The public reaction to character assaults from senior Howard ministers on Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd demonstrates once again how the “ethical factor” is discounted by voters because of an unfortunate but widespread belief that both sides of politics are unreliable when it comes to matters of ethical conduct. Indeed the past few weeks illustrate how a holiness contest between politicians is doomed to backfire.

That said it is arguable that there is an improving level of discernment in the public response. Most voters are able to distinguish between those charges that matter and those which are irrelevant to a fair judgment about the proper exercise of public office.

On the other hand, the community is far from impressed about certain cases, most notably allegations regarding retired Queensland Minister of the Crown Gordon Nuttall for receiving a personal, non-repayable loan from a business man with whom his government was dealing. While, the case of former Minister Santoro whose slippery shiftiness about a false pecuniary interests declaration and continued trading in shares showed a disdain for the forms of accountability and inevitably raised the question about his fitness to continue in Parliament.

However, the current cycle of accusations and mud-slinging from our elected representatives has been more about political point scoring in an election year than about raising ethical standards in public life. As a consequence, public cynicism about politicians is reinforced while measures designed to enhance accountability and probity are weakened.

The Prime Minister’s sacking of Senator Ian Campbell highlighted a hypocritical disdain, rather than concern for ethics and standards especially when compared to a series of more serious ministerial indiscretions in the past which the Prime Minister has tolerated, such as Peter Reith’s mishandling of his phone, Senator Parer’s mining shares, to say nothing of ministerial responsibility in the AWB affair.

After all Ian Campbell’s sacking offence was doing what MPs are supposed to do - meeting a delegation of constituents which happened to include Brian Burke.

Seemingly, voters are more discerning when it comes to judgment between personal mistakes or misconduct and the ethical importance of significant policy matters. Maybe the polls are detecting an emerging mood that issues affecting the future like climate change, affordable housing and job security are the ethical considerations determining political preferences.

At the same time there is a growing realisation that the processes of government in Canberra are in urgent need of ethical review.

Undoubtedly some state jurisdictions need the integrity spotlight at full beam. However, unlike many of the states where there have been inquiries and measures like anti-corruption commissions put in place, the prevailing situation in the Commonwealth parliament and executive government is one where the government of the day sets its own rules. As a result there is a Ministerial Code administered in a manifestly inconsistent way.

A compelling case exists for establishing an independent Office alongside Parliament like the Queensland Integrity Commissioner or a Parliamentary Commissioner of Standards as they have in the United Kingdom. Not only would such a position provide a point of advice for MPs and ministers when it comes to conflicts of interest and pecuniary interest declarations but it should also be a source of challenge to the Prime Minister regarding issues of integrity in government.

One such issue is the question of former ministers taking up inappropriate positions on their retirement including consultancies that enable them to profit personally from their insider knowledge. Similarly, there is the vexed question of managing influence peddlers. Registering lobbyists may be a start.
This is a complex problem for, as the Brian Burke case demonstrates, there is more to it than curbing lobbyists trying to control a decision. The most corrupting influence is when such power brokers actually control the public officials who make the decision.

That brings us to the core of these matters. An ethics regime will support those with moral intent and courage. Its impact however will be conditional on the culture and ethos of political parties, parliaments and bureaucracies.

Too often, personal or factional interests and the sheer desire to win, whatever it takes, undermine good and clean government, and therefore the capacity to promote the common good and serve the public interest, which should be at the heart of democratic government.

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