Why Australians hate politicians: exploring the new public discontent

By Sally Young

Australians are more angry and dissatisfied with politicians than ever before. This might not be so alarming (after all, Australia has a long history of antipathy towards politicians) but for the worrying evidence which suggests that Australians have not only lost confidence in politicians, but also in the political system generally. A new level of cynicism can be readily observed in angry calls to talkback radio and caustic letters to the editor as well as empirically, in surveys, opinion polls and at the ballot box (where voting behaviour is increasingly volatile). While public opinion is never unanimous, the breadth and depth of this new discontent is quite remarkable — it cuts right across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Democracy requires eternal vigilance but there is a difference between healthy scepticism and corrosive cynicism. A sceptic may finally be persuaded by the facts, but the cynic, never. Widespread political cynicism has the potential to diminish political participation and erode the quality of democracy. Central to democracy is the notion of the public interest, which requires trust. As Al Gore states, ‘democracy stands or falls on a mutual trust — government’s trust of the people and the people’s trust of the governments they elect’ (Gore 1994, p. 646).

Australia is not alone. The U.S., Canada, the U.K., Italy, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Ireland,
Germany and Japan are also experiencing unprecedented discontent with their elected leaders (Nye, Zelikow and King 1997, pp. 1–2; Kingmann and Fuchs 1995). This is part of a broader phenomenon in which trust in all institutions is declining. People have not only lost confidence in politicians but also in bank managers, union leaders, lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists (Brown 1999, p. 15).

In Australia, three main suspects accuse each other of causing the new discontent: the public, the media and politicians. Politicians generally blame the media for fuelling the new cynicism but also point to the public and their unrealistically high expectations of politicians. Journalists blame the politicians — their lack of leadership, policy failures and personal indiscretions. The public, naturally enough, condemns the politicians who have let them down, but also, and somewhat surprisingly, blames the media — as the media is seen to be ‘in cahoots’ with the politicians. It is appropriate to begin with these three actors in order to uncover what is really driving the new public cynicism, before moving on to canvass some methods for rebuilding trust.

The public

It may seem strange to consider the public a ‘suspect’ in causing its own cynicism but this is exactly the argument that some politicians and political scientists have made when they claim that Australians expect too much from their politicians. This is not a new argument. W. K. Hancock observed nearly 70 years ago that: ‘Australian democracy has come to look upon the state as a vast public utility, whose duty it is to provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number’ (cited in Woodward et al 1997, p. 244). More recently, Ian McAllister has argued that politics is an activity that Australians tolerate ‘only so long as it is able to deliver the economic rewards necessary to maintain a comfortable standard of living’ (Woodward et al 1997, p. 265). According to proponents of this utilitarian view, Australians have ‘come to expect’ that the government will ensure their jobs and standards of living (Walter 1998, p. 207; Woodward et al 1997, p. 245).6

This begs the question: if Australians only tolerate politicians as long as they ‘deliver’ the appropriate economic
‘rewards’ (that is, jobs and decent living standards), what happens when politicians are unable to deliver? According to many politicians and political scientists, it is this very issue which is driving the discontent.

To put it simply, the utilitarian expectations of many Australians are not being met. Although the Australian economy is doing well, many Australians are not (Suter 1999, p. 137). Living standards have consistently declined since the post-war boom. Incomes have grown slowly and become less equal (Lawrence 1997, p. 117). Unemployment, youth suicide, crime and poverty are all visible signs of decline. The problem, according to politicians, is that they are no longer capable (if indeed they ever were) of meeting the high expectations of the Australian electorate. In the context of globalisation, governments are less able to ‘determine the economic fortunes of their citizens’ and, consequently, less able to ensure their jobs and living standards (Lawrence 1997, p. 131).

For several commentators, the decline in confidence in institutions is a direct result of the economic slowdown that occurred in so many countries after the end of the post-World War Two boom (Nye et al 1997). But economic explanations alone are not sufficient. The breadth and depth of the discontent suggests we need an explanation which is not only economic, but also more general, broad and ideological. (After all, trust in all institutions has declined.) Robert Inglehart argues that a declining respect for authority is part of a shift in values brought about by changing lifestyles (Inglehart 1997, p. 217). That is, as people’s basic survival needs are met, they increasingly focus on achieving a better ‘quality of life’ and their expectations of governments rise accordingly.

Aside from policy expectations, people also have expectations about the personal qualities, behaviour and ethics of politicians. These expectations can be high indeed, and they can also be contradictory. For example, people want politicians to negotiate and compromise but not to be weak; to be strong but not arrogant; to be smart but not a ‘smart Alec’! Indeed, studies have confirmed that most of us expect politicians to live up to a far higher standard of ethics and morality than we apply to ourselves.
Reasonable or not, citizens carry with them expectations, however rudimentary, about political institutions. For some people, the political process lives up to their expectations, but for many others there is a discrepancy between what they think Parliament and politicians ought to be like and what they are actually like (Kimball and Patterson 1997, p. 701). Bound up in this gap between promise and performance is the importance of people's perceptions. When people assess the performance of politicians, they do so on the basis of subjective perceptions and not on any straightforward response to objective performance.\(^{10}\)

This is because there are no straightforward, objective 'performance indicators' which the Australian public can use to gauge the performance of their politicians. For example, there is no annual national address in which the Prime Minister outlines the state of the nation. Such an event could provide a set opportunity for the public to assess political performance. It would, however, have to use concrete and comparable statistics (such as unemployment, interest rates, and measures of the state of health and education) rather than emotive claims about 'achievements'. (Ideally, it would also allow a forum for questioning and debate). There is a dire need for information of this nature that allows more objective assessment of performance. As it stands, however, people's subjective perceptions are heavily influenced by subjective indicators and, as Papadikis notes, 'this suggests the likely influence of two factors on confidence in institutions namely, the changing role of the media and television’ (Papadikis 1999).

**The media**

Michael Wooldridge and Gareth Evans have argued that the media is a primary factor in causing public cynicism (Wooldridge 1998, p. 184; Evans 1998). While politicians are well-known for accusing the media of unfair reporting, in this case, many academics and social commentators have agreed (including in the unequivocally titled article, ‘A Generation of Vipers: Journalists and the New Cynicism’).\(^{11}\) Even some journalists admit that media reporting about politics fosters public cynicism (Simons 1999).
In many respects the media is an obvious suspect and not least because a powerful, uncensored media is common to the many countries experiencing public discontent. However, we must approach this notion of media responsibility cautiously because it is disempowering to hold the media solely responsible for somehow ‘producing’ people’s discontent. People are not mindless, empty vessels waiting to be filled with media views. Recent research shows that people actively select and judge from what the media is putting out (Bessant and Watts 1999, p. 367) and that what people bring to the media is often more important in forming their opinions of politicians than what the media actually presents (Weaver 1996, p. 43).

The media is only one influence amongst a suite of factors which influence people’s views about politicians (including partisanship, family, school and personal contact with politicians). And yet it is principally through the media that voters hear about politics (Forrest and Marks 1999). Few Australians have direct experience of politics. For example, only 2 per cent have ever helped a political candidate or attended a political meeting (McAllister 1998, p. 18). For the majority of Australians, the media remains the primary source of information about politics.

Despite this reliance on the media, many Australians seem to hold the media in as much disrepute as the political system (Brown 1999, p. 15). In a 1991 Saulwick Poll, the same amount of people who had ‘not much’ confidence in the political system (48.5 per cent), said they also had ‘not much’ confidence in the media (Saulwick 1991). This reminds us that the new cynicism is a wide phenomenon that is not confined to politics. However, for some people, distrust of the media and politicians goes hand in hand and is part of a perception that the media and politicians are ‘in it together’. This mind set was illustrated most starkly in the views of Pauline Hanson’s followers, for whom the alliance between the media and mainstream politics was obvious.12

The media is often blamed for fuelling public cynicism—but how does the media do this? Sometimes the message is quite direct. Coverage of the 1999 Victorian State election included updates about election promises headlined ‘pork-barrelling’ (‘who is promising what’) and the coverage included statements that ‘between now and election day, Victorian
politicians will promise anything to woo your vote...’ (Herald-Sun 1999, p. 15). Some media are also more directive than others. Talkback radio in particular thrives on discrediting the political system (Adams and Burton 1997). More often than not, however, cynicism is just part and parcel of the way in which the media reports politics.

From an analysis of the print media over 1999, I observed several common media representations of politicians. One of the most endemic is that of the ‘professional politician’. Insidiously ambitious, the professional politician will do anything to woo your vote and therefore spends much time and money (often taxpayers’ money) poring over polls in order to learn what you think and recycle it back to you. In the ‘contest’ or ‘horse-race’ view, politics is represented in the media as an adversarial competition in which politicians vie fiercely for power — not for the power to do good but power for its own sake. Related to this is a new media focus on ‘political strategy’, including campaign tactics and pre-selection contests. Increasingly, the public gets to see more of the ‘grubby daily business’ of politics, including the tricks and tactics politicians use in order to win votes. They are also seeing more and more of the ‘private lives’ of politicians — their families, social lives, habits and peccadilloes.

This media focus on what goes on ‘behind the scenes’ parallels media reporting in the U.S. But it is not the only factor which seems to represent an ‘Americanisation’ of Australian politics. Australian politics has become increasingly ‘presidentialised’ through an increased media focus on individuals — particularly leaders. Howard is portrayed as the ‘face of the GST’ just as Pauline Hanson is used to symbolise the debate about race and immigration. As the media focuses more attention on an individual, it allows far more scope for that individual to disappoint — to ‘trip up’ under the glare of media scrutiny. It also takes the focus away from parties and from policy, leaving the public with an impression that politics is about individuals and conflict between them.

Although there is no evidence that official corruption has risen, scandals increasingly fill the headlines (Patterson 1996, p. 19). Here we can see several sub-variations: ‘the corrupt politician’ who misuses public office in order to line his own pocket, the ‘greedy politician’ who does not need to be
corrupt but just uses the numerous ‘perks of office’ to rip off the taxpayers, and finally the ‘money waster’ who continually wastes taxpayers’ money on frivolous and silly things. Of all the messages which the media sends, this suggestion that politicians cannot be trusted seems to be the most prevalent and the most accepted.

Some of these representations of politicians have an historical basis. The image of the fat, greedy politician is as old as the profession itself, and the infamous baby-kissing politician was a precursor to the tactics of today’s ‘professional politician’. However, some of the other representations stem from, or are being enhanced by, broader trends affecting the media. These trends include the globalisation of the media, the concentration of ownership, the growth of media empires, and technology. One of the primary purposes of the new media is to ‘sell’ (Lawe Davis 1999, p. 53). This has fostered a convergence between politics and entertainment — a focus on politicians as celebrities, the sense of a permanent campaign and a shift to editorial commentary which has seen journalism (particularly political news) become less focused on events and facts and more concentrated on analysis and interpretation. Politicians increasingly have less chance to speak for themselves.

While media reporting does not necessarily ‘create’ public cynicism, the way the media frames and presents politics frames the fire — it stimulates and heightens cynicism. There are ways in which reporters and editors can minimise this (for example, by focusing less on scandals or on the personal lives of politicians) but outlining any prescriptions opens up an important debate about the media’s watchdog role and whether reducing the amount of criticism would also stifle scrutiny. Ideally, it would be possible to improve the quality of political reporting without diminishing necessary scrutiny. Reporters might consider moving beyond the stock standard representations — to show cooperation between politicians as well as competition and by encompassing more positive representations about politicians (their long hours and community involvement, for example). However, in today’s new media, any change in the manner of reporting politics will only work if it ‘sells’ as well as the old reporting style based on conflict and scandal.
Politicians

When the media is accused of being responsible for fuelling public cynicism, journalists often respond by counter-accusing politicians. Reporters, they argue, are merely doing their duty when they report that politicians waste public money and break election promises: it is the politicians and their behaviour which has really put people off (Donovan 1999, p. 13; Reider 1996). For many journalists, media reporting is only a mirror and the real key to public cynicism is the poor quality of our politicians (Grattan 1998; Kelly 1998, p. 21)

Years of travel rorts, credit card misuse, exorbitant superannuation payouts and broken election promises have confirmed to a weary public that politicians really are ‘liars, cheats and scumbags’. There is a widely held perception that politicians waste taxpayers’ money, have too many perks, do not listen to the public (except at elections or via consultants and polls), are beholden to big business and/or minorities (i.e. take care of everyone except the ‘ordinary Australian’), break promises, and only look after themselves. This image has surely been magnified by the media but politicians and their behaviour are still at the crux of it.

There are two main ways politicians have failed to meet public expectations. Firstly, in the policy realm, politicians have failed to ‘fix’ social ills and to ensure jobs and living standards. Secondly, in the personal realm, politicians have behaved badly, failing to live up to that prototypical image of MPs as dedicated, hard-working, honest and respected public servants.

Policy failures

In the policy realm, different commentators have agreed that politicians and their policies have caused public anger, but there are vastly different views about which politicians and which policies have failed. Many on the right, including Tony Abbott and P. P. McGuinness, blame the political correctness and ‘pandering to minorities’ of the Keating era for people’s loss of faith in politicians (Abbott 1998; McGuinness 1998). For those more to the left, people’s anger and exclusion is seen to be more the result of economic rationalism, cutbacks and globalisation (e.g. McGregor 1997; Manne 1998).
For some commentators, the Hawke-Keating years are at the root of public cynicism (Pilger 1996, p. 16). But while it is true that attitudes to politicians changed most markedly during this period, this was also the case in many other countries, including the U.S. and Britain. It is therefore unreasonable to place all of the blame for public discontent on an individual like Keating or even on a particular party. It is necessary to instead look more broadly at factors which can help us explain why public confidence in politicians across so many countries declined in the 1980s.

Most significantly, American commentators Bob Edwards and Michael Foley identify three main policy factors — policies which governments in many liberal capitalist democracies across the world introduced during this era, largely in response to globalisation. These are: economic re-structuring; the dismantling of the welfare state; and the devolution of government. Edwards and Foley note that ‘ferocious economic restructuring overturned communities and shattered the work lives and expectations of millions over the past 20 years...’ (1997, p. 674).

In many countries, the policy prescriptions of economic re-structuring, dismantling of the welfare state and the devolution of government received widespread acceptance. In a two-party system, for example, the policies often received bipartisan support and were adopted by political parties which had formerly been identified with very disparate views. As a result, political parties became less differentiated. This has been compounded by ‘modern’ views about political strategy, which seek to downplay ideology in an attempt to appeal to the maximum number of voters. For example, in Australia the major parties have sought to become ‘catch-all’ parties — deliberately cultivating policies, leaders and strategies which will maximise their popularity with the greatest number of voters. But as the parties increasingly resemble each other in their aim for the ‘centre’, voters have become increasingly confused about what they stand for. People no longer see any great differences between the major parties and are less inclined to think that their vote matters (Bean et al 1998). ‘Whoever you vote for, a politician always wins’ sums up the cynicism many Australians now feel.¹⁵
Personal failings

We cannot discount that public cynicism stems in part from the perceived ‘bad behaviour’ of politicians. One of the most visible signs of politicians behaving badly is also one of the most common images: that of Parliament at Question Time. Mackay notes that the parliamentary behaviour of Australia’s politicians ‘is no longer regarded as a joke... it is rapidly approaching the point where parliamentary behaviour is regarded as a national disgrace...’ (Mackay 1993, p. 179). Negative political advertising (such as the ‘Guilty Party’ advertisements used by the Victorian Liberal Party in the 1992 and 1996 Victorian State election campaigns, or the Keating ‘Get a job’ jibe advertisement used by the federal Liberal Party in the 1996 federal election campaign) also has a detrimental effect on public perceptions of politics. Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar (1995) argue that negative political advertising can even cause voters to become ‘repulsed’ by the political system.

If Australia’s professional politicians follow the lead of American ones (and they often do), they will begin to use personal tactics more and more. Finsberg and Shefter (1999) call this ‘post-electoral politics’ in which media revelations, parliamentary investigations and judicial proceedings replace elections as the primary tools of political competition. We can already see the beginning of this in the 1997–8 ‘travel rorts’ scandals and the recent attempt by the Federal Liberal Government to commence an investigation into Paul Keating’s 1994 piggery deal.

Putting media influence aside, the culture of cynicism towards politicians has a firm basis in real failures and real problems in the way politicians now practise politics. ‘Big vision’ policies and policies which have been badly explained or debated have alienated and angered many people. Governments seem unable to meet the array of competing social objectives and the needs and expectations of a diverse electorate. Policies such as privatisation have failed to deliver the promised rewards and all politicians have come to seem the same as the policy gaps between parties have narrowed. In the personal realm, politicians seem childish, ill-mannered and even corrupt, and the political tactics which politicians
use are increasingly unseemly. Politicians can begin to remedy this by changing their parliamentary behaviour, minimising the use of negative political advertising and resisting the temptation to follow American-style post-electoral politics. Of course, the simplest remedy is also the most challenging—politicians can regain public confidence by making good policy and explaining it well.

Good policy needs to be based on long-term goals and the national interest. It should be informed by public input but also explained to the public in a manner centred on information and education (rather than emotive sales techniques). Political parties might consider providing forums such as conferences or summits, which allow people to air issues, examine problems and recommend solutions. New technology (particularly the Internet) has fantastic potential to allow direct participation in such forums for those 98 per cent of Australians who do not attend political meetings. By using new technology and media, and presenting political issues in a different manner, it may be also be possible to reach younger Australians (who traditionally have shown little interest in ‘conventional’ politics).

Another option is the use of slogans by politicians, such as ‘policies rather than personalities’, ‘scepticism rather than cynicism’, and ‘civilising global capital’, Mark Latham’s eloquent phrase capturing the idea of how politicians can inform people about their position and opportunities in relation to globalisation. Australian politicians might also consider following the lead of the Blair Government to ‘promise only what we can deliver and deliver what we promise’. They could also take responsibility for communicating their achievements, ideas and policies and tell their own side of the story through the use of direct mediums, such as talkback radio, e-mail and web pages.

Rebuilding trust

A certain level of mistrust of politicians is a long-standing and healthy feature of Australian life but we have seen how healthy scepticism has changed into deep distrust, cynicism and even anger. What can we conclude about this phenomenon?
Firstly, we can now say conclusively that no single actor (or single factor) is responsible. Several different things are happening at once and the causes of public discontent are multiple and complex. There have been deep structural changes in social and cultural attitudes over the past three decades, including a trend towards the individual, which have undercut the authority of all institutions — not just government and politics. The rise of post-modern values has led to a shift in people's expectations, needs and desires. We also cannot discount the influence of economic factors. For many people, living standards have declined (or just as importantly, are perceived to have declined). The economic slowdown, wage compression, globalisation and middle-class lay-offs have hurt a lot of people and have affected general confidence in government and politicians.

Public 'moods' are never static nor universal and this is particularly true today when we are living in a very volatile political culture. While this volatility makes it difficult to 'keep up' with public opinion, we can take hope from new research that indicates the darkest phase of public cynicism in Australia may already have passed. We hope that this is the case and we will return to a more healthy scepticism as opposed to bleak cynicism. However, it is still very important that we understand this social phenomenon, as some of the changes in social and cultural attitudes which accompanied the rise in public cynicism are here to stay. These changes are going to force us to rethink public expectations, to question the role of the media and to ask what we want of politics, politicians and policy. This chapter has hopefully provided a starting point in this process.
impossible as many globalisation writers contend, merely more difficult.

11. Vertical Fiscal Imbalance (VFI) is the name given to the situation where the Commonwealth of Australia has power over most revenue-raising measures (particularly income taxation), but the States have the responsibility for service provision of public services, most notably health and education.

12. For a discussion on the role and impact of telecommunications and information economy developments on the concept of community, the implication on the high cost of 'social space' faced by those living in rural and regional areas, and the role of public policy in relation to these issues see Rural Policy Research Unit, www.rurpri.org/.

13. For a critical view of the claim that a new and normatively compelling concept of equality based on social capability will renew the social democratic agenda, see Watts (1999).

14. Social capital is one element in a wide variety of elements that make up the multidimensional nature of 'social exclusion'. For a discussion of social exclusion as a framework for social policy analysis, see Jones and Smyth (1999).

15. The financial difficulties were the result of the Commonwealth Government withdrawing funding. The Commonwealth's position was that funding was provided to give communities a 'taste' of technology and that centres were intended to be self-funding after twelve months. This position totally ignores the financial reality of these enterprises. The Commonwealth tactic of refusing to commit to recurrent funding for projects and leaving the States to pick up the funding gap is well-known to those who work in intergovernmental financial relations. In the case of OACs, the Tasmanian Government has increased its funding contribution and is waiting for the Commonwealth to do the same.

16. There are a number of democracy online interactive projects that the interested reader may like to further examine — see Minnesota E-Democracy www.e-democracy.org or United Kingdom Citizen Online Democracy www.democracy.org.uk.

17. Segell (1997) identifies four models of electronic democracy: the Electronic Bureaucracy Model, the Information Management Model, the Populist Model and the Civil Society Model.

Chapter 12: Why Australians hate politicians: exploring the new public discontent

1. The classic American work on this topic is by E. J. Dionne Jr., Why Americans Hate Politics, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1991.

2. Up to 66 per cent of Australians do not trust the government
(McAllister 1997, p. 248). Over 60 per cent believe that politicians make promises in election campaigns which they have no intention of keeping (D716 Saulwick Poll, March 1990, ssda.anu.edu.au). Social researcher Hugh Mackay finds that the level of cynicism towards politicians is ‘bordering on contempt’ (Mackay 1998, p. 39).

3. In a Saulwick Poll (1991) 61 per cent of Australians said they had ‘not much’ or ‘no’ confidence in the political system.


5. A white-collar worker seems just as likely to be dissatisfied as an unemployed person. The difference lies in the depth of their discontent, with the unemployed and those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum seemingly the most discontented (Papadikis 1999, p. 88).

6. In 1993, Clive Bean found that 77 per cent of Australians surveyed agreed that the Government ‘has a duty to see that everybody has a job and a decent standard of living’ (Bean 1993, p. 65).


8. A 1994 Canadian survey found that most respondents saw nothing wrong with cheating on their expense accounts or evading taxes but were appalled by the suggestion that politicians might do likewise (Wilson-Smith 1995).

9. Such expectations may develop in the form of fuzzy images of the institution as a whole, arise from very partisan or ideological perspectives or from specific socialisation such as school textbooks or first-hand contact with an MP (Kimball and Patterson 1997, p. 701).

10. An objective assessment is made impartially on the basis of outward things which actually exist rather than on thoughts and feelings which can be illusory, personal or individual (subjective).


12. Particularly in the infamous ‘xenophobia/please explain’ exchange with Tracey Curro of ‘60 Minutes’.

13. In a 1996 survey, six out of ten people said they did not believe it made much difference who they voted for (McAllister 1998, p. 18).

Chapter 13: Education for democratic citizenship: the importance of civics education in the era of economic rationalism

1. This socialising process sees the political identity of the individual undergo a transition from being under the power of a sovereign authority (e.g. teacher, nation state, Queen, etc.) to