

## 2024 Royal Society of New South Wales and Learned Academies Forum: “Threats to Democracy”

### Closing Session: Panel Chairs and reports and open discussion<sup>1</sup>

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**Michael Baird:** I’ve started a new role at the Susan McKinnon Foundation.<sup>2</sup> It’s an organisation that believes in the power of better government and the impact that can have on a stronger Australia. We’ve heard a lot about where government has failed today, but there is a belief that good government can make a difference. We have had good leaders and good government. One of the things we have done at McKinnon is to acknowledge political leaders who have done great things. Next week we’re acknowledging Dominic Perrottet and Chris Minns, who ran a state campaign that didn’t go into personal attacks. It was quite respectful, and it stood out: you can have discourse in a respectful way on policies and not bring people into it. That’s being acknowledged. Bridget Archer is being acknowledged for standing up against corruption by having an independent national commission against corruption. We have to

celebrate democracy and good leadership. I can tell you, as a political leader — and I stand here as one of those in the last 25 years who didn’t get a great rap — there are good examples of political leaders, and we need to hold to account those who aren’t, and celebrate those who are. Political leadership, our institutions, and democracy have never been more important than right now. That’s why we’re here today.

I’ll just give a quick outline, trying to synthesise what I heard today — some of the key issues — and a quick reflection, then one point that you, the panellists, think is a takeaway, and then we’ll go to the room.

This is what I heard today: it is polycentric: there are multiple elements to democracy and the problem. A big part of it is where governments haven’t focused on the long term, and that has started to break down. The performance and delivery, the listening, the policy that’s addressing the real issues,

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<sup>1</sup> This is an edited transcript of the session, which can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mq4M7EPcF2g>

<sup>2</sup> <https://mckinnoninstitute.org.au>

the challenges they're facing are not being addressed. That then leads to a loss of trust in governments and institutions. People are feeling less optimistic — as we heard in terms of some of the data — with a lower quality of life. Good government should enhance the capability of our leaders, giving them the research and policy to attract more talent into the public service — part of what we're doing at McKinnon. But the things I heard today where we need action or attention were brought to light in quite graphic ways: we need more participation — this came through strongly — more information, and things like transparency, using collective intelligence through the integrity of data. Engaging our young people seems like a dominant theme. More partnerships — the “democracy sausage” — I like that because it's quite easy to understand. It's celebrating democracy, something that we take for granted. It's so important: compulsory voting on a Saturday. We get together with differences and we vote different ways as we go in, but we're one, and that was a really good message. Misinformation and disinformation came up. Katherine raised the “third rail,” and I'll reflect on this before I hand to the panel. I participated in the Voluntary Assisted Dying debate. It doesn't matter what my view was or where I went, but this struck me: I had a position where those against were many and quite aggressively opposed, but there was a group in the middle who said, “Thank you for your contribution, because, even though I disagree with you, I felt you listened; I felt that you were doing it in a respectful way.” It was very simple, but I thought in these sorts of debates where people are actually

willing to listen to both sides and have an understanding that your view is different. We seem to have lost that. That's something that's stuck with me.

So, I'll go to the panel. Peter, anything you think we should focus on?

**Peter Shergold:** My reflection on the day comes back to that wonderful opening session. It seems to me that the strengths we've got in Australia are partly due to that small part of democracy: the contest. I actually think we do it well: we've got an independent Australian Electoral Commission, we have compulsory voting, and we have a system where, time after time, the leader of the party that loses the election accepts that with good grace. These are important things. Going back to the democracy sausage, there is one issue which I think is important. I don't think we're thinking through enough what the impact is of increasing numbers of people in every election voting early, even before the campaign has scarcely begun. I think we need to think that through.

But the part where we've got to make change is what happens during the three or four years between elections. You've got to somehow make sure that people know that there is democratic governance going on between those elections. We know there are different ways we can do it, but we're doing it to a limited extent. I think what people are increasingly feeling is that elites get a voice through lobbying, but many people are not having that same impact. I think there is a challenge here. I think we saw it in the 2023 Referendum<sup>3</sup> of people being sick and tired, as they see it, of being told how to think by those at the top. We've got to find ways in which we can engage people,

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<sup>3</sup> The 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice Referendum.

including young people, in our democratic processes. I heard that time and time again during the day.

**Peter Varghese:** I think the quality of democracy tends to go in cycles, and at the moment, globally, it's in downturn. If I were to try and put my finger on what's at the heart of this, I think politics struggles with substance in the current environment, and that leads to large levels of dissatisfaction. It leads to a sense that the political system is not paying attention to what matters most, and it erodes trust. A political system that's delivering substance will not have any of those problems at the end of the day. The question is: how do you get to that point?

I think it's easy to be very critical and dismissive of the quality of political leadership today and say, "Just go back to the Hawke/Keating/Howard days and pursue a big agenda." But this is a difficult environment for political leaders to actually pursue a big agenda, in part because their political antennae, in my view, have been completely distorted by social media and technology. Old-fashioned politicians — and you'd know this, Mike — had an instinctive feel for where the centre of gravity of issues lay in the community. I think the current generation of politicians really struggles, so anything we can do to signal the value of substance as voters and as members of the community can help us move away from "politics as sloganeering" to politics as substantial delivery.

I'll make one other point, and that is the public service has an important role to play in this. I think at the moment the way the public service operates does not help with

bringing substance before political decision-makers. For the most part, our public service, which is staffed by bright people, is focused on second- and third-order issues, because they happen to be first-order political issues, and the first-order substantive policy issues are, to use Katherine's term, the third rail. In other words, you can't go near them. So we need to find a way to shift that culture in the public service and give the public service more room for genuinely "frank and fearless" — to use the cliché — advice to go to ministers.

If I can end on an optimistic note: genuine democracies, in my view, in the long term, are self-correcting because they are, by design, intended to respond to the will of the people and what people want. So I know we'll go through periods of despair in this discussion, but I remain a long-term optimist about the ability of democratic systems to self-correct.

**Michael Baird:** As a modern politician<sup>4</sup>, I can understand that, but I'll pick up on two points. First, I think that the public service has the substance issue — and knows it. One of the things that kept me awake at night was the long-term gap in health funding. We do not have the capacity — the revenue — to meet the health needs of the community, not just now, but in the next ten years. So why are we not dealing with that? That was a challenge, and the public service has ideas and approaches. So, how do we get that sort of issue to the top on substance? The second point is connected: in the last state election, Dom Perrottet took a strong view on gambling reform. There are lots of vested interests in that. He was attacked in many

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<sup>4</sup> Baird was the 44<sup>th</sup> Premier of New South Wales, the Minister for Infrastructure, the Minister for Western Sydney, and the Leader of the New South Wales Liberal Party from April 2014 to January 2017.

different ways. But interestingly, what came through in terms of research is that people resonated with it because he was standing up against those interests, as there is a view that all lobbyists run around behind closed doors. He was making a stand on actual policy that's going to make a difference to people who are vulnerable. It came through in his polling. So, it's the substance of an issue, in taking a stand. Good policy can be good government. There's a social media site led by donkeys, and it goes around highlighting poor political leadership across the world with ridicule. There's plenty of material.

**Sally Cripps:** I'm going to come out of the closet as a technological optimist in terms of democracy. While I understand the very real concerns around social media, I think it is too easy just to blame things on social media and then talk about shutting it down for children. I will give a few reasons why I think this. I really loved the last session because that spoke to a lot of work I've been engaged in. What I've noticed: the printing press was an enormously democratically empowering piece of technology, and empowering communities with digital technologies for communication amongst themselves and to politicians is equally empowering. We have messed it up, but that doesn't mean we can't get it right going forward, just as the printing press, when it came out, was going to be the end of the world.

One of the reasons I feel so strongly about this is two experiences: one of them was meeting Audrey Tang,<sup>5</sup> who at the age of 15 mobilised the youth of Taiwan via digital platforms. He had algorithms designed to tell people what they really had in common.

The upshot of it was they used this to get the education department to change practices in classrooms, and that was a 15-year-old using technology. When I talk to people about that here, all I'm told is that's Taiwan, we're different, don't try it. I think that it may just be Taiwan — we may not get there, but to just dismiss it and not even try it is really not very courageous of us. I think we need to be a bit more courageous than we have been. I'm really pleased to say that I've been working with the Department of Education. I think the way forward in terms of engaging people who make policy, improving democracy, is to recognise their fears. The Department of Education initially made us take AI out of everything we were doing, but we have now got to a point where they are talking to us about using their chatbot in classrooms to collect data in real time. They haven't actually signed on the dotted line, so I'm not counting my chickens before they hatch, but to understand what's going on in the classroom — what works, what innovations help children finish school well. I want to end on that note.

I think I just want to take my hat off to the last session because we're focusing too much on our fears and not enough on the next generation coming through and what technology actually could do for them if we had a serious attempt at making it work in a really positive way.

**Christina Slade:** I want to start by going back to what I thought was quite an inspirational first, theoretical piece, because what it did was throw the responsibility straight into our court. The polycentric model means that our Royal Society, the civil service — all these other parts of the structures which

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Audrey-Tang>

support an elected democracy — have got to stand up and start being engaged. I think that is a very good message for us because we're part of the groups where we're discussing these and trying to think of ways forward. I found that very helpful. On the other hand, I quoted Ed Coper, who has a fantastic new book.<sup>6</sup> He said tweaking the algorithm of what information we digest will not reinvent the “golden age of journalism” or restore trust in honest politicians. So, the issue is not for us to try and think nostalgically about what was actually never as golden as all that. Indeed, in my lifetime, Rupert Murdoch moved to Adelaide, where I was born, and set up the News. So there's been ups and downs all the time, but we do need to be really proactive, thinking not just about children but about these new technologies, and working closely with the regulatory structures. I think that what Carly has done — this battle where she says we need technology and regulation in privacy law — that's the right way for us to think about it.

My colleagues in the World Trade Organization community are appalled because what happens if you have more data regulation is that digital international trade slows down, and less free trade pushes up prices. I'm not an economist, but that's what happens. So, it's going to have impacts, and we're going to have to think about those to and fro. I feel very much the same about social media and children. Of course, we worry about this, so we need to start thinking about it. The other side of the polycentric model is the community. It really does mean that we need to be more engaged. I found today

very interesting. I thought that *Strengthening Australian Democracy*,<sup>7</sup> which Jeni Whalan talked about, was actually a case study in polycentric action, and it's quite impressive. I've only looked at a few pages of it, but I do think that we're all going to have to stand up and start thinking about it, thinking about things we don't want to think about — like pornography on the internet, which I don't want to think about.

**MB:** I think that's a good balance from the Panel. There are obviously concerns and various actions and approaches, but also optimism. I think it's the two together that are a big part of today. Does anyone want to comment?

**Michael Baume:** I'm one of the old politicians. In his excellent keynote address this morning, Professor Pettit talked about democracies, and he said the health of democracies depends on the strength of the checks and balances that are present. We see around the world systematic attempts to dismantle checks and balances in many countries. President Trump has said that he'll dismantle one of the checks and balances in the Department of Justice. Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to make the judiciary subsidiary to the Knesset. What should be done to protect those checks and balances?

**PV:** I thought one of the many interesting things that Philip Pettit said was that elites are playing a very important role in anti-majoritarianism, in constraining majoritarianism. To my mind, there are both positives and negatives. What is to be done is to remain constantly vigilant

<sup>6</sup> Coper E (2022) *Facts and Other Lies — Welcome to the Disinformation Age*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

<sup>7</sup> Strengthening Democracy Taskforce (2024) *Strengthening Australian Democracy: A practical agenda for democratic resilience*. Dept. of Home Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia.

about the weakening of guard rails and institutional scaffolding that support democracy. That includes the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, the integrity of electoral machinery, and maintaining a broad social consensus on red lines in the public sphere. You can have different views about many things, but a democracy that doesn't understand its red lines is in trouble. We will see how far Donald Trump goes in dismantling many of those guard rails. He may succeed in going very far — potentially even eliminating the concept of a conflict of interest from government. That is a serious risk. That said, it is important for elites to uphold guard rails. However, they should not constrain majoritarianism by dictating what is acceptable in terms of thought and expression. That is a risk for democracies, and elites — of whom there are many in this room — need to be careful not to cross that line. I hope that helps.

**PS:** I'd like to follow up and turn the coin over. I agree with the need to strengthen elite institutions, including the public service. But it is equally important to support and strengthen civil society organisations. It is no surprise that governments leaning towards authoritarianism often try to weaken or eliminate civil society organisations that stand up fearlessly to anti-democratic trends. We must strengthen both elite institutions and civil society, allowing more opportunity for individuals and organisations to participate in democracy beyond just voting.

**MB:** Two points. First, the onus is on us and leaders across the system to stand up when safeguards are challenged. The Electoral Commission has come under attack — not as severely as in other countries, but still enough that we must defend it. We must

use our influence to stand up for what we believe in. Second, I reflect on the experience with the teals. They were marginalised and attacked in many ways. Simply put, the community felt they weren't being listened to or prioritised. I'm in teal country, I know the community — they did not feel heard. That applies across all politics and leadership. The more the community feels engaged, the more those safeguards will remain intact.

**Q:** As a sociologist, I followed today's discussion with great interest. It seems the main lesson is that the modern nation-state developed in parallel with rising literacy and national media. In the past 20 years, the idea of the nation has splintered into bubbles of interest and culture. How does a national state like Australia create an inclusive, reimagined nation to reintegrate particularly young people who no longer feel connected to a now historic idea of nation?

**CS:** I think that's the right question, but I have two contradictory thoughts. When my husband and I were in Mexico, we hosted Anzac Day. We invited backpackers from across the city, and they came to the residence for breakfast with a strong sense of national belonging. These were backpackers from every ethnic background. That really gave me a jolt — I'm a '70s kid and we didn't attend Anzac Day. So, there are sources of national connection. But what that imagined national identity looks like — whether it's national or transnational — is another question. Do we foster it? I'm not sure I want to. Nationalism often leads to war if unchecked. I would ask the sociologist: how do you think we should move forward? This isn't my area. I just think all children should learn rigorous philosophy and logic from the age of three.



**SC:** That's a great question — what fosters belonging? At the micro level, what makes a school tick is a sense of belonging. That sense of belonging varies — there's no single recipe. I'm a big believer in the scientific method, and with digital technologies we can learn rapidly what works. This empowers communities to adapt and share solutions. Communication is key. The one thing I would hate to see shut down is communication — even if the channels aren't ideal, we need to fix them, not eliminate them.

**PV:** I would add: in a diverse country, the only path to unity is unity of values. In Australia, that means values based on a secular liberal democratic tradition, with some uniquely Australian characteristics that give it a particular texture. Diversity alone isn't a basis for unity.

**Des Griffin:** I agree with Peter. The absence of shared values is a major issue. Democracy, as I understand it, is built on the idea that involving more people in decision-making leads to better outcomes. But it's been distorted by powerful interest groups and a toxic, oppositional culture in public discourse. Abuse has replaced kindness. This behaviour gives social permission for violence and polarisation. The 2023 Referendum debate was full of hideous statements. No effort was made to understand the underlying issues. This happens elsewhere too — like with debates on social media and children. Children are never asked their views. The education system is failing them, and they're excluded from policy discussions that affect them.

**MB:** Thank you. That connection to young people and the need to bring people

together — the polarisation is real. There's a group in the UK called *More in Common*<sup>8</sup> that does amazing work facilitating respectful debate. It encourages leaders to see both sides and focus on shared values.

**Vince di Pietro:** A major threat to democracy is the disenfranchisement of regional and rural Australia. I led the recovery committee for the Currowan Bushfire, which devastated 82% of the Shoalhaven. City residents have more options: cheaper energy, better telecommunications, safer infrastructure. In regional areas, there are single roads in and out, vulnerable to disaster. Census data gathered in the months of August dictate whether or not we invest in telecommunications and power, which is totally inadequate for the number of people who visit regional and rural Australia in the summer months for Christmas holidays and in the winter months for skiing. The net result of that was that during that fire we had situations where if people could get to a petrol pump, they couldn't pump it because the power was out, and if they could pump it, they couldn't pay for it because the mobile phone network was out. Nothing has changed since. This neglect poses a threat to democracy, especially since 85% of national defence capabilities operate in those regions. People have lost trust in leadership.

**MB:** Thank you. That's a powerful point and an important one. I know how hard that work must have been and how deeply it affected those communities.

**Erica from RSA:** FOMO — fear of missing out — is a real threat to democracy. Academics call it "relative deprivation." It's when people believe they're missing out compared to others — that newer communities, for

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.moreincommon.com/about-us/our-dna/>

example, are getting better opportunities. Politicians can exploit this. The ultimate threat to democracy isn't technology, it's people. When politicians use deprivation narratives to win votes, how do we work with them to stop fuelling distrust in our institutions?

**MB:** I'll give one example that addresses both trust and policy. For years, infrastructure was planned based on political needs rather than public good. An independent authority was set up to prioritise projects — schools, hospitals, roads — transparently. Governments didn't have to follow it, but if they didn't, they had to explain why. It also quarantined funding for regional NSW. While not perfect, the mindset was to govern in the state's best long-term interest. When people see sensible, fair decisions, they gain trust. That approach helps.

**John Timmons:** Three-year terms lead to short-term policies and populism. The UK's five-year terms might be too long, but how can we move the federal government to four-year terms?<sup>9</sup>

**MB:** I can speak for McKinnon here. We're running a program on this, with Peter Shergold involved. Both major parties have said they're open to four-year terms. Under the current system: year one is for implementing promises, year two for action, and year three is an election campaign. It's chaos. Four-year terms offer stability, trust, and better governance. But no government wants to spend political capital on it — it's too easy to be accused of trying to stay in power longer. That's why groups outside the system must lead. If you can build bipartisan

support and engage the public with the real benefits, it can happen.

**Ian Walker, New Democracy:** Governments love regulation in areas like social media but seem devoted to self-regulation when it comes to democracy. As Jeni mentioned, innovation is key. Is it the role of groups like ours to disrupt that complacency?

**PS:** Yes, I believe it is. These pressures need to be applied to government and parliaments. Sometimes, we do it by demonstrating what works — you've done that through direct democracy initiatives. We must take responsibility for encouraging leaders to implement needed reforms. Most reforms should strengthen democratic processes not just during elections but every day of the year.

**Tibor Molnar, Sydney University:** I want to return to the forum title: "Threats to Democracy." I once heard Joe Hockey say Australia should "wind up the economy to create more jobs." That's backwards. You create jobs, and the economy grows. Similarly, democracy is a symptom of a healthy civic society. If you build an egalitarian, idealistic, functioning society, you get democracy for free. So perhaps we should be asking: what are the threats to civic society, not democracy? What fundamental issues do we need to address?

**MB:** Good point. I think they are connected, not separate.

**CS:** I would add that in the polycentric model discussed this morning, it's up to all of us to do what we can.

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<sup>9</sup> Of the world's 186 nations with active legislatures, just over half have five-year terms, and 40 per cent have four-year terms, according to Gary Nunn in the *SMH* of April 28, 2025, p.22. [Ed.]



**SC:** Spaces like this one — third spaces — are crucial. Thank you for organising it. This is how we address those threats.

**MB:** Agreed. You won't get everything resolved in one day, but collectively we've raised a broad range of ideas. We've identified threats and opportunities, and multiple stakeholders are engaged.

Let me finish by thanking Her Excellency the Governor for returning and for lending us her House. Thanks to all the staff — you did an amazing job. And congratulations to the Royal Society. These kinds of days are genuinely helpful. I've been challenged, and our future work will be shaped by today. The more people work together on these issues, the better chance we have of success. Thank you to everyone who participated.

