



# MEDIA RELEASE

3 August 2018

## AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY: ARE WE IN CRISIS?

### MoAD opens new, thought provoking exhibition: *Democracy. Are You In?*

If there is a single word which characterises the *Democracy. Are You In?* exhibition opening this week at the Museum of Australian Democracy, it would be trust. And that's a quality that's in worryingly short supply in Australian politics.

The Museum of Australian Democracy's new exhibition has an urgent question for you: *Democracy. Are You In?*

Arising from a research partnership between MOAD and the University of Canberra's Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), the exhibition's starting point is evidence that we're increasingly disconnected from government. IGPA found "compelling evidence of the increasing disconnect between government and citizen reflected in the decline of democratic satisfaction, trust in politicians, political parties and other key institutions".

Here's how Professor Mark Evans who heads IGPA explains it: "*Everyone says distrust of government is part of the Australian culture, but if you look at survey data, there has been a stark decline since the John Howard era. We've had some peculiar high profile events that did not play out well in the electorate with the dismissal of several prime ministers. Those incidents figure very strongly when you discuss issues of integrity within focus groups.*"

*When you ask about the characteristics of an ideal politician, the key dimensions are integrity, local connection, and delivery. Trust is earned by creating solid benefits for the community. Nationally, the view is that prime ministers haven't been effective in getting big ticket items up, there's a lot of inconsistency between the rhetoric and what's being delivered.*

*"There's a dominant assumption among politicians that you cannot have those sorts of conversations with the public, but citizens say that's not true. They expect to have grown up conversations, and they cannot understand why politicians are still engaging in adversarial politics on major issues".*

*Told through powerful stories of democracy in action, Objects of interest include the Rainbow flag signed by supporters of the Marriage Amendment Bill 2017, a Berlin Wall fragment, Jessie Street's brooch and modelled microphone, and Neville Bonner's tobacco tin with soil from Jagera Country*

While the exhibition celebrates both significant activities and individuals who have shaped our democracy it also casts an eye to the future – exploring new ways for ordinary people to have their say:

MOAD director Daryl Karp sees *Democracy. Are You In?* as a call to action. "*I think that democracy around the world is under serious threat. While ours is a world leader, we're not without our own risks. This is our contribution. It's about giving people a voice that does count, one that says 'Be involved. Don't step away.'*"



Director, Daryl Karp says *“The Museum of Australian Democracy engages people in a conversation about Australia’s democratic past and their involvement in its democratic future. Celebrating the spirit of Australian Democracy and the power of your voice within it, the museum is a touchstone of stability and a response to pressures and the erosion of trust faced by liberal democracies around the world. We are a safe place in which individuals can reassess their own roles in upholding Australia’s democratic values.”*

And that’s the central point here: major change needs robust democratic processes, these in turn require citizens to participate. This exhibition is not about whether gun reform, the 1967 referendum on indigenous recognition, or same-sex marriage were good ideas - it’s about how we got there as a nation.

Former Deputy PM Tim Fischer’s .303 rifle was a treasured heirloom for the Vietnam veteran. When PM John Howard responded to the Port Arthur massacre with the 1996 Firearms Act, some gun owners resisted.

Fischer says of his rifle, *“it’s a product of Australia, passed down from my father but when I sold the farm at Boree Creek, I thought, well, it has another role to play. Even a deputy PM can give up his gun”*.

On trust in the political process, Fischer says *“I doubt Australia would have resolved the guns issue so well, had social media existed in 1996 and ’97. What’s changed now is that even a sensible proposal immediately goes to the extremes before any consideration of its merits. There’s a whole new template that breaks the bond between elected leaders and representatives. That’s made it a different ball game”*.

Marriage equality also engendered intense national debate. Greens leader Senator Richard di Natale says of that, *“as much as I rejected the plebiscite process, it was a sign of the community coming together and a very strong campaign to shift public opinion”*.

Pointing to declining support for major parties, he says, *“It’s interesting that people are voting for disruptors to the status quo. There is a thirst for something different from a political system totally captured by other interests. The challenge is to provide genuine, enduring alternatives, for which people are searching. We can all do that by continuing to build a movement for change”*.

**ENDS**

---

For further information, please contact Annika Scott, [annika.scott@moadoph.gov.au](mailto:annika.scott@moadoph.gov.au), (02) 6270 8165 or 0400 946 608

**INTERVIEW OPPORTUNITIES:**

- The Hon Tim Fischer, former deputy prime minister
- Daryl Karp, Director, Museum of Australian Democracy
- Professor Mark Evans, Institute of Governance and Political Analysis, University of Canberra

**ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL:**

High res images of the exhibition are available here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/dmt8w4e0bbasa65/AAA4Whmt5ET8m6wZjt1IVABqa?dl=0>