

# **Engaging in the Future: Overcoming the Limitations of Parliamentary Representation**

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The paper will begin by exploring why engagement with public and public interests might be considered a virtuous activity for any Parliament to encourage. Then it will focus on the potential and limitations for such involvement in the work of Parliament, drawing on personal experiences as a New Zealand Parliamentarian in representing a busy and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)-intensive electorate generating large volumes of individual and agency casework; in developing and delivering training for NGOs in lobbying politicians; and in chairing Parliament's key law reform Select Committee for six years. It will conclude with recommendations applicable to all Parliaments and MPs and a vision for how the eternal Parliamentary challenge of engaging with the outside world might be tackled over the next decade. In traversing this path, the paper will use as its driver the move to create alternative decision-making or focussed debating forums to by-pass or largely supplement traditional democratic forms. It will question whether traditional democracy can transform itself to achieve the essence of the intended outcomes of those new developments.

## ***Introduction***

A contemporary Parliament, by its nature, involves a great quantity of decision-makings' being delegated by the public to a small group of individuals. Inevitably satisfactory representation can be difficult. At the very least, genuine engagement by Parliament with its citizenry offers an antidote to the distance between citizens and those who make the laws which affect them. This paper will explore three key points of engagement between the public and Parliament: direct engagement at Electorate level, the lobbying of Members of Parliament (MPs), *and* the Select Committee process.

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Its focus is on how the quality of these points of engagement can be improved so that Parliament is still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the face of heightened yet often vague calls for a delegation of decision making ‘*back to the people*’, Parliaments, in terms of their structures, and Parliamentarians, in terms of their character and flexibility, have the ability to demonstrate in tangible terms that they have the imagination and adaptability to develop new means of eliciting the views of the populace in ways that avoid the sovereignty of Parliament being weakened.

### ***Why is Engagement Important?***

Democracies are underpinned by the theory that individuals should have a ‘say’ in how they are governed. This principle manifests itself in parliamentary democracies through a delegated ‘say’ in law making- representation of the many via a small number of MPs. It follows that any opportunity for engagement through which the various elements of society can communicate their views and influence decision making has the capacity to increase peoples’ influence on laws; such a process is not confined to a general election. Engagement goes some way towards redressing the amount of power which is ‘given up’ by the citizenry to the government of the day. Philip Parvin and Declan McHugh argue that by strengthening the ‘chain of command’ from the voting populace to decisions made in Parliament, Parliament can increase its legitimacy, lifting its quality of representation to a higher level (Parvin & McHugh 2005, 649). The people will trust Parliament’s decisions more if they believe that they have informed or influenced the nature of legislation, or that it is possible for them to have such an effect. Parvin and McHugh suggest that declining membership of political parties, declining voter turnout, and declining trust in government can be linked to a break in the democratic ‘chain in command’:

The problem is not widespread political apathy, but rather that a vital link that connected citizens to the state and the formal democratic process has been broken (Parvin & McHugh 2005, 640).

Engagement with the citizenry is virtuous for a number of practical reasons. First engagement through methods other than voting allows minority groups who may not otherwise register on the agenda of the majority, to make an impact. Numerically small religious, ethnic, or single issue groups who will often not determine the outcome of an election, have a chance to influence MPs generally through the medium of agency and individual contact. Under New Zealand’s Mixed Member Proportional system, a greater range of viewpoints and thus entry points for lobbying are encompassed in the Parliament. This has occurred both through a wider range of political parties — among contemporary Parliamentary parties ACT, the Greens, the Maori Party, the Progressives and United Future have all appeared in Parliament since the introduction of MMP in 1996, and the wider racial, geographic and sexuality mix, and the greater number of women MPs, generated by the party list system. Thus some minority groups are already represented, tempering the complete grasp on control the majority may have in other parliamentary systems. For minorities which would find it difficult to pass the 5% vote threshold a

party needs to enter New Zealand's Parliament, or who do not have a member capable of winning an electorate seat (the alternative route to Parliament), or do not have advocates in Parliament from one or more political parties, points of engagement may be the only chances they have to influence decision making. For Parliaments which use an electoral system that has typically discouraged small parties, First Past the Post (FPP) systems for example, this form of minority influence can be especially important (Mulgan 2004, 58).

Second, engagement with the citizenry can enrich and aid MPs in the policy and law making process. For example, groups with a special interest in a given health issue can add to MPs' knowledge, and thus ease understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a current health bill. Elected representatives are faced day after day with a broad range of complex policy issues and often require special background knowledge to fully appreciate the issue. For example, groups or individuals who have specific knowledge of an area of science law or social service provision, can better aid the chance of an informed decision being made by the MP. Furthermore, numerically small sections of society communicating their interest in a policy better informs a decision made by an MP or a Parliament. A broader range of opinions and ideas garnered or proffered on a specific policy issue, as opposed to the broad platform via which MPs get elected, can alert MPs to the distinct effects of a policy on any given sector of society — not just on the 'majority.'

The challenge for MPs is to reinforce the 'chain of command' by strengthening the existing points of engagement, without actually abdicating law-making power to some other body than Parliament. Calls for powerful citizens' assemblies, more referenda and direct democracy initiatives threaten rather than enhance the basis of the representative system. Representative democracy allows ordinary citizens to elect the person who will best see to their interests, whether that be by way of Burkean representation or representation which seeks to mirror exactly the electorate's anticipated or known views on policy. Both of these systems recognise that the business of government, whether in the legislature or executive, is time consuming and requires decision-makers with particular skills who can look to the 'wider' interest. These characteristics of government weaken the average citizen in his powers of governance, regardless of whether he is chosen by ballot or emerges through a volunteering system onto a forum or voting in a referendum. Although citizens will be strong judges of what is in their or perceived wider 'community' interest, they lack the skills, information, resources or sheer time and effort required to clearly evaluate proposed law, which in a Parliamentary democracy will affect everyone, not just that individual. It is for this reason that any attempt at direct democracy generally incurs large expense to provide citizens with the resources needed to make specific decisions or produce recommendations on legislation and policy in a particular area. While quite possibly producing a satisfactory outcome on that particular matter, it begs the question of how the rest of the wide range of decisions which continually have to be made in the public interest are to be made.

Any attempt to set up an alternative body of ‘government’, whether via referenda or citizens’ assembly, risks poor decision-making unless it is provided with enough resources to essentially become a second sovereign decision-maker. If achieved, this then raises fundamental questions about the purpose of the original democratic body. The solution down in the ‘chain of command’ is surely not to create a second chain and leave the first one discarded and broken. The solution is to strengthen the command from people to sovereign legislature, thus refreshing and bolstering legitimacy for Parliaments to add reinforcement to the original chain. Fragmented sovereign bodies lack a clear mandate, weaken each others’ legitimacy, and compromise effective law-making. Parliaments must improve the quality of engagement with the citizenry to answer calls for a dilution of their power in a positive way.

### ***Electorates as a Point of Engagement***

Although parliamentary electoral systems vary, geographically defined electorates (with sole or multiple members) are a key characteristic of most democracies. Tim Barnett’s electorate (Christchurch Central in the South Island of New Zealand) comprises approximately 62,000 people for whom he is the sole formal parliamentary representative. Electorate MPs aim to represent their geographical area as a whole and influence decisions relevant to their specific electorate. They are the visible face of Parliament (and Government, if their party is in power) in their area. They handle problems brought to them by the public, often involving Government agencies. In the New Zealand Parliament, List MPs often carry out a similar role for the electorate or electorates allocated to them. Most voters thus have a choice of MPs from two or more parties to contact; in Tim’s central city electorate they have a choice of four. The design of electoral systems is of essential importance to the existence of a strong base for engagement; if citizens have only one MP to choose from in their quest to engage and that MP is deeply hostile to their issue, they are unlikely to make much progress or to improve their appreciation of the positive qualities of democracy.

If deeper engagement of MPs with constituents is to meaningfully reinvigorate the ‘chain of command’, groups or individuals must genuinely feel that by engagement with individual MPs they can have some direct influence on broader decision making. Electorate MPs’ local offices are the primary physical method by which constituents can engage with their representative, but e-mail also plays a major role in discourse and influence and most MPs are regularly visible throughout their Electorate in a round of regular visits and attendance at public events.

A contemporary, active and outcome-focussed Electorate MP should be working beyond the ‘problem receiving and visibility maximising’ model. Three examples from Tim’s work are:

Collecting from individual casework evidence of the law and/or policy not working as well as it could in certain areas, and producing reports for colleagues and Ministers (this should be done privately when in power, publicly when in opposition) — e.g. the child support law, aspects of the family reunification policies within Immigration law.

Using the resources of the Parliamentary Library to give local NGOs the evidence they need to put forward a case, for example concerning increased funding for their work. A recent such instance involved an agency providing social support and advocacy for prison inmates, whose funding per inmate had declined markedly after rapidly rising prisoner numbers.

Working with the disputes resolution service attached to the Accident Compensation scheme, but available on contract to other Government departments, to help solve apparently intractable and very long-term problems brought by constituents, and involving Government agencies.

Of course attending to, advocating for and representing over 60,000 people in an electorate is a difficult if not impossible task for one MP and their two staff. As electorates grow in population numbers (a reality built in to the New Zealand electoral arrangements) and diversity (a reality born of demographic trends and globalisation), their needs will metamorphose as they incorporate a wider range of distinct groups of the citizenry. This constitutes a growing limitation on the ability of the electorate MP to effectively represent their constituency — the push will be for quantity of engagement (e.g. communicating with as many in the electorate as possible) as opposed to quality of engagement. The tools of technology, which have helped shorten ‘social paths’ (Harris 1995, 8) in New Zealand and around the globe, provide both a hindrance and a potential aid to the electorate MPs’ ability to have quality engagement with their electorate.

### ***The Use of Email in Engagement with Politicians***

The large increase in correspondence via email — both absolute, and as a proportion of total communication — has generated a number of issues for MPs when seeking effective engagement with the electorate. It is very easy to contact an MP via e-mail, certainly easier than using normal post or physically meeting with them. Although this has obvious benefits for those who wish to contact their MP in a cheap and time-efficient manner, the amount of correspondence that an MP receives has, with the onset of e-mails, been rising dramatically. Along with the increase in quantity of correspondence, there is also placed upon the MP (or his or her staff) an increased demand for an immediate reply — and, especially with the nearly universal use of BlackBerries among MPs, there is a heightened risk of intemperate comments being made as the MP responds directly; the usual quality controls are absent. Since e-mails can easily be sent to all MPs without containing any information on where the sender lives, there can result significant duplication or

confusion — or a collective silence from all 121 MPs if the problem presented is particularly intractable. The high volume, accelerating use of e-mail communication indicates an apparently unlimited quantity of individuals or groups trying to engage with MPs. Their response to e-mails and ability to discuss issues of importance suffers unless appropriate resource allocations are made to cope with the increased communication.

Of course, e-mails are also substitution for face-to-face engagement. An MP becomes another ‘figure of public authority’, similar to the often faceless members of the public service with whom citizens also engage via new technologies, for purposes of taxation, welfare, immigration, and so on. This relative anonymity, compared to those who, for example meet with their local electorate MP, decreases the likelihood of relationships forming between MPs and their constituents (awkward); constituents cannot ‘put a face’ to their representative and advocate. Furthermore, the anonymity that e-mail provides constituents is a good example of the difficulties created by ‘geographical shrinkage’ in which physical barriers no longer exist to contacting certain MPs, technology generating a far larger pool of people who can easily contact MPs.

E-mail allows a new and easy way for individuals and groups to engage with MPs, but the quality of that engagement is called into question by the characteristics of that engagement. Mere communication does not represent a real use of a point of engagement, such as the engagement that can come from a constituent-MP relationship.

### ***Online Engagement for Electorate MPs***

A promising approach to strengthening engagement for electorate MPs is to create online spaces directed at and more importantly reserved for people living in their electorate. The experience of a UK select committee on aspects of Defence Force Personnel Policy indicates that having an online tool, such as an online forum accessible only by a select group or community (in that case defence force personnel) and with the specific purpose of discussing specific topics, was a positive one. The participants, 75% of whom had not contacted their MP previously, overwhelmingly believed after the experiment that it was a good method of consultation which they would recommend to others and would participate in again. (Ferguson 2008, 220–21) The key to the forum, as opposed to the less successful and overly ambitious ‘Citizen Space’ used by the UK government in 2001 (Ferguson 2008, 222), appears to be the structured nature of the engagement. A defined group within society was allowed to participate, MPs led the direction of discussion and the questions posed and many of the posts in the names of MPs were actually written by them. A structured online forum for local issues or even a local perspective on national issues is a way in which an MP could use new technology to have focused, quality engagement with their electorate. Obviously the example is from a select committee’s interaction with the public (and

is useful for that ‘point of engagement’ also), which raises the possibility that online forums may not be so effective in increasing the positive perceptions of citizens about government if the context was not that of a direct policy consideration leading to law drafting. One can envisage, though, a structured engagement which is still useful for the electorate MP: for the Burkean, it is an opportunity to logically reason their beliefs to constituents, at once better informing those beliefs (even if constituents’ views are not automatically followed) and also allowing constituents a chance to judge the reasoning of their representative; for those MPs who wish to mirror the wishes and views of their electorate as closely as possible, it is a comparatively easy way through which a constituency’s views on certain topics and issues can be garnered. Although it is difficult and undoubtedly politically counter-productive to deter those who have any variety of comments for an MP to e-mail them to that MP, an online forum does at the very least provide a venting space for some of those who do not require direct advocacy and advice but still wish to impart their views on policy to their representative in the national assembly, in a way that will more closely replicate conversation than traditional e-mail exchanges.

### ***Lobbying as a Point of Engagement***

Political lobbying can have many purposes and outcomes: raising awareness about a particular issue, agenda-setting, informing elected representatives, confirming decision makers’ minds or attempting to change them. At its most powerful, successful lobbying can be the catalyst for changing laws and creating new policies. Those who have the knowledge of process and the communication skills required to effectively lobby MPs, political parties or Government officials are found most frequently in highly developed sector interest groups (e.g. Local Government New Zealand), the corporate sector, or well-established NGOs. Having a paid lobbyist can be helpful, but groups without that luxury can still have substantial impact. Although a wide range of interests are thus able to effectively use lobbying to influence decision making and can replicate the skills and pass on the useful data obtained from contact with MPs etc from organisational generation to generation. However, ‘everyday’ individuals, voluntary sector groups and smaller, less experienced or culturally alienated NGOs often do not have the skills, or — having the skills — do not have the confidence to have the same impact on Parliament. The fact that knowledge on how to lobby is locked up in certain groups and sectors is a constraint on Parliament. Not only are MPs limited in the voices that they hear via lobbying, but individuals and small groups feel that their potential for engagement is modest and thus their ‘say’ is diminished in comparison to those who ably utilise lobbying to achieve their ends. Parliament and MPs can lessen this potential gulf in engagement and its consequent impact on the quality of laws and policies by actively educating interested groups in lobbying.

Tim Barnett has been planning and delivering political lobbying training workshops for NGOs and individual activists for ten years, while an MP. An average of 25 seminars have been presented each year (varying between 30 minutes and one day

in length), with an average 20 people attending each seminar. This equates to roughly 500 people a year increasing their or their organisation's ability to influence decision making. A booklet summarising the key messages contained in the training has been published, *Political Lobbying — how to plan and deliver a strategy to confirm, inform or change the minds of politicians*. It is distributed at the seminars and is also available on Tim's website. He deliberately has no copyright on it, and versions (some adapted for specific NGO or issue networks) exist in many places in many forms. The groups advised vary greatly, recent examples being the Methodist-Presbyterian Public Questions Committee, drug law reform activists, Christchurch Youth Mental Health Organisations, Tamil community leaders and the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society.

The booklet and seminars emphasise ten key 'steps' to lobby success:

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| 1. evaluating the intended message;                          | 11. evaluating the intended message;                          |
| 2. establishing the background to the issue;                 | 12. establishing the background to the issue;                 |
| 3. working to a lobbying plan;                               | 13. working to a lobbying plan;                               |
| 4. creating that plan;                                       | 14. creating that plan;                                       |
| 5. choosing the right point to intervene;                    | 15. choosing the right point to intervene;                    |
| 6. the importance of targeting the message;                  | 16. the importance of targeting the message;                  |
| 7. meeting politicians;                                      | 17. meeting politicians;                                      |
| 8. making submissions to a select committee or similar body; | 18. making submissions to a select committee or similar body; |
| 9. utilising the media, <i>and</i>                           | 19. utilising the media, <i>and</i>                           |
| 10. evaluation of the lobbying effort.                       | 20. evaluation of the lobbying effort.                        |

Although many aspects of the lobbying advice are of a practical nature (e.g. finding out the position and current stance of those whose minds you wish to influence, or the appropriate format and management of a press release) the booklet also indicates at what point in the decision-making process the point of engagement should occur. The booklet proffers a diagram of the 'system' of law-making and indicates that different 'categories' of people will need to be persuaded to the lobbyist's point of view at different stages of Parliament's decision making.

The lobby process is at its heart a marketing exercise. Through it, agencies and individuals select appropriate interventions to advance their cause. The role of the MP as strategic adviser to groups advancing causes which they support is a crucial way to improve engagement. To take three examples from Tim Barnett's work:

Diabetes New Zealand contacted Tim to help them rebalance their heavy focus on service delivery rather than policy reform and education and their low profile with politicians and other change-makers. Over the years he delivered training to their Board and Annual Conference, advised on the skills needed in a new Executive



Director who would be interfacing with MPs and Government officials, and then worked with them to establish a Parliamentary Grouping on Diabetes, which meets 4-6 times a year and attracts significant cross-party representation, receiving high-level briefings on research findings and service developments and holding Ministers to account.

A group wanting to promote New Zealand Government action to counter the effect of depleted uranium on returned service people sought to get the issue on the agenda. Tim advised them of the process by which Select Committees heard petitions; they prepared a petition and obtained significant publicity in presenting it to the Committee. The consideration of the petition is ongoing; the process has helped the group to communicate their beliefs and aspirations, and draw the attention of potential supporters to their existence.

A group seeking the cessation of sow crate use on grounds of animal cruelty wanted to educate MPs on the issues and ensure that their messages were memorable and consistent nationwide. Tim advised preparation of a power-point presentation; the group did this and showed it to Tim and others in a session designed to obtain feedback. After incorporating that feedback, the group produced and used a final version.

### ***Select Committees as a Point of Engagement***

Although select committees are utilised to varying degrees by many parliaments, the New Zealand select committee process facilitates an interchange between parliament and the public that is '*the most distinctive feature of New Zealand's parliamentary system*' (McGee 2005, 236). Select committees have been established for the following areas in the New Zealand Parliament:

Business;	Local Government and Environment;
Commerce;	Maori Affairs;
Education and Science;	Officers of Parliament;
Finance and Expenditure;	Primary Production;
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade;	Privileges;
Government Administration;	Regulations Review;
Health;	Social Services;
Justice and Electoral;	Standing Orders; <i>and</i>
Law and Order;	Transport and Industrial Relations.

With all but three of the Committees meeting at least once a week when Parliament is sitting. Membership of the committees as a whole is approximately proportionate to political parties' seats in the house. The committees' roles are: to consider legislation, report on petitions from the public, undertake financial review of government and parliamentary departments and organisations, examine international treaties, and inquire into any issue at the request of the House. They have the power to appoint independent advisers, summon witnesses and sit in

private or secret session. Select committees' primary interface with the public comes from the submissions they receive from individuals or groups. A guide to written submissions is available on Parliament's website. Submissions are initially made in writing (online submissions are increasingly common) requests to be heard orally are rarely refused. At that hearing supplementary information can be presented. This can be face to face (either in Parliament or around New Zealand during regional hearings), via videoconference (since April 2002; permanent videoconferencing facilities have subsequently been installed in Parliament's select committee rooms) or teleconference. This range of tools has the ability to once again allow Parliament to break down the geographical distance between itself and many of its constituents, allowing for ease of engagement.

The Select Committee system is the most robust aspect of the New Zealand Parliament's engagement with the public. Citizens can interact face-to-face with the MPs, who will report directly to Parliament on the issue under consideration. Oral submitters are asked questions directly relating to their position on the issue at hand and can bring other interested parties along from their group or organisation to help in presenting to the committee. If the quantity of submissions received and containing a request to be heard is particularly large, innovative hearing styles can be adopted (e.g. the 'town hall' method with people lining up to summarise their views in a couple of minutes at a microphone). With agreement, submitters can conduct debates with opposing submitters in front of the Committee or present particularly lengthy and substantial submissions, likely to be transcribed.

New Zealand's Select Committees are open for the public to watch during the hearing of submitted evidence, and they are also able to be televised if the committee assents. They rarely refuse! Recently, New Zealand's Parliament has created two very large Committee rooms to accommodate the large influx of viewers which attend select Committee hearings on controversial or important issues. This evidences a Parliament which is willing to engage with the public and assist those who wish to be a part of the Select Committee process. Any willingness of Parliament to open Select Committees to the wider public audience, though, must be tempered by observations made about sessions at Select Committees which have been televised: more often than not, MPs' behaviour noticeably changes to become more adversarial in the hope of gaining public awareness of the individual MP and their political party; those presenting submissions can feel even more intimidated than 'normal', having to speak in front of and be questioned by a range of MPs in full media performance mode. As Parliament moves towards more comprehensive televising of Committees, benefits which do come from a greater public audience must be judged in light of how many Select Committees will actually gain widely televised viewings. It seems likely that media will seek to focus on those dealing with highly controversial issues.

### *Potential Improvements for Select Committees*

MMP has seen Committees become less politically dependable for the incumbent Government, do more at their own initiative (for example, setting up inquiries), be asked frequently by Ministers to explore particular matters covered by bills, and tackle a wide range of high-level public interest legislative challenges which attract a very high volume of public submissions. While such incremental improvements are happening, increasing the level of robust engagement with the populace, it is hard to offer significant further suggestions for 'constitutional' reforms to improve the quality of New Zealand select committees. Indeed, such straightforward changes as the ability to meet for longer (at present many are groaning under a heavy workload and can only meet for 3½ hours per sitting week as of right) and to employ more senior support staff may be the priority concerns. Because select committees are such an effective form of engagement when considering legislation, Parliament could with comparative ease consider extending the amount of time which it devotes to select committees, which would, among other benefits, allow public submitters more time to present evidence to the committee than the few minutes they are usually allocated currently.

Committee Chairs do have considerable discretion to improve the style and standard of public engagement. When chairing the Justice & Electoral Committee 1999-2005, Tim Barnett worked with Committee staff to create an information handout for submitters, and introduced a consultation process with NGOs and other interested parties on matters to be raised in the twice-annual reviews of the work of Government agencies. Improved feedback also went to submitters once a Committee report was produced, with a reminder that all documents considered by the Committee in producing their report (including previous private reports from advisers appointed to work with the Committee) were available from the Parliamentary Library. More Chairs should use the discretion available to them.

In David McGee's 1994 recommendations for Parliamentary Reform, he suggested that the lack of ministers on select committees jeopardised the committees' effectiveness. It is true that having the minister who is 'in charge' of the legislation being considered would provide authority and direct contact between the committee (and submitters) and the bill's proponents but, now more than ever, as McGee recognised in 1994, ministers' hectic schedules makes their attendance (and quality contribution to) select committees practically unfeasible. With Ministers holding multiple portfolios, conflicts of interest would also be a significant risk.

One proposal emerging in Christchurch has been the establishment of a Democracy Centre, an independently funded agency running physical, electronic, and educational services to support citizens seeking to engage with local and central Government and Parliament, bringing together groups with common concerns about issues, training in lobby skills, advertising the availability of elected representatives.

At a more modest level, Parliament's assistance (e.g. leaflets, website) to those who wish to be a part of the Select Committee process, although good, could be refocused and expanded to widen knowledge of Select Committees as a point of engagement. Parliament currently only advises the public of a call for submissions via newspapers, which of course will only notify that readership. Notification of a call for evidence from select committees could be given on more non-traditional news sources (online news websites, blogs, radio, television, e-mail groups set up for various topic areas). Furthermore, there is room for Parliament to take a proactive education role in providing workshops (perhaps similar to the lobbying workshops discussed above) accessible to New Zealanders in all parts of the country to illustrate and explain the select committee process of engagement. Some may argue that Parliament can only 'cope' with so many submitters, yet Select Committees have been flexible in accommodating those interested so far. Furthermore, they always have control over the number of oral submissions they will accept and the length of time they will give to submitters during which they can present evidence to the committee. There is room for greater education about the ability of the public to make submissions, and encouragement of that form of focused, quality engagement.

### ***Wider Limitations for Parliamentary Engagement***

Any future increase in the quantity or quality of efforts by MPs to engage with the wider public must take into account the following factors: the necessity to target youth (persons born after 1970 are about 22% less likely to vote than those born before 1933), the necessity to target those in low-income groups (who are overrepresented in negative engagement statistics), the necessity to engage with the widening range of ethnic communities, which have varying levels of organisation and a great variety of cultural norms, and the necessity to make sure that any utilisation of modern technology does not exacerbate pre-existing discrepancies between those best off in our societies and those worst off (Vowles 2004). Many of the ways in which Parliament can increase or has increased, engagement between itself and the public is through the utilisation of new technologies. Video conferencing with a Select Committee, engaging in an online electorate MP's forum, or accessing the vast amounts of information available to the public about Parliament all require physical access to the appropriate technology as well as the skills and resources needed to utilise that technology. Not only will those requirements be least likely to be met by citizens who are poor, but also these requirements exclude those who cannot use tools such as the internet (e.g. older people) and reinforce the difficulties faced by those who do not speak the dominant English language of New Zealand's Parliament. Parliament must take particular care to provide these groups with the necessary resources so that they may also have better engagement with their government.

### ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

Ideas such as multiple referenda, citizen's forums and the promotion of ever more exotic and quixotic attempts to elicit opinions from the public emerge for a reason. Traditional representative democracy slips all too easily into the assumption that a distance between governors and governed is comfortable and tolerable; for all sorts of reasons it no longer is. The choice is clear — move towards such approaches, leaving the task of being an MP less as a decision-maker and more as a scene-setter and a mouthpiece for the product of the new democratic method; or look to reform what is there now to work significantly better and more consistently. It is one of the wonders of democracy that it can adapt to countries starkly different in terms of population size and culture; there is no earthly reason why it cannot reform itself to increase meaningful engagement with the wider population.

Three compatible approaches — the role and style of the elected representative, means of encouraging a wider range of voices to communicate messages to our representative democratic system and how to further transform the crucially placed Select Committees to maximise their accessibility — have been traversed in this paper. These are all challenging things to do. Challenging for their vagueness (e.g. telling politicians to work in different ways), challenging because of the difficulty faced by the institutions which need to consider taking them on board (e.g. the political implications of giving Select Committees the power to make a real difference) and challenging because they are not directly in the power of either politician or Parliament to effect (e.g. transform the ability and preparedness of small and alienated NGOs and informal networks to speak to those in power). And, as the paper noted, challenging because some population groups in society are more alienated and disengaged than others; any solutions should be devised with the need to address their alienation in mind. There is a real danger that their needs will again be sidelined.

What will the next decade hold for Parliaments? Accelerated IT reforms including greater reliance on websites and social networking sites for news and broader communication, more worldwide crises requiring speedy Governmental responses, strengthening multinational organisations and (conversely) ever greater demands for greater power at community level, greater ethnic variety in society, maybe growing recognition that traditional approaches to intractable problems such as drugs require fresh but controversial approaches. If election turnout numbers continue to reduce, and if Governments and Parliaments fail to address effectively the challenges of the time, alienation and disengagement will continue to accelerate.

Within that environment, it is unlikely that a democratic silver bullet of forums, referenda or whatever will be successful in permanently reducing disengagement. This paper recommends building on the well-tested, looking to the people (the elected politicians), the interaction (the lobby process) and the institutional design of the Parliament (Select Committees). Those are all eternal elements of

a mature democracy, and it is in them and from them that the solutions to disengagement will emerge. This is eminently achievable, comparatively resource-modest and absolutely vital if our democracy is to retain its relevance and its responsiveness. ▲

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