

# The Australian Citizens' Parliament: forging shared identity through public deliberation

Janette Hartz-Karp<sup>1\*</sup>, Patrick Anderson<sup>2</sup>, John Gasti<sup>3</sup> and Andrea Felicetti<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Sustainability, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

<sup>3</sup>Department of Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Political Science, Università di Bologna, Bologna, Italy

- Active citizen participation is increasingly being recognized as essential to effective public policymaking. A key challenge for public administrators is how to effectively engage constituents' diverse viewpoints in sound deliberation that will likely result in coherent, agreed judgments. This paper investigates one such public deliberation process, Australia's first Citizens' Parliament, which brought together 150 randomly sampled Australian citizens charged with the task of formulating concrete policy proposals to be considered by the Federal government. One unexpected outcome of this initiative, especially given Australian ambivalence about nationalism, was the emergence of a shared identity among participants that appeared to bridge cultural and geographical divides. We explore linkages between salient elements of the deliberative process, the emergence of a sense of 'being Australian', and the final agreed list of policy recommendations that indicated an understanding of and commitment to the 'common good'. If the emergence of a shared identity is acknowledged as a key to the development of a coherent public voice, then further examination of these linkages will be critical to the efficacy of future public deliberations. Moreover, given the heterogeneous nature of the Australian electorate and the challenges inherent in the country's federal governance structure, the findings have significant implications for policymakers in similar constituencies, notably the EU and the USA. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## Introduction

Public policymaking in western countries is generally seen to be the province of technocratic experts, organized interests and elected

officials. However, there is increasing recognition of the benefit of involving citizens in the process, essentially to increase the sense of democratic legitimacy and ease the implementation of policy (Fung, 2004; Gastil, 2008). The difficulty has been in finding ways to involve citizens effectively, with so many citizen engagement initiatives resulting in unintended negative outcomes (Stratford and Jaskolski,

\*Correspondence to: Janette Hartz-Karp, Institute of Sustainability, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia.  
E-mail: j.hartz-karp@curtin.edu.au

2004; Sarkissian *et al.*, 2009). How is it possible to harness disparate voices, enjoin them in egalitarian, analytic problem solving and facilitate coherent agreed outcomes? Public deliberation has been proposed as way of tackling these challenges, because in contrast to other forms of community engagement, it positions participants at the nucleus of the policy creation process (Bohman, 1996; Elster, 1998; Dryzek, 2000).

Problems of perceived policy legitimacy are exacerbated in nations with fairly weak nationalist-collective identities, as in Australia (Elder, 2007; Anderson, 2009), or even more so in unions of independent nation states, as in the case of the European Union (EU). For instance, the legitimacy of common policy at European level is aggravated by the fact that conflicting State level identities (and interests) tend to dominate the political debate within EU (Blokker, 2008), at the expense of common European identity. The question is whether in these instances, public deliberation could enhance the likelihood of achieving agreed policy outcomes that are perceived to fairly represent the views of the people. This is of particular import given recent policy debates in the EU, Australia and the United States, in which hotly disputed policies have been passed by central governing bodies only at considerable cost to their perceived legitimacy in the eyes of dissenters.<sup>1</sup>

It is with these questions of national identity and legitimacy in mind that this paper investigates a recent Australian public deliberation process, the Citizens' Parliament. This

novel event brought together a random sample of Australian citizens, charged with the task of formulating and submitting to Federal Government concrete policy proposals to 'strengthen our political system to better serve the people'. By way of introduction, we begin by outlining the key steps in the Citizens' Parliament deliberative process, then shift the focus to an unexpected outcome of these deliberations—the sense of shared identity that emerged among the deliberators. Since the researchers had no *a priori* expectation of this phenomenon, a relevant methodology to track it was not instituted. Instead, using the largely qualitative data available, we explore the intriguing questions: How did this shared identity emerge? Furthermore, could there be a connection between the emergence of shared identity and the apparent enhanced participant understanding of and commitment to the 'common good' that was reflected in the final agreed outcomes?

To address these questions of identity, the context of the Citizens' Parliament needs to be explained, as does the difficulty of forging a common sense of identity in an Australian setting. Linkages between the shared identity that evolved and the convergence on policy recommendations deemed to be beneficial to all Australians are then explored. We then look backward to identify the salient elements of the deliberation that likely laid the foundations for this emergent sense of common identity. Finally, we conclude by drawing out wider lessons from this experience, including the relevance of the findings in the Australian context and the broader implications for other heterogeneous constituencies, such as the members of the European Union and the United States.

### ***The Australian Citizens' Parliament***

The Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP), held in February 2009 at Old Parliament House in Canberra, was unlike other parliamentary settings where elected officials argue issues from partisan viewpoints. This parliament, consisting of 150 randomly selected Australian citizens—

<sup>1</sup>In the EU, one recent example involves the difficulties encountered by the Union in taking measures to help member States with their major economic problems without allowing those same economic troubles to extend into the rest of Europe. Austerity measures and rescue decisions have generated dissatisfaction towards policies that most people perceived as governmental impositions. In Australia, this is reflected in the current debate about funding and responsibility for public hospitals, with repeated calls to end the 'blame game' between State and Federal governments. Former Prime Minister Rudd recently announced a plan for the Federal government to become the dominant funding partner of public hospitals and has threatened to hold a referendum on the issue if State leaders do not back his proposal. In the US, contentious public debates over health care reform did not end, even after the passage of a major policy overhaul.

one from each federal electorate—deliberated on the question, 'How can we strengthen our political system to better serve the people'? The Citizen Parliamentarians (CPs) took part in a process that spanned 6 months, beginning with regional meetings, continuing through a period of online deliberation and culminating in the 4-day event in Canberra. In the formal ceremony marking the end of this process, the CPs presented a final set of prioritized political reform proposals to a representative of the Prime Minister.

The ACP was a new design for national citizen deliberation, though it drew heavily on prior experiences with Citizen Assemblies (Ward, 2008; Warren and Pearse, 2008), deliberative polls (Fishkin 2009), and a variety of other formats (Carson and Hartz-Karp 2005). The ACP was generated from discussions between a small group of academics and others passionate about democratic reform. The academics, together with newDemocracy, a non-governmental organization (NGO) established by one of the organizers, submitted a research proposal to the Australian Research Council. This proposal was successful and Australia's first Citizens' Parliament was born. Though strongly influenced by the Canadian Citizens' Assembly model<sup>2</sup> (Ward, 2008; Warren and Pearse, 2008), the ACP was different in many respects: it was not an engagement process initiated by Government; its topic was very broad (rather than the single issue of electoral reform as in the Canadian case); the CPs deliberated over a much shorter period of time (3 months); the final results were strictly advisory to Government (as opposed to being submitted to a referendum); and the process was national (rather than regional).

The ACP organizers were interested in discerning if it was possible to re-create a small-scale participative civic society, akin to that in Athens in the age of Pericles (Ober, 1989), or the New England town meetings in the

United States, where the focus was on citizens talking together to achieve consensus (Mansbridge, 1983). The research team wanted to explore whether 'ordinary' Australians would be willing to participate in an essentially unpaid process that was university and NGO-inspired rather than created by Government, and a process that discussed a topic which, according to studies documenting Australians' apathy towards politics (Brenton, 2005), participants might not find particularly interesting. Moreover, would participants be able to understand the complexities of the political system in a relatively short period of time, and be willing to work together to achieve a broad consensus about how to strengthen that system?

To get a sense for its design and implementation, we briefly review the ACP. A coordinating and research team of academics from four universities and the NGO newDemocracy hosted a series of six World Cafes for the general public to help ascertain the scope and framing for the ACP. Six World Cafes of between 50–150 participants in Sydney and Melbourne addressed the main question of how to improve our political system under three sub-questions that included the problems and concerns with the current political system, potential changes that would better reflect community interests, and agreed changes the group would wish to see. The overall question that worked best became the charge for the ACP: *How can Australia's political system be strengthened to serve us better?*

To oversee, critique, and promote the ACP, the organizers then created an independent Reference Group, which consisted of well-known politicians, academics, and activists. To oversee and advise the proceedings more directly, two independent ombudsmen and two distinguished Co-Chairs were named, the latter being Lowitja O'Donoghue (named Australian of the Year in 1984 and 1990) and Fred Chaney (appointed an Officer in the Order of Australia in 1997).

To recruit the citizen participants for the ACP, 8000 invitations were sent to a random sample of Australians, and 150 CPs were selected at random from the nearly 3000 recipients who

<sup>2</sup>The British Columbia and Ontario Citizens' Assemblies were government-sponsored initiatives in which participants were charged with the predefined task of reforming their respective provincial electoral system. For more information, see <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public> and <http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/>

responded positively to the invitation. The 150 CPs were remarkably representative of the general population. Fifty-one per cent of the ACP participants were women, with 22 per cent under 35 years of age, and 33 per cent 55 or older. Nearly a third (32 per cent) had no tertiary qualification, while 27 per cent held a Bachelor degree, and 14 per cent had a postgraduate degree. Four of the participants self-identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.<sup>3</sup>

The CPs first met face-to-face in local meetings held in each capital city and several regional cities. The aim of these 1-day deliberative forums was to help participants to understand the CP process, commence networking, share knowledge and practice several deliberative techniques, including a world café and the online deliberation.

Partly out of concern for the 2850 eager respondents who were not invited to the ACP in Canberra, an Online Parliament was created to precede the face-to-face Canberra deliberation. Over the course of 4 months, roughly 100 CPs together with 200 participants from the pool of 2850 generated a set of initial proposals that would be further deliberated at the ACP.<sup>4</sup> Any member could post an idea, and once four or more participants signed up to develop an idea into a detailed proposal, they worked collaboratively as a team in a private online workspace. The final proposals were posted and then prioritized by all online participants. The top five proposals were publicly presented by team representatives at the ACP opening ceremony.

After training around 50 volunteers, who were table facilitators, researchers, theme team members and other coordinating support staff, the organizers were finally ready to begin the 4-day Citizens' Parliament with the 150 CPs in Old Parliament House, Canberra in February, 2009. The 150 CPs participated in a 4-day

face-to-face deliberative forum at Old Parliament House in Canberra. The agenda was as follows: Day 1—understanding what we want to achieve together at the 2009 ACP; Day 2—broadening our perspectives and options; Day 3—determining what is most important to us; Day 4—consolidating and delivering our recommendations. At the end of each day, a preliminary report documenting the day's inputs was disseminated to each participant.

A variety of dialogue and deliberation techniques were applied including 21st century town meeting, world café, open space, aspects of a deliberative poll (i.e. expert panels, participant deliberation to produce questions and panel responses), inquiry panel, fishbowl and small group dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Most sessions were facilitated small group deliberations, interspersed with plenary sessions. Participants who had previously often claimed to be apathetic or disinterested in politics, became immersed in deliberating complex political issues that had arisen from the online and continuing deliberations. Issues included preferable electoral systems, power distribution between federal, state and local governments, human rights, constitutional issues and civic empowerment. To give a sense of how these deliberations progressed, a preferred voting system of 'first past the post' was developed by an online team and prioritized by others online. This issue was discussed intensely in small groups and with experts from varying viewpoints. In a memorable vignette, that evening, a small group of men, apparently truck drivers, were talking animatedly over an evening drink. They called over one of the authors and to her astonishment, said, 'Love, first past the post won't work' and proceeded to explain why not. Indeed, by the last day of the deliberations, the online team that had proposed this option declared in a plenary session that they had unanimously rescinded it. The CPs had moved on, eventually prioritizing optional preferential voting. Details of discussions such as this are described below in more qualitative detail.

<sup>3</sup>These demographics are comparable to national data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, with modest over-representation of middle-aged and more educated Australians. See: <http://www.abs.gov.au>

<sup>4</sup>The not-for-profit organization CivicEvolution™ ([www.civicevolution.org](http://www.civicevolution.org)) designed and hosted this online engagement process.

<sup>5</sup>See the Citizens Parliament Handbook ([www.newdemocracy.org](http://www.newdemocracy.org)) for a description of each of these techniques.

By Day 3, 51 proposals had been created. In order to prioritize this lengthy list, participants considered the criteria they would employ, which were the essential characteristics of a healthy democracy. These included freedom, transparency, guaranteed education for all, justice and fairness in government, inclusiveness, access for all to the political system, access to information, diverse media and active citizenship. The prioritization process that followed was achieved through an individual ballot, using the 21st century technology. Firstly participants prioritized the characteristics they had developed by considering which were most important to a healthy democratic system. They did this by dividing \$100 or 100 points between the characteristics. Participants then ranked the options they had developed according to each of the top 2 prioritized characteristics. In the final prioritizations, participants ranked the options in terms of which would be easiest to implement, and which would be the most important in the long term. Importantly, to avoid a rush to judgment, different techniques were employed to encourage CPs to think, share, judiciously weigh the pros and cons of the ideas and only then, individually rank them using the private ballot. The final top five proposals<sup>6</sup> were presented by CP representatives to the Minister representing the Prime Minister in a formal ceremony. At the close of the last day, all participants received the final report, and it was also sent to the Prime Minister and other Members of Parliament.

<sup>6</sup>When all the prioritization activities were considered in total, the following seven proposals surfaced as those with most support:

- (1) Reduce duplication between levels of government by harmonizing laws across state boundaries.
- (2) Empower citizens to participate in politics through education.
- (3) Accountability regarding political promises and procedure for redress.
- (4) Empower citizens to participate in politics through community engagement.
- (5) Change the electoral system to optional preferential voting.
- (6) Youth engagement in politics.
- (7) Recognize aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples in the Constitution. See Carson, L (ed. 2009) for further details.

### ***The emergence of a common identity***

Having described the general features of the ACP, we now return to the question of common identity and review the evidence that such an identity emerged. Since the organizers had not expected a sense of common identity to emerge from the relatively short ACP process, the evidence supporting this needed to be gathered retrospectively. This was an extraordinarily researched and documented initiative. Though obviously not designed with shared identity in mind, there were surveys before, during and after the ACP; daily feedback notes and daily preliminary reports documenting the day's outcomes, notes from researchers who each observed a number of tables, table inputs to the computer during the 21st century town meetings, table transcriptions of discussions at each table, online social networking sites following the ACP, and a survey to all CPs 1 year following the ACP. Using an *ex post facto*, largely qualitative, interpretive methodology such as this to try to re-create the steps that led to an unexpected outcome is both a common and mindful method of inquiry (Thorn, 2008). Herein, we draw on many of these the data sources to track this phenomenon of shared identity, including all the deliberation transcripts.

### ***Indications of emergent identity at the ACP***

From the time responses to the Citizens' Parliament invitations started to arrive, it was clear this initiative tapped into a sense of excitement and pride rarely if ever evidenced in usual community engagement initiatives. Rather than just responding by email, many participants phoned to express how 'excited', 'privileged' and 'honoured' they felt at receiving invitations to participate in the Australian Citizens' Parliament. As one CP noted when she saw the ACP advertisement in the local paper, 'I thought it was a chance of a lifetime. I wouldn't get this chance again to actually try and do something'.

This sense of pride at being 'selected' was reaffirmed by participants' comments at the

regional meetings. For example, one participant asked if she could leave her mobile phone on so she could hear from her son who was participating in the State finals of a debating competition. When asked why she was not there listening to the debate, she replied: 'My country has called. I had to be here. My son understood'. For others, the sense of identity created by working together on something they deemed to be important began with the online deliberations. A number of CPs who had participated online talked publicly about the time, effort and learning that had gone into their proposals. They felt proud of their work together, and many felt committed to their findings and loyal to the team that had produced them. One woman spoke of the 'importance of being part of something bigger' than herself, and the need she felt to be 'representing the work' of the Online Citizens' Parliamentarians in her team who were not attending the ACP.

On the first day of the ACP in Canberra in the historical House of Representatives of Old Parliament House, a number of CPs spoke of how extraordinarily proud they felt to be 'part of history' and to have their views taken seriously. For instance, one participant said during a small-table discussion, 'We have the [chance] to say something, so [in this] first time Australian people are together, they have got... to do something. It's going to give awareness to the individual Australian people... about our democracy'.

One of the Co-chairs noted the poignancy of the moment when a new Australian came to the microphone and spoke about the extraordinary opportunity this was, one that would not be afforded in her birth country, concluding her remarks with 'Advance Australia Fair' (the Australian national anthem). In a similar vein, when another CP was asked what lesson she believed participants had learnt during the process, she answered the following: '... that we're lucky we live in Australia, that we need to take responsibility to participate, protect and enhance our system and democracy'. Yet another said at the closing stages of the ACP 'I heard about a "we" and an "us". If I'm sitting here, which I am, then I think I'm becoming a

part of the "us"... I hope that we can take this new approach back to our communities'.

To complement these qualitative CP accounts, also consider the response to a pre-deliberation survey completed by CPs.<sup>7</sup> Participants were asked whether they 'felt like an outsider here at the Citizens Parliament', and 86.8 per cent reported that they did not. Only 5.6 per cent feeling like an 'outsider'. Moreover, this sentiment was not significantly different between those who had—or had not—chosen to deliberate online, with 7.3 per cent of online CP deliberators seeing themselves as an 'outsider' in Canberra compared to 4.6 per cent of those who did not participate online.

Finally, to assess the degree to which Australian national identity had become important for the CP participants, we included the following question in the 1-year follow-up survey: 'How important is "being Australian" in describing who you are?' Only 9% said it was 'not too important' or 'not at all important' to them, with 23% saying it was 'fairly important', 35% viewing it as 'very important to them' and the remaining 33% reporting that 'being Australian' had become an 'extremely important' part of how they describe themselves.<sup>8</sup> In other words, over two-thirds of CP wove Australian national identity into their core conception of themselves—even a full year after the ACP. We consider that an unlikely outcome given that a strong national identity is not commonly reported as part of the makeup of Australians (Anderson, 2009).

### **Theorizing convergent and divergent identities**

Viewed in the larger context of deliberative democracy (see Chambers, 2003; Uhr, 2009), the Citizens' Parliament faced many of the same challenges inherent in deliberative democratic processes, in particular the challenge of working with the conflicting cultural

<sup>7</sup>This survey had an 87 per cent response rate, with 130 of the 150 CPs completing it.

<sup>8</sup>These results are based on 107 surveys, a 71% response rate when counted against the full list of 150 CPs we tried to contact in the follow-up survey.

and political vantage points inherent in any pluralistic society (Dryzek, 2005; Levine *et al.*, 2005). By degrees, deliberation seeks to advance towards a 'reasoned consensus' (Habermas, 1984; Cohen, 1989), or at least the more modest kinds of agreement possible in political reality (Little, 2007). Deep and stable cleavages often form between diverse sub-publics, political cultures and political partisans (Brewer and Stonecash, 2007), with Australia being no exception (McAllister, 2000). Given the distorting effects these divides can have on information processing and discussion (Rahn, 1993; Mutz, 2006; Kahan, 2007), deliberative democrats face a significant obstacle when seeking to help 'the public' find anything like a singular voice.

Social grouping of all sizes can often seek to secure their relationships and self-understandings through creating a 'social identity'. As defined by Tajfel (1978: p. 63), a social identity is 'that part of an individual's self-concept' derived from his or her social group membership, 'together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership'. Tajfel's work helped to spawn the broader 'social identity theory' approach to understanding the formation of collective identifications (Howard, 2000; Hogg, 2005). In this perspective, people constantly make social comparisons to establish their placement within in-groups, as contrasted with out-groups. People deploy their social identities to accumulate status, strengthen their self-concept and coordinate their actions with others.

A key concept in social identity theory is *salience*—the subjective significance of a particular social identity. Which of our many identities becomes salient in a given context depends on the objective features of that context and how it is framed. Having settled on an in-group identity, people move quickly to develop prejudices against out-groups and resist any influence from such outsiders. Meta-analyses of these effects show them to be both strong and pervasive across a wide range of cultural settings (Mullen and Hu, 1989; Schütz and Six, 1996). Experimental studies repeatedly show how difficult it is for

people of a given social identity or cultural orientation to weigh information and argument equally across lines of social difference (Mutz, 2006; Kahan *et al.*, 2007).

How one judges the social value or harm of such identification processes depends, in part, on the particular behavioural norm to which in-group members become habituated as a result. Consider the case of 'superordinate identity', which is an over-arching social identification that reaches across more particularistic social divides to unify a social group (Gaertner *et al.*, 1999; Lee, 2005). Making salient a superordinate identification, such as nationality, can result in pro-social cooperative behaviour that overrides regional or personal self-interest—potentially (though not necessarily) for the betterment of all. Forging a superordinate identity, however, constitutes a remarkable achievement, given the difficulty of arriving at *any* universally shared perceptions or judgments in even the smallest social groups (Mason, 2006).

### ***Challenges to the emergence of a shared identity in the Australian context***

If there exists a generic difficulty in achieving superordinate identification, the particular case of Australian identity constitutes a particular challenge. At a minimum, as Walsh and Karolis (2007: p. 727) point out in their recent review of work on Australian identity, 'being Australian constitutes a kind of particularism, [but] it isn't a static identity or set of timeless values'. Stated more forcefully, since the 'birth' of the modern Australian nation through Federation in 1901, the ways in which Australians perceive themselves have often been imbued with a sense of ambivalence (Elder, 2007; Anderson, 2009). While this lack of a robust concept of national identity undoubtedly has many sources, we here identify two issues generally perceived as being divisive in the Australian context and which were reflected in attitudes expressed by participants during the ACP.

The first of these is the challenge to coherent national identity posed by the multicultural nature of Australian society. Until the latter half of the 20th century, the very notion of Australian citizenship was predicated upon the former colony's ties to Britain—legally, culturally and in the popular imaginary (Meaney, 2001). As a result, the overwhelming majority of Australians defined their belonging within the nation in terms of their 'Britishness': issues such as swearing allegiance to the Crown in citizenship ceremonies, the national anthem and the flag have held significant symbolic weight as markers of Australian identity (Kapferer, 1996: pp. 14–17). As these have been contested by a more diverse ethnic and cultural populace, uncertainty about the nature of Australian national identity has been exacerbated by the shift away from official ties to Britain and the embrace of multiculturalism (Davidson, 1997: pp. 87–89; Ang and Stratton, 1998). The challenges provoked by this questioning of the nature of Australian identity have been the focus of heated debate ever since—not only in political and academic circles, but in a myriad of popular discourses such as the 'Asianization' debates of the 1980s (Ricklefs, 1997), the rise of 'One Nation' in the 1990s (Suvendrini, 1999) and more recently, the Australian government's treatment of asylum seekers and refugees (Mares, 2002).

These tensions exist within the broader context of historical discrimination against Aboriginal Australians, who as a group have been marginalized since the British invasion and settlement of Australia in the eighteenth century (Peterson and Sanders, 1998; Moran, 2002). Infamous episodes of institutionalized racism such as the forced removal of Aboriginal children—the so-called 'Stolen Generations'—have created a legacy of psychological trauma (Koolmatrie and Williams, 2000), as well as entrenched disadvantage in terms of employment, material well-being, imprisonment and illness (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991: Volume 2). Empirical studies suggest that whereas recent efforts at reconciliation have had an impact on the vocabulary with which Australians refer to

these issues, underlying racist attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians persist in both direct and more subtle forms (Pedersen *et al.*, 2000), particularly among older respondents and those with less formal education (Dunn *et al.*, 2004; Pedersen *et al.*, 2004). This prejudice is often based on false assumptions about the behaviour of Aboriginal people and their treatment by government (Pedersen *et al.*, 2000), and is reflected in common discourses that exculpate the impacts of colonialism, rationalize the 'plight' of the Aboriginal population in economic terms, discount the prevalence of discrimination and racism and emphasize the need for a collective identification as Australians without affording special privilege to any one group (Augoustinos *et al.*, 1999).

The interesting question for the ACP is whether those attitudes were in evidence. The divide between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians was apparent from the outset. In small table discussions, some participants initially made derogatory remarks about Aboriginal people, using crude slang terms and referencing behavioural stereotypes. One participant said that 'talking about Australians' is like talking about 'a bag of liquorice all sorts'. Another CP remarked, 'I'm not very sympathetic to Indigenous peoples'. Even more reticent CPs holding these views argued that Aboriginal people have no claim to any 'special treatment'. Addressing the question of a national holiday recognizing the Aboriginal experience, one CP said that 'no Australians should have a status' different from any other. Another CP remarked, '... we are all one country, we're all one people. Why should we make special places for people that obviously don't want it?' Another CP asked, 'Is there an Indigenous American Day? Is there Indigenous Inca Day? Is there Indigenous something Day? I mean, nearly every single continent on this earth was invaded at some stage...'.

The divide in opinion on these issues was reflected in discussions about a proposal to recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as the first people of Australia in the Constitution, for example: First participant:

'There shouldn't be different groups of people, it should be just one group... Nothing rate should be put into the Constitution; we should be put as Australian, as a group, and that should...encompass everyone no matter where you come from.' Second participant: 'Well, for me the "we" as Australians, has to include recognition of Indigenous people as the first people of Australia and I don't think Australia can move ahead without that occurring and for me it has to be at... Constitutional level, it has to be at the highest level of the land.'

The influx of ethnic groups was also perceived by some to be a threat to a common Australia. As one CP, who remarked, '... so Australians generally feel that they are under threat of losing their identity'. Along the same vein, another participant said, 'I fear for some other cultures that are coming into the country now, they will never integrate, even the second or third generation'.

Like most Australians, CPs expressed both diverse and ambivalent views about whether Aboriginal people and some ethnic groups could be fully integrated into Australia. The question for deliberative theorists is whether being involved in deliberation changed the sense of 'us' and 'them' sufficiently to enable a convergence on a coherent set of outcomes that encompassed all Australians.

### **Linkages between consensus outcomes and shared identity**

Some critics of deliberation have raised legitimate concerns about the power dynamics that would occur in deliberation, particularly in settings that privilege a narrow conception of 'rationality' or otherwise privilege one legitimate mode of discourse over another (Young 1996; Sanders 1997). Even should deliberation respectfully embrace divergent styles and perspectives, as many have believed possible (Pearse and Littlejohn, 1997; Dahlberg, 2005), one might still fear that minority voices would be quiescent or simply outvoted by emergent majorities (Williams, 2000). Recent

evidence, however, suggests that women and minorities speak up and participate as actively and with at least equal enthusiasm to their counterparts in well-structured deliberative settings, such as juries (Hickerson and Gastil, 2008) or Deliberative Polls (Siu 2009).

With regard to the quality of the design of a deliberative event, it is worth noting a particular feature of the ACP that encouraged diverse and minority views. During table discussions, participants were given the option to send 'strongly held minority views' along with those ideas on which a broad consensus was reached. These minority views were routinely projected back into the room alongside the themes of the consensus views. This aspect of the Citizens' Parliament was both appreciated and frequently noted by the CPs, the ability to 'speak out without worrying what others thought'. Furthermore, there were also two ombudsmen whose intervention was never called for by any of the CPs. Instead, participants showed a great appreciation for the quality of the deliberations and for the great attention paid to differing views by fellow participants during table discussions.

Given both the theoretical and practical challenges of developing a shared identity after only a relatively brief period of public deliberation, it was no wonder that the identity that did emerge was something of a surprise to the ACP organizers. The final list of proposals submitted to the Federal Government was similarly surprising. Although the ACP organizers hoped by the end of the deliberations to reach consensus based, well reasoned proposals to submit to Government, there were no expectations about the content of those proposals. Hence, it was unexpected that the final priority list of proposals also reflected what appeared to be an understanding of and commitment to the 'common good', i.e. seen to benefit *all* Australians.

Four of these final policy recommendations reflected an apparent shift in attitude on indigenous and minority issues. These were: (1) Recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples as the first people of Australia in the Constitution; (2) Minority Group

Representation, [recognizing that] our 'we' is all Australians, [and we need] a system that gives more minority groups representation, particularly indigenous people; (3) the possibility of an Aboriginal reconciliation day or 21st century treaty signed to recognize the past; (4) Indigenous Citizens' Parliament. Possibly a CP concerning Indigenous Australians, or a regional CP representative of all indigenous peoples, if that would fit with indigenous culture.

Given the discriminatory attitudes that continue to be espoused by many Australians with regard to issues such as land rights and reconciliation (Moran, 2002), the fact that proposals supportive of Aboriginal and minority rights were not only advanced but prioritized was nothing short of extraordinary. The excerpt below gives a clear idea of the enthusiasm with which some deliberators sustained the need to support the aboriginal community:... the [Prime Minister's] apology was wonderful and it was very fine but to me that recognition [of Indigenous people as the first people] has to come at the highest [Constitutional] level. And we move forward from there and I don't know how we move forward from there but until that recognition comes we don't move forward at all as a country.

As one aboriginal participant recounted, 'For a rare moment in my life I actually felt part of the majority and not the minority'.

It could be that the inclusion of an Aboriginal Co-chair and an Aboriginal speaker in one of the expert panel discussions impacted on the participants' perception of their role as representing *all* Australians. However, it is doubtful whether this alone would account for the inclusive nature of the deliberations. Rather, it would appear that the consensus that emerged during the ACP did so organically, as a result of the deliberative process itself. One of the facilitators noted this as one of the key achievements of the deliberation: 'One of the CPs had a profound discovery, which I feel was one of the many achievements that came out of the forum. Through dialogue this CP learnt more about the indigenous plight, mainly through

discussion with one of the aboriginal participants and his mind-set shifted through this dialogue [...] he discussed this shift as being one of the poignant experiences for him personally'.

As a further sign of identity integration, on the final day of the ACP, an Aboriginal CP selected as one of the participants to present the Final Report to Government commenced his talk by extending his arms to all present and saying, 'Australia...', as if it was indeed all of Australia sitting in the Chamber. The gesture resonated with many CPs who commented on it spontaneously to researchers.

This apparent shift in attitude towards an understanding of the 'common good' was also reflected in policy proposals put forward by the CPs addressing the overlap between state and federal administrations. The question of state rights versus centralization at the federal level has long been a contentious issue in Australia (Galligan, 1995), especially in terms the allocation of natural resources (Hollander, 2010) and the question of finances and taxation (Wiltshire, 1992; Keating and Wanna, 2000). A number of CPs noted that they had come to the event with local identities foremost in their minds, such as one who remarked on the first day, 'I identify as being Tasmanian first, Australian second'. Later conversations reflected the extent to which a different viewpoint was emerging, for example as one CP responded:... you're changing my mind now, I was thinking we should have gone with States but now I'm listening to your point of view, I'm seeing something I didn't see before which is the Western Australian point of view to this. ... so we also need to have different States with different ideas but as a basic umbrella we need certain things coming as one to unify the country.

The final list of policy proposals highlighted the extent to which 'we Australians' had come to the fore. The number-one ranked and eleventh ranked proposals were as follows: (1) Reduce duplication between levels of Government by harmonizing laws across state boundaries. Many laws which differ in

the different states should be made consistent to avoid duplication or differing requirements. A task force could examine possibilities for unification of legislation across the states and territories. Suggested solutions also include rationalizing local councils and federal control of issues. Remove or Reduce State Level of Government. The proposal is to have only federal and regional governments, with local government to be replaced with larger regional councils. Major laws and policies would be decided at the federal level. A full Senate election would be held at each general election.

As an important side-note regarding the outcomes of the ACP, it became apparent that the Citizens' Parliament had a clear and direct impact on many participants and at least an indirect impact on public policy. From the outset, CPs expressed hope that the outcomes of the ACP would be heard by politicians and would impact political life. This was reiterated during the final speeches made by CP representatives, for example, that the ACP was 'democracy in the community' and politicians should take note. While the CPs apparently did not expect the ACP to influence their lives, it nevertheless appeared to do so. According to follow-up online conversations, the CPs appear to have developed an appetite for attending to and influencing political life at a community level, with many becoming involved more directly for the first time. In terms of public policy, a number of the recommendations of the ACP have risen to significance on the political agenda. These include a concerted attempt to reduce the layers of government (in health); a Government proposal to recognize Indigenous people in the Constitution; public debate concerning reducing the voting age from 18 to 16; and a Government policy on climate change that would include an Australian Citizens Assembly to deliberate on the topic. While it is not possible to pinpoint the origin of these policy directions, their rise to prominence has demonstrated, at the very least, a remarkable prescience on the part of everyday citizens to discern future political priorities.

### **Underlying components of the emergence of a common identity**

The question that arises from the emergence of a strong sense of common identity and the final set of unexpectedly inclusive proposals, is what elements of the ACP process led to this outcome? Since the emergence of a super-ordinate identity appeared to be a precursor not only of a singular voice, but one that enhanced understanding of the common good, it is important for policy makers to have a better understanding the factors likely to lead to this outcome. From an exploratory overview of the broad array of data available to the authors, a number of themes emerged that were likely precursors to this identity formation.

### ***The sense of integrity and legitimacy***

Under the umbrella of integrity and legitimacy, a number of issues were raised by CPs including: that each Australian citizen had an equal chance to participate in the CP, which gave the whole process a kind of legitimacy 'unusual to most public forums'; that the process was credible because 'respected Australian universities' were convening the proceedings rather than Government; that the 'highly respected, independent Co-chairs added legitimacy' to the process; that the broad and unbiased topic allowed 'space' for everyone to contribute; that the bi-partisan Reference Group and expert panels, were a welcome change to the usual more ideologically biased group of organizers and 'experts'; and finally, that the professional facilitators and event-coordinating team were seen as critical elements of the delivery of a fair and respectful process.

Despite the usual cynicism of Australians about parliamentarians, CPs spoke of the importance of having Government Ministers and other parliamentarians at the opening and closing sessions as legitimizing the deliberations. The Prime Minister was unable to attend (the economic crisis had burst and the devastating Victorian fires were raging), however he did ensure highly appropriate representatives:

Senator Faulkner, the Special Secretary of State, and Anthony Byrne, the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Secretary. Both indicated that the Prime Minister and Government would seriously consider the findings. This was noted by some CPs as 'hopeful', 'at least they're listening'.

**Participants also spoke of the significance of deliberating in Old Parliament House, seated in the chairs of former parliamentarians in the grand House of Representatives.** This was Australia's first Citizens' Parliament and participants were proud to be part of history. As one CP commented: 'The thing is we've all become a part of the history of this building now'. For over half the Citizen Parliamentarians, it was the first time they had ever visited Canberra, Australia's capital city. Other CPs commented how the official opening ceremony that commenced with the CPs being piped in to the House by a didgeridoo, followed by a 'Welcome to Country' delivered by a local aboriginal elder, created a poignant sense of legitimacy.

CPs feedback also highlighted two occasions during the proceedings (when things went somewhat awry<sup>9</sup>) as moments that reaffirmed the integrity of the process. On two very different occasions, an uncomfortable situation arose that could have undermined the integrity of the process. In each case, a decision was made to make the situation transparent and to hand it over to the CPs to resolve. As one participant said publicly following the first incident, that she had initially felt 'cynical about the integrity of the process', but more than anything else, the

public airing of difference—a somewhat embarrassing episode to the organizers—had 're-affirmed the integrity of the process'.

### ***The mutual trust and bridging capital that developed***

The process of random sampling to elicit participants and the daily random seating of participants at small tables meant that the divergent strands of Australian ethnic identity were necessarily brought together. CPs often expressed surprise that there was such good will and easy yet often intense conversation given the diverse backgrounds. For example, 'It was great to see everyone getting along so well, I found myself speaking out in front of total strangers, which I would ordinarily not do. The fact that everyone listened, without making rude comments or interrupting me most of the time, even agreeing with what I said, was very reassuring'.

CPs expressed surprise that they had developed such firm friendships over such a short period of time and often with people very different to them, whom they were unlikely to meet let alone befriend in their everyday lives. In depth discussions where CPs were urged to talk about what mattered to them were seen as one of the reasons this occurred. The skills of the facilitators and reminders about the agreed ground rules for respectful discussion, were noted in the CP daily feedback as critical to fostering understanding and the willingness to be more open and sometimes more vulnerable (for example admitting to 'not knowing', 'speaking out' or 'feeling silly'). These were seen as another reason for the development of trust and connection. Additionally, the notion that everyone had something important to say, and that this was a joint inquiry—rather than presuming that 'experts' had the 'right' answers—also engendered a sense of interpersonal respect and collegiality.

In many instances, what was being described was 'bridging capital', where diverse groups with weak connections develop 'generalized' trust and mutuality (Larsen *et al.*, 2004).

<sup>9</sup>In the first instance, one of the Co-chairs publicly expressed his dismay when two panellists described why they were supportive of deliberative democracy, with one being dismissive of the current system of governance. This was only resolved when numerous CPs took up the microphone to say that they would not be easily led, their minds were open and they understood that this was just one viewpoint. In the second instance, there had been an incorrect summation of results that was only discovered after the day's proceedings. Since there had been follow-up deliberative work on the priorities identified (the last one being incorrect), the lead facilitator apologized for the error and offered the option of revisiting the prior afternoon's deliberations. Following an almost unanimous vote, this option was rejected.

Research has shown that the trust that evolves through discourse between those with divergent opinions is central to a sense of social cohesion and inclusion (Cattell, 2001). CPs reaffirmed this when they described how the opportunity to deliberate with so many others, whom they perceived to be different to themselves, was critical to their sense of 'being in this together'. As one CP wrote after the event: 'Being so much at ease with [150] strangers, who weren't strangers any more at the end of it... Watching my narrow focus and intense passion broadening and strengthening after listening and learning... Feeling so involved with the process and feeling we could bring change for our children's future'.

### ***The effects of facing adversity together***

CPs worked through a gruelling 4-day programme, even though most had never participated in a deliberative event before and were not used to this sort of intense discussion and learning; indeed, a considerable number of CPs had not completed high school. Because of the relatively short time frame in which to deliberate on a very broad topic, the Citizens' Parliament agenda was tight and demanding. CPs came to every session (buses picked them up at the beginning and close of each day), and worked without complaint and with extraordinary good will, day after day. This was despite the fact they knew the Government had not committed to implementing their findings and that they would receive only nominal payment for their time.

Exacerbating these difficulties, the Citizens' Parliament was conducted during one of Canberra's most intense heat waves. The student accommodation where the CPs and the support team were housed had no air conditioning. The evenings were unbearably hot and sleep was difficult. Worse, the CPs were together during the onset of a national tragedy—the Victorian fires that began raging while the Citizens' Parliament was in session. A minute's silence was observed in the House of

Representatives on two separate occasions for the lives lost in the blaze, and there were daily updates and readily accessible newspapers outside the deliberation chambers. Since every electorate was represented in the Parliament, several of the CPs were from fire-affected areas. Though there were tears and agonized questions about whether to leave the Citizens' Parliament, in the end all CPs and support team chose to stay. One CP who had lost her best friend decided that this is what her friend would have wanted—to 'make the most of this opportunity to make a difference'. Moreover, another CP from Victoria eventually decided to stay until the end of the event because he believed that the ACP was 'a once in a lifetime opportunity'.

These observations seemed particularly cogent given that the popular literature on Australian identity is rife with images of Australians coping stoically with adversity, pulling together in the face of hardship, supported by the bulwark of mateship and wry humour (see Murrie, 1998). The wider scholarly literature has also found that shared adversity can foster a sense of shared identification within a larger collective, such as the team-bonding that often occurs in athletics (Wolf-Wendel *et al.*, 2001). It logically follows that a nation brought together—even in the form of a deliberative microcosm—could experience a rising *national* identification, not entirely unlike that experienced by national representatives in international athletic competitions, such as the Olympics.

### ***Participating in respectful deliberation***

The facilitated small-table discussions explicitly reinforced the importance of respectful engagement, careful listening, and a focus on inquiry rather than just advocacy, that is on awareness of one's own thinking and reasoning and inquiry into others' thinking and reasoning. This was reflected in many statements made by CPs in recorded conversations, for example: **I loved the group discussion...no one was attacked**; '**I strongly disagree, but I'm**

trying to be tolerant'; 'I'm worried I might be speaking over people'. Moreover, many CPs appreciated the tone of the deliberation. For example of the CPs made the following statement commenting on those things she enjoyed the most during the ACP: '...we had the opportunity to be heard and put our view forward and have people listen respectfully and it was all done in a very pleasant sort of atmosphere. That was probably one of the things'. Another instead pointed out that: '...The other reflection that I've had just in talking with different people is just the power that comes from being heard, being understood, not judged and not criticized and that is a very, very powerful dynamic'.

At the broadest theoretical level, it is well established that social identity forms through communication and interaction (Gergen, 1994). More specifically, it is a common tenet of deliberative theory that the process of carefully working through issues together fosters a recognition of shared values, an appreciation of the moral justifications underlying different views, and the discovery of common ground—all factors that contribute to a sense of common identity that transcends conventional self-interest (Barber, 1984; Warren, 1996).

Looking beyond the particular case of the Citizens' Parliament, this deliberative experiment confirmed the belief that facilitated, small-group deliberation among diverse citizens can not only yield decisions based on the aspirations of broader community but can also strengthen the participants' *sense* of community. Participants in deliberative events have a unique vantage point, acting as both representatives of the community and as the community itself. It is this composite perspective that allows deliberating citizens to reframe relevant issues so effectively and which supports them in arriving at equitable, consensus-based solutions. Given the national character of the issue and the demographic representativeness of the participants, it is plausible that the CPs thereby discovered *national* commonalities—or at least cultivated a mutual respect—among themselves and their various viewpoints.

### Achieving a satisfying result

A final factor that emerged that appeared to foster a strong shared identity was the outcome of the Parliament. In Australia, there is much disparaging talk among citizens, government officials and the media about 'talkfests', full of 'hot air' that rises and evaporates, resulting in little action or change. Both organizers and CPs expressed determination to prevent the Citizens' Parliament from becoming a 'talkfest'. Time constraints were discussed as being more of an opportunity than a barrier, for example, as one CP testified, '... I was looking from the opposite perspective which is—this is the time we have and we have to make the best use of that time'.

To underline the journey undertaken and the progress being made, a written product of the day's deliberations and outcomes was disseminated at the end of each day. The Final Report outlined the process, the proposals put forward by the CPs, and their final priorities. During the course of the deliberations at Old Parliament House, CPs put forward a total of 54 proposals. They listened carefully to each other during discussions about those proposals, and listened to and questioned experts about their various merits and drawbacks. In the process of prioritization, a number of proposals selected by the CPs seemed to rise to the surface repeatedly, with a high majority status. From the long deliberations, the CPs became very clear about the directions that were important to them. They covered a lot of ground in a relatively short period of time and were understandably proud of their efforts: 'Our representatives speak with clarity and passion, emphasizing [...] our conviction that a group of ordinary citizens can make a significant contribution to the political debate—if only given the opportunity. We are simultaneously exhausted and proud of what we achieved' (Cruttenden, 2009).

The Final Report was endorsed unanimously by the CPs and formally presented by them to the Prime Minister's representative. While cynicism about government and politicians was rife throughout much of the deliberations,

CPs nonetheless publicly commented on how important it was for Government to pay attention to the findings of the Citizens' Parliament. A number of the CPs selected by their colleagues to deliver these findings spoke openly about the responsibility they felt for 'getting it right' on behalf of 'all Australians'.

Thinking about the interplay of group achievement and identity, there is a clear relationship between members' perceptions of their effectiveness and their willingness to trust and identify themselves with their group. This is generally true of small groups (Gastil, 2009) but more specifically argued in the case of team building (Salas *et al.*, 2005). In the case of the Citizens' Parliament, it is thus likely that a shared identification flowed, in part, from achieving a satisfying outcome, on top of the interpersonal/social achievements and personal growth experienced during the process.

### **Conclusion**

The ACP was created to examine whether it would be possible to re-create a small-scale participative civic society that emphasized citizens deliberating together to achieve consensus or common ground. An unexpected outcome of this deliberative process was the emergence of a common identity of 'being Australian'. Attributes traditionally linked to 'Australianness'—such as mateship, the belief in a 'fair go' for all, and determination in the face of adversity—were all evident as the CPs readily embraced each other as friends and colleagues irrespective of their background and together persevered despite 4 days of intense heat and an extremely challenging programme. More striking, however, was the organic emergence over the course of the initiative of a more profound sense of shared identity, one predicated not just upon tolerance and acceptance of the 'other', but on a true embracing of all participants as *bona fide* Australians, whose values, opinions and aspirations carried equal importance in both the deliberative process itself and within the

context of the broader task of strengthening Australia's political system.

The reasons we have put forward for the emergence of this superordinate Australian identity include the perceived legitimacy of the Citizens' Parliament process, the cultivation of mutual trust and 'bridging capital', the confrontation of shared adversity, taking part in a respectful deliberative process, and the accomplishment of a satisfying result. The synthesis of these elements lends insight to the process whereby participants developed joint 'ownership' of the process and the policy recommendations. This notion of ownership was further reflected in the sense of responsibility—both personally and on 'behalf of the nation'—expressed by many CPs in terms of performing the task entrusted to them to the utmost of their ability.

The collective repositioning of participants that resulted from being asked to take responsibility for formulating effective reforms for the future on behalf of all Australians, and to do so through an egalitarian process with ethnically and attitudinally diverse others, proved to be critical in the emergence of identity at the ACP. To effectively address the question assigned to them, participants actually created a microcosm of an informed, empowered and egalitarian Australian society—revealing what 'Australians' might look like if they were to take responsibility for their political system while ensuring an equal voice for all citizens regardless of ethnic or cultural heritage. Not only did the CPs unintentionally map out new territory of Australian identity, but their experience also brought to the fore new insights into deliberative democratic theory and practice.

Taking stock of these likely sources of superordinate identity might help explain how deliberative processes—whether in Australia or elsewhere—can ensure a sufficient degree of shared identity among participants to enable them to speak with a coherent voice. Given the importance of forging shared identity in deliberating across political and cultural differences (Mansbridge, 1983; Barber, 1984), the ACP offers some insight into both

the precursors and the potential outcomes of achieving this.

The findings suggest that forging shared identity may be vital to enhancing participants' understanding of the 'common good', and that salient features of public deliberation are integral to both of these processes. Given the heterogeneous nature of the Australian electorate and the challenges inherent in the country's federal governance structure, the findings have significant implications for policymakers in similar constituencies, notably the EU and the USA.

With regard to the EU in particular, public deliberation may represent an extremely important political resource. In fact, if deliberative assemblies seem apt to favour the rising of shared identities and the development of a stronger conception of the 'common good', using deliberation at the European level may prove a very helpful instrument to further develop a shared sense of a common European identity, which might be capable of drawing closer the EU and its diverse people.

### Biographical notes

**Janette Hartz-Karp** (Ph.D., University of California Los Angeles, 1981) is a professor of sustainability at Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute, (CUSP) Western Australia, where she studies deliberative democratic theory and practice.

**Patrick Anderson** is a PhD candidate at Curtin University Sustainability Policy (CUSP) Institute, Western Australia. His research focuses on the transformative impact of deliberation on civic behaviour.

**John Gastil** (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994) is a professor of communication and political science in the University of Washington, where he studies political deliberation and group communication.

**Andrea Felicetti** (M.A., Università di Bologna, 2010) is a recent graduate student at the Faculty of Political Science, Università di Bologna. His research interests focus on democratic theory and deliberation.

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