Abstract

The authors compare two initiatives designed to enhance public participation in Australia: the Australia 2020 Summit (conducted in April 2008) and the Australian Citizens’ Parliament (October 2008 — February 2009). The comparison centers on participatory inclusion and process design. Although both processes aim to prompt reassessment of the existing parliamentary political system and to generate ideas for improving it, different conceptions of participatory democracy underlie their designs. The 2020 Summit reflects the idea of participation as a process in which government officials consult with persons they identify as stakeholders. Questions are formulated in advance by officials for the purpose of eliciting information relevant to the task of formulating sound policy. In contrast, the Citizens’ Parliament (CP) emphasizes the primacy of the public in the policymaking process, and hence the importance of enabling citizens themselves to “set the agenda” for discussion. Participants are selected at random to achieve a demographically representative cross-section of the population as a whole. Instead of privileging the views of experts, the CP seeks to validate the knowledge participants have acquired through “lived experience.” The initial impression of the authors is that the Citizens’ Parliament succeeded in providing officials with more valuable, authentic, and innovative ideas than did the Summit. The authors speculate that the Final Report of the Citizens’ Parliament will have a greater positive impact on public participation than the governance recommendations from the 2020 Summit.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, civic engagement, random sampling, public deliberation

* The Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute, j.hartz-karp@curtin.edu.au
† The United States Studies Centre, The University of Sydney, l.carson@usyd.edu.au

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Australia is one of the world’s stable liberal democracies. It has a history of
democratic innovation. But the recent *Democratic Audit of Australia* and other
studies tell a story of falling confidence in our political system. Symptoms include
low levels of citizen engagement, apathy, and cynicism toward politics, declining membership
in and public support for political parties, and growing numbers of young Australians seeking
to avoid mandatory voter registration. (Australia makes voting compulsory at all levels of
government.) Some observers trace the malaise to a “democratic deficit”—institutional
arrangements and conduct that appear at odds with the normative ideals of democracy,
including factionalism within parties, the intentional polarization of issues by political
partisans, the over-simplification of issues in the news media, and the short time horizon of the
policymaking process.

One factor contributing to the malaise may be the lack of opportunity for meaningful
engagement by citizens with government officials and with each other regarding problems and
issues of public concern. In this connection it is worth noting that two initiatives have been
undertaken recently with a view to stimulating reassessment of the existing parliamentary
political system and generating ideas for improving it: the *Australia 2020 Summit* (conducted
in April 2008) and the *Australian Citizens’ Parliament* (October 2008 — February 2009).
Both initiatives address the matter of public participation in the policymaking process.

The *2020 Summit* and the *Citizens’ Parliament (CP)* are based, however, on different
conceptions of participatory democracy. The *Summit* reflects the idea of participation as a
process in which government officials consult with persons they identify as stakeholders.
Questions are formulated in advance by officials for eliciting information relevant to the task
of formulating sound policy. In contrast, the *CP* emphasizes the primacy of the public in the
policymaking process, and hence the importance of enabling citizens themselves to “set the
agenda” for discussion. Participants are selected at random to achieve a demographically
representative cross-section of the population as a whole. Instead of privileging the views of
experts, the *CP* seeks to validate the knowledge participants have acquired through “lived
experience.”

Both the *Summit* and the *Citizens’ Parliament* purport to enhance participation by citizens
in Australian politics in at least two ways: First, both aim to provide government officials with
information to which officials otherwise would not have access; namely, detailed, firsthand
knowledge of the public’s needs, interests, priorities, concerns, readiness to accept trade-offs, etc. Second, both imply the opportunity for the public to exert genuine influence on substantive policy decisions after considering the information supplied by participants. In the discussion that follows, the authors compare the Summit and the Citizens’ Parliament with a view to assessing their potential for enhancing citizen participation in the policymaking process. Our comparison centers on differences in design and on the approaches they take to ensure that participation is as “inclusive” as possible. Our initial impression is the Citizens’ Parliament succeeded in providing officials with more valuable, authentic, and innovative ideas than the Summit; and we speculate that the report of the Citizens’ Parliament will have a greater positive impact on public participation than the Summit.

The Australia 2020 Summit

Following his election in November 2007, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, decided to convene an Australia 2020 Summit at Parliament House in Canberra on April 19-20, 2008. The rationale for this undertaking was “to tackle the long-term challenges confronting Australia’s future—challenges which require long-term responses from the nation beyond the usual three-year electoral cycle” (Australian Government, 2008a). Accordingly, the broad purpose of the Summit was to harvest “big ideas” for the federal government to implement by the year 2020.

The Summit plan called for inviting 1,000 of the “best and brightest” minds from across the country to address the challenges facing it and to produce a set of recommendations for action. Challenges were sorted into ten policy discussion “streams.” Each stream was co-chaired by a federal cabinet minister and a prominent person selected by the government. The co-chairs in turn constituted the steering committee, which was headed up by Professor Glyn Davis, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne. For each stream, organizers sought a hundred participants, who were required to cover the costs of their travel and accommodation. The co-chairs extended personal invitations to prominent Australians within each stream. In addition, self-nomination forms were available on the Summit website. (More than 8,000 people applied, including the authors.) The application form asked candidates to list notable achievements and to provide a statement explaining how they would contribute to the discussion. Applicants were allowed to request
authorization to participate in up to three streams. The authors applied successfully for admission to their first choice, the governance stream. Significantly, the co-chairs have not revealed publicly how they made their selections.

A background paper was prepared for the participants in each stream, raising the main issues of concern, providing some related data, and asking a series of open-ended questions. For the Governance stream, background papers were, and are still, available online (Australian Government, 2008b). These papers were “not intended to be definitive or comprehensive, but were put together to stimulate discussion on the main challenges and opportunities facing the country and the choices to be made in addressing them.”

The Summit-proper was the culmination of a broader “national conversation.” The latter included the “Youth Summit,” held at Parliament House the previous weekend, and over 500 community and school summits across the country. There was also an African Summit, and a Jewish Symposium convened when it was realized the Summit was being held during Passover. Altogether, before the main event some 2,600 individuals and groups presented 8,800 public submissions that were published subsequently on the Summit website in both full-length and summary form for the benefit of participants.

At the outset of the Summit, it was evident that most participants were, to one degree or another, experts in the subject matter of their stream. For example, the governance stream attracted many senior academics, legal experts, and public servants who prided themselves on their grasp of the intricacies of constitutional law and legislated regulations.

Four volunteers from well-known organizational consulting organizations were available to each stream for assistance in facilitating discussion sessions. Volunteers were selected from among persons who had offered advice and support to the organizing team. In some streams, volunteers facilitated actively, while in others they were relegated by participants to supporting roles. In all streams, they served as recorders who took notes and assisted in writing reports.

The two-day agenda included plenary sessions involving all participants at the beginning and end of both days. Stream sessions were conducted between. The news media maintained a highly visible presence throughout. All participants had signed a release permitting the media to record their images and remarks. Journalists moved freely through the discussion rooms. Roving television, radio, and documentary reporters conducted interviews during session
breaks, some of which were shown during plenary sessions. On the government-funded channel, ABC2 (available only to people who subscribe to cable television service or who receive digital free-to-air broadcasts), coverage was continuous. Coverage was dominated, however, by the plenary sessions, speeches, celebrity interviews, and studio commentary on what was broadcast. Only brief glimpses of participants engaged in stream discussions were available to viewers.

Limited coverage of stream discussions aided the ability of stream co-chairs to conduct their proceedings according to their personal preference. Co-chairs could choose to follow the brief given them by the volunteer facilitators or to ignore the guidance offered. Some controlled the agenda and discussion tightly, while others allowed participants more freedom to determine what was discussed and how. In some streams, an aggregative approach was taken for ascertaining group views (e.g., using dot stickers to set priorities or requesting a show of hands); in others, the approach was more deliberative in the sense of encouraging participants collectively to weigh “pros and cons” and to work toward consensus for recommendations.

At the close of the Summit, each participant received a hurriedly prepared “Initial Report” (Australian Government, 2008c) listing the top ambitions, goals, themes, and “Big Ideas” from each discussion stream, most captured on the first day. Many participants (including the authors of this paper) were disappointed to discover that items they believed had been assigned priority had been left out.

A month after the Summit, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet released the somewhat more satisfying Australia 2020 Summit Final Report (Australian Government, 2008d). The Final Report attempted a comprehensive summary of the discussions and of the items captured by recorders. Not surprisingly, even this version of the proceedings was disputed by some, including participants in the Governance stream, and dismissed as a “whitewash.” The Report stated explicitly the ideas contained in it represented the views of participants and had not been endorsed by the federal government.

At both the Summit and in the “Final Summit Report,” it was stated the discussions to which participants had contributed would not be the end of the process initiated by the Prime Minister. The recommendations from each stream have been referred to the corresponding government department for consideration. Moreover, for some time after the event the Summit
website continued to attract new ideas and commentary. The government reputedly is following the commentary that accumulated there and through other channels such as radio talkback, newspaper forums, and online discussions. The Prime Minister committed to responding to the ideas by the end of 2008. His response, however, has been delayed. As we write (in February 2009), the authors do not know which ideas, if any, will be endorsed. It is noteworthy, though, that Mr. Rudd did mention the “innovative” idea of “collaborative governance” in his closing remarks at the Summit—a hopeful sign for those of us who supported this notion.

The Australian Citizens’ Parliament

In 2005, a small but diverse group of Australians, including the authors, formed a nonprofit organization, now called newDemocracy (newDemocracy, 2008) with the aim of finding ways to counter the nation’s democratic deficit and the pervasive public malaise about politics. Through their academic positions—with the University of Sydney and Curtin University of Technology (Perth), along with partners from the Australian National University, Canberra—they secured an Australian Research Council-Linkage grant (with newDemocracy as co-funder) to convene and study an Australian Citizens’ Parliament (ACP).

Before commencing the Citizens’ Parliament process, newDemocracy established a Reference Panel of diverse people renowned in governance to “champion,” inform, and provide advice to participants. The Reference Panel included former state and federal politicians from all parties, experienced commentators on politics, academic observers of Australian politics, and issue movement leaders and activists. The key tasks of the Reference Panel were to advise on background content issues and, at the conclusion of the CP, to promote the process and recommendations with government officials and the news media. A number of World Cafés were held around Australia for eliciting the public’s views of the Australian political system, including its strengths and perceived opportunities for improvement. The World Cafés also tested potential tasks for CP participants and questions for them to deliberate. (The information gathered at the World Cafés was made available to the public online, and a summary was later distributed to participants.)

The task, or “charge,” given CP participants was, “How can we strengthen our political system to better serve the people?” Considering that any deliberative charge needs to strike a
balance between breadth (to afford participants sufficient latitude in their thinking) and narrowness (to keep them productively focused), the CP charge probably erred on the side of breadth. This was appropriate, however, in light of the importance assigned to enabling participants to “set the agenda” and to focus on the issues they were interested in or concerned about.

Australia’s electoral rolls were used to select potential participants at random. (Selection bias was minimal because voting in Australia is compulsory.) Invitations were sent to 60 randomly selected citizens from each of the 150 federal electorates. Of the 8,000 citizens who received invitations (around 1,000 were returned without reaching the addressee*), an extraordinary 35 percent (n = 2,760) responded positively. Many called the toll-free number to convey how “excited” they were to have been selected, how “important” they regarded the project, and how “honored” and “privileged” they felt to have received an invitation.

A stratified random sample of 150 persons was then drawn from the pool of respondents. These “Citizen Parliamentarians” (CPs)—one per electorate—mirrored the Australian population by gender, age, education, and ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity.

CPs met initially in smaller regional meetings where the final charge, “How can we strengthen Australia’s political system to serve us better?” was discussed and clarified. The CPs then learned more about the process, completed the research Q sort, experienced several different methods of deliberation, and began developing proposals in preparation for the online deliberation. Participant feedback from the regional meetings was very positive, with participants (including those who expressed cynicism initially about the process and its potential impact) expressing less anxiety about the process and looking forward to the opportunity to contribute.

The 2,760 persons who accepted the invitation to participate but who were not selected as CPs were invited to join the “Online Parliament” (OP). (The OP included the already-selected CPs as well.) Online Parliamentarians (OPs) posted ideas for strengthening our democracy, and other interested OPs joined them to form “teams.” Their assignment was to act like a “think tank” and, with the help of new online deliberation software, to develop their ideas into well-researched, well-reasoned proposals.

* This number represents a return rate of 11 percent; 10 percent is typical.
○ This software enabled self-managed teams to evolve and explore democratic deficit problems and develop proposals. It contains elements of online discussion forums, team project management, and collaborative filtering
At the outset, 58 ideas were posted online, with around 28 relevant to the topic. Teams were launched for 22 of the 28 relevant ideas (each with four or more team members; the largest had 26 members). Of those, 11 teams converted their idea to a proposal endorsed by the group. These 11 proposals formed the initial agenda of the CP. OPs prioritized the proposals and the CP representatives from the teams presented the top five at the opening of the Citizens’ Parliament in Canberra.

Like other deliberative processes that make use of representative “mini-publics,” the CP afforded “ordinary citizens” an opportunity to engage one another in a form of political discussion that is unusual in official venues such as legislatures, councils, and school boards, especially as the news media portray the political debate that occurs in such arenas. Citizen deliberation is cooperative rather than competitive, pragmatic rather than partisan, egalitarian rather than elitist, democratic rather than technocratic. Political authority resides in the participants, and the key “expertise” consists of their “lived knowledge,” their needs, and their values. In addition to “lived knowledge,” participants in the CP had access to information online in the form of relevant articles uploaded by the organizers (including ideas that emerged from the Governance stream discussion at the 2020 Summit), with articles uploaded by the CPs. Before the meeting of delegates in Canberra, all participants were sent a hard copy of the completed and endorsed online proposals, each summarized to one page, as well as an overview of Australia’s political system. Moreover, CPs were encouraged to search for and bring to the discussion any information they thought was relevant.

At the regional meetings; during the online deliberation; and at the Citizens’ Parliament, participants were charged with the task of identifying a “direction” or “way forward” that would serve the interests of all Australians to the greatest extent possible. They were encouraged to understand and acknowledge each other’s views as a means to that end.

From the 6th to the 9th of February 2009, the 150 Citizen Parliamentarians met and deliberated in Old Parliament House in Canberra, a setting that symbolized both gravitas and a long tradition of Australian democratic innovation. The CP was officially opened by the co-
chairs, Lowitja O’Donoghue and Fred Chaney, both highly respected Australians,\(^6\) with the opening address given by the Cabinet Secretary and Special Minister of State, Senator John Faulkner. The plenary and official sessions were held in the House of Representatives, with individual or groups of CPs often taking pride of place around the Speaker’s Table. Most of the small-group sessions were held in the Members’ Dining Room, where tables were set up for (on average) seven CPs and a facilitator to maximize opportunities for deliberation.

Although the CP charge was very open-ended, the agenda was very structured. Before receiving final approval, it went through numerous iterations by the design team and the organizing team. Different deliberative methods were employed to stimulate participants’ thinking, to encourage them to share their views, to have them weigh the pros and cons of ideas, and then to prioritize their proposals for bringing about the kind of healthy political system they would like to leave to the next generation. The methods included a modified 21\(^{st}\) Century Town Meeting (AmericaSpeaks, 2007), and a World Café (The World Café, 2008), as well as other techniques for small group dialogue and deliberation and various innovative ways to make panel sessions more interactive.

At the close of each day, every CP received a copy of the preliminary report that documented the proceedings and findings. From a list of 52 ideas developed during their deliberations, the CPs honed the list down to the critical few, which they included in their Final Report. The Report, written in their own words, outlined their proposals and priorities. Representatives selected by the CPs delivered the Report to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Mr. Anthony Byrne, and to the media. Each CP received two copies,\(^7\) and the broader public was afforded access to the Report online. At the opening and closing of the CP, the Government representatives made the commitment to give the findings of the CP serious consideration and to report their response.

\(^6\)Lowitja O’Donoghue is a renowned Aboriginal activist and elder. Fred Chaney is a well-known past Liberal Minister of the Australian Parliament, respected by all parties for his integrity. The co-chairs had responsibility for ensuring the integrity of the process. Two Ombudsmen, Fiona Hollier and Phillip Hart aided them in this task. Their job was to safeguard the Citizens’ Parliamentarians by being available to address issues that were seen by Parliamentarians as unfair or inappropriate. These issues did not arise.

\(^7\)This was at the request of the CPs—one for themselves and one to deliver to their local federal member of Parliament.
Discussion

Comparing the 2020 Summit and the Citizens’ Parliament

Whom does the process engage?

The Summit and the CP were designed to involve two distinct sets of participants. At the opening ceremony of the Summit, Mr. Rudd stated that he was “opening the windows of democracy” and “turning to you, the people of Australia to help solve the issues facing us” (Rudd, 2008). However, given the background of most participants, it became clear the process was based on the assumption that experts and stakeholders were most likely to contribute “big ideas” that would improve the nation’s prospects for the future. Attention from the media increased the probability that people already confident in their abilities and knowledge would seek the opportunity to share their views. Thus, the Summit was hardly a “people’s convention.” It was rather closer to a meritocratic conclave or—as one commentator, Burchell (2008), noted, “a gathering of people selected on indeterminate grounds of general outstandingness.”

The Citizens’ Parliament, in contrast, aspired to be more democratic than the Summit. Its stated goal was to assemble a group of citizens who were representative of the population as a whole. By definition, a representative group includes the full range within the population of demographic characteristics such as age, gender, income, education, partisan affiliation, political interest, and so forth. Although no subset of a population can mirror precisely and in detail all its

Figure 1

A Continuum of Participation in Democratic Processes

Random Selection

Self-nomination (e.g. public meetings, some committees)

Conscription (e.g. criminal juries, compulsory voting)

In fairness to the Prime Minister, Mr. Rudd did urge subsequently (in the introduction to the 2020 Summit preliminary report) that the question of reform be made a matter for widespread public consideration: “The challenges facing Australia are great and all Australians need to think about how they will be met.” (emphasis supplied).
characteristics, random selection eliminates most of the skewing that is introduced by permitting participants to self-select. Moreover, as Figure 1 indicates, random selection occupies a position midway on the continuum stretching from maximally voluntaristic self-nomination and minimally voluntaristic conscription.

The literature on facilitating democratic discussion deals in depth with stakeholders: people who have a particular interest in how an issue is resolved and who are likely to benefit or to be affected adversely by the decision. Because of their “stake” in the outcome, the knowledge they bring to the issue is considerably greater (though usually more selective) than that possessed by “ordinary citizens.” Yet despite the understandably narrow perspective of stakeholders, both the public and government officials assume that they are better able to provide decision makers with useful information and advice than are members of the ostensibly ill-informed, inattentive, and conflicted public. Even in academia, participation by “ordinary citizens”—beyond actions such as voting and perhaps contacting their representatives—has received only scant attention. Most political “elites” fail to see how their involvement might add value to the policymaking process. The CP put to the test all the commonly held assumptions about the ability and willingness of “ordinary citizens” to demonstrate their fitness for democratic self-rule.

**What is a “good” democratic political process?**

Ideally, political decision-making in a democracy ought to result in policy outcomes that everyone (or almost everyone) can at least “live with” or “go along with,” because those outcomes are, on balance and all things considered, in the best interests of all citizens. What are the essential features of a political process that will yield such outcomes? What requirements must it meet?

The CP has shed light on these questions, as have other recent experiments in revitalizing democracy that have been conducted around the world. Although the extensive data collected at the CP have not yet been analyzed, the following are some initial observations:

1. Although the conveners of the Summit sent information to participants in advance, and although participants were invited to discuss issues through a weblog, only a handful (at least in the Governance stream) took advantage of this opportunity. In contrast, 99 of the 150 CPs contributed to the online deliberations.
2. Participants in the Summit met over a shortened weekend. In contrast, the Citizens’ Parliament process spanned three months, including the regional meetings, online deliberation, and three full days (over a four-day stretch) of final deliberation and reporting. Thus, the CP offered participants far more time to explore issues through dialogue and deliberation. This translated into recommendations that were understood by all and enjoyed a far greater degree of support than did the Summit’s. By the end of the CP, there was a steep distance between participants’ top preferences and all other proposals. This fact was documented with the aid of computer technology, and was open to CPs to audit. In contrast, at the Summit, the quick count of hands supporting proposals, done in rushed sessions without even a proper count, afforded participants little assurance that in all cases a clear majority had been achieved. Nor did these last-minute sessions clarify the criteria participants used when voting. In contrast, the CPs discussed the criteria for establishing priorities, and in each instance, the criterion being applied was clarified and discussed before prioritizing commenced.

3. The Summit and CP differed fundamentally by structure. At the Summit, almost half the time available was devoted to plenary sessions that were mostly scripted, often for media purposes, rather than being aimed at meeting the deliberation needs of the participants. On day one of the Summit, for example, in the governance stream roughly four and a half hours of the seven and a quarter hours allocated for work were devoted to participant interaction. Of the approximately five hours designated for work on the second day, only two and a quarter hours were devoted to participant interaction. Criticism was widespread among participants that, if the government really wanted to learn their views, it was spending far too little time on it. At the CP, in contrast, well over two-thirds of the time available was allocated to interactive sessions, and most of each plenary session was devoted to responding to the deliberation needs of the CPs. Notably, of the three hours available on the first day, around two hours were interactive; of the seven-and-half hours available on the second and third days, approximately five were interactive; and on the final day, of the four hours available approximately three were interactive.

Moreover, the Summit’s “stream” discussions permitted only minimal intensive small group deliberation. In the Governance stream, for example, the program opened with speeches followed by a large-group session during which participants promoted their “big ideas.” Another plenary followed, in which the key ideas of four subgroups were reviewed. It finished with the
co-chair delivering a rallying cry to “think big.” On the second day, the Governance stream started with a plenary to review the work done the previous evening by the facilitators, who had produced a summary of the stream’s work from the day before (the accuracy of which was substantially disputed by participants). The stream’s work concluded with a plenary involving a chaotic, high-pressure session to prioritize the items that would be submitted to the closing multi-stream plenary. Too little time was left for the smaller-group sessions to do the real work of developing key themes, ideas, and actions.

In contrast, the Citizens’ Parliament used most of the available time to broaden and deepen the discussion. Small group interactive sessions predominated, and a variety of deliberative techniques was used to maximize participation. Even the panel discussions were interactive. In addition, the technology of networked computers enhanced deliberation by making possible prompt analysis, theming, and prioritization of team and individual inputs, which greatly reduced the time needed in plenary sessions for these tasks. The technology also enabled the CPs to express themselves in their own words. Lastly, it helped ensure that priorities were accurately captured and documented, which in turn allowed the CPs “voice”—rather than a post-event analysis supplied by the facilitators—to serve as the basis for the preliminary and final reports.

One way to summarize the deficiencies of the Summit is to say that, in the main, it reflected the premises that underpin “community consultation” in Australia: the indispensability of experts, the need to focus on factual information, the primary goal of eliciting feedback, the emphasis on government’s legal decision-making authority, etc. Unfortunately, it was all too clear from the outset that any decisions made following the Summit would be made by government, and by government alone—this despite a new emphasis in Australia going beyond consultation to achieve “active participation … a collaboration in which citizens actively shape policy options, but where government retains the responsibility for final decisions.”

Moreover, the small-group sessions were conducted in the manner of traditional “workshops.” For example, participants called out their comments and suggestions, which facilitators recorded by hand on flip charts. No use was made of newer dialogue and deliberation techniques. In view of the continual expression of dissatisfaction among participants with facilitators’ interpretations of the discussions in Summit sessions, a tool such as a 21st Century Town Meeting (which was used during the CP) could have reduced dissent and distrust substantially.
In contrast, the *Citizens’ Parliament* reflected the nascent movement in the Western world of “deliberative democracy”—a “pragmatic, inclusive form of discourse in which citizens collectively—even cooperatively—analyze a ‘problem’; establish criteria by which to evaluate public responses to it; identify multiple options that reflect different sets of values or value-priorities held by members of the public; weigh arguments for and against each option in light of the criteria established previously; and, through an indefinite period of continuing discussion (that may or may not include voting), approach a measure of agreement that (ideally) most participants can accept as a collective ‘decision’” (Hartz-Karp & Briand, 2009). According to the Australian Government’s Department of Finance and Deregulation (2004), deliberative democracy is thus a political practice in which citizens exert a substantial and meaningful influence on policymaking, even though “government retains the responsibility for final decisions.”

The agenda of the *CP* was constructed around a commitment to designing a deliberative process guided by contemporary adult learning principles. For example, more time was made available for participants to deliberate, in part by using experts to provide “just-in-time” perspectives and additional information. It was expected that participants gradually would build up their confidence as significant contributors to making public policy through deliberation in the smaller face-to-face regional meetings, through the online deliberations, and at the Canberra event. Participants publicly gave after-the-fact credence to this supposition. For example, the youngest participant stated at the final plenary session that she knew nothing about politics initially and was not interested in it, noting that she said little in the first two days of the *CP*, but could not be stopped by the end. She concluded, “I can now go home, open the newspaper and turn to the politics page… I’m going to be our first woman Prime Minister.”

4. In the *Summit*, the Prime Minister and his support team organized the discussion with various “streams,” or topic areas. Other teams, consisting of a federal minister and a person well known in the field, convened each stream. The convening teams then framed the issues they wanted stream participants to consider, and sub-groups were formed accordingly. Although volunteer facilitators were employed, more often than not it appeared the conveners had determined beforehand how the sessions would proceed.
The organizers of the *Citizens’ Parliament*, on the other hand, avoided pre-framing the problems, issues, or challenges to be explored. Instead, they employed a bottom-up approach, harvesting ideas for discussion topics from multiple World Cafés and the online deliberations. CPs were encouraged to take or leave these as they further deliberated.

5. Success in identifying and developing “big ideas” of the sort the Prime Minister called for at the *Summit* depends on people bringing to the discussion concrete proposals they have thought through carefully in advance, and then using their influence to gain a competitive advantage for them in debate. In contrast, generating “*deep ideas*”—creative responses that grow out of insight rooted in reflection—relies more on listening carefully to others’ views and to their explanations and justifications for those views. It requires (among other things) a sincere interest in what others think and why, exploration of different perspectives through mutually-respectful dialogue, the desire to find or create common ground, and acceptance of reasons and arguments that are understandable even if ultimately one feels obliged to disagree with them. The notion of big ideas implies intellectuality, analysis, and creativity. The notion of deep ideas adds grounding in values, principles, purposes, and priorities established *through interaction with others*. While the former might be expected to emerge from a process of community consultation, the latter reflects the moral essence of deliberative democracy—“living in ‘right relationship’ to others” (Briand, 2007).

At the end of the first day of the *Summit*, the co-chair of the Governance stream expressed disappointment that few “big ideas” had been proposed. This came as no surprise to those of us versed in the deliberative-participatory alternative to politics-as-usual. (Even at its best, the latter contains flaws that in present circumstances render it anachronistic in important respects.) In small-group sessions, it was apparent that many of the specialists were less than frank and open, perhaps to the point of censoring themselves to preserve their image as detached professionals. Whether out of a desire to maintain this illusion, or to inoculate themselves against criticism, or to avoid engagement with “the laity,” or to achieve some other purpose, the effect was an absence of imagination, boldness, and the willingness to think aloud for the benefit of all. Instead, predictably, they spoke in cautious, tentative tones of
incremental and short-term change within existing structures of government. Creativity was crushed.”

Many *Summit* participants who were not government experts also reverted to form. Familiar with partisan politics, parliamentary procedure, and bureaucratic in-fighting, they caucused, lobbied, and bargained to have their ideas adopted. They showed no awareness that the vast majority of Australians find such behavior distasteful, instead preferring conversations about things that really matter and down-to-earth, pragmatic problem solving. Consequently, few new ideas arose because of participant interaction. Each participant came as an individual and left as an individual. The process provided no impetus to draw people out of their roles (and shells) and to prompt them to remix and redevelop their proposals into more-inclusive and more-far-reaching aspirations. Instead, it encouraged participants to hold tenaciously to their original views and to advocate for their adoption. As a result, participants failed to capitalize on the invaluable asset of diversity.

The presence of more non-specialists might have improved the *Summit* discussions, if only by allowing them to ask naïve but humanizing questions to provide some relief from the pedantic, technocratic habit of mind that pervaded the Governance stream. The irony of expertise is that it leads, not to ideas that might reveal new paths to solving old problems and issues, but rather to dead-ends that go nowhere. As Einstein observed, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” He also said, “We cannot solve our problems at the same level of thinking that created them in the first place” and “imagination is more important than knowledge ...” (But then, Einstein wasn’t an “expert.”)

To avoid the pitfalls of the *Summit*, participants in the *Citizens’ Parliament* were enabled and encouraged to foster the growth of a “collective intelligence” that takes in and integrates many small, insightful contributions from as many participants as possible. The potential of harnessing collective intelligence far exceeds the knowledge, experience, and certainly

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*By the end of the *Summit*, the Governance stream embraced the following notions: collaborative governance—revolutionizing the ways government and communities interact; universal automatic voter registration and compulsory voting for all Australians over the age of 18, with optional registration permitting 16 to 18-year-old Australians with entitlement to vote; strengthening the civil society sector, including the removal of tax roadblocks to raising funds and the reform of charity law; and abolishing private campaign finances, including third-party donations, with an exemption for small individual donors. Of these recommendations, Governance stream participants chose only “collaborative governance” as a priority, which the Prime Minister then pronounced as a “new idea” worthy of further investigation.*
wisdom of even the “best and brightest.” To that end, Surowiecki (2004) in his book, *The Wisdom of Crowds* offers many examples of situations which input from a wide range of sources has led to better overall decisions.*

The designers of the CP felt sure that ordinary citizens would be less possessive and protective of their ideas and more willing to allow changes to be made. By utilizing processes that were non-threatening, and even fun—they endeavored to ensure that participants would be freed from the inhibition that often deters people from making valuable contributions. It was unsurprising, then, that novel and useful suggestions emerged unpredictably. For example, one participant came up with the (somewhat whimsical) idea of creating a “policy idol” competition, perhaps in the form of a TV “reality show” based on Parliament. Another suggestion was to abolish both the term and the norms associated with political “opposition,” the implication being that disagreement should be expressed within the context of collaborative problem solving. A third example of a thought-provoking proposal was the recommendation to consider establishing an Indigenous Citizens’ Parliament to amplify the political voice of Australia’s native inhabitants. Finally, there was an inspired suggestion for making politicians more accountable to the people: publicly issuing “repeat offenders” three-strikes “red card.”

Despite participants’ relative lack of “expertise,” the CPs did consider some of the more predictable, big-picture issues raised by the Summit. These included adoption of a bill or charter of rights; modernizing federalism; changing the electoral system; and empowering citizens through community engagement. However, the CPs also brought fresh priorities to the fore: empowering citizens to participate in politics through the experiential education of practicing the sort of deliberative methods used in the Citizens’ Parliament; instituting a

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* Random selection, it is worth noting, helps extend this range by drawing into the discussion voices that are otherwise missing.

* Affording politicians additional opportunities to perform in front of a camera is perhaps an invitation to political theater that would be both less illuminating and less amusing than the brilliant British comedy series, “Yes, Minister.” Nonetheless, there is something to be said for the notion of setting standards for policymaking performance and then holding government officials to those standards in a manner that is much more public than current accountability measures.

◊ For readers unfamiliar with international practice in games such as football (soccer), lacrosse, field hockey, rugby, Australian Rules football (“footy”), badminton, etc., the umpire displays a red card to a participant who is being ejected from the game for repeatedly committing infractions of the rules. This is akin to “fouling out” of a basketball game or assessment of a “game misconduct” penalty in ice hockey.
“citizens’ question time” in parliament; and introducing optional voting for high school students aged fourteen to eighteen.

Perhaps the most noteworthy difference between the Summit and the Citizens’ Parliament was the subjective experience of participants. In the Summit, participants were often heard to say that, though enjoyable in some respects, it was also quite frustrating (for the reasons cited above). In contrast, many participants in the Citizens’ Parliament remarked, both during the CP and later, online, that the Parliament was for them “a life-changing experience.” It remains to be seen whether continuing research with CP participants confirms that this was indeed the case.

**Conclusion**

Although it was an exhilarating experience for the authors to attend the Summit and to talk with extraordinary people about the future of the nation, it was also disheartening to discover that so little of the learning and innovation that has occurred in recent years in the fields of community engagement and deliberative democracy had been incorporated into the proceedings. We believe that more-profound, more-dramatic, and more-promising ideas would have emerged had this been done, and that additional time spent deliberating could have developed those ideas into concrete, workable recommendations.

The Prime Minister wants ideas to “transform our future.” We will see whether the outcomes of the expert-heavy Summit or the grassroots-orientated Citizens’ Parliament acquire the power—by gaining more traction and by striking people as more democratically authentic—genuinely to transform Australian democracy.

Despite our disappointment with and criticism of the Summit, we wish to state clearly our hope that these two initiatives—the Summit and the Citizens’ Parliament—will, in different but complementary ways, herald the beginning of a democratic renewal in Australia. To that

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*As noted earlier, the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has stated publicly that his government does not have all the answers, and that it therefore is imperative that the Australian people help to meet the critical challenges facing the country. Rudd’s championing of a new relationship with the people undoubtedly led to the extraordinary energy, goodwill, and genuine desire by Summit participants to contribute collectively to a better future. Despite the judgment of most pundits that the success of the Summit would turn on whether the government took action in response to its recommendations, from our viewpoint it has already proved a success by demonstrating the desire for and possibility of significant change in policymaking direction, and by opening a window of opportunity for renewed civic engagement.*
end, we have joined other researchers involved with the *Citizens’ Parliament* in a quest to deepen our understanding of what can be achieved when organizing large-scale citizen deliberation on complex issues. After an analysis of the research findings from the *Citizens’ Parliament*, we will document how citizens experience such a process, and how their preferences, judgments, and values are affected by their participation. We will reflect on the relevance of this Australian experiment for other countries and on the possibility of exporting it and adapting it to other national and cultural contexts. We hope to use what is learned from this initiative to implement inclusive, representative, and deliberative experiences for citizens in Australia and elsewhere. Finally, through this experience we hope to shed new light on the theory and practice of democracy.

**Janette Hartz-Karp** is renowned nationally and internationally for her innovative work in community engagement and deliberative democracy. Her current position as Professor of Sustainability at the Curtin Sustainability Policy Institute. She served for four and one half years as a community engagement consultant to the Western Australian Minister for Planning and Infrastructure. She was tasked with finding innovative ways to achieve joint decision-making with the community and pioneering deliberative democracy. She has continued with this pioneering work, co-designing and co-facilitating Australia’s first Citizens’ Parliament and co-designing and co-facilitating a pilot global dialogue on climate change in Alberta Canada.

**Lyn Carson** is the United States Studies Centre’s academic program director at the University of Sydney in Australia. She is an associate professor in applied politics with a particular interest in deliberative democracy and civic engagement in political decision-making. She has been teaching, consulting, writing and researching in this field for nearly two decades and was co-designer of the Australian Citizens’ Parliament and an invited participant at the Australian Prime Minister’s 2020 Summit. She also maintains a website on active democracy, www.activedemocracy.net.
References


Notes

i For example, according to ANU and the Electoral Council of Australia (n.d.), in 1856 Australia introduced the secret ballot (known initially in the rest of the world as the “Australian Ballot”). In 1894, the South Australian Parliament gave women the right to stand for Parliament. Australia was the first nation-state to be federated by popular vote (1901). It remains among the few countries that continue a national policy of compulsory voting (resulting in extremely high (> 90%) voter participation rates).

ii A team at the Australian National University (ANU) has been conducting “audits” since 2002 to assess Australia’s strengths and weaknesses as a democratic society. Since early 2008, the Audit has been based at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, with continuing input from researchers at ANU and other universities (Brenton, 2005).

iii For example, Papadakis (1999) and Norris (2001).

iv For example, Hill (2003).

v Institute on Governance (2005). The IOG is a Canadian non-profit think tank founded in 1990. Its mission is to provide an independent source of knowledge and advice on good governance principles, standards, and practices.

vi These initiatives have progressed largely independently of one another. The Citizens’ Parliament had been approved for university funding but was still in a conceptual phase at the time of the 2020 Summit. In a personal conversation between the Prime Minister and one of the authors at the 2020 Summit, the PM was alerted to the impending Citizens’ Parliament and asked to participate in the proceedings if possible. Although the Government participated, opening the Citizens’ Parliament and receiving the Final Report, PM Rudd was not able to attend. The Online Citizen Parliamentarians had access online to the findings of the 2020 Summit if they wanted to make use of them.

vii Perhaps predictably, in view of the cynicism that characterizes contemporary news reporting, the phrase, first used by the Prime Minister, became a frequent—and mostly derisive—shorthand label for the Summit. For example: Malcolm Farr, Up close and personal at Rudd’s thoughtfest, and Glenn Milne, The PM’s monster headache, The Sunday Telegraph, April 20, 2008, pp. 13 and 15, respectively.

viii These streams included: 1) the productivity agenda—education, skills, training, science and innovation; 2) the future of the Australian economy; 3) population, sustainability, climate change, water, and the future of our cities; 4) future directions for rural industries and rural communities; 5) a long-term national health strategy; 6) strengthening communities, supporting families, and social inclusion; 7) options for the future of Indigenous Australia; 8) the arts, film, and design; 9) governance—democratic renewal, a more open government (which included the role of the media), the structure of the federation, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens; and 10) security and prosperity in a rapidly changing region and world.

ix The leaders selected are widely respected community members—selected, it would seem, to gain maximum public “buy-in” to the process.

x Whether the need to cover their own costs was a constraining factor for some prospective participants was not made public. However, if it was, it nevertheless did not reduce the expected number of participants, which was, as expected, 1,000.

xi There was much discussion in the media about the extent to which the selected participants were of left-leaning/Labor persuasion, despite the many disclaimers from the selectors and the Government that the aim and end result was to assemble a broad range of perspectives.

xii Discussions with several stream facilitators suggests that there was no overall process discussion about how best to reach the desired outcomes. Each stream functioned as a separate unit, and from all accounts operated with varying degrees of success.

xiii To understand the methodology of a world café, see http://www.theworldcafe.com/
The “charge” is a term used to describe the task or question to be deliberated. Since the charge will frame the deliberations, much care is taken to ensure it is unbiased and acceptable to all stakeholders, and that it is neither too broad nor too narrow.

“Q Methodology” is a statistical research method used to look for correlations between subjects (persons) across a sample of variables. It reduces a large number of individual viewpoints to a few “factors,” i.e., shared ways of thinking.

Despite great pains taken to explain the topic to be discussed, the ‘charge’, a number of the proposals submitted were not relevant to the question of how to strengthen the political system. Members of those teams were encouraged either to reframe their proposal so it addressed the ‘charge’ or to join other teams. However, this was a self-managed online deliberation system, so a number of teams chose to pursue their interests together regardless of whether their ideas would be used at the CP.

This term is used by Fung (2003) (p. 339), borrowing from the term of Dahl’s (1985) “minipopulus” or minipopulation” (p. 88).