



Ben Wyatt GAICD, Nicola Roxon GAICD, Melinda Cilentio GAICD (from left)

## THE BIG PICTURE

Businesses shouldn't demand simple answers to complex problems and brand a government a failure if it doesn't fix the issue, this year's AGS *Governance of Government* panel heard.

By Christopher Niesche

**Former federal Attorney-General** and Health Minister Nicola Roxon GAICD noted that business needs a better appreciation of the complexity and breadth of issues governments face. "Business shouldn't go to government to say, 'Fix my problem. This is the one thing I care about and why won't the government fix my problem? Therefore, it's a failure if it doesn't.' We can't get good government if every tiny different group just wants their issue fixed."

Businesses would be more effective in advocating for what they want from government if they understood there was always a big picture and considered the whole environment, not just their particular problem, said Roxon, chair of super fund HESTA and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and a non-executive director of retirement living developer Lifestyle Communities.

Melinda Cilentio GAICD, CEO of the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, said that directors often have to make complex choices and rarely believe there is only one right decision. However, political commentary tends to focus on the one "right" decision governments should make that will cure everything.

Former WA Treasurer Ben Wyatt GAICD agreed, saying that the conversations about issues and policy in the media were "very binary". Politicians are under pressure to deliver a line for public consumption on some very complex



Being able to find part of your working life to contribute to public policy is really rewarding. It means the decisions are better.

Nicola Roxon GAICD

issues. Governments can float big ideas, but they very quickly get reduced to winners and losers, and politicians are left responding to those immediate issues rather than being able to look 20 years ahead.

In response to a question about transparency, Wyatt said there is a lot of transparency in government and politicians are disclosing

and declaring to several different institutions. Whereas, public company directors face the scrutiny of an annual meeting once a year. "That's parliament every day," said Wyatt, now a non-executive director of APM, Rio Tinto and Woodside Energy.

A key issue is how to get the public sector and the private sector to work better together, because it's unreasonable to expect that all expertise will reside in government agencies.

Roxon said that when business leaders are asked to sit on a government panel or inquiry, or to contribute to policy in some way, they should make sure they're clear about what they're being asked to do. "People seem to be surprised sometimes that ministers or governments have the ability to appoint or dismiss people in various processes," she said. "Finding out what the set-up is before you say yes is probably a good idea. Knowing whether you're giving advice and that's just an input to decision-making. People often think once they've opined on something, that it'll just be implemented. That's really how things happen."

She is concerned there is a reticence among businesspeople to get involved with government. "The expertise in this room and around board tables and in business is amazing. And being able to find part of your working life to contribute to public policy is really rewarding. It means the decisions are better."