

# Taking community engagement to the next level

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The worrying trend of declining public trust in our political institutions presents parliaments with challenges and, more importantly, responsibilities.

This is recognised in the latest global parliamentary report, published jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme (referred to as ‘the global report’), focusing on public engagement in the work of parliament. The global report found that:

*Declining trust in public institutions means that parliaments cannot simply continue business as usual. It challenges parliaments to assess the progress they have made and step up their efforts at engagement. Reversing the trend of disenchantment requires concerted action going forward.<sup>2</sup>*

As one of the authors of the report, I saw from the research conducted for it that parliaments across the world are concerned about the disconnect with the communities they represent and are looking for new ways to enliven their public engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> This article includes extracts from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *The Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement*, 2022, for which Andres Lomp was one of the lead authors.

<sup>2</sup> IPU and UNDP, *The Global Parliamentary Report on Public Engagement*, 2022, p. 10. Accessed at: <https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/global-parliamentary-report/global-parliamentary-report-2022-public-engagement-in-work-parliament>.

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An important theme of the report is that parliaments need to take their community engagement to the next level. It emphasises that engagement is not optional but rather an essential part of the work that parliamentarians and parliamentary administrations undertake.

There is much guidance in the report for parliaments big and small, including a series of recommendations focusing on being strategic, inclusive, participatory, innovative and responsive. An underlying theme in all the recommendations is that parliaments need to become more accessible if they are to remain relevant to the communities they represent, and no one should be left behind.

One of the ways in which parliaments can become more inclusive is by moving beyond just informing the community about its processes and work. Instead, the focus needs to shift to more boldly involving the community in that work. As the global report points out, '[i]t is a simple but powerful truth that people care about the issues that affect them. Engaging with people on issues that matter to them can help parliaments remain relevant to the communities they represent'.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the political nature of many issues, parliamentary administrations traditionally have been cautious about highlighting specific topics through their engagement, concerned that the apolitical nature of their staff might be compromised if they are seen to be pursuing agendas. The focus has tended to be on promoting the processes through which people can engage and leaving the discussion of issues to the elected representatives.

Issues-based engagement, however, is likely to be more impactful as people tend to take an interest in issues rather than procedures. By actively considering ways to better engage people with the issues that the community is interested in, parliaments can encourage public participation in their work. It is better for a parliament to be seen as a forum for ideas and dialogue rather than as a place of political machinations and mayhem. As the global report suggests:

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<sup>3</sup> IPU & UNDP, *Global Report*, p. 56.

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*One potential avenue is for parliaments to modify their existing procedures and processes so that issues proposed by the community can be discussed and investigated.<sup>4</sup>*

A petition system is one option. Some parliaments already refer petitions that gather enough signatures to committees for public hearings or to a plenary session for debate. Parliaments that do not have these kinds of processes could look at how they have operated in other jurisdictions and come up with similar community-activated methods for debate and review that suit their circumstances.

As committees are a primary avenue for engagement between parliament and the community, they have an opportunity when setting their agenda to open themselves up to new ways of interacting with the public on topics that matter to them. Committees could, for example, host forums, roundtables and workshops on subjects proposed by the community.

Another way parliaments can connect with the public is by commissioning research on topics that matter to the community. Parliamentary libraries or research departments could carry out this research independently or in partnership with other research bodies, including higher education institutions.

Traditionally, parliamentary researchers have focused on gathering information and examining topics to assist members of parliament in their legislative and committee work. The remit of parliamentary libraries and research departments could be broadened to include engagement with the community. In other words, they could prepare research material that addresses issues of concern in the community and informs members of parliament about these issues.

Parliament could also organise forums and seminars on topics proposed by the community. This would give people from across society an opportunity to influence the issues that parliament examines and debates.

Social media could be used to get the community involved more actively in such discussions and debates. Online forums broadcast through social media platforms, such as Facebook Live, can provide opportunities for interaction between members of

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<sup>4</sup> IPU & UNDP, *Global Report*, p. 56.

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parliament and the community. This could include mixed panels comprising both parliamentarians and members of the public.

An interesting example of this occurred at the Victorian Parliament when the Electoral Matters Committee hosted an online forum through Facebook Live at the commencement of its inquiry into the impact of social media on Victorian state elections.<sup>5</sup> A mixed panel of committee members and community experts, including a youth representative, discussed the focus of the inquiry as a way of engaging the community with it and encouraging public submissions.<sup>6</sup>

Taking an issues-focused approach to education and youth programs about parliament can also make the experience more interactive and encourage participants to explore the topic rather than simply follow a procedure. Many jurisdictions offer role plays and youth parliaments, but their reach is often limited to schools that regularly enrol for those programs or to a select group of young people who nominate to participate.

Opportunities to broaden issues-based discussion and debate among students at the primary, secondary and tertiary level should be explored, including by supporting teachers to undertake such activities in the classroom. With limited resources, the challenge for parliaments will always be how best to engage with students at all levels, and that is why emphasis on teacher professional development can be a game-changer.

Community-activated pathways for engagement can allow parliaments to broaden and deepen their interaction, providing genuine two-way dialogue between electors and their elected representatives on issues that matter to the community. Enabling community members to influence the matters that parliament debates, investigates and researches gives the public a direct say in what parliament does and demonstrates its willingness to make engagement with the community more participatory.

Engagement shifts to a new level when parliaments collaborate with the community, working together to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. This can also lead to co-creation that embeds the community in decision-making processes so that solutions are designed with people instead of for them.

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<sup>5</sup> Parliament of Victoria, *Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections and electoral administration*, Electoral Matters Committee, 14 September 2021, p.241.

<sup>6</sup> Electoral Matters Committee, *Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections*, p.241.

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Collaboration can allow parliaments to access expertise and community members to interact with decision-makers. Limited resources can be used more efficiently, with parliaments and external partners setting up joint engagement initiatives rather than going it alone.

A more localised focus to engagement can be another advantage, enabling parliament to benefit from local knowledge and allowing local communities to get more actively involved in parliamentary programs and processes. Partner organisations that already have a membership base can connect parliament with new audiences.

Collaboration has become an important guiding principle for the Victorian Parliament's community engagement. Through a range of community partnerships, we are tapping into the mutual benefits of two-way interaction with various sectors of the community.

Our partnerships have brought about:

- a regular parliament news bulletin in Auslan, initiated through collaboration with a group of young Deaf community members
- a community toolkit about parliament, developed as a joint project with a group of culturally and linguistically diverse community members
- video, website and social media content for young people produced by young people
- a new education resource on Aboriginal history, culture and decision-making, developed jointly with a local Aboriginal college
- webinars conducted jointly with key Victorian institutions
- exhibitions as part of high-profile Victorian festivals, showing parliament as an active participant in community events.<sup>7</sup>

Each of these initiatives is helping parliament develop a network of organisations and people who connect us with diverse audiences across Victoria. By directly involving them in the co-design of resources and programs, community members develop a deeper appreciation of parliament and are more likely to become advocates for parliament.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Parliament of Victoria Website. Accessed at <<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au>>.