

## Democracy in Australia – Citizen participation in Democracy

Opinion polls provide increasing evidence of shrinking citizen trust in politicians and governments in Australia. Scott Brenton also gives the examples of the growth of 'protest parties' such as One Nation and the Australian Greens, and political slogans such as the Australian Democrats' 'Keep the Bastards Honest' as illustrations of reactions to this declining trust. Australians still hold democratic ideals, he says, but public confidence in democratic practice is low. Finding new ways of actively engaging citizens in political decision making is thus important.

As well as holding elected officials accountable at the ballot box, good democratic systems must involve citizens in a broad range of democratic processes and practices. Community consultations are an important part of citizen participation, but those that are not truly designed to influence decision making are what Janette Hartz-Karp describes as 'DEAD': Decide, Educate, Announce and Defend. It is a false model of consultation which often results in community anger and frustration at the tokenism of the consultation, and ultimately decreases community interest in consultation. Citizen engagement can take many much richer forms, benefiting both the citizens involved and the governments and authorities which serve them.

The first part of this sheet describes examples of purposeful citizen engagement and participation. The second part gives examples of attempts to measure democratic health with citizen involvement in such surveys.

### International examples of citizen engagement and participation

#### *West Germany*

West Germany in the 1980's suffered a crisis of democracy. The State was one which John Dryzek describes as having a charter of corporatism, which allowed access to political decision making only to business and labour. A public space was created for citizen deliberation, and individuals and groups created protest movements which led to the founding of research centres and development

of expertise in areas of public concern. Although these activities operated outside the West German State, the critiques that were developed were able to influence public policy. Dryzek writes that the protests and research associated with these public deliberations were able to weaken the corporatism of the state which then allowed individuals a greater say and level of access.

#### *Brazil*

The city government of Porto Alegre in Brazil practices 'participatory budgeting'. The government convenes neighbourhood, regional and city wide assemblies, with over 50,000 citizens participating, in which participants identify spending priorities. Since the practice was established, a range of improvements in governance, well being and citizen engagement have been achieved, with an increase from 75 to 99 per cent of homes having running water and the number of public schools almost tripling. Many other cities in Brazil have followed Porto Alegre's successful example and introduced participatory budgeting.

#### *USA: Savannah*

The city council of Savannah, Georgia, prepares not one but a range of city budgets in a process called 'Budgets for Outcomes'. Budgets are detailed, with priority outcomes identified, and residents decide between them.

#### *New Zealand*

The federal government of New Zealand provides a framework for democratic engagement of citizens in their local governments. It does so by requiring community participation in identifying those outcomes which are most important to local communities in the long term. Councils also have responsibility for measuring progress toward these agreed outcomes.

#### *Sweden*

The Swedish constitution enshrines popular democracy. In 2000, a Commission on Swedish Democracy was set up. The Commission found that, although there were no specific threats to democracy in Sweden, participation in

democratic practice was low among young people. The Government responded with a broad public education and awareness campaign, increased accountability measures, and a review of internal governance checks.

## Australian examples of citizen engagement and participation

### *Reid Highway, Western Australia*

The Western Australian state government struggled with a decision on the site of a new freeway exit. Residents of the suburbs of the two proposed sites objected and began active protest campaigns. The Minister responsible instituted a 'citizens jury' process in the hope of resolving the issue.

Members of the jury were selected at random from both of the affected areas and provided with resources to come to their decision including advice from experts and representatives from a range of relevant areas. The aims and procedures were first agreed. They were to seek consensus and to prepare majority and minority reports in the event that the different parties could not agree. The Minister also agreed to conduct a pilot of the jury's decision, within budget limits. This agreement, according to Hartz-Karp, was highly influential as the jury members felt substantial responsibility to come to the right decision.

The jury recommended the solution that had originally been proposed by the department, but the result was that trust in the department was increased and residents felt more satisfied with the decision. During the work of the 'citizens jury', issues related to the decision were re-framed in a way that informed both residents and the department. Originally the parties had had different priorities; the priority for the department had been traffic management and for the residents safety.

### *Tasmania Together*

Tasmania Together was a government program to develop a long term State plan, but with significant community participation and ownership. The program was led and monitored by an independent statutory authority. It began with a major community consultation which outlined 12 goals and 151 benchmarks to be monitored by the Progress Board of the project. The Board, established by an act of parliament, made regular progress reports and the act which created the Board was repealed at the end of

2012. The goals and benchmarks established by the Board will continue to be taken up by the Tasmania Together Unit within the government.

### *newDemocracy's Citizen Parliament*

In February 2009, a group of 150 randomly selected citizens met to participate in a deliberative process to consider governance in Australia. They were supported by a reference panel and expert facilitators. The participants recommended changes in four areas; inclusion (the need for the political system to be made more inclusive, especially for various minority groups), disaffection (cynicism about and alienation from the system), contentment (greater engagement and approval of the way the system works and the citizen's place within it), and empowerment (stressing the need for more effective citizen participation in politics).

### *Victorian Local Government Associations - Connecting Communities, Strengthening Communities*

The VLGA is a peak body of local government leaders which works toward stronger community engagement and better local democracy. Under the above program it supports members of underrepresented communities to stand for local government, for example, by providing resources for women who would like to stand for election, and by providing information for new councillors who need support in their new roles. The VLGA provides guidance to councils in conducting high quality community consultation.

## International examples of the measurement of democratic health

While voting practices and public discourse may provide some indication of the level of democratic engagement, more detailed consideration is necessary of the level and nature of actual engagement.

### *Canada: Citizen based national progress measures and a democratic audit*

In the past decade, Canada has developed two projects with important implications for strengthening democracy.

#### *Canadian Democratic Audit*

In Canada in the 1990s, there was "substantial evidence that many Canadians were dissatisfied with the state of

the democratic practices and institutions” (Cross 2006:2). Voter turnout rates were at a record low, with the party system in upheaval. From 2001-2006 a team of Canadian political scientists conducted the Canadian Democratic Audit, a wide-ranging examination of democracy in Canada. Areas such as communications, the cabinet, elections, political parties, citizens, federation, advocacy groups and legislatures were analysed from the perspective of public participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness.

### *Canadian Index of Wellbeing*

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) is considered the world’s leading example of a national system for the assessment of comprehensive, citizen-based progress and wellbeing measures. It began in 1999 with a national consultation of Canadian citizens to identify core national values and key aspects of wellbeing. The Index built a collaboration of representatives of community, universities, business and some government agencies, including the national statistics office of Canada. A structure with eight dimensions forms the framework for measuring the state of national engagement. The dimensions are: community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy population, leisure and culture, living standards and time use. The Index has begun to generate comprehensive reports on the state of democratic engagement in Canada and forms the basis for discussion of key aspects of citizen engagement and the models available for increasing such engagement.

### *IDEA*

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance has developed a framework for auditing democracy which has been used in many countries. This framework measures citizen participation as a key feature of successful democracy and the organisation provides support related to a range of democratic issues.

### *OECD*

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recognizes that, along with economic growth and social and environmental welfare, democratic health is necessary for progress. The Global Project of the OECD has developed a set of progress measures which aim to capture progress toward these broad goals. The OECD makes these tools available to governments and their agencies.

## Australian examples of the measurement of democratic health

### *ABS MAP framework: democratic progress in Australia*

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has made some progress towards a full development index by harnessing existing data under the title of ‘Measures of Australia’s Progress’. MAP captures elements of democracy, governance and citizenship as well as other social, environmental and economic trends. The ABS has committed to evolve MAP over time and includes new measures as data is available.

### *The Democratic Audit of Australia: the quality of Australian Democracy*

This project, initiated in 2002 and now based at Swinburne University, is one of the best national examples of the “democratic audit” approach. It is derived from the framework conceived by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Stockholm, Sweden. It focuses on four key signs of a healthy democracy; political equality, popular control of government, civil liberties and human rights, and the quality of public deliberation. The project conducts assessments of Australian democracy based on these criteria.

### *An Australian National Development Index*

The 2008 Australian 2020 summit proposed the development of a national development index as a key priority. The preparation of such an index would follow international trends to establish long term, consistent indicators of economic, social and environmental progress, including measures of social inclusion. The Government in part accepted this recommendation and committed to establishing a Social Inclusion Board which would manage an index along with related tasks. In May 2009, the Social Inclusion Board produced a report in which it proposed a set of indicators. These indicators include measures aimed at capturing Indigenous well-being with a focus on income, health and access to services. The index excludes measures of democracy or citizen participation.

Subsequently a group of non-government bodies including the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Australian Council of Social Service, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and several university

bodies (with the involvement of the Australian Bureau of Statistics), have come together to create an independent body that would prepare a comprehensive index modelled on the Canadian Index of Well-being. The Australian National Development Index (ANDI) was established as an organisation in 2012. The ANDI pilot for a research and community engagement program should be completed by May 2013, with plans to establish a national conversation about progress, wellbeing and sustainability.

### *Other Australian practices and problems: 2020 Summit*

At the Australian 2020 meeting, a wide range of proposals for strengthening democracy were also supported by the Governance group. These included the idea of establishing an Australian commission into democracy and citizen participation which would: hold community hearings on the state of democracy across Australia; carry out and commission detailed research on key issues in Australian democracy; report on current and likely future problems of democracy; and suggest a series of strategically linked measures to strengthen the quality and degree of participation in democracy in Australia at all levels. There were also many specific proposals to improve civic participation, citizen trust, parliamentary performance, civics education, deliberative democracy, and voter enrolment, as well as strong support for a national human rights bill.

The federal Government's response a year later was muted, in effect endorsing only the concept of developing improved electronic democratic processes and considering holding a series of public forums. Given that the Summit was established to bring together the 'best and brightest' in Australia to address the most important long term challenges in Australia's future, this was a disappointing response.

### *Open Government Partnership*

With Australia joining the Open Government Partnership in mid-2013 (a multilateral organisation working for transparency in government, citizen participation, fighting corruption and strengthening governance), the government has committed to develop an action plan with citizen consultation. It is an opportunity to learn from the lessons of the 2020 Summit and improve the model of consultation/response.

## Priorities for Australian citizen participation

Incidents such as the Windsor Hotel development scandal, when a strategy memo proposing a bogus consultation process leaked from within the office of the Victorian Minister for Planning, have damaged citizen trust in consultation processes carried out by Government. To take citizen participation seriously governments should:

- commit to true collaborative decision making
- implement findings from the Citizen's Parliament study (see [www.newdemocracy.com.au](http://www.newdemocracy.com.au))
- promote the significance of citizen involvement in democratic engagement, and illustrate what might be done by drawing attention to examples
- encourage governments at every level to make use of such devices to engage citizens more actively
- establish and refine regimes of measurement of community well-being which involve citizens, as has been done in the Canadian example.

Currently, community groups in Australia carry out important consultation and research activities which strengthen democracy but do this with little help from government. There needs to be co-operation and input from government to encourage more real community dialogue.

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