

Contribute →

---

News Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle

---

---

**Australian politics**

🕒 This article is more than **5 years old**

# A federal Icac is voters' best chance at breaking the scandal cycle

*Lenore Taylor*

---

---

---

---

---

---

Parliament responds to each new allegation with mutual blaming and minimum procedural change, eroding public trust each time

Sat 17 Jun 2017 10.02 AEST



I'm hoping the Reverend Graham Dempster wasn't listening to question time this week.

I don't know him [but I read his submission](#) to the recently resurrected Senate inquiry into a national integrity commission - effective

"I am greatly concerned for the future of parliamentary democracy in Australia, therefore I write, as an individual, and not represent in response to the call for submissions to the above inquiry ... My sense is that our political system is close to being irreparably broke

"I believe, as do many people I interact with, that the current 'self-regulation' by our parliament is not working . establishing a federal integrity commission would be a positive step towards addressing these problems as it would help greatly in re trust between the parliamentary processes and the general public - something that, in my view, has been almost totally lost."

As if to prove his point, question time descended into a shout-athon about Chinese business donations to both major parties in which its behaviour by highlighting the misdeeds of the other, a kind of louder version of the schoolyard defence "Yeh miss but he's worse

Malcolm Turnbull thundered about Sam Dastyari's donations and the senator's [subsequent contradiction of Labor's official position](#) Labor countered with former trade minister Andrew Robb's [post-politics part-time job with Chinese company Landbridge](#), the same controversially secured the lease to the Darwin Port. Mixed in, mostly for hilarious effect, were revelations that a Chinese mining m: Bishop Glorious Foundation" - apparently a company that had that name for just a few days, without the foreign affairs minister eve historic allegations about a Labor frontbencher.

In short, serious questions countered with the usual tactics - when things get hot, find something dubious about the other side to sp signal that this is a fight of the mutually destructive kind.

The parties had already tried to draw the truce line on this scandal cycle - the prime minister has ordered an inquiry into Australia's influence laws and has said he will introduce laws to ban foreign donations in the spring. Labor backs the foreign donations ban and into foreign interference by the powerful joint intelligence and security committee as well.

But while a foreign donations ban is a good idea, it can't solve the underlying problem. Are foreign donors really the only ones who r return for their generosity? Will we ever get to the bottom of the allegations now in the news, or the next lot that surface?

As things stand, no. Like all the previous scandals, this one is likely to blow over - not because the allegations have been clearly disp don't have the tools to know anything for sure. Perhaps something serious will end up being swept under the carpet. Perhaps, as the said this week, damage to a bilateral relationship will have been done for no good cause.

Good journalism can show donations coinciding with decision-making, or donations coinciding with favours and access, or politicians taking some personal advantage from a decision they played a part in, but without some way to compel donors or recipients or decision-makers to act in the public interest, it is almost always impossible to prove causation, or wrongdoing.

But every coincidence of privileged access and power, every apparent connection between donation and outcome, undermines the fairness and integrity of the system.

Corruption or integrity commissions have the power to prove whether things are, in fact, connected. That's how a series of stories about Eddie Obeid and Ian Macdonald turned into court proceedings that landed both men in jail.

That's how the voters of [New South Wales](#) are now getting to hear the astonishing allegations that the former head of not-for-profit care for migrant women, Eman Sharobeem, used taxpayers' money to pay for everything from [diamond necklaces, cars and property](#) to dentures, and how they will hear the court's verdict on the claims.

That's how Queenslanders are hearing equally gobsmacking allegations about [electoral fundraising by local councils](#) and the favours done in return.

In those states, and also in Western Australia and South Australia, voters know there are permanent powerful bodies investigating allegations of misconduct and corruption. There is legitimate debate about some of how they operate - whether hearings should be public, how corruption should be defined - but not about whether they are needed.

But still the federal parliament responds to each new allegation with mutual blaming and minimum procedural change, eroding voters' trust each time.

The Labor leader, Bill Shorten, has said he is open to the idea of an integrity commission and the Greens and Nick Xenophon have called for one for years. The inquiry reports in August.

Something really needs to give this time, because a devastating proportion of Australians agree with Reverend Dempster's sincere call for reform. [80% think a national integrity commission is a great idea.](#)

---

Article count [on](#)

**You've read [5 articles in the last year](#)**

... we have a small favour to ask. Tens of millions have placed their trust in the Guardian's fearless journalism since we started publishing, turning to us in moments of crisis, uncertainty, solidarity and hope. More than 1.5 million supporters, from 180 countries, now power our journalism, keeping us open to all, and fiercely independent.

Unlike many others, the Guardian has no shareholders and no billionaire owner. Just the determination and passion to deliver high quality reporting, always free from commercial or political influence. Reporting like this is vital for democracy, for fairness and to demand accountability. It's powerful.

And we provide all this for free, for everyone to read. We do this because we believe in information equality. Greater numbers of people can see the events shaping our world, understand their impact on people and communities, and become inspired to take meaningful action. It's from open access to quality, truthful news, regardless of their ability to pay for it.

Every contribution, however big or small, powers our journalism and sustains our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as \$1 a month. If you can, please consider supporting us with a regular amount each month. Thank you.**

Single	<b>Monthly</b>	Annual
\$10 per month	<b>\$20 per month</b>	Other

Continue →

Remind me in December

