'We Asked, You Said, We Did': Closing the Feedback Loop in Committees' Public Engagement Processes

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Abstract: Parliamentary departments are adopting more professionalised and embedded approaches to public engagement to address declining trust in democracy. A critical element of such engagement is 'closing the feedback loop'. This involves returning to participants at the end of a process to explain how their contributions influenced outcomes (such as recommendations made by a committee), or to evaluate the impact of the engagement activity. Closing the feedback loop can help foster trust and legitimacy by assuring people they have been genuinely heard. However, many parliaments do not have clear strategies or consistent processes for feeding back to participants following an engagement initiative. This article argues that feedback loops are an indispensable component of effective parliamentary engagement. It considers the advantages (and associated risks) of implementing and closing feedback loops in public engagement with committee inquiries, presents three case studies, and concludes with practical strategies and considerations for embedding feedback into committee inquiries and other types of parliamentary business.

INTRODUCTION

Political trust in Australia has seen some decline over the past two decades, reaching a record low in 2019.[1] However, recent research from the Australian National University indicates that, unlike in countries that have elevated populist leaders and parties, the Australian population

[1] Liang Jiang, 'Political Performance and Political Trust in Australia'. *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 68(1) 2022, p 109.

remains broadly satisfied with democracy itself, albeit with 'significant pockets of discontent'.[2] These so-called pockets of discontent, shaped by factors such as economic pressures and education, are a source of some concern: if people lose trust that democratic systems and institutions are working for them and in their best interests, there is a risk they will turn to actors with much weaker commitments to those institutions and democratic norms.[3] This represents a challenge for modern legislatures, whose authority and legitimacy depends on the trust citizens place in them. For this reason, public engagement has become a key strategic focus for modern parliaments. Engaging with diverse publics can help to restore trust by improving the representativeness of decision making and strengthening public policy outcomes and governance. Parliaments must provide *authentic* and *meaningful* opportunities for citizens to learn about, participate in, and influence their democracy, if they are to combat civic disengagement and mistrust.

In this article, I explore the importance of public engagement with parliamentary committees, with a particular focus on how committees can feed back to participants at the end of an inquiry (referred to as 'closing the feedback loop'). Informing stakeholders about how their input has shaped a committee's deliberations and findings is critical to ensuring they feel genuinely heard. However, embedding feedback loops in committee processes is challenging; in many parliaments, such mechanisms are ad hoc, underdeveloped, or absent altogether. Leston-Bandeira et al contend that lack of feedback is 'one of the main problems with parliamentary public participation initiatives'.[4] I consider the advantages of implementing and closing feedback loops in public engagement with committee inquiries and discuss the implications of failure to do so. The article offers three case studies as examples of closing the feedback loop in practice and outlines some strategies practitioners can consider using in committee inquiries and other areas of parliamentary public engagement.

[2] Nicholas Biddle and Matthew Gray, *Perceptions of democracy and other political attitudes in Australia* (Report, October 2024), p 3.

[3] Biddle and Gray, *Perceptions of democracy and other political attitudes in Australia*, pp 49-50.

[4] Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Didier Caluwaerta and Daan Vermassen, 'Reimagining Engagement between Citizens and Parliament', in David Judge and Cristina Leston-Bandeira (eds), *Reimagining Parliament*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024, pp 65, 76.

PARLIAMENTS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Global Parliamentary Report, jointly produced by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), offers insight into, and analysis of, some of the most pressing challenges for contemporary parliaments. Public engagement with the work of parliament was the focus of the third IPU Global Parliamentary Report ('IPU Report'), published in 2022. Significantly, the report's core message was that 'engagement with the community is a necessity, not an option; an enabler, not a distraction.'[5]

Indeed, in recent years, there has been a clear trend towards more professionalised and embedded approaches to engagement by parliamentary departments, as they work to counter disenchantment with democracy. Parliaments cannot hope to perform their functions in a way that fulfils community expectations unless they listen and are responsive to the people they represent. As Armstrong argues:

> *We also need to make sure that the engagement we seek is relevant and matches a need; that it is integrated into parliamentary business and that there is an outcome. We want people to feel that something happens as a result of their feedback. The public's trust in both the institution and our processes are at risk if they feel that we are not listening.*[6]

As representative institutions, parliaments' legitimacy and authority hinges on the extent to which citizens trust them to act in their best interests. The IPU Report observes that a responsive parliament, one that actively seeks to understand and resolve community concerns, is better placed to build public trust and, therefore, secure legitimacy.[7]

Several factors can shape an individual's attitudes toward democracy, including their civic knowledge, sources of information about politics and government, level of social engagement, and experience of adverse life events.[8] At the same time, broader social and digital transformations are reshaping patterns of democratic participation. Leston-Bandeira argues

[5] Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme, *Public engagement in the work of parliament*, (Global Parliamentary Report, 2022), p 11 ('IPU Report').

[6] Emma Armstrong, 'Digital Innovation and Public Engagement at the Scottish Parliament'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 37(2) 2022, p 58.

[7] IPU Report, p 34.

[8] Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Public Service Commission, *Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy* (2023 National Survey), pp 24-36.

that the growth of the internet, increasing expectations of standards of governance, and decline in trust underscore the need for sustained public engagement by parliaments.[9] She further highlights the rise of the 'critical citizen'. This concept describes the phenomenon whereby higher levels of education and unprecedented availability of information have created a citizenry that is more critically engaged in matters of governance and better equipped to form judgements. As a result, Leston-Bandeira argues, citizens of today are more likely to question, criticise, or seek to influence the decisions of their elected representatives, when compared to past generations.[10] There is also greater demand for transparency, openness and accessibility, given how easily information can be disseminated in today's digital society, as well as a growing focus globally on promoting these ideals.[11] For the modern parliament, addressing the critical citizen's ever-increasing demand to participate is not simply a matter of appeasement, but a necessary condition for realising the promise of representative democracy in contemporary society.

Public engagement in parliamentary contexts can be classified according to five broad categories of activity: information, education, communication, consultation and participation.[12] Engaging the public effectively requires that parliaments do all five well. Hendriks and Kay note that while many legislatures are communicating more effectively with the public through websites, blogs, YouTube and other social media platforms, comparative research shows an over-reliance on initiatives designed to inform or educate the public about existing functions. Innovative participatory approaches that '[strengthen] ties between citizens and elected representatives' are not evident to the same extent.[13] In other words, there is a tendency by parliaments to 'broadcast' to the public, rather than engage them in a dynamic and dialogical way. Where participatory mechanisms do exist, it is important they be 'outcome-led rather than activity focused'.[14] Simply creating opportunities for participation will not

[9] Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 37(2), 2022, p 9.

[10] Leston-Bandeira, 'How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies', p 9.

[11] Leston-Bandeira, 'How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies', p 9.

[12] Leston-Bandeira et al, 'Reimagining Engagement between Citizens and Parliament', p 67.

[13] Carolyn Hendriks and Adrian Kay, 'From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal: Deepening Public Engagement in Legislative Committees'. *Government and Opposition* 54(1), 2019, pp 25, 26.

[14] Leston-Bandeira et al, 'Reimagining Engagement between Citizens and Parliament', p 67.

assuage disillusionment.[15] Unless public engagement supports participants to feel more confident, empowered or valued as a result of their contribution, it could potentially have the reverse effect of exacerbating the democratic deficit.

Parliamentary committees, particularly those with broad powers of inquiry, 'have long been the site of engagement between citizens and members of parliament'.[16] By virtue of their position at the 'nexus' between the formal political system and the broader community, committees offer rich opportunities for democratic renewal through public engagement.[17] Effective public engagement by and with committees should be an enriching exercise, both for the committee members and the communities with which they engage. On the one hand, committees themselves stand to benefit 'epistemically and democratically',[18] as the contribution of diverse actors can help shape public policy for the better and ultimately lend legitimacy to their recommendations.[19] On the other, committee inquiries can, and should, provide a forum in which all citizens – not just the politically active, but also the seldom heard[20] [21]– are empowered to have a say over laws and policies that affect them. Geddes observes that the evidence-gathering process gives people a voice, enables them to shape parliamentary

[15] Leston-Bandeira, 'How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies', p 12.

[16] Sarah Moulds, 'A toolkit for evaluating the effectiveness of parliamentary public engagement'. *University of South Australia Law Review* Vol 5, 2023, pp 1, 11.

[17] House of Commons Liaison Committee, *Building public engagement: Options for developing select committee outreach* (Special Report, October 2015), p 25.

[18] Hendriks and Kay, 'From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal', p 29.

[19] Iris Young argues that through deliberative democratic models, the voices of 'a plurality of differently opinioned and situated' people may offer representatives new information and insights, or prompt them to recognise the prejudices underpinning their existing views. According to Young, the process enables participants not only to express their opinions, but also for opinions, beliefs, and priorities to be transformed. Such is the potential of parliamentary committees: Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p 26.

[20] E.g. Hendriks and Kay observe a participatory bias that results in a clear over-representation of 'well-resourced actors' in formal public engagement processes, at the expense of 'everyday citizens, or more dispersed publics': Hendriks and Kay, 'From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal', p 30.

[21] A paper by Professor Diana Stirbu, commissioned through the Senedd Research Academic Fellowship Scheme, considered various measures of committees' effectiveness. It was proposed that committees monitor diversity indicators such as the gender, ethnicity, and geographical spread of witnesses, along with the proportion of 'non-usual suspects' and the year-on-year increase in new individuals or organisations giving evidence. Stirbu noted that 'institutional narratives converge around the value of diversifying the range of evidence… and witnesses committees engage with': Diana Stirbu, 'Power, influence and impact of Senedd committees: Developing a framework for measuring committees' effectiveness' (Project Report, 2021). London: London Metropolitan University.

proceedings beyond the ballot box, and helps sustain the connection between parliaments and the publics they serve.[22] At the end of that process, demonstrable connections need to be made between issues raised by citizens during the inquiry and conclusions arrived at by the committee. Where demands were not met or suggestions not adopted, inquiry participants should be told why. In this way, committees can assure their stakeholders that they have been listened to and their contributions are valued.

This, of course, describes the aspirational ideal of public engagement with committees. The ways committees engage with citizens must be both *effective* and *ethical* if they are to inspire trust in democracy.[23] When done well, public engagement promises an enlivening of democracy; done poorly, it can leave parliaments vulnerable to accusations of tokenism and further erode public trust. Members and secretariats must therefore be alert to risks or pitfalls in how they engage the public.

Implementing feedback loops in public engagement: Advantages and challenges

One of the most promising ways of dispelling perceptions of tokenism is to implement a feedback loop. The IPU Report defined feedback loops as 'two-way stream(s) of communication between parliament and the public involved in the engagement exercise'.[24] The notion of feedback loops contrasts with linear or transmissional models of communication (for example, informational websites, media releases and advertising).[25] Closing the feedback loop involves returning to the public that participated in a parliamentary process after it has concluded. This could be for the purpose of evaluating the impact of an engagement initiative, or informing participants about how their inputs were incorporated.[26] The case studies

[22] Marc Geddes, 'Committee Hearings of the UK Parliament: Who gives Evidence and does this Matter?'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 71(2), 2018, pp 288-289.

[23] Emma Banyer, 'The franking credits controversy: House of Representatives committees, public engagement and the role of the parliamentary service'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 35(1), 2020, pp 77, 78.

[24] IPU Report, p 39.

[25] Jim Macnamara, 'The Work and "Architecture of Listening": Addressing Gaps in Organization-Public Communication'. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 10(2), 2016, pp 133, 134.

[26] The Queensland Parliament, for example, surveys subscribers to committee updates, witnesses who appear at public hearings, and individuals who submitted to committee inquiries to understand their experiences and improve the committee process. This includes finding ways to improve accessibility for seldom-heard groups: Queensland Parliamentary Service, *Annual Report 2023/24* (Report, 2024), p 21; Queensland Parliament, 'Engagement Survey'. Accessed at https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Work-of-Committees/Introduction/Survey

presented later in this article provide some examples of what closing the feedback loop can look like in practice. Sheldon argues that a feedback loop has the dual function of encouraging continuous learning and improvement by parliaments, as well as signalling to citizens that their participation has been worthwhile and their contributions given serious consideration.[27] Not only does this create incentive for future participation, it also enhances representative democracy through deliberative decision making, and helps to build trust with, and demonstrate respect for, citizens.

Although there is a view among scholars that closing the feedback loop should be 'a priority of all public engagement initiatives',[28] it does not appear to be a practice that is well-established in many parliaments. This can be attributed to, among other things, inadequate planning and resourcing, training and skill deficits and competing demands of committees' work programs. Also, if there is a lack of institutional strategic focus on closing the feedback loop in public engagement, or if these objectives are not clearly communicated and embedded in practice, it is unlikely to occur.

Properly closing the feedback loop is challenging, because there is no one-size-fits-all model for public engagement. Feedback initiatives need to be calibrated to fulfil the needs and expectations of unique participant groups. This means they may be time-consuming and resource-intensive (in particular if the activity entails travel or organising stakeholder meetings outside of Parliament House), or require new skillsets of committee staff (for example, if the feedback mechanism involves producing specialised resources, such as webpages or alternative versions of a committee report).[29] In addition, closing the feedback loop demands

[27] Christine Sheldon, 'Closing the Gap: Establishing a "feedback loop" for effective parliamentary public engagement'. *Journal of Legislative Studies* 29(3), 2023, pp 425, 439.

[28] Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Nicole Nisbett and Alex Prior (University of Leeds), Submission No 72 to House of Commons Liaison Committee, *Inquiry into the effectiveness and influence of select committees* (September 2019), p 7. See also, e.g. Aileen Walker, Naomi Jurczak, Catherine Bochel and Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'How public engagement became a core part of the House of Commons select committees'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 72(4), 2019, p 965.

[29] In many parliaments, the sheer volume of committee activity, and the demands this places on resources, makes it especially challenging to deliver meaningful and consistent feedback to inquiry participants. For example, this trend toward heavier committee workloads is evident in the current hung Parliament in New South Wales. In 2023-24, there was a 57 per cent increase in the number of inquiries in the Legislative Assembly and a 150 per cent increase in the number of select committees established compared to the first financial year of the previous Parliament. Understandably, this has entailed more committee meetings, hearings, site visits and a significant increase in the total hours of official proceedings: New South Wales Department of the Legislative Assembly, *Annual Report 2023/24* (Report, 2024), pp 28-29.

investment of time and resources at the *end* of an inquiry, potentially after the public's attention has moved on. In the context of the increasing demands on members' time, some members may take a cynical view that post-inquiry engagement is a big commitment for disproportionately little political advantage. Committee staff may have all the good will in the world, but without support and buy-in from members, they are hamstrung.

Although these challenges are considerable, they are by no means insurmountable. The final sections of this article explore case studies of feedback loops in parliamentary practice, and strategies and opportunities for practitioners to consider.

CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP: CASE STUDIES

The following three case studies, drawing on initiatives from different jurisdictions, offer considered and meaningful examples of closing the feedback loop in practice. Each example considers a different context for parliamentary public engagement; namely, a committee inquiry, a chamber debate, and a regional parliament exercise. Moreover, the case studies illustrate three unique forms of feedback – the first through a creative approach to framing a committee report, the second through digital storytelling, and the third through in-person engagement.

Case study 1: Kids' version of a committee report (Legislative Assembly of New South Wales)

In September 2009, the NSW Joint Committee on Children and Young People tabled a two-volume, 353-page report on its inquiry into children and young people aged 9-14 years in NSW.[30] Recognising that the report was likely to be inaccessible and unappealing to the group to whom its recommendations were directed, the Committee undertook to repackage its report into a 'kids' version', using plain language and visually compelling design. It was to be the first publication of its kind produced by a committee of the NSW Parliament.

A couple of elements of this initiative make it a particularly fine example of closing the feedback loop. Firstly, the Committee sought to involve children and young people in the preparation and design of the kids' version of the report. It also consulted the Commission for Children and

[30] Committee on Children and Young People, Parliament of New South Wales, *Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW: The Missing Middle* (Report 5/54, September 2009).

Young People.[31] The State's peak body for out-of-school-hours services supported this initiative by organising two discussion groups with young people in the target age group. Secondly, the report incorporated young people's voices and established clear connections between the input they provided ('What kids said') and recommendations made by the Committee ('What to do').

While the Committee's research found that most of the children and young people consulted preferred one design, a small group at the younger end of the age range preferred a different design option. Ultimately, both versions – shown in Figure 1 below – were published to maximise reach and appeal. In addition, the Committee distributed the kids' versions to inquiry stakeholders, including several children's organisations, encouraging them to promote the resources through relevant channels.

The Committee Chair at the time, Robert Coombs MP, told the House that feedback from the discussion groups 'substantially improved the quality of the final product'.[32]

[31] New South Wales Department of the Legislative Assembly, *Annual Report 2009/10* (Report, 2010), p 17.

[32] R. Coombs, New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 19 March 2010, pp 21783-21784.

Figure 1. Kids' version of a committee report (two different designs) produced by the NSW Committee on Children and Young People (September 2009).

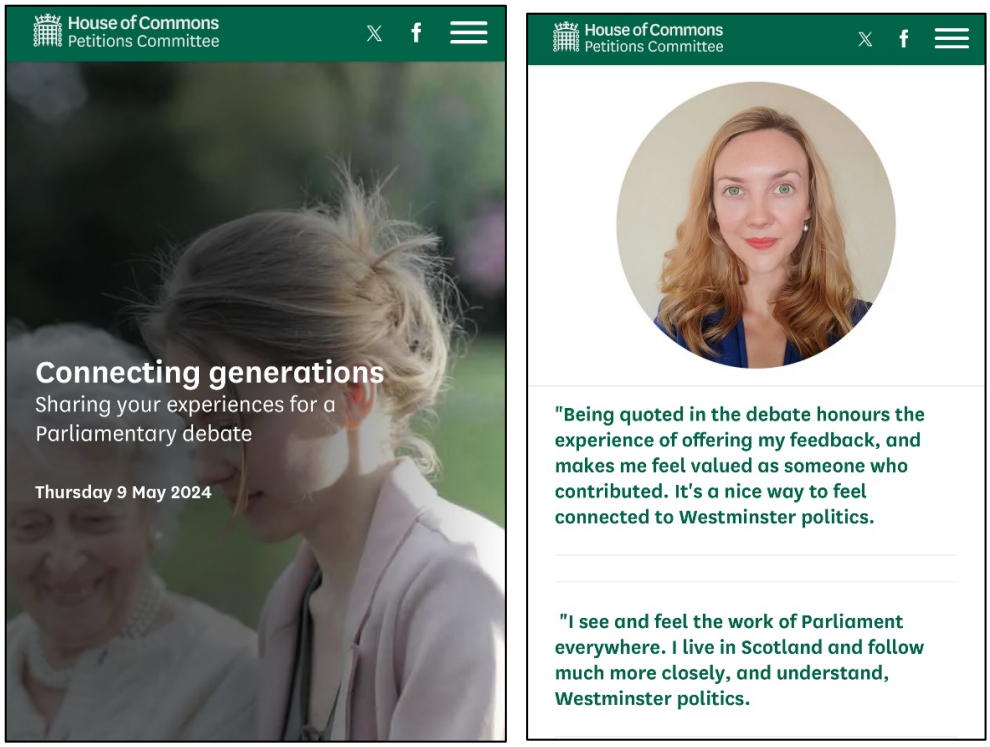
Case study 2: Digital storytelling (United Kingdom House of Commons)

The use of digital storytelling by the UK House of Commons' Chamber Engagement Team is a creative and effective method of closing the feedback loop following an engagement initiative. These digital stories, which are webpages produced using the design platform Shorthand (referred to in this article as 'Shorthand stories'), incorporate video content, dynamic scrolling effects, explanatory boxes and testimonials to illustrate how feedback or contributions from the public informed a particular item of parliamentary business.

For example, in preparation for a debate on Global Intergenerational Week 2024, the MP who led the debate, Fellows, asked the public to contribute their stories and ideas through an online engagement activity. Ms Fellows then shared several of those stories in her contribution to the debate. The Shorthand story pulls together various media, including the video of Ms Fellows'

speech, the Government's response and various informational resources, as well as reflections from participants quoted in the debate.[33] Screenshots of the story are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. UK Petitions Committee's online digital story about a debate in Westminster Hall on Global Intergenerational Week 2024.



Feedback gathered after the debate suggests that participants, through their direct engagement with Parliament, felt heard, valued, and inspired to participate in future initiatives. People said, for example:

[33] House of Commons Petitions Committee, 'Connecting generations: Sharing your experiences for a Parliamentary debate'. Accessed at: https://ukparliament.shorthandstories.com/cet-global-intergenerational-week-2024/index.html

> *I've always been conscious of the impact of parliamentary process in my life, but I do feel more empowered to have a voice in that process in the future, having been quoted. ('Catherine')*
>
> *I felt empowered. I wouldn't have expected that. It's good to feel heard and that your input matters. It's reassuring as a democratic action. The work of Parliament is essential to my life, even if it's hard to measure how much. The experience of being represented encouraged me to participate more in other ways. ('Marion')*[34]

The Shorthand story 'Connecting generations' clearly demonstrates how a complete feedback loop is mobilised, from the initial soliciting of public input and engagement, right through to collecting and presenting participant feedback. The page also highlights avenues for citizens to get involved with parliamentary debates in future.

Case study 3: Taking Parliament to the People 'report back sessions' (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa)

Each year the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), the upper house of the South African Parliament, holds a week-long event it calls Taking Parliament to the People (TPTTP). During TPTTP, the NCOP sits away from Cape Town and, in collaboration with provincial legislatures, invites members of the public to attend meetings and forums and raise issues regarding government service delivery. Through this program, the NCOP aims to drive public participation in parliamentary processes, particularly among citizens in remote and rural areas for whom it is impractical to visit Parliament.[35]

In 2018, to address criticisms that public engagement processes 'lacked a feedback mechanism and that previously identified challenges were rarely revisited',[36] the Parliament modified its TPTTP program to include an in-person 'report back' session. These sessions aimed to ensure

[34] House of Commons Petitions Committee, 'Connecting generations: Sharing your experiences for a Parliamentary debate'. Accessed at: https://ukparliament.shorthandstories.com/cet-global-intergenerational-week-2024/index.html

[35] Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 'Public participation and oversight programmes'. Accessed at: https://www.parliament.gov.za/national-council-provinces

[36] Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, *Annual Report 2017/18* (Report, 27 August 2018), p 32.

greater executive accountability, by providing feedback to communities on issues raised during the main TPTTP program. They usually take place 12 months or more after the initial engagement. The report back programs – which can span several days – may consist of verification visits to service delivery sites, as well as unmediated public meetings where citizens can interact with legislators on service delivery issues raised during TPTTP.[37]

A WAY FORWARD FOR PRACTITIONERS

The case studies discussed above illustrate a range of techniques parliaments and individual committees can employ to close the feedback loop in public engagement. This section briefly explores other methodologies, as well as considerations for parliaments looking to improve their post-inquiry engagement.

Firstly, it is essential that all parliamentary public engagement is underpinned by a robust and well-understood engagement strategy. Hendriks and Kay emphasise that while committees will necessarily use different mechanisms to support participation by diverse publics, an overarching strategy helps to ensure that fundamental principles of good public engagement are observed across all committees and areas of parliamentary business.[38] As this article has argued, closing the feedback loop should form a key tenet of that strategy. Moreover, many parliamentary departments (including the NSW Legislative Assembly[39]) are now employing digital communications and/or community outreach staff with specialised knowledge and skillsets 'beyond the traditional clerkly profile that supports parliamentary business' to oversee public engagement.[40] Having dedicated engagement staff supports parliaments to reach out to seldom heard groups and sustain relationships, actively monitor best practice in other jurisdictions and drive innovation.

Walker et al observe that until recently, very little would follow the tabling of a committee report. Nowadays, committees are increasingly experimenting with ways to promote their reports and recommendations and reach more diverse audiences.[41] Earlier planning and

[37] Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 'NCOP embarks on a report-back programme focusing on the impact of migration on service delivery in Gauteng'. Accessed at: https://www.parliament.gov.za/project-event-details/290

[38] Hendriks and Kay, 'From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal', p 42.

[39] New South Wales Department of the Legislative Assembly, *Annual Report 2020/21* (Report, 2021), p 22.

[40] Sofia Serra-Silva and Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'The Invisible Architects of Public Engagement: Understanding the Different Types of Roles Played by Parliamentary Staff'. *Politics and Governance* Volume 14, 2025, pp 2, 4.

[41] Walker et al, 'How public engagement became a core part of the House of Commons select committees', p 977.

identification of engagement objectives – ideally at the start of an inquiry – will help ensure committees' activities are focussed, productive and provide meaningful experiences for participants. It would also assist departments with resource allocation. Opportunities to close the feedback loop should always be considered in these early stages of planning, so that it becomes an entrenched part of committee practice – not an afterthought.

As mentioned previously, one-size-fits-all models do not support genuine public engagement. The needs and expectations of the target cohort, as well as the initial means of participation, should naturally inform the approach to feedback. Take, for example, a committee that has elicited insights from First Nations stakeholders through an informal process of yarning. Yarning prioritises 'Indigenous ways of communicating' and 'shows respect to Elders and connections to Lands, laws, culture, community and family'.[42] It stands to reason that feedback should be offered in the same way, both to foster cultural security for participants and to honour their contribution authentically. In saying that, the most effective way to optimise the feedback process is to ask stakeholders how they would like to receive feedback about inquiry outcomes.

Depending on the stakeholder group and its needs, approaches committees could consider include:

- reporting outcomes of public engagement in the committee's report, along with 'more systematic integration of the information obtained… showing how it influenced the committee's deliberations';[43]
- generic emails and social media content to announce the publication of a report, possibly acknowledging or highlighting a particular group's contribution;[44]
- creating reports or summaries in formats accessible to people with visual, auditory or cognitive disabilities;
- translating reports or summaries into languages other than English;

[42] Amy Cleland and Carole Zufferey, 'Yarning about yarning: A potential strategy to deconstruct whiteness', in Jioji Ravulo, Katarzyna Olcon, Tinashe Dune, Alex Workman and Pranee Liamputtong (eds), *Handbook of Critical Whiteness*, Singapore: Springer Verlag, 2023, p 1257.

[43] House of Commons Liaison Committee, *The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system* (Report, September 2019), p 57.

[44] Leston-Bandeira et al, Submission No 72 to House of Commons Liaison Committee, p 7.

- in-person meetings, roundtables or yarns to consult on proposed recommendations (or in-person report back sessions);
- use of e-consultation platforms such as the one used by the Scottish Government (*We asked, you said, we did*),[45] both to harvest citizens' suggestions on an issue and keep them informed of actions taken in response;
- narrating citizens' stories in committee outputs, which 'shows a capacity for committees to relate (and demonstrate relation) to citizen input';[46]
- Shorthand stories, or other forms of multimedia storytelling;
- surveys to help evaluate the impact of an engagement activity, which signal to participants that the parliament takes public engagement seriously.[47]

Clearly, there is a myriad of ways in which committees can close the feedback loop with citizens who have engaged with their processes. The list above is by no means exhaustive. While this represents the final step in the inquiry engagement process, it is arguably the most critical and will leave an impression on participants, one way or another. That said – and as alluded to earlier in this article – the strategies outlined above carry potential risks that practitioners should carefully consider. For instance, they could artificially raise expectations for future engagement. In addition, because these activities may require apolitical parliamentary staff to innovate and exercise a degree of strategic influence, their actions may risk being perceived as transgressing their politically neutral remit. And, of course, without adequate research, planning, or resources, such initiatives may simply fail to achieve their intended purpose and be perceived by the intended audience as tokenistic or insincere. However, as this article has

[45] The e-participation initiative *We asked, you said, we did* (implying a complete feedback loop, and therefore an apt title for this paper) is a feature of the Citizen Space platform designed by a private company called Delib. It is used by local authorities and government agencies throughout Scotland. The process is perhaps self-evident: citizens provide input on issues through the platform and policy makers respond with actions taken as a result. Consultations are then summarised succinctly on a webpage according to the issue in question ('we asked'), the feedback provided by the public ('you said') and the outcome ('we did'): E.g. Scottish Government, 'Consultation on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024: Statutory Guidance on Part 2 and 3, section 18'. Accessed at: https://consult.gov.scot/children-and-families/part-2-and-3-uncrc-incorporation-scotland-act-2024/

[46] Alex Prior and Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'Parliamentary storytelling: A new concept in public engagement with parliaments'. *Journal of Legislative Studies* 28(1), 2022, pp 67, 77.

[47] Moulds, 'A toolkit for evaluating the effectiveness of parliamentary public engagement', p 16.

established, careful and thorough preparation will go a long way toward mitigating these challenges.

CONCLUSION

Purposeful and inclusive public engagement in the work of parliamentary committees can enhance their epistemic and representative capacity, by allowing access to a wide spectrum of views and expertise. This, in turn, lends legitimacy to committee outputs. Closing the feedback loop should be seen as an integral part of any public participation initiative. It is about giving people a sense that they were genuinely heard as part of a process and not 'speaking into the void'. This article has highlighted different ways to close the feedback loop in committees' engagement processes. Exactly what form a feedback activity should take depends on a range of factors, including the nature and objectives of the original engagement, and the needs, expectations and preferences of participant groups. Effective feedback is difficult for parliaments to deliver well; it is perhaps the most commonly overlooked aspect of public engagement practice. A greater focus on closing feedback loops as part of a formal parliamentary engagement strategy would promise more consistent implementation and earlier planning of feedback activities. This, ultimately, will help to ensure parliaments are realising their broader strategic goal of inspiring trust and confidence in parliament, its people and its processes.