



**Re-engaging the disengaged: Why Parliamentary education
and community engagement is core business**

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I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and pay my respects to elders past and present.

I also acknowledge:

1. Madam Speaker;
2. My Parliamentary Colleagues;
3. to all the Presiding Officers

Welcome to the oldest Parliament in Australia. First established in 1823. We have been here, in this place ever since.

It is an interesting time in politics with populist “revolts” seen around the world.

Australia has so far largely avoided some of the populist ‘revolts’ and the confusion that has been occurring around the world.

Nevertheless, many Australians are disillusioned with, or simply disengaged from, the wider political process.

Given the community’s lack of trust in politicians, the challenge, for us as Presiding Officers, is how to respond.

As an institution, parliaments are uniquely placed to address disengagement with the political process. Initiatives being undertaken in parliaments across Australia and elsewhere provide the chance to show how democracy can work and what it can mean for the citizen in a changing world.

So what is populism? Populism is a political style that features

- an appeal to “the people” versus “the elite”;
- the use of “bad manners” that are allegedly “unbecoming” for politicians; and
- repeated claims of crisis, breakdown or threat.

In his 2016 book *What is populism?*, Jan-Werner Müller, Professor of Politics at Princeton University, defined populism as:

... a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*,populists claim that they, *and only they*, represent the people. Other political competitors are just part of the immoral, corrupt elite

This is not a healthy way of looking at the world or politicians who care about an inclusive democratic political system.

In some countries this disillusionment is shown by the falling turn out at elections. Here in Australia with compulsory voting it is not something we experience. Instead however, there has been an ongoing rise in the number of Australians voting for minor parties at State and Commonwealth elections:

- According to Australian Electoral Commission data for the 2016 election, just over 35% of Senate first preference votes and 23% of House of Representatives first preference votes went to parties other than the ALP and Coalition.
- Similarly, the 2015 NSW State election saw approximately one quarter of Legislative Council votes and one-fifth of Legislative Assembly votes go to minor parties.

According to another 2016 report “Mapping Social Cohesion”, only 29% of Australians believed that the Commonwealth Government could be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people most of the time: down from 48% in 2009. A 2013 survey, conducted by the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra reported that 90% of Australians think they have little or no influence over national decisions, while just over three quarters felt this way with regard to local decision-making.

These pessimistic views of politics are in stark contrast to the high degree of faith Australians have in their democratic system of governance. According to the 2012 World Values Survey, 87% of Australian respondents stated that a democratic political system was a fairly good or very good way of governing this country. The Survey also indicated that many Australians engage in, or are interested in becoming involved in, the political process.

So if there are many Australians who do want to re-engage with their political system, how can they be reached?

A variety of responses have been suggested:

- finding new political leaders who can juggle long-term vision with the politics of the moment;
- renewed efforts by political parties to effectively groom future politicians;
- increasing community efforts to boost “social capital”; and
- calling the media to account for unfairly presenting politicians.

However, one of ways of re-engaging the public has largely escaped discussion: and that is by educating and informing citizens of their political system via the *institution* of the Parliament.

Compared to the political class, it is interesting to note that the Parliament is more favourably regarded by Australians; 28% of respondents to the World Values Survey reporting confidence in the institution, compared to 13% for political parties.

Although these confidence levels remain low, this is likely because Parliament is directly associated with politicians and governments. If the focus is on Parliament as an institution, the potential is much higher.

Public engagement has not traditionally been the core business of parliaments, but that has been changing now for some time. It is clear that Parliaments increasingly see the need to make engagement a core component of their business.

So how does Parliament go about engaging more with the community? Technological developments have long been identified as radically changing the means by which people engage with the issues of the day, as well as what issues grab their attention.

Effective use of new technology can greatly influence the political debate of the day, and subsequently the public's perceptions of a given issue.

Most Australian parliaments, including this Parliament, now have their own Twitter and Facebook accounts. It is easy to provide information – the task is to ensure that information is entertaining and informative and continues to evolve in a positive manner.

It is imperative that parliaments make greater efforts to engage the community through social media. UK think tank Demos recommends that all parliamentary debates should have a social media element to allow the public to offer their views and opinions for the participants' benefit.

One of our earliest attempts was in 2009, when the NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No 2 conducted an inquiry into bullying of children and young people. In order to encourage the participation of children and young people, the Committee hosted an online survey. While there were risks involved with this process the exercise resulted in the committee receiving over 300 responses from children and young people, a typically elusive target group.

Furthermore, the survey had the added benefit of introducing hundreds of young people to the work of the NSW Parliament. The survey responses made clear that young people welcomed the committee's attempt at online consultation. A number of respondents commended the NSW Parliament on its willingness to use new technologies and embrace the online environment, contributing to positive perceptions of the NSW Parliament.

The Legislative Council Committee Office has also embraced the use of social media in advertising inquiries and related activities. Whereas inquiries were previously advertised via media releases and newspaper advertisements, the latter is no longer standard practice. Committees now regularly utilise Twitter, including tweeting all media releases and hearing schedules, as well as photos of committee activities and links to live webcasts on hearing days.

The Committee Office has also recently used a free graphic design software program to create social media content, incorporating fonts, images and icons into an infographic that was attached to a tweet advertising a committee inquiry. These infographics can also be used on other social media platforms, such as the NSW Parliament's Facebook page, to inform the community of committee activities.

Other social media initiatives include creating YouTube videos of Portfolio Committee No 5 – Industry and Transport’s visits to regional locations for its inquiry into the augmentation of water supply for rural and regional New South Wales, and the use of the Storify social media platform to document the progress of inquiries.

Evidence suggests that the public is interested in parliamentary outreach and engagement. According to the UK Hansard Society’s most recent Audit of Public Engagement, 82% of respondents thought it was important or very important that the UK Parliament encourages public involvement in politics.

However, as a core function of parliament, only 26% of respondents believed that their Parliament had done a good or very good job of this encouragement.

Australia faces similar issues. To give one example, the 2007 Federal parliamentary inquiry into civics and electoral education found that civic apathy amongst Australian youth may be derived from a belief that the world of politics bears little or no effect on their lives. However, when youth understood the way in which political processes worked, they became more likely to participate.

Like many parliaments, the NSW Parliament recognises this challenge and is making efforts to increase civic engagement amongst the NSW community. Currently, the NSW Parliamentary Education department conducts a wide range of programs — twenty two (22) in total—which engage the community with the workings of parliament, cultural events and topical issues of social importance.

Many of these programs are designed for school students: for example, the National Schools Constitutional Convention involves one hundred (100) NSW secondary students discussing constitutional issues in the NSW Parliament, where they subsequently select delegates for the National Convention in Canberra. Other programs are aimed at select community groups, such as the Young Women’s Leadership Seminars, in which approximately 100 Year 11 girls from NSW secondary schools participate in leadership programs involving keynote speakers and parliamentary members focussed on issues surrounding women and leadership.

Every day in our chambers, when Parliament isn’t sitting, staff of both House departments deliver school talks three (3) to four (4) times a day to classes of primary and high school students. This is about to be expanded – we are intending to construct a new purpose built Education Centre on the floor

below us, which will increase the number of schools we can engage with each day.

One of the longest running and most popular of the Parliament's community education programs is "A Little Night Sitting", where community members sit in during evening sittings of both Houses, and hear talks from members of parliament explaining what they have seen.

Education and engagement programs extend beyond the confines of the NSW Parliament. In order to engage regional communities without the capacity to travel to Sydney, Parliamentary Education has used video conferencing software to deliver talks to regional schools. Similarly, when conducting regional hearings, Legislative Council committees have been accompanied by parliamentary staff who run parliamentary education workshops at local schools. This was an idea which came from a program conducted by the National Parliament of the Solomon Islands, our parliamentary twin. There may be more ideas we can take from the Pacific and apply here.

Parliamentary associations are also conducting engagement activities. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), as part of its goal of promoting democratic governance across Commonwealth nations, conducts a series of CPA Roadshows designed to connect parliamentarians with youth in schools, colleges and universities.

Parliamentary education can be directed at more than the general public: communicating and working with third parties is another potential means of engaging the community. This method of engagement has been used with relative success as part of the NSW parliamentary committee process.

Pauline Painter in the NSW Legislative Assembly, has reported on the increasingly directive and proactive attempts by third party organisations to encourage their members to make submissions to inquiries.

Another way in which third party participation in parliamentary inquiries is facilitated is via workshops delivered by committee staff. For example, since 2009 the Legislative Council Committee Office has delivered a very successful program of workshops run in conjunction with the Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) aimed at improving non-government stakeholders' understanding of parliamentary inquiries and their skills in participating in them. Held four times a year, these workshops give members of the

community sector practical advice on how to write an effective submission and what makes an effective witness at a hearing.

The examples I have provided are just a starting point. Presiding Officers can encourage new innovative ways to fill gaps in community political education, and find ways for the public to re-engaged with the political process.

The current initiatives represent a series of small steps along a much longer, challenging path. But it is a path as Presiding Officers that we have a key role, and one in which we can make a small but important difference to the future of the democratic system of which we are one of the officeholders.

The public is on standby – disengagement and disillusion doesn't have to be permanent. Surveys show that the public has confidence in Parliament as an institution. It is up to us to respond, and justify that confidence.

Thank you.