

A crisis of trust that bodes ill for society

Our faith in politicians is at a historic low, argues **Andrew Leigh**, and the parties, especially Labor, need to repair the damage.

FOR THE last few weeks, two stories have dominated the political media — John Howard's credibility in the children-overboard saga, and the past wrongdoing of the Governor-General he appointed. Sounds like a successful time for Labor, right?

Not necessarily. The danger that Labor now faces is that the public response to recent events will see the standing of politicians slump to new depths. Sure, voters may think less of John Howard, but it is possible that the recent scandals may also lower their opinion of all politicians, Simon Crean included.

Let's start with recent trends. In 1976, about one in five Australians rated their federal politicians "high" or "very high" for ethics and honesty. A quarter of a century later, only one in 10 held the same opinion. Similar trends are apparent for many other industrialised countries, including Britain and the United States.

In a recently published book, *The Prince's New Clothes: Why do Australians Dislike their Politicians?* I suggest three factors that may explain why trust in politicians has collapsed. First, the past few decades have seen a "social-capital crisis" across much of the western world. We are less likely to join organisations, less trusting of our neighbours, and less involved in politics. The same factors that have led us to disengage from civic life have probably also contributed to our tendency to trust our leaders less.

The second major change is that politics has tended to fo-

cus on issues of left and right, temporarily ignoring the rise of post-materialist "identity politics", and leading voters to feel that neither party really represents their values. Here, the parties have begun to respond, with the emergence of Green politics, the Third Way, and Compassionate Conservatism — all indicators of a political system shifting beyond simple left-right debates.

Third, changes in the way in which the media report politics have affected the standing of politicians. With a greater focus on conflict over substance, and personalities over policy, media reporting has become more critical towards politicians. In the words of one commentator, much journalism today "presumes to lift the curtain on the wizard and reveal the charlatan behind it".

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Amidst these trends, the Labor Opposition faces a difficult test. On the one hand, it wants to call the Government to account through Senate hearings and the media spotlight. On the other, Labor knows that voters may eventually conclude that "they're all crooked". Moreover, the backlash may hit the ALP harder than the Coalition.

The more voters distrust politicians, the more they may come to decide that Government is ill equipped to solve

the problems of society. The result? The party with the most activist vision of Government will suffer the greatest harm. Selling a large-scale policy, *a la* Knowledge Nation, can only become tougher if voter distrust rises.

After the events of the past two weeks, it is clear that a major challenge for our federal parliamentarians over the coming term will be to tackle the issue of falling trust. Now is the time to transform the tone of Question Time; to toughen up the rules on share ownership by politicians; to adopt a Canadian-style ethics commissioner — and perhaps to follow Britain's lead and ensure that all children are taught civics in schools. None of these reforms would be easy, and none of them in itself would solve the crisis of trust. But together they might just make a difference.

Simon Crean should not allow good poll numbers to mask the challenge that he now faces. For the sake of our system of government, let's hope that he is thinking today of how trust in politicians can be rebuilt for the future.

For as our archbishop-turned-Governor-General might put it, what does it profit a man if he gains the prime ministership but loses the trust of the Australian people?

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