

# Dysfunctional politics slammed

From an original article, ABC News Online, Chris Uhlman

Former federal treasury head Ken Henry has lashed out at political and media dysfunction that has led to paralysis, tribalism and deep divisions crippling crucial reform.

The National Australia Bank chairman told a conference in Canberra that "politicians have dug themselves into deep trenches from which they fire insults designed merely to cause political embarrassment".

"Populism supplies the munitions," said Dr Henry (photo).

"And the whole spectacle is broadcast live via multimedia, 24/7. The country that Australians want cannot even be imagined from these trenches."

Dr Henry contrasted politics today with the policy success of years past, even though the contest then was as "adversarial and every bit as partisan".

It was a time "when the tribal tensions within parties were generally well managed and the political contest appeared to energise policy, not kill it". But over the last decade almost every major infrastructure project had turned into a political fight.

"In the most recent federal election campaign, no project anywhere in the nation — not one — had the shared support of the Coalition, Labor and the Greens," Dr Henry said.

"Every government proposal of the last 10 years to reform the tax system has failed."

The constant political brawl meant considered, long-term recommendations on fiscal, economic growth and environmental challenges were ignored.

"The reform narrative of an earlier period has been buried by the language of fear and anger. It doesn't seek to explain; rather, it seeks to confuse and frighten."

Dr Henry warned that research conducted by the NAB showed that Australians were worried about the future, with only one in five believing that the nation had a clear, shared vision.

Business also had to make the case for change and it had to build trust.

"All of Australia's business leaders, including in NAB, could talk more openly, with greater conviction, and more inclusively, about the role we see our businesses playing in building a better future for all Australians," Dr Henry said.

"Australians are calling for their leaders, in politics, in business and in the broader community, to develop a shared commitment to a clear vision for our future," Dr Henry said.

"It's time to deliver."

He pointed to policy challenges that demanded urgent attention and which were critical to building the country that Australians want:

- Budget repair
- Planning for a strongly growing, but ageing, population
- Climate change mitigation and energy security.
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