

Help build global democracy

PATRICK GORMAN



The 2020 parliamentary year started with a hope for a more purposeful democracy, driven by a bipartisan bushfire condolence motion.

The National Cabinet was born in 2020 and gave Australians a sense of faith in our leaders, putting purpose above party and showing an ability to act fast, act in the national interest and act as a team.

During the crisis, most Australians turned to trusted sources of information, including the Government, State premiers and members of Parliament.

This year is also when we started the dismantling of Australia's democracy. Parliament became optional. Our committees became virtual, and their hearings were disrupted by poor internet connections.

The once unified National Cabinet frayed and split. The Government's commitment to democracy and parliamentary traditions disappeared.

This isn't a uniquely Australian phenomenon. Democratic breakdown is occurring across the globe. From Hong Kong to New Zealand to the US we're seeing elections delayed or tweaked.

Even before the pandemic in 2019 the Global Democracy Index hit its lowest rating since it was founded by the Economist Intelligence Unit more than a decade ago. That was before the coronavirus slammed the brakes on our public institutions.

This coming decade is a fight between believers that democracy will prevail and those who seek to say it's becoming too hard.

Australia must protect our core value of democracy. Protecting democracy is the smart way to defend against bigger threats.

The world's health and economic challenge of 2020 will become a decade or more of ongoing national security and democratic challenges.



Illustration: Don Lindsay

Our focus as a pivotal power on the world stage is to think how we can best prevent failed states.

Australia should become the leading international voice for democracy.

Democracy is a value we take for granted far too often in Australia. But the rest of the world doesn't experience democracy quite as consistently.

As we adjust our international response to COVID-19, democracy building must be a priority.

Our nation will never have the financial heft of China's Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure funding program. Instead, we should have a "Ballot and Representation Initiative" to play to our strengths.

Promoting democracy and strong institutions rather than simply bankrolling infrastructure is cheaper and more effective, and is a strategic value we must prioritise.

Democracy building is very practical: training future leaders, enabling women to run for office, running free and fair elections, building ethical political parties, working with

civil society to build accountability mechanisms, and ensuring parliaments of diversity.

The costs of not protecting parliaments and democratic institutions are clear.

We start by setting a good example at home. The measures Australia has taken to suppress the spread of the virus and flatten the curve have been extremely successful.

That has come at a cost to our own democratic traditions. We must not let this crisis suppress our democracy or our commitment to international stability and order.

Australia, as a beacon of democracy and security in both our region and the wider international community, has a duty to ensure that those values shine as brightly as possible during these dark times.

Australia's democratic values aren't something we can just follow when times are good. Our nation has embraced the task of growing and improving our democracy since Federation in 1901. We've proved it's a good system for a start-up nation like ours.

When asked, we also help others. In 2014, I travelled to Kabul to observe the re-count of

the Afghanistan presidential election. Our team consisted of people from the US and India and a good contingent of Australians.

At home in Australia, as it has become clearer that the coronavirus outbreak could go well into 2021, we've adapted.

Practising democracy in Australia is currently more difficult than at any time since Federation. Persistence has been key.

A functioning political system and a vibrant national debate aren't just about how we protect the health and livelihoods of our citizens.

We must also protect our democratic institutions for a decade that's going to be destructive and dangerous to democracy.

While things are comparatively good at home, for too long our global institutions have avoided the hard questions on promoting democracy.

This is a gap that Australia should and can fill. There are three practical and immediate actions Australia can take to get democracy back on the international agenda.

1: Demand leadership from the UN Democracy Fund

With a measly staff of eight and a tiny budget, the UN Democracy Fund is built to fail. But that doesn't have to be the case.

Australia should lead a push with like-minded countries to replenish funding for the UN Democracy Fund. At the same time, it should become a standalone agency, not an appendage to the Secretary-General's office.

2: Re-prioritising democracy building in the aid program.

Australia currently spends \$793 million a year on capacity building and governance initiatives in our aid budget. "Effective governance" is important, but so is representative government.

Increasing the democratic institutions of our aid partners also increases our confidence in the spending of our aid.

Australia's country-specific programs in supporting free media and civil society organisations play an important role, too. The Australian expertise we have could be shared more widely.

3: Push for democracy to be part of the next United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals run until 2030, and we'll need to renew and revise them. The Sustainable Development Goals have avoided the difficulty of mentioning democracy.

Wouldn't it be good if one day goal 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, instead becomes Peace, Justice and Strong Democracies. After all, the UN says that democracy is a core value of the institution.

The era of Australia's humility on the world stage is over — it's time to share our passion and expertise in this space with the international community.

Australia becoming an international voice for democracy will energise our diplomats and is entirely in line with our values. This should become a priority as part of our contribution to building and maintaining a post-COVID rules-based order.

Patrick Gorman is the Federal member for Perth

How plus-one invitations to office parties can go wrong

GARY MARTIN

With the end-of-year office party season in full swing, many are wrestling with a decision more difficult than buying a gift for an unpopular colleague — whether to take advantage of the plus-one option on the invitation.

With efforts to keep things safe during a pandemic, plus-one invitations are likely to be more common this year than ever before as some companies move to hold barbecue lunches at the beach, picnics in the park or backyard bashes under a tarpaulin.

While the annual office party

can be loads of fun, it can also be a career minefield. And bringing along a significant other can make the party explode.

Any single adverse action by your partner could dismantle, damage or demolish your strong professional standing.

For starters, there is the prospect of having to babysit a person who does not know any of your colleagues and thereby forces you to forgo valuable schmoozing time with important people.

There are also those who cannot keep up with office banter, others who remain blissfully unaware of the office pecking order and partners

who come armed with a Grinch face and fail to charm.

Perhaps your overindulging partner will sour your good name by ordering multiple drinks at once from the free bar under the alarmed eye of the boss.

Some plus-ones go as far as having a word in the ear of the boss about your own awkward career matter.

One minute your partner seems to be engaged in small talk but the next they have their finger pushed firmly into the boss' ribcage.

And if you are really unlucky there is a chance your partner might end up flirting innocently with the boss or a

colleague, pick a fight with an annoying co-worker or fit in so well that they prefer the love of your company over yours.

Of course, there are some advantages in bringing a significant other to the office party.

If you are not particularly close to your colleagues, having your partner beside you can help get through those awkward moments when you are left standing alone.

And in the aftermath of #MeToo some bosses have a hidden agenda when it comes to plus-one invitations: bringing along a significant other could promote good behaviour.

Having partners on deck,

they believe, might just prevent dodgy moves on the dance floor or those ill-advised hook-ups.

At the end of the day there is no better or worse choice when it comes to plus-one invitations.

Any decision will come down to whether your partner likes to get out, meet new people and fend for themselves — or is one who will need to follow you to the restrooms for fear of being left alone.

Just because you have received a plus-one invitation does not mean you have to take one.

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