

2019: a failed system leaves citizens bereft

2019 showed that we should focus more on a political system that is failing Australians than on the individual personalities that populate our parliaments.

Bernard Keane – *Crikey* - 20 December 2019

https://www.crikey.com.au/2019/12/20/2019-failed-system-citizens-bereft/?utm_campaign=Daily&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&ins=Rk45OStrMkRTMUpCT0R6QTBxWnFzd09

Systems that rely on the presence of good people to function effectively will always fail. Eventually, with mathematical certainty, some duds will come along. They may not be malicious or outright corrupt, but merely mediocre, narrow-minded, thick will do. And they'll coincide with a period when the system is under pressure.

Duds when things are fine lead to missed opportunities, not damage. Pressure when good people are in charge can be managed. But when both coincide, you get trouble.

Australian politics has been under considerable pressure for some time, and 2019 showed that the duds are in charge. One of the last images of the political year was the most appropriate: Michael McCormack, acting prime minister in the absence of Scott Morrison, railing at climate protesters yesterday as Australia burned amid record heat. No wonder Morrison scurried back early from his holiday.

This end of year wrap is about the system, though, not the duds.

There are two big structural weak points in our political system (actually, three if you count the inefficient federal structure that the 19th century Brits foisted on us, but that's a discussion for another time). There's the lack of transparency that enables powerful interests to purchase access and influence over policymakers out of sight of voters. And there's the lack of any protection for citizens against their own government. Both will be familiar to regular *Crikey* readers.

The lack of transparency allows political donors to buy their way into private contact with key decision-makers where they can influence policy, without any scrutiny or accountability. This applies to both sides of politics, although in Labor's case the major donors are trade unions, which must serve the interests of the working men and women who form them. In the case of the Liberals and Nationals, the major donors are corporations that serve the interests of shareholders, foreign investors and corporate executives.

Moreover, people tend to move from trade unions into politics. One of the powerful incentives corporations can offer politicians and senior public servants is the reverse: a well-remunerated corporate job after public life is over. The lack of any meaningful federal anti-corruption body further enables this pervasive soft corruption of the federal policymaking process.

If you have good political leaders, who are motivated by the national interest as much as by their desire for power, this lack of transparency is less of a problem. When you have high-quality public servants prepared to lead on policy, it's less of a problem. But we have mediocre-at-best politicians and a cowed, increasingly incompetent public service.

That's why, until the groundswell of public opinion made it untenable, the Liberal Party ran a protection racket for the big banks that donated so much, allowing them to operate virtually unchecked.

That's why it continues to refuse to take action on climate change, which would harm the mining and energy companies that provide a steady flow of money.

That's why politics' biggest donors, the big four consulting firms, are enjoying hundreds of millions in government contracts despite being riddled with conflicts of interest and a deep involvement in tax dodging.

That's why the most deeply toxic and corrupt party division in Australian history, NSW Labor, continues to be a cesspit of crooked cash, dodgy dealings and foreign influence.

The lack of any protection for citizens against their government is another inheritance from the Brits. Unlike the Americans, for whom the idea of a bill of rights to protect people from government is the subject of universal, non-partisan consensus, [we're stuck in a twilight zone where a bill of rights is a left-right partisan issue](#).

Again, if you have good political leaders, you don't need to worry too much about the lack of protections. Instead, we have a government that isn't merely mediocre in its view of basic freedoms, but actively hostile. It uses the powers of the state to harass, intimidate and jail citizens who might embarrass it, enabled by an opposition that has been supportive or silent as it has happened. Witness K. Bernard Collaery. Annika Smethurst. Dan Oakes and Sam Clark. David McBride. Different people, different roles, but all hounded by the government for embarrassing it.

Meanwhile, national security is undermined by senior figures in the government and the bureaucracy who happily hand confidential information to stenographer journalists to serve their own interests.

Most analysis of all this revolves around people and personalities. The scandal-prone minister. The authoritarian senior bureaucrat. The donor who wants results. The AFP goon threatening to prosecute journalists. But someone dodgy, or blatantly corrupt, or obsessed with power, or actually evil, will always happen along at some point. The *system*, and whether it can act as a check on them, is the issue.

We're very good in Australia at focusing on people and appalling at focusing on systems and structures. Ninety five per cent of political coverage is about people; 5% is about the system that enables or fails to check them — and most of that is in early February when the politicians allow a glimpse into a few donations they feel like declaring from the previous year.

But focusing on personalities is just the way the powerful like it, since it reduces the chances of anyone noticing the *system* is the real problem and leaves them free to deal with decision-makers unencumbered by accountability or transparency.

The problem is all the worse given that what is supposed to be a key watchdog in the system, the media, is increasingly unable and unwilling to do its job. The decline in the numbers of journalists, editors and producers is well known. For all their faults, we need large media companies that are sufficiently well-resourced to be able to challenge the powerful, including in a court system that bends over backwards to protect the powerful from any criticism. But those companies grow smaller every month, with fewer journalists, editors and producers having to do more and more.

Exacerbating things, one of the dominant companies operates as an attack dog for the Coalition — including toward any Liberal or National MPs who might express belief in climate change and the need for action. Another key media player, the ABC, has had its funding cut by the government and its executives cowed.

That leaves the official opposition, still licking its wounds after losing an election so unloseable a betting company actually paid out on them days before the poll. Labor was unable to defeat a chaotic party huddled in the smoking ruins of its own civil war, amid a stagnating economy, led by a smirking policy vacuum. It is unlikely that it will be presented with as generous a set of political circumstances next time.

While aspects of Labor's defeat reflect systemic issues — the power of the wealthy to repel efforts to rein in their exploitation of fiscal arrangements, the malignant influence of News Corp and its journalists — another points to something wider.

Time and again, progressive parties have sought to respond to populism by offering considered, detailed programs that specifically address the grievances of disaffected voters — particularly tax initiatives to fund better social programs. But voters prefer — sometimes by a landslide, in the case of Boris Johnson, or narrowly, in the case of Trump or Morrison — policy-free right-wing leaders, with inclinations, subtle or entirely explicit, to bigotry. That these leaders tend to be members of the very elite that angry voters are said to be disaffected from and tend to end up serving the interests of those elites adds extra irony to their success.

Labor's defeat thus has superficial comparisons with John Hewson's 1993 defeat, in which a massively detailed policy program became an anchor that pulled the Coalition down from 20 points ahead to disaster on election night. But Paul Keating, the complete opposite of Morrison et al, was hell-bent on using his time in office to deliver more policy change, and used his 1993-96 term to deliver major industrial relations reform, National Competition Policy, complete the privatisations of Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank and economic stimulus packages.

The relentless pace of reform — now looked back on fondly by all in the governing class — was a key reason for Keating's landslide loss in 1996. You can be sure Morrison won't make the same "mistake". For Morrison, being in office is not an opportunity to change anything, but to prevent change. That may harm Australia, but it minimises Labor's chances at the next election. Indeed, the opposition may be out of power until deep into the 2020s unless it can resolve the problem of how to address populist discontent in a manner consistent with its progressive traditions.

Plenty of progressive voters have spent the months since the election with their heads under the doona, in a sullen snit about politics. You can see it on social media; we've seen it in reader reactions here at *Crikey*. Not that conservative voters have much to cheer about; the reluctance of the Morrison government to do anything beyond what it is forced by circumstance to do — think the belated extra funding for home care packages, or the implementation of the Hayne royal commission recommendations — or culture war pet projects like religious discrimination, is a source of intense frustration. Business has been futilely calling for economic stimulus, for clarity on climate action, micro-economic reform and something, anything on energy policy virtually the entire year as the economy slowly sank into a mire.

But there's no point sitting back and waiting for the media, or the Coalition, or Labor, to fix things. Things won't improve until the system is changed, to reduce the influence of powerful interests and shed much more light on them, and to put in place basic protections for Australians against the depredations of their own government.

Political donations and funding reform, meeting diaries, a proper federal ICAC, radically wider freedom of information laws and a US-style bill of rights are crucial fixes for a broken political system that Australians, whomever they vote for, have lost faith in.