

**RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT: SYDNEY *BUILDING BLOCKS OF DEMOCRACY* ATHENS
DEMOCRACY FORUM ROUNDTABLE 2022***BY WENDY HU*

Over 40 individuals gathered at NSW Parliament on 11 March to attend the first of five *Building Blocks of Democracy* roundtables to be held across the globe for the Athens Democracy Forum 2022. The Building Block for Sydney was 'power of the people'. Common themes emerged from the discussions. Distrust arises from parliament not making decisions in the public interest. Instead of putting the desires of their electorates first, participants believed that vested interests, especially of those with money and lobby groups, were being prioritised. Political donations and fundraising were identified as significant impediments to the responsiveness of parties to citizens. Trust is further eroded when politicians lie and do not keep campaign promises. The increasing difficulty of discerning what constitutes the 'truth' due to the dismantling of the monolithic media is a contributing factor. Inclusivity in decision-making, especially in ensuring the voices of individuals with diverse backgrounds are heard, was also a key consideration. Ultimately, two recommendations were put forward, although each with nuances to be elaborated on later in the report:

Recommendation 1: Use of citizens' assemblies to support government decision-making processes, such as parliamentary committees.

Recommendation 2: Political donations and fundraising reform consisting of limiting contributions only to individuals living in the electorate and introducing a cap.

Participants fell into two groups. Those with yellow dots on their name tags were individuals with 'better than average access to politicians'. Those with blue dots on their name tags represented the broader public and were selected at random from the list of *New York Times* Australia subscribers. The question both groups had to answer was:

“How can we reconnect people to their parliaments in order to produce more trust in public decisions?”

With a Federal election called for 21 May, it elicited very topical discussions. Polls asking Australians how much they trust the leaders of the two major parties are currently a staple of front-page news. However, the question went beyond trust in the political candidates of the day. It concerned trust in the system of democracy.

The event sought to apply deliberative techniques in small group discussions and task focus. In the first session, after an introduction by Iain Walker and welcome by Damien Cave, participants heard from an Expert Speaker panel comprised of Professor Archon Fung, Professor Anika Gauja and the Hon. Geoff Gallop. Afterwards, participants with the same-coloured dots gathered in groups of five to brainstorm three questions to ask the Expert Speaker panel. It was followed by provocation by the Hon. Lee Evans MP (Chair of the Committee on Electoral Matters, Centre-right). The second session followed the same structure. The Expert Speaker panel comprised of Glenn Milne and Rod Simpson and the provocation was delivered by the Hon. Jonathan O'Dea MP (Speaker of the House, centre-Right). In the third session, the groups of five had to coalesce on one recommendation to address the question of trust. The yellow dot groups presented first to give the blue dot groups the opportunity to respond to their proposals. To conclude, a consensus seeking exercise was conducted to facilitate agreement by all blue dot participants on two recommendations to be presented at the London roundtable.

As such, there were two categories of 'experts'. First, those on the Expert Speaker panel who gave ten-minute lectures on their views and the politicians who gave provocations. Second, those with yellow dots who participated in discussions were also 'experts' in that they were from advocacy groups, authors etc. Therefore, the recommendations proposed by the citizens underwent two rounds of change as they were a response to the recommendations proposed by the Expert Speaker panel and yellow dot groups.

EXPERT SPEAKER PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) **Professor Archon Fung**

Archon explained that levels of trust in government in Australia are at an all-time low. One reason is that the government hears predominantly from lobby groups representing special interests. Normatively, governments are deserving of trust because they are responsive to what citizens want. The old school conception of political representatives being trustees or delegates, however, does not properly address the rising distrust in politicians. Two new conceptions have developed in response. One is descriptive representation which entails political leadership reflecting the demography of the population. It relies on the intuition that people trust leaders who look like them. The other is recursive representation, which states that the relationship between politicians and citizens should be an iterative two-way street. Archon's recommendations pertained to recursive representation.

Recommendations

- Participatory budgeting or budget cutting where citizens decide how the public revenue should be spent or what public expenditure should be cut.
- Empowered citizens' assemblies where a group of citizens selected by a lottery deliberate on important issues and can make binding decisions. To make this work practically, Australia should start by holding 2-3 well-publicised citizens' assemblies on topical issues.
- Randomly selected town halls where citizens agree to devote several hours to make decisions with other constituents.
- Participatory legislation and constitutionalism where citizens shape laws through methods like referenda.

(ii) **Professor Anika Gauja**

Anika posited that parties are one of the most important institutions in democracy for they connect citizens and states. Yet, they present a paradox, as parties are also one of the most distrusted institutions. There are four elements of parties that should be reimagined to address the crisis of trust. First, membership and connection to the community. In Australia, parties have outdated branch structures and are too ideological. Second, parties as a forum for robust and inclusive policymaking. Third, the role of parties in selecting candidates. It is not voters discriminating against women, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or from other diverse backgrounds, but parties. Lastly, representation and representative behaviour.

Recommendations

- Membership and connection to community: allowing members to dip in and out of party politics as they choose, harnessing technology and making it easy and fun to participate.
- Forum for robust and inclusive policymaking: parties being a space for deliberative participation at an electoral, geographic or issues-based small unit level before deliberative participation is scaled to a state, regional or national forum.
- Selection of candidates: quotas and primaries.
- Representation and representative behaviour: mandating policy manifestos.

(iii) **The Hon Geoff Gallop**

Geoff argued that politicians are fearful of going against vested interests without trust and only with trust are politicians more likely to try new things. One reason for the lack of trust is the destruction of trade unions as there is no longer a voice for the working class. On the other side of the equation is politicians not trusting citizens. To understand public concerns, governments run consultations, but the problem is that the same individuals or groups typically get involved.

Recommendations

- Introduce proportional voting for the Federal House of Representatives.
- Mandate the use of citizens' assemblies by parliamentary committees.
- Alternative to regulating the role of money in politics is to randomly select different perspectives for politicians to hear.

(iv) Glenn Milne

Glenn proposed that atomisation is occurring in Australia. The 2022 Federal election is being contested by a record number of viable independents who are challenging the two-party system. Atomisation is being propelled by distrust and the yearning by people for re-engagement. It is technologically driven. The atomisation of the media preceded the atomisation of democracy whereby there is no longer a media monolith and social media has empowered the individual to source the news and disseminate it. Atomisation will only be good for democracy if it forces parties to re-engage at the community level. Money is the reason parties have become wilfully disengaged. A lack of transparency has led to the rise of dark money and public funding has become a vehicle for complacency in parties.

Recommendation

- Introduce a low-value, high-quantity political donations model where contributions are capped at \$200 per individual and public funding is eliminated.

(v) Rod Simpson

Rod spoke about his personal experience running 'Voices Of' North Sydney and how it exemplified the reason for distrust. Rod has run numerous kitchen table conversations to understand the issues most important to constituents since 2020. Around 70% of the electorate participated. When Rod brought the list of issues in order of priority to the local Federal representative, however, they were not responded to by a change in policy agenda.

Recommendations

- Climate change commission which is transparent and engages with the public so that there is an understanding of the difficulty of trade-offs.
- Metric of government accountability not being GDP but wellbeing.

(vi) The Hon Lee Evans MP

Lee argued that the biggest issue is fundraising, particularly its lack of transparency.

Recommendation

- Citizens' assembly on political donations reform.

(vii) The Hon Jonathan O'Dea MP

Jonathan stated that he recognises that representative government needs enhancement and that people do not have trust in the systems and functions of government. There is a need to involve more people in decision-making.

Recommendation

- Use of citizens' assemblies as an advisory body to governments to distribute power more diffusively and help politicians in their decision-making process.

‘YELLOW DOT’ GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

The expert participants, or those given yellow dots, were all divided in the direction of their recommendations. Three of the four groups developed recommendations based on ideas presented by the panellists and provocateurs, although not necessarily based on the major ideas.

Expert Group 1 (EG 1)

Expert Group 1’s recommendation largely mirrored Glenn Milne’s proposal, focussing the role of money creating a lack of incentive for politicians to engage with constituents and divided loyalties.

Recommendation

- The complete reform of political and election funding by removing public funding and large volume private funding.

Expert Group 2 (EG 2)

Similarly, Expert Group 2 concentrated on one specific recommendation by Professor Anika Gauja on the publication of a policy manifesto by parties based on the success of the UK experience with the Constitution Committee. The group argued it creates a framework and sets expectations for future policy decisions which people can access and understand.

Recommendation

- All parties must publish a manifesto before an election campaign.

Expert Group 3 (EG 3)

Expert Group 3 took a different approach of amalgamating and enhancing a popular recommendation by the panellists and provocateurs of holding citizens’ assemblies. The group noted the failure of review bodies which do not have authority to enforce recommendations and the lack of local, diverse, and expert perspectives in policy and legislation making. They wished for political representation to be framed as a service and to use the strength of Australian democracy as a practical way to encourage active and diverse participation.

Recommendation

- A randomly-selected, citizen engaged, term limited, policy-formulation, engagement and legislation implementation assembly.

Expert Group 4 (EG 4)

Expert Group 4 devised their own recommendation separate from the proposals by expert panellists and provocateurs. They wanted a structural device that would establish new democratic processes to ensure voices are heard and issues identified. Their concerns were polarisation, single-issue candidates and the number of people disenfranchised with democracy.

Recommendation

- Institutionalise an oversight or advancement of democracy body, for example, an electoral commission or open government office/commissioner.

‘BLUE DOT’ GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Unlike the expert groups, the citizen groups were largely aligned in their priority recommendation. The requirement of some form of citizens’ assembly in public decision-making was advocated for by three out of the four groups. These groups built upon the recommendations of Professor Archon Fung, the Hon Geoff Gallop, the Hon Lee Evans MP, the Hon Jonathan O’Dea MP, and Expert Group 3 with two further nuances. These citizen groups emphasised the importance of inclusivity through a compulsory participation mechanism and accountability in elected representatives responding to the deliberations of citizens’ assemblies. The other common recommendation was political donations and fundraising reform which was a direct response to the recommendations put forward by Glenn Milne and Expert Group 1. Citizen Group 4 supported an additional requirement that political donations come only from the constituents of whom the candidate is seeking to represent. One group also raised the importance of proportional voting for all levels of parliament.

Citizen Group 1

EG 1	Reject	EG 2	Reject	EG 3	Alter	EG 4	Reject
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Citizen Group 1 advocated for citizens’ assemblies to be used at the electorate level. The requirement of compulsory attendance by both citizens and political representatives was another unique feature. Their recommendation aims to normalise participation in public decisions for all Australians, like voting and jury duty, and to encourage dialogue across the community, to address the problem of parliament not being representative.

Recommendation

- Make citizens’ assemblies compulsory in each electorate similar to jury duty service, and compulsory for legislatures to host and attend these and report back to their electorate.

Citizen Group 2

EG 1	Reject	EG 2	Reject	EG 3	Alter	EG 4	Reject
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Similarly, Citizen Group 2 wanted a citizens’ assembly, although they focussed on its function of defining what the public considers as the most important issues to be resolved. Drawing on Professor Archon Fung’s proposal of an ‘empowered citizens’ assembly’ and in response to the second Expert Panel stating their view that the recommendations of citizens’ assemblies cannot be binding in Q&A, the group also included an accountability mechanism in their recommendation.

Recommendation

- Gather people from all corners of the community in a citizens’ assembly or jury to raise issues and define what is important and introduce a mechanism for politicians to be accountable to the recommendations, providing reasons for why recommendations were adopted or ignored.

Citizen Group 3

EG 1	Alter	EG 2	Reject	EG 3	Alter	EG 4	Reject
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The establishment of a citizens’ assemblies was also a focal recommendation of Citizen Group 3, although the group proposed in addition political donations and fundraising reform and the introduction of proportional voting for all houses of parliament. The diverse mixture of ideas epitomised a difficulty faced by all groups of what to prioritise amongst many worthy reforms. At their core, the proposals seek to break the stronghold of the two major parties, improve political representation and move from adversarial to consensus decision-making.

Recommendation

- Improve representation via introducing transparency in funding, establishing citizens’ assemblies or other new democratic tools, and proportional representation in all levels of government.

Citizen Group 4

EG 1	Alter	EG 2	Reject	EG 3	Reject	EG 4	Reject
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Citizen Group 4 deviated from the trend of advocating for citizens’ assemblies by building on Glenn Milne and Expert Group 4’s recommendation. The group also proposed that there be a monetary cap on political donations to candidates but introduced a further requirement that only individuals (not corporations or other entities with separate legal personality) enrolled in the electorate can donate to a candidate seeking to represent that electorate. Reasons for the recommendation included to make candidates dependent on constituents for (re)election, compel engagement with constituent concerns and prevent rich self-interested lobbyists from corrupting the political process.

Recommendation

- Cap on donations to candidates and sitting members and mandate that only individual constituents enrolled in the seat can donate.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, the citizens engaged in a consensus building exercise to determine which one or two recommendations the collective wanted to put forward at the London conference. The experts did not participate in this task. After some deliberation, two recommendations received the most support. *Recommendation 1* received the majority of support. *Recommendation 2* did not receive much outright support but a moderately-sized group who equally supported both recommendations stated that they would prioritise political donations and fundraising reform for its more immediate impact on trust. They argued that citizens’ assemblies processes would take some time to institutionalise. Finally, a small group wanted the introduction of proportional voting in all houses of parliament but prioritised *Recommendation 1* over *Recommendation 2*.

Recommendation 1: Use of citizens’ assemblies to support government decision-making processes, such as parliamentary committees.

The most effective way to increase trust is for parliaments to use citizens’ assemblies to support the decision-making processes of government. The selection process of a civic lottery should result in a diverse and inclusive body of citizens. To maximise representation, participation in citizens’ assemblies should be made compulsory like jury duty. Citizens’ assemblies can have multiple functions. These include for elected representatives to understand the concerns of their constituents, for parliaments to understand what the public views as the most important issues, to scrutinise policy and legislation, and to propose solutions to issues such as climate change or political donations reform. To be most effective, politicians should be involved and empower the citizens’ assembly to have some level of authority. Alternatively, politicians should be held accountable to the decisions of the citizens’ assembly and transparently provide reasons for why their proposals were not adopted.

Recommendation 2: Political donations and fundraising reform consisting of limiting contributions only to individuals living in the electorate and introducing a cap

Another effective way to rebuild trust is to reform the political donations and fundraising system so that contributions are capped and are only able to be made by individuals living in the electorate of the candidate they are supporting. The cap should be small so individuals on low incomes are not prevented from expressing their political views. Only individuals, and not corporations, charities or other legal entities should be able to make political donations.