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Check against delivery

I don't like him but...

They were the words I heard spoken most often about PM John Howard. The 'but' was the most important word of all because what usually followed was 'he has the best interest of the country at heart' or 'he knows what he's doing' or something along similar lines.

Now, even his strongest critics long for the stability, sense of direction and conviction of his national stewardship.

So what's happened since then to result in what I call a crisis of confidence in politics and politicians?

The short answer is a lot ...we've had a lost decade of political non-achievement.

However, you may care to compare today with yesterday, few if any people feel or sense we are better off now rather than then.

Let's survey the wreckage.

Then we had zero net debt, in fact we had billions in the bank, now we have \$500 billion federally and more to come. That's 90K for every child in the country and no reasonable plan to pay it back.

Then we had Australia's second longest serving PM, now we haven't had a leader last even one term before getting turfed by his own team.

We had Leadership that was principled, credible and consistent. Unlike today when 'everything is on the table' as an excuse not to have to make a decision.

We had politicians who relished the battle of ideas rather than the battle of thought bubbles that seem to last less and less with each new round.

There was a steely resolve to pursue the right course of action, no matter the difficulty, because it was the right thing to do.

Then, words actually meant something rather than the Alice in wonderland vision of 'it means whatever I want it to mean'.

Have you noticed how the opposition, and sometimes the government now refer to savings? You might think that means they are going to spend less- after all that's what most families would think.

Strangely, in the blizzard world of modern politics savings actually means more taxes. That's right, their savings cost you more.

It's little wonder the people have stopped listening.

Put simply the political class has lost touch with the people they are meant to serve, and the people are no longer paying attention.

In fact, they are registering their protest at the contempt the major parties have shown the electorate by voting for a crossbench of loudmouths and shock jocks.

We have seen self-named vanity parties, devoid of principles but deluded by power, dictating the course of the nation.

And it's getting worse. What began with an assortment of the weird and wacky, has now become the political playpen of some unwelcome agendas.

For Australia's sake that needs to change.

Lest you think I am being a trifle alarmist, let me ask you to ponder this.

In 2004, John Howard ran in an election against Mark Latham. The opening statement of that campaign was 'this election is about who you can trust'.

Now consider which political party would credibly be able to adopt that mantra for themselves today? Liberals, Labor, greens, Hanson, Xenophon, Lambie, Hinch...

Respectfully, it is none of the above.

Let me give you just one example of the gulf between what politicians say and what they deliver.

Treasurer Wayne Swan promised a surplus of \$21.7 bn in 2009. It was imagined.

In 2010 and 2011 we were 'back to surplus' in 2012. More fiction.

In 2012 we were told the surplus would return in 2017.

Chris Bowen said the same in 2013.

The change of government initially promised a surplus in 2023 then it became 2024 and the most recent claim is a 'Return to balance' in 2021.

After that track record, I am sure you'll excuse my doubts.

So the problem is people don't trust our mainstream parties and are voting with a motley bunch of alternatives that aren't doing the nation any favours.

And now I have joined them. Jumped ship and become part of the problem many might say.

Unsurprisingly, I would posit that I have become part of the solution.

You see, I cannot see the voters lost to the major parties returning to them at any time soon. As soon as their chosen party of protest implodes, the disaffected seem to find another pop-up personality cult for their frustrations.

For many voters it seems more important who it's not rather than what they stand for.

And that is a potent cocktail with potential to make things even worse for all of us.

I believe there is a better way.

A path forward where principles are put before politics and where policies are more important than personalities.

And that's what Australian Conservatives are all about.

We want to make sure that there is a principled, credible, and stable alternative to the major parties available in the senate.

We want to provide the electorate with a consistent and predictable approach to policy making built on the tried and tested rather than the experimental.

And we have a clear plan to rebuild community confidence in politics and it starts with Bursting the Canberra Bubble.

It's a seven point plan that will deliver savings, transparency and accountability to the parliamentary process.

It begins with bringing politicians into the real world.

A couple of weeks ago, the parliament voted to remove the gold travel pass for retired politicians. It was a good start but the gravy train of post parliamentary benefits needs to be brought to a stop.

Is it reasonable that a politician can retire in their 30's and receive a tax payer funded pension from that point on?

I don't think so, and that is compounded when you consider that on the death of the former member, their designated spouse gets a hefty chunk of it for the remainder of their life.

So Australian Conservatives believe that no retirement benefits should be available to ex politicians until they reach the preservation age like the rest of us.

It's the same with ex-Prime Ministers. Just because you win the political hunger games doesn't mean you should automatically receive an office, chauffeur and travel at taxpayers' expense.

At the very least there needs to be a qualifying period of service as PM. I proposed a minimum of four years which would conveniently eliminate those who have delivered the problems of the last ten years.

We also need to clean up political donations. There is growing concern about the influence of large donors and foreign entities in our political process.

Some of these fears are unjustified but some are very real.

Australian Conservatives consider the solution reasonably straightforward.

Donations to political parties, candidates and associated political entities can only be made by individual citizens, capped at an annual amount and everything over the tax deductible threshold should be disclosed in 'real time'.

That approach also needs to be applied to the activist groups that seek to influence the political process.

The recent leaks from the Democratic Party in the United States demonstrated the co-ordinated global movement, funded by billionaire activists, to influence local politics. That should worry all of us.

The idea of transparency in political donations also needs to be extended to the running costs of political offices.

We owe taxpayers the ability to know exactly how every politician is spending their money. That spending needs to be available soon after it occurs rather than many months later in financial reports or by forcing journalists to dig it up using FOI requests.

Not surprisingly, I am sure the taxpayers won't like everything they see but the court of public opinion, aided by the opinions of the fourth estate, would quickly identify impudent spending.

Recent events involving state and federal politicians demonstrate that a number are doing the wrong thing but sometimes it takes years for them to be caught. We can't afford that any longer.

Perhaps optimistically, I think this could result in the spirit of competition between polities as they sought some advantage over their peers by saving taxpayers money!

Consider it the 'helicopter view of spending' where what your politician is costing you is searchable and disclosable in real time.

As a politician I can tell you it would make us all think twice about every expense.

That helicopter view of spending also needs to apply to government at large.

All agencies and departmental spending over a nominal level should be available in a publicly searchable national database that is simple to navigate and easy to use.

This means that all the yoga classes, corporate soirée's, gold plated coffee machines and fat-cat stamp duty rebates would be searchable and disclosable to all of us.

No more tedious estimates exploration where the 3 rules of the bureaucracy are they can't lie, they can't tell the truth and can't make the government look bad!

It's no surprise that FOI requests have grown massively in recent years because journalists, more than anyone, know how hard it can be to get information out of government.

More simply, taxpayers have a right to know how their taxes are spent.

Such a portal of spending accountability has been in the United States for many years. It cost a modest amount to set up and supporters claim the accountability it has delivered has resulted in billions in annual savings.

It works in the USA and it will work here too.

Transparency will help end the rorts, it will help end the waste and the cronyism in every single area of public expenditure.

It's also time for Federation reform...or more accurately restoring the constitutional boundaries that attach different responsibilities between the states and the commonwealth.

There is a needless and confusing duplication of operations between these two tiers of government. The public are sick of the buck passing and blame game about who needs to fix whatever particular mess.

It's Time to make the division of responsibilities very clear - for politicians and public alike.

Not only will that limit the size and scope and reach of the Federal government, it will actually strengthen state parliaments and focus state oppositions on achieving better outcomes for their state.

I expect it would also limit the commonwealth from expensive and wasteful boondoggles designed to prop up politically vulnerable seats at taxpayers' expense.

Which brings me to my next point.

We need serious parliamentary reform in this country.

The stalemate we currently have in the senate is a good example of an area in need of improvement and some would say modernisation.

The idea that a government faced with an uncooperative senate could convene a joint sitting of the parliament, to pass blocked legislation, without the need for a double dissolution election has a lot of merit.

Interestingly such a scenario probably wouldn't impact this parliament given the state of the House of Representatives. However it would be a step in the right direction and the long term interests of our country.

So too would be specific reform of the senate.

The 76 senators have an obligation to their state and also to their nation. Regrettably, these responsibilities are often corralled by the straitjacket of career advancement.

To enhance the power of the senate as a house of review, it makes sense for the executive government to be drawn solely from the House of Representatives. It won't remove the ambition but it will restore the senate to its primary role as a house of review representing individual state interests.

Perhaps more controversially, it's time to call time on the derided 'career politician'. That's the polly who goes to uni, salts the local branches, gets their first and only job as a political staffer and then makes the jump into elected office.

With limited life experience, their only goal is to stay in office as long as possible and climb the greasy pole to get as high as possible.

Term limits for politicians would change that mindset. Knowing they had a finite time in office, be it 6 or 12 years would focus the attention of doing something rather than being someone.

Political service would once again become a public service rather than a political career. In the words of one commentator "term limits reward real-world experience over backroom experience".

I have no doubt of the benefits of that change to our nation and the body politic.

Finally, it is time we held the politicians and public servants accountable for their claims. Nowhere is this more important than in the realm of our national accounts.

The last decade has done a disservice to our children and the generations to come. We have very little to show for the \$500 billion in debt and not much more to expect from the debts to come.

These debts are a result of poor policy initiatives and some silly spending decisions. These are directly attributable to politicians and the public service.

They conceive, create and commission the very programs that have let us down so badly.

They are the ones responsible for the financial projections that are like a mirage in the political desert.

Remember the promises of every treasurer since 2008 about the mythical surplus just around the corner.

Well it's time to have them put their money where their mouth is.

So when parliament resumes, I'll be introducing a motion that indicates to the independent politicians remuneration tribunal that politicians pay should be frozen until the budget returns to surplus.

Nothing forces politicians, particularly the senate cross bench, to grasp how their reactionary positions damage future generations than linking that damage to their own pay packets.

We simply cannot afford to keep paying annual bonuses to those responsible for decisions that have us trading at a loss.

Over the forward estimates this would save a modest \$4.7 million but it would sharpen the minds (and spending habits) of your elected representatives about the importance of balancing the budget and repaying the accumulated debt.

Moreover, if you want to really get serious, the same fate should befall all executive level public servants. If this were the case, a staggering \$568 million would be saved over the next four years.

Let's remember that some of these people are earning in excess of \$800k per year while every executive level public servant is earning well in excess of the average wage, supplemented by generous conditions, job security and superannuation.

If it's good enough for the average family and private sector worker to be asked to tighten their belts then it's good enough for the public sector too.

Ladies and gentlemen, I read recently some words attributed to Victor Hugo.

"You can resist an invasion of armies, but you cannot resist an invasion of ideas"

Australian Conservatives are about ideas, principled ideas which can make a real difference in the lives of all Australians.

It starts with restoring faith in our national governance and confidence in those who are elected to serve us.

These ideas matter and in today's broken Australian politics, their time has come.

It's time to burst the Canberra bubble.