

Grudging acceptance is measure of our PM The Australian 9 January 2026

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In 1085, William the Conqueror launched what is often described as England's first royal commission: a kingdom-wide inquiry, later embodied in the Domesday Book, in which royal officials were sent "over all England into every shire" to assess the taxable obligations of each manor.

William's commission was an inquiry into the governed. The 19th century's great achievement was to insist that royal commissions inquire into the governors. That transformation – directed at exposing how the state itself conducted, mismanaged or abused the great affairs for which it bore responsibility – forged one of the central instruments of public accountability.

It was precisely that accountability Anthony Albanese's initial reaction to the Bondi massacre vehemently rejected. Yet to suppress accountability is to weaken a fundamental pillar of a free society.

No one put the point better than Edmund Burke, who warned the House of Commons that free societies "are not primarily ruled by laws; still less by violence". They rest instead on "a bond of trust" – the trust that persuades citizens to vest governments with the powers needed to secure peace and prosperity.

That trust, in turn, depends on credible mechanisms that place the governors, not the governed, under constant and effective scrutiny.

The difficulty of securing that scrutiny lay at the heart of the dilemmas that consumed British politics in the Victorian era. The consolidation of parliamentary supremacy; the rise of cabinet government and tight ministerial control over the great departments of state; the emergence of party discipline, which weakened parliamentary supervision; the expanding scope of governmental activity; and the courts' lack of both the expertise and the authority to review public policy or administrative conduct, combined to erode traditional forms of oversight.

The result was the risk of a vacuum in rigorous scrutiny and informed guidance – one that gravely threatened the legitimacy of an increasingly ambitious state.

Profound social changes in the public sphere compounded the danger that posed. Rising literacy, the removal of punitive taxes on the press, and the resulting explosion in the number and circulation of newspapers vastly broadened informed public debate. The public sphere was no longer confined to traditional elites; increasingly, and especially with the expansion of the franchise, it encompassed the burgeoning middle – and soon the working – class.

The pressure exerted by public opinion became more extensive, broader, more continuous, and more insistent – surging to near-irresistible levels when shocking failures of policy and administration were exposed, as they were with devastating clarity during the Crimean War.

A crucial intellectual shift accompanied these developments.

Thomas Hobbes's assertion in *Behemoth* (1680) that "the power of the mighty hath no foundation but in the opinion and belief of the people" had long been a maxim of English political thought. But public opinion now came to be understood as a decisive check on the conduct of public affairs between elections, weighing constantly on the minds of ministers and parliamentarians alike.

Its function, wrote William A.

Mackinnon in 1828, in the first monograph ever devoted to the subject, was to act as "the government of the government"; and nothing short of untrammelled accountability could hope to satisfy it.

Concealment therefore became steadily less acceptable. As Walter Bagehot observed in 1867, the new spirit of the age was "not only the toleration of everything, but the examination of everything".

Little wonder, then, that nearly 400 royal commissions were established in the 70 years from 1830 to 1900 – almost five a year – laying the groundwork for sweeping reforms of both policy and administration.

Those reforms were central to sustaining public trust in, and the legitimacy of, the British state during a period of convulsive transformation.

Yet the demand for public accountability was, if anything, even stronger in Britain's distant territories, and nowhere more so than in Australia, where governmental activity was unusually pervasive. An early casualty was the doctrine, still dominant in English law, that "the king can do no wrong", and its corollary of Crown immunity. And an equally early response to the breadth of governmental responsibility was extensive reliance on royal commissions of inquiry – into policy failure, administrative breakdown and ministerial mismanagement wherever and whenever they arose.

Moreover, royal commissions in Australia were endowed with powers far exceeding those in the mother country. Unlike their equivalents in Britain and the other colonies of recent settlement, they could compel the attendance of witnesses, subject testimony to cross-examination under oath, and secure otherwise confidential government documents – powers later entrenched in the commonwealth's Royal Commissions Act 1912.

That singular blend of inquisitorial and adversarial procedure, which enabled the best commissions to illuminate even areas of government normally shrouded in darkness, contributed mightily to what John Hirst identified as the characteristically Australian trust in the "impersonal exercise of public authority" – a trust that persisted despite Australians' abiding distrust of politicians themselves.

Royal commissions served, in other words, as a crucial safeguard: when things went badly

wrong and the community demanded answers, an impartial, public and transparent process would provide them.

It is that safeguard Albanese sought to dismantle. His refusal to establish a royal commission into the management of the pandemic was an early signal that the longstanding compact between government and the governed would be set aside. The attempt to reject a royal commission into spiralling anti-Semitism – and its escalation into outright murder – marked its shocking apotheosis.

This was no accident or momentary lapse. It reflects an implicit calculation that public opinion, in anything like its traditional sense, no longer imposes a serious constraint. The fragmentation and polarisation of the public sphere; the splintering of media authority; the confidence that those outlets retaining influence with the government's supporters – above all, the ABC – are simply mouthpieces for left-leaning propaganda; and the political exhaustion induced by incessant torrents of competing claims and counterclaims have, in Labor's view, stripped public opinion of its capacity to compel action.

In those circumstances, calls for accountability can be ignored, while moral authority lacking institutional force is easily brushed aside. As Stalin is reputed to have asked of the pope: How many battalions does he command? In contemporary politics, the question is more prosaic but no less corrosive: How many votes do moral imperatives actually move? Once that calculation is made, accountability ceases to be a principle and becomes an inconvenience. What was once routine evasion hardens into something more serious: the hollowing out of a constitutional safeguard that generations rightly regarded as indispensable.

Whether the intensity of the public reaction to the savagery at Bondi has durably disabused Albanese of that calculation remains to be seen. But Henry Kissinger was right to observe that what distinguishes great leaders is “not simply physical power but strength reinforced by moral purpose”.

Greatness may well lie beyond Albanese's grasp. Decency does not – and it requires submitting power to the scrutiny on which free societies depend. That he has had to be dragged, kicking and scheming, to grudgingly acknowledge that fact is not merely a symptom of the times; it is a measure of the man.