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Reforming political donations is essential if we are to trust our politicians

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Political funding is a fundamental public trust matter. It deserves to be debated at COAG. Shutterstock

The electorate is growing increasingly weary of being treated as a plaything by too many of its elected representatives. If MPs do not believe just how disillusioned the Australian community is with their approach to representative democracy, they should consult, among other things, the surveys that rate the level of trust people have in the profession. It is not good and would be of great concern to any other profession.

As MPs contemplate how they might go about adopting new behaviours, they should keep in mind that actions speak louder than words, especially when it comes to their oft-cited mantra that politicians do not underestimate the intelligence of Australian voters.

Disenchantment with that mantra arises in large part from observing MPs' actions, which too often fail to reflect their words. But the voters' low opinion can be fixed if MPs are willing to make a few basic changes to the way they operate.

The public interest should take absolute precedence over party and personal interests. To assist in this regard, MPs may find it helpful to recall that the high office they hold, as the people's representative, means that they occupy a position of public trust.

This special trust obliges them to ensure that their actions – as opposed to words – serve to strengthen the health of Australia's democracy and the institutions that are its foundation.

Politicians must knowingly stop making false promises to voters in the lead-up to an election. Post-election, when solemn promises are too often broken, the electorate uses its intelligence to judge such behaviour. They perceive it as nothing more than a desperate, unethical bid to win power.

Some MPs should also cease engaging in retaliation politics. It contributes nothing to the public interest and only discredits those who choose to follow this path. Retaliation politics is also a waste of taxpayers' money. Taxes pay the wages, expenses and perks of the MPs who engage in this form of destructive politics. It has gone on for far too long. The electorate is well and truly over it.

The abuse of the scheme grossly misnamed as politicians' "entitlements" must be overhauled. MPs should receive a reasonable salary and be reimbursed for genuine expenses. But those expenses must be fully justified.

We do not wish to hear any more tortuous and at times incredulous explanations that try to defend the spending of public money on what are clearly personal and/or party political matters, especially when those explanations are an insult to voters' intelligence.

The time has come, it has nearly past, for all MPs to address the trust deficit that surrounds their profession. Action in this regard needs to start immediately if our system of democracy is to be protected.

Reforming political donation laws would be an excellent starting point. It has been, and still is, a major reason for people's growing disgust with the behaviour of politicians and political parties. This was recently typified by the NSW Electoral Commission condemning the NSW branch of the Liberal Party for failing to disclose its major donors in 2010-11.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is meeting on Friday. This provides the perfect opportunity for political leaders to agree to introduce uniform political donation laws across

Australia. Political leaders will recall that this matter was raised by NSW Premier Mike Baird at a dinner prior to the previous COAG meeting, but there has been little action.

As a starting point, those attending COAG could agree to adopt the NSW model, as recommended by the Schott report into political donations. Taxpayers have a right to assume that their elected representatives have read this report and all the parliamentary committee reports funded by them.

Political funding is a fundamental public interest matter. It goes to the heart of the public trust principle and as such deserves to be placed on the COAG agenda. Doing so will demonstrate political leaders' commitment to act to ensure Australia has fair, equitable and transparent political donation laws. Taxpayers expect no less.

The electorate's concern about political donations includes the behaviour of political parties as well as the conduct of MPs who pass laws to reform political funding regimes and then spend their time, and hence public money, devising ways to circumvent exactly the same laws. Something is very wrong with this type of behaviour. It graphically highlights why the system needs fixing.

In an effort not to tarnish all politicians with a less-than-flattering brush, the time has come for all honourable members to speak up and publicly demand a change to the way politics is funded in this country.

Actions rather than words will send a positive message to the electorate – one that makes it clear that MPs are truly motivated by the public interest, and that they respect and will adhere to the public trust principle.

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