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# **Submission to the Inquiry into the 2025 federal election**

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## Summary

We welcome the opportunity to present our views to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. This submission focuses on the electoral reforms passed earlier this year by the 47th Parliament (the fifth element of the inquiry terms of reference), and questions relating to the composition of Parliament (the final element of the inquiry terms of reference).

The Electoral Reform Bill, passed in February 2025, will substantially improve transparency of political donations when it comes into effect from 1 July 2026.

The Bill lowers the donations disclosure threshold from \$16,900 to \$5,000,<sup>1</sup> and requires donations to be disclosed within seven days during an election period, and within two months at other times.<sup>2</sup> These long overdue reforms mean Australians will know who's donating while policy issues – and elections – are still 'live'.<sup>3</sup>

The Bill also introduces caps on donations and electoral expenditure. Capping electoral expenditure will help to reduce the fundraising 'arms race' between parties, and their subsequent reliance on major donors.<sup>4</sup> Donations caps help to limit the influence that any single interest can hold over the national debate.

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<sup>1</sup> Parties will also need to disclose donations from a donor when they cumulatively reach the \$5,000 threshold (within a calendar year), even if each donation is a smaller (below-threshold) amount. This closes a long-standing loophole in the disclosure rules. But another loophole remains: parties won't need to disclose donations from the same donor to different party branches, as long as donations to each branch are below the threshold: see Tham (2025).

These are important reforms, but substantial problems remain with the current design. The total cap of \$90 million for electoral expenditure by a political party is too high. And the per-seat cap of \$800,000 is too low, advantaging incumbents over new entrants.<sup>5</sup> A loophole in the design of the donations cap also advantages major parties by allowing the cap to apply separately to each branch of a party.<sup>6</sup>

We recommend that the 48<sup>th</sup> Parliament amend the electoral reforms to close remaining loopholes and level the playing field for new entrants. There are also further opportunities to reduce the influence of money in politics.

Greater transparency around lobbying would provide an additional check on donor influence. Ministerial diaries should be published, so voters know who our most senior policy makers are meeting. And the lobbyist register should be broader so that it includes in-house lobbyists, not just commercial lobbyists. This would make it possible to identify which major donors are also active lobbyists, and what they are lobbying for.

Transparency around lobbying activity can help to level the playing field and protect the public interest by alerting under-represented groups to speak up, and encouraging policymakers to seek out a wider range of views. The goal of increasing

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, within 21 days following the month the gift was received.

<sup>3</sup> Griffiths (2024a), and Wood et al (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Griffiths et al (2020), and Griffiths and Chan (2023).

<sup>5</sup> New entrants typically need to spend more to introduce themselves to their electorates. See also Tham (2025).

<sup>6</sup> Tham (2025).

transparency is not to deter advocacy but to underscore the responsibilities of public officials.

Further detail about the need for and nature of these broader reforms is provided in the **Appendix**.

The Committee has also been asked to consider ‘the composition of the Parliament as a whole, including: the length of the parliamentary term; the potential for fixed terms; and the number of elected representatives relative to the growth in population and the electorate’.<sup>7</sup> Grattan Institute has not published research on these questions, but this is an area of current work.

There is a strong case for fixed parliamentary terms to provide greater stability and predictability. There is also a reasonable case for longer (four-year) terms, to allow more time for long-term policy work between election cycles.<sup>8</sup> But both reforms require changing the Constitution,<sup>9</sup> which can be a serious hurdle, especially if public support is ambivalent.<sup>10</sup>

Increasing the size of the federal Parliament can be done through legislation, without changing the Constitution.<sup>11</sup> Increasing the size of Parliament could provide voters with greater access to

national parliamentary representation, while also assisting with the complexities of governing by providing more candidates for committee activity and ministerial positions.

Australia’s population has grown substantially since the federal Parliament was last expanded in 1984: from about 16 million to about 27 million.<sup>12</sup> And Australia has more inhabitants per parliamentarian than most countries.<sup>13</sup>

A material lift in the size of parliament would be needed to meaningfully achieve a more even distribution of voters per electorate nationally (and bring Australia closer to middle of the pack internationally on inhabitants per parliamentarian).<sup>14</sup>

This is a reform worth exploring. Additional parliamentarians and supporting infrastructure would need to be funded,<sup>15</sup> and a material lift in the size of Parliament may be best undertaken as a staged process – for example by increasing the size of Parliament at each of the next three federal elections.

We would welcome further inquiry by the Committee into the costs and benefits of a material lift in the size of Parliament.

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<sup>7</sup> Inquiry terms of reference.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the pros and cons, see Daley and Krust (2025), Sheppard (2024), Prasser (2024), and Lewis (2024).

<sup>9</sup> A voluntary agreement for fixed three-year terms would be possible without Constitutional change, but any attempt to give it formal legal effect raises problems. See Grattan (2016), and Daley and Krust (2025).

<sup>10</sup> Sheppard (2024).

<sup>11</sup> The Commonwealth Parliament can determine the size of the Parliament, subject to some Constitutional restrictions. See Muller (2023).

<sup>12</sup> Since Federation, the federal Parliament has had two major expansions (Representation Acts of 1948 and 1983). See Church (2023) for the history.

<sup>13</sup> Australia ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> among 82 nations in the Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database. Australia has about 120,000 inhabitants per parliamentarian, which is close to the international average but well above the median (~76,000).

<sup>14</sup> Using 2022 data, Muller (2023) estimates each state would need 18 senators, meaning the House of Representatives would have 224 Members, to get all states and territories to around 80,000 electors per member.

<sup>15</sup> Costs include the salaries of additional parliamentarians, their staff, expanding parliamentary departments, and refurbishing the parliament itself (which currently has chamber seating for 172, but provision for up to 240, although offices are already at capacity): Muller (2023).

## Appendix: Integrity chapter of Grattan Institute's 2025 Orange Book

<https://grattan.edu.au/report/orange-book-2025>

### 1.1 Where we are

Australia's institutions are a key determinant of our prosperity. They underpin our living standards, support and shape the economy, secure our rights and freedoms, and enable us to make collective decisions about the type of society we want to build.

Australia's institutions are generally strong, out-performing many of our international peers. But globally, trust in institutions is declining. And Australians are particularly sceptical when it comes to vested-interest influence over public policy. Reforms since our previous Orange Book have made much-needed progress on transparency of political donations and strengthening appointments and grants processes, but there remains further room for improvement.

In order to maintain the trust and confidence of the Australian people, our institutions need to serve – and be seen to be serving – the public interest, not vested interests. And there are emerging risks for Australian democracy, including misinformation and the global retreat from democracy.

We should be proud of our institutions, but we cannot afford to be complacent.

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<sup>16</sup> Edelman (2025, p. 43). Australia's international position on trust hasn't shifted much in the past four years, while other countries such as France, Germany, and the UK have experienced substantial falls in trust over this period.

<sup>17</sup> 47 per cent: Edelman (2025, p. 43).

### Australia outperforms many of our peers on trust in government

Australia is around the middle of the international pack in terms of trust in government – we sit above the US and UK, but behind Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Singapore.<sup>16</sup>

Australia is well-positioned, above the OECD average, on many dimensions of trust in government (Figure 1). For example, Australians generally trust that government will protect lives in an emergency, and that government takes decisions based on evidence. But Australians are more sceptical when it comes to potential misuse of public office for personal or political gain.

### But trust is still low

While Australia performs well in comparative terms, in absolute terms, trust in government is still worryingly low. Less than half of Australians trust the government to 'do what is right',<sup>17</sup> and 70 per cent think people in government look after themselves (Figure 2).<sup>18</sup> Only 17 per cent of Australians think the next generation will be better off.<sup>19</sup>

Trust varies substantially across institutions in Australia. Australia's electoral system is a particular strength, and has long garnered high trust and respect.<sup>20</sup> Other highly trusted institutions include our emergency services, public health institutions, and our

<sup>18</sup> McAllister et al (2022).

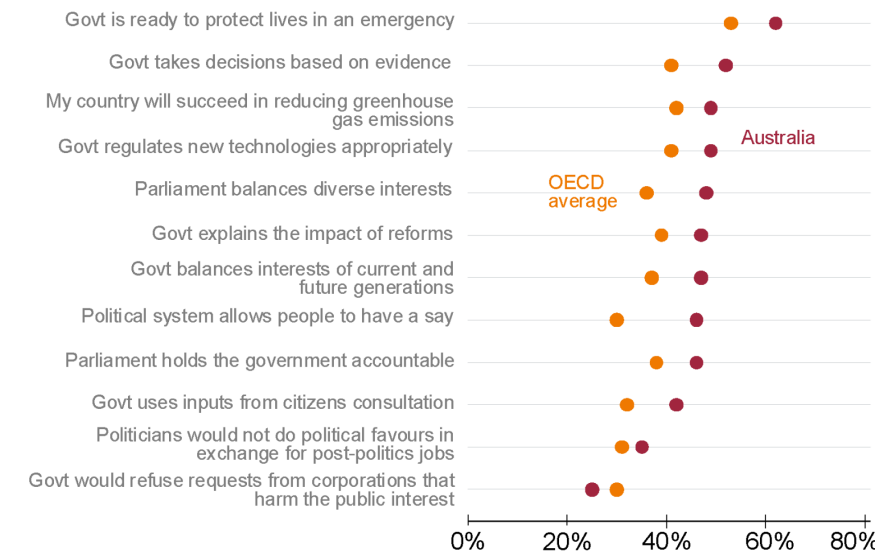
<sup>19</sup> Edelman (2025, p. 14).

<sup>20</sup> APSC (2024a). The latest report on trust in public services noted a decline in trust in the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) relative to other services,

defence force.<sup>21</sup> Political parties are among our least trusted institutions, only ahead of multinational corporations.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 1: Australia is generally above average on trust, except when it comes to corporate influence**

Share of the population who are confident in, or find a surveyed behaviour likely



Source: OECD (2024).

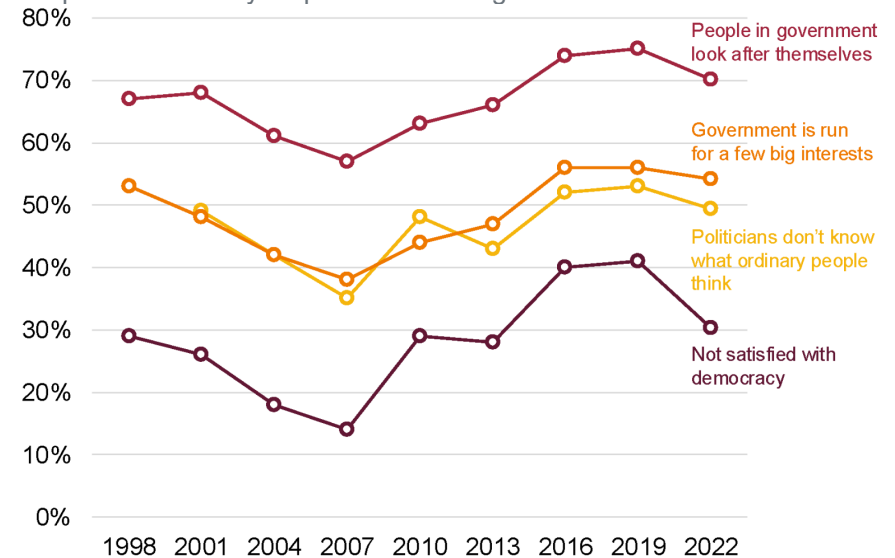
though this reflects, at least in part, changes to the survey methodology.

Threequarters of Australians still say they trust the AEC.

<sup>21</sup> APSC (2024b): more than 70 per cent of Australians express trust in these institutions.

**Figure 2: Mistrust is high about who government serves**

Proportion of survey respondents who agree with selected statements



Source: McAllister et al (2022).

Trust is not a simple verdict on competency, it also relates to an institution's visibility and public engagement. Institutions that deliver tangible services are typically more highly trusted. Survey respondents attribute their own low trust to a lack of transparency,

<sup>22</sup> 26 per cent of Australians express trust in political parties, and 23 per cent express trust in multinational corporations: APSC (2024b). O'Donnell et al (2024) also shows very low trust in traditional media (23 per cent) and social media companies (8 per cent), but this survey did not measure trust in political parties.

and to institutions not listening and responding to people's needs and concerns.<sup>23</sup>

Trust in institutions also turns on the sources of information that people rely on. It is harder for institutions to maintain trust when Australians increasingly receive information from dispersed sources online,<sup>24</sup> and trust in traditional media is declining.<sup>25</sup>

### Australia's democratic institutions aren't working for everyone

Australians need to be confident in the institutions that govern them, and that requires, at least in part, a sense of political agency.<sup>26</sup> Trust in government and satisfaction with democracy are typically lower among groups who are less well served by the status quo.<sup>27</sup>

Young people, people with less education, and people with greater financial concerns are all less trusting of government.<sup>28</sup> And satisfaction with democracy is typically lower among women, people on low incomes, the unemployed, and people who live in regional areas.<sup>29</sup> Social isolation, discrimination, and hardship are major drivers of dissatisfaction with democracy,<sup>30</sup> as are perceptions of inequality.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> APSC (2024b). A lack of transparency was also a key driver of declining trust in government during the pandemic: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024). See also Evans (2025).

<sup>24</sup> ACMA (2024). In particular, a rising share of people get their news from people they don't know on social media, where it may be less accurate and more difficult to verify.

<sup>25</sup> Edelman (2025).

<sup>26</sup> OECD (2024), and Evans (2025).

<sup>27</sup> Sathanapally (2024).

Migrants (with the exception of the large proportion of migrants who come from the UK) are typically more trusting than people born in Australia, which may reflect differences in culture, attitudes towards authority figures, and direct experience with other systems.<sup>32</sup>

### Australians are concerned about vested-interest influence

Corporate and vested-interest influence stands out as a particular concern for Australia (Figure 1). More than half of Australians say government is run for a few big interests (Figure 2), and about half believe that corruption is a widespread issue in Australia's democratic institutions and processes.<sup>33</sup>

Grattan Institute research shows that many well-resourced groups have too much say and too much sway over public policy. In particular, highly-regulated businesses – those that have the most to gain, or lose, from government decisions – have the most meetings with senior politicians, make the most use of commercial lobbyists, and are also disproportionately large donors to political parties. Many of these businesses have the resources to hire former politicians and advisers, and to woo politicians through hospitality.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> McAllister et al (2022) find lower trust among younger people. OECD (2024) reports lower trust among people with less education and greater financial concerns, as does O'Donnell et al (2024).

<sup>29</sup> APSC (2024b).

<sup>30</sup> APSC (2024b).

<sup>31</sup> Biddle (2024).

<sup>32</sup> APSC (2024b).

<sup>33</sup> APSC (2024b).

<sup>34</sup> Wood et al (2018).

Organised attempts to influence policy can benefit the few, at the expense of the many.<sup>35</sup>

In healthy democracies such as Australia there are many safeguards to promote policy in the public interest, not least elections themselves. Yet several risk factors remain – including financial dependence, cosy relationships, and a lack of transparency in dealings between vested interests and parliamentarians – that leave Australia vulnerable to policy capture.

Gambling is one example of a powerful industry swaying policy in its favour at the expense of the public interest. The industry is hugely overrepresented in its access and influence compared to its contribution to the economy.<sup>36</sup> And Australia's policy settings to prevent gambling harm have remained weak, despite the powerful case for reform.<sup>37</sup>

## 1.2 What we should do

Government should be building and maintaining broad-based trust in our public institutions to do the right thing: to act on evidence and be transparent with decisions, to treat people fairly, to engage widely and not be swayed by vested interests, to always put the public interest first, and ultimately repay the trust of the Australian people through shared and inclusive prosperity.

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<sup>35</sup> Wood et al (2018).

<sup>36</sup> Wood et al (2018).

<sup>37</sup> Sathanapally et al (2024).

<sup>38</sup> Parties will also need to disclose donations from a donor when they cumulatively reach the \$5,000 threshold (within a calendar year), even if each donation is a smaller (below-threshold) amount. This closes a long-standing loophole in the disclosure rules. But another loophole remains: parties won't

Recommendations to support this agenda and strengthen Australia's institutions are outlined in the following sections.

### Reduce the influence of money in politics

Better and more timely information on political donations is needed as a public check on the influence of money in politics. The new Electoral Reform Bill, passed in February 2025, will substantially improve transparency of political donations when it comes into effect from 1 July 2026.

The Bill lowers the donations disclosure threshold from \$16,900 to \$5,000,<sup>38</sup> and requires donations to be disclosed within seven days during an election period, and within two months at other times.<sup>39</sup> These long overdue reforms mean Australians will know who's donating while policy issues – and elections – are still 'live'.<sup>40</sup>

The Bill also introduces caps on donations and electoral expenditure. Capping electoral expenditure will help to reduce the fundraising 'arms race' between parties, and their subsequent reliance on major donors.<sup>41</sup> Donations caps help to limit the influence that any single interest can hold over the national debate.

These are important reforms, but substantial issues remain with the current design. The total cap of \$90 million for electoral

need to disclose donations from the same donor to different party branches, as long as donations to each branch are below the threshold: see Tham (2025).

<sup>39</sup> More precisely, within 21 days following the month the gift was received.

Under the current system, it takes at least seven months and sometimes up to 19 months for a large federal donation to be made public.

<sup>40</sup> Griffiths (2024a), and Wood et al (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Griffiths et al (2020), and Griffiths and Chan (2023).



expenditure by a political party is too high. And the per-seat cap of \$800,000 is too low, advantaging incumbents over new entrants.<sup>42</sup> A loophole in the design of the donations cap also advantages major parties by allowing the cap to apply separately to each branch of a party.<sup>43</sup>

The next parliament should amend the legislation to close remaining loopholes and level the playing field for new entrants

### Improve transparency of lobbying activity

Lobbying is a normal and important part of the democratic ‘contest of ideas’. But some groups have a lot more access to decision makers than others,<sup>44</sup> and therefore more opportunity to influence policy decisions.

Transparency around lobbying activity can help to level the playing field and protect the public interest by alerting under-represented groups to speak up, and encouraging policymakers to seek out a wider range of views. The goal of increasing transparency is not to deter advocacy but to underscore the responsibilities of public officials.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> New entrants typically need to spend more to introduce themselves to their electorates. See also Tham (2025).

<sup>43</sup> Tham (2025).

<sup>44</sup> Wood et al (2018).

<sup>45</sup> A 2024 Senate inquiry identified many deficiencies in the current system for regulating lobbying, including the lack of transparency, but ultimately deferred substantive recommendations to further review: Senate Standing Committees On Finance and Public Administration (2024).

<sup>46</sup> Wood et al (2018, pp. 57–58), and Griffiths (2024b).

Ministers should publish details of all meetings and events they attend in an official capacity, as well as those in which they are represented by ministerial staff. The published diary should identify who was present and the key issues discussed.<sup>46</sup>

The Australian Government Register of Lobbyists should also be expanded to include anyone with a lobbyist pass for Parliament House (the ‘orange pass’).<sup>47</sup> Almost 2,000 orange passes are granted to people who require ‘significant and regular business access’ to politicians; which includes many of the most active commercial and in-house lobbyists.<sup>48</sup> Expanding the register would give the public much better information about lobbying activity and bring some of the most active lobbyists under the Lobbying Code of Conduct.<sup>49</sup>

### Improve processes for public appointments, grants, and taxpayer-funded advertising

Many Australians are suspicious that politicians misuse their power for political advantage. Appointing ‘mates’ to powerful or well-paid jobs, allocating grants based on electoral considerations rather than need (‘pork-barrelling’), and using taxpayer-funded advertising to spruik the government of the day are corrosive to public trust. Better processes for public appointments, grants, and

<sup>47</sup> The register is currently limited to third-party lobbyists (who lobby for a client), excluding in-house lobbyists who lobby for themselves or their employer (including major businesses, unions, and peak bodies): Wood et al (2018, pp. 58–59) and Griffiths (2024b).

<sup>48</sup> The Senate Standing Committees On Finance and Public Administration (2024) reported there were 1,977 orange passholders.

<sup>49</sup> For example, the Lobbying Code of Conduct requires lobbyists not to engage in corrupt conduct or mislead public officials: Attorney-General’s Department (2022). Passholders who breach the Code should have their pass suspended or withdrawn.



taxpayer-funded advertising would help to safeguard the public interest from partisan influences.

The government has made important progress on cleaning up appointments processes, including to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (now the Administrative Review Tribunal), which was more undermined by political appointments than any other institution.<sup>50</sup>

But good processes should apply to all public appointments. All public appointments should be advertised, an independent panel should do the shortlisting, and the minister should choose from the shortlist (or redefine and republish the selection criteria) but should not directly select any candidate not shortlisted.<sup>51</sup>

Open and competitive grant processes are also needed to ensure value for public money and to reduce opportunities for politicised spending. But open, competitive grants are still rare – just 11 per cent of all grants by value in 2023-24.<sup>52</sup> While grant processes were recently strengthened,<sup>53</sup> open, competitive processes are still not required.

All grants should be allocated through an open, competitive, and merit-based assessment process, with limited circumstances defined for non-competitive processes (such as emergency grants to support communities after natural disasters).<sup>54</sup> This would

ensure taxpayers get better value for money, and would reduce opportunities for pork-barrelling.

Governments also routinely spend public money to spruik their own achievements, especially in the lead up to elections.<sup>55</sup> Taxpayer-funded advertising campaigns should only be allowed where they are necessary to encourage specific actions or drive behaviour change. Campaigns that promote government policies or programs, without a strong call-to-action, should be blocked by an independent review panel.<sup>56</sup>

### Boost countervailing voices

Citizen engagement is a core responsibility of politicians and public servants. But it's not easy. One way to get better, more inclusive policy debates is to embrace policy review processes that actively seek out a range of voices.

Various institutions and processes already facilitate this and could provide a guide, including the Productivity Commission inquiry process and Senate and House of Representatives committee hearing processes. More inclusive policy review processes can help to counter the prevailing skew in access and influence towards those with greater power and resources.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Griffiths (2024c).

<sup>51</sup> Wood et al (2022a).

<sup>52</sup> GrantConnect (2024).

<sup>53</sup> Department of Finance (2024).

<sup>54</sup> Wood et al (2022b).

<sup>55</sup> Wood et al (2022c).

<sup>56</sup> The panel should assess all government advertising campaigns before launch. If the panel deems a campaign to be politicised, or otherwise not value for money, it should not run: see Wood et al (2018). An Independent Communications Committee currently reviews proposed campaigns, but this is done mid-development (not as a final clearance), and the committee cannot block politicised campaigns: Department of Finance (2023).

<sup>57</sup> Wood et al (2018).

### Prevent gambling harm

Australia has let the gambling industry run wild. Australians have the highest gambling losses in the world. It is all too easy to lose too much, and our communities are paying the price.<sup>58</sup> But the good news is that gambling harm is largely preventable with better regulation.

Gambling normalisation starts young, and sports betting advertising is a major culprit. The federal government should ban all gambling advertising and inducements,<sup>59</sup> as recommended by the 2023 Murphy Inquiry with multi-partisan support.

For those who choose to gamble, mandatory pre-commitment with maximum loss limits would ensure people no longer lose more than they can afford. Gamblers would choose their limits in advance – before they lose track of time, start chasing losses, or are otherwise compromised in their decision-making – and the system would then enforce these limits, including regulated upper limits to prevent catastrophic losses. The federal government should establish a national pre-commitment system for online gambling, and should support state governments to introduce similar schemes for pokies.<sup>60</sup>

### Guard against cynicism and build on our shared values

Australia's social cohesion is remarkably resilient and underpins our prosperity, but it is under pressure.<sup>61</sup> It should not be taken for granted or put at risk in the fray of political point-scoring.

Building on shared values, improving trust in institutions, and nurturing Australians' sense of belonging, opportunity, fairness, and justice can all help to further strengthen our social cohesion. The recommendations in this chapter, and across the Orange Book, would strengthen Australia's institutions to better serve the public interest and support Australians to make better collective decisions about what we want this country to be.

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<sup>58</sup> Sathanapally et al (2024).

<sup>59</sup> Sathanapally et al (2024, pp.28-29).

<sup>60</sup> Sathanapally et al (2024, pp.31-37).

<sup>61</sup> O'Donnell et al (2024).

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