

Gary Banks shows way to regain political trust

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COVERAGE of Victorian Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews's prodigal son bus tour has been peppered with references to his awkward attempts to imbue his private relationships with political promise.

Like an increasing number of Australian politicians, he has been adopting the American approach of selling his personal parable instead of selling his policy prescriptions.

It isn't the first time journalists have been packed on to a campaign bus or the first awkward over-sharing the public has been subjected to. American-style barnstorming bus tours seem to grow in popularity at every election despite each community they arrive in being largely underwhelmed and somewhat bemused.

It's easy to understand why campaign staff are so keen on the American-style personal values campaign. First, it allows the media and communications team to gain sole custody of their candidate, abandoning policy advisers, ministerial team, family, backbenchers and head office staff for the thrill of the open road.

Second, character-based campaigning holds the promise of restoring trust when surveys report political trust is at an all-time low. But once again the triumph of style over substance puts us further back in the battle to restore confidence in democracy.

Recent surveys, including the Monash Mapping Social Cohesion report, show political parties and parliament ranked at the bottom of scores for institutional trust. The biennial Constitutional Values Survey found more than one in four Australians are convinced democracy is not working. This isn't because they prefer Stalinism or a caliphate. Voters don't want democracy replaced — they want it delivered.

Efforts have been made on both sides of politics to review and reform after significant losses. The review by John Faulkner, Bob Carr and Steve Bracks

for Labor reportedly recommended increasing grassroots participation to address declining membership and reconnect with voters.

The 2011 review by Peter Reith for the Liberals reportedly recommended trials of US-style primary elections to replace plebiscites of local branch members. This same remedy was championed by former NSW state secretary, now senator, Sam Dastyari.

But it's not "grassroots democracy", "character" or campaign tactics that lie at the heart of what is destroying trust in politics. It's process.

While Labor continues to fight about the Faulkner, Carr and Bracks report and Jackie Kelly quits the Liberals over plebiscites, the closest explanation I have seen for a solution to the modern malaise in politics was delivered last year by a public servant — former Productivity Commission chairman Gary Banks.

In his 2013 Garran Oration for the Institute of Public Administration Australia, Banks argued that declining trust was hurting the economy as well as the polity, "inhibiting the willingness of producers to invest and employ people, both actions requiring confidence in the future".

His prescription was the stuff of nightmares for the growing army of people in the smoke and mirrors business.

"How this is to be achieved," said Banks, "can be distilled into two words: good process."

This was not an argument to replace leadership or reform with more bureaucracy. It was simply a plea for consistency, transparency and accountability. Political promises should be based on serious policy knowledge, grounded in research, exposed to the light of professional and public scrutiny. Importantly, promises should be followed through without post-release dissembling, backflipping and blame shifting.

Banks's prescription included "policies not appearing out of the blue", which is to say policy should arise from public debate and research rather than be crafted in secret and sprung for media impact. He also suggested "programs not being announced prematurely" — for example, schemes such as pink batts that were not thought through before being released with fanfare. "Stakeholders not being ignored" is another basic to get right because policy written in isolation tends to be ignorant of service level and logistical details. This leads to implementation problems, confusion and a perception of incompetence.

Transparency, of course, matters: “details of programs and their rationale not being suppressed”, which is to say the intellectual and moral case for a policy should be clearly available to the public. Last, “policies not being dropped or reversed without explanation”. Backflipping not only causes short-term damage; it calls into question how much thought or care went into thinking up the scheme in the first place.

Improving process is not about generating more paperwork. Nor is it about handing over democracy to technocrats. It simply means setting a standard for political leadership that requires diligence, consistency and accountability. In the long run, the only true path to greater public confidence is to govern with greater competence.

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