Politicians and Political Cynicism
More or Less?

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The assumption that there is an increasing level of cynicism about political systems and distrust of politicians has become a truism in discourse about politics. So accepted have both the concept and the term 'political cynicism' become that any explicit agreement on what the term means and what the concept includes have come to seem unnecessary. It is simply widely accepted by both politicians and political observers (Putnam, Pharr and Dalton 2000; Young 2000; Burchell and Leigh 2002; Corner and Pels 2003; Lewis 2004) that political cynicism is a problem and that it should be addressed. The decline of confidence in politicians, legislatures, the government and the public service is common and increasing in the developed world. Surveys in thirteen developed countries (Austria, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United States) indicated that only the Netherlands showed no sign of a decline of confidence in politicians (Pharr and Putnam 2000).

The purpose of this article is to examine that truism through an analysis of the history of the concept and the validity of its measurement. It will also draw some conclusions based on the beliefs of some Australian members of parliament about the causes and consequences of political cynicism.

Analysing political cynicism

Despite the general tendency to identify increasing levels of political cynicism in Australian politics as a new phenomenon, attempts to define, analyse and explain it

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have been occurring for many years. In 1930 the historian W K Hancock located the cause of political cynicism in Australians' reliance on the state and their 'incurably romantic' view of politics. Thus, he argued:

> Government, being constantly overstrained, is constantly discredited. Almost everyone is absorbed in politics; but almost everybody believes those knowing fellows who say that politics is 'a dirty business'. This is precisely the danger of credulous idealism, that its disillusioned victims console themselves with an equally credulous cynicism. (Hancock 1961/1930, p. 238)

Hancock's definition and explanation still resonated some sixty years later, when the American political scientist Jeffrey C Goldfarb, in his study of the culture of political cynicism in the United States defined cynicism in a simple phrase as 'a form of legitimation through disbelief' (Goldfarb 1991). Like Hancock, Goldfarb viewed political cynicism as a way for people to explain their disappointment. Political cynicism is an expression of popular disillusionment with the process and institutions of politics, with the parliaments, the parties, the debates and the individuals. It is possibly also disillusionment, well founded or unfounded, with the bureaucracy and the results of government programs and action. It shows itself in a lack of confidence in the institutions of government and the individuals affiliated with them, whether as elected officials or employees. In Australia the sheer number of politicians (Commonwealth, state and local councillors) and the frequency of elections, with compulsory voting, may also have had a wearing effect on part of the electorate.

This lack of confidence showed itself in a study of workers in several Melbourne factories in 1951–52. Seventy-three of the 127 workers interviewed 'inclined to the view that politics in Australia are a self-contained field of doubtfully honest activity that bears no relation at all to the interests or purposes of the ordinary citizen' (Lafitte 1958, p. 116).

In 1960 Mayer, Loveday and Westerway analysed letters to the press about the 1959 Richardson Report on Parliamentary Salaries. Their study covered 711 letters to the editor received by 17 city and country newspapers in all states and the Australian Capital Territory.

The letter-writers showed a consistent distrust of politicians. They assumed that those attracted to a parliamentary career could not be trusted to have the 'right' motivations, that they were inferior to businessmen in talents and ability, and to pensioners and workers in moral character, and that they sought to be superior to those who elect them. Mayer, Loveday and Westerway also compared the opposition to the Richardson report shown by the letter-writers to the results of four Gallup Polls on parliamentary pensions conducted in 1947 and 1948 and one on the Richardson report recommendations in 1959. They concluded that there existed a 'hard core of "extreme antis" in Australia opposed to any pensions for defeated or retiring politicians' (Mayer, Loveday and Westerway 1960, p. 157). Based on

Australian Gallup Polls over the period they suggested that this hard core fluctuated between 54% and 69% from 1947 to 1959, when their opposition to parliamentary pensions was intensified by their opposition to the Richardson report.

In 1970 Western and Wilson analysed an attitude survey of 456 people in the Brisbane metropolitan area about their opinions on politicians, parties and politics generally. Their conclusion was that people's attitudes to politicians are both complex and contradictory. 'Political cynicism', as expressed by a majority of this sample, was related to a perception that politicians were distant from the voters, or from the Australian population in general, and lacked a feeling of responsibility towards them. They might be honest, hardworking and intelligent but nonetheless lack that connection to the voters that the respondents seemed to seek (Western and Wilson 1970, pp. 171–2).

Bean (1988) used the results of the National Social Science Survey 1984 in an article on mass attitudes towards the Australian political system. On the basis of questions about parliamentarians losing touch with the voters and the government being run by people 'looking after themselves' he concluded that the cynics comprised 49% of the sample and the trusting only 32%. A further finding was that those with not much political interest tended to be more cynical (58%) and less trusting (26%) than any other group. Although Bean did not explicitly define political cynicism, the respondents have defined it by their answers. As with Western and Wilson's results, political cynicism appeared to be closely related to a belief that politicians are distant and uncaring. In a later analysis Bean (2001) drew upon the 1969 and 1979 Australian National Political Attitudes surveys, the 1984–85 National Social Science Survey and the 1993, 1996 and 1998 Australian Election Studies to examine the issue of whether political trust has been declining in Australia. His conclusion was that the pattern of political trust in Australia was both cyclical and related to the government of the day rather than the political system in general (Bean 2001, p. 32).

In 1976 the Morgan Gallup Poll began asking respondents to rank a range of occupations which included federal and state politicians on their honesty and ethical standards. The percentage of those surveyed giving members of the Commonwealth Parliament 'high' or 'very high' ratings for ethics and honesty was 19% in 1976, dropped as far as 9% in 1995 and 1997 and 7% in 1998, but then rose to 16% in 2002, 17% in 2003 and 20% in 2004. The 2004 figure is the highest recorded.

Ratings of state parliamentarians have shown a similar pattern, starting at 21% in 1976, declining to a low of 7% in 1998 and rising again to 19% in 2004. They suggest that the reputation of politicians has varied, not necessarily that it has declined in recent years or is substantially worse now than in 1976. (*Morgan Poll* 1983, *Morgan Gallup Poll* 2004). Moreover, as Goot (1999, pp. 20–21; 2002, pp. 23–24) has pointed out, this decline in the standing of politicians was accompanied

by a similar decline in the standing of other occupations. In the period between 1976 and 2000, although the standing of doctors, teachers and union leaders 'enjoyed a modest rise', that of bank managers, lawyers and journalists also declined (Goot 2001, p. 23). Since 2000 doctors, teachers and union leaders have maintained their position, while amongst the losers only bank managers have begun to retrieve their position (*Morgan Gallup Poll* 2004). Goot has also pointed out the difficulties of drawing conclusions from a series covering a relatively short time period and in which the changes are comparatively small. Papadakis (1999) also noted a general decline in Australia in confidence in government and non-government institutions between 1983 and 1995. Two conclusions can be drawn from this decline. The first is that any decline in confidence is general, and that an apparently higher level of cynicism about politicians should be seen in the context of that overall decline in confidence. The second is that, as Papadakis points out, attitudes are highly variable and subject to numerous contingent factors.

A common explanation is that politicians, the media, the bureaucracy, academic commentators and the political class in general have lost touch with the rest of the Australian population (Mackay 1993; Simons 1999). Reporting on discussions amongst small groups of people conducted between 1979 and 1992, Mackay (1993, pp. 307–17) painted a picture of a population confused by a political system, which had become more and more distant from them. Simons, herself a journalist, argued that most of the press gallery seemed to have lost touch with the interests of the electorate, and were reporting for each other or for the rest of Parliament House:

> People aren't listening, and all the analysis, all the Canberra-speak and the effort,
> all the journalists' search for the underlying meaning leads, paradoxically, to a lack
> of meaning. (Simons 1999, p. 112)

What can be concluded about the phenomenon of political cynicism from the opinions that people have expressed about politicians? The Morgan Gallup Polls provide the most consistent series of data, but began only in 1976. How can the Morgan figures be related or compared to Lafitte's respondents in the early 1950s, half of whom doubted the honesty of politicians? And what of the division in Bean's respondents between the cynical and the trusting, and the discovery that the more ignorant are also the more cynical? Political cynicism, distrust of politicians, disillusionment with the institutions of government, certainly exists and is powerfully articulated. It is not new, not simply an Australian phenomenon, and the argument that this is a phenomenon of the 1990s, or even the 1980s, cannot be sustained on the available evidence.

Political cynicism and distrust in government and politicians has been a prominent feature of Australian political life since colonial times. Periodicals such as *Melbourne Punch*, *The Bulletin*, *Table Talk* and then *Smith's Weekly* were assailing politicians from an early date (Wright 1992, pp. 57, 97, 105; Alomes and Jones 1991, pp. 119-22; Mahood 1973, pp. 42–154). This tradition has continued into the

twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Hogan (2001) has argued that in New South Wales political cartoons throughout the twentieth century have shown an unremitting hostility to politicians and the political process. Any rises in parliamentary salaries have brought an outraged response from writers of letters to the editor and to the government and scandals were reported assiduously by the media and watched equally assiduously by readers and viewers. In 1933 an increase in parliamentary salaries was greeted by the *Sunday Sun*'s headline 'He cometh like a thief in the night' (Lloyd 1988, p. 203). A closer look at the political and economic realities of the past also suggests that insecurity has been normal, not unusual, throughout the existence of parliamentary government in Australia. The nineteenth century saw the transition to self-government in all the Australian colonies, economic booms characterised by gold rushes and land speculation, economic collapse and depression and widespread unemployment and insecurity. In the twentieth century there were two world wars, a major depression in the 1930s, recessions in the 1960s and 1980s, involvement in small-scale wars in Korea in the early 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s. Both World War I and the Vietnam War had the unintended consequence of large-scale anti-conscription movements and consequent social division. The anti-Vietnam movement was also part of a larger social movement, which was to lead to significant social change in Australia. Even the 1950s, often remembered or imagined nostalgically as a time of white picket fences and social homogeneity, had as its dark background the Cold War threat of another total war.

It should also be remembered that the late twentieth century saw major changes in social behaviour and this can make historical comparisons difficult (Alomes, Dober and Hellier 1984; Murphy 2000). Language, which would have been regarded as violent and obscene in the earlier part of the century, had become common in films, television and books in the 1980s and 1990s. Children who were expected to defer to adults grew up to encourage their own children to be self-assertive, and those children spoke with a freedom unthinkable to previous generations. Swearing became commonplace where once it was forbidden. Where pop music in the 1960s was marked by the Beatles singing 'I wanna hold your hand' and some radio stations refused to countenance the Rolling Stones' invitation 'Let's spend the night together', in the 1990s and 2000s explicit lyrics are commonplace. In 1975 the television personality Graham Kennedy was banned indefinitely from live television after calling 'faaaaark, faaaaark' in imitation of a crow (Blundell 2003, pp. 313–7). In 1998 a later Australian television personality, Rob Sitch, asked 'Who the fuck are you?' and remained on air (Carbone 2002). In the 2000s, words that were once forbidden are widely used in their original meaning to refer to, for example, sex or as emphatic adjectives. Once the prime minister was 'Mr Menzies', or 'Mr Whitlam', but later leaders became 'Hawke' and 'Howard'. Language is stronger and more explicit, in politics and elsewhere, and in such a context it is hard to judge if stronger language necessarily implies stronger feelings. The expression of a feeling as hatred in 2000 may equate to disapproval in 1960. It may

be that the expressions of contempt and distrust towards politicians heard in 2004 are no more powerful or extreme than those of 1954, just more strongly expressed.

The parliamentarians' view of political cynicism

Politicians themselves are likely to have considered views about the level of and reasons for cynicism about politics in the Australian community. Public cynicism about politicians is a long-standing phenomenon in Australia, as it is elsewhere. It may be one aspect of a more generalised lack of trust in the institutions of government or a phenomenon specifically related to parliaments and members of parliament. The following discussion focuses specifically on questions of cynicism about and distrust of politicians rather than government.

In 1997-98 twenty-three members of parliament were asked the open-ended question 'Why are people so often cynical about politicians as a group?' as part of a longer interview about their roles and perceptions. They were all backbench members of the 38th Commonwealth Parliament, which was elected in 1996. The interviewees were a cross section of that parliament. They represented the Liberal and National Parties and the Australian Labor Party, both houses, both genders, and all states except the Northern Territory. The amount and type of publicity about parliament and parliamentarians fluctuates over time, but during the period of the interviews the media were pursuing several stories about members of parliament who had apparently manipulated the parliamentary travel allowance system to increase their total income.

Since 1990 the standard salary of a member of parliament has been linked to public service salaries and adjusted automatically. As a result, in the 1990s and early 2000s there has been little public criticism of parliamentary salaries. Instead the debate and discussion has moved to allowances, which have been widely reported in the media as 'rorts'. And of all the rorts, the 'travel rorts' have been the most reported and the subject of the most criticism. Extra virulence is added to the criticism by the fact that allowances appear to be susceptible to manipulation in a way that salaries are not. Parliamentarians can be criticised for the amount of their salaries, and frequently have been, but it is difficult to argue that any individual has manipulated the system to receive a salary to which he or she is not entitled. When allowances are the subject, however, it is easy for critics and cynics to assume that every member of parliament is rorting the system. By the mid-1990s public cynicism about parliamentarians appeared to be rampant.

Despite the large amounts of publicity generated by the 'travel rorts affair' as it had become known, the interviewees were not anxious to blame it for any public cynicism about politicians or the political system. The explanations offered for political cynicism can be divided into two broad categories. The first explanation looks to external factors. The Australian economy is in the process of being

restructured, the unemployment rate is high and the casualisation of work is pervasive, people fear for the future and the government seems to be unwilling or unable to take action. The result is a distrust of the political system, which extends to parliamentarians. The second explanation looks to the inhabitants of the political system, not only the politicians but also other participants described by one interviewee as 'the political elite'. At its simplest, this explanation presents either the media or the parliamentarians as uncomplicated villains — the media reporting only the bad things in the political system, the parliamentarians manipulating allowances and behaving aggressively in parliament.

The majority of parliamentarians interviewed favoured the first explanation more strongly than the second. They looked at least partly to a combination of disappointed expectations and an increasingly complex and insecure society, whilst also recognising that the behaviour of politicians had sometimes added to an existing disillusionment. An ALP member representing an electorate taking in both country rural areas and some of outlying Melbourne summed up one perspective:

> First of all, they do expect us to provide some leadership, they expect us to spell out a strategy and carry it through and they've had a very bad dose of either straight broken promises or being let down. (Interview, 13 August 1997)

Almost all the interviewees discussed expectations. Nine, six ALP members of the House of Representatives, two ALP Senators and one Liberal member of the House of Representatives, saw it as the primary issue. The public, they believe, vote for members of parliament with an expectation that they will provide both leadership and solutions. Like Hancock 70 years earlier, they see cynicism as a result of disappointment. This question produced considerable reflection about the reason for this disappointment. Most argued that politicians themselves must accept some responsibility. One member who holds a safe Labor seat believes that when politicians constantly attack each other 'we don't encourage a better view of what we do' (Interview, 2 July 1997). Like several others, he argued that distrust of politicians is an integral part of the Australian tradition, and not necessarily a bad thing. He also felt that the nature of politics encouraged distrust:

> Australia has a culture of irreverence and attacking tall poppies. I don't have a problem with that. I like a lot of those aspects of our culture and prefer them to the sort of obsequiousness that so-and-so's the king or the president and has to be paid homage or respect, but it can be destructive from time to time. The reason why people don't have a high opinion of us apart from that natural tendency to be irreverent and to cut down tall poppies is because we do such a good job at attacking each other. It is a body contact sport, politics, so if we become aware of the shortcomings of others we bring them to public attention. (Interview, 2 July 1997)

Another view was that governments inevitably break promises, and the equally inevitable result is deeper distrust. The Liberal MP, a backbencher with an electorate on the leafy fringe of a capital city, described the phenomenon as 'institutionalised lying … a litany of broken promises whenever governments

change' (Interview, 12 June 1997). His outline of how it happens shows some cynicism on his own part:

> It's so convenient when you get in, you do an audit of the books and you say 'oh, Jesus, you know, things are so much worse than we ever expected' and that gives you an opportunity to break every promise you made in the run-up to the election. That creates enormous cynicism out in the public arena. (Interview, 12 June 1997)

A Senator reflected sombrely that 'we are now known in the community as liars because we can't keep our promises' (Interview, 1 September 1997). No one suggested, however, that the 'institutionalised lying' was a deliberate tactic. It is seen, rather, as the result of structural forces inhibiting how politicians work and what they can do. Even in talking of the other side, there is a general admission that new governments tend to break promises because they fail to realise before their election what is possible and what is not.

'The state of the world' loomed large in several interviews. At one end of the spectrum is the view of a long-serving Liberal with an electorate stretching from the fringes of a large country town to surrounding rural areas that 'politics the world over is dealing with impossible alternatives' (Interview, 12 June 1997). By 'impossible alternatives', he means the attempt to serve the interests of a variety of competing groups and individuals. Inevitably this means compromise, and equally inevitably many people are not happy with a compromise. He also saw the ignorance of many individuals about the functions and operation of both government and parliament as contributing to the dissatisfaction already described. Another long-serving Liberal from a rural electorate looked back at a long career in state and federal politics to reflect that every decision has an adverse effect on somebody and politicians are in an obvious position to be blamed.

An ALP member of the House of Representatives, who had also been a Senator, regarded 'the state of the world' as a reason for public cynicism about politics and politicians, but looked more broadly to globalisation which has decreased the power of national governments:

> … community aspirations about the capacity of, what they want their government to be able to do, is increasingly out of kilter with what government can do as globalisation takes over. And the nation state is not as relevant as it was so the people who govern it can't deliver as much of what people want as they once could. It's not possible. There are things that, there are uncomfortable changes that people would like stopped, that can't be stopped. And they want someone to stop it. And it's not popular to say 'We can't'. We'd probably be much better advised if we were frank and said 'we can't' … But the other thing that worries me is this question, that there is a trend towards a political elite, of which I'm a member, it's not me as some outsider throwing rocks at people, who are so certain about the correctness of their own position that they have got out of touch with the rest of Australia. And I include in that the press gallery, most of the senior economic commentators and academic political commentators, members of parliament,

political party apparatchiks, staffers. If there are 100,000 people in Australia who think the free trade, labour market deregulation, GST strategy is the way to go I'd be surprised. But almost 100% of the political elite think that's the way to go. And that dissonance is what's causing the problem. (Interview, 29 August 1997)

The view that a feeling of powerlessness and insecurity contributed to political cynicism was shared by a Liberal representing a prosperous outer area in a state capital, who argued that, in an age of transition and insecurity, there is a society-wide cynicism about institutions. This is increased by some politicians being seen to be abusing their position — 'people need to blame someone' (Interview, 29 April 1998)

Like others, he also saw parliamentarians themselves as bearing some responsibility. The Colston affair, and other smaller scandals related to travel allowances and conflicts of interest, hung heavily over the interviews, but not to the extent that interviewees saw such contemporary scandals as the major cause of political cynicism.

Media reporting of parliament and politicians was generally seen as a minor problem, which worked with a general ignorance about the political system to encourage public distrust of politicians. This perception contrasted somewhat with the views of members of the Parliament of Victoria interviewed by Coghill and Lewis (2004) in 2001–2003 who expressed frustration at 'inaccurate, sensationalist reporting, and at times the over-reporting of trivial matters' (Coghill and Lewis 2004, p. 13). However the Victorian parliamentarians also recognised a more complex relationship between themselves and the media.

While the parliamentarians interviewed for this study universally recognised the existence of public disillusionment and cynicism their response to it was, like the phenomenon itself, more complex than it first appeared. Several pointed to the difference between how 'politicians' are described and referred to by members of the public and the treatment that individual parliamentarians receive. Another ALP member of the lower house described it as a 'love-hate relationship':

> … there's a love-hate relationship between Australians and their political representatives. Because often if you ask people about their local members they'll be quite positive, if you ask them about politicians in general they'll be quite negative. (Interview, 1 September 1997)

Nor was public cynicism about politicians seen as necessarily bad. Four inter-viewees explicitly regarded some level of anti-politician feeling as a healthy Australian characteristic. A Liberal Senator put it in explicitly class conscious terms:

> You put yourself up in a position of power, and I guess one of the trends of Australians, they would like to think that everybody's the same, they don't want to see an elitism, because most of the people who came to Australia came here to get

away from that. They were either exported here because of it, by people who were
landed gentry, they didn't want to see that sort of thing happen here in Australia,
although it did to a certain extent with the graziers and whatever, but I think the
average Australian likes to bring you back to their level. (Interview, 22 April 1998)

The ALP member who had already detected a 'love-hate relationship' saw it as part
of a politician's role:

> I would prefer that politicians are scapegoats rather than other minority groups,
> frankly. You know, some of the nastiness you see in the community at times
> directed toward other outsiders is particularly unpleasant, whereas for politicians
> it's part of the territory, I think you can ride with it. (Interview, 1 September 1997)

Sometimes the cynicism of the public about politicians is reciprocated. Another
ALP member, reflecting on the constituents he has worked with, and the number of
them who have lied to him about their situation or tried to enlist his help in dubious
projects, suggests that 'half of them think that politicians are corrupt because of
what they'd like to do if they got there' (Interview, 12 December 1997). In
explaining the voters' cynicism about politicians, should we look not to the
political system and its inhabitants but to the society itself?

What can be concluded from the thoughts of this group of parliamentarians about
the public view of them and their colleagues? Firstly, they accept that a certain
amount of dislike and distrust of them is inevitable, and may even be desirable.
Perhaps it is preferable that politicians be scapegoats rather than other, more
powerless, groups in society. From this perspective, being the object of political
cynicism could be described in the language of human resources as part of the
position description. When the human resources consultant Cullen Egan Dell
effectively created a position description for a member of parliament during the
1988 Remuneration Tribunal inquiry it included a list of the functions and
responsibilities of a member of parliament (Cullen Egan Dell 1988, p. 1). Many of
those functions and responsibilities were measurable in some sense; goals and
objectives could be set, appearances in Hansard and constituent inquiries counted,
and committee memberships added up. The role of being a lightning rod for public
political cynicism did not appear in this document, but it is nonetheless recognised
as an important one by parliamentarians themselves. Parliamentarians recognise
that public cynicism is partly a result of their own behaviour, but they also believe
that it is necessary for them to behave as they do. Part of the parliamentarian's role
in a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy such as Australia is to attack other
parliamentarians (Alomes 1991). The increased number of women in all the
Australian parliaments does not appear to have softened the adversarial style, as
women parliamentarians seem to have readily adopted the traditionally aggressive
style of question time (Taylor, 2002). Although there has been substantial
discussion of the ways in which the Australian parliamentary system has developed
and diverged from its original model, no one has so far suggested that the positions

of government and opposition are likely to vanish or become irrelevant. Perhaps a different type of position description needs to be developed for politicians.

A second conclusion from the interviews is that politicians see the causes of political cynicism as complex, and in general resist the temptation to blame the media. Although nearly all the interviewees mentioned the media as contributing to the poor public image of parliamentarians in Australia, only one cited the press gallery as the sole cause. Instead they recognised the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the media and parliament. The press gallery, with its privileged access and its location within Parliament House, has a unique ability to report on current affairs from the centre, but it also has the ability to create news on the basis of its own interests. The parliamentarians and ministers, regardless of how they see the media, are aware of this power, but they are also able to use the press gallery. In Trish Payne's 1999 study of how backbenchers interact with the press, she quotes a press gallery journalist:

> The Gallery is preoccupied with the politics of conflict because they make the best stories and our masters at head office are a lot more interested in conflict than we are. If there ain't no conflict, there ain't no story. (Payne 1999, p. 17)

This view was supported by one interviewee, who had spoken against his party policy and concluded that 'if you want to disagree with your own party, go out there and attack your own party position, there's any amount of publicity you can get doing that' (Interview, 2 July 1997).

The complexity of the relationship between parliament and the media is also reflected in another opinion common among the interviewees, and already discussed earlier, that media coverage of parliament is followed only by the relatively few who are already interested. Those who are interested are knowledgeable, and are addressed by the 'serious' media, but the consequence is a lack of interest by the public in most political news and a lack of understanding by the press gallery of the interests of most Australians. From this perspective public cynicism is frequently a result of ignorance about politics, about how government works, and about what parliamentarians do. As a Liberal interviewee remarked, if all people know about politics is the 'theatrical debate', then they have a right to be cynical, and cynicism is fostered and encouraged when the 'political news' is about scandals, rorts and junkets.

Thirdly, 'the state of the world' argument, which has been mentioned earlier, was common. People are cynical about politicians now because their jobs are insecure, the economy and in institutions are being re-structured yet again, and the people in charge seem unable to resolve any problems. This was an approach taken by several interviewees, who argued eloquently that the uncertainty in people's lives brought about by globalisation and economic change has created a climate of political cynicism.

Conclusion

The concept of political cynicism extends to more than a dislike or distrust of politicians. It can include a lack of confidence in government in general, lack of participation, an unwillingness to vote, lack of interest in which party is in power, a belief that most decisions are made by a few important people in the interests of themselves and numerous other signs of disengagement from the political process. Goot (2002) has examined the range of its expressions in public opinion polls and concluded that it is not correct to see it as a unique contemporary problem. The argument that political cynicism has been a continuous undercurrent in Australian politics, varying in strength and changing in its manifestation in response to changing political events and phenomena, is supported by reference to Australian political history.

If political cynicism is related to disappointment and distrust, and the incurable romanticism discerned by Hancock, then the requirements of a life in politics are bound to result in political cynicism at some level. Politicians will always disappoint because they will always need to broker deals and count the numbers, and people will always be disappointed. However the disappointment and distrust is not confined to the political system and politicians; it reflects the condition of the rest of society. Nor is it new; once again an examination of political history demonstrates a consistent strand of disappointment in and disillusion with politics and politicians.

Finally, the parliamentarians who are the subject of the public scorn described as political cynicism, appear to regard it as part of the job, and not a phenomenon that disables them in carrying out their duties. The politician's view of political cynicism is perhaps best summed up in the words of one of the parliamentarians interviewed, a veteran of many years in the House of Representatives who said simply 'It's never changed. It's always been the same.' (Interview, 27 August 1997).   ▲

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