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The People's House: Enhancing Parliaments' Community and Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century – the Western Australian Experience

Parliament's engagement of communities is an implied constitutional requirement, stemming from its obligation to make laws for 'peace, order and good government.' Responsible Government also dictates that Parliament is ethical in its decision-making, is responsive to public opinion, and ensures equality of opportunity both in terms of precluding discrimination and meeting appropriate service standards. Parliament and its Standing Orders are structured to ensure that the liberties and scrutiny of democratic government are well embedded and to provide opportunities for public/citizen participation.

Put simply therefore, it is the democratic right of individuals to be informed of the actions taken by Parliaments (except where precluded by legislation or Standing Orders), to be actively involved in the decisions that affect them and to contribute to community building. It is the democratic obligation of Parliaments to strengthen the relationship between communities and Parliament and its capacity to incorporate community values, interests and needs into decision-making.

The Hansard Society captures this well when it states that 'unless the public are informed about what Parliaments are doing they cannot influence the institution; and unless they can influence the institution they cannot hold it and their elected members to fully account.'¹

Public engagement by legislatures across the globe, however, is a common problem and an ambitious objective when faced with critical reporting in the media, a level of community distrust, disinterest or lack of knowledge of the perceived impact of Parliament on their lives, issues of political sensitivity and historical and conservative practices. It is because of the effort required to bridge this 'democratic deficit' that the Hansard Society cites that public engagement programs have become core business for many legislatures.²

The media and the Western Australian Parliament's relationship is, like most Parliaments, one of necessary dependence. While the media's perception of Parliament and its Members varies depending on the presence or otherwise of a 'political crisis', political fodder or blunder, as we know, political reporting, particularly that with a more satirical focus or criticism, sells papers and makes radio and television headlines. It is not to say that some media criticism is not warranted and goes to the heart of the integrity of the behaviour of some politicians. While media is a necessary accountability measure, it is also the single most important source of information about the activities of Members and the Houses of Parliament.

Political cartoons cleverly and humorously perpetuate the public's often negative perception of politicians and the institution of Parliament as untrustworthy. They are so popular the best are published in annual volumes. They tend to have a repeat 'narrative' of limited vision, false promises, spin doctoring, absurd policies, dishonesty and cover ups, brattish and self-focused behaviour, fossilised practices and poor performance in news polls.

Negative media portrayal of Parliament and politicians obviously has a significant influence on public perception. The 2014 Lowy Institute for International Policy (Lowy Institute) Poll surveyed nationally 1000 Australian adults and an additional 150 adults aged 18-29 years of age on democracy, amongst other issues. The Poll had a sample error margin of +/-3.1% on the 1000 sample.

¹ Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*, 2011, p7.

² *Ibid.*

The survey results revealed that only 60% of Australians and 42% of young Australians between 18-29 years believed that 'democracy is preferable to any other kind of government'. When asked to choose between democracy and a strong economy, 53% chose democracy and 42% a strong economy.³

The Lowy Institute noted that these responses were made despite Australia being one of the oldest continuous democracies in the world. For those that did not believe democracy was preferable to any other kind of Government, five propositions were posed to which respondents were asked to report on whether each was a major or minor reason for their views. The results were:

- 45% said that democracy is not working because there is no real difference between the policies of the major parties;
- 42% said democracy only serves the interest of a few and not the majority of society;
- 36% said they had become disillusioned with Australian politics and think another system might work better;
- 21% said that a more authoritarian system where leaders can make decisions without the processes of democracy achieves better results; and
- 21% said that democracy is the usual form of government now and always will be, so I don't worry about it.⁴

The Lowy Institute argues that the results show that ambivalence about democracy is not attributable to a desire for an alternative and more authoritarian system and nor is it due to apathy.⁵ The survey results, however, appear to indicate a need for better communication and engagement and positive building of the political profile.

It is certainly not all doom and gloom though. In the 2015 Lowy Poll 65% of the voting age public (up 5% on 2014) said that democracy was preferable to any other kind of Government with 49% of 18-29 year olds (up 7% on 2014) expressing a democratic preference.⁶

On public preference for politicians as opposed to our system of government, the news in 2015 is also marginally better. The 2015 Roy Morgan Image of Professions Survey of 598 Australian men and women over the age of 14 which measures ratings for ethics and honesty classifies State Members of Parliament (MPs) as being amongst the 'biggest gainers' for the year. However, Gary Morgan, Executive Chairman of Roy Morgan, states, 'There is still no love for our politicians with State MPs 14% (up 2%) only marginally favoured ahead of Federal MPs 13% (up 1%) but both in front of a handful of professions including Insurance Brokers 11% (down 5%), Real Estate Agents 9% (unchanged), Advertising People 5% (down 3%) and right at the bottom of the heap – Car Salesmen 4% (up 1%) – a position they have held for over 30 years unchallenged as Australia's least trusted profession.'⁷

³ Lowy Institute for International Policy, Available at: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/lowy-institute-poll-2014>. Accessed on 21 August 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lowy Institute for International Policy, Available at: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/lowy-institute-poll-2015>. Accessed on 21 August 2015.

⁷ Roy Morgan, Roy Morgan Image of Professions Survey 2015 – Nurses still easily most highly regarded – followed by Doctors, Pharmacists and School Teachers, Media Release, Tuesday 28 April 2015, Melbourne.

Politics and Politicians in Australia are not alone in the poor ratings. In the United Kingdom, the Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement in 2011 showed a significant decline in the perceived impact of Parliament on the lives of the community in the prior decade.⁸ In 2014, the same poll found that 50% of respondents were interested in politics (the same rate as 2001); and while knowledge was found to have improved, only 51% agreed that Parliament debates and makes decisions that matter to them and 23% (down from 30%) thought that it encouraged them to be involved in politics.⁹ Results of a 2012 Angus Reid Public Opinion Poll¹⁰ on the most respected jobs in Canada, the United States of America and Britain showed respect for politicians at 27%, 20% and 15% respectively, although a 2014 Gallup Poll on Honesty and Ethics in the USA showed trust in Members of Congress at 7%, down from 10% in 2013 and 42% in 1973.¹¹

In 1966, Sir Robert Menzies stated, 'There is hardly a section of the community that doesn't in one breath protest undying hostility to Government interference and, in the next breath, pray for it.'¹² Perhaps for some that equates to politics as a necessary evil.

The Hansard Society suggests that 'improved levels of knowledge about Parliament will contribute to greater public understanding of it, which, in turn, might contribute to higher levels of satisfaction with it and perhaps even a greater degree of public participation.'¹³ It is true that knowledge is important, but as we are aware, sound models of engagement (such as the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum developed by the International Association for Public Participation, which is fast becoming an international standard)¹⁴ are more than just the provision of information and the British results above show that despite increased knowledge about Parliament, there was still a clear deficit in garnering community input and involvement in politics.

How community engagement is structured obviously varies from Parliament to Parliament depending on individual circumstances.

So how do we define community engagement in the context of Parliament?

⁸ Hansard Society, Hansard Audit of Political Engagement 8, The 2011 Report with a focus on Coalition Politics, Civic Involvement and the Big Society, Available at <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-8-2011.pdf>. Accessed on 21 August 2015, p5.

⁹ Hansard Society, Hansard Audit of Political Engagement 11, The 2014 Report with a Focus on Accountability and the Conduct of MPs, Available at <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-11-2014.pdf>. Accessed 21 August 2015, pp.1-5.

¹⁰ Angus Reid Global, Professions: Nurses, Doctors are most respected jobs in Canada, U.S. and Britain: Less than three-in-ten respondents in three countries express respect for politicians, Media Release, 2 October 2012, New York. Available at: <http://angusreid.org/nurses-doctors-are-most-respected-jobs-in-canada-u-s-and-britain/>. Accessed 4 September 2015.

¹¹ Gallup, Public Faith in Congress Falls Again, Hits Historic Low, Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/171710/public-faith-congress-falls-again-hits-historic-low.aspx>. Accessed 21 August 2015.

¹² Bill Wannan 1977, *Dictionary of Humorous Australian Quotations and Anecdotes*, South Melbourne, p125.

¹³ Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*, 2011, p7.

¹⁴ International Association for Public Participation, *IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum*, Available at <http://www.iap2.org.au/documents/item/84>. Accessed 21 August 2015.

The Hansard Society in its 2011 case study into *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World* adopts a fairly straightforward and comprehensible approach to community engagement, employing a definition of community engagement in its broadest sense:

*'It is the range of activities whose primary function is to raise awareness of the Parliament amongst the public and to facilitate a two-way flow of information, ideas and views, between them, requiring both listening and interaction on the part of both the institution and the citizen.'*¹⁵

This definition is not that dissimilar to one contained in the Australian House of Representatives Service Charter, which also establishes community service standards and aims as part of a House commitment to assisting those that visit the House or want to contribute to the work of the Parliament.¹⁶

The 2011 Hansard Society case study reviews information provision; Parliament as public space; educational activities; outreach; facilitation or support platforms for politicians to engage with the public; media and organisational structure.¹⁷ This structure is usefully applied to a review of community engagement in the Western Australian context.

Commencing with Parliament's revised organisational structure, both the Hon Michael Sutherland MLA, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and I, along with the heads of the three Parliamentary Departments, have long recognised the need to better engage the public of Western Australia, particularly young people, in Parliament. In 2013 the Parliamentary Education Office transferred across from the Legislative Assembly to Parliamentary Services under a whole of Parliament management committee.

Community Engagement Strategy

Recently we established a project position of Manager Community and Civic Engagement, tasked with undertaking consultation to inform the development of a Community Engagement Strategy, communication plan and other related documentation to increase public accessibility to information about the Parliament and people's democratic rights, duties and opportunities for participation. The Education Office was also restructured as a trial to bring a greater focus to improving Parliament's branding and communication (including the terminology and language used), and included the establishment of a position of Communications Officer.

The concept was that not only did the Western Australian Parliament require a clear vision for community engagement (and a distinct identity) but also defined pathways and the capacity and resources to execute that vision. In the absence of this approach, Parliament's community engagement work risks being fragmented, with activities being delivered in different parts of the organisation without coordination or whole-of-Parliament strategic objectives in mind. Stakeholders

¹⁵ Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*, 2011, p8.

¹⁶ Australian Parliament House, House of Representatives, Available at: http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Department_of_the_House_of_Representatives/Service_Charter#charter. Accessed on 21 August 2015.

¹⁷ Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*, 2011, p4.

also remain partly undefined and there is need to incorporate defined stakeholder groups within our strategic planning (such as professionals, partner organisations, media/teachers and other communicators and citizens) with appropriate regard given to the dissemination of information and a greater degree of participation.

A considered and coordinated approach to community engagement in a Parliamentary context is essential, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by the Parliamentary environment, including how to:

- Clearly establish whole-of-Parliament strategic objectives and goals across different Parliamentary departments, reduce fragmentation and achieve a coordinated approach to attaining those objectives and goals
- draw the line between political and Parliamentary business
- ensure consistency and quality of communications
- partner with, and harness the energy of, the media (media marketing campaign, including mechanisms for communication)
- achieve comprehension amongst the public of what Parliament does in the context of what can sometimes be construed as historic and archaic procedures and processes
- modernise our processes to ensure they are more accessible to the community, particularly young people
- physically open up Parliament House to all ages while balancing the demands of security and preservation of a historical building and materials¹⁸
- engage with the broader public, organisations, young people and disenfranchised and other hard to reach groups
- best employ limited resources
- ensure our objectives and actions are realistic, achievable and measurable

While strategy development is in its infancy and we are currently in the process of undertaking a situation analysis to inform its development, we are fortunately placed to be able to draw on the expertise of other Parliaments such as the Australian, UK, Canadian, Danish, Irish Parliaments and more recently, the Victorian and New Zealand Parliaments (amongst others).

In the interim we have instituted some changes to the way we do business in terms of community engagement.

The Media

To date the Western Australian Parliament has sometimes been guilty of adopting the role of appeaser with the media, rather than being proactive, given the risk of being incorrectly reported. In June 2014 Parliament established a Library Café to increase the level of in-person patronage by Members of Parliament of the services provided by the Library, particularly given a heightened reliance on electronic communication and resources. It was also our intention to bring greater exposure to the public, as guests of those Members or Former Members, to what is one of the grand and stately rooms of Parliament, increasing their understanding of the functions of the Parliament

¹⁸ Hansard Society, Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World, 2011, 27.

through the provision of displays and other forms of information. The Parliament's purchase of a \$12,000 coffee machine for the café was reported in the paper and filmed and reported by television media.

Sir Robert Menzies once said (referencing the words of South Australian Premier Sir Thomas Playford) '...You never get into trouble for what you don't say.' There's a great deal of truth in that, though in my experience what you don't say is frequently reported.¹⁹

There was no purchase of a \$12,000 coffee machine and Parliament had on request of the media and prior to coverage, provided costings pertaining to the establishment of the Library Café. The coffee machine was on loan and to keep costs down, the Parliament had sourced furniture from other departments.

The largest component of expenditure related to plumbing to the location which was required for the water dispenser for the upper floor. The conversion of all water dispensers to a mains water supply is one of Parliament's long-term sustainability strategies. Minimal building specifications for what is a heritage building means that many of the works require exploratory work, and the development of plans (to reduce future cost and for building preservation) and repair work are more expensive than in a contemporary building.

The 'coffee machine scandal' had followed significant media criticism over the purchase of furniture to replace 20-year-old furniture that was no longer serviceable.

To this point Parliament had been preparing 'media release' information either in response to, or in preparation for, media enquiries. In other words we had not proactively addressed major issues with the media head on and media articles or stories were often significantly advanced at the point that journalists requested information.

Following these events considerable thought was given to how we could provide the media with insight into the challenges faced by the Western Australian Parliament in managing a heritage civic building and encourage more ethical journalism in relation to the business of the House and its Members.

Members' commitment to both their Parliamentary and electorate responsibilities and the community is generally very high, however, we cannot always control the behaviour of Members of Parliament, which at times contributes to declining public trust, unless it is either unethical and/or contravenes the Standing Orders of either House. As Presiding Officers we can, however, be vigilant about enforcing those standards in Parliament and afford appropriate training to Members such as ethics and media training to assist them in negotiating the competing and complex demands of their various political and representative roles. The Chamber departments of the Western Australian Parliament deliver, through a consultant, ethics training once per Parliament and more recently, the Legislative Assembly has reviewed the training needs of Members going forward.

What we can do with the media from a Parliamentary perspective is adopt an approach that ensures greater transparency and enhances opportunities for insight and participation in the affairs of

¹⁹ South Australian Chamber of Manufacturers Annual Dinner at Adelaide, Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies, 3 October 1964, p2.

Parliament and the work of its Members. In other words, open the House as the people's house, provide accurate and timely information, be more accountable and encourage proactive informed journalism, particularly in relation to topical issues, as opposed to reactive uninformed journalism.

The West Australian Parliament's Strategic Asset Management Plan identifies critical capital works of \$11.5m and it currently receives \$1m per annum in consolidated revenue for this purpose. To date there has not been additional funding available through Treasury and if some of those works are not undertaken soon Parliament House risks not being a functioning Parliament.

In August 2014 given habitual and often inaccurate reporting on Parliamentary expenditure, myself and Michael Sutherland invited two credible print and radio journalists to Parliament, along with a photographer to discuss the dire state of the Parliamentary building. The strategy was aimed at using the media to influence public perceptions of expenditure on the Parliamentary building so there would be some comprehension of the maintenance requirements and less disengagement when future issues about expenditure arose in the media.

The journalists were taken on a tour of Parliament House and given access to parts of the building normally restricted to the press and public. The restriction on photography was also limited. The journalists were exposed to the parts of the Parliament requiring extensive maintenance in order to persuade them of the very present maintenance issues requiring expenditure. They were subsequently provided with detailed information in writing in relation to the required works.

The article that followed in *The West Australian* in August 2014 entitled 'Parliament Crumbling: \$11.5m fix needed to get the House in order' detailed Parliament's leaking roof, sagging floor, deteriorating stonework, wooden sash windows held together with putty and the inadequacy of the accommodation. The article highlighted Parliament as the seat of democracy, and its age and heritage, and called for the public to take a mature, responsible look at the very real maintenance issues required.²⁰ The anecdotal response from the public was that it was appropriate that public monies be expended on the Parliament House building and despite sizable works since that time there has been no negative reporting on public expenditure on the building.

Parliament has also recently partnered with apolitical organisations to bring greater profile, including media profile, to the organisation and its role. In 2014 we worked with Heritage Perth, entrusted with promoting cultural and building heritage in the Central Business District, on the delivery of an Open Day and a series of talks. We also partnered with Open House Perth on a day dedicated to building architecture. While these approaches to community engagement are discussed later, through this process Parliament was able to access the existing trusted media networks of these organisations. This resulted not only in a lot of positive print, radio, electronic and social media stories but radio broadcasting from Parliament House on Perth Heritage Days. The connections fostered through this arrangement have led to discussions with one radio station about the potential for insight stories on the functioning of Parliament which we intend to pursue further in 2016.

²⁰ "Parliament Crumbling: \$11.5m fix needed to get the House in Order" (The West Australian), 20 August 2014 2014, Gareth Parker, p8.

As part of the development of the strategy we will be consulting the media, as key partners, on the type of information they want about Parliament and how we can better engage with them in the work and activities of the House.

Parliament as public space

In the United Kingdom the Hansard study of political engagement found that 27% of the public believed that the Westminster Parliament was not welcoming to them and many were disappointed at not being able to see the backrooms (non-public areas).²¹

The difficulty we face as Parliaments is how to provide greater public access in the context of an increasing global security risk while meeting the working requirements of the Parliament. The shooting at the Canadian Parliament in 2014 occurred one week prior to an intended Open Day at Parliament. While many Parliaments understandably closed, the Western Australian Parliament undertook a detailed risk assessment and increased security measures, and opened to the public. The public response to Parliament remaining open was considerable and the media reporting on the tail of the shooting was extremely positive.

Since that time the Parliament has undertaken a hostage exercise with the WA Police, produced a video for staff on how to react in such an incident and target hardened, introducing various security measures, including additional proximity card controlled doors, which have isolated the majority of Member and staff accommodation. One of the considerations in this process was how to balance public access while maintaining the security and working needs of its occupants. Installation of the new doors has resulted in a substantial improvement in security while allowing public access to the foyers on all levels of the Parliament. From a community engagement perspective, this provides significant opportunity for more effective use of that public space in educating the community. Parliament has also undertaken building works to improve public access to Parliament House such as the installation of a universal access toilet and audio loops in the Chamber galleries.

The West Australian Parliament has recently adopted a greater focus on informational displays in public space (i.e. Anzac Day, Heritage Days, Building Heritage), particularly in relation to commemorative events. A Presiding Officer Statement is also read in the House(s) if the commemoration is particularly significant. With limited public space Parliament has had to be quite creative with display concepts.

Parliament has also actively encouraged use of the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly Chambers to engage school and university students, for example convening the YMCA Youth Parliament and UNYA National Debating Championships, and Parliament recently used these facilities for its own Statewide Student Parliament.

When assessing public events at Parliament House, consideration is given to approaches that have the broadest reach, are most engaging and provide significant opportunity for education on the roles and functions of the Parliament.

²¹ Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*, 2011, p27.

The aforementioned Heritage Perth event which is themed on an annual basis has to date provided more scope for engaging young people and the broader public, hence Parliament's participation in Open House Perth, which as noted was focused on architecture, has ceased. Parliament ensures where possible in the delivery of open days that it establishes partnerships with community or government organisations to enhance community interest and uses existing networks with community to disseminate information and engage additional government and community resources.

In 2014 for the Perth Heritage Days Open Day which was themed 'Perth at the Outbreak of War', Parliament partnered with Government House, military museums, re-enactment groups such as the 10th Light Horse and ground troops. A special event website and displays were developed relevant to the theme and information was provided about the role and functions of the Parliamentary Chambers, Members of Parliament who served at war and the role of war time legislation.

The 2015 event to be held this month is themed 'People Who Shaped Perth' and Parliament will be focusing on Edith Cowan, Australia's first female Member of Parliament and champion of the women's suffrage movement. While the event will include displays, it will be very performance based, with a play in the Legislative Assembly Chamber and presentation in the Legislative Council Chamber on women's suffrage and the role of legislation in social change. The event will be delivered pursuant to community partnerships and the public will be given access to areas normally off limits such as the Speaker and President's corridors, Parliamentary Dining Room and the Parliamentary Library.

The concept of performance-based delivery of information as an engagement or educational tool is a current focus of the Parliament. It is based on the concept that people can only read so many facts and that story-telling and humour often creates a connection or awakens their imagination so the information or experience resonates for a lot longer. It also reminds the public that Parliament is not a dry soulless place, but a living place.

Most on my wish list is the creation of a public forecourt at the front of Parliament House over the freeway. This would symbolically and practically link the city to the people's house, provide capacity for much needed accommodation and a civic space in which the public could exercise their democratic right to protest and in which Parliament could deliver engagement activities.

Educational Activities

Parliament delivers tours to about 15,000 people per annum, 11,650 of whom are school children.

With the release of the new Humanities and Social Sciences Curriculum Civics and Citizenship Concepts, the Western Australian Parliament will in the coming 12 months re-configure its educational tours to address the skills and concepts in each of the year levels. A review of existing educational resources to align them with the curriculum will also occur. A new student activity workbook and teachers notes are currently being developed as a preparatory and post tour resource for upper primary school with the development of an Indigenous resource for remote schools next on the agenda. These will be trialled with relevant schools prior to their introduction to establish buy-in. It is intended that Professional Development of teachers will be introduced in 2016 to

accompany the new resources and to prepare teachers for the mandated introduction of the civics and citizenship stream in 2017.

Parliament has since the establishment of a dedicated Aboriginal People's Room and Gallery in 2004 acquired considerable Indigenous Art, including through a partnership arrangement with Edith Cowan University. The Sergeant-at-Arms has recently reviewed art tours delivered by the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments with a view to introducing similar tours in the Western Australian Parliament.

Parliament partnered with Heritage Perth for their 2015 Walk and Talk Series delivering a series of talks on governance in the Parliamentary Library and a tour of the Parliament House gardens. This month we will be undertaking a trial talk and tour series involving presentations by former Members of Parliament on Parliament and the role of a Member of Parliament followed by an educational tour of the House. These will be also held in the Parliamentary Library Café and refreshments will be provided. Ongoing consideration will be given to different tour options to cater for different interest groups.

In 2014 Parliament increased the reach of its public tour advertising in newspapers and through the erection of signage around key entry/exit points of the Parliament grounds. A subsequent survey showed between 1 March 2014 and 28 February 2015 a 24.5% increase from newspaper advertising and a 10.9% increase from signage. Currently advertising is being modernised and brochures and publications are being re-drafted to include contemporary language and colourful and engaging graphics.

Parliament has a well-established Research Program involving students from the five state universities in the research and delivery of a report on a topic of interest submitted by a Member of Parliament. In 2015, 33 students have enrolled in the program. The program outcomes are under review and consideration is being given to how to more effectively integrate learning about roles and functions of Parliament and its Members into the program. The orientation program was realigned with this purpose in mind and it is proposed that a Question and Answer session with Members of Parliament be afforded to university students later this year.

In 2014, as the result of a partnership arrangement with the Parliament, Murdoch University established a Parliamentary Studies Unit, which is being trialled over three years. The unit run at Parliament House involves a series of seminars delivered by Parliament on:

- the Australian Parliamentary Model;
- the history and evolution of Australian Parliaments;
- Parliamentary practice;
- the Committee system;
- the future of Parliament in a 'post-democracy'; and
- testing theory and knowledge: an insight tour of Parliament

The Heads of Department, Parliamentary Fellows and Presiding Officers deliver guest lectures to university students about the work of the House followed by a Question and Answer session. Another lecture was recently delivered to Curtin University on the operations of the Western Australian Parliament.

Since 2005 Parliament House has partnered with the floristry school at Challenger Institute of Technology (TAFE). Annually, several students studying in their final semester of the Certificate III in Floristry attend training at Parliament House, working with flowers and other plant material provided by Parliament House. The training provides students with a real opportunity to learn how to work to a professional standard and meet the industry expectation of work completion within specified time frames. Students are taught to be economical with all materials, recycling and replenishing where possible, as well as sourcing plant material from the Parliament House garden. The Presiding Officers acknowledge and thank each graduating group by hosting a morning tea. Since the program commenced the Floristry team have won multiple state and national titles, including the state and national 'Interflora Florist of the Year' title 2013.

Parliament also recently commenced a program of school-based apprentice chefs, with two apprentices currently on board. Apprentices undertake training through TAFE while completing school, with practicum experience under the tutelage of Parliament's Head Chef and catering team.

Parliament is progressively undertaking evaluation of its educational programs to ensure they meet their established objectives, including with respect to community engagement.

Outreach Activities

Since 2009 the Western Australian Parliament has delivered an outreach program called Making Laws for All. The program aims to improve equity of access to Parliamentary education for Years 5-7 students who reside in regional and remote locations of Western Australia and who have limited access to the educational programs delivered at Parliament House. The program is based on principles of empowerment, is culturally appropriate and highly interactive, and caters for different literacy levels. Community examples of rules and decision-making are used to parallel decision-making processes in Parliament.

The program is currently under review given recognition that there may be alternative modes of delivery that will ensure better integration of concepts into the overall teaching program for improved comprehension. The Indigenous-specific resource which Parliament intends to develop will ensure lessons are a lot more experiential and hands on, essentially based more on kinaesthetic learning. Parliament will also be exploring opportunities for professional development with remote teachers and electronic means of delivery of information, particularly given improvements in internet access and the use of interactive whiteboards and touch screen televisions.

As part of the development of its strategy, Parliament will be giving consideration to how to reach people in locations they operate from or frequent and how to improve the presentation of information on our website and its interactivity. There is also an identified requirement for a portable display on Parliament that could be used at professional learning sessions for teachers, educational conferences, libraries, fairs, etc. This will provide greater reach in relation to the work of the House.

Support platforms to facilitate Member involvement with the public

Members host student tour refreshments (as well as community groups on request) and are invited to participate in tours relevant to their electorate or region. Members are also encouraged to join with Education staff in the delivery of remote and regional outreach programs in their respective

region, the Parliamentary Research Program and provide tutelage in relation to the Statewide Student Parliament on Parliamentary procedure. As detailed, Former Members are being trialled in the delivery of public talks held within Parliament.

Parliament ensures that high-quality facilities are made available to Ministers to host industry functions that encourage reciprocal exchange of information between government and peak organisations.

As Presiding Officers we also host Parliamentary functions where formal talks or discussions occur centring on the work of Parliament and Parliamentary democracy with an accompanying tour of the House. Examples include functions that recognise a wide range of community groups and individuals for their contribution to the community and organisations that promote economic development in the State.

Members have also been encouraged to establish Parliamentary Friendship Groups, similar to the Australian Parliament. These are informal apolitical groups open to all Members that aim to raise awareness of the group's established purpose and increase liaison with Members of Parliament. Seven have been established to date and include groups focused on culture, medical issues, carers, tourism and hospitality.

Members of Parliament have also recently become more involved in public awareness campaigns wearing various lapel pins and ribbons and requests can now be made to the Presiding Officers to light the House to promote a particular awareness campaign.

In addition to a media focus we have been targeting Members of Parliament on occasion through pre-prepared newsletter articles for inclusion in Members' electorate newsletters as well as disseminating event flyers.

Conclusion

In 2006 the Hansard Society in *Reaching the Public: An examination of options for Parliamentary Outreach* stated that it was important not to overstate the problem in relation to public disengagement from politics and that claims of a full-blown crisis were exaggerated. Further, the Society argued that there had never been a 'golden age' of democracy, with election results from as far back as the 1950s and 60s showing public knowledge and understanding of the political system as relatively low and that politicians and Parliament had never been particularly trusted or liked. While Gilbert and Sullivan mercilessly caricatured and denigrated Parliament and Members of Parliament, the Hansard Society argued that although distrust, disinterest and lack of knowledge had always existed, this was not an excuse for ignoring the issue.²²

The 2011 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement, which was five years subsequent to this report, recorded a significant decline over a 10 year period on the impact of Parliament on the lives of the community. In this regard, Australia is not faring that well either.

I strongly argue therefore that community engagement and the development of community engagement strategies and plans become an integral part of the business of Parliament under the

²² Hansard Society, *Reaching the Public: An examination of options for Parliamentary Outreach*, 2006, p4.

committed leadership of the Presiding Officers and Heads of Department. Opportunities exist in the community engagement space for greater information sharing and collaborative approaches across Australasian Parliaments, including around strategy development and shared resources (generic publications or educational resources). It would be useful if consideration could be given to the establishment of an email group similar to the Information Technology Forum ANZPIT to progress information exchange and to examine opportunities for collaboration.

Finally, for community engagement to be effective, we as Members of Parliament must first and foremost conduct ourselves in a manner that reflects the value of the institution of Parliament. It is only from this foundation that any approach to engagement will be successful.