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# The Australian Citizens' Parliament: A World First

## **Abstract**

The Australian Citizens' Parliament was held in February 2009, with one participant from each federal electorate. The main meeting was a culmination of a process involving a series of regional meetings and online development of proposals by citizen participants. Within a broad charge of 'How can Australia's political system be strengthened to serve us better?' participants could develop their own proposals and so craft the agenda. The process yielded a set of recommendations for the structure and operation of government, as well as masses of social scientific data.

## **Keywords**

Citizens' Parliament, Australia, New Democracy Foundation

## THE AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT: A WORLD FIRST

John S. Dryzek

With Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, Lyn Carson, Janette Hartz-Karp, Ron Lubensky, Ian Marsh, and Simon Niemeyer.

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I will start with a quote from one of the most famous statements about democracy, from Pericles' Funeral Oration for the War Dead of Athens.

We do not copy the laws and ways of other states. Actually, we are the pattern to others. Our administration places power in the hands of the many instead of the few: this is why it is called a democracy. . . Class considerations are not allowed to interfere with merit. Nor does poverty bar the way – if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition.

In ancient Athens, citizens could serve the state by being selected by lot. They were representatives – but not elected representatives. The Australian Citizens' Parliament is a world first, but in a way it takes us back to this very old conception of democracy, which pre-dates elections.

I will return to Pericles at the end, but before I begin in earnest I would like to acknowledge all the people who put so much time and energy into making the Citizens' Parliament happen – close to 200 people worked on the project, along with our 150 citizen participants. First and foremost is Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, who founded and funded the New Democracy Foundation, which made the Citizens' Parliament possible. Next, I want to acknowledge my co-investigators on the Australian Research Council Grant that also provided funding: Janette Hartz-Karp, who put so much energy into organizing the process; Lyn Carson, whose idea it was to begin with (in a conversation with Luca); Simon Niemeyer, who organized a lot of the research around the project; Ron Lubensky, our webmaster; and Ian Marsh. This lecture represents some of my personal views, which are not necessarily shared by the others who worked on the project. But they are listed as co-authors in recognition of the fact that they are the people who made the Citizens' Parliament happen. It would take me too long to list everyone else who made a contribution, but they know who they are.

So what is the Citizens' Parliament, and why is it a world first?

The Citizens' Parliament was an assembly of 150 citizens, one from each federal electorate, selected from the electoral roll. Our youngest participant was 18, our oldest was 90. We began by sending out letters to over 9,000 randomly

selected people asking if they'd be interested in participating if they were selected. Almost 30% said they would be.

This is an astonishingly high positive response rate, especially given the demands we would make on their time, and gives the lie to those who say ordinary people aren't interested in participating in politics. As long as they are provided with some decent politics to participate in, which they usually aren't, there is plenty of interest by ordinary people. From this 30% we did a further more or less random selection to get the 150. I say 'more or less' because we had to adjust to make sure we got several indigenous participants, and a good spread on the basis of age, gender, and education (technically, we used stratified random sampling).

We then invited the selected 150 to a series of one-day meetings (mostly in capital cities) that explained the process, and got them to start thinking about the basic charge of the CP: *How can Australia's political system be strengthened to serve us better?* The main meeting of the CP was over four days in February 2009 at Old Parliament House, but there was plenty for them to do in the months leading up to the main meeting. The main meeting was co-chaired by Lowitja O'Donoghue and Fred Chaney.

Before the main meeting, the participants could contribute to our 'Online Parliament' – which we also opened to those who wanted to participate but didn't make the final cut. Groups of citizens organized online to develop some proposals and justifications for them, which helped provide the agenda for the Canberra meeting.

When they arrived in Canberra, the citizens worked really hard over four days. We also demanded a lot of them for research purposes (we were after all funded as a research exercise by the Australian Research Council), with interviews and questionnaires. We generated a mountain of research data, enough for at least ten PhD dissertations.

The timing turned out to be as bad as it could be for the Canberra meeting: it coincided with the weekend of the terrible bushfires in Victoria, which meant we got very little media coverage. It was horribly hot in Canberra, and our citizens were housed in student accommodation with no air conditioning.

The particular process we used was mostly based on the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting' model developed by our US colleague Carolyn Lukensmeyer and her *AmericaSpeaks* Foundation. This involves ingenious use of communications technology to synthesize the deliberations of large numbers of participants – 150 in our case (though it can work for larger numbers). Our participants were divided into 24 tables in the Members' Dining Room of Old Parliament House, each with a volunteer facilitator. Participants would periodically move between tables. They deliberated upon particular proposals, and could introduce new proposals or synthesize existing ones.

Toward the end of the process they could vote on the proposals that had been tabled; the voting involved allocating an imaginary 100 points to the proposals the individual favored in whatever proportion he or she chose. This is how the final list of recommendations was generated, and this is what the top six looks like:

- Reduce duplication between levels of Government by harmonizing laws across State boundaries
- Empower citizens to participate in politics through education
- Accountability regarding political promises and procedure for redress
- Empower citizens to participate in politics through community engagement
- Change the electoral system to Optional Preferential Voting
- Youth engagement in politics

The recommendations were presented by several of our citizens in the House Chamber, and were received by the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Secretary Anthony Byrne, representing the Prime Minister. While the content of the prioritized proposals is important, what is equally important is the demonstration of the sophistication with which ordinary citizens can, if given the opportunity, handle complex political questions.

So far I haven't said anything about why this was an exercise in *deliberative* democracy. Deliberation is a particular kind of communication that ideally induces reflection about preferences, beliefs, and values in non-coercive fashion, and that connects particular interests to more general principles. One of its key virtues is reciprocity: communicating in terms that others who do not share one's point of view or framework can accept.

Deliberation is different from adversarial debate. The initial aim is not to win, but to understand. Deliberation allows that people are open to changing their minds. The Citizens' Parliament was designed to enable this kind of communication, and the facilitators were there to encourage that.

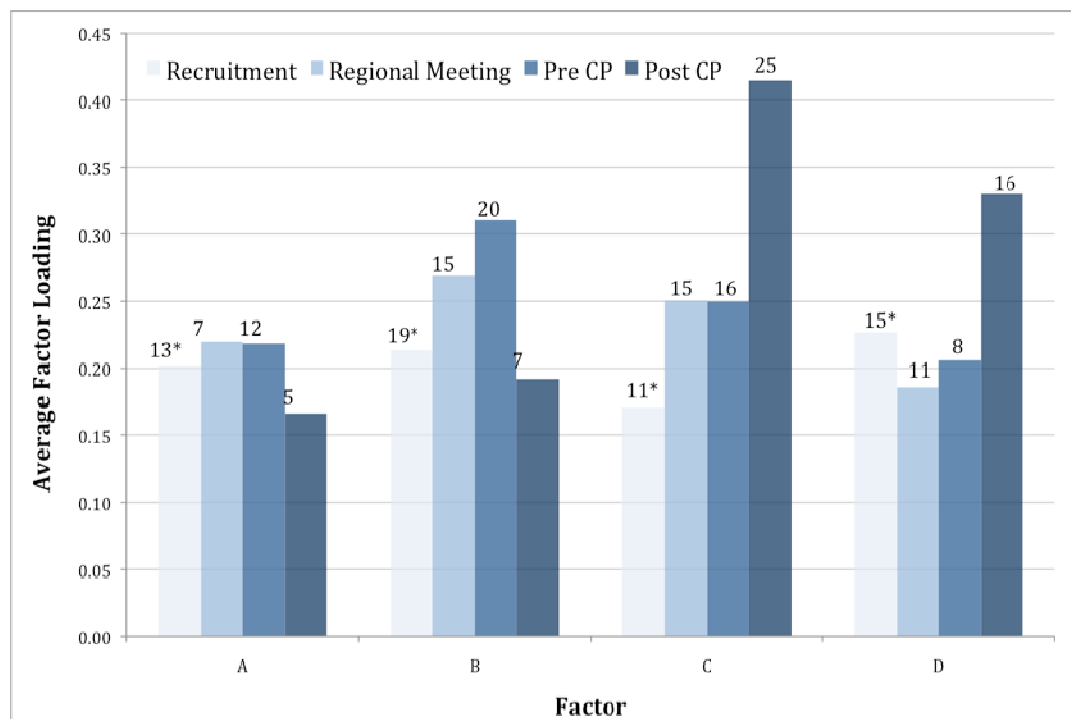
After the Citizens' Parliament concluded, I found it very hard to listen to parliamentary debates. The deliberative quality in these debates is low compared to what our citizens achieved. We can actually test this impression through a 'discourse quality index' developed by Swiss colleagues at the University of Bern, some of whom were here for the Citizens' Parliament. For that we needed a transcript of discussions. Because we recorded all the citizens' discussions, we were able to convert them into transcripts and, ultimately, will be able to compare them with transcripts of parliamentary debates and committee discussions.

A variation in deliberative quality would, perhaps, be unsurprising given that the Citizens' Parliament was designed with deliberation in mind, whereas parliaments in Westminster systems most certainly are not. Parliaments in more consensual systems are not quite so bad in these terms, however, as our Swiss colleagues have demonstrated.

Preliminary results indicate that our citizen participants shifted their views quite substantially during the course of their deliberations. For example, we find that one particular point of view – C on the graph – increased substantially from the beginning to the end of the process. This point of view represents a positive appraisal of the Australian political system and the citizens' place in it.

The moral I'd draw from that is that if you give people the opportunity to deliberate, they see the political system as something that is theirs and worthwhile. Factor D on the graph represents a strong belief in participatory empowerment; again, it increased during the process. B is a more disaffected view, which rose and then fell. There was less change in factor A, which represents a commitment to the effective inclusion of all kinds of social groups into the political system.

## Changes to agreement with positions



Factor A = inclusion

Factor B = disaffection

Factor C = contentment

Factor D = participation

The subtitle of this lecture is 'A World First'. This is not the first deliberative forum composed of randomly selected citizens. Other examples include citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies, deliberative polls, consensus conferences, and planning cells, developed in different parts of the world. The model closest to ours is the Citizens' Assembly.

The first one of these was held in British Columbia about four years ago, set up by the provincial government to recommend a new electoral system for the province. Citizens' Assemblies have subsequently been held in Ontario and (with a somewhat dubious design) the Netherlands. Our citizens' parliament is a world pioneer: first because it is *national* and based on one person from each electorate; second because of the "Online Parliament" component; and third – and most important – because we put agenda creation in the hands of the citizens themselves. We did of course give them a broad charge – "how can Australia's system of government be strengthened to serve us better?" – but within this framing, they were free to craft options of their own. And they did.

What did our citizen participants think about everything that happened? For almost all of them it was a profound experience, for some of them life-changing.

Our oldest participant, Nola, wrote:

So much to gain and learn all meeting with many ideas coming together from every part of Australia. History in the making and I am a very proud participant.

One of our indigenous participants wrote:

[F]or a rare moment in my life I actually felt a part of the majority and not minority. I would love to participate and learn further from this process and hope that it hasn't finished with one gathering. I think that everyone has so much more to give.

Though we didn't ask them to do anything by way of follow-up, many of the participants did things like contacting their local member to communicate the recommendations of the Citizens' Parliament, giving talks to community groups and schools, or contacting their local newspaper to run a story on what had happened. Some even wanted to organize local versions of the process.

We eventually received a written response to the Citizens' Parliament Final Report from the Office of the Prime Minister which said:

The Prime Minister appreciates the commitment made by the selected citizens and many volunteers who helped make the event such a success. The report represents a constructive contribution to the ongoing

debate about our system of government and how it can serve Australia and its people better.

Well, yes it does! But we were hoping for a bit more in the way of response than that.

I promised at the outset I would return to Pericles, so here he is again. I'd like to emphasize the beginning of that quote: "We do not copy the laws and ways of other states. Actually, we are the pattern to others." When it comes to democracy, that quote actually applies quite well to Australia. Historically, Australia pioneered among other things votes for women and the secret ballot. For a long time in the United States, secret voting was known as the "Australian Ballot". Australia can now be at the forefront of democratic innovation, and the Citizens' Parliament is just one example. So where do we go next?

First, we might think about a formal role for institutions like the Citizens' Parliament. One possibility suggested by Ethan Leib in the United States in a book called *Deliberative Democracy in America* is that assemblies like this should constitute a fourth 'popular' branch of government, both scrutinizing policies developed in the other branches, and generating proposals for them. The problem is the severe constitutional inertia that characterizes the United States.

Several years ago in the context of debates about reform of the House of Lords in the United Kingdom, the Demos think tank produced a paper suggesting the Lords be replaced by an assembly of randomly selected citizens. To me it is perfectly obvious that such an assembly would do a much better deliberative job than hereditary aristocrats (who have now gone) or the party hacks appointed for life (who have replaced them).

Applying this idea to Australia, it would be a bit churlish to use a Senate lecture to call for the replacement of the Senate. However, Queensland is currently lacking an upper house, and so I commend this idea to Queensland (as well as Nebraska and New Zealand, similarly lacking an upper house). To me, it is crystal clear that we need to create space for more deliberation in our politics. What we've worked on suggests one way – but not the only way.

My colleague John Uhr has written an excellent book on how to make parliament itself more deliberative. And a citizens' parliament could only ever be just one component of a broader deliberative system; it is not a deliberative democracy in itself.

Now I think it is time to start thinking about a Global Citizens' Parliament. A lot of political authority is now exercised at the global level; but there is a huge democratic deficit there that a Global Citizens' Parliament could help reduce. A Global Citizens Parliament organized by random selection would actually be much more feasible than one organized by election. Random selection is much cheaper. Also my guess is that China would never agree to elections, but could agree to a number of its citizens selected at random.



Deliberative democracy has actually begun to make inroads in China, even as electoral democracy seems blocked (at the national level). Li Junru, Deputy Director of the Chinese Communist Party School, recently called for the expansion of deliberative experiments in China. And before anyone can allege a communist plot, let me point out that one of the ancestors of deliberative democracy is Edmund Burke, the founder of conservatism, who over two hundred years ago characterized parliament as ideally a 'deliberative assembly'. I have a feeling he would be very disappointed in contemporary parliaments in these terms – especially Westminster style systems.

The other key actors in establishing a Global Citizens' Parliament would be the United Nations and the United States. The UN would not be a problem. And things look promising in the United States. The Deliberative Democracy Consortium and associated groups in the United States now have access to the Obama White House. At the moment they are only discussing ways to invigorate deliberative citizen participation in the United States; but I also hope my American colleagues might be interested in going global.

So for all of you who remain skeptical concerning what I've said about the prospects for institutionalizing deliberative democracy, I conclude by saying:

YES WE CAN!

And if you would like more information, visit  
[www.citizensparliament.org.au](http://www.citizensparliament.org.au)