

Hon Meg Webb MLC
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Via: email

5 February 2026

Dear Chair

RE: MCKINNON SUBMISSION TO *INQUIRY INTO THE CONDUCT OF THE 2025 HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY ELECTION AND 2025 LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ELECTIONS*

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2025 House of Assembly Election and 2025 Legislative Council Elections operation of the 2024 ACT Election and Electoral Act 1992*. I commend the Committee for its interest in electoral administration, and I thank the Committee for accepting McKinnon's submission after the closing date.

This submission:

- provides an overview of McKinnon, including McKinnon's Democracy focus area
- outlines some findings of research on public perceptions of Australian democracy that McKinnon has commissioned that may be relevant to the Committee's inquiry; and
- recommends consideration be given to bolstering civics education and electoral funding reforms, and notes yet-to-be-published McKinnon-supported work relating to the misinformation and disinformation in the 2025 Federal Election.

Overview of McKinnon

McKinnon was founded in 2015 by Dr Sophie Oh and Grant Rule, with the aim of strengthening Australia's democracy. McKinnon believes that better governments are the key to a stronger Australia. The quality of leadership and democracy has never mattered more, which is why McKinnon works to develop political leadership, strengthen institutions and solve the most pressing policy issues to create lasting outcomes that benefit all Australians.

McKinnon's work is focused on four key areas:

- strong and trusted democratic institutions that foster cohesion, constructive debate, and informed public participation in democratic processes
- exceptional political leadership, as positive leadership is crucial in a high-functioning democracy
- world leading policy, supporting innovative solutions to Australia's biggest problems such as education reform through leading pilot programmes
- a high performing public sector, with the right capabilities and institutions to produce high quality service delivery, evidenced based policymaking and long-term thinking.

McKinnon incubates, delivers and supports practical improvements that deliver tangible progress to the operation of government and supports initiatives including:

- the McKinnon Prize in Political Leadership, in partnership with the University of Melbourne, which was established to recognise political leaders at all levels of government who have driven positive impact through their vision, collaboration, courage and ethical behaviour

- the McKinnon Institute for Political Leadership, in partnership with Monash University, is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation that provides outstanding professional development for members of Australia's federal, state and territory parliaments
- Australian Policy Online (APO), which curates and archives a free online library of articles, research reports, evaluations, policy briefs and white papers to help organisations including government, non-for-profits and think tanks access timely and reliable information on public policy
- e61, a not-for-profit, non-partisan economic research institute that analyses big data to help answer Australia's most pressing economic policy questions.

McKinnon is non-partisan and motivated only by the public interest.

For further information please visit our website <https://mckinnon.co/about-us>.

McKinnon's Democracy focus area

A resilient and vibrant democracy requires constant vigilance, engagement and renewal. With declining trust in institutions, global disruptions, and youth disengagement, supporting and strengthening our democratic foundations has become critical for Australia's future.

McKinnon's Democracy focus area includes supporting and strengthening:

- trusted democratic institutions, so that Australians trust our electoral systems and processes
- an informed and engaged electorate, to ensure that Australians have trusted and accurate sources of information and are motivated to participate in democratic processes
- a cohesive society, so that Australians can respectfully come together to solve common problems
- healthy public debate, so that debates are constructive and focussed on the most important issues.

McKinnon is supporting a range of work as part of this, including research into public perceptions of Australian democracy, the McKinnon Index, civics and media literacy education, and a report on the operation and effectiveness of 'truth in political advertising' laws already operating in a number of Australian jurisdictions.

McKinnon research on public perceptions of Australian Democracy

McKinnon has commissioned research into public perceptions of democracy in Australia, including democratic institutions, systems, actors and norms. The research included focus groups and polling and covered a number of topics that may be of interest to the Committee. The research has not yet been released, but McKinnon intends to release the research in coming months, and can provide the Committee with the research report once it is published. A summary of key findings is set out below.

Key findings from the research include that:

- Australians are mostly positive and optimistic about Australian democracy and broadly support Australia's current electoral system, but are less trusting of politicians (e.g. many express concerns that politicians do not reflect everyday Australians, lack perspective on their views, are self-interested, neglect long-term policies, and make election promises that they do not keep and that there is little accountability for these practices).
- Australians broadly support Australia's current electoral system and Australian elections are viewed as largely free and fair, with adequate access and transparency in the voting process, but there is dissatisfaction with election campaign tactics (e.g. the overuse of negative messaging as a tactic, rather than focussing on their achievements and plans), and most participants believe that election campaigns are too focused on degrading other parties rather than articulating their policy platform
- there is a sizeable appetite for change in Australia's political system and strong support for a range of democratic reforms, such as improved civics education, as well as reform measures that centre on

election campaigning that aim to improve fairness and transparency in the election process, 'truth in political advertising' laws, and restricting public funds for negative political advertising.

McKinnon Index

The McKinnon Index is an annual dashboard which will, from its inaugural Index in 2025, track the health and effectiveness of our governments and democracy over time. The collection of measures within the Index, based on a nationally representative survey of over 4,400 people, include measures related to trust in government and political leaders, effectiveness of the public sector and government service delivery, and democratic behaviours and the performance of democratic institutions. Measures are collected at both the State and Federal level and can be broken down by demographics.

A key finding of the 2025 McKinnon Index is that support for democracy remains strong (76% support), but satisfaction with how it works in practice was far lower (54.5% satisfied). This is also true in Tasmania, with Tasmanians showing slightly higher support for democracy (77.1%) but had lower levels of satisfaction with it (52.9%). And while Tasmanians had slightly higher levels of trust in the Federal government (40.8%) than the national average (37.6%), they had much lower levels of trust in their state government (29%) than the national average (40%). These results are likely to have been influenced by the fact our survey was in field from 9 July to 31 July 2025, which overlapped with the Tasmanian State election. When the 2026 McKinnon Index is released, we will be able to confirm if these results were temporary or reflect the longer-term views of Tasmanians.

Civics education

The McKinnon Index also found that young people had lower levels of democratic support and satisfaction than older Australians, and were less confident in election outcomes and more likely to hold undemocratic views, like saying they could not be friends with people with different political views and being more likely to support violence to advance a cause they care about. One aspect that may explain these results is that younger people were also less interested in politics and less confident they understood how our democracy works. They were also much more likely than older Australians to say that their main reason for voting was simply to avoid paying a fine.

These higher levels of dissatisfaction and disengagement pose challenges to our democracy, as clearly many young people do not feel like the system is working well for them or struggle to care enough to be active participants. Civics education can help address this issue by improving civic literacy, attitudes, values, engagement, and participation. While civics education is already taught in some form in schools, current delivery is patchy and performance is slipping – the most recent 2024 National Assessment Program: Civics and Citizenship results were the lowest since testing began in 2004. Tasmanian student proficiency results in year 6 and year 10 were lower than all jurisdictions except SA and the NT. McKinnon strongly believes that enhancing civics education in Australia is an important democratic reform that will help ensure stronger democratic participation, particularly among young people.

We note that the Federal Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) recently conducted an [Inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia](#) that discussed these issues and recommended enhanced civics education across Australia (McKinnon made a submission to this Inquiry, which is available [here](#)). Some States have also considered increased civic education provision such as in [NSW](#) and [SA](#).

Recommendation 1: That the Tasmanian Government explore bolstering the level of civics and media literacy taught in schools.

Electoral funding reforms

Report commissioned by McKinnon to examine 'truth in political advertising' laws in Australia

In 2024, McKinnon commissioned Associate Professor Yee-Fui Ng (Faculty of Law, Monash University) to examine the effects, operation and administration of 'truth in political advertising' laws in Australia (see [here](#)). Associate Professor Ng's final report is based on 34 interviews with various stakeholders involved in 'truth in political advertising' laws (such as current and former premiers, ministers, MPs, electoral commissioners, political party directors/secretaries, and civil society groups) and were concentrated in South Australia, but also includes interviewees from NSW, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory.

The final report made a series of findings about the design, operation, and effectiveness of existing 'truth in political advertising' laws in South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory, including that:

- most political actors in South Australia support their 'truth in political advertising' laws, and 'truth in political advertising' laws in South Australia have not had a 'chilling' effect on freedom of speech
- there was a high level of compliance with the South Australian Electoral Commissioner's determinations in relation to 'truth in political advertising' laws, and that the South Australian Electoral Commission's reputation for impartiality has not been affected by its administration of 'truth in political advertising' laws
- South Australia's 'truth in political advertising' laws may need to be updated to address contemporary issues such as artificial intelligence and deepfakes.

The final report also made 25 recommendations about the design, operation, and effectiveness of 'truth in political advertising' laws, including that:

- 'truth in political advertising' laws should focus on false and misleading statements of fact, and not extend to opinions or predictions
- 'truth in political advertising' laws should apply broadly to all forms of political advertising (including social media, streaming services, bulk text messages, and robocalls), and should apply to media generated by artificial intelligence; and
- there should be education and training to support awareness and understanding of 'truth in political advertising' laws.

The final report considered appropriate enforcement mechanisms, and recommended various sanctions and remedies, including the loss of public funding to political parties for breaches of 'truth in political advertising' laws on the basis that public funding for elections should not be used for political advertising that is false or misleading in material way.¹

Potential electoral funding reforms in Tasmania

As Associate Professor Ng's report notes, Tasmania has previously considered proposed 'truth in political advertising' laws.²

To support better quality political discourse, political communication and information in electoral campaigns, McKinnon recommends that all jurisdictions, including Tasmania, introduce electoral funding reforms that would link public electoral funding provided to political parties, MPs, and candidates to:

- 'truth in political advertising' laws; and
- a requirement to produce a policy manifesto.

¹ Yee-Fui Ng (2024) *Truth in political advertising laws: design, operation, effectiveness and recommendations for reform*, page 68. The final report and interview summaries are at 'Truth in political advertising laws operation and effectiveness: Final Report', available at <https://mckinnon.co/democracy/insights/truth-in-political-advertising-laws-operation-and-effectiveness>.

² Yee-Fui Ng (2024) *Truth in political advertising laws: design, operation, effectiveness and recommendations for reform*, available at <https://mckinnon.co/democracy/insights/truth-in-political-advertising-laws-operation-and-effectiveness>, page 14.

This aims to ensure that public electoral funding provided to political parties, MPs, and candidates promotes the public interest, there is better quality of political discourse, and voters cast their votes based on policy programs rather than false or misleading political advertising.

To develop an appropriate policy model and ensure that any proposed 'truth in political advertising' reforms are fit-for-purpose and address contemporary issues relating to political advertising, discourse, and communication, consideration should be given to:

- existing 'truth in political advertising' laws in South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory
- the findings and recommendations in Associate Professor Ng's report; and
- the Federal Government's Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Communications) Bill 2024 (Cth), which was introduced into Parliament in November 2024, but was not enacted prior to the 2025 Federal Election.³

Recommendation 2: That the Committee recommends that the Tasmanian Government draft and introduce into Parliament an electoral reform bill that:

- a) includes 'truth in political advertising' laws; and
- b) links public electoral funding provided to political parties, MPs, and candidates to:
 - i. compliance with 'truth in political advertising' laws; and
 - ii. a requirement to produce a policy manifesto.

Misinformation / disinformation in relation to the 2025 Federal Election

McKinnon commissioned three projects to monitor for misinformation across multiple platforms and mediums during the 2025 Federal Election:

1. *Crowdsourced monitoring project:* We commissioned Melbourne University's Hunt Lab to utilise teams of volunteers to look across the major social media platforms to catalogue electoral misinformation as well as other problematic content such as intimidation of candidates, posts undermining the integrity of the AEC or election.
2. *Chinese language monitoring project:* We commissioned academics from Melbourn Uni who already monitor WeChat for misinformation to scale up their efforts during the federal election and expand to cover other platforms like Red.
3. *Australian Ad Observatory political ad monitoring project:* The Australian Ad Observatory (AAO) use an online browser extension that people can download to catalogue all the paid social media ads they see in order to check whether what platforms report as being shown to people is accurate. A representative sample of Australians in marginal electorates was recruited to catalogue political ads they saw to find any cases of misinformation as well as check if platforms transparency reporting on political ads is accurate.

The aim of these projects was to better understand the nature of online electoral misinformation in Australia, and test whether real-time monitoring could support agencies to better respond to it. We will release a report with detailed findings early in 2026, but data indicates that people encountered misinformation online during the Federal Election daily, particularly casting doubt about the result or questioning the integrity of the Australian Electoral Commission in the two weeks after the Election. We also detected cases of suspected astroturfing (which involves a message or campaign that is orchestrated but purports to be from a grassroots-based organisation) and unauthorised political ads. The AAO have submitted their findings to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy and were invited to speak to their submission on 29 September 2025.

³ Available at <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r7279>.



Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry, and I wish you well in undertaking this important work.

Regards



Tom Mooney
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Democracy & Engagement