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Integrity

People are sick of politics as usual, we need to restore integrity and honesty to our democracy

People rightly expect a high standard of ethical behaviour from their elected representatives and officials. You expect us to act in the public interest, respect the trust you've placed in us and to advocate for your views. Open, honest, transparent government is not an optional extra – it is what people demand and deserve. I'm pushing to restore Australians' trust in politics and reforming the way we do politics – leading by example through the 'Indi way' of doing politics differently and working hard to introduce a Federal Integrity Commission and other critical reforms during this parliament.

Policy Paper

Dr Helen Haines MP – Federal Member for Indi

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Trust in our democracy has never been lower, and we all suffer from a broken politics

Scandal after scandal with no sight of reform

For a long time now, **Australia has seen falling trust in government and rising disillusionment with politics**. According to Transparency International, Australia is among a handful of countries where perceived corruption has worsened “significantly” over the past eight years – dropping down the Corruption Perception Index rankings over this time¹.

It’s not hard to see why. In the last year, **we have seen political scandal after political scandal**. The people of Indi and Australia are tired of scandals. We want politics done differently.

This Government has also asked the public to trust them in remarkable ways throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Downloading the COVIDSafe App, accepting indefinite suspensions of parliament, a ban on leaving the country, mandatory quarantine rules, suspension of interstate travel and social distancing restrictions on schools and businesses.

Each of these required a huge extension of trust from the Australian public to the Government. **The Australian public should expect that level of trust and transparency back**. This is a two-way street.

At a time like this, **reforms to restore faith in politics should be prioritised**. Both the Coalition and Labor have committed to introducing a **Federal Integrity Commission** in this Parliament. And the case for one has never been stronger.

But it has been 18 months since the Government released its lacklustre proposal for a *Commonwealth Integrity Commission*. Since then, nothing has happened.

At the same time, we have **very little transparency** about the role of lobbyists over decision-making and **political donations** remain largely out of public sight.

When our elected officials fail, we all fail. The status quo is simply just not good enough.

I have a plan to restore integrity to our system nationally, and model a better way of doing politics locally

I will work to:

1. **Establish a National Integrity Commission to stamp out corruption in federal public administration**

In February, I established the Beechworth Principles. **The Beechworth Principles outline five clear but compelling characteristics that I believe a Federal Integrity must have.** If the Government releases their Bill for a Federal Integrity Commission, I will judge it against these five principles. If it meets them, the Government can count on my support. If it does not, I will introduce amendments, or put forward my own Bill for a Commission that does.

The Beechworth Principle state that any Federal Integrity Commission worthy of its name must have:

- **Broad jurisdiction** so that everyone involved in Federal public service must be subject to independent scrutiny. The Commission must have the power to investigate all persons involved in Commonwealth government and administration outside the judiciary. Federal public servants, politicians, their staff and any private entity carrying out public functions must be obliged to report corruption and wrongdoing and be protected when they do, with Commission oversight.
- **Common rules** so that all persons must be held to a single standard of behaviour. All persons carrying out or influencing public functions should be subject to the same high standards and level of scrutiny. The Commission must be able to investigate any behaviour, whether criminal or not, which does or could adversely affect public confidence in the honest, open and fair exercise of public power.
- **Appropriate powers** to fulfill its purpose. The Commission must be able to receive referrals from the public, government agencies and whistle-blowers, carry out corruption-prevention activity and coordinate State and other bodies. Whilst protecting individuals from arbitrary use of coercive powers, the Commission must be able to initiate its own investigations, use search and surveillance powers, subpoena documents, compel witnesses, investigate past misconduct, make recommendations, and refer criminal conduct for prosecution.

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- **Fair hearings** that are conducted openly when in the public interest. The Commission must be able to decide to hold public inquiries and hearings where it is satisfied this is in the public interest, subject to ensuring natural justice for those under investigation and due process of law. The Commission must be able to publicly report its findings of fact and recommendations when in the public interest.
 - **Accountability to the people** so that the Commission must remain accountable to public, not political interests. The Commissioner should be an independent officer of the Parliament appointed only on recommendation of a cross-parliamentary Standing Committee of Members and Senators. The Committee should oversee the work of Commission, and report annually to Parliament. A civil society committee should advise the Commission and Parliament on a comprehensive national anti-corruption plan.

The Beechworth Principles have been endorsed by judges, legal experts, ethicists, politicians from across the spectrum, **and thousands of everyday Australians** who signed a petition that I took to parliament earlier this year.

I am committed to holding the Government to their promise and working to ensure we end this parliamentary term with a Federal Integrity Commission worthy of its name.

2. Reform political donation legislation to lower threshold for mandatory donations and require real-time disclosures

According to the *Democracy 2025*, more than 75 per cent of politicians and citizens agree the amount of money political parties and candidates can spend on election campaigns and how much they can accept from donors should be limitedⁱⁱ. And yet this Government continues to resist **reform to lower the threshold for declaring donations** and to reduce the time the public must wait before we find out who is bankrolling our politics.

The Parliaments of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have all set a disclosure threshold on political donations at \$1000. In contrast, the Commonwealth requires disclosure just once a year and then seven months after the reporting period has ended.

We cannot have anonymous donors and mates with deep pockets running our politics. Donors to major parties include big business gaming, betting, tobacco, coal and ore miners, brewers, banks, insurers and pharmaceutical companies.

I want to see all donations to all candidates published in real time so that voters can see these donations before voting. We need **comprehensive, robust reform of the system of political donations and disclosure**. The law should be the same for all.

3. Set the standard for political representation and transparency in Indi

Indi is known for doing politics differently. And I am honoured to be the first independent to succeed another independent in the history of the Australian parliament. That was no accident, and neither is the **unique political culture and ambitions of Indi**.

I am committed to embracing the vision Indi has for a democracy where everyone gets to participate. That includes pushing for fair, **open and transparent government** at all levels; from my own offices in Wodonga and Wangaratta, to the offices of huge Government departments across the country which I scrutinise in Parliament.

I call this the ‘Indi Way’ of doing politics differently, and I attempt to live out every day by:

- Inviting enthusiastic **volunteers** from communities across Indi to join me in Canberra every week that Parliament is sitting to see how Government works and participate in our democracy;
- Develop **policy positions** with and for community, like my community energy plan which I am developing in conjunction with local renewable energy groups;
- Ensuring that every vote I take in Parliament is informed by **what is good for Indi** and what is good for Australia.

4. Ensure delivery of all Government promises to Indi

This Government made a lot of promises for Indi during the 2019 election campaign – from new the \$64 million promise for a **McKoy Street Intersection flyover in Wodonga**, to a new half a million-dollar **scouts hall in Myrtleford**, \$3.5 million-dollar **dual court stadium in Mansfield** and \$14.5 million to build new specialist clinics at **Albury-Wodonga Health**.

The Government has also made promises since the election – like the \$2 billion commitment to **bushfire recovery**, or its commitment to release a bill for a Federal Integrity Commission.

I am committed to ensuring the Government delivers everything that it promises to the people of Indi. I keep track of every announcement, and follow up with Ministers, departmental staff and communities on the ground to ensure words translate to action and change.

References

ⁱ Corruption Perceptions Index 2019, Transparency International

ⁱⁱ Democracy 2025 Report No.5: How Australian federal politicians would like to reform their democracy, October 2019, Democracy 2025