

## Careful with that democracy, it's fragile

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There are plenty of things to be pleased about in the centenary of Federation, but the state of our democracy isn't one of them.

There are many obvious problems. Public confidence in politicians is at profoundly low levels, and worst in young people. Membership of political parties is declining. Governments act and think like commercial corporations, while citizens are transformed into customers. Elections are increasingly "policy-free", and those policy commitments that do see daylight are soon discarded as "non-core" due to the inevitable "financial black holes".

A sense of the futility of politics as a constructive enterprise, a collective responsibility, is widespread. The political process seems to have jettisoned public interest for self-interest. An era of punitive, unstable electoral politics seems to be dawning.

These things are all bad enough, but our apathy and complacency about the state of our democracy may be a worse problem in the long run. On ceremonial occasions, we are ritually assured we have one of the "oldest and best democracies in the world", and we accept it, despite the evidence.

We seem to think of our democracy as something unchanging, like Phar Lap in the museum. The notion of democracy as a dynamic idea, that needs debate and innovation, that extends beyond institutions like parliament and into workplaces, communities and daily lives, seems just too difficult.

We have forgotten that democracy is a relatively recent arrival, which took centuries of struggle to achieve and needs constant renewal to survive. And when occasionally we do stumble across a historical opportunity for national debate about our democracy and society, such as the republic issue, it is soon mugged and sanitised by the usual short-term operators.

All of this is strange, and somewhat hypocritical, when you think how often we are told that democracy is fundamental to our "way of life" and that, periodically, thousands of young men are supposedly sent away to die for it. If it is so important, why do we take so little care of it?

So should we conclude that democracy doesn't really matter, or that the problem is too hard to fix?

When ideas are important to people in power, things really can get done. In the past 20 years, the shape of Australian government has been profoundly changed by a simple idea,

that of the market, and its relatives, privatisation and competition. This idea has been promoted energetically and systematically. Commissions of inquiry were set up into the efficiency of almost every industry and every government program; hundreds of expensive consultant reports were produced; and these led to legislation, organisational closures, sales and restructurings, budget changes, program cuts and human dislocation on an awesome scale.

Yet, for the most part, this big idea did not prove popular with the Australian people, when they could see its effects in practice. From banking and electricity privatisation to school closures and the GST, the people consistently gave the market the thumbs-down, no matter how much money was spent promoting it. Indeed, there has hardly been a single major policy initiative over the past 15 years that was truly popular, that captured the public imagination and not just its hip pocket.

Now stop for a moment and imagine that the same determination, energy and planning was applied to another idea - only this time an idea that the people support: that is, democracy.

Imagine a national commission of inquiry to examine every aspect of democracy. Imagine hearings and consultations all over the country to find out why we don't like our politicians and why we don't value the parliament more than the MCG. Imagine special reports on local democracy commissioned by communities and schools, and the enactment of legislative guidelines to ensure more effective democracy in the government, the economy and the community. Imagine the adoption of a national, long-term democracy strategy.

Sounds like a pipe dream? Maybe it does, except that one country is doing precisely this: Sweden. Concerned about the same democratic problems, but recognising that "everybody shares a collective responsibility for this trend", they set up the Government Commission on Swedish Democracy. This led to a national consultation on democracy and citizen participation and, last year, to a long-term national strategy to enhance democracy, *Time for Democracy*.

The Swedes too were celebrating an important national milestone, the 80th anniversary of universal suffrage, and they did it with substance, not just style. Is there some lesson for us here?

It's time for an Australian Democracy Commission.