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## Fixed terms needed to bring stability and belief to a system that is losing integrity

Hobart Mercury, Hobart

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Tasmania must enter the 21st century with much-needed changes that would regain the trust of tired voters, writes **Dr Richard Herr**

It's time for a rethink and time for Tasmania's parliament to catch up with the 21st century. Every other state and territory jurisdiction in Australia other than Tasmania has fixed-term parliaments.

NSW led in 1991, South Australia followed a decade later and then Victoria, the ACT and the Northern Territory came along a few years later. Western Australia adopted fixed-term legislation in 2011 and Queensland in 2015.

They have all pursued this reform for a bundle of reasons including reducing public cynicism, building business investment confidence, managing the cost of elections and political prudence.

All of these reasons might be summarised more virtuously as a democratic need to protect parliament as an institution from corrosive partisan manipulation.

Tasmania's single experience of fixed terms illustrated the importance of this protection.

In 1992, then Liberal premier Ray Groom made Tasmania the second state to pass fixed-term legislation.

This parliament went full term, but when the 1996 election produced a minority government his successor Tony Rundle repealed the legislation to put control of electoral timing back in party hands.

Support for the idea re-emerged in 2008, from the other side of politics, with draft legislation under then Labor premier David Bartlett.

Again the initiative fizzled out in the jockeying to protect some potential future party advantage.

While not unmindful of the potential for short-term advantage, Tasmania's fellow mainland

jurisdictions have adopted and maintained their fixed-term parliament legislation for the greater long-term benefit of slowing the erosion of public trust in political parties.

For more than a generation, the two major political parties have become less coherent and demonstrably less effective as representative organisations. Hence the rise of new minor parties and the growth in the number of independents across Australia.

Cynical voters have become increasingly distrustful of the various way that the political parties have manipulated control of the levers of power to their advantage.

These include perverting local interests by parachuting outside candidates into preselection for safe seats, protecting ministers from parliamentary accountability and stage-managing electoral dates.

Fixed-term parliament legislation has been an important response to some of this public distrust in at least two ways.

Giving up the contemptuously self-serving control of the electoral calendar has worked to allay voter scepticism, while strengthening more co-operative approaches in parliament by limiting the appeal of a snap election.

Despite the positive experience of mainland jurisdictions, local critics erroneously claim fixed terms could prevent parliament from holding bad governments accountable.

None of our fellow states and territories have given up the absolute right of the parliament to withdraw support from a government that doesn't have the confidence of the

legislature.

Rather, fixed-term arrangements require that the breakdown in relations within the chamber must reach the threshold of no-confidence before a snap election can be considered.

Even here, the parliament will not necessarily be dissolved. Before the premier can seek an early election, the parliament must be given the opportunity to support an alternative government.

Fixed-term parliament legislation does not eliminate snap elections, but

it does make these available only as the last option in the collapse of a government's relationship with the parliament.

Had Tasmania had effective fixed-term parliament legislation in place it is probable that it could have prevented at least two, and I would argue, all three of Tasmania's recent snap elections.

The results of the most recent poll show that the political parties did not have the time to reset their policies to appeal to a jaded electorate. There was no time for voters to consider new priorities to change their vote.

Most of all, everyone is tired, battered and bruised by the relentless and mind-numbing adverts, claims and counterclaims. Voter fatigue is real but so is the tunnel vision that parties and candidates experience without adequate time to develop new policies.

Time alone will not solve all our problems, but fixed-term parliament legislation will offer some relief from the hasty and ill-considered, decision-making that has left all Tasmanians exhausted and disheartened.

We all need time now.



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Hopefully it is only a matter of time for Tasmania to embrace fixed-term parliaments because it is now well past time to join the 21st century.

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