

# Winning an Election Doesn't Justify Every Decision

Adam Tugwell | 4 March 2026



Across the country, people are feeling a growing sense of political disconnection. It isn't abstract. It isn't imagined. It is the lived reality of a system that no longer behaves in a way that resembles what most people understand democracy to be.

The act of voting was once seen as the moment where the public shaped the direction of the country. Today, it feels more like a ritual—something we perform because we are told it matters, even as the outcomes drift further and further from what voters believed they were

choosing. The gap between expectation and reality has widened to the point where trust is no longer strained; it is breaking.

This is not because people are apathetic. It is because they are paying attention.

### **The Mandate Voters Believe They Are Giving**

When people vote, they do so with a set of assumptions that have always underpinned representative democracy:

- that the broad direction set out during the campaign will guide the decisions that follow
- that elected representatives will act in the best interests of everyone they serve
- that trust is the foundation of the relationship between the electorate and those who govern

Nobody goes to the ballot box believing they are surrendering their agency. Nobody imagines they are authorising a government to act without reference to what was promised or discussed. The mandate voters believe they are giving is conditional, relational, and rooted in trust.

Yet what they see instead is something very different.

### **The System Behaves as Though Victory Grants Unlimited Permission**

Once in office, governments increasingly behave as though electoral victory grants them licence to do whatever they choose for the duration of their term - regardless of whether those decisions were ever mentioned, justified, or even hinted at beforehand.

Policies appear that were never discussed. Priorities shift without explanation. Decisions are justified with slogans rather than substance. And when questioned, the response is often a variation of the same message: *trust us*.

But trust is not a renewable resource. It is earned through alignment between words and actions. And today, the gap between the two is widening.

People hear the language of service, fairness, and responsibility. But they see actions that contradict those words. They hear promises of transparency. But they see decisions made behind closed doors. They hear claims of moral purpose. But they see outcomes that feel detached from common sense and lived experience.

This is not cynicism. It is observation.

### **Centralisation Has Distilled Power to the Point of Theatre**

The deeper problem is structural. The system is built to centralise - and it keeps centralising. Power moves upward. Responsibility moves downward. Accountability evaporates. The

distance between the people who make decisions and the people who live with them grows wider every year.

In that environment, elections become symbolic rather than substantive. They create the appearance of choice while the mechanics of the system ensure that real power remains concentrated at the centre.

This is why governments of different colours behave in ways that feel eerily similar.  
This is why decisions increasingly appear detached from the lives of the people they affect.  
This is why the political class no longer feels the need to hide what it is doing.

The relationship between the electors and the elected has been reduced to performance. The public is the audience. The political class is the cast. And the script rarely changes.

### **Words Have Become a Substitute for Action**

One of the most corrosive developments in modern politics is the rise of performative governance. Words have become a substitute for action. Announcements have become a substitute for delivery. Narrative has become a substitute for truth.

The culture rewards performance, not awareness.  
It rewards loyalty to the centre, not responsibility to the community.  
It rewards obedience, not integrity.

And because the system selects for these traits, it produces representatives who speak the language of public service while acting in ways that serve the system itself.

This is why the gap between political rhetoric and lived reality feels so vast.  
This is why people feel unheard even when politicians claim to be listening.  
This is why trust continues to erode.

### **The Moral Contract Has Been Broken**

If politicians intend to govern in ways that depart significantly from what voters were led to expect, the moral requirement is simple: they should say so openly.

They should go to the electorate and declare:

“By voting for us, you give us licence to do whatever we believe is necessary for the duration of the government - even if it bears no resemblance to what we told you beforehand.”

Of course, no one would ever say this. Because it would expose the truth: that such a mandate would never be given.

And yet, through their actions, this is precisely the mandate many governments behave as though they possess.

People feel betrayed not because they disagree with every decision, but because they never consented to the direction being taken.

## **Real Democracy Requires Proximity**

Real democracy only works when decisions are made by the people who live with the consequences. Distance destroys representation. Centralisation destroys accountability. Hierarchy destroys awareness.

When decisions are made far away - geographically, psychologically, or morally - they become detached from the realities they shape. And when that happens, the system stops being democratic in any meaningful sense.

The frustration people feel today is not ideological. It is not partisan. It is not even primarily about competence.

It is about distance.

A system that centralises power inevitably produces decisions that feel alien to the people they affect. A system that elevates money as the organising principle inevitably produces outcomes that prioritise the centre over the community. A system that rewards obedience inevitably produces representatives who forget who they are supposed to serve.

## **Recognising the Disconnect Is the First Step**

The growing sense of disenfranchisement is not apathy. It is awareness. It is the recognition that the system no longer behaves as a representative democracy should. It is the understanding that elections have become a ritual rather than a mechanism of accountability. It is the quiet realisation that the mandate voters believe they are giving is not the mandate politicians believe they have received.

Until this disconnect is acknowledged for what it is, nothing will change.

Because the problem is not the decisions themselves.

It is the structure that produces them.

It is the culture that normalises them.

It is the distance that enables them.

## Further Information

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