

Election is done, now to focus on what matters

- [Andrew Hamilton](#)

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Most comment on the federal election has naturally concentrated on how it was won and lost: how votes were gained here and lost there, how people were consoled or devastated by the result, and how the parties will respond in future elections.



It is time to return to the more important question of what matters for the future good of Australia. This is what governments and political parties are bound by tradition and by their own official rhetoric to serve. This, not electoral success or failure, should govern their actions and our response as citizens to their governance.

The most urgent claims, those by which our grandchildren will judge us, are first that we should pass on to them a habitat in which they can live without anxiety. This demands addressing climate change responsibly. It will require strong leadership endorsed by all parties and shapers of public opinion.

The second priority is to address the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few to the detriment of others and to the national welfare. This is the legacy of a destructive economic ideology that threatens the cohesion of Australian society.

To respond to these claims will not be easy. Necessary change will involve some people and groups in loss. It will also run against the strong emphasis on the competitive individual which puts under pressure the bonds between individuals and groups everywhere, whether between nations in trade and security, between business and workers, shareholders or between different minority groups. Ultimately, all is reduced to the art of the deal, based on superior power. This mindset, whether expressed in the abuse of power or in attempts to overthrow it, leads to popular mistrust in government and any appeal it might make to a larger, national good.

Because of the strength of this attitude the third priority facing government is to commend and embody the commitment to the common good, meaning that individuals seek their own good in the good of all people. It implies that the demands of individuals and of groups, whether defined by class, age, gender, wealth, race, occupation or anything else, need to be viewed and argued for as contributing to the good of the whole society.

It implies that all that we do carries with it a social license. The license for drinking coffee in the street involves placing the cup in a bin and not throwing it on the ground. The social license for running a bank involves acting with respect to clients, to the environment and to ethical values. The social license for governing the nation involves respect in human relationships, respect for the rule of law, avoiding conflict of interest, and placing the common good above the good of the party in making decisions.

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Social licenses are required because human beings matter: not because they are wealthy, white, liberal or right-thinking, but simply because they are human and because they depend on one another to live human lives. For that reason the fourth priority facing government is to support the most disadvantaged and disregarded in society. In Australia these include especially Indigenous people and those who seek protection from persecution.

In a society based on competition between individuals, the death and destitution of others is of no concern. In their personal lives and attitudes most people realise that this attitude is indecent. They are compassionate. Governments must commend and embody responsibility for responding to human beings as human in all levels of society.

The difficulty of embodying a concern for the common good and respectful relationships in government and Parliament is large. But it is the more necessary because the current conduct of politicians in public debate and in private conduct, and the subjection of good governance to satisfying party political demands, has so deeply eroded confidence in government.

The practice in the recent election of offering huge bribes to crucial electorates and the refusal to increase the scandalously low Newstart undermined any claim to concern for the common good. These things may win a seat for a Party but they further diminish respect for politicians and government.

To meet large challenges always demands personal conversion. That is true of governments as well as of individuals.



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Main image: Prime Minister Scott Morrison, flanked by his wife Jenny Morrison, delivers his victory speech at the Sofitel Sydney Wentworth on 18 May 2019 in Sydney. (Photo by Tracey Nearmy/Getty Images)