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THREATS TO DEMOCRACIES: A VIEW FROM AUSTRALIA

Like many other Western liberal democracies, Australia is currently experiencing a range of challenges to both the stability and sanctity of democratic structures and institutions and the beliefs and values that underwrite them.

Threats to democracies are nothing new – they have existed for as long as democracies themselves. However, faced with a range of risks and threats to long-held assumptions about the strength and robustness of rules-based democratic governance, liberal-democratic states like Australia are having to work both harder and smarter to ensure that our democratic systems can withstand efforts to undermine or overturn them.

For Australia, some of these challenges are no different to those faced by a range of other democratic countries; they include rising levels of foreign interference; a tsunami of online dis- and misinformation; escalating social, cultural and political polarisation; and the erosion of citizen trust in both governments and public institutions. These are global challenges, whether we are looking at democracies in North America, Europe, the Asia-Pacific or elsewhere.

In domestic terms, however, Australia faces some current challenges to its democratic resilience that reflect more localised trends in three key areas:

1. media and information flows,
2. social cohesion, and
3. citizen-government trust.

A DYSREGULATED MEDIA AND INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

In 2017, the Australian Parliament passed legislation that abolished the country's "two out of three rule," which had effectively limited one media company operating across print, television, and radio in one city, and the 75% 'reach rule', which limited a single television broadcaster from reaching more than 75% of the population.

These changes – combined with the profound disruptions created by global social media and other digital platforms – have negatively influenced perceptions of Australian media fairness, balance, trustworthiness, and legitimacy so necessary for the

transparent and verified information flows that underpin thriving democracies, with "perceptions of bias and conflicts of interest... undermining trust in news."

Alongside this, the sense of a common "public sphere" in which national contests of ideas, approaches, and models for economic and social wellbeing or change might be canvassed has now become far more fragmented, resulting in an exploding series of miniaturised "public squares" that are increasingly private rather than genuinely public in nature.

And the ongoing stoush over Australia's news media bargaining code, which forces social media companies to pay for Australian media content or risk fines, has resulted in companies such as Meta (owner of Facebook, amongst other platforms) refusing to sign on, further eroding access to reputable and fact-checked media sources in a country where 20%, or one-fifth, of Australians received their news from social media platforms in 2023 (up 3% from 2022). Mis- and disinformation actors have exploited these weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

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SOCIAL COHESION: STILL ROBUST BUT STARTING TO FRAY

While Australia still ranks very highly on a range of social cohesion indicators, it is also the case that our social cohesion measures are now the lowest they have been since the nation's chief social cohesion national survey measure, the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion, began in 2007. As the 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion report notes (p. 6):



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Social cohesion in Australia is under pressure and declining ... Our indicators suggested that cohesion had been declining after a COVID-related spike in 2020. While there were some signs to suggest that cohesion was returning to a pre-pandemic normal, declines in our sense of national pride and belonging, increasing financial strain and a weakening sense of social inclusion and justice were warning signs of further weakening in our social fabric. The [2023] results reinforce these concerns and underline the precarious and uncertain social environment of Australia in 2023.

The reasons for this precarious environment are too complex to unpack in a brief magazine article, but they have been exacerbated in part by the rise in extremist and violent extremist rhetoric and behaviour that arose during the peak of the COVID pandemic. After a relatively brief burst of national unity in the face of a global health challenge, large numbers of Australians began to balk at what they saw as overly intrusive, stringent, or unnecessary public health measures that limited geographical mobility and physical and social contact with others, mandated vaccine uptake and created significant job losses or curtailments, despite significant investment in financial offsets by government to help cushion the pandemic's economic blows.

In this sense, a paradoxical weakness of liberal democracy was revealed: In countries like Australia, where most citizens alive today have never experienced the repeal or limitation of freedoms that are taken wholly for granted, the experience of the power of the state to intervene or countermand those freedoms

came as a huge shock to the Australian system. This shock, and the uncertainty and anxiety it created, was quickly exploited by a range of extremist actors, particularly on the far right, who encouraged the uptake of conspiracist and anti-government narratives that served as entry points for harder-edged far-right extremist ideologies and networks.

These networks have in many cases survived by revising or resetting their focus and targets, a concerning sign for the resilience of extremist movements and their ability to adapt. One of Australia's most devastating recent terrorist attacks, the Wieambilla ambush by Christian extremists which killed two police officers and a neighbour on a remote Queensland outback property, serves as a prime example of what happens when anti-government sentiment is taken to its logical endpoint. Such sentiment in Australia, while often more rhetorical than violent, has not abated – but violent threats against elected officials have accelerated, particularly following the onset of the Israel-Gaza conflict, representing a new threshold of anti-social normalisation in Australian (un)civil discourse.



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DECLINING LEVELS OF TRUST, RISING LEVELS OF POLARISATION

These dynamics are in turn underpinned by Australia’s low levels of trust in government and institutions. The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer’s findings on polarisation in Australia reveal that “Australia is on a path to polarisation, driven by a series of macro forces that are weakening the country’s social fabric and creating increasing division in society.” This year’s report finds that almost half of Australians (45%) say the nation is more divided today than in the past. ... Australia [is] currently straddling the boundary between “moderately polarised” and “in danger of severe polarisation” alongside Canada. ... The data reveals [just over half of] Australians (54%) think the nation’s social fabric has become too weak to serve as a foundation for unity and common purpose.’

Unpacking some of the Edelman data further, we see that in 2023 only 45% of Australians trusted government, with government joining “the media in distrust territory” for the first time in seven years, although media remained the “most distrusted institution” in the country.

All of these dynamics and conditions – global as well as more locally nuanced – have created an environment in which people’s grasp on what democracy is and why it is essential to protect it has arguably weakened, providing further opportunities for both state and non-state actors to exploit a range of micro-, meso-, and macro-level systemic weaknesses.

What does this mean for the continued resilience of Australia’s democratic norms and systems? As the Australian Government’s 2024 Strengthening Democracy Taskforce report notes, “strengthening democracy is a process of continuous innovation” – in how we continue to affirm, practice and defend what we value about our system of democratic governance. This includes, for example, Australia’s compulsory voting system, which ensures that all Australians have a say at each election – local, state, or federal – on who will govern them, one of only 23 countries worldwide to do so. But it also means that we



...and I do not feel these divisions can be overcome

(Adapted from the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Australia Report)

cannot remain complacent about the threats or challenges we face. This includes understanding that threats to democracy are never just external in nature – for instance, in the form of foreign interference. They can also be internal, particularly when the rights and freedoms we associate with democracy are used against the very system that confers such rights and freedoms to begin with.

Renewing our focus on ensuring that we have a robust, transparent, balanced, and fair media ecosystem; a rigorous commitment to social cohesion; and inclusiveness that calls out discrimination, embraces principled debate, and rejects polarisation; and the rebuilding of trust by government (not just ‘in’ government) in its operations, ethics, and systems would be one pathway for attempting to ensure the continued resilience of Australian democratic norms.

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