



Effective Public Engagement

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Introduction

At the 2017 Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference (POCC), the President of the Legislative Council presented a paper entitled “Re-engaging the disengaged: Why Parliamentary education and community engagement is core business”. The President presented both a pessimistic view of politics – the community’s lack of trust in politicians, the appeal of populism, the decline in votes for the major parties, and that Australians think they have little or no influence over national decisions – and a more positive one, the high degree of faith in our democratic system of governance. In his paper the President noted that many Australians are interested in becoming involved in the political process and one of the ways of re-engaging the public is through the institution of Parliament.

Public engagement is said to be essential to a healthy democracy, to greater participation in democratic processes, to better understanding of the role of parliament and members of parliament and, by extension, to greater trust that the parliament and the people’s representatives will better represent the public’s interest. This paper builds on the President’s paper, expanding on the idea that public engagement by the institution of Parliament has the potential to reengage. The paper briefly attempts to articulate why we ‘do’ public engagement - the role the institution of parliament, in engaging with the public, can educate the public, encourage participation and counter the disengagement and disenchantment with politics and the political class. It then turns to the current methods adopted by the Parliament of New South Wales for informing and educating the community about the processes and activities of the parliament and its members. While there are a number of important means for engaging the public exercised by members and committees, these are not canvassed in this paper.

The paper then turns to whether the New South Wales’ Parliament’s efforts in the use of digital technology stack up against world-wide standards before looking at what more can be done to enhance public engagement and achieve the objective of enhancing the public’s interest in, understanding of, and participation in the activities and processes of parliament.

Parliament and the people

Initially, when the Council was first established in 1824, it operated in secret. Members were required to take an oath declaring that they would not: ‘directly or indirectly communicate or reveal to any person or persons any matter which shall be so brought under my consideration or which shall become known to me as a member of the said council’.¹ It operated as a cabinet, rather than a legislature.

The New South Wales Parliament is now much more accessible to the public. The building is open Monday to Friday and whenever the Houses are sitting and there is an enormous amount of information published on the Intranet about the proceedings of the House. However, to date, this approach has largely been one of broadcasting, rather than interacting. This is consistent with many parliaments, worldwide.

The parliament is now committed to doing more than just opening its doors and providing information. As articulated in the parliament’s strategic plan for 2009-2018, aiming to increase involvement and awareness of NSW citizens about the Parliament and parliamentary process and, by establishing structures for delivery on its commitment. This commitment recognises that there is now a greater responsibility on the parliament than merely informing the public, it must engage.

So why do we want to engage the public? Several reasons have been given for public engagement – it is essential to a healthy democracy, to greater participation in democratic processes, to better understanding of the role of parliament and members of parliament and, by extension, to greater trust that the parliament and the people’s representatives will better represent the public’s interest.

Low levels of interest in parliament have been attributed to distrust and disenchantment with the political class. As noted by the President of the Legislative Council, the Hon John Ajaka MLC, in his paper to the POCC, although there has been a general distrust of Australian politicians and the political class since Federation, surveys of Australian attitudes indicate that level of trust and confidence in the Australian political system has fallen even further in recent years.²

According to some, parliaments have become the public face of political detachment:

“In recent decades, parliament’s connections with the public have become a major issue of concern for both policy-makers and academics. Within the context of a rise in political apathy in post-industrial societies, well evidence by scholarship of authors..., parliament has often become the most visible face of a general trend of increasing political disaffection, backed up by declining levels of voter turnout and trust in institutions.”³

The level of apathy, disinterest and disenchantment with politics and parliament in the community is fed by negative media reports on such matters as inquiries into members’ conduct, entitlement rorts and alleged broken promises and so on. Yet, as Steven Reynolds, Deputy Clerk

¹ *New South Wales Act 1823*, 4 Geo IV, c 96 (Imp), s 24.

² Hon John Ajaka MLC, *Re-engaging the disengaged: Why Parliamentary education and community engagement is core business*, Presented at 48th Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, Sydney, 3 July 2017

³ C Leston-Bandeira (2012), *Studying the Relationship between Parliament and Citizens*, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18:3-4, 265-274, DOI: 10.1080/13672334.2012.706044, p 268

of the Legislative Council said in a 2011 paper, much of the bad press is undeserved.⁴ This gap between reality and perceptions is one of the reasons for the rise in populism, the media environment allowing populists to deliver simple, headline grabbing messages.

The challenge for Parliaments is to grab the public's attention from the media, or second hand news via Facebook or snapchat. Parliamentary processes are difficult to grasp for anyone not versed in, or interested in parliamentary practice and procedure and the language used to describe and record parliamentary processes can be technical and impenetrable. The challenge for parliaments is to be comprehensible, interesting and impartial:

“Parliaments have to keep an impartial and apolitical posture whilst conveying political content. What is more parliaments have complex and slow processes, making them uneasy bedfellows with fast changing technology.”⁵

A number of the public engagement activities and efforts of the NSW Parliament are designed to do precisely this – to deliver information about the role of Parliament and its proceedings, and the work of members of parliament in an engaging, interesting and comprehensible way without “dumbing down” the importance and relevance of Parliament's work and while at all times remaining impartial.

Many of the public engagement programs and projects are initiated and delivered by one or other of the three departments of the NSW Parliament, the Legislative Council, Legislative Assembly, and Department of Parliamentary Services, or by collaboration between all three. However, to ensure a strategic approach, an ongoing forum for all three departments of the NSW Parliament to discuss methods for engaging the public was established since 2012. The group has a wide mandate: to enhance the visitor experience to the Parliament; to create new and interesting reasons for the community to visit the Parliament; to better inform and educate visitors about the history and role of the Parliament; and to enhance the Parliament's general service delivery to the people of NSW. The recent establishment of a position within the Department of Parliamentary Services for a dedicated social media officer will enhance the Parliament's ability to focus on new digital technology. In addition, the Legislative Council has committed to developing a social media strategy and to provide training to staff during the 2017-2018 year.

Whether the Parliament's efforts in public engagement are effective is considered later in the paper.

Engaging the community – a multi-pronged approach

This section describes some of the methods by which the Parliament is currently employing to engage the public. These methods range from the more traditional approaches, such offering tours to visitors to Parliament House and the provision of official information on the Website, to the use of modern technology and digital media.

Comprehensible publications

As this paper is about the role of the Parliamentary institution in engaging the public, the use by members of digital media is not being canvassed. However, suffice it to say, that many members

⁴ Reynolds S, The tablecloth and the long bell: media perceptions of the NSW Legislative Council 1999-2009, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn 2011, Vol 26(1), p 142-156

⁵ Griffith, Jeffrey & Leston-Bandeira, Cristina. (2012). *How Are Parliaments Using New Media to Engage with Citizens?*, *Journal of Legislative Studies*. 18. . 10.1080/13572334.2012.706058.

have embraced social media and have used the more interactive tools to engage with their constituents.

Nevertheless, there remains a gap between members and the public and Parliament can help bridge this gap by providing access to information in a manner, both comprehensible and relatable, to assist the public to understand the processes and structures of parliament and the system which members must navigate to achieve their aims.

As well as the formal records of the House, which by necessity are written in the precise procedural language unique to parliament, the Legislative Council produces two publications which seek to provide information about the work of members and the proceedings of the House, in plain and simplified language.

House in Review

The *House in Review* summarises the sitting week – the legislation considered, motions debated, votes taken and reports and papers tabled. In a departure from traditional parliamentary publications, the House in Review focuses on policy objectives of members, and the various proposals and debates, rather than parliamentary procedure, while at all times remaining free of political rhetoric or bias.

It is written in a conversational style, aiming to be comprehensible to non-versed in parliamentary language, and to make what is often a complex and slow process, interesting to the general reader.

The *House in Review* is published on the Parliament's website on the Friday of each sitting week and is emailed to members, their staff and to parliamentary officers. Several hundred people have also subscribed to the publication. House in Review subscribers include Members, departmental officers, other parliaments, academics and organisations such as the Bar Association. The publication is also distributed by members, via email, to constituents and community groups.

Running Record

Each sitting day, the Council records the proceedings of the House on an online, real-time webpage. The Running Record is updated as items of business are concluded, adjourned, interrupted or resumed. The outcome of divisions are recorded and links are provided to the content of bills and amendments and to tabled papers and notices of motions.

It has been important to the Legislative Council that while the *Running Record* is intentionally a simplified version of the Minutes of Proceedings, it does not 'dumb down' parliamentary procedure or trivialise the importance of the proceedings of parliament.

Education and outreach

The Legislative Council, and the Parliament as a whole, understands that key to enhancing public engagement, and to increase knowledge and understanding in the community of the work of members and the House, is through education, training and outreach. The Parliament participates in programmes delivered to primary, secondary and tertiary students, both in Sydney and in regional areas and offers internships and cadetships to university students.

School tours

In the last five years over 1,300 school groups have visited the parliament for tours and presentations from parliamentary staff on the roles of the Houses, the passage of legislation and the work of members.

The Legislative Council Chamber and Support team, in conjunction with the Legislative Assembly, offers a role play to primary and secondary school students. Students take their places in the chamber, on the front and back benches, or participate as members, the President and Ministers.

The current role play scenario for secondary students was developed in consultation with the Legislative Assembly and Parliamentary Education and involves a mock sitting at which the 'Alcohol Drinking Age (21 Years) Amendment Bill' is debated in both houses. It builds on the longstanding 'Extension of School Hours Bill' role play scenario that has been offered to primary school student visitors. The bill begins in the lower house where the government has the numbers for it to pass. The students then move to the upper house to consider amendments to the bill with the government not having the numbers and thus having to negotiate with the cross-bench and opposition. Students use prepared scripts to act out the various roles involved in the passage of a bill.

The Education Unit in the Parliament also coordinates a busy program of educational seminars and activities including video-conferencing with rural and regional schools and events for Sydney University Law Students, Young Women's Leadership Seminars, School Leadership visits, a YMCA Youth Parliament, an Indigenous Student's debate program and others.

School outreach

The Legislative Council conducts a school outreach program to deliver sessions to secondary school students alongside public hearings being conducted by Council committees in regional and rural areas has provided an opportunity for staff to conduct role plays and provide information not only about the relevant committee inquiry but also on the system of government and parliament in the State and federally and the role and functions of the Council and members. Students can then observe the hearing and the work of the committee in practice.

Community workshops

Committee staff of the Legislative Council deliver a successful program of workshops run in conjunction with the Council of Social Services of New South Wales (NCOSS). The program is aimed at improving non-government stakeholders' understanding of parliamentary inquiries and their skills in participating in them.

Parliament and Democracy Course, University of Sydney

Since 2015, the Legislative Council has participated, with the Legislative Assembly, in the delivery of the Parliament and Democracy course in collaboration with Professor Rodney Smith, University of Sydney. The NSW Parliament section of the program is delivered to the students on four separate days in Parliament House and includes sessions by Parliamentary officers on the legislative process, the role of committees, interactive sessions with current members and former ministers, as well as opportunities to observe committee hearings and the Houses in session.

Public Sector Seminars

Each year the Legislative Council conducts two or three seminars targeted to public servants. The Legislative Council in Practice seminars, delivered by senior Legislative Council staff, focus on the interactions between the Executive Government and the Legislative Council including ways in which the Council holds the Government accountable and the effect of that process on government departments and other organisations. A panel of members of the Council provide a unique opportunity for public servants to hear directly from members about their work and experience as a member of Parliament.

Education Centre

The Parliamentary Education unit in the Parliament also coordinates a busy program of educational seminars and activities including video-conferencing with rural and regional schools and events for Sydney University Law Students, Young Women's Leadership Seminars, School Leadership visits, a YMCA Youth Parliament, an Indigenous Student's debate program and others.

These activities and others will be enhanced by the construction this summer of a dedicated Education Centre.

In the 2016-2017 year, 5,633 primary and 3,436 secondary school students visited the Parliament to participate in tour and role play programs in the Chambers. While the tours and role plays receive very positive feedback, the ability of the Parliament to deliver the program is limited by the number of sitting days each year during which the Chambers are unavailable. The additional venue will increase the number of tours and role plays to be conducted each day, including on sitting days and enhance the Parliament's capacity to deliver a range of seminars and programs for the public service, community groups and so on, and for members to meet with constituents.

Encouraging the public to visit parliament

Over 160,000 people visit the New South Wales Parliament each year,⁶ whether to visit a member, tour the historic building, observe the sittings of the Houses or participate in a parliamentary hearing. The opportunity to engage, to interact, with so many people each year is not underestimated. Not only are guided tours offered, but the Chamber Support staff of the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly are motivated to talk to visitors about the history of the building, the operations of Parliament and to showcase our unique Chambers.

The Parliament devotes considerable resources to provide an interesting and engaging physical setting and each year holds a number of events and activities designed for adults, families and children, to ensure that a visit to Parliament House is not only interesting but also educational.

Open days

The Parliament holds two main open days each year – Family Fun Day and Sydney Open. In addition to these, Parliament House has been opened on Australia Day and ANZAC day.

The Family Fun day is managed by the Education Unit and is targeted at school children, during their school holidays. Each year a theme is developed and actors and staff re-enact or perform an educative scenario for the children. Many members of staff of the parliament participate in the activities, and engage with the children and their parents.

⁶ Department of Legislative Council, Annual Report 2015-2016, p 55

Since 2011 the Parliament has participated in Sydney Open, an event management by Sydney Living Museums during which many of the most architecturally and historically significant buildings in Sydney are open to ticket holders. The event is conducted on a Sunday and will be held on 5 November this year. Sydney Living Museum provides a number of volunteers, but staff of all three departments of the Parliament are also on duty to guide and answer questions from people who visit Parliament House.

Exhibition space

The Parliament House Fountain Court is an expansive lobby with a feature fountain designed by Robert Woodward (1923-2010). The Fountain Court is the main thoroughfare for all visitors to the Parliament and is also an exhibition space available for community art exhibitions. The Parliament also stages exhibitions itself. For example, in 2016 an exhibition to commemorate the 200 year anniversary of the competition of the 'Rum Hospital', the original façade of Parliament House was staged and in 2017, an exhibition entitled *Women in Parliament* highlighted the role and history of women in politics.⁷ These exhibitions, to which resources from all three departments of the Parliament have contributed, are designed to encourage public visitation to the precinct and to promote engagement with the institution through education.

Parliament also exhibits its own artwork on the walls of the Fountain Court and is a venue for the Plein Air Art Prize and the Head On photographic competition.

Reconciliation Wall

As part of the Reconciliation process with the indigenous peoples of Australia, in 1998 the Presiding Officers dedicated the western wall of the Fountain Court as a permanent area for the exhibition of artworks by Aboriginal people. Drawn from galleries, Parliament's collection and the artists themselves, the artworks are changed frequently.

NAIDOC Week events

Every year the Education Unit in the Department of Parliamentary Services organises a program for children and families during NAIDOC week. The aim of the program is part of Parliament's commitment to community access and engagement activities, and in particular strategies to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Activities include opening the Chambers for viewing and a range of interactive activities, Aboriginal arts & craft, indigenous music and dance and storytelling.

Public tours

Members of the public can Explore the Parliament with a free guided tour, offered at 1:30pm every Monday and Friday and every day during school holidays. Chamber and Support staff take visitors through the Chambers and the historic Parkes, Wentworth and Jubilee rooms, and describe the various artefacts and paintings on display throughout the public spaces of the Parliament building, while also educating visitors about the role, history and work of the Parliament.

⁷ *Women in Parliament*, was the third major exhibition driven solely by the Parliament, following the exhibition *Twenty Five: Stories from Australia's First Parliament* in 2013 and *Politics & Sacrifice: NSW Parliament and the ANZACs* in 2015.

A comprehensive website

Like all Parliaments in Australia and New Zealand, the Legislative Council's website is an object of continuous modification and improvement.

There is an enormous amount of information published on the Intranet about the proceedings of the House, including official records such as the Minutes of Proceedings, details and copies of bills and amendments, members', details and members' entitlements, Library research publications, committee references and reports, tabled papers and so on. Submissions to Legislative Council committees can be lodged online, and the webcast of the Houses, and committees, twitter and Facebook can be access via the Parliament's homepage. The website aligns with both the Parliament's Strategic Plan, and the Governments ICT strategy of open government.

Publication of digitised records 1824-1901

A project to digitise tabled papers and correspondence dated from the First Council of 1824, up to Federation was commenced in 2014. All scanned documents of the First Council of 1824 to 1855 are now available online and the originals transferred to the care (but not control) of State Records where they can be accessed by members of the public. Tabled papers of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council from 1856 to 1901 have also been scanned and will be made available when metadata and quality assurance checking (which is dependent on the limited resources of the Parliamentary Library) has been completed.

This is only one of the many projects undertaken by the Parliamentary Library to enhance the information available and the ways of searching information in the Library website.

Social media

Twitter

Since 2013 the Department has managed the Legislative Council Twitter account (on which members regularly appear wearing high vis vests and hard hats) [@nsw_upperhouse](#) which has posted 2,806 tweets and has (at the time of writing) 2,114 followers . Twitter is, evidently, used to inform members, the media and the public about the House and Committee activities

Facebook

The Legislative Council has contributed content to the New South Wales Parliament's Facebook page and will continue to work with the Parliamentary Education to develop new material and story ideas. Details and photos of newly elected members, committee activity and exhibitions in the Parliaments Fountain Court are all posted on Facebook. The New South Wales Parliament currently has 8,240 followers and 22,428 people have visited the page.

International standards of parliamentary openness

The international study of the fairly narrow field of public engagement with parliament is enlightening.

In 2012, the *Declaration on Parliamentary Openness* was officially launched at the World e-Parliament Conference 2012, at which Australia was represented, in Rome, Italy, on the International Day of Democracy.⁸

The *Declaration on Parliamentary Openness* calls on all parliaments to “create, maintain and publish readily accessible records of its plenary proceedings, preferably in the form of audio or video recordings, hosted online in a permanent location, as well as in the form of a written transcript or Hansard”.

The World e-Parliament Conference, co-organized by the United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), through the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, is the biennial forum addressing, from both the policy and technical perspectives, how the use of information and communication technology (ICT) can help improve representation, transparency, accountability, openness, and effectiveness in the complex parliamentary environment. According to the World e-Parliament Report 2016, the Conferences provides an opportunity to debate the challenges and benefits provided by ICT and to analyse successful approaches, to identify good practices and lessons learned to network with peers, and build partnerships in an international setting.⁹

Guidelines established by the IPU are intended to assist parliaments in best practice for parliamentary websites. The NSW Parliament compares favourably with the standards. Both Houses of the NSW Parliament have social media accounts and disseminate a wide range of information, including transcripts of debates, text of legislation and information about members to citizens through the official domain page.

The 2017 Audit of Political Engagement by The Hansard Society asked the public to select from a list of six options, the ways in which they would most like to receive information about the parliament. The top two choices were downloadable material from the Parliament’s website, and via social media.¹⁰ Necessarily, then, parliaments around the globe are developing new interactive methods to engage the public including online discussion groups, alerting services, e-consultation on bills, e-consultation on issues, online polls and of course e-petitions.¹¹ Dedicated youth websites, or specific sections within existing website directed at young people have been established in recognition that young people expect to be able to interact online, to express their opinions,¹² and access information in a way and at a time that suits them.¹³

⁸ Since its launch, the *Declaration on Parliamentary Openness* has been formally endorsed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Parliamentary Assembly, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), and the First Summit of Legislative Presidents of the Americas organized by the Organization of American States. It has also been endorsed by a number of national and subnational legislatures and parliamentarians.

⁹ World e-Parliament Report 2016, Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, p 20 <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/eparl16-en.pdf>

¹⁰ Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 14: The 2017 Report*, 2017, p 32-34

¹¹ Griffith, Jeffrey & Leston-Bandeira, Cristina. *How Are Parliaments Using New Media to Engage with Citizens?*, p 505

¹² Griffith, Jeffrey & Leston-Bandeira, Cristina. *How Are Parliaments Using New Media to Engage with Citizens?*, p 505, p 510

¹³ World e-Parliament Report 2016, P 66

Where to from here?

Measure

Surveys and audits conducted locally and internationally give some guidance as to how the public have engaged with parliament. In “Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987– 2016” The Australian Election Study stated that when asked what type of political participation respondents had engaged in during the past five years, 12% of respondents stated they had taken part in a protest, 39% had signed an online petition, and 44% had signed a written petition.¹⁴

The Hansard Society *Audit of Political Engagement 14: The 2017 Report* stated that of the various ways the public can engage with UK parliament including contacting a member, signing a petition, visiting parliament for a tour, following on Twitter, or Facebook, 56% of those surveyed reported that they had done none of these things.¹⁵

The use of specific tests and techniques such as surveys for measuring whether public engagement is effective are being utilised around the world¹⁶ to inform further development of website information and delivery.¹⁷

Enhance and target

While the focus to date has been on the publication of information, rather than active engagement, social media connected with the official website ultimately leads to opening up parliament, drawing people in and directing users to richer and more complex online information¹⁸ – grabbing the attention of the public. And plans are being developed to increase opportunity for public engagement, such as closed captioning and video on demand.

Changes to the format of the Legislative Council’s publications to capitalise on the potential of digital media are in the pipeline. The creation of a blog and the restructuring of content by subject matter, or by portfolio area are possibilities. Data gained from more interactive technology will potentially lead to better targeting of specific audiences, with the language and tone matching the audience,¹⁹ and based on interests and policy topics being discussed on-line.²⁰

Training and resources

Dedicated websites and interactive online tools require resources to truly take advantage of the potential. The World e-Parliament Report 2016 highlighted that a lack of funding and insufficient knowledge among staff and members remain key challenges for parliaments.²¹

¹⁴ S Cameron, I McAllister, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987-2016*, 2016, p 57

¹⁵ The Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 14: The 2017 Report*, London, 2017, P 33

¹⁶ However, the World e-Parliament Report 2016 found that only one in four parliaments with websites had conducted an evaluation of their digital engagement.

¹⁷ Griffith, Jeffrey & Leston-Bandeira, Cristina. *How Are Parliaments Using New Media to Engage with Citizens?*, p 503; see also World e-Parliament Report, p66

¹⁸ World e-Parliament Report 2016, p 56, p66

¹⁹ Andy Williamson & Freddy Fallon, Transforming the Future Parliament through the Effective Use of Digital Media, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 64, Issue 4, 1 October 2011, p 787

²⁰ World e-Parliament Report 2016, p 57

²¹ World e-Parliament Report 2016, p 77

Training in the use of social media as a tool to engage the public is also essential in order to have a clearer idea of how people communicate most effectively and to ensure the most effective use of resources available.²²

Make parliamentary proceedings more comprehensible

Social media is not only a tool for disseminating information. It is also a resource for drawing people in, and directing them to for in-depth and complex information concerning the work of the Parliament.

Consideration must also be given to new ways of making information about parliamentary proceedings interesting to a wide audience. Some methods currently being used or trialled internationally include: online discussion groups, alerting services, e-consultation on bills such as is being used in Brazil, e-consultation on issues, online polls and of course e-petitions, dedicated youth websites, or specific sections within existing website directed at young people.

Conclusion

There is great scope for parliament to engage the public with a view to countering the negative perceptions of parliament and its members. Traditional methods such as school visits and tours of parliament as well as the use of digital technology to directly engage citizens are currently being employed. However, the rich and deep resource of social media, by which to draw the public in and direct them to more complex information and resources, ultimately leading to greater understanding, is yet to be fully realised.

This paper extends the discussion started by the Hon John Ajaka. Perhaps the next step is to measure the effectiveness of public engagement and whether the efforts made increase understanding of the role of parliament and members of parliament and counter the disenchantment, disinterest and apathy in the community.

²² Griffith, Jeffrey & Leston-Bandeira, Cristina. *How Are Parliaments Using New Media to Engage with Citizens?*, p 502, p506