



SPEECH

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Parliamentary integrity and a conduct code

House of Representatives

The news is in. According to the ABC's Australia Talks survey results released last week, politicians rank amongst the least trusted professions, beaten to the wooden spoon by the celebrities. This dismal finding is repeated year after year in reputable surveys both in Australia and around the world. But why?

On paper, in theory it should be the opposite. Parliament, the legislature, is the fundamental pillar of our democracy. We each represent the voices of hundreds of thousands of people. It should be a respected institution. But that's not what people see. Yes, they may see some policies delivered and, yes, they may see some programs delivered, that's the bottom line.

But what they really see—and what I've seen as a new member of parliament, as someone who was an outsider and is now an insider—are these things: bad behaviour, accusations and counteraccusations, debate shutdowns, mudslinging, obtuse political donations and a lack of transparency. And it is quite shocking as a member of parliament to see those things here on the floor of parliament. I am now one of the people who's ranked as one of the least trusted professions in the world. It is not a nice feeling.

All of this comes at a cost. It comes at the cost of seeing secret deals done—secret deals that none of us in the House can understand when a vote is passed through the Senate, for example. This comes at a cost, and not in the way a sudden financial emergency affects our bottom line but in a slow, incremental way, eroding the authority of our institutions and damaging the rule of law.

As I said in my first speech, so many Australians want change desperately, but equally they are scared of change when it comes to trusting the political system to bring it about. Let's work to improve this. There is a way. It's complex, but we can navigate it. We can do difficult things in this House; I'm sure we can.

We need a robust federal integrity commission to help restore the trust that so many Australians have lost in their elected representatives. As an independent MP, I, like my other crossbenchers, have been a clear and consistent voice for the establishment of this institution. It was in response to this pressure that last year the government announced plans for its own Commonwealth Integrity Commission.

The former member for Indi, Cathy McGowan, and her suite of integrity legislation was pivotal in preparing the ground for this announcement, as was the work of the member for Melbourne preceding that. It sets the standard for how we can move forward.

Any federal integrity commission should include public hearings. At the very least, that's what our people want—and discretion to initiate investigations, open referrals from concerned members of

the public and, importantly, whistle-blower protections to prevent retaliation. I encourage the government, I encourage all of my MP colleagues, to aim for this standard.

Alongside this, this House needs a code of conduct and the creation of two independent positions to offer confidential advice to members and ministers, including the Prime Minister. These changes are critical.

Under our current system, integrity issues within the parliament and the executive are dealt with by the parliament, the Prime Minister and the Special Minister of State. These institutions, tasked with upholding political, ministerial and parliamentary integrity and honesty, are also primarily political institutions. Advice from independent bodies would overcome this inherent and very obvious conflict.

The code of conduct would require that a parliamentarian ensures that their conduct as a parliamentarian does not bring discredit upon this parliament. This code would include provisions about dealing with conflicts of interest, using position for profit, outside employment, accepting gifts or hospitality, using influence and using public resources. By placing them in a code of conduct we declare to the Australian public the standards that they can and should judge us by.

Some will say that the current system works well enough. Yet how can this be, when the research shows us that 90 per cent of citizens have a negative view of the standards of honesty and integrity held by politicians?

Democracy 2025 reports that if nothing is done and current trends continue then fewer than 10 per cent of Australians will trust their politicians and political institutions, resulting in ineffective and illegitimate government and declining social and economic wellbeing. Some will say that an integrity commission will be politicised, resulting in vexatious referrals, which will destroy the careers of honest people.

Well, I ask that we set about doing this work to stop the vexatious referrals and mudslinging that happens in this House. As elected representatives in the highest offices of the land, we should be held to the highest (standard).