

# The declining reputation of politicians: is it deserved?

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*The reputation of politicians is low and, poll data suggests, has been declining. Part of the cause derives from their own behaviour, and the special benefits to which they are entitled. It also derives from what they say about one another, as in debate about introducing a republic. It may likewise be partly attributable to unrealistic expectations by the community.*

Media outlets as diverse as *The Australian*, *Reader's Digest*, *Herald-Sun*, *A Current Affair* and *The Bulletin* often tell us what the Australian public thinks of its politicians.<sup>1</sup> They remind us that elected representatives are less trusted than marketers, psychologists, lawyers and journalists.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of which poll you refer to, politicians are among the least trusted group in society.

Politicians largely blame the media for their poor reputation and the public for expecting and demanding more than they are capable of delivering. The media blames the politicians — after all, they only report what politicians do. The community blames politicians because they do not deliver on their promises, 'feather their own nests' and put party interests before the interests of those they are elected to represent.<sup>3</sup> These vantage-point explanations largely seek to displace blame. However, there is an element of truth in all of them. This article examines the degree to which media coverage of politicians and the parliament; the conduct

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this article politicians will be defined as members of the Commonwealth and state parliaments.

<sup>2</sup> See *Reader's Digest*, February 2001 survey on trust, published in the *Reader's Digest*, August 2001, 95–111.

<sup>3</sup> S. Young, 'Why Australians hate politicians: exploring the new public discontent' in D. Glover and G. Patmore, eds, *Labour Essays: For the People: Reclaiming our Government*, Drummond Publishing, Melbourne, 2001, 171–82, 216–17, 235–7.

of members of parliament (MPs); and unrealistic public expectations have contributed to the decline in politicians' reputations. It concludes by examining whether our elected representatives deserve the reputation they do *not* enjoy.

### ***The media: are the politicians right?***

#### **The polls**

A variety of opinion polls are used by the media to remind citizens constantly that they do not rate their elected representatives very highly. But is the methodology used to arrive at these findings always reliable? In some instances it is. For example, the Morgan Poll, which has been scientifically measuring public opinion for more than 50 years has rated politicians for honesty and ethics since 1976. Their findings show that the proportion of Australians who believe Commonwealth and state politicians have 'high' or 'very high' standards of honesty and ethics has declined during the past twenty five years. In 1976 twenty one per cent of people thought state politicians were honest and ethical, and nineteen per cent thought Commonwealth politicians were. By 2000 those figures had fallen to twelve and eleven per cent respectively.<sup>4</sup>

But many of the polls conducted by media outlets for self-reporting purposes are not subjected to the same methodological rigour as the Morgan Poll. For example, in research for this article I accessed the *Sydney Morning Herald's* web page (24 August, 2001) where I was invited to 'Vote' on the question 'how do you rate politicians' behaviour'? Under the sub-heading 'Party political attacks: How do they make politicians look?', the options were 'Tough, Righteous, Irritating or Trivial'.<sup>5</sup> This type of poll is flawed in a number of ways, as are similar surveys conducted by commercial current affair programs and radio 'shock jocks'.<sup>6</sup>

The problem for politicians is that media outlets that conduct unreliable polls inform their readers and viewers of the results, often with great fan-fare. What they fail to do is explain why the findings are unreliable.<sup>7</sup> Despite being flawed, the message from these polls helps to form the public's perception of politicians.

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<sup>4</sup> Morgan Poll, 'Finding No. 3349', The Roy Morgan Research Centre, Sydney, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The results of this survey were Tough 27; Righteous 66; Irritating 497 and Trivial 487.

<sup>6</sup> The options available to those who participated in the survey were limiting and the categories ambiguous. 'Tough' is a word with positive and negative interpretations but there is no explanation as to how the pollster wants the voter to interpret it. Also, a participant could vote as many times as they wanted. They could spend all day voting 'Trivial', whatever that is supposed to mean. Commercial current affairs programs also use this style of polling. They will run an often emotive story and immediately after ask viewers to phone a number to register a yes/no vote about a group or issue that was the focus of the story.

<sup>7</sup> Unless a person has undertaken a research methods course they are unlikely to understand the importance of issues such as reliability, validity and representative sampling when conducting surveys.

### Cause for complaint?

Politicians complain that they are often subjected to biased journalism, which treats them as a homogeneous group and portrays all politicians in a bad light. Leak's article *Us vs Them* in the *Weekend Australian* in March 2001 lends weight to their claim.<sup>8</sup> His piece is best described as 'shock jock' print media journalism. It presents what is an unbalanced attack on politicians in general.

Leak begins by explaining that while '... politics has never attracted the finest minds, today it does not even attract mediocre ones'. However, he notes political life does hold '... an irresistible attraction for spivs, charlatans, grandstanders, dilettantes and liars'. The article, which continues in this vein, is extreme and not all stories in the media are as vitriolic or biased. Steketee in the same newspaper on the same day, and on the same page as Leak, also addresses the issue of politicians' reputations.<sup>9</sup> His article points out that Australians' dislike of their elected representatives is nothing new; rather, it is part of the country's rich and irreverent culture. What is new, he explains, is that the confrontational nature of politics and all it involves is now watched and listened to by a far larger audience than in the past.

The Leak and Steketee articles illustrate nicely that the media does not speak with one voice. While some journalists such as Leak berate politicians, others such as Steketee offer reasoned argument when assessing the role and reputation of politicians. Journalists such as Tim Colebatch go so far as to warn other journalists and the public that the cynical approach of talkback politics and commentators 'who argue by abuse rather than logic' are increasing the community's level of cynicism about politicians and 'poisoning politics'. We should, he argues, 'all recognize the dangers and retreat'.<sup>10</sup>

Even though politicians blame the media for the growing public cynicism toward them, research indicates that the public are discerning when it comes to the media: they do not believe all that they read.<sup>11</sup>

The public consciously selects and forms their own opinion about the media's message; they do not simply accept it.<sup>12</sup> Nor is the media the sole source of influence on people's opinions. The family, school, working environment, peers, significant others and personal contact with politicians influence how people view members of Parliament.<sup>13</sup> It may be true to claim that the media influences what people talk about, but this does not mean it influences how they think.

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<sup>8</sup> B. Leak, 'Us and Them', *Weekend Australian*, 24-25 March, 2001, 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> M. Steketee, 'Cynics and Politicians', *Weekend Australian*, 24-25 March, 2001, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> T. Colebatch, 'Our cynicism is poisoning politics', *The Age*, 20 March 2001, 15.

<sup>11</sup> J. Schultz, *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media*, CUP, Cambridge, 1998, 69-94.

<sup>12</sup> I. Ward, *Politics of the Media*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1995, 23-25.

<sup>13</sup> Schultz, *loc. cit.*; Ward, *loc. cit.*

When arguing that the media is largely responsible for their poor reputation, politicians need to remember that the public is as cynical about the media as they are about politicians. In 2000 the Morgan Poll found that only fourteen per cent of people thought talkback radio announcers had high or very high standards of honesty and ethics. For television reporters the figure was twelve per cent and newspaper journalists rated the second lowest of all occupations included in the survey. Only seven per cent thought they were honest and ethical.<sup>14</sup> These figures coupled with the arguments raised above suggest that politicians may be crediting the media with powers and abilities they do not have.

The media may be able to set the agenda in the short term but it is primarily reactive. It overwhelmingly responds to economic, social and political events by reporting them while they are occurring or after they have occurred. The exception is investigative journalism. It can create the news; however, only a minority of journalists engage in investigative journalism.

But even though the media primarily reports events, if its focus is too biased and too narrow it can affect people's perceptions of institutions and how they work. The televising of parliament is a good example of the latter.

### **Democratic reform: unintended consequences**

On a positive note, television has made parliament more accessible to the people. One British peer goes so far as argue that the televising of parliament is a return to Athenian style democracy because it allows all citizens to 'observe the legislative process in action'.<sup>15</sup> It has also widened the range of people who are interested in parliament and increased the public's awareness of parliament as an institution.<sup>16</sup>

Others fear that televising of parliamentary proceedings (Question Time and the occasional parliamentary committee hearing) has changed how the public views parliament as an institution and has affected the behaviour of politicians. Steketee admits that the media's focus on what he describes as 'the drama of politics' creates the impression that politicians spend their time in combat with each other.<sup>17</sup> What we rarely see, hear or read, he reminds us, are stories about politicians adopting a bipartisan approach to legislation, working productively, in the public interest, on parliamentary committees, or working in their electorate. Nor do we hear very much about the majority of politicians, the backbenchers.

Steketee's views echo those of researchers such as Norton who argues that the media gives a distorted impression of political life and exhibits only a superficial

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<sup>14</sup> Morgan Poll, *loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> S. Franks and A. Vandermark, 'Televising Parliament: Five Years On', *Parliamentary Affairs* 48(1): 70, January 1995.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> M. Steketee, *loc. cit.*

interest in parliament.<sup>18</sup> By concentrating on personal scandals and the highly partisan Question Time the public gets the impression that that is what political life is all about. But, as Norton points out, the media's fixation on Question Time is 'grossly disproportionate to the parliamentary time that the event occupies . . . and to the range of activities undertaken . . .' by Members of Parliament.<sup>19</sup>

Television also influences the way in which politicians behave in parliament. One British backbencher admits to deliberately choosing words that were 'slightly cheeky and funny' in the hope that they would be taken up by the media. Her hopes were realised. 'The whole house roared' with laughter at what she said and the media coverage was such that 'every pub in the land was talking about [her] that night'.<sup>20</sup> By recognising that television coverage is motivated by what makes good television — what will best entertain the viewers — not what will best inform, this politician received a level of coverage usually denied a backbencher.

The problem with such an approach is that parliamentary business is reduced to what entertains. This type of behaviour can lower the level at which debate takes place; in the long term it will do little to enhance the standing of the parliament or the reputation of politicians.

Similar attention-seeking behaviour sometimes occurs when backbenchers abuse their position on committees in order to enhance their public profile. Their tactics can include being obnoxious to people called before the committee and to the chairperson. The behaviour of these backbenchers, who constitute a very small minority of elected representatives, does nothing to enhance the standing of politicians. But it does make for good television. This 'look at me' type behaviour entertains, whereas a committee comprised of a group of politicians from various political parties wading diligently through a complicated issue in a bipartisan fashion does not.

While many politicians simply play to the cameras, television may have a restraining influence on some MPs conduct in parliament. Gough Whitlam threw a glass of water over the Minister for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck, in the House of Representatives in 1965. As the incident preceded the televising of parliament it is not widely known.<sup>21</sup> One can only speculate as to how many times the public would have been subjected to a re-run of the incident if it had been captured by television cameras, and if the possibility of that happening would have tempered Whitlam's behaviour.

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<sup>18</sup> P. Norton, 'Conclusions: Stronger Links, Weaker Support', *Parliamentary Affairs* 5(3): 468–75, July 1997.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>20</sup> Franks and Vandermark, *op. cit.*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Steketee, *op. cit.*, 3.

While the media can distort the public's perspective on what parliament does there is also truth in the media's claim that when it comes to the televising of parliament and parliamentary committees, they only record what politicians do.

### *Consequence of decisions*

Politicians must bear responsibility for their own decisions, some of which have led the community to believe that they are more interested in 'feathering their own nests' than tending to the public good.<sup>22</sup> A brief review of MPs entitlement/allowances, and the way they have been abused by some, helps to explain why politicians are seen as hypocritical: they demand restraint and accountability from others but exhibit little of these qualities themselves.<sup>23</sup>

### **Allowances, study tours and entitlements**

A Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) report in 1991 brought to public attention the way in which Queensland politicians had been 'abusing' their travel entitlements for years.<sup>24</sup> The report found, inter alia, that there was convincing evidence to suggest that the Parliamentary Travel Entitlements Scheme 'was abused by a significant number of Members of the 1986–1989 Queensland Legislative Assembly'.<sup>25</sup> For example, one member of parliament, accompanied by his wife, went to a Great Barrier Reef island for seven days to escape being 'constantly hounded' by the media. He rationalised his decision on the basis that a daily travel allowance would have been payable wherever he went. This MP claimed that his seven days away constituted legitimate parliamentary business as he would not have been placed in the situation where he needed to escape if he had not been a member of parliament.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Norton, *loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> For the purpose of this article, the definition for entitlements is taken from the Australian National Audit Office Performance Report, 'Parliamentarians' Entitlements 1999–2000'. As it explain, 'Senators and Members of Parliament, particularly those who are Ministers, require a wide spectrum of support services to carry out their various responsibilities effectively. These services are generally referred to as entitlements . . .' (ANAO, 'Parliamentarians' Entitlements 1999–2000' in *The Auditor-General Audit Report*, No. 5, 2001–2002, AGPS, Canberra, 11.) The distinction is made here between entitlements, what politicians require to carry out their jobs 'effectively', and 'perks of office'. 'Perks' are defined as (a) entitlements/allowances that politicians grant to themselves, but which are not necessary for them 'to carry out their responsibilities effectively' and (b) as entitlements/allowances which cost politicians a great deal less than other public servants have to pay for the same goods or service.

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed account see Criminal Justice Commission, *The Report on an Investigation into Possible Misuse of Parliamentary Travel Entitlements by Members of the 1986–1989 Queensland Legislative Assembly*, CJC, Brisbane, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

The level of accountability for the way in which some politicians spend taxpayers' money on study tours also causes concern. Queensland's Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee's role is to monitor and review Queensland's Criminal Justice Commission. During its three-year term one committee took study tours to several Australian states and to Wellington, Auckland, Washington DC, New York, London and Amsterdam.<sup>27</sup> In Victoria a member of the Legislative Assembly went on a taxpayer subsidised study tour to the United States and took four years to submit a mere 16-paragraph report on the trip.<sup>28</sup>

A recent report from the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) revealed that Commonwealth parliamentarians' entitlements cost Australian taxpayers at least \$354 million a year.<sup>29</sup> This figure may appear excessive for 227 senators and members, but a detailed public reporting on how and why the money was spent may well prove otherwise. However, it is not possible for the community to make an accurate assessment, as according to the report the existing system does not have adequate guidelines, record keeping practices and accountability mechanisms in place. Some entitlements, such as travel allowances, air fares, telephone costs, stationery and travel entitlements for retired MPs are unlimited. Spouse and dependent travel is not publicly reported, nor is retirement travel.<sup>30</sup>

The ANAO made 28 recommendations 'aimed at strengthening the stewardship of public money, improving the services provided to Parliamentarians and enhancing public disclosure within the *current* Parliamentary entitlements system . . . ' (ANAO 2001a, 31).<sup>31</sup> The clear message coming from the report is that accountability for taxpayer-funded entitlements is inadequate. But what, if anything, will MPs do to rectify the situation?

In defensive mode, Prime Minister John Howard announced that a review of parliamentary entitlements would take place and that they may be capped. However, at the time of writing he had not announced when the review would commence, whether it would include members of the community, who would conduct it and what would be its terms of reference. The then Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, promised that a Labor government would appoint a special auditor to audit

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<sup>27</sup> C. Lewis, 'The Politics of Civilian Oversight: Serious Commitment of Lip Service?', in A. Goldsmith and C. Lewis, eds, *Civilian Oversight of Policing: Governance, Democracy and Human Rights*, Hart, Oxford, 2000, 39.

<sup>28</sup> E. Hannan, 'They get paid for just turning up and wait, there's more . . .', *The Age*, 21 July 2001, 2.

<sup>29</sup> ANAO, *loc. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> ANAO, *op. cit.*, 21–26.

<sup>31</sup> The Department of Finance disagreed with 25 recommendations and agreed with qualifications to three. In response to the Department of Finance the ANAO commented that '[w]hile Finance has disagreed with many of the recommendations because it advised the necessary practices had already been implemented, or were not necessary, or were a matter for government, the audit findings suggest the need for the department to review the current system of administration for Parliamentary entitlements and address the shortcomings highlighted in this report' ANAO, *op. cit.*, 32).

parliamentary entitlements and would extend half yearly reporting to include all entitlements — not just travel.<sup>32</sup> It seems that his promise is four years too late.

The reputation of Commonwealth MPs (which is usually below that of state MPs) could be enhanced if they were proactive about implementing adequate accountability measures rather than continually having to be reactive. Commonwealth MPs could have avoided the negative publicity which has surrounded the Auditor-General's report if they had acted, as they said they would, on the 1997 Baxter Review which also examined how parliamentarians' entitlements were administered and recommended arrangements to improve accountability.<sup>33</sup>

The entitlements/allowances state MPs receive have also been criticised. A recent report in the *Age*<sup>34</sup> and *Sunday Herald Sun*<sup>35</sup> helps to explain why the public of Victoria is becoming increasingly cynical about its politicians.

Victorian MPs are entitled to a daily sitting fee allowance that can total more than \$1200 per year. Many in the community may think that being an MP would necessarily entail attendance at Parliament when it is in session.<sup>36</sup> They also receive a committee attendance allowance if a committee they are a member of meets on non-sitting days and the meeting lasts for more than one hour. Again, the reason behind this allowance needs to be explained, for without an adequate explanation, it may be difficult for members of the community to understand why an MP attending a parliamentary committee meeting should be entitled to a special allowance. Similarly, backbenchers who chair joint investigatory committees receive an additional \$9,150 annually. In most other professions, chairing a committee is considered part of a person's job and part of their career development; as such it would not attract a generous allowance.<sup>37</sup>

It costs MPs approximately \$930 per annum (\$35 a fortnight) to lease a car. The lease includes free petrol, maintenance, registration and city parking. Members of Parliament and their spouses may use their taxpayer-funded car for private purposes and the free petrol still applies. They do not have to pay train, tram or bus fares and they and their spouses are entitled to free travel on interstate trains.<sup>38</sup> It is these types of allowances and privileges which fuel the community's growing cynicism about politicians especially as it is Victorian politicians who grant them to themselves: A case of Caesar giving to Caesar.

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<sup>32</sup> Kristen Lawson, *The Canberra Times*, 8 August 2001.

<sup>33</sup> ANAO, *op. cit.*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Hannan, *loc. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> D. Wilson, 'Perks for the Pollies', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 8 April 2001, 14.

<sup>36</sup> In order to receive this allowance a parliamentarian must actually attend the parliament.

<sup>37</sup> Hannan, *loc. cit.*; Wilson, *loc. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Hannan, *loc. cit.*; Wilson, *loc. cit.*



Politicians around Australia have also voted themselves post-employment entitlements that in the case of Commonwealth MPs attract less accountability than the entitlements of current senators and members. It is difficult for members of the community to understand why a person who no longer works for an organisation should continue to derive monetary benefits for themselves and their partner from that organisation. Taxpayers, who fund these benefits, are entitled to receive a detailed and public explanation which explains the logic of these post-employment entitlements and the benefits the community receives for this type of expenditure.

### *Superannuation*

The superannuation benefits received by state and Commonwealth politicians have also been criticised. After serving just eight years in parliament, parliamentarians in one state receive a \$45,750 a year pension indexed for life. If they have served for 12 years their pension rises to \$53,000 per annum, again indexed for life<sup>39</sup> and the benefits rise depending on length of service. The average annual wage paid to an Australian worker is approximately \$42,100.

Politicians have attempted to justify their extraordinary superannuation benefits on the basis that they have to face the electorate every three to four years. This is no longer a convincing argument. The notion that anyone has a job for life is well and truly gone and has been for many years. Politicians would be aware of this, as some governments have been 'downsizing' state and Commonwealth public sectors for more than two decades.

There is a need for a full, frank and open debate that explains why the community should subsidise politicians for the rest of their lives when they voluntarily chose to stand for parliament. If the pre-selection battles in some seats are an indication, political life is a much sought after career. No one is forced to stand for parliament. It is not something that is demanded of certain sections of the community in the way that service to one's country is during times of war. The Commonwealth Parliament has not granted World War II veterans, some of whom were compelled to give six years of their life to the service of Australia, anything like the benefits they have awarded to politicians who serve two terms in parliament. Nor did these veterans receive generous salary and allowances during their years of service. It is the disparity between how politicians reward themselves and others which is adding to the perception that politicians' first priority is to 'feathering their own nests'.

Some politicians are beginning to acknowledge that their superannuation benefits are partly responsible for their declining reputation. Former Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, recently said that former politicians who earn substantial sums of money, while also receiving a very generous pension which is heavily subsidised by the tax-payer, 'irk the public conscience in a major way'.

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<sup>39</sup> Hannan, *loc. cit.*; Wilson, *loc. cit.*

Other senior MPs are acting to bridge the gap between what politicians and the rest of the community pays for goods and services. The Speaker of the Victorian Parliament recently increased the cost of meals in the parliamentary dining room so that they better reflect standard commercial rates. The Presiding Officers are also supporting closer scrutiny of overseas travel allowances. A review of some travel allowances was recently announced after an Independent MP criticised the way in which some politicians reported on trips overseas undertaken at taxpayers' expense. The Independent 'was rounded on by a number of MPs, some claiming he was a "sleazebag" who had brought all MPs into disrepute'. The Premier did not agree. He wrote to the Independent supporting his call for 'a thorough review'.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Denigrating their own profession***

Politicians constantly remind the community just how bad other politicians are, and in doing so reinforce their own poor reputation.<sup>41</sup> In many ways they are their own worst enemies. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating's reference to his parliamentary colleagues as 'scumbags' and 'unrepresentative swill' did nothing to enhance the reputation of politicians: neither his nor his parliamentary colleagues.<sup>42</sup>

MPs argue that it is the adversarial nature of politics that causes them to criticise and find fault with each other constantly, and, by association, to denigrate their own. However, politicians are not the only profession that operates in an adversarial context: the legal system is based on it.

The public does not hear lawyers referring publicly to other members of the legal profession as 'scumbags', 'liars' and 'swill' (the liquid refuse that is fed to pigs). Parliamentary privilege may explain why some politicians make their defamatory comments about other politicians in parliament, and why other professions do not make similar remarks. However, parliamentary privilege is not an issue for many of the insulting and denigrating comments MPs make, in and outside of parliament, about other members of their profession. In an adversarial context disagreement with opponents is the norm. That is not at issue. What is the level and tone at which those disagreements take place.

The denigrating of politicians by other politicians was taken to absurd lengths in the recent referendum about whether Australia should become a republic. The issue of how a president should be elected arose; should it be by popular vote or should the president be voted in by two-thirds of a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament. Some politicians campaigned on the basis that if a popular election was held the community could end up with a politician. The clear message to the Australian

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<sup>40</sup> Hannan, *loc. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> C. Condren, 'To be or not to be ethical? That is the rhetorical question', *The Australian Quarterly* 17(5), 16–33, October 1999.

<sup>42</sup> F. Devine, '“Our Masters” voices sing a sweeter tone', *The Australian*, 8 April 1999, 13.

community was that this would be the worst possible outcome. The problem for politicians, which is reflected in the polls, is that many in the community are believing their message.

### **Community expectations**

While politicians must share some of the blame for their poor standing with the community, the community itself is not blameless. It increasingly expects and demands more and more of MPs and government.

Trying to satisfy the expectations of *the* Australian community is impossible as there are very few wants, needs and expectations that are common to all. The community is multi-cultural and has a country-city divide. It is made up of many sub-sections as diverse as: the young, middle aged and elderly; homosexuals and heterosexuals; single parents and childless couples; a New Zealand community; Greek community and Vietnamese community; the handicapped and so on. These groups do not have the same wants, needs and expectations, but it is the government and parliament's job to try and satisfy all of the often conflicting demands.

The belief that governments are able to respond to the needs of the community stems from a romantic notion of popular sovereignty, where sovereignty is said to reside 'in a people understood as being in some fundamental sense unitary and undivided'.<sup>43</sup> If the assumption that the people speak as one is wrong, and we know that it is, it is not surprising that representative democracy cannot deliver for all. The notion that it can is a myth.

Another problem that prevents politicians from meeting people's expectations is the nature of parliamentary politics. Parliament is dominated by the executive and operates on the basis of forming majority-voting blocks on the floor of the House. As such it inevitably 'offends the notion of a popular will' which has unitary connotations.<sup>44</sup>

Hindess links voter disenchantment to 'the peculiarly modern dream of a self-governing community able to manage its own affairs', a dream which he argues has resulted in a 'democratic deficit'.<sup>45</sup> The deficit inevitably arises because non-democratic factors such as internationalisation of economic issues, limited control by national governments over private sector decisions, globalisation of crime and international terrorism constrains democratic arrangements. As Hindess explains:

The democratic dream of power to the people or to their elected representatives sets a standard of governmental capacity which no

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<sup>43</sup> D. Burchell, 'Playing the Popularity Game', *Australian Quarterly* 17(115), 25, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> B. Hindess, 'Democracy and disenchantment', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 32(1), 80, March 1997.

government can possibly achieve . . . If the fantasy of all power to the people, or even to their leaders cannot be realized . . . then disenchantment with government will continue to be the normal condition of democratic politics.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the polls reflect this type of disenchantment and not, as the media often portrays, simply a disenchantment with the behaviour of politicians.

As well as having unrealistic expectations about what the democratic system can deliver, the community also makes unreasonable demands. The role of government in social and economic areas has increased substantially during the past fifty years to the point where many are questioning whether government can 'cope'. The benefits of advanced industrialism have resulted in the basic economic needs of a sizeable portion of the community being met. As a result, new demands are being placed on governments and alternative governments that include 'an array of cradle to grave social programs', equal opportunity legislation, protection of the environment, adherence to international treaties and, more recently, demands that governments guarantee employee entitlements when private businesses fail. These, and many other demands, are being made by a more educated and politically aware public who blame politicians when their demands are not met, without first examining the capacity of the system itself to deliver.<sup>47</sup>

### **Is it deserved?**

If the community is at times unreasonable and the media focus too narrow and biased, do politicians deserve their poor reputation? On one level, and in terms of some of the issues raised in this article, politicians must bear part of the blame, but not all of it.

Whip makes the point that we expect too much of members of parliament. She explains that:

If we pride ourselves on a democratic political system in which we are represented by our peers, in which the common man (sic) may aspire to attain political office, we cannot justifiably complain if we find that, in most cases, our elected representatives have brought to their office only the skills and abilities of the common man.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> R. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn), Chatham House Publishers, Chatham, 1996; A. Kornberg and H. Clarke, 'Beliefs About Democracy and Satisfaction with Democratic Government', *Politics Review Quarterly* 47(3): 537–63, September 1994.

<sup>48</sup> R. Whip, *Recruitment Patterns and Role Perceptions of Australian Parliamentarians*, mimeo, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1977, 432.

After choosing a member of the community to represent them, the community then expects politicians to undertake a task which 'is ill defined' and which places conflicting demands on their time. On the one hand the public and media complain that parliament does not sit often enough. At the same time, politicians are expected to be 'on tap' for their electorate, to attend a multitude of functions often in the evenings and at weekends and to sort out a plethora of problems many of which are beyond the capacity of any MP.<sup>49</sup>

Politicians need to explain some of their behaviours and decisions to the community. But the community and the media need to examine whether their expectations and demands are beyond the capacity of any politician and government always to deliver.

### ***Conclusion***

The decline in the reputation of politicians needs to be put into perspective. They are not alone in experiencing the community's loss of confidence. Trust and support for institutions and the leaders of other institutions have also declined during the same period.<sup>50</sup> The Morgan Poll (2000), referred to throughout this article, shows that during the past twenty-five years the number of people who think bank managers are honest and ethical has fallen from a much higher base and more dramatically than politicians: from sixty six per cent to twenty six per cent. Lawyers have also experienced a decline. The number of people who think they are honest and ethical has fallen from forty two to twenty nine per cent.

The media often portrays politicians as if they have been cloned. However, as John Uhr has pointed out, there is no standard MP.<sup>51</sup> The 'temptations' they confront and the 'vices' and virtues of individual politicians vary according to their role and position within and outside of parliament. By thinking of them as a homogeneous group, the false impression, that all politicians are dishonest and untrustworthy, can be created.

The focus of media attention is overwhelmingly on the executive government and to a lesser degree the shadow cabinet. Backbenchers receive little attention, yet they are the overwhelming majority of politicians. Perhaps if the media's focus widened to include all politicians, perceptions would alter for the better.

Dalton maintains that while the community is becoming more cynical about politicians, to date this cynicism has not translated into an erosion of support for

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Dalton, *loc. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> J. Uhr, 'Democracy and Ethics of Representation', in N. Preston, C. Sampford and C. Bois, eds, *Ethics and Political Practice: Perspectives on Legislative Ethics*, Routledge, Leichardt, 1998, 11–24.

democratic principles.<sup>52</sup> Dahl also argues that there is no indication that the decline in confidence in members of parliament is matched by a decline in the support for democracy as the ideal/preferred form of government.<sup>53</sup> To understand what he calls this 'democratic paradox', Dahl argues for an examination of:

- what people mean by democracy;
- why they value it;
- when people express support for democracy and democratic systems of government exactly what are they supporting; and
- why, when people express little regard for some political institutions and leaders, they strongly believe that democracy is the best form of government.

This examination needs to take place. It is important because established democracies have to understand better the reasons behind what is becoming a worrying trend. Dalton reminds us that '[a]uthoritarian states may endure without the support of their publics but popular support is essential for democracies to survive'.<sup>54</sup> While the current cynicism has not, as yet, contaminated people's belief in the democratic system of government, if not understood more fully it could incrementally eat away at democratic institutions and the democratic process. While politicians have a responsibility to ensure that this does not happen, so too does the public and the media. ▲

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<sup>52</sup> Dalton, *loc. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> R. Dahl, 'A Democratic Paradox?', *Political Science Quarterly* 115(11), 35, Spring 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Dalton, *op. cit.*, 264.