voters' choice entirely. Beforehand, the candidates for office may or may not be chosen democratically. Post election those who constitute the executive or the judiciary may or may not be chosen democratically. Those who can determine the ultimate design, choice and even implementation of policy, may be inside or outside the formal democratic institutions. Power and influence are widely distributed through the institutions in the society - the institutions of government, churches, business enterprises, trade unions, NGOs and others. The bases of power can be constitutional, money, status, memberships, industry, knowledge, credentials.

Moreover, the actual distribution of power changes over time as technology changes, new resources and opportunities emerge or are discovered, as markets produce economic success and failure, and circumstances change. Though some have prolonged opportunities to exercise power – classes, industrial organisations and of course, government institutions themselves - power is a great shapeshifter. Whatever the distribution at any particular time, however, unequal power is an inescapable fact of life.

Another thing we can also be sure of is the reality that power is always directed by self-interest, often selfish, sometimes public spirited or altruistic, sometimes guided by selfish values, sometimes by benevolent intentions.

As noted above, each democratic political system structures the constitutional basis of power somewhat differently, and each will therefore produce somewhat different policy outcomes, even if starting intentions are similar, because different institutions offer different incentives, and the incentives to behave in some ways rather than others vary further with the private and public allocations of power that result from political processes. The dynamic force driving these processes in all democracies, indeed in all countries, is the interest of all participants in seeking outcomes that will reduce the significant uncertainties each may face. All democratic institutions contain very strong incentives for candidates and elected officials to gratify or favour those whose votes they seek but also contain incentives for politicians to give in not only to their own personal (albeit self-interested) desires for office, but also meet the self-interested and often selfish desires of those whose support they seek.

Can such a system naturally produce good government? To the extent that democracy tends to spread power and influence widely, the incentive to meet the needs of wide sections of the population is certainly greater than in dictatorships or autocracies, where great power is always concentrated and, in the absence of widespread happiness and democratic authority, corruption, coercion and fear inevitably present themselves as available instruments for achieving compliance.

Democratic elections can produce peaceful adaptation in policy that autocracies find almost impossible. Yet there is no reason to think that the 'pluralist' balancing of selfish desires that comes naturally to the democratic politician will produce national security or opportunities for all, let alone the happiness that all seek. Something more is needed.

What is needed is a civic culture that the shared interests of all are more important than the selfish interests of the powerful, and that the task of the member of parliament is to apply a philosophy, or at least an understanding, of how these shared interests can best be realised, and how the individual's interest in controlling his or her own life can be optimised. Robert Menzies called such an understanding 'liberalism' and urged that the selfish desire to treat politics simply as a remunerative job to deliver benefits to the powerful be replaced by a spirit of public service among those who offer themselves for elected office.

The fact that Australia, born during the Enlightenment, has been rich in public spiritedness among its leaders and possesses a population aspiring to opportunities to build a better life according to their own plans, has encouraged the development of a political culture where the ingredients of good government can come together through democratic institutions. Powerful expressions of selfishness have always been present, but governments that understand and have an intellectual model of a broader public interest have traditionally had the power to resist and counter otherwise unbridled selfish interests.

A particular culture of public service and human understanding are key to locking into place the link between democracy and good government. If there is a flaw (one hopes not a fatal flaw) in Australia's democracy, it lies within the political parties that dominate the selection of candidates and hence members of parliament.

Australia's major parties are generally treated as if they are the same kind of entities. In some respects, of course, they are similar: both the Liberal and Labor Parties are subject to the same fundamental forces of power and self-interest, and of course dwell in the same country and face the same domestic and international circumstances. Nevertheless, convergent political evolution has produced superficially similar but, in reality, very different creatures.

In key respects, the Liberal Party of Australia is fragile, in the same sense that one might say human beings are fragile in an uncertain world. Its fragility arises from the fact that it relies on individual members acting voluntarily, and while it has many non-authoritative policy proposing forums, purpose and direction is impossible to achieve without effective leadership. Such a party is subject to the erosion of purpose by the natural operation of the self-interests of its members, parliamentary and non-parliamentary, and the never-ceasing pressures on its leaders and members by organised interests in the wider society.

The party's now long history of governmental experience contributes to its resilience, but the resolution of its debates over direction and the natural tendency of all parties to factionalism can only be addressed by a parliamentary leadership willing to establish both purpose and direction.

The Labor Party may look the same in many respects, with both a parliamentary party and organisations in each state and nationally, but it is a different species of party, initiated historically, and still controlled by, powerful vested interests drawn from the trade union movement. Federal/state tensions exist in both parties, but the union base gives longevity to Labor's factions, and this reduces the party's fragility (and flexibility) through focussing internal tensions between parliamentary and organisational wings, even with strong leaders. The general rule that there is no reason to expect that a powerful interest will act in the wider public interest applies, and less firmly established democracies have given way under union-based parties to 'Peronist' policies that are the very definition of bad government, undermining democracy in the process.

If this analysis is sound, the conclusion must be that while Australia has a marked capacity to produce new (minor) parties if the major parties stumble, the 'majors' have proved far from secure in their internal democratic processes, and weak in their capacity to hold onto a philosophy of the public interest. They are very vulnerable to the disease of self-centred selfishness because of the incentives they offer (power and money) to activists who flock to them as their golden road to the exercise of authority and its power to efficiently secure obedience.

Robert Menzies saw this clearly and expressed his concerns and his proposed solution in his Forgotten People radio talks of 1942. But it was, perhaps in the Great Depression in 1931 that he stated most powerfully the requirement that political parties must fulfill if good government is to be democracy's outcome:

'I believe that a large majority of the public today is perfectly ready to give its adherence to a party which will display political principle and political courage.

We have suffered far too much from people who have no political convictions beyond a more or less genteel adherence to our side of politics. That kind of adherence is worthless. We must have people who believe things, and who are prepared to go out and struggle to make their beliefs universal.'

Menzies set himself a long-term task to change this, and the modern Liberal Party was the solution he designed. But over time no party is immune to the very forces that threaten to break the link between democratic institutions and the policies of good government designed to benefit all.

2. Greg Melleuish

When we talk about the sickness of democracy we have to be very careful as it is the case that all modes of government have their healthy and their pathological aspects and it is impossible to eradicate completely some of the more undesirable elements of a democratic polity. Looking back at the original democracy, Athens, these 'sicknesses' or more truthfully faults, were identified by Thucydides and Plato, as demagogy, a tendency to be driven by passion rather than reason, leading to poor decision making. The first crime of democracy was the trial and execution of Socrates for supposedly 'corrupting the young', although it would be truer to say that the real reason behind his trial was that his behaviour marked him out as different.

Of course, Athenian democracy was a 'pure' form of democracy with virtually nothing in the form of checks and balances. It was very difficult to thwart the excesses of 'people power'. The Roman Republic was not a democracy but developed instead a complex set of checks and balances that sort to limit the concentration of power. 'Modern' democracies have sought to combine 'people power', in the shape of universal adult suffrage with checks and balances designed to ensure that the people do not abuse their power and introduce 'selfish' legislation.

This certainly was the case in Australia. When universal manhood suffrage came into being in the Australian colonies, following the introduction of responsible government in the 1850s, it was matched by measures, including an Upper House that was either appointed or elected by a restricted franchise and a governor who could disallow legislation, put into place to curb democratic excess. The power of the governor and imperial authorities declined over time, although it is a cause for reflection that the first measure of the Commonwealth government, the Immigration Restriction Act, made use of the dictation test instead of being explicitly racist out of concern that the imperial government would otherwise disallow it.

In the 1850s John West, editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* had been a vociferous critic of democracy because he feared that it would introduce obnoxious legislation, especially in relation to race and restrictive economic policies. He advocated federation as a check and balance to counter democratic excess.

He was not wrong that democracy could lead to the development of selfish and, sometimes, obnoxious, legislation. One of the worst examples was the 1881 anti-Chinese immigration legislation in New South Wales. Even more extraordinary was the fact that some members of the Legislative Council refused to vote against the legislation, even though they found it to be morally repugnant, simply on the basis that it represented the democratic will of the people.

In the Forgotten People Robert Menzies identified these two key factors, selfishness and a tendency to go along with the crowd, as central to what he saw as the sickness of democracy.

Individuals and the politicians who they voted to represent them too often saw democracy as simply an instrument for self-interest and were too prone to submerge their individual independence into what we would now term group think.

Menzies's answer was largely cultural in nature. He saw the need for an increase in civic virtue, or the need for political leaders to behave in a disinterested fashion, which is to say in a way that benefits the whole of the community as opposed to particular interests. One key to producing a set of political leaders was education, particularly liberal education as a means of developing a wide and broad appreciation of the world.

But Menzies was also very aware of the frailties of human nature and its capacity not to live up to high ideals. What he did not really explore was what are best described as the structural problems of Australian democracy, in particular the tendency of Australian governments to accumulate power and a lack of means to restrain that accumulation. True, he rightly opposed the increased statism that an Evatt inspired post-war reconstruction program was leading. I don't think that he fully realised that that the Australian form of the Westminster system inevitably led to a concentration rather than a diffusion of power.

A liberal contemporary of Menzies, Francis Armand Bland identified this growing tendency to bureaucratic centralisation. He was concerned for example with the weakness of local government in Australia, seeing it, correctly, as a site of politics where democratic practices are fostered. This weakness of local government set Australia apart from American democracy.

'Foo' Davies wrote that Australians have a genius for bureaucracy, or perhaps more properly a weakness for seeing bureaucracy rather than democracy as a way of solving problems. They innovated with bureaucratic practices, including the statutory corporation in the early twentieth century. The liberal thinker, Frederic Eggleston, chronicled the failure of these bureaucratic innovations in his *State Socialism in Victoria*.

In his critique of the growing state leviathan, Bland pointed back to World War I's 'War Precautions Act' and how widely it was interpreted. Gordon Greenwood has described Billy Hughes as a 'semi-dictator'. Why were such wide powers needed, especially given that Australia was so far away from the theatres of war and the number of aliens from enemy countries in Australia quite tiny? This was replicated during World War II when the threat was admittedly greater. And, of course, during the recent Covid pandemic.

Australia has a long history of democracy but it also has had periods of authoritarian behaviour.

At the same time, let's also not forget the long reign of Sabbatarianism, WOWSERism and censorship in this country. Australian democracy has long not just tolerated but encouraged illiberal practices.

Democracy, considered both as a political form and in its Australian manifestation, has pathologies that cannot be cured, but of which we need to be aware and able to treat both in terms of culture and in looking at our institutional arrangements.

3. Tim Lynch
Is Australia safer and more prosperous if it prioritises its national sovereignty over its international commitments? This debate has framed Australian foreign policy since federation in 1901. It has a marked ideological valence today: the right bends toward the nation and the left away.

Robert Menzies, like prime ministers before and since, sought to resolve this tension by making internationalism advance national interests. The ANZUS Treaty (1951) made Australia more secure (the national interest end) in a pact where the efficacy of common action with the United States (the integration means) was central.

Middle powers get to defend themselves if they can oblige bigger powers to help. This truism captures the mostly effective accommodation between national and international interests in Australia's geostrategy.

But the balancing act is coming under significant challenge. Partly, this is because the moral claims of both camps have been elevated. Liberals and Nationals (the clue is in the name of the junior partner in the Coalition) have tended toward national interest tests: is honouring the UN Refugee Convention conducive to national security?

Labor and the Greens, alternatively, deify international agreements as markers of their moral superiority. Climate change agreements, for example, enable the projection of globalist values into the Australian domestic energy market. Binding Australians to emissions targets that would have a negligible impact on global temperature burnishes the internationalism of progressive elites.

Moral posturing cuts both ways. Australian Liberals connect mateship with the United States as an important part of the nation's ideological identity. Integration via pacts such as AUKUS advance Australian values – even though the national sovereignty implications of the submarine deal remain complex.

The ALP's embrace of internationalism is similarly a study in ambiguity. Leftwing identity politics, for example, has elevated the sovereignty claims of indigenous Australians. There is a 'First Nationalism' in progressive ideology that is at least as strong as its transnationalism and assorted integrationist impulses.

Part of the problem is that Australia's two key partners (in security and trade, respectively) offer competing examples. The United States has prospered by prioritising its national sovereignty. China has grown not by disavowing nationalism (quite the reverse) but by embracing internationalism. Which one should Australia mimic?

American constitutionalism has had an important role in creating the conditions for the nation's rise. The nationalism made possible by the US Constitution has had a beneficial impact on US power. Contrast that with Europe. The European project prizes integration because it was nearly destroyed by its competing nationalisms.

Even an Australian fetish for the EU reaches a natural geographic limit: into whom or what would so large and isolated a continental nation integrate? The islands of the South Pacific do not offer a path to viable integration. No Australian leader has suggested pooling sovereignty with Fiji or Vanuatu; Nauru is seen as a de facto penal colony, not as a partner in a Pacific Union.

Because left and right increasingly define the national sovereignty question in different ways, the consequences for our democracy are considerable. Does democratic legitimacy reside in national interest tests or in how far Australia is part of a 'global consensus' on issues like Israel/Palestine or climate change?

The dearth of Australian flags on our university campuses. The mandatory training in particular forms of indigenous politics. The deference to multiculturalism. These all suggest a political discourse uncomfortable with national sovereignty and desperate to embrace a replacement transnationalism.

Is this form of cosmopolitanism capable of mobilising state violence to defend the Australian experiment in democracy? Can any nation that decides its sovereignty is malleable (even shameful), when push comes to shove, defend itself from more avaricious states? These questions are central to Australian politics but rarely get a proper airing.

The RMI policy dialogue was an exception.

Several key positions were staked and debated. One speaker argued that China was inescapably central to Australian debates about national sovereignty vs integration. Some of those actors most sceptical of Chinese power have tended to be those pessimistic about the state of Australia democracy. Where does that leave us?

We are seeking to both prosper from and to contain the PRC but lack a values-driven vocabulary to frame the undertaking. We join AUKUS, defend it somewhat half-heartedly, and are then bemused when our political class (think Bob Carr and Daniel Andrews), at least cosmetically, embrace the CCP.

There is a certain Australian self-conception as a culturally and economically cosmopolitan pole – attracting the region's best young minds to our campuses. This is belied by an actual economic diversity which rival's Uganda. Why, asks a second speaker, should we demand our global influence be superior to theirs?

We are not big enough and diverse enough to make our values universal. It follows that we need to integrate when and where we can and to become proponents of a practiced internationalism. The Albanese ministry's climate colonialism – do as we do, and we will save the planet – a position imbibed and recycled by the teals, may not do anything to change the weather. But what is our alternative? Is it not derelict to claim because we matter so little we must do less abroad?

The problem with this progressive realism is its deleterious impact on domestic debates. A third speaker argues persuasively that a 'lanyard class', setting itself up as a sort of quasi-religious saviour of the world, necessarily alienates those who must pay more to heat their homes. The losing US presidential candidate in 2016 called them 'deplorables'.

This disdain, which has a creeping analogue in Australia, does nothing for democratic cohesion and makes civil society harder to maintain. A managerial class, that sees salvation in integration, has inadvertently expanded an Aussie battler class that hues to national sovereignty and nationalism. Both sides claim the other is a threat to democracy.

Somehow, we must find a way to make integration bolster national cohesion. A fourth speaker argues convincingly that Ukraine's quest for security from Russia, and thus safety for its sovereignty, requires integration into both the EU and NATO. A good model, but one our geostrategic situation makes harder to adopt.

We can happily (but not complacently) reflect that Australia lacks a comparable territorial threat – the kind that would make debate over national sovereignty vs integration moot.

4. Chris Berg

One of the books in my collection that I am most fond of is *Press and Speech Freedoms in America: 1916-1995*, a plain looking chronological history of free speech in the United States. I ordered it from an early version of Amazon when I was first becoming interested in censorship and the fight against it.

Classical liberals and conservatives tend to think of rights as eternal fixtures of the universe – they are 'natural' or 'ancient'. I was and am still happy to defend that proposition. But what the chronology emphasised to the younger me was not the fixed nature of these truths but how each generation applies them to the obsessions and prejudices of the day.

The First Amendment is as absolute a statement of principle as has ever been written in legislation: 'Congress shall make no law' abridging free speech and the press. But historically Congress has made many laws that have done so. It was only after the First World War that the crime of sedition came to be seen as a violation of the First Amendment, and only during the 1960s that obscenity laws began to fall.

Principles are eternal. How they are understood to apply to specific policy questions changes. In the debate over the Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (the legal provision that Andrew Bolt was found in 2011 to have violated with his articles on indigeneity, and which the Abbott Government unsuccessfully tried to amend in 2014) the question was whether 'hate speech' should be considered to be 'free speech'. Speech that was hateful was to be carved out from the speech that should be considered free.

Now we are in a moral panic over misinformation, one made more salient because of social media and artificial intelligence. Speech that is misinformation (misinformative speech?) is now argued to be outside the free speech boundaries.

Nobody is required to be a supporter of free speech. It is a political view like any other. But, for the vast majority of us that proclaim that they do support this right at least in principle, how can those exclusions be justified? John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is the ur-text of the liberal defence of free expression. And on his terms, hate speech and misinformation should be clearly considered within the boundaries of free speech.

For hate speech, mere offence – even grievously offensive expressions of hate – does not rise to the material harms that he believes should be the role of the state to prevent. (Although I should note that scholars have in recent decades been trying to extend Mill's concept of harm to include offence. This extension is, to my mind, unworkable.)

Misinformation even more squarely ought to be protected on Millian grounds. In his view, truths should always be subject to scrutiny. Even demonstrably false speech has value as it strengthens the virtues of the truth. And, as Mill would say, we ought not to trust the government that claims to be the arbiter of truths and falsehoods.

There are, of course, other arguments for freedom of speech – Mill's *On Liberty* is not the Bible and he would not have wanted it to be treated as such – but it is striking in these debates how often so many declare their allegiance to lofty principles while at the same time undercutting them. If misinformation ought not be protected under the banner of free speech, then what should be?

Section 18C was brought into Australian law as part of the Racial Hatred Bill in 1995. It was written in an era very different from our own.

The first mainstream web browser, Netscape Navigator, hadn't even been released when the bill was first introduced to parliament a year earlier. Around 2 per cent of Australian households had access to what our leaders in parliament called 'the information superhighway' (on the rare times it was referred to at all). The legislative ambition in 1994 was that the law might provide a weapon against racist street offences. Its most prominent use was against a newspaper columnist.

But now, with our ubiquitous access to the vast global real-time communication stream, the idea that an Australia law could materially prevent any form of speech is laughable. Section 18C is a monument to technology's awesome power to thwart the parliament's best laid plans.

We will, I hope, remember the political campaign to regulate misinformation as an artifact of a very particular moment in time; the twin shocks to global politics that were the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the 2020 global pandemic. Each were so catastrophic to the usual order of business that regulators and policymakers sought to explain for political disagreement in epistemology. The problem was not the usual conflict of political visions but a fundamental break down in the structure of public knowledge, caused and propagated by the internet.

But parliament has a habit of making its short-term political obsessions into permanent fixtures of Australian law. Our eSafety Commissioner was established first to protect children but now appears to think of itself as an all-purpose internet regulator, and is constantly pushing to expand its jurisdiction and authority.

The Albanese Government's attempt in 2024 to pass a misinformation bill would have granted regulatory power over social media platforms to the Australian Communications and Media Authority to make 'standards' over their fact checking processes and rules. Like the eSafety Commissioner, what may have looked initially modest would have inevitably expanded, long after its original intent was forgotten.

It is necessary to argue against new restrictions on speech on their own terms, and to focus on their specifics. That is the pact we make when we enter policy debate. But it really helps to have a historical lens. History clarifies the stakes. History is fortifying.

And the chief lesson I have taken from the history of free speech is not simply that it is a natural right—though it is—but that speech controls are inherently unstable. Censorship is imperialistic: once established, it tends to spread, reaching for ever more of the public sphere. Sooner or later, that expansion provokes a backlash, and the regime of controls collapses.

The pattern repeats across eras and political systems: efforts to control speech inevitably overreach, undermine the credibility of those enforcing them, and ultimately collapse.

5. Lorraine Finlay

There was a moment during the 2025 Robert Menzies Institute Policy Dialogue when it was remarked that we seem to be losing the ability to disagree well. The comment struck a chord with me. In a political climate increasingly shaped by polarisation and mistrust, the ability to engage in principled disagreement without descending into insults or hostility is becoming rare. That's what made this Dialogue both different and timely.

The Dialogue brought together a diverse group of thinkers (including academics, policymakers, commentators and advocates) to examine the historical foundations of Australian democracy, the pressures it currently faces and the prospects for its renewal. The structured but informal format welcomed contributions from all and allowed for a level of candour and nuance that is increasingly rare in public discourse.

The Dialogue's theme, Conditions for a Successful Democracy, was not approached as an abstract exercise. It was grounded in the recognition that democracy, both in Australia and globally, is under pressure. Autocracies now outnumber democracies for the first time in over twenty years, accounting for some 72% of the global population. [39] Liberal democracies have become the least common regime type in the world. The Freedom in the World 2025 report recently found that global freedom had declined in 2025 for the nineteenth consecutive year. [40]

In Australia, the Lowy Institute Poll 2025 found that 22% of Australians aged between 18 – 29 years agreed with the statement that in some circumstances a non-democratic government can be preferable, and 10% agreed that it doesn't matter what kind of government we have**.** [41] If you care about human rights and freedom, then it matters enormously what kind of government you have.

Against this backdrop, the Dialogue provided an opportunity to reflect on the current state of Australia's democracy, and what we can do to strengthen it. It didn't offer easy answers, but it did something more valuable: it modelled the kind of civil discourse that democracy depends on.

This was especially evident in Session 5, which I had the opportunity to contribute to. Titled 'Protection and Censorship of Free Speech', the session explored the role of free expression in democratic life, where the lines between protection and censorship should be drawn, and who should get to make those decisions. These are all questions about which reasonable minds can disagree and about which there is no single, perfect answer. But continuing to search for a more perfect approach and striving to better fulfil our ideals should be a constant aim for any democracy that truly believes its best days lie ahead of it.

Rather than focusing solely on legal boundaries or regulatory frameworks, the discussion in this session turned to something more fundamental: the cultural and civic value of free speech.

Free speech is often defended in abstract terms, but its real power lies in what it enables – open debate, accountability and the contest of ideas. It is the mechanism through which democracies test their assumptions, correct their course and renew their legitimacy. As Robert Menzies stated in the Forgotten People, '... if truth is to emerge and in the long run be triumphant, the process of free debate – the untrammelled clash of opinion – must go on'. [42]

Without the freedom to question, challenge and dissent – democracies stagnate.

But freedom of speech is not just about the right to speak – it is also about how we listen. The session underscored the importance of creating space for disagreement that is respectful, rigorous and grounded in good faith. In an age of social media outrage and ideological echo chambers, this is no small task. Yet it is essential. Democracies do not require consensus, but they do require a shared commitment to engaging across difference.

One of the most valuable aspects of the Dialogue was its refusal to treat disagreement as a problem to be solved. Instead, it was embraced as a democratic strength. Participants disagreed – sometimes sharply – but overwhelmingly did so with civility and curiosity. That, in itself, was a quiet act of democratic renewal.

The broader sessions reinforced this theme. Whether discussing national sovereignty, misinformation or institutional trust, the Dialogue returned again and again to the idea that democracy is not self-sustaining. It requires active stewardship – not just by governments, but by citizens, communities and institutions.

It also requires trust, both in institutions and in each other. That trust is built not through uniformity, but through the kind of engagement that occurred at the Dialogue: honest, respectful and open to challenge.

This emphasis on civic culture – on how we engage with one another, especially when we disagree – was one of the Dialogue's most powerful undercurrents. As several participants noted, democratic decline is not always marked by dramatic events. More often, it is a slow erosion of norms: a loss of trust, a retreat from shared facts and a growing reluctance to engage across ideological lines. In this sense, the health of a democracy is measured not only by its institutions, but by its habits – how we speak to each other, how we listen and how we respond to those that we disagree with.

The Dialogue reminded us that disagreement, when approached with humility and curiosity, is not a threat to democracy but one of its defining strengths. As Menzies himself recognised, the clash of ideas is how truth emerges.[43] In a time when polarisation too often replaces persuasion, and outrage substitutes for argument, we must recommit to the democratic discipline of disagreeing well.

The lessons from the 2025 RMI Policy Dialogue are clear. We need more spaces like this – spaces where disagreement is not feared, but welcomed; where free speech is not just protected, but practised; and where democracy is not taken for granted, but actively renewed.

As we reflect on the conditions for a successful Australian democracy, we must also remember that freedom of speech lies at its very heart. Freedom of speech is not a luxury, but rather a necessity for our democracy. We protect it by practising it, not censoring it. And we ensure it serves all Australians by insisting that it is used responsibly, with civility and with conscience.

6. Aruna Sathanapally

One of the fundamental challenges for any democracy is how to bring people together from all walks of life to share and debate ideas, build consensus, make decisions, and continue to move forward constructively together.

Discussing this challenge, and many others, at a recent policy dialogue on the Conditions for a Successful Democracy hosted by the Robert Menzies Institute, I was struck by two things.

First, that the policy dialogue itself was an elegant microcosm of some of the challenges we were discussing. Could 40 or so thought-leaders with different – often opposing – perspectives reach consensus on anything?

Second, that yes we could! There was in fact a remarkable level of consensus on both the strengths of Australia's democracy and on some of the emerging risks.

On a wide range of indicators, Australia's democratic institutions out-perform many of our international peers. And that matters because our institutions are a key determinant of our prosperity: they underpin our living standards, support and shape the economy, secure our rights and freedoms, and enable us to make collective decisions about the type of society we want to build.

There was a strong sense in the room that Australia's democracy is largely healthy and resilient (and what a privilege that is).

But there was also recognition of various risks for our democracy, and the 'frog in the pot' problem – that democratic erosion may not be perceived until it is too late.

While Australia sits above the OECD average on most dimensions of trust in government, trust in government in Australia is still worryingly low.[44] Australians need to be confident in the institutions that govern them, yet less than half of Australians trust the government to 'do what is right', and 70 per cent think people in government look after themselves.

Australia's democratic institutions aren't working for everyone. Trust in government and satisfaction with democracy are typically lower among groups who are less well served by the status quo: including young people, but also women, people on lower incomes, and people living in regional areas.[45] Collectively that means there are a lot of people who may not feel well-served by our democracy (no matter how world-leading it might be).

Migrants are an interesting exception here. Migrants (except for those from the UK) are typically more trusting than people born in Australia, despite the disadvantages they often face living in Australia.[46] This may, at least in part, be due to direct experience with other systems.

Polarisation is present in Australia on specific issues, but generally lower here than in other democracies. Surveys in the lead up to the 2025 federal election showed an electorate that is 'neither deeply polarised nor highly enthusiastic, but instead uncertain, ambivalent, and shaped by broader moods of optimism and pessimism'. [47]

Perhaps the biggest risk for Australian democracy is what's going on globally right now. We live in particularly uncertain times (the Economic Policy Uncertainty Index has been off the charts in 2025) [48] – geopolitical tensions are very high, long-standing international rules and norms are being questioned, and we are seeing more and more extreme weather events. There is the real possibility of a major shock or disruption around the corner.

Now there's nowhere I'd rather be in a crisis than in Australia, but Australians usually turn to government in a crisis – so that's a big moment to build trust or to lose it.

While those of us at the policy dialogue were able to agree on many of these emerging risks, where reasonable minds differed was on how worried we should be, and what sorts of preventative action we should pursue.

Which reforms would help Australia to further strengthen its democratic resilience? What safeguards are we missing? And how can we create a healthier public sphere to be able to debate and answer these questions?

We didn't land solutions (and to be fair, that wasn't the goal). But we did build greater consensus on the problems and risks, which is more than half the battle.

Australia's growing intergenerational divide – in trust and fortunes – tells us that tackling intergenerational inequality must be a priority for strengthening democratic resilience**.**[49]

Likewise, we need better ways of engaging other groups who feel left behind or disconnected. We need to be able to talk to each other and build on shared values. Citizen assemblies and deliberations can help facilitate these conversations. And communal, trusted sources of information are important.

We need healthy public debate, a healthy public sphere. We need more people engaged in politics and standing for office. And we need to continue to build confidence in our democratic institutions, while maintaining room for healthy scepticism and honest questioning.

Strengthening our democratic resilience is a collective, ongoing challenge – not an end state – and one I am heartened to see Australian thought-leaders embrace.

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