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# Lessons from the crucible: Options for parliamentary representation, accountability and trust from power sharing situations

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## Abstract

Australia has a long tradition of democratic innovation, with its political institutions evolving alongside shifting social, technological, environmental, and geopolitical conditions. Yet like many peer democracies, Australia is experiencing declining support for major parties, rising electoral success for independents and minor parties, and increasing public concern about the responsiveness of its democratic institutions. Unlike many European systems designed to accommodate multiparty governance, Westminster-derived systems such as Australia's remain structurally oriented toward majority rule—creating challenges when voter preferences no longer align with this model.

This paper examines the implications of these shifts, including recent federal election trends, emerging public attitudes towards minority governments, and historical examples of parliamentary adaptation. It explores how institutional conventions—such as assumptions around executive dominance, majoritarian legitimacy, and the centrality of ministers in policy processes—may need to evolve to maintain trust, responsiveness, and representativeness. Drawing on both domestic and international examples, it considers what can be learned from minority and multi-party governance, and identifies potential adaptations in parliamentary procedure, accountability mechanisms, and public administration.

While opportunities for innovation are evident, so too are risks—including political instability, unclear mandates, and heightened complexity for public policy delivery. These dynamics raise critical questions for future research: How can systems not designed for power-sharing adapt if there are shifting electoral preferences? What institutional reforms can improve legitimacy without sacrificing effectiveness? And how can trust in democratic institutions be rebuilt when the pathways of representation are increasingly diverse?

This paper aims to prompt further research and dialogue across disciplines on how institutional design and democratic practice can evolve to reflect the pluralism of contemporary Australia—strengthening the resilience of its democracy in the decades ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://australiandemocracy.org.au/>

# 1 Introduction

Australian democracy remains robust, but it is not immune to the complex and evolving pressures facing democratic systems worldwide. Moreover, Australian democratic practices and institutions have had a long history of democratic innovators and leadership evolving with changing social, technological, environmental, and political conditions. These changing conditions often test the adaptability of democratic institutions and, specifically, their ability to maintain public trust and legitimacy during periods of transition (Strengthening Democracy Taskforce, 2024).

In this context, many OECD countries have witnessed a long-term decline in participation in elections (OECD, 2024) and support for political parties (OECD, 2022), alongside growing support for independent or minor party candidates. While some nations have designed their parliamentary systems to accommodate multiparty governance—such as Germany’s Bundestag or Sweden’s proportional coalition structures—countries shaped by Westminster traditions, including Australia, often assume a two-party dominant model. In these countries, parliamentary rules, committee structures, and electoral expectations around accountability largely reflect this assumption.

However, changing voter behaviour is challenging those assumptions. As electoral support for major parties decline, new questions emerge about how democratic institutions can and should adapt to better reflect citizen preferences. How can systems be designed for oppositional governance become more inclusive of diverse voices? How can these systems accommodate members whose electorates do not choose one of the major parties? What lessons can be drawn from power-sharing and minority government experiences here and abroad? And how might reforms to parliamentary practice enhance both representation and public trust?

Trust in politicians and political parties has steadily declined in Australia (Evans et al, 2016; Stoker & Evans, 2022), even as trust in the public service and democratic processes has remained relatively stable (APSC, 2025). This trend has been shared globally for several decades (Valgardsson et al 2025). Research highlights that resilient democracies are not simply those with formal integrity mechanisms, but those whose institutions are responsive to citizen needs and capable of evolving in line with public expectations (OECD 2025).

Against this backdrop, this report explores what lessons can be learned from comparative contexts when systems evolve into minority and multiparty governments - what we refer to in this paper as “crucibles” of democratic experimentation. These moments often make visible the dynamics of negotiation, accountability, and power-sharing that are otherwise obscured in majoritarian settings. They provide a rigorous test of how systems listen to voters, of how well they balance the need to be responsive to the changing citizenry while maintaining responsible enduring institutions. By analysing international examples and relevant Australian experience, this discussion paper canvasses how democratic institutions may and can adapt to shifting electoral realities in ways that deepen public trust, enhance representativeness, and renew confidence in politics.

## 2 Context

In May 2025, Australia held a federal election following months of speculation and close polling. While the Albanese Labor Government was returned with a significantly increased majority in the House of Representatives, the result belied a deeper shift in electoral dynamics that mirrors broader international trends.

Even though there was a majority outcome in the 2025 Australian Federal Election, primary voting for both the major parties remained under thirty five percent. In many electorates, major party candidates' success was reliant on preference flows from independents and minor parties. The current Australian Parliament includes more independent members than in the UK, US, Canada and New Zealand combined (Riboldi et al, 2024).

Although minority governments are still relatively rare in the Australian House of Representatives (Megalogenis, 2024), minority or multi-party arrangements are more common in the Australian Senate, which has substantial powers (Prosser et al, 2025). As explored later in this paper, an historical perspective shows the steady shift in voter first preferences for non-major parties. If it continues on its current trajectory, and multi-party or independent members become more prevalent, this raises questions around what parliamentary and institutional arrangements would need to adapt in our multiple democratic systems to ensure due representation works.

Polling conducted after the Federal Election saw a small increase in trust in Parliament from 49.9 per cent of Australians (trusting it somewhat or completely) in April 2025, rising to 58.3 per cent in May 2025 (Biddle 2025).<sup>2</sup> This is statistically and substantively significant, but it is also fair to say that while Australians returned a record majority government in 2025, it did not come with a record return to trust in the representativeness of major party arrangements.

These findings are consistent with the conclusions in the most recent democratic audit of Australia (Evans & Dunleavy, 2025). This audit found overwhelming support for representative democracy in Australia, but growing interest in making the system more responsive and accountable to the people. The audit underscores growing public appetite for reform to make democratic institutions more accountable and reflective of community expectations.

Importantly, the need to rebuild trust in government is not the preserve of any single political party. Rather, it reflects a cross-partisan recognition of the importance of institutional legitimacy. It has also become a feature of the ALP's approach to reforming public administration (Gallagher, 2022). This raises a central question for all members of government: what changes are required to ensure parliamentary representation evolves in line with public expectations and electoral patterns?

In response, this report examines both Australian and international examples of how parliaments can strengthen trust by improving representation. In particular, it focuses on lessons from minority and multi-party governance contexts, where institutional flexibility and power-sharing arrangements have prompted innovations in accountability, transparency, and responsiveness. By drawing from these cases, the report aims to contribute to a broader conversation about how Australian democratic institutions can adapt to build enduring public confidence.

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<sup>2</sup> This is based on data from Wave 4 of the 2025 Election Monitoring Survey Series (EMSS), described below

The report is structured in five parts. First, we briefly overview the core features of minority government, before we present findings on a recent survey on Australian attitudes towards it. Third, we report insights from a past federal minority parliament that ran full term. Fourth, and most substantially, we examine case studies from international examples of minor and multi-party governments to distil lessons for Australia. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for tangible change to enhance representation, lift effectiveness, build public trust and renew democratic arrangements in our parliament for new and different times.

### 3 Features of minority government and parliament

Minority government was a widespread expectation prior to the 2025 Federal Election (Megalogenis, 2024). Yet, it is not as rare as some might think (Strom & Mclean, 2024). Australia's earliest elections after Federation tended to result in minority governments. Australia's first few Prime Ministers – Barton, Deakin, Watson, Reid, and Fischer – all led without majority support. However, after the Second World War and the emergence of the current two-party system with Labor (ALP) and the Liberal National Coalition (LNP), majority governments became the norm, at least until the 2010 election when Julia Gillard took office with less than half of seats (relying on the support of three independent and one Greens MP).

Meanwhile, the 2025 Election did not provide the minority result prophesied by many, while it was a catalyst to an unexpected split in the LNP and it did result in the largest ALP caucus in decades, returned for this (and perhaps the next) term. That said, the continued relatively low primary vote of the major parties, the ALP's reliance on independent preferences and surprise challenges from independents all mean that it is unlikely that the 2025 result has removed minority government permanently from the electoral landscape. In raw terms, a fifty five percent two-party preferred does not present the stable strength (or community mandate) of a fifty one percent primary vote. Rather, as Briggs and colleagues (2025) demonstrate through graphic analysis, independents are changing the electoral landscape substantially, making each next election less predictable.

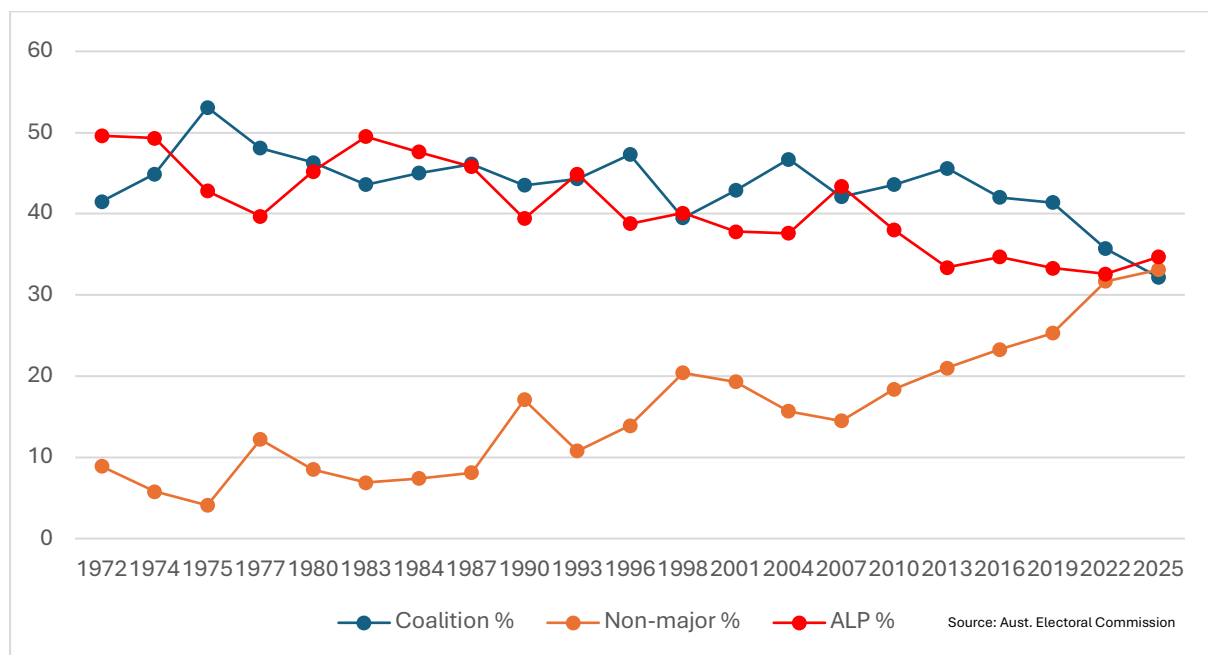
For these reasons, and to provide context to the decisions that underpin this discussion paper, it is worthwhile to briefly note the key features of minority government. First, the term 'minority government' is commonly conflated with 'minority parliament' (Prosser & Denniss, 2015), where with the latter, no party holds a majority in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. Here, we use the terms according to this specific meaning, except when used differently by the author under review. Neither do we use an alternate term, 'hung parliament', because the term is normative, suggesting that it is an aberration, unwelcome or unworkable, while we believe that such arrangements are only different (Strom, 1990). It is also important to note that the Australian Senate is a legislative chamber and one of the most powerful upper houses in Westminster systems (Prosser et al, 2025), while it has experienced minority government for almost all of the last four decades. In this sense, minority arrangements are neither new to Australia nor an inherent cause of past parliamentary instability.

Minority arrangements are more likely in Australia than other Westminster systems due to several unique features of its system. First, voting is compulsory, which means there is the potential for greater electoral support for independent and other parties from voters who do not support either of the two major parties (and might otherwise not vote). Second, voting is preferential in the House (meaning that should a non-major party member secure one of the top two first preference votes, they can harness votes from lower preference candidates), as well as proportional in the Senate (meaning that members from non-major parties can secure the last available seats).

Third, the Australian major parties exercise a strict three-line whip for almost every vote (unlike the UK and US), which means in the 150 seat (House) and 76 seat (Senate) chambers, a small number of non-major party members can consistently hold the deciding vote (i.e., balance-of-power).

Minority arrangements are becoming more likely because of changing electoral trends. Riboldi and colleagues (2024) examine lower house electoral trends since the 1970s to trace the rise of independent and minor party MPs. They attribute this to steadily falling support for the two major parties from ninety percent in the 1970’s to less than 70% in 2022. When adding the 2025 result, we see non-major parties securing more primary votes than one of the major parties for the first time.

**Figure 1 Australian Primary vote since 1970**



This graph presents a less prominent, but equally important, second narrative of the 2025 Federal Election, which is, the ALP won a landslide of seats with the same primary vote as the 2016 election (which it lost). This leaves the ALP majority potentially vulnerable at the next election to either a switch by the Opposition to a widely popular leader or direct challenge from Independents in previously safe ALP seats (as was seen in the seat of Bean in the ACT).

It is also important to note other factors underlying the 2025 election result (Raue, 2025). These include the significant fall in votes for major party candidates (which has continued since 2019). More seats were won on preferences than ever before, with only 11 seats won on primary votes alone. The average gap in vote between second and third primary votes fell to thirteen percent (down from twenty six percent in 2004), while the 2022 decision by the Australian Electoral Commission to conduct three-way preference counts grew in their use at the 2025 election.

Further, strategic voting, previously a feature of the multi-party Senate (where people voted for others to keep the major parties ‘honest’ (Prosser et al, 2024)), saw signs of a shift, where in 2025 more people voted for a viable local candidate in their electorate, making the house vote more fragmented (and the Senate result more indicative of major party support). Two possibilities may have been at work here. One is that ALP voters in traditionally Coalition seats voted strategically

to keep the Coalition out of that seat. The other is that voters who do not support the major parties are looking for viable local representation, which they do not see as viable in the larger state-based Senate. We would suggest that the latter may be more likely due to the breadth and sophistication of electoral understanding to manipulate preferences to vote a major party out. We also look to the trend identified above in support for non-major parties and the examples of significant success with a viable candidate in a smaller state or territory (as can be seen with Senator Pocock in 2025 and Senator Xenophon before him in winning a quota ahead of a major party), as a more likely explanation.

Riboldi and colleagues attribute these changes to broader social trends (such as post-industrialism, post-materialism and anti-politics), making voters more issue-interested than ideologically orientated. This makes it harder for major parties to provide a consistent platform that wins the support of an increasingly diverse and fragmented populace. These authors' analysis also notes that disillusioned Australian voters have been more likely to shift support from Labor to the Greens and from the conservative Coalition to independent/teal (i.e., conservative-environment) candidates.

What this analysis and the aforementioned trend suggest is a significant challenge currently facing the Australian political system, Namely:

- Will the two major parties change their principles and processes to recapture voters' confidence that they are representative of them at local and national levels to rebuild their relevance and support, or
- Will our parliamentary system change to provide greater scope for effective representation of those who do not share major party views and a majority in their electorate have voted 'other'.

Further, if the above trends continue, which is plausible, and if minority government does not hand others the 'balance of power' on every occasion, the vital question becomes:

- How adequately are our parliamentary methods of representation prepared for more Australians supporting 'other' candidates than supporting the party forming government and appointing ministers in the House?

This trend then becomes a matter for consideration by public administration and public servants, whose work is traditionally driven by the minister of their respective department. How might minority parliamentary arrangements impact on their work? Good (2010) has argued that when uncertainty and frequent changes in leadership come from minority government it can disrupt long-term planning and policy implementation. However, Good also argues that minority governments can foster innovation and responsiveness, as they must be more attuned to the demands and interests of a broader range of stakeholders. Others have noted that minority governments must navigate through negotiation and coalition-building, which can often lead to more inclusive and deliberative policy-making processes that better enable the work of policy makers (Dufour et al, 2011).

Meanwhile, public commentary has noted the increased prevalence of non-major party voting, which has resulted in a range of public claims ranging from that minority government will further damage democracy or conversely it will revitalise it by forcing change (Megalogenis, 2024). Often major party-political leaders argue that it will result in illegitimate and inefficient government (Coorey, 2025), while they campaign that only majoritarian rule by one of the two major party groupings can result in the 'continuity and certainty' (ABC Insiders, 2025) that Australia needs in

time of uncertainty. Such views may indeed be accurate, but it will be at least another three years before Australians have the opportunity to test their veracity.

## 4 Australians' contemporary attitudes to minority government

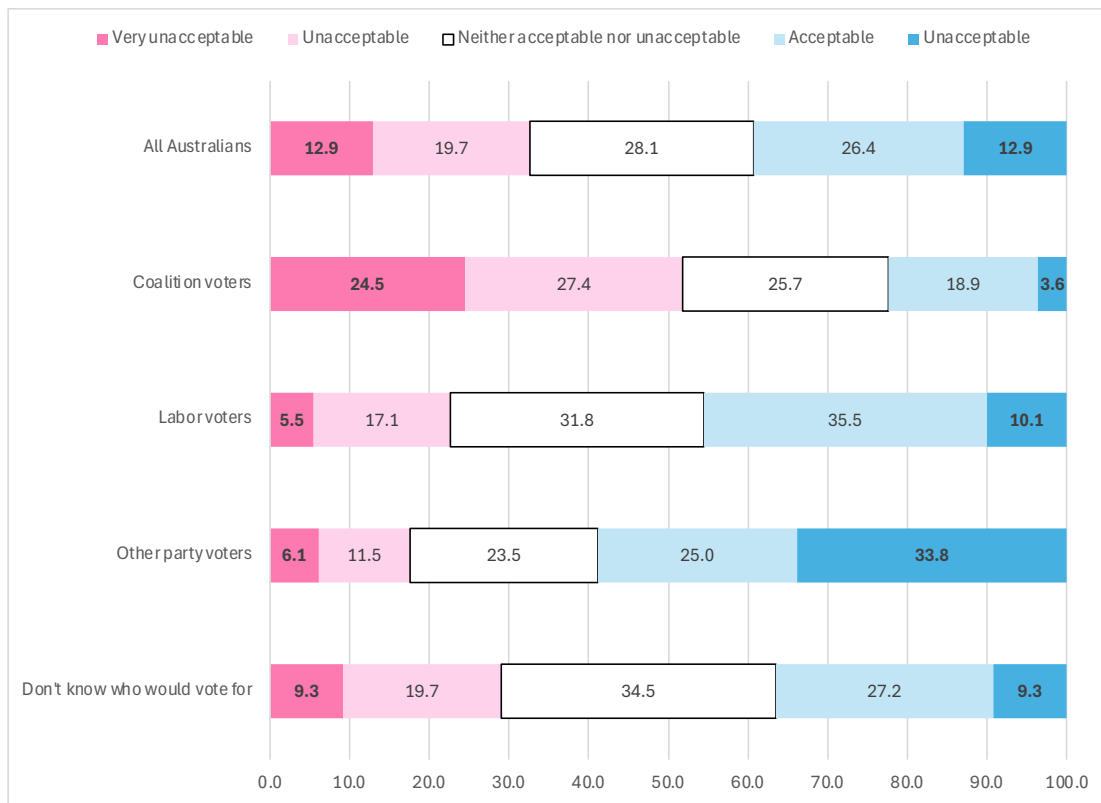
To test public attitudes of Australians to minority parliaments, we accessed the Australian National University's 2025 Election Monitoring Survey Series (or EMSS). This has been tracking political attitudes and voting intentions since October 2024. Wave 3 of the 2025 EMSS included a small module on public perceptions of minority government (using the term more common with the public). Data collection commenced on Thursday the 26th of March with a pilot data collection. Full data collection commenced on Friday 28th March (the day the 2025 Federal Election date of May 3rd was announced) and finished on the 8th of April (with 3,608 respondents).

Respondents were first primed with the following statement *'At the next federal election, it's possible that no party will win a majority in the House of Representatives, and Australia could have a minority government. In this situation, the government would rely on the support of independent or minor party MPs to pass legislation and remain in office.'* They were then asked: *'How acceptable or unacceptable do you find the idea of a minority government in Australia?'*

More Australians think that a minority government is acceptable (39.3 per cent) than think it is unacceptable (32.6 per cent). This relativity is also true for those that said they would vote Labor (45.6 acceptable/22.6 per cent unacceptable), a minor party or independent (58.9/17.7 per cent) and those that do not know who they would vote for (36.5/29.0 per cent).

The only party which has voters that do not see a minority government as being acceptable (in net terms) is Liberal voters, with more than half (51.8 per cent) saying a minority government is unacceptable compared to just under a quarter (22.5 per cent) that think it is acceptable.

**Figure 2 Acceptability of minority governments, all Australians and by voting intentions, March/April 2025**

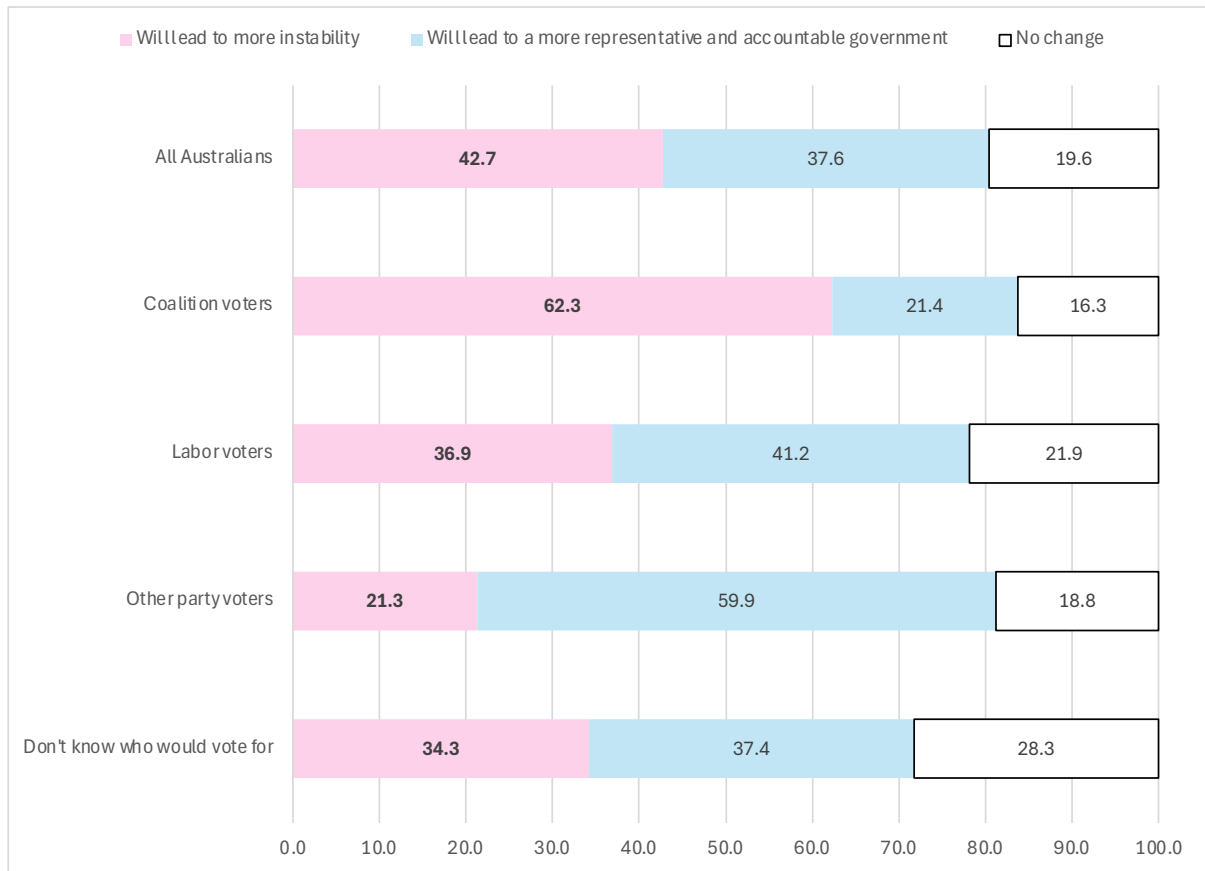


The next question on the EMSS asked explicitly about the stability of minority governments. Specifically, respondents were primed with the following statement: ‘Some political commentators predict that minority government will result in unstable government and promote minority interests, while other commentators predict that it will result in representative government and hold major parties more accountable.’ They are then asked: ‘Which of the following best reflects your view of a minority government compared to a majority government?’ with three possible response options.

Australians are reasonably evenly split on whether a minority government will be positive or negative. However, slightly more Australians (42.7 per cent) think that a minority government will lead to more instability, compared to those that think it will lead to a more representative and accountable government (37.6 per cent). The remaining 19.6 per cent of Australians do not think there will be any change.

Coalition voters are most likely to see a minority government as being negative, with 62.3 per cent expecting more instability compared to 21.4 per cent expecting more representativeness/accountability. All other Australians, but particularly those that say they would vote for a minor party or independent, are more likely to think that a minority government will have a positive rather than negative impact. These mixed expectations suggest that while many suspect that minority government will be a rocky ride, most expect little to no change.

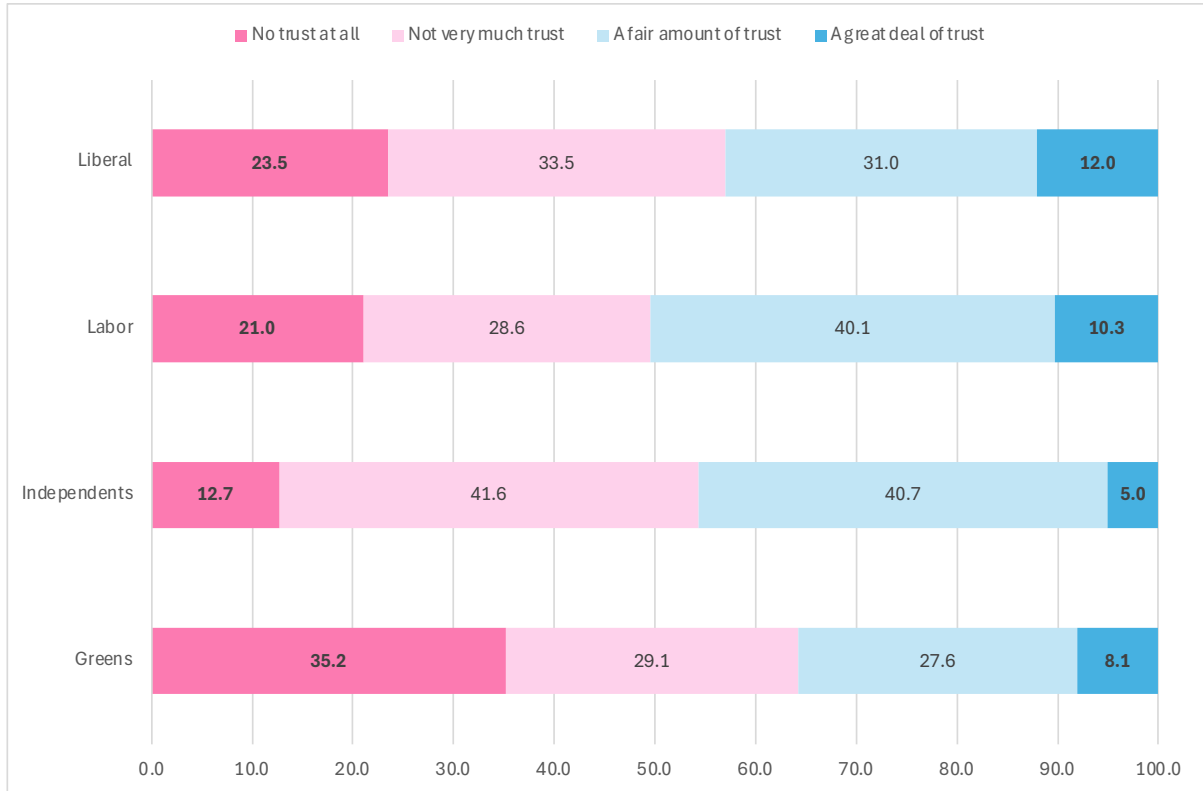
**Figure 3 Views on stability vs representativeness/accountability of a minority government, all Australians and by voting intentions, March/April 2025**



Not only were there differences in views towards minority governments by the voting intentions of respondents, but there were also differences in views towards the different political parties in how confident respondents were towards that party. Specifically, respondents were asked ‘How much trust do you have in the following parties or groups to act responsibly in a minority parliament?’

Although the Liberal Party had the highest per cent of people that had ‘A great deal of trust’ in them (12.0 per cent), when combined with the ‘A fair amount of trust’ respondents, broad trust appears to be higher for the Labor Party (50.4 per cent) compared to the Liberal Party (43.0). Broad trust is, however, lowest for the Greens party (35.7 per cent). Interestingly, although both groups may be in a position to hold the balance of power, trust is higher for the Independents (45.7 per cent) compared to the Greens.

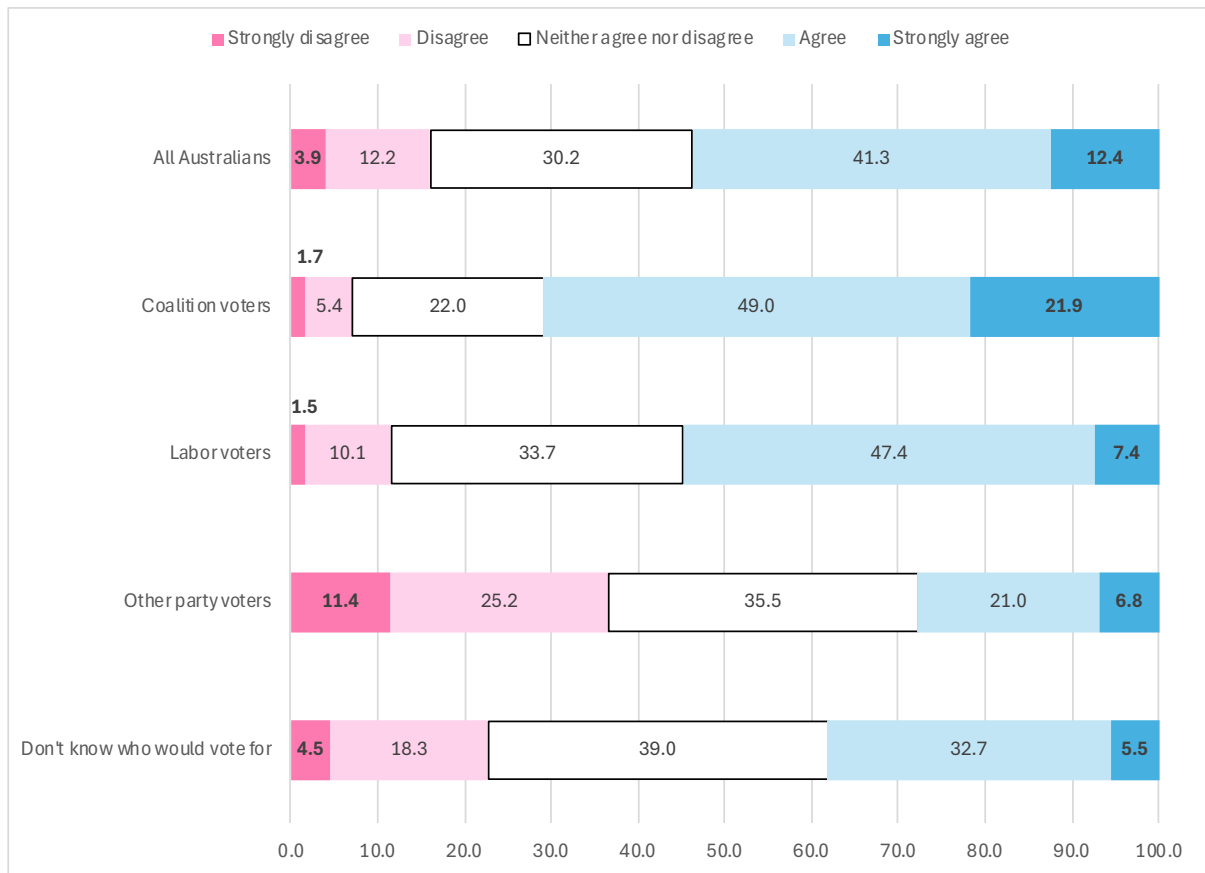
**Figure 4 Trust in parties and independents in a minority government, March/April 2025**



These findings are compatible with previous research on minority government in Canada (Dufresne & Nevitte, 2014), which found different public attitudes to minority government by partisan alignment.

After this question on minority government, we then tested attitudes on majority. We asked respondents the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that *‘Stable and effective government requires a majority of seats for one of the two major parties within the House of Representatives.’* Results suggest that, although previous questions are accepting of minority governments, they still have a strong preference for majority governments. Amongst Coalition voters, 70.9 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Even a majority of Labor voters (54.7 per cent) did, leading to more than half of all Australians (53.8 per cent) either agreeing or strongly agreeing. It is only amongst minor party voters where there is a greater per cent of respondents that disagree (36.8 per cent) compared to agree (27.8 per cent).

**Figure 5 Perceptions of majority governments as being required for stable and effective government, March/April 2025**



Immediately after the election, data was collected as part of Wave 4 of the EMSS. This wave of data collection commenced on the 5th of May. Between then and the 13th of May, a total of 3,720 surveys were completed. One of the questions asked was ‘Considering the electoral outcomes of this federal election, how well do you think that the interests of the following groups will be represented by the newly elected members of parliament and the winning party.’ While respondents were asked about a range of groups, they were also asked explicitly about how well the Parliament will represent ‘voters like me.’ More Australians (59.0 per cent) said well or fairly well, than said not at all or not very well (41.0 per cent). Nonetheless, the latter represents a substantial minority that do not feel represented by the election outcome.

In summary, new data from the EMSS reveals a public that finds minority governments more acceptable than unacceptable, although views divide sharply along partisan lines—Labor and minor party voters are generally supportive, while Coalition voters remain sceptical. A slim majority—around 54 per cent—agree that stable and effective government requires one of the two major parties to hold a majority in the House of Representatives. So, Australians retain an underlying preference for majority governments, as was shown in the preference flows of the 2025 Federal Election.

## 5 Insights from previous Australian minority governments

Now, having considered features and attitudes surrounding minority government, let us consider some important insights from the ‘crucible’ of past experience in Australia.

Most notable of these is the minority 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament where the Labor Government, under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, signed an agreement with the Australian Greens party and three independents. This agreement launched with great ambition for a ‘new paradigm’ for Australian politics (Prosser & Warhurst, 2014). Notable amongst the proposed reforms were improvements to parliamentary behaviours, more opportunity for debate of Private Member Bills (PMBs), changes to Question Time, the establishment of the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) to check party costings, improvements to the parliamentary committee system and the creation of a Code of Conduct for MPs, as well as establishing an independent Speaker and a Parliamentary Integrity Commissioner. The first of these were successful, the latter two stalled in parliament, the Code took until 2024 to emerge, while the PBO has been sustained.

In terms of legislation and administration, the Labor’s minority parliament was stable and productive, running full term and passing more bills than the previous Howard Coalition majority government. Major reforms included an Emissions Trading Scheme, National Disability Insurance Scheme, regional hospital funding and the Mineral Resource Rent Tax. The changes of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament saw an increase in PMBs and amendments, with two independent PMBs passing the House for the first time. However, while independents were more involved in parliamentary activity and placed issues on the agenda, their direct legislative impact was limited; much of their influence was indirect, such as shaping government bills or raising the profile of key issues (Prosser & Warhurst, 2014).

In terms of the politics of Gillard’s minority parliament, the picture is less positive. Parliamentary insiders describe it as amongst the most politically toxic on record (Prosser & Warhurst, 2014). It is also often observed that the government leaked significant political capital over its term. Meanwhile, campaign and other commitments made prior to entering minority arrangements required compromise to secure support in the chambers and were subject to political criticism over perceived inconsistencies between campaign commitments and political policy positions. This came to have significant currency in the lead up to the spill of Gillard’s leadership in June 2013. A close assessment of the Gillard Government by Crowley and Hughes (2022) noted that it never lost a vote, ran full term, was a reformist government, and Australia’s most legislatively successful federal government; but it failed to be re-elected and its supporters largely suffered in its aftermath. Carson and colleagues (2019) summarised that Julia Gillard was more adept at internal minority negotiations than general communication, seeing perceptions of illegitimacy and dishonesty gained traction.

Politics and policy scholar, Allan McConnell (2010), identifies policy success as a multifaceted concept, involving parliamentary/process, political and program elements. It is beyond the scope of this report to conduct a thorough review using this lens, but it is fair to say the success of Gillard’s minority parliament was mixed. In terms of parliament and process, it would seem relatively successful. The independents involved at the time attributed this to Gillard and Albanese’s negotiation skills and ability to maintain coalitions, which enabled the government to last a full term and pass substantial legislation (Prosser & Denniss, 2016). In terms of politics, it would seem a failure. Those same politicians described a situation where the Prime Minister

struggled to communicate the complexities and achievements of minority parliament to the public because the election strategy of her party was to emphasise majority as stability and strength, not acknowledging minority as effective governance (Prosser & Warhurst, 2014; Prosser & Denniss, 2015). In terms of programs, the situation would seem neutral in that there was no noticeable impact on the professional support provided by the Australian Public Service. What is notable, however, was the passage of Opposition and PMBs without the support of the Minister (a situation that occurred again in the brief Coalition minority parliament in 2019 (Grattan & Seaborn, 2023)), which provides an interesting challenge for an APS with its priority on sole loyalty to the minister (Prosser & Denniss, 2015).

In summary, minority parliament, when managed well, can result in more representative outcomes, while the Gillard Government was neither completely unstable nor successful. A key theme about what worked from this case is that negotiation and inclusion are essential, including due recognition of the legitimacy and power of minority partners. A key lesson is around the central role of politics and the importance of communicating the nature of minority to shape electoral outcomes. In essence, what works in minority contexts is a pragmatic and flexible approach that recognizes the real power dynamics of parliament and politics.

## 6 Insights and cases from international multi-party systems and for public administration

We now turn our attention more broadly to multi-party and minority arrangements in other parliaments. We start by noting the European experience of multi-party parliaments created by design, which have worked effectively on a consistent basis. While there are lessons to be learned from these parliaments, these insights are beyond the scope of a single discussion paper, and we have chosen to consider Westminster-like contexts in the belief they will more easily translate into the Australian context. We also note the extensive experience of minority government in Australian state and territory parliaments, and while this informs some of the literature reviewed here, again due to matters of scope and focus in a single paper, we do not review them comprehensively here.

However, notable within Westminster contexts is that of two prominent coalition arrangements. The first is the coalition between the Australian Liberal Party and its minority National Party partner. This had been so stable over decades that it has been formalised into ‘the Coalition’ and is often assumed to be a major party in itself (Botterill & Cockfield, 2015). The split in the LNP after the 2025 election only serves to emphasise this success for almost one hundred years, while the recent split also raises two important points. First, that there are important lessons to be learned about the art of coalition government (that are again beyond the scope of this paper), as can be seen under former Prime Minister Howard (Lovell & Blyth, 2022), and second, that a National Party outside of the opposition status provided by the Coalition would also benefit from representative change that benefits other minor non-government parties.

The other coalition example is the Conservative-Liberal Democrat arrangements in the United Kingdom from 2010 to 2015. The Institute for Government (Paun, 2015; Nice & Paun, 2019) has produced analyses of how the UK coalition arrangements operated over this period. While much of this analysis focusses on processes to form coalitions, our report focusses on effective support of these arrangements once in place. In relation to this, the IfG analysis noted that Cabinet and its committees played a greater role in collective decision-making than in previous

single-party governments. Meanwhile, the principle of collective Cabinet responsibility was generally applied, but exceptions were explicitly allowed in areas of irreconcilable party difference. In another study, Barlow and Bale (2021) found that, once in office, the coalition had to reconcile its shared governance structure with the Westminster model's emphasis on executive dominance, while the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act played a critical role in ensuring the coalition's stability by reducing the Prime Minister's ability to call early elections. In relation to this, the IfG report highlights the need for flexibility, clear public written agreements, and robust dispute resolution mechanisms for successful coalition governance. Major coalition partners should maintain good faith and no surprises with partners, reward backbenchers for lost opportunity and develop communication paths from backbench committees to ministers. Minor partners should choose cabinet positions carefully, negotiate for adequate staffing and ensure minor party staffers are integrated into senior operations.

The IfG also assessed the occurrence of another minority in the UK (from 2017 to 2019), from other Westminster parliaments (i.e., Canada and New Zealand), and in devolved UK legislatures (i.e., Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland). These reviews of minority government draw out several key lessons for multi-party parliaments. These include that minority governments must set long term strategy and goals to avoid interests diverting their agenda. They must also accept frequent parliamentary defeats and prepare the media and public for them (so they are not seen as confidence and trust issues). A pivotal insight across all IfG cases is that a successful minority government cannot be governed in a majoritarian way (Hazell & Paun, 2009) and may take different paths (Paun, 2011). That is, minority administrations that adopt a more consensual approach, negotiating and making concessions, are more likely to remain in office to progress their policy agenda.

In terms of procedural change, the IfG reports also make observations on the importance of allowing for additional time (both for party consideration and parliamentary processes), which may mean the Parliament may need longer to handle bills and the executive release its strong control of parliamentary time. Related to this is the provision of adequate staffing to smaller party or minority partner members to manage the additional work demand. It also notes a more central role for the Speaker both in handling vibrant chamber interactions and casting a deciding vote. The IfG reports also observe that while parliament can be strengthened under minority government, it remains restricted in forcing the executive to do anything against its will. In summary, these reports emphasize that hung parliaments demand flexibility, clear agreements, and robust dispute-resolution mechanisms.

More broadly, Prosser (2012) has considered important issues around the formation of non-majoritarian governments. He argues that the rise of independents and minority governments introduces distinct and evolving challenges for parliamentary integrity and accountability. Prosser proposes an expanded model of parliamentary integrity that goes beyond traditional anti-corruption and probity measures. This model should encompass broader concepts such as transparency in negotiations, clarity in the exercise of influence, and mechanisms to ensure that deals and agreements made outside formal party structures are subject to public scrutiny. This he argues would produce stronger power sharing arrangements and more robust accountability in minority and coalition contexts.

Looking to the case of Canada, we find evidence of instability in that the Martin Liberal minority government (2004 to 2006) fell to a corruption scandal and the Harper Conservative minority government (2006 to 2011) which fell over contempt of parliament issues. Cody's (2008) case study reported that Harper's tenure was marked by intense political rivalry, limited legislative

progress, and frequent controversies. That said, Russell's (2023) study of minority government in Canada over several decades found that minority often led to more inclusive and deliberative policymaking, while claims of legislative gridlock and instability were often overstated.

In New Zealand, the Clark Labour minority government (2005 to 2008) had more success passing both an emissions trading scheme and nuclear free legislation, while the Ardern Labour minority government (2017 to 2020) passed zero carbon and tightened gun ownership laws. Meanwhile, Crowley and Moore's (2020) case study of Swedish, New Zealand and Australian arrangements shows that where Green parties are asked to support government for the first time, a toleration or 'arm's length' arrangement that delivers clear policy gains should not precipitate long-term electoral cost. They recommend that there should be a written agreement detailing the delivery of policy gains, the management of interparty relations, access to government and legitimate escape clauses. Such arrangements can run full term, as they have in these case study countries, and can offer a stepping stone onto fuller participation in government.

Amongst devolved UK parliaments, the Welsh parliament has experienced consistent minority since the early 2000's, going full term and passing a range of legislative packages. In Scotland, Salmond's SNP minority government (2007 to 2011) lasted full term and abolished prescription charges and introduced minimum alcohol pricing. Meanwhile, a comparison of the Irish and Australian experience of independents supporting minority government (Kefford & Weeks, 2020) found minority governments with support from independents do not lead to instability nor poor performance, while they were only marginally less productive in terms of legislative output. Where there were stronger contractual ties between parties and independents, the governments lasted longer.

Meanwhile, Nordic countries provide multiple cases of minority government. In his review of them, Bjørn Erik Rasch's (2011), investigates the institutional and political factors enabling the prevalence and stability of minority governments in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Rasch argues that minority cabinets—common in these countries—are not anomalies but strategic adaptations to fragmented party systems and institutional norms favouring negotiation over rigid majoritarianism. He observes that Nordic minority governments rarely occupy the ideological centre but instead leverage their position to broker issue-specific deals. For example, Danish governments frequently collaborate with parties across the spectrum, from the far left to centre-right, depending on policy priorities. Similarly, Sweden's "contract parliamentarism" codifies support agreements, enabling minority cabinets to function like majority governments. He concludes that their success reflects a governance model prioritizing negotiation and accountability over executive dominance.

A major comparative study addresses the key issue of effectiveness. Analysing 197 governments across 21 parliamentary democracies, Thürk (2022) distinguishes between *substantive minority cabinets* (lacking formal support agreements) and *contract minority cabinets* (backed by written agreements with opposition parties). Her findings reveal that while substantive minority governments underperform compared to majority coalitions, contract minority cabinets achieve similar legislative success rates, effectively functioning as majority governments in disguise. This large study emphasises the importance of formal agreements in minority contexts.

Another theme that has been addressed in the minor and multi-party government literature is that of expanding provisions for Private Members Bills (PMBs). It is commonly found that improving PMBs lifts representation and legislation by amplifying diverse voices, prompting major social reforms, empowering backbenchers, and influencing government policy. In Australia, any MP can

introduce a PMB and have been used both a means for non-government members to lift media profile for issues or to put pressure on government to introduce legislation in areas that it has avoided (Prosser & Denniss, 2015; 2015b). In the past in New Zealand, the proportion of PMBs making it to select committee and becoming law increased under the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system, with some bills sponsored by opposition MPs leading to significant policy changes (Shaw, 2004). In the UK, a ‘ballot bill’ system is used to raise priority PMBs, with dedicated days for debate (Baker & Maclary, 2025), while only a small percentage of PMBs become law, those that do often are ‘presentation’ bills that address underrepresented issues or technical reforms. In this case, the number of PMBs introduced has risen over time, reflecting growing demand for greater representation of different interests. Advocates for wider parliamentary representation of changing parliamentary composition and a more diverse community often point to PMBs as a potential area of inclusive reform.

Now, having considered a range of insights for politics and parliament, we turn our attention to the vital role played by the civil and public service. Importantly, the implications of minority government and parliament extend beyond the parliament to the work of the public service and civil servants, with several implications. Responsive public service recognizes the changing dynamics of governance and needs to tailor its approach accordingly. As such, the public service should recognize minority parliament as an emerging and potentially common feature of the future political landscape, requiring a cultural shift in public administration practice.

Working in the Australian context, Prosser and Dennis (2015) draw out a number of other core lessons for public administrators from the crucible of minority government contexts. These include the need to understand and engage with a broader range of parliamentary actors and to recognise that minority party members can shape, amend, or block policy initiatives, and that their priorities and concerns must be factored into policy advice and strategy. Public administration must move beyond a narrow focus on the executive and develop new skills in stakeholder engagement, negotiation, and alliance-building. This includes preparing options and amendments across the political spectrum and providing advice that reflects the realities ministers face with minority government. Hence, public servants need to be agile and adaptable, monitoring the evolving composition and alliances within parliament to anticipate potential political challenges or opportunities for policy proposals.

In the UK, the IfG (Hazell & Paun, 2009; Paun, 2015) has also considered the implications of minority government for the civil service, both in terms of preparing scenarios for the formation of coalition or minority arrangements, and the activity and skills needed to sustain them. It argues that the civil service needs to be prepared for a caretaker government and to support negotiations between political parties during government formation. This includes pre-election planning for multiple outcomes, rather than assuming single-party majorities, and monitoring all parties’ manifestos, policy proposals and understanding potential negotiation dynamics. It also includes drafting agreements and clarifying technical details, while it requires neutrality while assisting prolonged negotiations (as seen in New Zealand’s structured approach to cross-party talks). It can include providing dedicated civil service liaisons for each party prior and during the caretaker period.

The IfG’s consideration of important principles to sustain minority government arrangements included preparation to serve a minority government (and not just the minister or executive). These include regular and rigorous information provision to minor government partners and clear written rules to maintain confidentiality while allowing limited dissent non-confidence matters. This extends to budgeting as fiscal matters require confidentiality and necessitates contingency

planning and rapid response capabilities to mitigate instability risks. It also argues that civil servants must become more attuned to parliamentary dynamics, including opposition priorities crossbench and backbench sentiment. This involves closer monitoring of legislative development and proactive engagement with stakeholders. This should be supported by written guidelines for managing minority governance, including handling confidential information, defining ministers' authority in negotiations, and clarifying the civil service's role in supporting cross-party talks. A range of vital skills for civil servants are also identified, these include:

- political awareness
- stakeholder engagement
- networked collaboration
- cultural sensitivity
- reality testing
- cross departmental collaboration
- organisational stewardship
- adaptive leadership
- values-based leadership
- iterative problem solving, and
- citizen centred approaches.

Together, this work emphasizes that minority and multi-party parliaments can function effectively, but require public services to adopt more flexible, politically astute, approaches. In the following section, we consider what changes may be needed to institutions and convention to make this possible.

## 7 Opportunities for changing conventions and institutions

Scholars of organisational change often talk about the importance of both structure and culture. When put metaphorically, the distinction is made between the established rules and systems of the game with conventions of how the game is played. In the case of contemporary Australian politics, there are ample examples of established conventions being confused with constitutional essentials (Prosser & Dennis, 2015). The two-party system was not an original feature of Westminster systems. The Australian Constitution does not mention the Prime Minister. Strict major party voting and restricted conscience voting is a uniquely Australian thing. The Australian Public Service Act states that public servants report to the people and parliament, not just the minister. Such seemingly unchangeable conventions have emerged over time and can change again - when conditions demand.

More immediately, as we look to the post 2025 Election situation, where the most likely path of Labor government legislation through a minority Senate is either the left-leaning Greens or the recently right-ruled Liberal Party, it raises the question of adequate representation of large body of middle voting and regional Australians. Much of the 2025 vote went to centrist independent candidates, with some winning seats or quotas on first preferences. Meanwhile, the trend toward first preference votes to non-major parties continued to rise.

Should all these trends continue in the future, it inevitably raises issues about adequate avenues for representation of these 'other' voters in existing procedures, conventions and institutions.

While major parties may lay claim to representing the views of all Australians, some elder statespersons in the major parties point to the diminishing member bases as narrowing their representation and making them easier to be controlled around factional interests. Whether a fair assessment or not, the trends from the ballot box suggest that a growing number of Australians do not feel they are being represented adequately by the major two parties and are looking to new sources of representation.

In this context, we provide consideration for changing conventions and public institutions to enhance their effectiveness in new and different contexts. We approach this in three ways. First, we test contemporary public attitudes to making such changes, before distilling ‘taken for granted’ conventions from the reviews above. We conclude by making practical suggestions for change. In line with the underlying argument in this report, if the electorate is changing our parliamentary composition, it may require a conscious effort to reshape Australia’s institutions in this changing political environment. Meanwhile, such changes should ideally consider broad public opinion on the appropriateness of any change.

To examine Australian’s appetite for institutional change in support of minority government we included a question in the EMSS. Respondents were asked *‘If minority governments became more common in Australia, how supportive would you be of making the following changes to parliamentary rules and procedures to make them work more effectively?’*

In response, Australians were most supportive of ‘Setting up an independent body to oversee power-sharing agreements between major parties and crossbench MPs’ with 47.6 per cent of Australians supportive compared to 18.2 per cent unsupportive. Australians are also quite supportive of ‘Requiring minority governments to sign formal agreements with the independents or minor parties they rely on’ (42.7 per cent supportive, 20.3 per cent unsupportive).

**Figure 6 Support for institutional change under minority governments, March/April 2025<sup>3</sup>**



In general, Australians were more supportive than unsupportive of four proposals that were put to them. We take this to suggest that Australian are not against the idea of change to our practices, while responses may vary according to the specific proposal for change.

## 7.1 Opportunities for challenging conventions

Second, we wish to distil some of the underlying conventions within our literature review that are so taken for granted that it may not be realised that they are open to review, and beyond that, open to reform for stronger democratic representation.

Majority is the only stable and legitimate form of government

The above review shows that minority parliament (in the case of Gillard), minority government (in the case of the Senate) and minority arrangements (in multiple forms internationally) are not inherently unstable or ineffective. Hence, it is important to reconsider assumptions that majority rule is the only path to stable and legitimate forms of governance. More importantly, not accepting the legitimacy of minority government undermines the attitudes needed to support effective governing in these contexts. In the case of Australia, it is prudent for political leaders to embrace negotiation when faced with the minority Seante, even when holding a large majority in the House. Our cases

<sup>3</sup> Note: After the second question, respondents were given further guidance that ‘A confidence vote is one that can trigger early elections if the government loses’

show that political leaders who embrace cooperation, negotiation and inclusion in good faith, as well as take a transactional approach and genuinely seek consensus are more successful. As Hazell and Paun (2009) observe, minority government cannot be effectively managed using majoritarian ways. Put another way, when a party does not secure more than fifty percent of the primary vote, its authority is only to propose legislation. Or as Sharman (1999) puts it, when everyone has a mandate, no-one does, and the only mandate a government with less than fifty percent primary support has is the mandate to negotiate. Further, as the UK and Australian minority experience illustrates, it is important for minority parliaments to educate and communicate around successful negotiation and consensus or risk media reports of negotiation as weakness or failure through the majoritarian lens.

That said, examples of majoritarian convention persist. Scholar Anne Twomey (2019) notes that an increase in minority governments in Australia has raised questions about the legitimacy and validity of mechanisms to ensure government control over the operation of the House when the government does not hold a majority on the floor. For instance, Twomey examines the provisions of the Commonwealth Constitution and their interaction with the Standing Orders of the Houses. She notes that the importance of this issue was illustrated in late 2018 when the Morrison Government slipped into a minority in the House of Representatives. From that point it became possible for a Bill to be passed, with the support of the Opposition and crossbenchers, against the will of the Government. The main impediment to this was Standing Order 47 of the House of Representatives. It provides that, in the absence of leave or notice, the Standing Orders may only be suspended by a vote of an absolute majority of the House. As the suspension of Standing Orders is the only mechanism by which a Bill may be brought on for debate in the House by a “private member” (PMB), the major parties can act together to prevent bringing on discussion or a vote on PMBs. Here, a majoritarian view can constrain broader representation and power sharing in the House.

Opposition is the only way to do Westminster politics
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The above review is consistent in its emphasis on cooperation, negotiation, inclusion and trust in good parliamentary governance. And yet, the perception of many Australians of parliament is conflict, negativity, immaturity and opposition. The truth of the matter is often far from the perception. A significant proportion of legislation is not controversial and passes with the support of both major parties. Much of the work in the committee stage of legislation or in the work of committees is collaborative and constructive. Parliamentarians often develop strong and trusting relationships across party lines. And yet, perceptions of conflict and opposition persist. One potential explanation is a view that Westminster politics is oppositional by nature makes conflict inevitable. Another is that the news media only report conflict and controversy because it makes better ratings than cooperation and collaboration, but this in turn, warps perceptions of parliament.

In this light, it is important to note that minority arrangements do not automatically result in more cooperation, negotiation and consensus - it is a choice by governments. In 2013, Lundberg completed a comparative study of mixed-member proportional representation in Scotland and in New Zealand. His paper challenges assumptions that proportional representation inherently fosters consensus politics, arguing instead that adversarial partisanship persists even under mixed member parliament (MMP). Lundberg concludes

that MMP moderates but does not resolve adversarial politics, as cultural and institutional legacies of majoritarianism continue to shape political behaviour in both nations. Australian examples of when governments took a majoritarian view and failed to recognize the importance of compromising with the crossbench include the early Rudd government (Prosser & Denniss, 2015) or the Abbott Government with the Senate (Prosser et al, 2016), key reforms or budget measures can stall, while those that adapted to the realities of minority government such as the Howard Government's GST concessions (Daly, 2005) or Gillard's minority parliament (Prosser & Denniss, 2015) achieved legislative success.

Parliament is under representative and too male, pale and stale

Although not addressed directly in the review above, multi-member parliaments were more likely to represent the diversity of voters, particularly in chambers that had seats assigned for first nation or other groups. This is assisted by parties pursuing diversity quotas, as in the case of gender, which provided more opportunity for female party leaders. Representation of diversity remains more challenging within lower houses with single member seats, although the number of female MPs as part of the Australian 'teal' phenomenon should be noted. Although perceptions are of predominantly male and culturally narrow parliaments (not helped by the composition of many government executives) progress has been made in broader representation. Previous studies have found that more equitable representation of gender and minorities can result in improve legislative outcomes and economic progress (see the review of Mirziyoyeva & Salahodjaev, 2023), while some parties (including the ALP) having adopted gender quotas with some effect. Comparisons of proportional representation (PR) and first-past-the-post (FPP) systems consistently find that PR systems elect more diverse legislatures, particularly by gender.

The case of Australia's minority Senate is indicative. A recent review for the democratic audit of Australia (Prosser et al, 2025) found that in terms of representing the diversity of Australia's population, the Senate has also performed better than the House. It has achieved a gender-balance with 51 per cent of members being women in 2019. The first two Indigenous parliamentarians were both senators and there continues to be more First Nations senators than MPs. Senators with Asian ancestry, women, Muslim and openly gay senators were also elected before their counterparts in the lower house. The first female party leaders were also in the Senate. However, challenges remain as indicated by the recent case of Senator Fatima Payman who separated from the Labor Party due to differences between her cultural and party position on a key issue in 2024. The revised staff allocation to the Senator (on becoming an independent) also points to considerations around the discretionary allocation of staffing resources by the Prime Minister (rather than the parliament). That said, there are grounds for the conclusion that the Senate provides an avenue to present and represent more diverse perspectives within the parliament.

Individuals holding the balance of power hold the country to ransom

One of the features of the cases reviewed above is the diversity in party voting arrangements. As noted previously, Australia is unique in the strictness of its major party voting discipline. This creates a situation where a handful of cross-bench MPs can hold the 'balance of power' in minority parliaments. If these disciplines were relaxed so that

members could vote according to their conscience or electorate (rather than party) preferences, it would create a situation where the balance of power shifted by issue. This could be actioned by major parties permitting their members to have a limited number of conscience votes that can be used on any bill of choice within a parliament. This would require a relinquishing of control by the parties, but it might go some way to renewing trust in major parties and tempering the appeal of anti-politics politicians. It will also encourage government executives to pay closer attention to backbencher, crossbencher and opposition member interests, which will contribute to more widely representative government.

A related point is the relative power of balance of power minority MPs to hold the government to ransom. This is often overstated. When working with one party as a coalition or minority partner, it is a risk, but in reality, most minority situations involve multiple partners, and hence, multiple pathways to securing a majority. When any minor party or independent makes claims that are too extreme or unreasonable, there are others or even the opposition to secure an agreement. It is by choice that the major parties adopt an oppositional stance, should they adopt an alternative approach, then crossbench power brokers become a handful of irrelevant votes.

The minister is the only pathway to policy action

The common convention within Westminster systems is that due to the government holding the majority of seats, the minister holds control over policy. This is often assumed by politicians, lobbyists and sector leaders alike as they try to find their way into immensely busy calendars. However, minority government presents a challenge and an opportunity. First, because ministers require the vote of members outside of their parties to secure passage of legislation, which usually requires negotiation and concession, and second, these other members can provide a champion or pathway to policy change that is not as encumbered by party or bureaucratic requirements. Used responsibly, this pathway can result in more inclusive and representative policy than that which emerges from major parties with narrowing member bases, used irresponsibly, it can result in populist or poor policy. That said, in line with the point above, concessions will only be secured while non-major party member demands continue to be more reasonable than that of other members or the opposition party.

Prosser and Denniss (2015; 2015b) explore this phenomenon through the concept of the 'marginal member'. These are the non-ministerial MPs whose votes are required to pass legislation, are prominent in parliament and influential on committees. Their support is often contingent and issue-specific, and their influence can be decisive in shaping, amending, or blocking legislation. Acknowledging the legitimacy of these members requires a rethink of mandate from something that relates only to a major party and covers a whole policy agenda and results from as little as an additional one percent of two party preferred. This rethink of mandate as it is a concept includes that might be claimed by minor party or minority members with a quota in the Senate or more votes than a major party in a seat. While relevant to all parliaments (the power of backbenchers in minority or slim majority contexts should not be underestimated), it is particularly pertinent in minority parliament.

The public service only serves the minister

An associated convention that is prominent within the public service is that it is primarily and/or solely loyal to the relevant Minister and Prime Minister. This is often assumed within academic policy models, such as the policy cycle (Prosser & Denniss, 2015). However, this assumption is challenged by minority government. In his book about the history of the Australian public service, Innis (2025) argues that departments responding just to the minister, not to the parliament, is a recent thing. He notes that when a new Public Service Act was proclaimed just in time for the new millennium its aim was to establish an ‘apolitical’ Australian Public Service that was ‘efficient and effective’ in ‘serving the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public’. It is important to note that public servants were to serve executive government but also had to independently serve the parliament and the people. While Innis’ response to the question ‘how much should public servants respond to the parliament, rather than the minister’ would not be as bold as that suggested in this report, it does not diminish the importance of the question, particular in minority parliaments.

The potential implications of different answer to this for the public service are substantial. Our review noted occasions within minority parliament contexts when PMBs or amendments to legislation passed without the support of the minister. In most cases, this occurred without the direct input of the department responsible. Implementation has been a key strength of public administrators for decades and has not wavered under past minority parliaments. However, as minority arrangements have increasing influence both before and during parliament the resulting commitments, legislation or PMBs may fall to the department for implementation and accountability. If departments are to be held accountable for policy outcomes, it is important for there to be appropriate avenues (that do not rely solely on the discretion of the minister) for them to have input into them along expert and evidence lines.

It is not the role of the public service to engage with politicians

A likely response from public administrators is the convention that good policy is objective, while politics makes bad policy. However, minority parliament arrangements highlight that this is not practical, while all policy work is political in some way. Adopting this view risks confusing being politically neutral with being policy absent, removing public service expertise from discussion. This hurts everyone. Insights from Australia and the UK in our review indicate that in minority contexts, public servants need to be more politically attuned. A good model for this might be the Australian Parliamentary Library’s non-partisan model, revealing that public servants can provide balanced briefs across all party positions. This ‘all-political’ not ‘a-political’ approach keeps evidence in the conversation and helps address concerns about ill-informed deals with crossbenchers (or back-benchers) in minority contexts.

Meanwhile, another commonly raised concern about the more active participation of public servants in (potentially politicised) minority government circumstances is the exposure of notes or advice given by officials under Freedom of Information Acts. This is a legitimate concern. However, if teams of public servants keep each other accountable, carefully document as part of good stewardship and stick to the all-political approach noted above, this concern can be overstated.

This discussion also leads to an important insight around evidence-based policy in minority contexts. Prosser and Denniss (2015) argue that, while important, the amount of evidence is not always decisive on policy or decision making in minority government contexts. When issues are politically significant to minority members or prominent in the media, evidence may take a back seat to political negotiation, local interests, or ideological positions. As such, the notion that political influence results in bad policy is not tenable in minority contexts. Rather, these authors argue that to be effective policy practitioners need to focus not on whether parliamentarians do or should use evidence, but when they do and when they do not.

Independents and minor party members are obstructors of good policy

Based on the convention above, it is not uncommon for public servants to look at parliament, and particularly non-major party members, as a force to compromise otherwise well-designed policy. However, if one accepts their role to serve parliament and accepts the legitimacy of minority government it has at least two implications for civil and public servants. It is recognised within the public administration literature that responsible and responsive relationships with ministers rely on trust. Surely, this same principle applies to all parliamentarians in a minority government. This means formal, two-way, mechanisms to establish and sustain elite trust between the public service and all parliamentarians are an important task for political and public sector leaders.

An extension of this is also to embrace the potential contribution of minority party and independent members to better policy. This has implications for civil and public servants, who can be subject to criticism for poor consultation and collaboration, or a narrow focus when just responding to the political or policy agenda of a single minister. Public sector reform increasingly holds the principle of putting people at the centre to support new opportunities to engage communities in policy development, collaborate on implementation, and avoid unintended consequences. This is especially crucial when working with independent MPs who work from ‘Voices for’ or ‘kitchen cabinet’ community mandates (Voice 4I, 2013; Grattan & Seaborn, 2019; 2023). Not only is this wider view of representation from MPs across the parliament an opportunity to broaden the scope of consultation, community inclusion and codesign, such activity may also be necessary for securing the support of key crossbenchers in future minority parliaments.

In short, by taking these challenges to taken-for-granted conventions seriously and then considering the full implications of changes to them, we can provide a foundation to renew our political and public institutions.

## 7.2 Practical opportunities and recommendations

Third, we present a series of practical suggestions for concrete changes that emerge from the above review and analysis. While they emanate from examples from within the crucible of minority government and multi-party contexts, we contend that if they improve representation, power sharing and public trust in times of minority government, they will equally do so in times of majority.

Create guidelines and templates for democratically strong minority arrangements.

Our review finds that minority arrangements often occur ad hoc and under time pressure. Our review recommends strong and transparent guidelines for better democratic

representation before and during minority arrangements. The Australian Democracy Network could provide important leadership by facilitating the creation of best practice democratic guidelines. These guidelines would become a reference point for both minority and majority contexts.

Document the principles and processes of minority and make them transparent

Many pressures come on partners over a full term of minority government. Our review recommends detailed documentation of principles (such as a public commitment to negotiation, effective access to the executive/APS and recognising the legitimate mandate of minor partners), processes (such as how information will be provided, how Cabinet confidentiality will not obstruct openness, how disagreements between partners will be resolved) and priorities (such as shared goals for policy, procedural and reform commitments). Publishing these arrangements will provide a public measuring stick for accountability across the full term. Again, any government seeking to enhance democracy and build public trust could produce similar guidelines for any parliament, including when not faced by the immediate demand of securing minority arrangements.

Enhance representation by strengthening and enabling PMBs

PMBs are an important vehicle to represent diverse views, raise issues and advocate change in parliament. Our review identified that convention and standing orders currently inhibit bringing on, adequately considering and voting on PMBs. This could be addressed through more resources for quality drafting of PMBs and more funding to the Parliamentary Library to provide evidence in support. In terms of process, Standing Orders could be changed to make it easier to bring on PMBs, and for more time to be dedicated to their debate each week (such as a dedicated private members day each week). Parliaments could also mandate a minimum of PMBs to go to vote in each parliamentary fortnight. The extent of access to these provisions should be weighted according to the size of the non-major party in the parliament. As above, any government seeking to enhance democracy and build public trust could adopt such measures in any parliament, including when not faced by the immediate demand of securing minority arrangements.

Strengthen accountability provisions within Question Time

Question time in both houses is often seen more as drama than debate, while some conventions can stifle transparency and accountability. Minority governments should commit to a strong focus on policy withing question time, while ‘dorothy dixer’ questions from the major party members should be moved out of question time. Also, responses to questions taken on notice should have set time limits for responses and not be dismissed on grounds of being too expensive to address unless a written justification is provided to the parliament. If anything, these changes to improve accountability during question time may be more relevant to raising public perceptions and rebuilding trust in times of large government majority.

Renew the committee system as primary means of accountability

Our review finds that the Australian Senate has powerful legislative and references committees (Prosser et al, 2025), these arrangements could be extended to the House.

These committees should be provided with greater access to ministers by back-bench and crossbench members that are not part of executive arrangements. Bills should only be referred to legislation committees after the second reading to address politicisation in committees and allow them to focus on implementation and improvement. Reference committees should also host ‘Chatham House’ sessions with senior public service officers and without ministerial involvement to enable better support of parliament by the APS. Additional funding should be provided to committees to support this.

Transparent and equitable staffing is required for minority government

Core parliamentary staffing is based around the responsibilities of a back-bench major party member, which is not adequate for minority responsibilities. Additional staff can be allocated to parliamentarians by the Prime Minister. A consistent and transparent formula for staffing need to be created that differentiates between the real resource needs of back-bench, crossbench and ‘balance-of-power’ members. The funding for this allocation of staff should be overseen by the parliament and not the Prime Ministers’ office or Special Minister of State.

Provide dedicated support and training to minor party and independent members

The workload of a full legislative agenda, committee and constituency work can be immense for the office of a small party or independent member, particularly in minority contexts. Beyond adequate staffing support, these members may need training in leadership, office management, prioritisation, performance and maintaining the wellbeing of small teams. When members do not have the support of a major party or previous experience in a parliament, they will need training in parliament, procedure, legal, conduct and other responsibilities. In the case of new independent or minor party members, a formal mentorships scheme should be established with past parliamentarians and support provided for training (such as that provided by the IfG and McKinnon Foundation).

The management of parliamentary time should reflect the nature of parliament

Time is amongst the most important currencies within parliament, with governments often expressing frustration over delays in passing legislation in minority arrangements. Our review highlights that different parties have different approaches to consultation with some needing time to return to their supporters for advice on policy positions. Time is also needed between introduction on bills and the vote so that minor partners can manage the large workload that may land on one office. In both cases, adequate time should be allowed for parties to do this and bills not rushed through sittings. A review of guillotine activity should be conducted at the mid-point of a minority parliament term to ensure adequate time and representation is being maintained. Meanwhile, consideration should be given to a threshold of signatures on member petitions above which time is dedicated to them for parliamentary debate.

The APS should take on new responsibilities to serve the parliament

Our review highlighted the responsibility of the APS to serve the whole parliament, not just the wishes of the minister, while this becomes even more significant when minority arrangements mean the minister does not have the final say on legislation. Clear and

consistent provisions should be made so that the APS can provide its expertise (and evidence) on implementation to the whole parliament while legislation is being considered. Our review notes the IfG recommendation that similar practical and non-partisan support be provided during the formation of minority arrangements. Once legislation has passed in minority contexts, the APS should provide a report on implementation to the relevant legislation committee to ensure that those who were responsible for the passage of a bill and amendments also hold accountability for the implications and success of that legislation.

#### Appoint Departmental Liaison Officers (DLOs) to the crossbench and minority partners

Many ministerial offices already access DLOs from departments. This should be extended across the crossbench and to minority partners. This role would assist in non-partisan advice on private amendments and PMBs (particularly in terms of evidence and implementation issues). The role could also assist open and early information provision (pre-introduction of legislation), which was a key finding of our review. These DLOs could also provide an important 2-way function where they become a conduit between departments and wider representation of community mandate independents to draw on this expertise for more inclusive and collaborative policy work with diverse communities. Consideration should be given to the coordination of the DLO function through the Parliamentary Library to mitigate perceptions or allegations of partisanship that could be harmful to public service officers.

#### Education and communication around minority government is vital

Our review found that understanding of minority government and parliament, its legitimacy and its successes is not high, and is at risk of being presented as ineffective or illegitimate by opposition parties or the media. Funding should be provided to enhance public understanding of how minority government works and the opportunities it provides for democratic engagement. The parliament should also develop a public communication mechanism on the process and achievements of minority parliament that is funded and managed outside of partisan party lines or via the media.

## 8 Concluding remarks – rebuilding trust in democracy in the era of low major party vote

In conclusion, we would argue that new developments in the Australian parliament over recent decades is the result of an electoral trend where people are taking reform of the system into their own hands and into the ballot box. Further, as electoral support for non-major party members increases, we suggest that it is important to ask how democratic institutions can and should adapt to better reflect these changing citizen preferences. Recognising that increased diversity in parliament also introduces complexity to governance, coordination and mandate, it is important to consider how institutions can adapt and learn from other contexts in those party systems. This discussion paper explores what can be learned from comparisons across contexts where this trend has been sustained and systems have evolved, providing us with “crucible” examples of democratic experimentation.

More immediately, we see potential lessons for the two major parties. At the 2025 election, we still see more people voting ‘other’ than the party that forms government’ than for it, while more people voted ‘non-major’ than at least one major party. We note this current result has not deviated from the above long-standing trend away from major party representation. And while this trend may ebb, it is unlikely to abate. Hence, we warn that the large number of seats returned may represent a softer majority and not the resounding mandate claimed by some politicians, commentators and media. We would suggest that any major party with an eye on future electoral success will also have an ear for more visibly including a diversity of voices in their party and in the parliament.

However, those who would seek such change face a significant challenge. This challenge is the expectations gap between what people currently think and what actually happens in our parliament (Prosser & Denniss, 2015). This theme of expectation gaps is taken up in Flinders’ (2012) work in defence of politics and democracy. He argues that despite widespread criticism, Western democracies deliver more than most realise and make a positive difference in most people’s daily lives. However, he also identifies significant gaps between what politicians promise, what the public demand, and what our parliaments deliver. This, he and others (Corbett, 2015; Stoker, 2017; Weinberg, 2020) argue, is resulting in declining trust in politics and greater disillusionment with democracy. We agree, and in response, would argue that measures for more representative, inclusive and accountable government could help close such gaps.

When viewed through the lens of oppositional two-party convention in Australia, many of the recommendations in this discussion paper may seem naïve or unworkable in today’s politics. Yet, they emanate from real and concrete examples. And, if we look to Australian political history, we see that things can and do change – when the electorate requires it. We suggest that looking at the current electoral landscape, Australia may be on the cusp of another such change. This possibility makes it prudent to look to existing evidence and think afresh so that we might prepare for whatever eventuality takes place.

It is this intent that is behind this discussion paper. The hope evident within it is that, by exploring new, even bold, options for changing existing conventions and procedures to better reflect parliamentary realities, relationships and representation, it will go some way to reducing democratic disaffection, deepening public trust and renewing confidence in politics in this nation. And in doing so, it might contribute to our long tradition of democratic innovation by helping evolve to a system that is more relatable, representative and accountable to the contemporary Australians that it aims to serve.

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