THE HENRY PARKES FOUNDATION

THE HENRY PARKES ORATION 2026

‘Trust in the people: the role of civics in a healthy democracy’

The Hon. Milton Dick MP

Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House, Canberra
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Thank you William for the warm Welcome to Country, and Ian for that very generous introduction.

I too would like to acknowledge that we meet on First Nations country. We celebrate 125 years of our Federation and our Parliament this year. If you put that in the context of 60,000 years of custodianship by First Nations people, it's about one-tenth of a blink of an eye. So, I'm delighted to be here and I acknowledge all First Nations people with us tonight.

I acknowledge distinguished guests, parliamentarians, civic leaders, educators, students, and all those who have joined us for this year's Henry Parkes Oration.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Henry Parkes Foundation, along with the Museum of Australian Democracy, led by Stephanie Bull, for making this possible. And thank you for the work that you do with everyone here at MoAD to promote and support democracy.

I also want to acknowledge former Senate President the Honourable Margaret Reid, the first of only two female presidents. Your contribution as a presiding officer is well-known and still well-regarded, Margaret, so thank you for your commitment to continuing with your democracy crusade.

It is an incredible privilege to deliver an address bearing the name of a man whose vision helped shape the Australia we know today.

And of course, in times like now where our democracy is under immense pressure, it is right to look back at our roots, which lead us back to Sir Henry Parkes.

Henry Parkes is remembered as the Father of Federation.

But long before he became a nation-builder, he was something else.

He was a democrat. He believed in the capacity of ordinary people to govern themselves. He believed public debate mattered. He believed citizenship carried responsibilities as well as rights. And above all, he believed the future of Australia would be determined not by a privileged few, but by the people themselves.

That belief sits at the heart of our democracy. And it is a simple, yet powerful reminder of who we are in Australia.

Because right now, I believe Australia finds itself at an important moment – we are at a crossroads.

It is a moment that demands reflection and a moment that calls for action.

The future health of Australian democracy depends upon renewing our civic culture.

Civics education is not an optional extra.

It is democratic infrastructure.

And I think that recent events, sadly exactly one week ago today, should serve as a wake-up call. And it's not just last week; the warning signs have been there for a little while now.

Not because Australian democracy is failing.

But because we have been reminded that democracy cannot be taken for granted.

Where we are now

There are moments in a nation's history when longstanding expectations are suddenly challenged.

Where the things we once considered permanent suddenly become temporary.

Where democracy is not inevitable.

I believe we are living through such a moment.

Across democratic societies, trust in institutions is declining.

The line between fact and opinion has become harder to distinguish.

Social media has accelerated the spread of misinformation, and in fields that before took years to master, now apparently create experts in 10 minutes.

Citizens feel disconnected from public decision-making.

Many people don't see themselves in the political process.

And across the world we have witnessed the consequences of this decline.

The rise of extremism, misinformation, disinformation and polarised people. 135 newsrooms have closed in the past five years.

Growing hostility towards public institutions and of course acts of intimidation and violence directed at elected representatives, as we saw last Monday.

We have watched these developments unfold overseas and often reassured ourselves that such things could never happen in Australia. That is not who we are.

We say these things could never happen, but unfortunately, no democracy is immune, including Australia.

The lesson of this moment is not that we should lose confidence in democracy.

The lesson is that democracy requires maintenance.

And it must be renewed by every generation.

That is why this moment matters.

That is why civics matters.

And that is why I believe we should see this not simply as a challenge, but as an opportunity.

An opportunity for democratic renewal.

Sir Henry Parkes

When Henry Parkes travelled the colonies advocating Federation, he was asking Australians to imagine something that did not yet exist.

A continent divided by colonial boundaries, separate governments, different interests and different priorities.

But he believed Australians could be persuaded to unite around a common purpose.

At the Constitutional Convention of 1891, Sir Henry Parkes championed a bold idea: that the new nation should be known as a 'Commonwealth'.

The term was embraced enthusiastically because it captured something distinctive about Australia. A belief that democratic institutions should exist for the benefit of all. Serving the common weal – the common good.

That idea remains as relevant today as it was more than a century ago.

Because democracy was never intended to be an individual pursuit.

It was always a collective endeavour.

On the first day of January 1901, the Australian nation was born. 125 years ago. Home to around three and three-quarter million people, it was modest in population but ambitious in vision.

It was, in many respects, a remarkable democratic experiment.

And at the time, a surprisingly radical one. Australia's the 10th oldest government in the world – and we're not a very old country.

The new Commonwealth brought together six self-governing colonies under a Constitution. A Constitution crafted through consultation, debate and public endorsement.

It reflected a growing belief that ordinary citizens should play a greater role in shaping public life and determining the future of their nation.

Australia's founders understood that democratic institutions would only succeed if citizens believed in them, participated in them and took responsibility for them.

Federation was a civic project. Australians gathered in town halls, attended public meetings, wrote letters to newspapers and debated constitutional ideas. They argued, persuaded and argued.

Federation was delivered by argument.

We sometimes look back on Federation as something that just simply occurred. But it was achieved through civic participation. A promise that Australians, acting together as citizens, could shape their own future.

That lesson remains relevant today. Because democracy has always relied upon more than institutions.

Democracy relies upon citizens possessing the knowledge, confidence and commitment necessary to participate in public life.

Without that foundation, democratic institutions grow weaker.

Not because the institutions fail. But because the civic culture that sustains them begins to erode. That's what we're seeing now across Australia and across the world.

Democracy is learned, not inherited

One of the most important truths about democracy in my opinion is also one of the most overlooked.

Democracy is learned, not inherited. No one is born knowing how democratic government works, or what their constitutional responsibilities are. These are learned behaviours, habits and values. It has to be taught in classrooms, around dinner tables, through faith communities and every institution.

This is why civics education matters so profoundly.

Civics to me is not simply about government or politics. It is about learning about how decisions are made, how disagreements are resolved, how power is exercised and constrained, how rights are protected and how responsibilities are shared.

And most importantly – how citizens can shape the future of their communities.

At its best, civics education develops three essential democratic qualities:

1. Curiosity – the willingness to listen before judging, and to seek to understand.
2. Responsibility - recognising that citizenship involves obligations as well as entitlements.
3. Participation – understanding that democracy is not a spectator sport.

Democracy evolves over time, every generation inherits democracy at differing points.

But it's their job to learn how to carry it forward.

Parliament and democracy

As Speaker of the House of Representatives, I have the privilege that only 31 people before me have held. I have the privilege of welcoming a million people to Parliament House every year – the most visited building in the country.

School students, community groups, visitors from around the world and people representing charities and not for profits.

Many arrive carrying assumptions about politics, many arrive who are indifferent to politics. But many are surprised by what they discover.

Because when people see Parliament up close, they are reminded of something important.

Outside what they see on TV, or on the news, are 150 members, debating in the chamber the issues that matter to their community. 150 members united for different causes, sharing the space, working together.

Throughout history millions of people have lived under systems where disagreement was silenced rather than debated.

We still see it today.

But the most important civic lesson of all is that we don't measure our democracy around how we handle agreement.

It's how we manage disagreement.

The challenge before us

Today, too many of the habits that support democratic culture are under pressure. People are busy, they do not have time. Public debate has become faster, louder and more fragmented.

We have access to far more information than any generation in history. So why the disconnect? Why aren't people more engaged?

For a generation with a multitude of information at our fingertips, *understanding* feels far harder to achieve.

The issue is not simply misinformation – it's trust. Trust in institutions, expertise, media, democratic processes, and in one another. And once trust is lost – trust me – it's incredibly difficult to rebuild.

We cannot simply stand up and demand trust. We must earn it.

But like trust, democracy is a two-way street.

As I always say – democracy doesn't collapse, it crumbles. And democratic trust is a partnership between institutions and the people they serve. Neither side can sustain it alone.

This is why civic education must be understood not as an educational afterthought, but a necessity.

Civics programs

One of the great privileges of welcoming people to Parliament House as Speaker has been the opportunity to engage directly with young Australians across the country.

Since taking the Chair in 2022, I have made civics education a central priority of my Speakership. I have visited more than 200 schools.

I have spoken with students in places as far as Charters Towers, Nullagine and Kangaroo Island. In some schools with as little as just two students.

Every year 100,000 students walk through that door, but 1.1 million don't.

So what are we doing for those kids? I asked the Parliament Education Office, what do those kids get? Do they get a gold star? Do they get a book? Well, we have changed that. We now have Parliament in Schools in every classroom and every school across Australia. I have now visited more than 214 schools personally to teach democracy, to teach civics. Schools where there are few as two students in them. Border communities, remote communities from the coast of Tasmania, right up to far north and Western Australia.

But regardless of location, whenever I've spoken to students in Nullagine and Kangaroo Island, when I'm in a school room, the message is always remarkably consistent.

Young Australians do care – far more than we give them credit for. The challenge is not that they do not want to participate; the challenge is that too many don't know where to start.

We don't teach civics nationally across Australia. It's hit and miss. Teachers have admitted to me they don't understand enough about it, so they're afraid to teach it. So I'm on a single mission before I finish my public service career, before I finish my life, that we will be teaching civics in year six, in year 10, in every classroom across Australia.

So young people want engagement; they want opportunities to contribute. And most importantly, they want to be listened to.

That is why I have always believed the responsibilitydoesn't just lie with the Speaker or members of parliament. It lies with everyone here.

It sits with us all to not just to invite participation, but to genuinely encourage it. And to ensure young Australians can see how their voices connect to our democratic institutions. Because as I mentioned earlier, democracy is not a spectator sport.

Earlier this year, we welcomed Australia's first National Youth Parliament to Canberra – 150 young people, representing every electorate in the nation. We do them at a state level, but we had never done one nationally. And I thought it was time, after 125 years, that young people took over the building.

We partnered with the YMCA to run the program, and the first thing I did was sit down with their leadership and told them I did not want 150 kids with blazers and pin and boater hats and pockets (I was that kid at school, obviously). Those kids are already engaged. I wanted the kids that would say, 'I never thought I'd get chosen. I wasn't the captain of debating'. The school captains are already winning the awards. Where are the kids that want to be involved? And that's what we did.

So it was a great gathering, not just for kids, but for the community and for members of parliament. A gathering in Parliament House to learn about our parliamentary system, to debate ideas, and to see democracy in action.

The experience left me optimistic. Not because these young Australians all agreed with one another. But because they didn't.

They debated the issue of artificial intelligence, guardrails for young people, all sorts of topics that they could disagree about but find agreement on and work collaboratively with each other. They debated respectfully, they listened, they challenged assumptions and they sought common ground.

One small piece of the puzzle, but we now have another 150 advocates and democratic warriors across every electorate across Australia.

125 years of Australia

But this year also marks another important milestone – the 125th anniversary of Federation and the Australian National Flag.

Ours is one of the few national flags anywhere in the world designed by its own people through a public competition that attracted more than 30,000 entries.

The flag that flies above our schools, our sporting grounds, citizenship ceremonies, community events and above parliament house is the design chosen by people through a competition. In today's dollars, the prize money was around $100,000. Entry was blind, with everyone given a number. There were no names. The governor of South Australia entered the competition – unsuccessfully.

Five people won that competition. Five students, one as young as 14 and a young girl, Annie Dorrington from Western Australia. I'm on a mission to bring their names back to life because they have vanished. We tracked down some of their living descendants and invited them to a ceremony, to unveil the flag that flies above Parliament House, just as it was unveiled 125 years ago on 9 September 1901.

And for the first time, I've also taken that flag on a road trip across Australia. So kids get to learn the importance of our national symbol, what it means and what it represents as well.

For 125 years, Australians have gathered beneath that flag in times of celebration, challenge and change.

And for 125 years, our democratic institutions have endured because successive generations have chosen to participate in them, strengthen them and pass them on to those who follow.

Just as Federation was not inevitable in 1901, democratic confidence is not inevitable in 2026.

Lessons from the Pacific and the world

This year I have had the privilege of engaging with parliamentary leaders from across the Pacific and around the world, and I was honoured just over two weeks ago to be elected as the 32nd President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Tanzania.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is the world's oldest multilateral organisation encouraging cooperation and dialogue between nations. It brings together 184 member parliaments and 15 associate members, promoting peace, democracy and sustainable development.

When I ran for the presidency, it wasn't because I wanted to be 'president of the world'. It was probably the hardest thing I've ever done – a two-year campaign, to try and become the first person in 137 years to ever lead this organisation from our region – but I ran because I want those tens of thousands of parliamentarians to teach democracy in every classroom across the world. That was my single platform. Because if the oldest multilateral organisation on the planet is to promote democracy, it has to practice what it preaches.

I am in place for the next three years, until 2030, as the IPU president. And for every single moment, I'll be doing this – talking about democracy, here in our community, across Australia, across the region and across the world.

It was an incredible moment earlier this month, standing on the stage in front of Members of Parliament from over 100 nations – declaring my pride in being Australian. “Australia is the best country in the world, with one of the greatest democracies in the world”.

And I really mean that. Whilst we have our challenges, absolutely, we have one of the best democracies in the world. We have the guardrails to protect democracy that so few countries do. Compulsory voting, compulsory preferential voting, the Australian Electoral Commission.Wonderful institutions that do so much work

And respect for those institutions as well. Yes, been frayed, but you add up those guardrails. We are so lucky in Australia, but we've got to fight for it. And part of my job globally will be to encourage other countries to follow our lead.

The IPU was formed in 1889 by Cremer and Passy, a UK and French politician – two MPs who got together and said, there are too many conflicts across the world; we need to use parliamentary diplomacy for peace and security. Back then, there were around 18 armed conflicts happening around the planet. Today, there are around 130 – the highest number in history. And when the sun goes down today across the world, more than 300 girls and women will be killed as a result of those armed conflicts.

People want democracy because it remains the most effective means of resolving differences peacefully and improving collective wellbeing. And now more than ever, global parliamentary diplomacy is important and global security remains ever the goal.

Australians should be proud of our democratic tradition. But pride is not enough. We need to continue to be active. Our task is not simply to preserve what previous generations created. Our task is to strengthen it for those who come after us.

This is our democratic moment

Every generation has their defining moment – their democratic challenge. I believe this is our moment – this is our turning point. Not because democracy is collapsing; it’s crumbling across the world.

The answer is not cynicism, disengagement or withdrawal. And we don’t need to accept it.

The answer is continuous participation and education.

In Australia, data shows that two out of three year 10 students don't understand how systems of government work. It’s a bit better – about 50 per cent –at a year 6 level. So that's why education at a year 6 and year 10 level is so important.

Imagine what might be possible if every Australian left school not only knowing how Parliament works, but understanding how they could shape their communities. Or where democratic literacy was valued as highly as digital literacy.

One of my first commitments as the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union is to ask all 44,000 Members to make a pledge. A pledge to simply visit one school in their country – their constituency. And to teach one civics lesson. Not a politics lesson – a civics lesson.

Imagine a nation where civic participation was seen not as the responsibility of a few, but as the shared obligation of all.

I am optimistic we can change that.

Conclusion

More than a century ago, Henry Parkes trusted the Australian people enough to imagine a nation that did not yet exist. He trusted citizens to engage with ideas, to weigh up the arguments, to make decisions.

The mission for our generation is no less significant.

I believe the best way to demonstrate that trust is to invest in the civic understanding that empowers citizens to participate fully in public life.

Democracy thrives and remains because citizens choose to sustain it. That is the lesson Henry Parkes understood, and that is the challenge before us.

This is our turning point, to rebuild trust. And to recommit ourselves to the simple but enduring idea that Henry Parkes saw in the very name ‘Commonwealth’: to serve the common good. That democracy flourishes when citizens accept responsibility for one another. And that the future of Australia belongs to its people.

If we want trust in our institutions, we must first invest trust in our citizens. If we want a healthy democracy, we must strengthen the civic foundations on which it rests. And if we are to meet the challenges of the 125 years ahead, we should begin where Henry Parkes began.

By trusting the people.

Thank you for your time tonight, and thank you for your trust in democracy.