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2024 Royal Society of New South Wales and Learned Academies Forum: "Threats to Democracy"

Panel Session 2: Challenges to Australian democracy[1]

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Peter Shergold: I'm the Vice President of the Royal Society of NSW, and I'm very pleased to introduce this next session on the future of Australian democracy, on the threats to Australian democracy, on the challenges to our structures of democratic governance, and on opportunities to reinvigorate or reimagine our understanding of democracy.

Kristy Muir, who's the CEO of the Paul Ramsay Foundation, and I started to open out this discussion earlier in the year in April, when we had a conversation for the Royal Society: on putting the civil back into civil society, the importance of the not-for-profit organisations that we were hearing about in the first session. You can find that, as well as many other good Royal Society functions, on YouTube.[2]

Just a few days ago, one of our Royal Society Fellows, Mark Evans, was part of a team that produced a new democratic audit of Australia's evolving democracy.[3] It's well worth looking at. I hope he will present his findings to a future meeting of the Royal Society. His well-balanced conclusion is that our long-established, solidly founded liberal democracy is not in crisis. They come to the conclusion that we're not now in the top ten democratic countries — over the last few decades our performance, they think, has been rather variable. There are signs of democratic malaise, and we need to find a way to renew ourselves and strengthen the protective power of democracy. So I think the Democratic Audit is a good foundation on which to base our session today.

I have pulled together a wonderful panel. Their biographies are in the programme.

The first to talk to us is Dr Jeni Whalan, who is a distinguished academic turned influential public servant, who headed the Commonwealth Government's Strength-

1 This is an edited transcript of the session, which can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLL05uwR9ts

2 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvPjaXBcQNo

3 Evans M, Dunleavy P and Phillimore J (eds) (2024) *Australia's Evolving Democracy: A New Democratic Audit*. LSE Press. https://press.lse.ac.uk/books/e/10.31389/lsepress.ada

ening Democracy Taskforce.[4] I think her strengths as a political scientist and a public policy strategist, author, and researcher are evident in the Report of that Taskforce, which was published in July this year.

Second is Leila Smith, a Wiradjuri woman and CEO of the Aurora Education Foundation, a Charlie Perkins Scholar, and Chair of the America Australia Association.

Third is Nick Bryant, who very modestly describes himself on his website as an author and journalist. In truth, Nick was for a long period one of the BBC's finest foreign correspondents, and then while in the United States wrote *When America Stopped Being Great*,[5] which I think, for perhaps the next two months, will sit in the library of the Oval Office with President Biden. More recently, he completed *The Forever War*.[6] Perhaps most pertinent today, he's also written *The Rise and Fall of Australia*.[7] And I do recommend all three books.

So now we're going to get a brief presentation from each.

Jeni Whalan

Thank you to the Royal Society for the invitation to come and speak to you today. Peter mentioned that I led the Australian Government Strengthening Democracy Taskforce in the Department of Home Affairs, which reported in July 2024. I thought I might talk to you about what that Taskforce found. The Taskforce has now rolled into an office — the Office of Community Cohesion — which I also lead in Home Affairs.

The Taskforce was set up in early 2023 by the then Home Affairs Minister, Clare O'Neil, who was troubled by the democratic backsliding we were seeing around the world and by a range of other challenges to democracy being felt here at home, particularly in her portfolio in the national security space. Challenges like foreign interference, violent extremism, but also a more pervasive sense of people's disconnection and disengagement from institutions. We were asked as a Taskforce to understand what the evidence around the world looked like, what the evidence here in Australia looked like, and then to be ruthlessly practical — not to start with Greek democracy, but to look hard at what we could learn from democracies around the world, what the state of play here in Australia was, and crucially, what could be done practically to strengthen Australian democracy in what feels like a more difficult time. That's what the Report lays out — we set out five ideas.

The *first idea* is that democracy is a national asset that's worth protecting. I hope that when we say that out loud it seems self-evident, but until we say it out loud it's perhaps not. In Australia, I think we've had a privileged complacency about our democracy for many decades. That's a terrific thing: we should be able, to some extent, to have as secure, robust and resilient a democracy that we can afford to take it for granted. But that time has passed. We're faced by a range of new challenges. We need to be more explicit about the contributions

4 *Strengthening Democracy* (2024) *Strengthening Australian Democracy: A Practical Agenda for Democratic Resilience*. Department of Home Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia.

5 Bryant N (2020) *When America Stopped Being Great: A History of the Present*. Penguin.

6 Bryant N (2024) *The Forever War: America's Unending Conflict with Itself — The History Behind Trump and J.D. Vance*. Penguin.

7 Bryant N (2015) *The Rise and Fall of Australia: How a Great Nation Lost Its Way*. Bantam.

of our democracy to our society. That goes not just for government — not just for the federal government and governments of all levels — but for all of our institutions, non-governmental as well, across society.

The *second idea* is that we can draw confidence in this task from Australia's long histories of creativity and ingenuity — often world-leading innovation and reform in our democracy. That's true through our modern democracy in our distinctive electoral institutions. In many respects, Australia has not only led the world but been the envy of the world for the strength and robustness of its electoral institutions: its pioneering use of the secret ballot, the extent to which our independent and professional electoral commissions make this the easiest place in the world to vote, and the extent to which our electoral commissions are independent in the first place. That's a tremendous strength. Not least our compulsory voting and our systems of preferential voting. It's also true in these long traditions of democratic innovation and ingenuity — in the integrity reforms which characterised the 1970s and '80s, in our incredibly vibrant and active civil society, about which we've heard some today. That is, Australian democracy has never stood still. The stewards of Australian democracy have never let it stand still. Every generation has risen to the challenge of protecting and nurturing our Australian democracy. That's the task for us today.

The *third idea* is that we needed a Strengthening Democracy Taskforce not because Australian democracy is fundamentally weak — in fact, the third idea is that Australian democracy is strong — but it's vulnerable to a range of shared challenges facing liberal democracies around the world. We heard a little in the previous panel about measures of trust and satisfaction, whether with democracy or government in different forms. One of the things that global comparison helps us with is that Australians value our democracy more highly than is common in liberal democracies around the world. Australians overwhelmingly think it's important — the majority think it's very important — to live in a country governed democratically.

But about one in two are concerned about the trajectory, the direction of travel, for democracy. They're concerned about a range of things: the rise of misinformation and disinformation in our environment, foreign interference, and also all the processes of governing and governments that we've heard so much about this morning. But here's the kicker: around 80% of Australians think it's worth doing something to fix the problems we might face. That's a tremendous reform constituency. That's a tremendous strength, again, that many democracies around the world would envy, with anti-democratic sentiment very low in this country.

I think it's important to recognise the strengths in our democracy so that we can protect and safeguard them, because the *fourth idea* of the Taskforce Report is that Australian democracy is facing a new constellation of challenges. I say constellation because it's not the effect of any one of these challenges or, in the framing of today, the threats — but the way in which they interact. We name them in the Report: they are from foreign interference; from rising misinformation and disinformation; from the role of social media and digital platforms, often interacting with those first two; increasingly, the role of algorithms and AI; dynamics of polarisation and division, of prejudice, hate, discrimination, of inequality; and finally,

perhaps the line through all of those — dissatisfaction and distrust in governments and processes of governing.

What do we do about it? This is the heart of the Report. The *fifth idea* is that there are very many things not only that we can do about it, but in fact many around this country are already doing on a daily basis to strengthen democracy — and around the world. If we look at those challenges to democracy, the Report sets out the way in which they come together to challenge three enduring strengths of Australian democracy. First: trusted institutions — we've heard a lot about institutions this morning. Second: credible information — I don't think we've heard that much about information. And third: social inclusion — we've started to hear a little about that today. But I think the interplay of institutions, information and inclusion is a crucial place for us.

The Report says there are really three things a practical agenda to strengthen democracy should do. First, it should protect our strengths. Act from a position of strength. Don't wait until we have a burning platform or democracy is on fire. Strengths like our electoral institutions, strengths like our information integrity, our free and open media environment, our citizens' engagement with the values and principles of democracy.

The second thing: strengthen people's civic engagement, their understanding of democracy — not in the academic sense or the theoretical sense that we've heard a lot of today — but in our everyday sense. What are your rights and obligations under a democracy? What does democracy give you? What are your duties to participate? Where are your opportunities to participate in democracy? How are you connecting with others in your community and across communities in our democracy?

Third — and I'll end here — is embrace democratic experimentation and innovation. We have a long history of doing that in our modern democracy. We're learning much more about the very long histories of governance in our First Nations history. And we need to embrace the experimentation and democratic innovation. That is why Australian democracy has the strengths it has today.

Leila Smith

First, it's so wonderful to be here. Thank you for having me. It's a really busy time of year for us all, but even doing the walk up the drive to come here and being in this stunning room, hearing all of the different perspectives and similar themes but different ideas, has been really inspiring. So thank you so much for having me.

As Peter said, my name is Leila Smith. I'm a Wiradjuri woman, so my family is from central west New South Wales. There's a small Aboriginal mission on the outskirts of Cowra — Erambie Mission. My father grew up there, and my grandmother and her mother grew up there as well. I think it's a really important place to start, because democracy is about having a voice.

When I arrived at Cambridge in 2013, I was the second Aboriginal student to study there. One other Aboriginal student — Lily Brown — had been there before me, and she had graduated just three months earlier. I mean, this is a really compelling, amazing institution — a bubble that is dripping in privilege. When I arrived and started thinking about our history — after tens of thousands of years of history — and realising this was something we hadn't had the oppor-

tunity to be part of, it was frustrating. We heard earlier about the economics of equality of opportunity. To think this university had been around for hundreds of years and this was a new experience for us — it was a very frustrating feeling. It's something — a theme and a sentiment — that we're hearing today about people feeling locked out and left behind. I think it really highlighted for me these two worlds, more than two worlds apart, that we were having.

That was ten years ago. We've now had nearly a hundred Aboriginal scholars go to top international universities with a 100% completion rate. These are mostly scholarship recipient students that the Aurora Education Foundation administers scholarships for. I'm the CEO of Aurora Education Foundation, so I've come full circle — from scholarship recipient to running the organisation. Ten years later, I get to do the call where I ring the scholarship recipients and tell them, "Guess what — you're going to Oxford!" It's the best part of the job.

We've had people going there. These are opportunities that are compelling, that are strength-based. Why don't more people know about it? This narrative that we're talking about — there is social change happening. There are good things happening. How do we capture people's attention in this world where people are absorbing news and information in so many different ways, in a world where attention spans are shorter than ever? This is something we really tackled and thought about on the Taskforce that Jeni talked about. I was an expert adviser on that Taskforce.

I'm also the chair of the American Australian Association. Two weeks ago, I was at a benefit dinner in New York. It was a week before the election. You want to talk about the Cambridge bubble? Well, New York is a bubble as well. We're sitting there on Wall Street in this massive fundraising gala, and everyone was saying, "It's going to be a close election — Kamala might get over, but it's going to be tight." There was somebody sitting next to me at the dinner who owns factories all around the US — Detroit, Dallas — and I said to him, "What do you think's going to happen?" and he said, "Trump by a mile." I said, "What makes you think that?" He said, "Because I've spoken to my factory workers and they're all voting for him." How can we have these bubbles where everyone — not everyone else, but a lot of people at that gala — was so sure it was going to be close, and then have this whole other world where they were so sure it was not going to be close?

That's something I spend a lot of my time thinking about: how do we bring worlds together? How do we bridge worlds — and generationally too?

Taking the theme today, which is about challenges to our democracy, I want to think about challenges to implementing change to strengthen our democracy. Another world we need to bring together, which we've heard about today, is the generational shift that is happening. We need to engage young people earlier. I am guilty of this as well, I have to say. I'm the first to put my hand up. Sometimes, by the time I engage young people in the design of something big, I do it later on. I leave it too late, and I don't think I'm alone in that. If we're going to be implementing any initiatives around democracy, we need to bring young people in earlier and earlier. We're getting better at it, but we still have a long way to go.

The second thing, which we've also touched on — thank you, Peter, for mention-

ing the importance of leveraging partners outside government — is thinking about not-for-profits at the regional and national level to achieve democracy goals as well. We heard, for example, in the Taskforce Report that participation in volunteerism, in sporting teams, in political parties, in unions is declining. So how do we engage people outside government when those rates are getting lower and lower? I think we need to look the next layer down and look at where the growth is happening. Women's sport, sure. Overall team sports might be declining, but let's take a look at women's football. Let's take a look at AFL. There are other areas of growth we can tap into, and I think looking outside government is really important to that as well.

I'm going to put one other thing on the table: I wonder if we also need to spend more time acknowledging the power of public-private partnerships to achieve goals. Corporates across the world are increasingly on board with ESG and long-term commitments to education, for example — something I see all the time. There is a role here for democracy work too. I don't know what it is yet, but I still think this is an important conversation for us to have. This is not just about everyday participants in society. It's not just about the philanthropic sector. It's not just about the community sector. It's about corporates. It's about everyone. And that's what we've been hearing here today as well.

In conclusion, the biggest challenge is timing. We need to act now. Once people start to feel they are left behind, they disengage, they don't speak up, our communities become fragmented. That's when discord, ignorance, and even hatred happen. And at the moment that hatred and intolerance and other sentiments like this start to crawl out from under their rock, that's when people start to think that others are less — and then they don't even want to try to understand them, because it doesn't really matter what they say.

So the biggest challenge is acting now and making space to focus on strengthening our democracy. Which is why I'm so thankful to be here today, and I'm so pleased to have this discussion. Thank you, everyone.

Nick Bryant

Thank you very much, Peter. It's very generous of you to mention that my book was in the Oval Office. I was rather hoping that, having passed the torch to Kamala Harris, Joe Biden would pass the book on to her as well. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened.

I've spent a lot of time talking this year — mostly about my new book. It's based on a simple premise: Donald Trump is as much a product of American history as Abraham Lincoln, F.D.R., John F. Kennedy, Barack Obama, or Joe Biden. It's just a history that gets forgotten, misremembered, and sometimes deliberately buried. It's a history that defies the grand narrative of American progress and advancement. How tempting it was to think that America's first Black president, Barack Obama, would be followed by America's first female president, Hillary Clinton. But history doesn't work like that, and that lesson has been underscored over the past few days.

After a year of speaking, it has been fantastic this morning to spend time listening. Just a couple of reflections on what I've heard: democracies work better when economies work better. If you look

at American history over the last 50 years, political polarisation closely tracks income polarisation. There's a missing middle in American politics because there's a missing middle in the American economy.

When I first returned to America in 2013 — before Donald Trump came down that famous golden escalator — I was struck by how many people told me they no longer believed their children would lead more abundant lives than they had. So, when Trump said "the American dream is dead," many believed him. Bill Clinton once boasted about building a bridge to the 21st century, but if you lived in the Rust Belt, it felt more like a bypass. Empty factories and derelict steel mills became echo chambers for the words "Make America Great Again." People genuinely felt like economic castaways in a globalised economy they couldn't understand and couldn't make work for them.

And I mention all of that because, when I returned to Australia three years ago, I heard the same thing: "I don't believe my kids will lead a more abundant life than I did. I don't believe they'll be able to afford property — the essence of the Australian Dream."

Another thing that worried me when I came back, in the midst of COVID, was during our two-week hotel quarantine. The first Saturday morning, we heard a muffled roar from the street below: an anti-lockdown protest. Turning on the television later that night, we saw people carrying signs and flags I was used to seeing in rural Michigan and Mississippi — Trump flags. One even showed him portrayed as Rambo, gripping an automatic weapon.

In Melbourne, too, we saw a grim kind of Americanisation. A gallows was paraded through the streets, aimed at "Dictator Dan" — the moniker increasingly used by Rupert Murdoch's tabloid, which had started to sound more shrill, more like its stablemate, Fox News. In a disturbing echo of January 6th, some protesters even urinated on the Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne's most sacred site.

These anti-lockdown protests became a cause célèbre for the American hard right. Candace Owens, a cable blowhard, suggested America should invade Australia to liberate its people. Tucker Carlson lamented that John Howard had tightened up Australia's gun laws, preventing citizens from taking up arms against the government. Ron DeSantis, then Governor of Florida, suggested cutting off diplomatic relations. Ted Cruz complained that the "Texas of the Pacific" had gone soft. And Donald Trump Jr tweeted in September of that year: "Don't Australia my America." I found myself thinking the exact opposite: "Don't America my Australia."

Because it wasn't just street Trumpism that was on display — it was a small-t Trumpism in Canberra as well. There was a post-truth quality to Scott Morrison's government. I was troubled that the Liberals tried to push through voter ID laws — straight out of the GOP playbook — despite the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) stating that voter fraud was vanishingly rare. After Morrison left office, we learned of the secretive multi-ministerial power grab, which defied democratic norms. During the Voice referendum, Peter Dutton questioned the integrity of the vote and of the AEC,

implying it was rigged.[8] The AEC is the gold standard. It should be treasured. It's part of a democratic model that I hope continues to serve Australia well.

I actually planned to begin my remarks by speaking about another Donald — not Trump, but Donald Horne. I loved his book, *The Lucky Country*.[9] I read it in one gulp flying from Sydney to Perth. It brilliantly encapsulated the land I was flying over. Horne is remembered for his famous line: "Australia is a lucky country run by second-rate people who share its luck." But it's worth remembering the subtitle: *Australia in the Sixties*. I'm not sure that line held through the '70s, '80s, or '90s — perhaps in the 21st century.

I see Mike Baird is here. I said to Mike before today's event, "Thank goodness, when you were changing prime ministers every few weeks and the reform era gave way to an era of revenge and retribution, the states were governed so well." In many ways, Australia became Canberra-proof.

But what really struck me in Horne's thesis was his second point: that Australia is a country of borrowed ideas. Derivative. Imitative. Mimicking others. Just look at Canberra — the names, House of Representatives and Senate, borrowed from America. The House chamber, with its green leather benches, looks like Westminster. The Speaker's chair in the old Parliament even contains wood from HMS Victory.

But this is where I think Horne was wrong. Australia has been brilliant at building its own democratic model: preferential voting, compulsory voting. I left Australia opposed to compulsory voting, but after eight years in America, I returned an absolute advocate. It's a safeguard. And weekend voting — what a celebration of democracy. America votes on Tuesdays, Britain on Thursdays. In America, they try to stop people from voting. Here, it's required — and that's a good thing.

So what I want to say today is: stick with the "democracy sausage." Don't go for the "democracy hot dog." And whatever you do, don't "America my Australia."

Q&A

PS: Well, that's great, and it gives me the opportunity to start the discussion and take questions or comments from the floor. Jeni, I was intrigued by what you shared about the Taskforce and its work. While you were doing this, was there anything that surprised you, or did everything turn out as you expected?

JW: I think I was somewhat surprised by the ongoing strength at levels I hadn't quite anticipated. When we started the Taskforce, I initially believed the situation might be worse than it turned out to be. The evidence doesn't entirely support that view, especially when you look at all the different aspects of democracy. One surprise was seeing how crucial everyday, practical spaces for democracy are — things that democratic theory and textbooks don't often mention. Public libraries, for instance, are incredible institutions. They do better than most in reflecting and serving specific communities.

For example, the library in my area is filled with people working on their side

8 AEC hits back after Peter Dutton suggests voice referendum rules are "rigged," *The Guardian*, 25 August 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/aug/25/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-referendum-aec-poll-unfairness-claims-rejected

9 Horne D (1964) *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*. Penguin.

hustles, laptops open. Meanwhile, other libraries serve as the only place people can access government services, update software, or check crucial government accounts. Some libraries even have domestic violence survival kits because they're seen as safe spaces for people with children. Beyond that, librarians are incredibly skilled in helping people navigate information — one of the most important skills in today's world. If we need places where people can come together across divisions to find credible information, public libraries are invaluable. So, stepping outside of democratic theory to understand democracy in people's daily lives was eye-opening.

PS: Thank you, Jeni. I completely agree with you on libraries. Around Australia, these spaces, which people once thought would disappear, have become the heart of many communities.

Leila, I love how you balance the strengths and weaknesses of our democracy. Should we start with the weaknesses or the strengths? What do you think is the best way to approach this?

LS: That's a really good question, and I don't have a simple answer. However, I've gone on a journey to find that answer. When I began at Aurora about five years ago, it was common in Indigenous Affairs to focus on what was wrong and how we needed help to fix it. But we, along with many others, started flipping that narrative. We wanted to talk about the strengths and why we needed people to work with us to build those strengths. It was successful, more than we expected.

Then came the 2023 Referendum, and people started thinking about how to frame the narrative around strength. One of our board members said, after the failed Referendum, "Maybe we focused too much on the strengths. We didn't highlight enough the real issues that this could help." I agree. We probably needed a better balance — acknowledging both strengths and challenges. The media, of course, plays a big role. Crisis narratives often get a lot of traction.

One example: Brooke Boney, one of our Perkins Scholars at Oxford, now works at *The Today Show*.[10] She's learned how to cater to mass audiences, which is a skill that could be combined with policy and media. We need more people who understand how to craft a narrative.

Another example: I also serve on UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Group.[11] Every year they release reports on global education. People's attention spans are shrinking, so last year they tried something new. They brought in a communications specialist, and the first report released with that help was on technology in education. The media simplified it to "UNESCO says ban mobiles in schools." This oversimplification got huge traction, but it missed the nuance in the report. It got media attention, but the question is: Was it the right approach? The jury's still out. My answer, Peter, is I think we need to temper it — balance strengths with challenges, and keep an eye on the larger picture.

PS: Nick, you've been a strong advocate for keeping the Australian democracy

10 Boney B (2025) Welcome to Country is not an election issue, so why are we talking about it? I think I know, *SMH*, May 1; also her book of essays, *All of It*, Allen & Unwin, 2025. [Ed.]

11 https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/about-us

sausage, and I'm with you on that. When I first arrived in 1972, I thought compulsory voting was strange, but now I'm a complete convert. When you talk about preserving our strengths, what do you think needs to change in order to sustain our democracy?

NB: I think you need to tell a different story about your democracy. Celebrate it and reject that "Lucky Country" mentality. Let go of the "mother-country thinking," the "tyranny-of-distance," and the cultural cringe.[12] Too much of the intellectual architecture that dominated post-war Australian thought is now outdated. You've made your own luck. In the late 1990s, you developed an economic model that works, and you've built a democratic model that works as well. You didn't just copy others — you improved on a system.

As Jeni mentioned, there's a strong tradition of democratic innovation in Australia. Other countries have borrowed your ideas, like the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), which is now regarded as the gold standard. Tom Rogers, head of the ACCC, often gets asked by other countries how Australia managed it.

The same goes for compulsory voting. Even American thinkers like EJ Dionne have written books about it — although they call it Universal Voting, because "compulsory voting" wouldn't fly in the U.S.[13] Australia's democratic model is something other countries look to, and yet Australians often underestimate their own success.

There are serious national issues Australia hasn't fully addressed, but there are also many things you do well — things that could be exported. Australia's democratic model is something the world could learn from. You need to tell the world your story. There's still a tendency in Australia to downplay your achievements, especially when it comes to democracy. But Australia has a great story to tell, both to itself and the world. I'm not always a fan of Australian politics, but I am a big fan of Australian democracy.

12 Phillips AA (1950) The cultural cringe, *Meanjin* 4. The author is a distant cousin of the Editor's.

13 Dionne EJ, and Rapoport M (2022) *100% Democracy: The Case for Universal Voting*. The New Press.