Public sector integrity encompasses various public sector actors, including all members of the public service and statutory authorities, those engaged in public-private partnerships and every elected member of parliament regardless of whether they are in government, opposition or serve as independents. The integrity displayed in the public sector is also crucial to the ethical standards adopted in government-business relations. It is pleasing therefore to see that public sector integrity is to form part of the Open Government Partnership’s (OPG) second National Action Plan (NAP).

My comments will focus on the following public sector integrity issues: political donations; lobbying; the establishment of a federal anti-corruption body; and the growing and worrying trust deficit between members of parliament and the Australian community. The first three impacts significantly on the fourth and none of these issues should be omitted from the second NAP.

**Political Donations and Lobbying**

The OGP’s first National Action Plan raises the issue of confidence in Australia’s electoral system and political parties. However, it appears that action in these areas relate primarily to the work of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM), which is not an initiative of the OGP. As a standing committee of Australia’s Federal Parliament, JSCEM examines electoral-related matters after every Federal election and has done so for approximately 30 years.

In the interest of a truly robust OGP, in which NAPs deliver ambitious “action across a broad spectrum of important areas for government”, I am presuming that the final shape of the second NAP will strongly endorse a totally revamped approach to Australia’s Federal political donations regime. This is necessary, as the current regime has failed, for far too long, to put the public interest before party and personal interests. If the Federal Government is genuinely concerned about restoring public trust in members of parliament and the electoral system, which bestows on them the honour of representing the Australian people, it must radically reform the political donations regime so that it is “open, transparent and accountable”. The OGP must work tirelessly to achieve this end.

To assist in addressing the worrying trust deficit between civil society and members of parliament, the second NAP’s focus in the area of public sector integrity has to be broadened to include a forensic examination into all aspects of lobbying and lobbyists. If the OGP is unable to do this, it must campaign for an independent review of such matters and advocate that such a review incorporates the views of a broad spectrum of civil society.

**A Federal Anti-Corruption Body**

Even a cursory examination of the literature surrounding the establishment of independent anti-corruption agencies will show that they are largely resisted by governments and championed by oppositions when they believe there is political advantage in doing so. If forced through political pressure to establish such a body, governments often put restrictions on their ability to deal effectively with corruption issues (preventive and reactive) by limiting their powers and the breadth of their jurisdiction and/or underfunding them. Historically, there are Australian examples of all three happening in various Australian states and at the federal level in relation to the Commonwealth Ombudsman. Members of the Australian community have heard a plethora excuses as to why a Federal anti-corruption body is not needed in Australia. Despite this, they have been and still are calling for one to be established. It is incumbent on the OGP to do all it can to bring about the creation of a powerful, well-resourced independent Federal anti-corruption body. Doing so will help to address the trust deficit referred to earlier.

**Trust Deficit Between Members of Parliament and the Australian Community**

Unethical, self-serving and party-serving behaviour by several members of parliament does not solely account for the growing trust deficit between members of parliament and civil society. Other factors feed into it and must therefore be raised and discussed if the OGP is to assist in restoring public confidence in our democratic political system. Issues include but are not limited to: the demise of frank and fearless advice by public servants; the increase in the number of political staff serving ministers and shadow ministers and the influence they exercise over public policy and media relations; the media and the political issues it chooses to pursue and prioritise; the demise of balanced journalism and the rise of comment and opinion by some clearly partisan journalists; and the community’s tendency to complain about governments or ask “what is the government going to do about it” without recognizing that it has a democratic responsibility to stay well-informed about political and policy matters,

**Broadening Consultation**

I close in saying, it is somewhat reassuring to see that the government’s proposed *Consultation for Australia’s Second Open Government National Action Plan 2018-2020* highlights public sector integrity as one of five areas it will focus on in the coming two years. Unfortunately, the ideas put forward by the OGP for addressing public sector integrity are extremely vague, but perhaps that is because the government intends to respond positively to suggestions from civil society before it broadens what will be addressed in the second NAP.

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