

## Supplementary Submission – Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy

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We thank the Senate’s Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee for this additional opportunity to continue the conversation on the direction for our democracy. The rapid adjustments in public decision making forced by COVID-19 provides an ideal ‘accidental experiment’ in democracy by compelling changes to some of the fundamentals of how our democracy functions; this Inquiry is ideally placed to capture some of the positive developments as outlined below.

The implications for nationhood, national identity, and democracy from CV-19 can be summarised as:

1. Citizens have demonstrated that they understand - and overwhelmingly accept - complex tradeoffs (incurring a cost today in return for an uncertain future benefit/avoidance of deeper cost).
2. Elected decision-makers have benefited from ‘sharing the decision’ (with medical officers), and that this has increased their power to act rather than eroded it.
3. Innovations in how we made public decisions (e.g. National Cabinet) were well received; this suggests that governments should see that innovation in democracy is welcomed and can deliver a popularity dividend.
4. Elected leaders delivered bad news rather than assuring us all was well: this ‘sharing the problem’ is rarely seen, and (perhaps counterintuitively) is the likely cause of the increase in public trust for politicians.
5. Leaders have been perceived as making decisions that are not primarily motivated by a desire for re-election.
6. **However**, it is significantly easier to act (and spend) in a crisis than it is to cease spending and retain public trust *after* the crisis. Retaining a public trust dividend means it will be critical to get in front of this problem.

*Elected leaders appear to the public to have been freed from ‘politics’ in favour of a freedom to govern. In return, the population has embraced a frank sharing of the problems facing Australia and the world.*

*A return to politics-as-usual is inevitable; however, capturing and embedding some of the agreed positives will leave an incremental trust dividend. The opportunity is to develop complementary processes that build on this accidental case study in innovation.*

**We recommend that this Committee attempt small trials of democratic innovations which have a potential to capture this trust dividend and turn around long-term declining trust in parliaments globally.**

### *What lessons can we learn from governance during COVID-19?*

People are usually very distrustful that there is any value in politics *for them* – they see conflict between a professional class of advocate about things which seem remote to their daily lives. Our COVID-19 response is clearly directly affecting the lives and livelihoods of everyone – it has also focused on clearly sharing the problem and publicly explaining the solutions. What happens in Canberra was clearly relevant to our lives, when much of the reporting of public debate is simply not as resonant.

Australians have reacted well when politicians have been candid with the electorate. This is seen in the continuing popularity of the nation’s federal and state chief medical officers and in record approval ratings for all state premiers. This is because their regular briefings share the very real problem facing the country with an honesty sometimes absent from politics. Communicating a life-threatening uncertainty necessitated the more candid approach from our leaders. **We cannot find another example where real downsides and complex trade-offs were shared with the community and immediately understood.**

The challenging task from here will be continuing to apply these lessons to how we govern in the future – particularly, as we navigate the social and economic costs of our recovery. We need to be proactive on this front. We need to share more problems with everyday people. That continuing openness will come across not as a desire for re-election, but as a genuine desire to solve problems – and that those problems will be more connected to our own daily lives.

This crisis shows the value of the professional politician – but not in exclusion to sharing the problem with those normally external to the political process and now involving them in the decision. Developing and trialling lasting complementary processes can get the best from those who dedicate their lives to politics and productively combine it with those dedicating their lives elsewhere.

These innovations already exist. They've been recently endorsed by the OECD and the United Nations Democracy Fund. They will seem radical but a small trial within the Committee can potentially prove their efficacy.

## **Appendix 1 – Concise answers to Committee Questions**

What we view as the most important answers for the Committee are highlighted using this shaded format.

### ***Freedom and responsibility***

- *Do the restrictions and supports during CV-19 offer any insights into the relationship between the state and citizens, their obligations and responsibilities?*

Yes, it revealed citizens could handle bad news, and could understand the trade-off being required of them for which they received an uncertain benefit (a proportionate possibility of not becoming sick in return for limitations carrying a personal financial and social cost).

### ***Trust***

- *Why does trust in governments appear to increase in times of crisis?*

In a crisis like this we actually need government, and thus the decisions are clearly and obviously relevant to our lives. In contrast, much of what emanates from Canberra is clearly about the political class and some long-standing fights rather than about things relevant to our daily lives.

- *What lessons can we take away from time of crisis to ensure they can maintain the trust of Australians?*

Australians have demonstrated an increased level of trust in government at a period when they have been delivered a very high degree of bad news. Our leaders have had no choice but to share the problem and be candid with their own uncertainty. This honesty extends a respect to citizens that they consider is often absent. In typical electoral politics, people often feel like the government is not run for them or that people in government look after themselves (Refer, The Australian Electoral Study; 75% agree with the statement “*People in government look after themselves*”). This state of emergency has brought politics back into the lives of everyday people while treating them differently.

We can learn from this and develop complementary democratic methods that involve everyday people in the decisions that affect them by removing the electoral nature of the interaction and providing the right incentives – a meaningful opportunity to contribute to a decision. This is best achieved, in our view, through a democratic lottery and giving small groups of citizens an opportunity to deeply understand the complexities of a given problem.

- *Why do Australians report slightly higher trust in state and territory governments than in the federal government?*

Globally, and irrespective of the crisis, we trust the tiers of governments that are closest to us as we directly interact and understand the services being provided for the taxes paid.

It does highlight the potential opportunity to be had from an (often suggested) review of the Federation which directly involves everyday people. An open question on “How do we want to be governed?” that aims to provide clear demarcation for state and federal service provision and revenue raising powers (aligning taxation with services delivered) would seem to be a good way to address this.

## **COVID-19 and democracy**

- *What makes a political system 'effective'? What makes it 'efficient'?*

Effective political systems solve difficult problems. Recent reports from the OECD demonstrate that they do this most efficiently through the use of complementary processes that present stakeholders and citizens with difficult trade-offs and provide the right incentives to find common ground around solutions.

- *Why do countries with 'populist' leaders appear to have more deaths from COVID-19?*

'Populist' is often shorthand for a style of electoral politics that unashamedly plays politics in bad faith by promising easy answers which in reality are undeliverable.

Elections require wide but often shallow public support, which necessarily makes many politicians populist to some degree. This is the nature of needing to win elections.

'Populist' is thus a question of degree: *more populist* leaders never want to offer any bad news to the electorate; and in this situation the avoidance of bad news turned out to be an icon of the short-term over the long-term (with "long term" being only a month due to the nature of pandemic spread). The populace wasn't asked to enter into the trade-offs of longer-term thinking, resulting in higher fatalities.

- *Why have countries such as Australia and New Zealand not embraced populist leaders up to this point?*

In Australia and New Zealand, the people who feel like they are 'outside' of politics haven't been subsumed into one of the major political parties – unlike in France, the United States or Poland for example.

Our multi-party system provides representation for these views in minority-parties. We can point to a steady decline in the share of the major parties' primary vote share at each election as evidence for the potential for this to shift. When there are more people giving their primary vote to someone other than a major party, it increases the appetite for major parties to attract those votes with a policy shift in that direction.

The number of people who are giving their primary vote to someone other than a major party can only be expected to grow as inequality increases throughout a long recession – unless we make changes to how we involve people in the difficult trade-offs we will need to make.

- *What will be the impact of COVID-19 on liberal democracy around the world?*

Governments will face new financial constraints. Our democracies will now need to face the long-term social and economic impacts of a long, global recession that has unknown peculiarities because of the ongoing nature of global restrictions. The 'fairness' criteria for all our public decisions will be tested more rigorously than ever before – we will need to adapt and improve our decision-making processes to ensure everyone feels like government is making decisions for them, by involving them.

## ***Decision-making and accountability***

*• Is that [reducing parliamentary sittings] a valid move during an emergency or should parliaments have continued sitting, with appropriately safe arrangements?*

We would suggest that Question Time is only beloved by MPs. The wider community hasn't missed it. Indeed, one possible cause of the rise in trust in governments is that we are seeing less of the behaviours that voters don't like by removing this principal forum for political theatre. We suggest that reviewing the operation of Question Time could be a key way to lock in some of the trust gains. The media have demonstrated an ability to ask questions to hold governments to account arguably more effectively than the theatre of Question Time.

*• Have the CV-19 arrangements reduced the scope of political debate?*

Temporarily, yes, but not because parliament is not sitting. Rule 101 in politics is not to attack a crisis leader, so that's what is happening. The media has not changed its behaviour (except that it is now being starved of the 'gossip' layer so our news and politics are arguably receiving *greater* depth of external critique).

*• Are Australians emerging from the crisis with a better understanding of how our federal system of government works?*

No. If anything it has further highlighted duplications and strange allocations of responsibility between State and Federal Governments, and thus the potential dividend to be had from reviewing this.

*• Will Australia's democracy emerge from CV-19 stronger or weaker?*

Our political leaders have garnered respect from the Australian people by working – co-operatively - on the problem at hand. Embedding what has been learned and observed can provide a long-term dividend in the form of a stronger democracy.