Community Engagement in a Parliamentary Context — the Queensland Experience

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I will be discussing Community Engagement in a Parliamentary Context. But who am I to discuss community engagement with you?

In July 2007 the Queensland Parliament formally embarked on a journey to more fully engage with the Queensland community it represents when it established the Community Engagement unit. I was appointed the Manager of that unit in August 2007.

The Community Engagement unit I now manage has staff with skills in media and communication, multimedia, publications, education, protocol, historical research, Indigenous liaison, and community engagement. Queensland is currently unique in the Australian parliamentary system — as the only parliament focusing on community engagement where all of the aspects listed above are managed in a co-ordinated way.

Therefore, I am in a unique position to discuss today's topic — *Community Engagement in a Parliamentary Context*.

But what am I actually going to discuss? Well, I will begin at the beginning and briefly define and explain community engagement. Then I will discuss community engagement in a parliamentary environment illustrated with an example. I will briefly discuss why a parliament should undertake community engagement. And in conclusion, I will outline the Queensland Parliament's vision for the future of community engagement.

Community engagement is an emerging discipline, drawing from wide fields of practice including political science and public administration. An increasing amount of information is also being published by community engagement practitioners themselves.

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As a result of its evolving status, whenever a group of community engagement practitioners gather to discuss 'what is engagement?', a discussion about diversity of language usually emerges.

This cartoon therefore sums up community engagement nicely!

'Engagement' can involve consultation, extension or liaison, communication, education, public participation and working in partnership. So community engagement is all of these things — and more!

Cartoons are fine, but we are a group interested in the scholarly — otherwise we would not be attending a conference held by the Australian Study of Parliament Group — so what is a scholarly definition of community engagement?

As community engagement is an emerging discipline, there is currently more than one accepted definition of community engagement. But within the literature, there is broad agreement on the basic concepts, principles and good practice approaches for community engagement.

Defining Community Engagement

I believe the most useful definition of community engagement has been developed by the International Association for Public Participation, also known as IAP2. For this speech, the terms community engagement and public participation are meant to be the same.

IAP2 is an organisation that has been developing, supporting and promoting the practice of community engagement throughout the world since 1990.

And it defines community engagement as 'any process that involves the community in problem solving or decision-making and uses community input to make better decisions'.

So this definition shows that community engagement is about making decisions.

And it makes it clear that communities should be engaged about decisions that are yet to be made, not with a view to hard-sell decisions already made. And if anyone watched the ABC show — the Hollowmen on Wednesday night — you'll know what I mean!

So good community engagement is about ensuring that the community feels that they have been heard, feel comfortable with the process and the basis on which the decision was made, even if they aren't happy about the outcome.

IAP2 has also developed a Public Participation or Community Engagement Spectrum to demonstrate five different levels of engagement possible with communities.[1] I am going to spend some time explaining this spectrum as it really is the 'heart and soul' of community engagement. To the community engagement experts in the audience, I beg your indulgence.

This spectrum shows an increasing level of public impact as you progress from 'inform' (at the left) through to 'empower (at the right)'.

Inform

At the *inform* level, you aim to make the decision-making process transparent by providing balanced and objective information. So you are letting people know what you will do and how it will be done.

Consult

Moving up the spectrum to *consult*, you continue to inform the community, but you are now also seeking feedback. By seeking this feedback, you are promising the

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[1] Twyford Consulting, Beyond Public meetings: Connecting Community Engagement with Decision-Making, 2006, p. 135. Also see: www.iap2.org.au

community that you will listen to and consider that feedback and use it in the decision-making process.

Involve

At the *Involv*e level, you are seeking more than just feedback. You are saying that you want to work with the community to generate new ideas. To work at this level of engagement, you are acknowledging that you don't have all the answers and believe that the community knows something that you don't. You are also saying that you would like to identify this information sooner rather than later, so you can base your decision on this information.

Up until this stage on the community engagement spectrum, the responsibility for making the ultimate decision rests entirely with the decision-maker and not with the community. This relationship now changes as you move further along the spectrum.

Collaborate

At the *collaborate* level, you actually want the community to help you make the decision and therefore share the responsibility for the decision.

Empower

Ultimately, at the *Empowe*r level, you are saying that the community only is going to make the decision and will become responsible for its implications and outcomes. Therefore, as you move from left to right along the IAP2 spectrum, the community is invited to have an increasing impact and therefore responsibility for the decision, to the point, at the Empower level, the community becomes the decision-maker.

People tend to think that engagement occurring at the inform level is less difficult than engagement occurring at the empower end of the spectrum. But in reality, no part of the spectrum is harder or more preferable than another.

Here are some examples of some of the community engagement tools and techniques often used at the different levels on the IAP2 community engagement spectrum.[2]

At the *inform* stage, tools include those quite familiar to most of us such as *fact sheets, websites, media releases and open days*. Obviously the tools change as you move up the spectrum to more fully include and empower the community through *focus groups and surveys at the consult level, workshops at the involve level, and committees at the collaborate level*. At the *empower level*, where the community becomes responsible for making the decision, tools used include *ballots and delegated decisi*ons.

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[2]   Source: Developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), 2004. See: www.iap2.org.au

Most community engagement projects tend to operate in the first three levels — inform, consult and involve. However, there may be aspects of a project or decision that operate at the collaborative or empower levels.

It is important to note that the one decision may actually involve the community at different levels on the spectrum for different aspects of that decision. For example, let's say we all lived in a fictional location called Springfield and the government of Springfield decides to locate a nuclear plant in the community.

The decision to locate the nuclear plant has been made and is now a given, so engagement would occur only at the inform level to let the community know of the decision.

However, to soften the blow, the government may decide to undertake some additional engagement where the community could be empowered on certain aspects of the nuclear plant placement. They may say that although the nuclear plant has been placed in your community, we will empower you to have the final decision on the flowers we place in the garden outside the reactor.

Now obviously, this is a facetious and entirely fictional example and it would never happen in real life. As if the community would actually be empowered to decide on the flowers. However, this example does demonstrate that within the one project, the community may be engaged at different levels of the spectrum during the course of the decision being made.

In summary, community engagement can occur at different levels and at different times during a project. I have just defined community engagement.

The Abergowrie Youth Parliament

Now, we will turn our attention to community engagement in a parliamentary context. And a good way of explaining this is through a practical example.

In April this year, a youth parliament for senior secondary school students was hosted by Abergowrie College and was held in Ingham, in north Queensland between Townsville and Cairns. Over ninety secondary students from 3 local schools participated. Just like other youth parliaments, the aim was to provide students with a parliamentary experience based on the processes and procedures of the Queensland Parliament.

This in itself is nothing extraordinary, every Australian parliament undertakes similar such events each year. But this youth parliament did differ.

Abergowrie College's involvement in this event was born out of students making a valuable and enthusiastic contribution to a parliamentary committee inquiry. The

Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee held an inquiry in April 2007 into issues concerning Indigenous Queenslanders. As a result of that inquiry, the students requested a youth parliament to explore other issues of importance to youth in the local area.

To ensure the students knew the parliament was listening to them and interested in getting their input on a range of issues, the Community Engagement unit facilitated the youth parliament, partnering with the Department of Communities.

The students debated a bill and participated in an adjournment debate during which they were allowed to speak on youth issues falling within the jurisdiction of the Queensland Parliament.

Additionally, to extend learning outcomes beyond the Westminster system of governance, the Parliament's Indigenous Liaison Officer conducted a yarning circle to model Indigenous governance. During the yarning circle, recommendations from the Youth Violence Taskforce Report were debated. It emerged that many local students supported the establishment of a police citizens youth centre (PCYC) in Ingham. All of the debates and information gathered have been provided to the local Member, the Department of Communities and the Youth Violence Taskforce.

In terms of community engagement, this activity operated at several levels on the IAP2 spectrum as it involved several decisions:

At the Inform level — it educated students and teachers on parliamentary and deliberative processes. It broke down barriers and showed that parliament was interested in the students' opinions and also that the parliament is an institution with relevance to them and their local community;

At the Consult level of engagement — The parliament was able to demonstrate that it would action feedback received through the committee process — they requested a local youth parliament on topics of interest to them and we delivered. Further, students were asked to debate and provide input on a number of youth issues;

At the Involve engagement level — The students' opinions, concerns and aspirations on youth safety, education, health, community service and driver safety were provided to the decision-making bodies involved with the youth issues. Out of this process the idea for a PCYC arose;

And this event could possibly even extend to operating at the Collaborate level as I believe that the local member is now working with the students to ensure that their desire for a police citizens youth club is actually achieved.

So why is the Abergowrie Youth Parliament a good example of community engagement in a parliamentary context? It fits the definition of a community engagement activity as it involved the community in a decision-making process

where they had input and influence on the outcome. It was apolitical involving local National Party and Labor Party members working in a collaborative manner to engage with the community. It resulted from a committee process. It occurred regionally, so the Parliament is reaching out into the community, and not operating as an institution remote to regional Queenslanders.

The event resulted in 90 students, their teachers, and through the media, other local community members being provided with a better understanding of parliamentary and decision-making processes and most importantly, how they can become involved and contribute to those processes;

Apparently it was also the first time that the local schools in the area had worked together. They had only ever competed against each other — on the sports field, in the arts and academically — this time, they worked collaboratively to achieve a positive outcome. It involved Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, serving as a useful reconciliation activity. The event provided the local member with valuable community input he would not have otherwise been able to access easily. And most importantly it built capacity and resulted in better outcomes for the community.

It therefore ticks all the community engagement boxes. And I believe this example demonstrates that community engagement activities enable parliaments to play an important role in building positive relationships between itself, its members and the community.

Public Participation Spectrum

But this is just one activity, there are numerous community engagement activities possible in a parliamentary context. Earlier, I showed you possible tools that could be used at each level along the community engagement spectrum.

Facilitating Tools

I now list tools that can be used to facilitate community engagement in a parliamentary context. This list is certainly not exhaustive, and provides only a glimpse of possible activities that parliaments can use to engage with the community. I am not going to go through them all individually and many of them we already use, but they can be fine tuned to ensure they become more valuable engagement activities for all involved — the parliament, its members and the community. And you may note, I list Members, their electorate offices, and committees as the primary tools for engagement between the parliament and the community at all levels of the spectrum except empower. This is because I firmly believe, along with other commentators, that the parliament as an institution has a role in supporting its members in an apolitical way to create opportunities and relationships for directly involving the public in its work.

Community Engagement or Public Participation Spectrum					
Public participation goal	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Increasing Level of Public Impact →					
Parliamentary examples	o Members/ EO o Committees o Fact sheets o Other parliamentary information – Tabled papers database o Website o Open days o Public tours/ virtual tour o Media releases o Education activities – public service seminars o Hansard o Broadcast of proceedings	o Members/ EO o Committees – submissions/ public hearings o Surveys o Petitions o Education activities – role plays	o Members/EO o Committees – submissions/ public hearings o Workshops o Education activities – Youth Parliaments	o Members/ EO o Committees o Advisory groups e.g. Indigenous Working Group	o Elections and by/elections o Referendums o Citizen juries

Source: International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), 2004, amended by Glenda Emmerson, 2008.

The previous list was of *possible* parliamentary examples of community engagement. I now list for you *actual* examples of activities we have undertaken at the Queensland Parliament over the past year.

They are many and varied — from creating a brand 'Everyone's Parliament' to jointly promoting Queensland wines and the parliament, appointing an Indigenous Liaison Officer, and launching a website which details the many ways Queenslanders can 'engage' with their parliament. And this is just at the inform level. Moving along the spectrum to consult, activities have included surveys during NAIDOC week; youth parliaments at the involve level through to collaborate — where we have worked with an Indigenous Advisory Group to have a range of activities undertaken.

Again, this list is certainly not exhaustive, and I'd be happy to discuss with you some of the specifics of these projects later if you are interested.

Looking ahead, activities such as the upcoming regional sitting of Parliament in October this year, the 150th anniversary of the Parliament in 2010, which follows on from the State's anniversary next year, will be the major focus of our future community engagement activities.

So we have just discussed: What is community engagement in a parliamentary environment?

Parliament and Community Engagement

Now, we will briefly turn our attention to Why should a parliament undertake community engagement?

Many international studies support parliaments undertaking activities which enable a closer link between the community, members and it as an institution. In the short time we have available, I will discuss just one of those studies.

In 2005, the UK Hansard Society published a report titled Neglecting Society.3 In that report, concerns about political disengagement were discussed. Specifically, the report acknowledged significant changes in society were occurring as a result of many trends and factors. This report stated that 'Parliament has lost power while the executive has grown stronger, bigger, more amorphous and less accountable…'

The report went on to say that 'Parliament is now ignored by the public and fails to interest the media.'

If true, this is a serious situation and should be a concern to us all here today!

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[3] Source: Hansard Society, *Neglecting Democracy,* 2005, p 28.

Community Engagement or Public Participation Spectrum					
Public participation goal	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Practical Examples at the Queensland Parliament	o 'Everyone's Parliament' brand o Fact sheets o Website (which centrally lists way to engage with the parliament) o Indigenous Liaison Officer o Wind Yarn didgeridoo o Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags o Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners o Queensland wine project o Regional Parliament	o Regional Parliament o Indigenous Liaison Officer o Education activities o Surveys - NAIDOC	o Regional Parliament o Indigenous Liaison Officer o Education activities – Youth Parliament	o Regional Parliament o Indigenous Liaison Officer o Indigenous Advisory Working Group o Artist in residence	o None (so far)

Source: International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), 2004, amended by Glenda Emmerson, 2008

The Hansard Society believed that the political system, especially the parliament, needed to respond and adapt to changes in society. They suggested that to address the problem, Parliament needed to be more assertive as an institution and that it had to explore ways of stimulating public interest in its work, experimenting with methods of directly involving the public. Specifically, they suggested the development of systems that enables MPs to listen more to what the public has to say.

Community engagement processes such as those discussed are just one way — but a very important way — a parliament can reassert its place as a central player in the decision-making processes that occur every day. And through community engagement, the parliament can act in an apolitical way to enable MPs to hear, and then act upon, what the community has to say.

The Future

But where do we go from here?

Through the examples I have discussed, I believe I have been able to demonstrate that the traditional institution of parliament can use the emerging practice of community engagement to empower the community it represents. Importantly, community engagement activities offer an opportunity for parliaments to reposition themselves as a central player in the decision-making process.

As they said in the *Hollowmen* television show on the ABC — Watch this space!

We continue to work on the ways we can incorporate community engagement into the parliamentary environment.

Conclusion

I conclude with the hope that you come away from this discussion this morning with a better understanding of community engagement and an appreciation of how community engagement processes can assist parliaments and its members to build more productive and positive relationships with the community.

It is my aim in my current role to ensure community engagement assists the Queensland Parliament in returning to its central role in decision-making, thus increasing its relevance to the community to become 'Everyone's Parliament!'   ▲