AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP (Queensland Chapter)

PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Monday, 17 November 2025

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Dr KOWOL: Good evening, everyone. I would like to welcome you all to this event, Perspectives on Democracy, hosted by the Australasian Study of Parliament Group, Queensland. My name is Dr Kit Kowol. I am the newly elected chair of ASPGQ and I am immensely pleased that we are starting off with a discussion of the sovereign citizen movement because, briefly, when I was at parliament my job was to open the enormous package that every sovereign citizen sent in to the Speaker denouncing any affiliation to the laws of the land. To see this being discussed in more than just the back office with the Deputy Clerk is a wonderful thing.

I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose lands, winds and waters we all share.

We are lucky tonight to have a fantastic panel to dive deep into their own perspectives and provide insight on the importance of democracy when it can be challenged by a movement like the sovereign citizen movement. We have Professor Graeme Orr from the University of Queensland; Mr Ray Stevens MP, member for Mermaid Beach; Mr Chris Whiting MP, member for Bancroft; and Ms Sandy Bolton MP, member for Noosa. After this discussion we will reconvene for drinks in parliament's historic Lucinda Bar.

I do have a couple of small housekeeping points. The first is that tonight's panel discussion will be recorded by Hansard and there will be a transcript that will be available on the ASPGQ website in due course. Panellists, do not worry: you will have an opportunity to review the transcript and, unlike when you are in the House, this is not an official *Record of Proceedings*. If you say anything you later regret, feel free to scratch it out or add something in. If you have a mobile phone, please put it on vibrate or silent. In the unlikely event of an emergency, please follow directions as to where to go.

I would like now to introduce our moderator for the evening, ASPGQ's outgoing secretary, Ms Alana Bonenfant, who works as an assistant committee secretary with the Health, Environment and Innovation Committee.

Ms BONENFANT: The format for this evening is that each participant on the panel is going to speak briefly—three to five minutes—introducing themselves and offering any perspectives they might have on the topic of sovereign citizenship but also their perspective on democracy, what is their experience and what they would like to add to this discussion. Then we are going to have a couple of questions from me as moderator and then we will transfer to questions from the floor. Without further ado, we will turn to our speakers. We are going to start with Professor Orr. Professor Orr is an expert in law and politics, and his primary area of expertise and research is in electoral law. He was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Law and has advised on models for an elected head of state. Graeme, over to you.

Prof. ORR: Thank you, everyone. I have a one-page handout. There might be a few spare copies floating around this beautiful chamber. They did not build in a projector. It is a place for reflection rather than shows. This is a public venue. Out of curiosity, does anyone here identify as a sovereign citizen or sympathise with their ideas and values? They are normally not shy. At heart, I think sovereign citizenship is a simple enough claim: `I am an individual and I am totally and radically sovereign over my own life and the established organs of government and law are not.' Behind that there is actually a plethora of many different sub-tenets and approaches—everything from the gentleman on the left, whom you may recognise as the alleged police murderer who took the slogan of a name Dezi Freeman, to the image on the right.

I saw this car last weekend at the Dunwich Cemetery in the town of Goompi on Stradbroke Island, where I spend half my time. It is an Aboriginal sovereign citizen. The numberplate, which you might be able to read, is KWUND 001. It is a fake. It is not just a fake on the department of transport; it also has the deliberate misspelling of `Quandamooka', usually spelt with a Q, which is the Jandai name for the region and the local native title group. This Murri person does not embrace the orthodox Indigenous case of Treaty or Voice, of negotiating Indigenous claims about sovereignty versus colonial or Crown sovereignty. Instead,

this person has their own ID card—issued, funnily enough, somewhere in Far North Queensland—that tries to identify them as a sovereign citizen. Part of this, of course, is pure performance. Part of this, of course, is thumbing your nose—avoiding paying registration et cetera.

If you look in white type on the handout, the three concepts in white type are my attempt to explain simply the broad types of sovereign citizens. Most sovereign citizens I think at one level are driven by this radical claim to individualism. It really is kind of what we call a natural law claim. It is not the classical natural law of Aristotle's time which is rooted in place—you did not eat pig because in hot climates pigs would have worms and you could not necessarily cook them out. Nor is it the natural law of religions because both classical natural law and religious natural law are really about how communities flourish, not about radical individualism. Sovereign citizens are more like extreme versions of hyperliberalism. I am not here to blame John Locke. The idea of individual rights was incredibly liberating—it still is in many ways—but this sovereign citizenship is an idea of the individual as an island—sovereign not just against tyrant kings but against the society that gives us all order and progress, even if, as we will discuss later, there are a lot of internal contradictions.

Secondly, as I point out on the handout in white, many sovereign citizens are grifters. They are not just seeking to personally avoid having to pay legal obligations like car registration; some actually make a living out of teaching others what we call pseudo-law. Thirdly, some I think just start out as curious. Like detectives, they are trying to navigate the thicket of real law but they end up down rabbit holes. For instance, they fail to understand how the Australian parliament could become so distinct from the UK that in 1973 we legislated to make Elizabeth the Queen of Australia. Most people just accept the Crown as a somewhat mystical abstract with many facets, but sovereign citizens go, 'Aha, here is some rupture in the edifice of law that somehow makes everything that follows not law,' and not binding on them.

Finally, what motivates all of this besides hyperindividualism, grifting and greed or misguided legal detective work? If you look at the bottom of that handout in black type, first of all we live in an age of increasing cynicism about government authority, which, of course, is healthy in moderation—I think its modern manifestation dates to 1960s liberation movements—but also we live in an age of hypercapitalism, and it is easy to believe that everything is a transaction: I can pick and choose what laws I consent to, just as I pick and choose in the marketplace what shoes to buy. This runs quite deep. In the 20th century, the idea is that power is legitimated by consent of all the people, but we mean the people collectively, not as a set of a million individuals. Sovereign citizens just atomise that claim of power flowing from the people. Today governments can be in government with just 30 per cent or so of the vote in lower houses, and that is a problem for this claim for electoral democracy which is facing challenges.

Secondly, we live in a demotic age. `Demotic' is just a fancy word for not a balanced democracy like representative parliaments and institutions and agencies full of experts. Demotic just means very flat; it is every person for themselves, where my opinion on everything is equal to anyone else's opinion.

Thirdly, all this is turbocharged by social media, where discourse is not public the way it once was, with public broadcasters and newspapers, but where nonsense can travel faster and farther than fact can travel and finds fertile ground in people predisposed to cynicism towards authority and with a strong view that 'my beliefs are as good as anyone's and rule everything'.

Ultimately, I think what drives this all is this hyperindividualism, which I fear is somewhat baked in now to Anglo and American societies in recent decades. A lot of this, unsurprisingly, does trace back to the United States but also to Canada, where the first breeding grounds of sovcit beliefs and actions appeared about 30 years ago. Trumpian politics does not help this, because it is predicated on distorted claims about constitutions and disrespect for systems of government, but it is obviously very different because it ultimately is about governmental power and not about individuals.

Ms BONENFANT: Thank you so much, Graeme. I would like to clarify: if you hear my accent, I am Canadian, not American. Next we are going to go to Ray Stevens. Ray was first elected as the member for Mermaid Beach in 2006 and, in addition to a number of other political roles that he has held, he currently wears the hat of the chair of the Ethics Committee and is a member of the Parliamentary Crime and Corruption Committee in the 58th Parliament. Noting the confidentiality of those roles, Ray, would you like to speak about your experience and your views on the matter?

Mr STEVENS: Thank you, Alana. Tonight's subjects—elected representatives, the voting public and the sovereign citizen movement—are all intertwined. My journey started in politics a long time ago. I had nine years in local government—a couple of mayoralties through Albert shire on the Gold Coast and then the Gold Coast mayoralty of an amalgamated city. Following that I had a brief time in local politics as an elected rep. In 2006 I became the member for Mermaid Beach—or Robina as it was back then. I have been the member for Robina/Mermaid Beach on the Gold Coast for 19 years. I spent a lot of that time in opposition. However, in 2012 under the Newman government I was assistant minister to the premier and also Leader of the House in this wonderful institution.

Many elected representatives in our party come from business areas or councils and were community workers. We have had quite a few from the police force. I think we currently have seven members of the police force all trying to progress their support for the ideals of our party as an elected representative in the LNP. The Labor Party has a lot of members from the union movement, political office staffers, some academia and some Young Labor lawyers. That is in their DNA, if you like. Very few on that side have come from the private sector and most of them have a union affiliation. There are, of course, Independents who run their own race.

Ms BOLTON: It is the community's race, not our own race.

Mr STEVENS: The member for Noosa was a wonderful local government representative, as was the member for Bancroft. It is a training ground for a lot of our elected representatives. It is disappointing for me, with all of those years of experience, the unfortunate view that a lot of the voting public have about their political representatives. It is such an important role that all elected repreciatives play in the lives of local governments, Queensland and Australia. We make decisions for the betterment of the areas that we represent. There will be different views from different parties and individuals, and that is what a good democracy needs. It also needs a great opposition. We were very successful for a lot of years as the opposition and now it is a wonderful thing for me to be in government, actually being on the 'doing' side of government in the Queensland parliament.

However, the voting public has a very distasteful view of politicians and, unfortunately, that has been driven a lot by the media. Of course, in recent times social media has also played a big part in that. Even the parliamentary process itself is delivered, in a lot of ways, for media benefit. The media sit out there and watch all the way through for what we call 'gotcha' moments and live off those in terms of a heading in the print news, the audio news or whatever. As the editor of a paper once told me, good news is bad news; bad news is good news. A long time ago on the Gold Coast there was a mayor—me—who reduced rates by five per cent, which was a big thing. It had never been done before. It ended up on page 28 of the local rag, the *Gold Coast Bulletin*. I said to the editor at the time, 'Why would you do that? It's a big thing to reduce the rates for local government.' He said, 'But if you put them up, I'll have you on the front page.' Unfortunately, that is the media's take on how politicians perform.

That has led to a great disinterest by a lot of the voting public. The voting public treat a lot of politicians and the words that politicians say with great disdain. That is very sad because I would say 99 per cent of politicians, from all areas, do the very best they can. They make decisions in what they believe—whether or not they have different views—is in the best interests of the people they represent, which in our case is the Queensland public. That is a disappointing part for me. How do you change the media getting free hits all the time and selling newspapers or getting advertisers for the nightly news? I do not know how you change that mentality. I do hope that in time to come there will be an appreciation of the enormous effort that most politicians put in in terms of their commitment to the areas they represent.

I move now to the problem of the voting public's lack of good opinion of politicians, which breeds a certain individual who claims to be in the sovereign citizen movement. In my view, in a democracy there is no such thing as a sovereign citizen movement or person; it is just a bunch of rebels justifying their unruly behaviour. They are clearly a minority group that is trying to impose their opinions across a body that has been democratically elected in order to put their views in place and make themselves untouchable in a democracy that is governed by the rule of law.

Importantly, when legislation comes through the House it becomes law, particularly in a unicameral House. That is the most serious thing we can put through on behalf of the Queensland people. To have so-called sovereign citizens saying, 'We don't agree,' I think is an absolute nonsense. Every effort should

be made so that we do not see a rise in that sort of thinking, which will bring about a very unruly society for us to live in. We have to be very careful that social media does not promote those types of ideas because, at the end of the day, it will be a very bad outcome for good community living. We can all have different views, but we really have to live by the democratic majority that makes the rules for all of us.

Ms BONENFANT: Thank you, Ray. Next up we have Chris Whiting, the member for Bancroft, who was elected in 2015. Prior to his service in parliament he was a councillor in both Moreton Bay and Caboolture. He currently serves as the deputy chair for the Governance, Energy and Finance Committee. Perhaps most importantly, he is also the Deputy Chair of ASPG Queensland. Over to you, Chris.

Mr WHITING: Thanks very much. Adding to that, I was also a real estate agent. My background is that I got involved early through the union movement. I worked for a union and then, as we have heard, I was in local government for 12 years. That was off my bat. I decided that in my community I could do a better job. I ran a grassroots campaign. I doorknocked for six hours every Saturday and Sunday, for six months. I managed to doorknock the entire area of Deception Bay, which was that particular division. I handed out photocopied flyers and that was it. I ended up with over 50 per cent of the vote. I was on council for 12 years. I ran for mayor in 2012 and did not get it. I worked in real estate and then came into state parliament.

One of the things I have taken from that, as have all of us who have been in local government—Sandy, you have worked in local government as well—is direct engagement. That is a real advantage that we have. If you have been in local government, you know how to directly engage with people. We wish that more of our colleagues had had that experience, shall we say. That is a bit about where I came from.

There are a couple of things I want to say about the rise of sovereign citizen movements. One of the things that Graeme said that I picked up on was that it is a lot of the snubbing of the nose at authorities. My thinking on this has been directed by an article in the *Atlantic* titled 'How the Ivy League broke America'. You have a mass of generally working-class people railing against what they see as the elite, well-educated, relatively wealthy and often progressive people who have obviously come through the Ivy League in America. It is similar to what we have seen here with a mass of people who feel alienated from power. They can actually exercise some power over their lives and they can snub their nose at what they see as the authorities by adopting this particular outlook. I think we should not underestimate that. It is a way of trying to reclaim power after they feel they have been alienated from power and influence in our society and in politics. I would recommend that article. I have a copy of that article and I can send it through. It is titled 'How the Ivy League broke America' and it is in the *Atlantic*.

The other thing I want to talk about on this issue is that we have seen the sovereign citizen movement rise because there has been an increasing lack of engagement by the majority of the voting public, that is, men and women in outer suburbia with their families. That is because of time pressures. Many people who should be engaged voters and should be engaged politically are worried about the cost of living. Costs are going up and they are spending their time earning money and worrying about those costs. In many households, both men and women work in high-pressure jobs, which really eats away at your time. Any downtime is spent on social media, and we will hear a bit about social media today. In my area, anyone with spare time wanting to contribute to the community helps out with kids sport, for example. That is where that extra energy goes.

Added to that, you now have a consumer outlook: 'I pay my taxes. I pay for you and I expect a service from you.' We see that as politicians: 'I pay for you and I want a service back for that.' There is none of the engagement of: 'I need something so how can I contribute to getting a solution?' It is more: 'I pay and I expect a service.'

In a lot of ways, you are seeing a sovereign citizen movement rise because for many voters that field of engagement has disappeared. There is a massive space for sovereign citizens to operate in because there are fewer people engaging with politicians, being vocal and speaking out in public forums about what needs to be done. Probably one thing we would have seen as well is that time pressures and all of those different pressures mean that people are walking back from being engaged with politics. As we all know, political parties are shrinking to incredibly small bases these days. People are not getting engaged.

Those are two aspects that I think we should consider when talking about threats to democracy and the growth of the sovereign citizen movement. I will keep it at that for the moment.

Ms BONENFANT: Thank you so much, Chris. Finally, we have Sandy Bolton, the Independent member for Noosa. She was elected in 2017 and has over 35 years of experience across various sectors. She was an inaugural councillor in the amalgamated Noosa Shire Council in 2013. In parliament she has served on many committees including as chair of the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee in the last parliament. She is currently a member of the committee that I serve, the Health, Environment and Innovation Committee.

Ms BOLTON: Thank you, Alana, and good evening, everyone. I am going to put the timer on because this is a very big subject and I am going to come at it maybe from a different angle than everyone else. When I look at movements or divisions or disengagement, I look at the contributors as to why. As the only elected Independent in Queensland, for three terms now, plus with previous experience, I suppose I am right at the grassroots amongst everybody. I am not just taking forward my opinion or that of a sector of the community; I am actually bringing the whole of the community together, even when they strongly disagree. I have had protests in front of my office. I have had movements bring forth some fairly awful accusations against me as a representative of the people. Of course, that is very traumatic because I am one of them. I consider my community a family. I have always looked at not only our democratic strengths but also our vulnerabilities. I believe that the movements we are seeing are a result of those vulnerabilities. I would like to touch on some of them.

As anyone who follows me would know, I have been fighting for committee reform for many years. Trust is shaped not only by outcomes but also by the process in which those outcomes are derived. We have seen a loss of trust. Disengagement comes from a variety of reasons and Chris touched on one of those. If you go back in history to over 100 years ago, when making a determination to abolish the upper house the voices of the people—the democratic voice—were totally ignored. You can go back 100 years and you can start looking at different points in time when the voices of people were ignored. Over that time there have been efforts to have that addressed, and commitments have been made that were not actioned by parties, but ultimately the flaws within our system still exist. If we do not address them, the lack of trust and the increase in misinformation and misleading information will continue.

You can look at that background and the continuing erosion of trust in governments—and it does not matter which colour is in government—not only here in Australia but also globally. Recently I was at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. A key topic of conversation, regardless of the actual topic or workshop or lecture, was not only the rise of movements and the decrease in democracy but also the contributors. That included our systems, our behaviours as members of parliament and political parties, whether it be in chamber or external, the role of media and social media in amplifying, and now of course concerningly social engineering and AI.

Let us look at the consequences of where our vulnerabilities are. You have communities or people not only looking at those processes. When they become disillusioned or frustrated, often they will gather with others. What I saw especially during COVID was that everyday people like yourselves—doctors, lawyers, people I had known for years—were joining movements not realising there was a label attached, as in 'sovereign citizen'. They wanted to voice their opposition to what they saw as being forced to do something against their will or not being allowed to connect with families. It started with a reason. It is not that they were labelled anti-vaxxers, for example. They were people who always had vaccinations, but they were in a position where they had made a determination for themselves and they were then labelled. That labelling became upsetting and frustrating and they found themselves linked and labelled as sovereign citizens. We also need to look at not only the contributors but also our role when we label movements, because that increases that feeling of being ostracised, isolated and sometimes demonised. This is all part of what we need to look at.

Ultimately, when you look at the structure of our systems, the reality is that many of the assumptions are correct. Often they feel that processes or outcomes are predetermined or tokenistic. There is a loss of confidence. There is a perception that ultimately the system is for the executive and not the people. In the last sitting week I said that I felt like it is not the people's house anymore because a number of things have occurred that bypassed the scrutiny and processes that people have come to expect should be a given. There should not be any excuses for that. I have fought for reform of the committee system and to close loopholes that allow that mistrust to continue. There have been many reports, but one by the Institute of

Public Affairs considered the reintroduction of an upper house. Queensland is in a position to lead the way in democracy, but to do that first of all we need to let Queenslanders have their say because it is their house.

Ms BONENFANT: I will open it up with a question to Professor Orr. Some of the recurring themes spoken about were voter apathy and the sovereign citizen pipeline. We are seeing people become increasingly disenfranchised and disillusioned with their elected representatives and therefore turning to whataboutmeism and asking, 'How can I advocate for myself?' How do you think the movement has evolved over time, and in your view what have been the standout contributing factors?

Prof. ORR: It is obviously not a movement in any organised sense. Sandy is right about labelling and so on. But it is still a many-headed Hydra. A lot of the things we are talking about here are important things, but there is nothing new about some of the things we are talking about. The idea that in a mass democracy you are going to have perfect processes that can hear everybody is also a nice fiction, but it is something you try and attain without ever reaching.

The sovereign citizen movement is a real thing. It grew out of identifiable movements in particular regions, particularly the Freemen on the Land in the US and so on, the Posse Comitatus sect. I can give you more readings if you would like. It overlaps with some conspiratorial and rejectionist causes, including things that happened during COVID. Also, for decades there are people who have known a few lines of the Magna Carta and like to imagine it is some sort of uber charter of rights. They forget that democratic parliaments have been amending and repealing laws for 800 years. Its history is quite convoluted and much longer than the last decade or so, but I do not think it can be explained by just the sorts of things we talk about in terms of improving parliamentary processes. We really are living in an interesting time when it comes to the kind of hyperindividualism without which you cannot understand this.

Ms BONENFANT: Do you think the rise of social media has contributed to the perception that sovereign citizens are a new phenomenon or that individualism is a new phenomenon?

Prof. ORR: Obviously social media itself is just a means to share information or opinions and so on, but it obviously turbocharges things. You can have movements that seem to coalesce much faster and spread around the world in different ways rather than just people trying to study what people are talking about in pubs and so on. Conspiracy theories have been with us forever, particularly in the American—and even Australian—tradition. You cannot just blame social media, because it actually provides a whole lot of good ways in which we can try and counteract this or make people feel they are more involved.

Ms BONENFANT: Turning to the members, any one of you can take this point. How do you think parliament can best ensure that legal protections against extremism are not going too far so as to dissuade legitimate dissent?

Ms BOLTON: We have to ultimately go back to who we are and whom we represent. I really understand what Graeme said about individualism, but movements need people. Democracy and what we strive and work so hard for needs the support of people. You still have to go back to why these movements grow and get people's support. What the prime minister of Barbados said about disengagement was really interesting. Sometimes we seek engagement on our terms, not on the terms of those whom we represent. We do have to protect the ability for everyone to have diverse viewpoints in a manner that does not impact negatively on the rest of our communities. I think that is really vital. That is paramount. You have to have safe communities. You have to have respectful discourse. It starts with leaders in the chamber.

Mr WHITING: The question was about the role of parliamentarians in protecting free speech. Sandy is right insofar as the mechanisms of review within parliament are important. It is one of those things where the responsibility comes down to all of us. If people expect parliament to produce an automatic defence of these particular rights we can do that, but maybe it reflects the local community aspect we all have. It is something we have a responsibility to do. You cannot just rely on parliament to say, 'Here you go, parliament. We've got a problem. Fix it.' We need to adopt many different measures within a community, within civil society, to protect those basic rights. I do not mean in a violent way. I feel very strongly that you cannot rely on the outsourced protection of individual rights to parliament. We must all work together as a civil society to protect those rights.

Mr STEVENS: I think it was Thomas Jefferson who said, 'I may not agree with what you say, but I will fight to the death for your right to say it.' We as parliamentarians would always defend the right of people to dissent from the views of the norm in a democracy, as long as they do it in a lawful manner. If a supposed sovereign citizen wants to become unlawful in their delivery of that message, in my view it is a matter for society to make sure they become lawful by whatever means required to protect the rest of our community. If we have one section that is unlawful in their behaviour, that will undermine the rule of law for our democracy. It amazes me the number of people who are protesting in relation to the Palestinian issue, but that is their right. As long as it is lawful and done correctly then as Australians we listen and arrive at our own opinion on the matter. In terms of sovereign citizens' abject objection to lawful directives, that is not able to be contemplated in a good and decent society.

Ms BONENFANT: What role do you think civic education is playing in helping people meet in the middle? As Chris noted, we are losing the average person to the overly educated parliamentarian. They feel there is a break in who is being represented by them. How can we meet people where they are and increase engagement? What role does civic education play in that?

Mr WHITING: I now have a 15-year-old son—he is 15 tomorrow—and he has been asking me questions about politics. I was surprised; I thought that all he was interested in is X-Box. He has been watching YouTube videos on politics and things like the Punic Wars, for goodness sake. We talked about social media, but let's not underestimate the power of this new technology to reach people in all different ways. He is getting an education that is very different to mine. We really need to look at some of these electronic means in terms of a village square. Let's not underestimate the power of that to reach young people. It is also a platform for different extremist views. I do not have an answer for that. We need to really embrace the positive aspects of the electronic marketplace to reach people who I know are not reading books anymore, and that is younger Queenslanders and younger Australians.

Ms BOLTON: When I go the schools in my electorate we have a big question and answer session where all the kids can ask me any question at all. One aspect I love is when I ask how many would love to be a representative of their community in some form. Initially you might get two or three who put up their hand, but by the end of the session I will have 30 out of 100 putting up their hands very enthusiastically. A good place to start is within our schools. Also, never underestimate the power of social media criticism, because it is a wonderful avenue to share factual knowledge with your community. Avoiding or blocking all criticism cuts off communication channels. I have spent many years and late nights responding to some fairly ferocious criticism; however, what I have found over the years is that they know they will get the truth from me based on facts and objective, credible research and not spin. As was said earlier, I am not looking for a 'gotcha' moment. If we engage in a way that is authentic and meaningful, it will take us through an era where things like social engineering and AI may be coming to the fore.

Prof. ORR: Misinformation, shared discourse and so on are all really important big issues, but when you are talking about sovereign citizens you cannot really fight irrational thought with rational thought. As a psychologist you can explain how and why, but the sorts of people who go down these rabbit holes are either predetermined or predisposed to this kind of radical individualism or they are doing it to justify their grift, to avoid taxes and so on. It is a wonderful contradiction, but they only deal in cash. What is legal currency but the ultimate imprint of the sovereign state and the Crown to create a means of currency? There are a lot of other internal contradictions that are very hard to rationalise. The other problem is people who think they have found a wormhole in the legal system and followed it down are also not going to be easily dissuaded.

The concept of trust is an interesting one in politics. We often think about it as something to do with ethics and so on. Largely, it is about people's perceptions of their economic and their environmental state. John Howard got that when he defined trust as: 'You can trust me to keep your mortgage rates down. You can trust me to do these things.' He did not mean, 'You can trust me to necessarily tell the truth,' and so on. He was using it in another way, and that is how political scientists can explain trust. Things do go in waves and all we can do is weather the storm of some of these movements and so on. When things are ticking over well economically and in the general social environment for the majority of people, then they can be kept in check. When they are not—and I think we are seeing this in the US—you start to see the collapse of social order, really.

Mr STEVENS: Just briefly in terms of civic education, the Queensland parliament itself does a wonderful job encouraging schools to visit through the parliament. We have a dedicated officer here, which is a very important part. I believe civic education is a very important part of determining longer term opinions about parliaments and what parliaments and parliamentarians do for their communities. I would venture to say there is probably not enough in school curriculums, and certainly I am advised tonight as a matter of fact that there is not a lot in tertiary education about parliamentary processes and the importance of politicians, parliamentarians and parliaments regarding the everyday life of our communities. Certainly, civic education is an enormous part in planting longer term views as people grow up. I think there should be a greater concentration on lifting involvement with our younger generation.

Ms BONENFANT: We might go to questions from the floor. Does anyone have a question?

QUESTIONER: I was a backbencher, so you did not get many questions. This is to the whole panel and it is the concern of institutions and the way they treat whistleblowers. I am just wondering if there are any comments that basically a lot of people could be turned off because they felt a person who was a whistleblower was not treated fairly by an institution.

Ms BOLTON: I am trying to answer that without conveying any confidentiality; you can pull me up. From my experience, for anybody who has come forth through the systems I have seen there has been what I consider an appropriate process undertaken for including protections for whistleblowers. I cannot say otherwise without there being a direct example. I can only say that from my own experience not only as an MP individually when people have come with information but also through our systems that I have seen.

Mr STEVENS: I think it is absolutely important to the whole democracy for whistleblowers to be protected, and we have acted in that particular area already in our first 12 months of this parliament. There have been some serious issues that have now been brought to our attention from previous activities. Certainly the whistleblower should not suffer any recrimination from their role—as long as it is not vengeful, frivolous or vexatious, if you like—and you can get that particular type of outcome from some investigations. I am just talking broadly here without any specifics. If there is a genuine whistleblower, they should be protected at every opportunity and we will make sure, from my point of view, that that absolutely happens.

Mr WHITING: Just thinking back on cases over the last hundred years or so, there have always been whistleblowers and there has always been a cost to them when they have spoken out. We have laws and protections these days, but they are not always going to work because you are up against vested powers. There are a lot of vested interests in making sure that what that person wants does not happen, and that has not changed in a hundred years. Those laws are there, but they are up against some fairly stiff opposition.

One of the things we have seen—and I am trying to think back on cases in history—is that once the story of a whistleblower gets out in terms of what has happened to them that has been picked up within traditional newspaper media. These days it feeds in immediately to social media and it is transmitted instantly to everyone. That is probably the difference that we are seeing now. I do not know if that aids or hinders the process of whistleblowing, but you do know that if someone speaks out and they are able to put that through social media channels it spreads widely very quickly. That has changed what happens with whistleblowing, and I am not sure in which way it has yet.

Prof. ORR: Yes, it is certainly true that these are worthy things. For whistleblowing we have better laws and protections than we ever had, and I teach public law as well as labour law. They are imperfect, but they are better than they were. Similarly, we have better education, more education and a more highly educated population on a whole than we used to have. What we do have, though, is a much more complex society and that is difficult to deal with. As has been mentioned, people are more time-poor and they are less likely to focus on worthy things like public institutions.

Another thing we have not mentioned, relevant also to whistleblowing, is that governments and corporations have also become more protective or defensive in a way because they are part of a kind of branding system that is, as Ray said, partly driven by a defensive posture when it comes to media. It is all about clickbait and so on. These are also part of the issue because people then can sometimes just look for a very simple explanation or a simple kind of narrative or story which is, 'Well, I reject all that. I'm a sovereign citizen. I will say yes and no to laws just as I'll say yes and no to the soft drink I buy.'

QUESTIONER: Could I just make two suggestions to the panel and get a response? The first is that there is a lot of observation I think in recent times about the inadequacy of civics education in schools and syllabus, and I think, Ray, you touched on that. I would like to see our education minister do something positive to bring back civics education to the school syllabus, because it used to be there. I think its absence probably leads to a lot of disengagement. People do not know who their members of parliament are; they do not know the different levels of government and just the basic tools to navigate our democracy. That is the first thing that I think is really critical to all this.

The next thing is that there is an awards committee of the former parliamentarians association of this parliament, and I would like to see MPs promote that more—the knowledge of it—because through the parliament we can promote an awareness that MPs do some really good stuff that you do not see ordinarily on the front page of the *Courier-Mail*, because it is the bad stuff you see there. I would be urging our parliament to do that. I think some of the responsibility does rest on the shoulders of our MPs to actually promote positive messages—and we know that a lot of our MPs do some wonderful things that never get heralded. They are the two suggestions that I might make to the panel.

Prof. ORR: I think these are all important and worthy things to think about, but we are living in the so-called attention economy. With Trump and Mr Palmer you get attention a certain way and then you try and grab power and use it that way, so we are going to be pushing barrows up a hill. I think these are important things for you guys to discuss, but they are not going to address the sovereign citizen movement.

Mr WHITING: On the issue of civics education in schools—and this also ties in with the sovereign citizen movement—what I am finding is that when I talk to the kids at high school they are engaged, but they are not seeing their faith in traditional politics addressing what they want changed or their needs. They are not seeing a world where climate change is being addressed, where they can afford to buy a house or where they get an education they can afford. We are doing politics one way; they are not seeing that their issues are being addressed through the way we are doing politics, and that feeds into what happens when they become of voting age. They become sovereign citizens where their experience has been, 'Well, politics has hardly ever addressed any of the issues I need addressed. Let's look for a different way to address those.' We do need that civics education in schools, but there is also an appetite there for it. We are just not listening to what the schools and the younger people need.

Ms BOLTON: Yes, I think sometimes we are looking at it from our viewpoint—what we believe is needed—and not from their viewpoint. It is important, as is the language we use. We are saying 'civic education'. Literally there is that turn-off point that says, 'No, not for me.' We need to move to that spot that says, 'What is it they are after?' As Chris said, those who have protested outside my office, who have come to me and who have joined movements did that as a result of not anything that you have mentioned, whether it was something that evolved overseas; it was housing, homelessness, people on the streets that they have known for years were a problem but the issue has not been resolved. I think, again, we have to go back to real listening.

Mr STEVENS: Again, David, thank you. I mentioned before how I believe in further progress through our education systems, because kids in schools, obviously, and even Bond University students have very little idea of what a parliamentarian's role is, how you got into it, who you represent and whether you are local or you are federal or you are state. In fact, I get blamed for a lot of my federal compatriot's problems and, even worse, blamed for my local council ones. If there is a footpath or a lawn that has not been mowed, I get a few calls on those sorts of things.

There is a great disconnect in the youth in the understanding of politicians. In fact, I would go so far to say that, after standing on many booths over many years, there is probably about a 60 per cent to 70 per cent disconnect with the voting public out there in terms of what is going on, people asking whether they have to vote and wanting to know if it was not compulsory in Australia how many people would turn up to vote. We have one of the few democracies in the world—I think there are about 12 of us—that have compulsory voting, and that is another issue for another day. We also have compulsory preferential voting, which is another particular item that relates to Australian voting. There are many issues out there from an education point of view that we could improve upon. How we get into that system is another big question.

There are a lot of other issues. As Chris said, the issues that are on everybody's plate are the cost of living, the crime waves, housing costs and the health issues. They are all the main issues that people are thinking about at this point in time, and politics and politicians are on the low part of it, even though we are the answer to their problems in the longer term.

QUESTIONER: My question is about the direction of individuals and the community. Politics is very important, but I do not think the general public are well informed and well trained in participating in political talking. If we had like what Charlie Kirk did on university campuses in debating any topic, I think we will have a better prepared population for the whole country moving forward in a good direction. My question is about whether there is a possibility for Australia to do similar things, like schools and unis have that kind of debate or raise the participation with (inaudible) the responsibility to other organisations. Do you have any ideas about how to educate (inaudible) political debate?

Ms BONENFANT: So how can we better equip the voting public to participate in these sorts of political debates?

Prof. ORR: Sovereign citizens are doing politics; they are just often doing it in ways that we might think are nefarious—through small groups online and so on that are highly defamatory and highly abusive sometimes of the authority, of the position, of ordinary public servants, good government, MPs and so on. If it is any consolation, Ray, sovereign citizens are not often enrolled to vote, so you do not have to worry about compulsory voting. The last thing you are going to do is put your real name on an electoral roll with your address and so on when you are someone who thinks you are somehow setting up almost—that is one thing we have not talked about, but at times in Australia there have been movements of individuals to secede, to put such signs up in front of their house. That is another kind of performative radical individualism from someone who wants to benefit from society but is happy to opt out of obligations.

Ms BOLTON: Just quickly, I think what you are saying is about having respectful, factual debate. When I went to school we all had debating teams, we all had our turn and we were given the rules of engagement. Is that not happening anymore? From my understanding it is. I think one of the greatest things you can do is give a topic, let everybody research it and then have a respectful debate. It is play the ball, not the man. It is optional now? You see, that is where I think some of the things that—I know that Ray, being in government now, can look at these things. He can look at these things that suddenly have become optional instead of compulsory. It gives you enormous skill sets—I wish I had been on the debating team—to understand, to be able to have your voice heard and also to know where to research information that is not misleading or does not add to the misinformation that abounds.

Mr STEVENS: Democracy is a wonderful thing. It is not perfect. It is very difficult to have everybody informed and included in the whole process. We would love to see more people from different areas. We would like to see more inclusiveness, if you like. I think that in North Korea Kim Jong-il has just about educated everyone in politics, but it is a sad way to go. The fact is that, as I said, most people only vote, in my view, because they have to. It would be interesting to see the percentage. In fact, years ago in America—and Graeme will know better than I—they were down to about 45 per cent on their voting. I think they are over 50 per cent now because there are a lot of unhappy people in America. They are the numbers they are bringing in.

We get about 78 per cent in terms of our voting turnouts, and that is because it is compulsory. There are a lot of people turning up because they have to vote, so they just pick somebody. I guarantee that by the time they get to No. 9, which I think I had on my last voting card, they have no idea whom they are voting for. It is a difficult process, and democracy will never be perfect. We run with a pretty good system and, basically, I have seen over a lot of years that the public get it right—except when they kicked me out as mayor, of course, but that is another story!

Mr WHITING: One of the things you said was that you feel that politics is broken; is that right?

QUESTIONER: Most of the time I only hear one side if there is any political event. There is no debate. There is no balance there. I want the debate back in normal life.

Mr WHITING: I see what you mean, yes. I see great cycles of that where one side is not heard, people are not heard, there is a crisis and then there is a feeling that democracy is not working. I think back to my studies. Look at what happened in the Great Depression, for example—one point of view prevailed, then

there was a crisis and then you got a reformation and a new consensus coming through. In democracy, that cycle is always happening—crisis, reformation or solution and a new consensus emerges. I think that is a continual process.

It is incumbent on all of us to make sure all of those voices are heard. As we have said before, we may not like what is being said, but it is incumbent on all of us to actually really listen to everyone and say, 'Okay, where can we accommodate that? How can we come to a new consensus?' There has to be that willingness to come to a consensus, and that is on all sides. That is on all people who are involved in politics. Maybe it is a bit pollyanna of me, but I still believe that is one of the great strengths of democracy—being able to weather those crises, come back together, cobble together a consensus and keep going forward.

QUESTIONER: John Adams once said—

... democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.

What is the panel's view on that, and are we on a process of suicide?

Prof. ORR: Jefferson had the idea that you have to have a revolution every 20 years. You do have to reinvent and address the flaws, as you have been talking about, in present processes of democracy. I think with the sovereign citizens we are also dealing with a special kettle of fish. How do you rationally speak to someone—and I have done a lot of fact-checking—who thinks the US commercial code applies in Australia and somehow exempts them from having to pay car registration? Do you say, 'You're a grifter and we're going to lock you up,' or do you say, 'You're misguided, and here is some education about the nature of our legal system'?

Mr WHITING: I think even amongst the sovereign citizens there are a great number who still believe in democracy. We might hear people like John Adams, who benefited enormously from democracy, making those comments, but at the deep bedrock there is that belief and that desire to make it work. We have to remember that there are times when it is very frustrating, but honestly I think everyone has a bedrock of expectation and a bedrock of goodwill to try to make it happen. That will keep driving century after century the great processes of democracy and the desire for every man and woman to be equally involved.

Ms BOLTON: It has been said that we are just one little blip in time. Our role as representatives or leaders in our communities is stewardship. Even though I have not been successful in getting the flaws addressed, I have great belief in human beings and I have great belief that both sides of the House will come together and remedy those aspects that are leading to an increase in those who are disengaging and moving into movements out of frustration. Is that a pollyanna moment? I have always had great belief and I will continue to keep seeking that.

Mr STEVENS: I have been hanging around longer than 20 years and I have not seen a revolution yet. You have a fake democracy in Russia, with a guy being very aggressive in the world at the current time; you have a non-democracy in China, which is threatening areas and which the world is basically looking at very closely; and, of course, you have North Korea being crazy. I think the world has moved on, so I think democracy is going to stay around for a long, long time.

If you look at the Second World War and Japan, they just followed their leaders blindly into what was a devastating war for Japan. It took a lot of years to get over that, and they are travelling well as a democracy now. With all of the weapons and powers in the world today, hopefully we will see democracy survive and thrive. I probably will not be around when the next revolution occurs, and that will be a good thing. I am not sure that the world will not carry out further wars. We are sort of heading down that track, which is very disappointing, but I do not think it will affect democracy in the longer term.

Dr KOWOL: On that optimistic note, we might come to an end. Thank you very much to all of our panellists—Ray, Sandy, Chris and Graeme—and, of course, to Alana. As we have heard, the solution to the dangers of radical individualism is a greater focus on community. There is nowhere that community is built more strongly than in the pub. I suggest that we all adjourn to the Lucinda Bar and fight the sovereign citizen movement one pint at a time. Thanks very much.