

The Australian Citizens' Parliament: A World First*

John Dryzek

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 it 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 come 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. It would take me too long to list all the others, but they know who they are. I should also point out that this lecture represents some of my personal views, which are not necessarily shared by others who worked on the project.

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 at random from the electoral roll. Our youngest participant was 18, our oldest 90. We began by sending out letters to around 9 000 people randomly selected asking if they'd be interested in participating if they were selected. Almost 30

per cent 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 everyone who says ordinary people aren't interested in participating in politics—provided they are given some decent politics to participate in, which they usually aren't. From this 30 per cent 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 at Old Parliament House, Canberra, but there was plenty for them to do in the months leading up to the main meeting. One of these was 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. The main meeting was co-chaired by Lowitja O'Donoghue and Fred Chaney.

When they arrived in Canberra we worked the citizens 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 theses.

The timing turned out to be as bad as it could be for the Canberra meeting: it coincided with the weekend of the bushfires in Victoria, and it was horribly hot in Canberra. Our citizens were housed in student accommodation with no air conditioning.

The particular process we used was mostly based on the 'Twenty-First 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 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 a 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 need a transcript of discussions. We recorded all the citizens' discussions, and so can convert into transcripts and compare with transcripts of parliamentary debates and (ideally) committee discussions. This variation in deliberative quality is perhaps not surprising 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 (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 beginning to end of the process. This point of view represents a positive appraisal of the Australian political system and their 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.

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 three 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, 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, 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:

... for 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). 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 in the United States now has 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



Question — Thank you very much, I really enjoyed that. It's good to know that you're not alone, there are others. Didn't the Democrats do something towards this when they were in power, like citizens' initiative referendum (CIR)?

John Dryzek — CIR's are a bit different. I only gave you the top six of the proposals that came up from the conclusion of the Citizens' Parliament, but actually citizens' initiated referenda were discussed as one possible proposal and it didn't make the top six but I think it made about number 11 or 12 if I remember rightly. The citizens' initiated referenda are a bit different. I used to live in the state of Oregon in the United States where we did have CIR and they had been around for close on 100 years I think. Every two years on the ballot, you could vote on probably around 20 to 25 particular measures ranging from closing the nuclear power plant in the state to tax limitation.

The thing about CIR is that they're not necessarily deliberative. In the Oregon case, if you wanted to get a matter on the ballot, all you had to do was collect signatures. I think it was something like six per cent of people who had voted at the last gubernatorial election had to sign. So the way you did that was you paid people to collect signatures. You could then conduct advertising once you got the measure on the ballot, and there wasn't necessarily anything in the way of deliberation.

I think what would be more interesting, if you are into CIR, would be to try and figure out a way to make that process more deliberative. The first thing you would do is ban paid signature collectors so you would really have to convince people to sign, and to devote their own unpaid energy to get signatures rather than having somebody paid to get signatures. That would be the first thing. The second thing you might want to do is actually have something like a citizens' parliament which deliberated the measure in advance of the election; have it publicized, have it televised, which would then give the broader citizenry something to go on rather than just advertising campaigns.

Question — Wouldn't one of the arguments against having this fairer debate be, if you put the theory into practice, you would be so long debating fairly and squarely that after a year you might get few laws passed.

John Dryzek — I'm not sure that is necessarily right. If you look at what we did in the Citizens' Parliament, we actually went to the other extreme. We got too much passed in those few days. The deliberative quality we had was fine, but it would have been still better if we had focused on a smaller number of proposals. We still managed

to get closure at the end of it. Of course it was done by voting. If you are waiting for consensus, that may take a long, long time. You can have deliberation without necessarily seeking consensus.

Question — So it's your wish, obviously, to get this through. I can hear people saying: 'Well, so what?'

John Dryzek — What do you mean 'So what?' The way that I would justify it, I would say that there are at least two kinds of justification. One would be just intrinsic democratic values. This is one way of making the system more democratic, more inclusive, a different kind of way for citizens to make their voices felt. But I actually think that there is an argument that can be made that this would actually produce better decisions. You would get things thoroughly deliberated rather than just being the topic above the adversarial debate. This is why I think it will be interesting to have a deliberative assembly like this as a house of review. It wouldn't necessarily be charged with decision-making itself, but it would be able to review proposals that had been debated in adversarial fashion elsewhere in the system and could actually provide a new angle on them, a new insight into them. And so I think that's where its value might lie. You might not want to do it for everything, for every policy measure, but you could do it for some. So I think that's what its value would be.

Question — This is a comment, then a question. I actually happen to be one of the 150 guinea pigs; there may be others here, I don't know. I think I was the member for Canberra in the Citizens' Parliament. Just of the CIR proposal that came to the Citizens' Parliament, I think one of the very interesting things is that it came with quite a lot of force from a group that was working on it through the online parliament. It was heavily delegated and modified during the four days to put into the proposal particularly what you mentioned, a deliberative process so that you could guard against maybe highly technical matters getting through on a sort of populist wave, which I think is the risk that a lot of people see in those processes. I think it was a very interesting example of how things worked in that deliberative Citizens' Parliament that the CIR issue itself was heavily deliberated and significantly modified to make it a more deliberative proposal.

My question is: there is a bunch of us who were involved in the process that are now communicating on a continuing basis online, and I know that there is still a heck of a lot of enthusiasm for the event and for seeing some sort of continuation. One of the proposals that came forward was linked to the six you had up there: to have some sort of continuing body or agency to promote citizens' engagement. Maybe that could be a creature of the state in some form or another, but maybe it would be better to be a citizens' commission of some sort, a continuing citizens' commission for citizens' engagement that could look at the citizens' engagement processes that we have in this country, comment on them, take complaints about them when they didn't do what they were supposed to be doing, and make proposals to governments, federal and state, about how to improve engagement processes and indeed maybe even initiate and manage further citizens' parliaments at national and state levels. What do you think of that?

John Dryzek — I think that's a great idea. I guess it's illustrative of a kind of creativity that was unleashed amongst our 150 citizens, because I must say that I think

about democracy a lot and I never actually thought about that one, but I think that would be a terrific idea. Actually I should have mentioned in terms of follow up, in terms of what the citizens were doing after the event, that there is this ongoing online interaction. Thanks for reminding me about that.

Question — I was wondering when you gave the example of Queensland why you hadn't also mentioned the Northern Territory and the ACT, particularly the latter, because there's probably more chance of it happening here. Could you give some indication of just how you would mesh that into an existing parliamentary system? I personally think that it's an excellent idea because I have always thought that an element of randomness into the system would do no harm. I would be interested in how you would mesh that into a working political system, such as one of the ones we have here in the states or territories.

John Dryzek — First, you are dead right, I should have mentioned the Northern Territory and the ACT. I think the reason I didn't is that Queensland was in my mind because there was a media story recently where there was somebody sitting in the empty Senate chamber of Queensland, of the Queensland legislature, and I thought, hmmm, I know how we could fill that. And that's what prompted that. Of course the ACT and the Northern Territory would be ideal candidates as well.

How do we mesh it in? That depends on a number of things. First of all, if there is an existing upper house then meshing it in would be perhaps slightly trickier; then you would need to call it something else, maybe call it a Citizens' Commission. I'm not sure what the name would be. Then presumably, you could have selected issues that would be referred to that, not necessarily all issues, but selected issues. But on what basis would you select, and who would do the selection? Those would be big questions, because presumably if the government knew what was being proposed was controversial but could get it through using its legislative majority, then it probably wouldn't want that to be deliberated. So you would need somebody independent of the government of the day who would decide which legislation, which policies, would get deliberated by the citizens' chamber.

How would you constitute that body? I'm not entirely sure, that needs thinking through. But I think there is room for deliberation about this question, about how exactly to make all this fit into the constitutional architecture. I think you can see solutions and ways to do it, like that independent body that I just suggested, and the only question there is that we need to think through exactly how that body itself would be constituted.

Question — My question is a follow-up to the point about a citizens' engagement commission. It sounds like a great idea, but it's not entirely consistent with position A, namely inclusive republicanism; that is, civic engagement, which it declined after the assembly's process. This suggests there is a bit of diffidence about the engagement of the whole community. The one barrier that is obvious is politicians' disinclination to have competition in their forums, but in the late 90s the government actually commissioned a lot of work on what is citizenship, and this was very broadly based, not just schools but adults too. It seems to me two results of your work would be: one, that our democracy is unhealthy at the moment and needs some change; and two, that the broader notion of citizenship, not just gaining a right to vote for example,

but having a larger set of duties and responsibilities as well as rights, needs another push like it was getting in the 90s but which just expired.

John Dryzek — If there is a problem with engagement, I suppose it could conceivably be from two directions: one could be that the politicians don't actually want it, and the second could be that the citizens don't want it. Now, when it comes to the politicians, I think it is telling that this Citizens' Parliament was of course not initiated by government; it was initiated from the outside. In some of the other examples I talked about, like the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, like consensus conferences as they began in Denmark, those things were actually initiated by government itself. So governments sometimes do it, but then sometimes they are not interested. I gave the example of Obama, whose Whitehouse does now seem to be interested in innovative ways of engaging citizens. Another example would be Gordon Brown in the UK. When he became Prime Minister, he actually talked up things like this, and he talked about initiating a whole range of citizens' juries on particular policy questions, on controversial policy issues. This would be another answer to the question, how do we build this into politics? The problem with that is that if it's not constitutionalised you're relying on just the enthusiasm of a particular prime minister, and of course once he is gone, and actually in Brown's case, enthusiasm didn't really last, but at least for a while it was there. So he talked about citizens' juries. He also talked about holding a national citizens' summit which would deliberate core values of the British political system, although it would not have been my advice to do that. That's what he was talking up, but that hasn't actually been held. So occasionally you do get politicians who do want to do something along these lines and who are quite serious about it.

In terms of the attitudes of citizens, would they want to participate? There is a lot of work that has been done on citizen participation by political scientists on the degree to which people do want to participate in politics. I don't want to enter into all the debates about that. But my own feeling is that if you give people the chance to participate in a particular kind of politics, of the kind that we offered them in this Citizens' Parliament, then they are interested. I will go back to the 30 per cent figure of people have said, yes, they would like to participate, out of the 9 000 people we contacted to begin with. That's really a quite high number given what we were demanding of them. So that's my conclusion, is that people aren't necessarily apathetic, it's just that you have to give them the right kind of opportunity to participate and they will in many cases jump at the chance.

Question — There are some that would say, first of all, your random selection actually flushes out busybodies who want to meddle in everything and you get people of a particular strain of views not representative of the country; and secondly, whether unwittingly or not, the organisers and the facilitators guide people in a particular direction. Have you got any comment on those two objections that have been made in the past?

John Dryzek — That's right, the random selection gives you a particular picture of the citizenry. It is very different from most forms of public consultation which attract people who are sometimes disparaged as the usual suspects; I think that's a bit unfair. Lyn Carson, who was one of the organisers of the Citizens' Parliament, refers to the incensed and the articulate, and those are people who will show up at public

consultations. In a process like this, the Citizens' Parliament, we still get some people like that, but most people are not like that. We get a truer representation of the citizenry than those ordinary mechanisms of public consultation. There is a role for activism and for the 'incensed and articulate' in the deliberative system but what we give is a different kind of picture.

Do the organisers guide the process and what happens in it? We did our best not to. That doesn't mean that we were necessarily always successful. The very fact that we were conducting a deliberative assembly implies that we believe in deliberation, and there is no getting away from that. But it doesn't mean that if you came to the citizens' assembly you necessarily had to share in any critique of the Australian political system. Luca Belgiorno-Nettis really started the New Democracy foundation because he was unhappy with the way the two-party system worked and he was interested in creative supplements to it, so that was really his motive force for starting all this. If we look at what the citizens actually came up with at the end, I think it would be very hard to find any trace of the New Democracy agenda in there. They actually turned out to be happier with the two-party system at the end of the process than when it began. Certainly there is no trace of the New Democracy agenda in there.

So all I can say is that we did our best to stop our own point of view conditioning what the citizens deliberated about. But in terms of the style of the interaction, well there is no getting away from it that we were promoting deliberative interaction and not adversarial debate, but we were up front about that with the citizens. I suppose they could have objected and said no, we would rather have debate, but to my knowledge, none of them did.

Question — Congratulations on giving the Swiss the prominence they deserve. It seems to me the Swiss have given us a system that we can put in and it will achieve every part of the point you have made. Would you care to comment on that?

John Dryzek — The ideal person to comment on it would have been Andre Bachtiger who has actually here from Switzerland for the Citizens' Parliament so of course knows a great deal about the Swiss political system. I have mentioned the experience of citizen initiated referendum in the US but it was really the Swiss who pioneered the use of referenda. They have referenda on all kinds of things at both the national and the local cantonal level as well. It was the existence of the initiative which led to a consensual party system because what they found was that after they had instituted the initiative and the possibility of a referenda on all kind of policy questions, when a minority party in government lost a vote in parliament, all it could do would be to send the measure to the citizens for a vote, and often it might overturn what the government had decided. So that was when they decided, there must be a better way of doing this, so we need to bring all parties into government. And of course that is what they do in Switzerland. All parties are represented in government; there is not a government and opposition. That makes the system more consensual, they have to work by consensus rather than just majority vote. That in turn improves the quality of deliberation in the Swiss Parliament so we actually can trace, in this case, the direct cause or link from referenda to a more deliberative political system. That perhaps is one lesson from Switzerland, but Switzerland is a very unique place and we need to think long and hard before saying, OK, just because it works in Switzerland it could work here. Well at least it did there and it's something to think about.

Question — Thank you. I have two suggestions. Number one, you mentioned earlier that it might be possible to do this on a global level. Would you consider doing that with senior children in school? If we are looking at 16 to 18 year olds, in 20 years those folk will be the world's leaders and it could be very interesting to get this sort of a thing globally through that group. Then as a dead opposite, what would be the reaction if you did the same sort of thing with jail inmates? They are people who have fallen foul of the existing system, many of them as you know, highly intelligent, and it could be a very interesting alternative.

John Dryzek — Two interesting ideas. Children at school, that would be a great idea, that might be a way of pioneering it, and because you could frame it as a sort of educational exercise that might be a way of getting past some of the political objections that you might otherwise get. So that would be a very interesting thing to do, nationally, as well as globally. Jail inmates, I hadn't thought of that one. The thing that that brings to mind is that there was a deliberative poll held a few years ago in Britain. Deliberative polls are a bit different from our design, but they basically work by random selection of the citizenry to recruit participants. I think the topic was criminal justice policy and just as a result of random selection they did have one or two participants who had actually spent time in prison and so they could give their own insights into what punishment was like and what it did for people. Obviously what you're talking about is one that would be entirely composed of prison inmates. I think it might be an interesting process to do that, possibly as part of rehabilitation and reintegrating people into society once they had left prison.

