

## THE HENRY PARKES ORATION 2016

# Knowledge or noise? The problem with political communication

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It is a great honour for me to be asked to give the annual Henry Parkes oration and to do it here in Old Parliament House, where I cut my own political teeth as a young reporter, 30 years ago next year.

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on tonight, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and pay my respects to those elders who've gone before and those living today.

In politics, a lot can ride on a good speech.

I have no doubt Henry Parkes knew this, as he prepared to deliver his Tenterfield Oration 127 years ago this week.

I wonder if he worked on it, agonising over what he wanted to say and the best way to say it, or if it was put together quickly or even on the spot.

If we assess the written text with the critical eye of today – and succumb to the contemporary media's compulsion to first find fault – we might say, controversially, that it was workmanlike; of itself, not especially inspiring.

That's not to say he didn't have a few memorable lines.

For example:

“The great question which we have to consider,” Parkes declared, “is, whether the time has not now arisen for the creation on this Australian continent of an Australian government ... and an Australian parliament.”

And:

“Surely what the Americans have done by war, Australians can bring about in peace.”<sup>1</sup>

In his speech, Henry Parkes insisted the only argument which could be put in opposition to this Federation proposal was that the time had not come.

He relied on the words of Queensland poet J. Brunton Stephens to back him in.

Not yet her day. How long 'not yet?' ...  
There comes the flush of violet!  
And heavenward faces, all aflame  
With sanguine imminence of morn,

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Tenterfield Oration', Sir Henry Parkes, Premier of the colony of New South Wales. 24 October, 1889. Reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 October 1889; see <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/13746899>

Wait but the sun-kiss to proclaim  
The Day of The Dominion born.<sup>2</sup>

But with those exceptions, it's a pretty plain set of words. It doesn't make you swoon, weep or want to fight them on the beaches.

As a piece of writing overall, Henry Parkes' oration doesn't set the world on fire.

Except it did set the world on fire, or at least it set the flame of Federation burning strongly enough that the notion of its possibility gathered momentum and was realised 12 years later – sadly after Sir Henry's death.

And because we know its impact, we don't judge Henry Parkes' speech by text alone.

Its true greatness was in its delivery, in the man and the moment.

Henry Parkes had several things that are important in politics.

He had an *idea* and he had *belief* – a way about him that said this Federation thing he was talking about was actually *possible*.

He also had timing. His message itself was that the time was right.

Henry Parkes was a persuader. He persuaded voters to elect him – and re-elect him -- and he served as New South Wales first minister five separate times. He was *good* at politics.

### **So, where are our great persuaders today?**

Political persuasion seems to be a fading art.

Together, advances in technology and changes in the practice of politics have given rise to a disenchantment that is infecting electors both here and beyond our shores.

The 24-hour news cycle and the rise of social media provide more opportunities than ever for politicians to connect with the electorate. Why, then, is voter disillusionment with our political leaders so high?

Perhaps because they don't much bother to try to persuade us anymore.

The art of persuasion has been corrupted. Rapidly advancing technology has dramatically changed how we communicate and how we distribute and receive news and this has had a knock-on effect in politics.

Persuasion is old-school. It can be hard. Often, politicians resort to trickery instead.

This technological shift has put severe commercial pressure on the old mass media, prompting vested interests to seek even greater power and influence as their organs and empires struggle to adapt and even survive.

It has encouraged our political leaders to take shortcuts in communicating with their constituents.

It has both raised our expectations and dashed our hopes, illuminated and amplified our fears and changed our definition of political competence, rewarding ambition and pizzazz ahead of long-term vision or solid policymaking experience.

First, some observations on the landscape.

### **Number one: we are in an era of great change.**

Technology is forcing some of that change upon us, global politics some more. Things are moving faster. People feel uncertain, uneasy.

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Dominion of Australia'. James Brunton Stephens, 1895. (The version quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* report on the Tenterfield Oration is slightly different; see <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/13746899>.)

There is concern that our standard of living is going backwards, that our kids won't be able to afford what we could.

Terrorism has made us suspicious of our neighbours, intolerant of difference and justified – or so some think – in our cultural and religious prejudice.

There is fear that our way of life is under attack.

**Number two: this technological change is bringing us closer together and at the same time, driving us further apart.**

We are more joined than ever to the rest of the world. Our instant communications technology ensures we can talk to and see just about anywhere on the planet and sometimes places beyond it.

That inspires some people to learn more and go see it for themselves. For others, it's an excuse to never leave the house.

And because not everyone has access to the technology that's driving the change, it is creating a social and economic divide.

As some pull further ahead, others fall further behind.

**Number three: people are unhappy with how 'the establishment' is responding.**

That is true not just here in Australia but in similar democracies around the world. The Brexit vote in Britain shows it. The United States election campaign shows it. The makeup of our own Senate shows it.

Political leaders have not adapted and neither have traditional mass media.

So why, in this age of increased connectedness, do we collectively feel so disillusioned, so unrepresented, so unheard? And whose fault is it?

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First, it is at least partly to do with technology.

Technology changes everything. It changes communication. It changes commerce. It changes politics. And it changes our relationships.

In periods of transition from the old to the new, people get left behind.

New communications technology also raises our expectations.

Because we can access the world at our fingertips, we think anything is possible and we are susceptible to the assurances of those who tell us it is.

We have 24-hour news channels that create constant demand for content and social media that can send out information in an instant, challenging the role of traditional media as the go-to source of our news.

It's not just the pace of things that's changed.

Technology affects the way we disseminate information and the way we receive it.

It has disaggregated the news. Now, instead of most mass media running a one-way conversation, we *all* talk back. We also talk to each other.

We don't need the old news media as much anymore to tell us what's going on. We can find out from our smartphones and we can be a part of the process of disseminating information worldwide.

Everyone can be a journalist, or *say* they are. The world is, literally, in the palms of our hands.

This means old media aren't the gatekeepers they once were. People don't rely on them as much to curate their news.

That's good and bad – good because the people feel more empowered being less beholden to big networks and newspapers that filtered their news before.

But it's also bad because now they're bobbing about in an open ocean of information.

There's a lot of stuff floating around out there and it's harder than ever to tell what's detritus and what to scoop up and save – what's genuine knowledge and what's just noise.

The philosopher AC Grayling equates what is happening now in the 21st century with what happened in the early 17th.

Grayling looks at periods of disruption from history.

His analysis of the events of the late 16th and early 17th centuries in Europe may have something to teach us today.<sup>3</sup>

He notes that during that period in history, as war broke out, the systems which had restricted people's liberty failed. Suddenly, people became more connected.

As a community of thinkers emerged who wanted to exchange ideas, a public postal system developed. People moved about. It was a new era of connectedness, of communication.

But with that came a downside. Not all of the ideas were good. Not all of what 'caught on' was sensible.

It was the era of superstition and magic. People believed in new concepts such as alchemy – the notion that base metals could be turned into gold. They searched for a universal solvent and the elixir for life. They looked for shortcuts to knowing about – and controlling – nature. The ideas were beguiling. People *wanted* to believe them.

Grayling argues that in the 21st century, this thing called the internet is creating much the same phenomenon.

Conspiracy theories abound. Shonks and shysters can make themselves look legitimate and prey on the vulnerable.

The ideas marketplace is incredibly crowded. Where is the quality control? It's everyone for themselves.

Eventually, in the 17th and subsequent centuries, superstition gave way to science as the ideas were tested and sifted for their effectiveness.

In the 21st century, we are again living in an era of 'it *could* be true'.

Just enough crazy, inexplicable things happen to encourage the conspiracists to peddle their arguments that 'you really *can* do this or that, she really *did* say it, he really *wasn't* born here'.

Remember back to Y2K? For a year we thought something devastating might happen as our clocks turned to midnight on 31 December, 1999.

And nothing did.

It seems insane now. How in this age of sophisticated technology could we – the whole developed world – be persuaded that all the world's computers might seize up and our systems collapse at once?

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<sup>3</sup> AC Grayling. Conversations with Richard Fidler. ABC Radio. September 10, 2016.  
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/conversations/a-c-grayling/7832048>

But then, just as we begin to convince ourselves that only what is explainable is true, a jet aeroplane filled with people disappears without trace and two years later, we can't find it.

Just enough weird things happen to make us believe that more and more weird things can.

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So, what does this mean?

Well, to use the language of the moment, this technology is a major disrupter.

Newspaper publishers didn't fully anticipate it – thought it was a fad that would never catch on – and are now struggling to survive. The old TV networks are competing with 24-hour channels with that insatiable appetites for 'content' – and you can define that however you like, as long as it fills a space. It's faster and cheaper to do everything live, rather than pre-package our news.

That can be good – it can put you on the spot – and it can be bad because what's reported is often just what's happening right in front of you, or what was captured on somebody's smart phone and only news *because* it was captured.

Sometimes that will be something important, that deserved our attention anyway. Mostly it's just to hold our attention into the ad break.

There's no time to wait to gather context, explanation, alternative views or greater depth in pushing out news and fewer resources to go looking.

That makes us in the media susceptible to manipulation by those in politics who recognise the value in filling the news pages and airwaves with junk.

A new word has crept into our politics in recent years: "announceables". Our political leaders like to have the bottom drawer full of them, things they can pull out and announce – 'da-daa' – on a quiet day.

Gone is the sort of sentiment Henry Parkes expressed in 1892, in frustration at the quality of debate in the NSW Parliament.

That September, three years after his oration, he rose to speak on the address-in-reply, having been – as *The Sydney Morning Herald* duly reported – in much doubt as to whether he should bother.

On rising, however, he was "greeted with cheers".

"He did not much like anything resembling a mock debate," the newspaper reported him saying. "Nor did he like a mere debate for the expenditure of thoughtless language, with no result."<sup>4</sup>

It's a pity more of today's politicians don't feel the same.

Today, they dream up things to announce to keep the media busy, to keep control of the media cycle, to promote themselves and their parties and to distract from the things they don't want us to observe.

Technological advances challenge traditional media's market share in a massive way.

We are all publishers and broadcasters now. We all have opinions and the means to express them. Citizen journalists and ordinary folks are competing with trained professionals for our attention as disseminators of news.

Suddenly, all the rules have changed.

Our technology has developed to a level where all the world's information is at our fingertips.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Page 3. September 2, 1892.

The internet is both treasure trove and rubbish dump. It's a huge challenge just sorting through what's on offer to work out which is which.

The mass news media used to do that for us – or try. Now, social media promote individual news disseminators instead and we rate “citizen journalists” as highly as those who went to the old school.

“Old media” are often condemned, accused of hiding the *real* news. People don't trust them anymore.

So with the technology problem, we have a trust problem.

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This technological change has implications for our politicians too.

Because the technological divide is changing the way *we* communicate – both ordinary citizens and journalists – it is also changing the way *they* communicate.

They are not separate from us, the public, anymore. They are no longer in ivory towers. They are tweeting from Question Time. Our political leaders don't have to rely solely on traditional media to talk en masse with their constituents. They can do it instantly, individually and as a group.

Like everything else, this has both upside and underside. The fact that their constituents can now very easily talk back is a little bit of each.

And the intimacy of platforms like Twitter means politicians, like everyone else, are exposed. The barriers between them and the people are being broken down.

Those people engaged on social media platforms express their concerns instantly, angrily and often anonymously and expect politicians to respond. And they can smell disingenuousness when it only has 140 characters to hide in.

On social media, information and sentiment – especially negative sentiment – spreads like a virus. That can make politicians panic.

Needing to connect with this new marketplace, old media monitor social media and present what is being discussed as news.

But while it's easier to speak to large groups than it used to be, it's also easy to not notice who's missing.

What about those who aren't on the internet? How do our leaders get to them? Direct mail? Special morning teas? Community meetings? It's time-consuming to still have to do all of that when you can chat to most people with a few lines on Facebook.

Although social media platforms allow large groups to gather online, it's not everybody. We are in transition to the fully digital age but we aren't there yet. Use of social media in Australia is at about two-thirds. That leaves a third of the population not on it. That's a pretty solid dividing line.

The technological divide is creating a social and political divide. It's a divide we are seeing all over the world.

This technological and social disruption leaves political leaders looking for shortcuts, ways to communicate faster and more effectively with more and more people.

Along with our communications technology, our research tools have advanced. Now, more effectively than ever, we can analyse how people think and feel.

As regards the art of persuasion, this risks making our leaders lazy. Lazy and a bit dishonest.

It's become too easy to use these tools to push a message out – figure out what scares us and just use it, on repeat, in whatever way advantages the message-sender best.

Politicians can use this information to feed back to citizens what they like to hear and then connect that sentiment to whatever they want to do.

They can also feed back what people *don't* like to hear and connect it to what their opponents want to do. Rather than just addressing our fears, they use them to their own advantage.

Cue the 'Medi-scare' from the recent federal election campaign.

The Labor Opposition argued the coalition Government was planning to sell the public health provider, Medicare. There was no evidence the coalition had any such plan. But Labor kept on saying it.

Journalists challenged it. The coalition denied it.

But they just kept saying it. It resonated *just enough* with enough people who remember that, historically, the coalition has not much liked the principle of universal publicly funded health care. It *'could'* be true. So it worked.

The shortcuts favoured by our politicians – and many in the media – include cosy relationships to generate mutually favourable treatment. Selective leaking from one side of the relationship ensures cheerleading from the other.

But the voters are onto it. It only exacerbates the diminishing trust. Their anger is more visceral as a result and their backlash more stinging.

Connections between politicians and media are nothing new.

Henry Parkes himself was both politician and newspaper man.

Rather than hide his ownership of *The Empire* newspaper, launched in December 1850, he used it, unashamed, to campaign for his own causes, including equality, with the contention expressed in his first editorial – and I quote – “that all have a fair and equal race before them and are entitled, without let or hindrance, to share the beneficence of earth and heaven alike”.

“Our duty as a radical journalist,” he continued, “is to make the voice of complaint, in such case, loud and general, till the cause be removed.”<sup>5</sup>

Having a media owner as a political leader might raise some eyebrows in Australia today. But he was certainly upfront.

The more informal and clandestine of such associations can undermine public trust in both traditional representative politics and the media.

Recent surveys on public trust in our institutions indicate we have a problem.

The results of a University of Canberra survey published after this year's federal election showed fewer than half of Australians – 42 per cent – were happy with the state of our democracy.<sup>6</sup> The nationwide survey of 1400 people found trust in both politicians and political processes was at its lowest in the past two decades.

Similar sentiment is detected across the Tasman in New Zealand. Work done at Wellington's Victoria University, headed by British Professor Michael Professor Macauley, has found that even in New Zealand, where trust and confidence in the public service is high – at 61 per cent, considerably higher than the OECD average of 40 per cent – politicians and media both rate low on the professional trust index.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Empire*. First edition, editorial. Sir Henry Parkes. 28 December, 1850.

<sup>6</sup> *Who do you trust to run the country? Democracy, trust and politics in Australia*. Mark Evans, Max Halupka and Gerry Stoker. Institute for Government & Policy Analysis, University of Canberra. Museum of Australian Democracy. June, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Victoria University of Wellington. School of Government. April, 2016.  
<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/sog/about/news/new-zealanders-distrust-in-government-growing>

Professor Macauley's research finds that in NZ, most trusted are doctors, police, judges and the courts, followed by small business and charities.

Least, are bloggers and online commentators, followed by members of Parliament, TV and print media, government ministers and big corporations. Professor Macauley finds the most dramatic falls in trust in the past three years were also in those last groups – and members of Parliament had the largest. Trust in NZ MPs has gone backwards 54 per cent.

This seems to largely mirror the rest of the world.

But while they say they don't trust MPs generally, they do trust their *local* MPs – the ones they actually know.

Macauley finds that having an emotional bond means we will forgive those who betray us – even our politicians.

But the bond has to be formed first.

At a recent presentation of Macauley's work, one observer remarked on how that list of trusted – and untrusted – professions appears to line up with Aristotle's three artistic proofs: the modes of persuasion used to convince an audience.

He noted that those we trust *least* in that list are in professions that tend to influence by appealing to emotion – pathos, as Aristotle called it. Those next least trusted appeal using ethics – ethos – and the most trusted rely on logic, or logos.

Macauley talks about a "trust quotient" and says what determines it are these three things: credibility, reliability and intimacy (or knowledge of each other).

To have **credibility**, you need to know what you're talking about and lean more to humility than hubris. For example, it's one thing to say you want government to be able to take risks. But in order for that to work, you have to have credibility. People need to have confidence that you know what you're doing and that you have a plan for if or when that idea doesn't work. Thinking out loud undermines trust and confidence – and credibility.

Whatever criticisms some might make of Henry Parkes, he had credibility. His five stints as Premier were in spite of problems he experienced in business. His business ventures failed but people clearly still trusted him.

So, having been a fierce free-trader initially hesitant about moves to federate, when he changed his mind, they listened. He faced criticism for being a latecomer to the idea of Federation. But his credibility, once behind it, gave it momentum.

To have **reliability**, our leaders need to be steady. They need to be calm. They need to take a moment and employ more haste, less speed, as the old saying goes.

Uncertainty or a lack of confidence in political leadership has a material impact. It affects people's willingness to spend money, which in turn undermines the economy.

In 2013, the economy suffered when the coalition's concerted campaign to portray Julia Gillard's minority government as illegitimate affected consumer confidence. The Government actually ended up passing 595 pieces of legislation through the House of Representatives. But it was still portrayed as unstable.

Michael Macauley's third criterion for successful leadership is **intimacy**. To create intimacy, leaders need to be confidently themselves, be genuine, authentic and real. They need to persuade voters they are as they *appear*, not driven by pollsters and focus groups and messaging specialists. These tools aren't unimportant – they can help do the job. But when they take over and drive everything and the real personality disappears, you're doomed. It's unsustainable. The voters eventually figure it out.

To create intimacy, leaders need time. Changing leaders repeatedly within their first three years in office has damaged trust too. We don't get to know properly the people we have chosen. Voters are being told they *don't* know best. To have a chance at creating that intimacy, our leaders do need to be able to serve out their first term.

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A by-product of this disillusionment with our leaders is that we only selectively hear what they say.

It's like musician Paul Simon says: "I have squandered my resistance for a pocketful of mumbles – such are promises. All lies and jest. Still, a man..." – and I might add a woman – "... hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."<sup>8</sup>

Someone should give *that* man a Nobel Prize.

Paul Simon was right. As we get angrier, our selective hearing gets worse. With all the noise these days, it's hard enough to hear anything so politicians use targeted messages to push our buttons. In the business, it's known as "dog whistling".

The other side of that is that we don't hear what we don't want to.

Some political leaders use this selective deafness extremely well. In the United States, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has been using it to devastating effect. He is the master of jumbled mixed messages.

The people attending his rallies are already susceptible to selective deafness – they think they haven't been well represented; they're anti-establishment, anti-politician. They're mad as hell and they've stopped listening to everybody else.

And until recently, Trump has been able to tell them *all* different things at the same time.

His language during his rallies is a jumble of messages designed to be all things to all people.

It hasn't mattered that it is incoherent – it's been his schtick. He's crafted the image of someone who, in the face of the forces of fake Washington, was authentic: the real deal.

But Donald Trump is made for television. He *made himself* for television. He is at least as fake as the politicians he challenges.

Throughout his campaign, he would make radical commitments – like building a wall to keep the Mexicans out – to get media attention while including just enough confusing contradiction in his language to keep people with other views interested.

But that has become harder, the closer the election came. He has had to take the national – and the international – stage alongside his opponent, the Democrats' Hillary Clinton, no longer able to control the subjects he was being asked to discuss. He couldn't use those mixed messages as effectively because moderators would call him out.

It is perhaps ironic that the thing which has done his campaign most damage is his *real self*, as opposed to the self he has crafted for his various audiences, revealed courtesy of a live microphone in the back of a bus.

Trump is an extreme example of the gilding of the lily that has become so common in politics.

He is also an example of misdiagnosing the problem and proposing solutions that only address the symptoms and not the cause.

Addressing the symptoms of citizens' disillusionment may be necessary but those solutions should also be aimed at addressing the root cause.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Boxer*. Paul Simon, 1969. From the album *Bridge over Troubled Water*. 1970

At the recent Conservative Party Conference in Britain, Prime Minister Theresa May's Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, announced a proposal to require all British businesses to have a public register of foreign workers.<sup>8</sup>

In one context, that might seem the perfect antidote to concerns about local jobs going to local citizens. It was a response to the kind of sentiment reflected in the Brexit vote.

But how does it look if we put it in a historical context. What if we put it in, say, 1939? Back then, they couldn't see what was coming. We have the benefit now of hindsight. Very quickly, the proposal was dropped.<sup>9</sup>

These are dangerous times, and not only because of crazy terrorist groups roaming the earth.

We need our leaders to understand the potential consequences of failing to listen properly, carefully to the concerns of their people and failing to address – and be seen to address – not just those concerns but the causes of them.

We need them to look to the breadth of history and recognise where these things can lead.

The measure proposed by Theresa May's government purported to address the symptom – the concern about foreigners amid a wave of refugees from the Middle East.

But what is behind that sentiment? What is its cause? Why do Britons, Americans and Australians feel politically and economically insecure? Are our leaders doing the work on *those* questions? I hope so.

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The diminished credibility of our leaders, our political system and our media can combine to create a gap. Like nature, politics abhors a vacuum.

As we are seeing here and abroad, those who step into that vacuum successfully can ignite public debate and generate support by promising solutions to symptoms alone and amplifying the attacks on 'the establishment'.

Politics is a game of emotion and those who can resonate emotionally with people do best at it.

They get away without addressing the cause because they sound convincing – real – they seem reliable and in some cases they are familiar. We've seen them on reality TV.

That powerful combination of advantages can outweigh facts.

Their supporters are deaf to the facts, especially if they are being presented by people who lack one or more of those important characteristics themselves, or who are part of the 'establishment' being attacked.

As the US election campaign enters its final weeks, it's interesting that the most persuasive campaigner *against* Donald Trump is not the Democrat candidate, Hillary Clinton, but the First Lady, Michelle Obama.

She has high credibility – especially when talking to and about women. She is perceived to be authentic and reliable and she is familiar. It all makes her a potent persuader.

So how do we address this problem with trust and political communication?

Restoring trust is not easy. We all know it's much easier to maintain a good reputation than repair a bad one. It takes time.

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<sup>9</sup> Government U-turns on plan to force firms to list foreign employees after just a week. By Jon Stone, Political Correspondent. The Independent, UK. October 9, 2016.

The media are – mostly – commercially driven. While they operate like a single organism, they are a many-headed beast and it's not easy to drive change. So that's not where change will most easily begin.

Our political leaders need to lay the groundwork.

They must forensically examine the federation for which Henry Parkes fought so loudly – something that is underway – and coordinate action to address the roots of their constituents' concerns: the impact of poorly planned cities, expensive housing, a casualised workforce, the impact of climate change, the cost of living – and transparently explain what they are doing about it, why and when.

They have a responsibility to address this disillusionment – really address it, not make excuses or be tricky. The restoration of trust is an urgent necessity.

Ordinary citizens can exert influence on their media and their politicians. Demand better. Engage with head as well as heart.

If it's not good enough, the ultimate sanction is to neither subscribe to it nor vote for it.

But as Henry Parkes did, I recommend thoroughly scrutinising the alternatives, just to check that what might replace it won't be worse.

Thank you.