

Benjamin Cronshaw

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Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the National Integrity (Parliamentary Standards) Bill

I appreciate the service that members of Parliament give to their constituents and the broader Australian public. It is a demanding and sometimes thankless task to be a politician. Australian democracy overall is healthy and largely free of corruption allegations. However, that does not mean that we should be complacent and not strive for higher standards in our how democracy works. Ministerial misconduct can undermine public service delivery and anticorruption efforts. It is concerning that, according to Transparency International, Australia's Corruption Perception Index score declined by 8 points in 2019 (from 85/100 to 77/100).

I support the proposal to develop stronger guidelines for ministerial responsibility and ethical conduct, such as outlined in the National Integrity Bill. This could provide clarity to members for the standards expected of them and the course of action required when they breach these standards. According to the Explanatory Memorandum, it would help to encourage a "culture of integrity."

Ministers are rightly expected to act with integrity and work for the public interest, and not abuse their position for personal or partisan gain. However, there have been concerning examples of alleged ministerial misconduct. The confused and underwhelming government responses highlight the need for stronger and clearer Parliamentary standards. In 2019, Energy Minister Angus Taylor was accused of creating a false document to discredit the Sydney Lord Mayor over her travel emissions. Angus Taylor remained as the minister, despite being the subject of a police investigation. In another case, Bridget McKenzie was called out for misusing a \$100 million community sports grant program as the former Sports Minister. According to a report from the Auditor-General, the grants were delivered disproportionately to marginal seats and seats held by the Coalition. There was criticism that these payments were being used politically to generate support for the Coalition in marginal seats, at the expense of more meritorious programs in other seats. As Transparency International writes, there should be "mechanisms to ensure at service

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delivery and public resource allocation” are based on the “overall public good,” rather than personal or partisan reasons. Bridget McKenzie eventually resigned (as Agriculture Minister) but only on technical grounds, not for misusing the program.

These cases of alleged ministerial misconduct are concerning and undermine public confidence in the Parliament, particularly when they are not promptly resolved. In a cabinet system, ministers should resign when they have not acted properly according to Parliamentary and community expectations. Overall, the system works well and most Parliamentarians act above reproach. But I do believe that a National Integrity bill or a similar system has merit to provide a better way to identify and manage examples of misconduct and restore public confidence in the Parliament.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Kind Regards,

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Bibliography

Transparency International. 2020. Corruption Perceptions Index 2019.