

## An inventory of democratic deliberative processes in Australia<sup>1</sup>: Early finding

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A lengthier paper than this early finding (under the authorship of Lyn Carson and Phillip Hart) has been submitted for publication. Details of the journal will appear on this website once that occurs so that the fully article can be accessed and cited.

### ABSTRACT

A range of innovative participatory approaches have been used in Australia to discuss policy and current issues: citizens' juries, consensus conferences and so on. These methods can be categorised as democratic, deliberative processes (DDPs) and are distinctive because they involve unengaged citizens, those who are not aligned to interest groups or engaged in lobbying or policy making.

This paper reports on data collected from an inventory of DDPs that have been convened over the past three decades in Australia (1974-2006). This brief paper reports on one early finding only—the variation in take-up of DDPs between states.

### BACKGROUND

Western democracies are thought to be experiencing a democratic deficit with declining trust between governors and the governed (Power Inquiry 2006). Involving the public in decision making is integral to democracy and community engagement in its various expressions is one way of ensuring that a citizen's influence can extend beyond the empty ritual of the ballot box (see Khan 1999). It seems clear, that despite the fact that some citizens still have faith in the current system of representative government, that a democratic imperative exists to strengthen the policy making system so that citizens can be confident that decision making is effective (Fung & Wright 2003, Gastil & Levine 2005).

Australia is not a leader when it comes to democratic, deliberative processes (DDPs). Australia, historically, has lagged behind countries like Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States with their consensus conferences, planning cells, citizens' juries, televotes and deliberative polls—some of them dating back to the 1970s. Australia can claim only three isolated attempts with randomly-selected groups brought together in a deliberative space in the 1970s and 1980s (under the influence of Fred Emery's work with industry councils and search conferences, see Emery 1989). The authors know of no other DDPs in Australia until the early 1990s in northern New South Wales.

What is a DDP? It is not a traditional form of consultation, like a non-interactive public meeting or a permanent advisory committee or an opinion poll or a call for written submissions or even a design workshop with invited participants. These traditional methods are consultative but fall short of the ideals of a DDP which is both *deliberative*, i.e. involving interaction between

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participants and choice making as a group, and *inclusive*, i.e. involving people selected in a way to ensure they are a microcosm of the community.

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A DDP, then, is a participatory method that draws together a cross-section of a population, usually through random selection, to deliberate over an extended period, usually a few days, about an issue of concern. They are typically one-off events though they might be part of a larger engagement strategy. The deliberations are assisted by a neutral, skilled facilitator and the group's goal is to make a decision or to find common ground and offer recommendations to decision makers. Ideally, the decision maker attends to these recommendations.

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The representative participants are *descriptively* representative. The aim is to attract participants who reflect the composition of the wider population. They are not delegates acting for others; instead they are meant to resemble or describe the population from which they are drawn. In some cases, when the numbers are small, stratified random sampling takes place, matching the characteristics of the small sample to the demographics of the larger population (in terms of socio-demographic relevance: for example, sex, age, occupation, geography, education). When large numbers are involved (with a deliberative poll or a 21<sup>st</sup> century town meeting) then random selection should provide a statistically representative sample (see Box 1 for an example of large-scale DDP). Also note that in the case study described in Box 1 the DDP was fortunate to have the imprimatur of an enabling leader, a government minister, and the participants' recommendations were adopted by the state government of which the minister was a part. This is unusual.

The WA State Minister for Planning and Infrastructure convened the Dialogue with the City.

The design attempted to engage the whole community. This included a survey of 8,000 residents, interactive web site, one hour TV broadcast, series of full page issues stories in the major newspaper, art and essay competitions in schools on the future of the city, and additional listening sessions for those frequently not heard – youth, the Indigenous and those from a non-English speaking background.

The process culminated in a '21<sup>st</sup> century dialogue' of 1,100 participants, held in September 2003. One third were stakeholder invitees, one third were respondents to advertisements, and one third were respondents to a random sample. Opportunities for deliberation were provided for in innovative ways. The forum combined interactive computer technology to determine key themes, with a planning game that enabled each participant to take the role of a planner to determine where and how the future growth of the city would occur. Participants were purposefully seated at tables of 10 to maximize the mix of expertise and views. A lead facilitator moderated, with a volunteer facilitator and scribe at each table. The end result, a new planning strategy for metropolitan Perth was submitted to the WA Planning Commission and the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure in 2004 (Carson & Hartz-Karp 2005).

**Box 1 Example of a large-scale DDP (21<sup>st</sup> century dialogue): Dialogue with the City, Perth**

Small group deliberation provides an opportunity for dialogue and deliberation. When people are given extensive and accessible information and a chance to discuss their fears and concerns, they have the ability to grapple with quite complex material and to move toward consensus. They also have the capacity to generate new ideas and solutions. This is evidenced by the many consensus conferences that have been convened throughout the world, including one in Australia

in 1999 on genetically-modified organisms (Einsidel et al 2001; Renouf 1999). See Box 2 for a description of a small-scale deliberation that also involved a complex issue.

In 2001 the Institute for Sustainable Futures convened a citizens' panel as part of its social research on the subject of container deposit legislation (its director had been appointed by the Minister for the Environment to undertake an independent review). A steering committee had oversight of the selection process (random mailing to 2000 households throughout NSW) and the design of the process (a modified citizens' jury). The panel was chosen to match a profile to ensure a cross-section of the population according to sex, educational qualifications, age, area of residence, household structure, ethnicity and employment. The panel was given background information agreed to by stakeholders. They also had access to a library of information plus independent experts over the two-and-a-half days they deliberated, with the support of two skilled, neutral facilitators. The panel's final report was incorporated into the report that was delivered to the Minister.

**Box 2 Example of a small-scale DDP (a citizens' panel): Container Deposit Legislation, NSW**

**INVENTORY—METHOD**

The Australian inventory began in 2004 and was completed in 2006. Four associate researchers collected data during this time. The survey protocol contained 32 questions which aimed to capture details for every DDP convened in Australia which conformed in part to the three ideals.

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By December 2006, 78 Australian DDPs had been documented. An analysis of these 78 can be found below. The data is very rich and this paper deals with only some of it, that is, where DDPs are being convened and when they were convened. Some observations are also made about the types of DDPs that are being convened in Australia. Examining the location of DDPs yielded a surprising finding which raised more questions for the researchers. This will be discussed later.

**INVENTORY—ANALYSIS**

Australia is the world's largest island and its smallest continent. Inevitably we were bound to find stark differences in the expression of DDPs in a country that is renowned for its diversity. Australia is a federation of six states (New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania) and two mainland territories (the vast and sparsely-populated Northern Territory and the tiny Australian Capital Territory). New South Wales (NSW) with approximately seven million people is the most densely populated state; Tasmania is the least populated with approximately half a million people (the two territories have even smaller populations). Table 1 shows the location (by state, territory or national) and year of each of these DDPs.

YEAR	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	ACT	NT	TAS	National	TOTAL
Pre-1977						1				1
1977-1986								1	1	2
1987-1996	3									3
1997-2006	12	5	5	1	41	4			4	72
TOTAL	15	5	5	1	41	5	0	1	5	78

**Table 1 Inventory of Australian DDPs (as at Dec 06) by location and date (in decades)**

### *Changes over the past three decades*

Very few DDPs were convened in Australia until 1999 when four DDPs were convened in the same year. This changed dramatically in 2001 when 12 were convened, seven by the same organisation (the Department of Planning and Infrastructure in WA). Without the DDPs convened by that government department, the number of DDPs convened in any one year never rises above single digits even though a slow growth is evident. Of the 78 convened (1974-2006), 30 have been convened (2001-2006) by one portfolio of agencies, planning and infrastructure, under the direction of the same minister, The Hon. Alannah MacTiernan MLA. This is a remarkable achievement in a six-year period.

### *Geographic spread*

South Australia and Tasmania have convened only one DDP each, the Northern Territory none. The tiny territory, ACT, has been more active than its size would predict and the other states have convened DDPs at a slow pace, except for WA.

Almost half of the DDPs were designed, coordinated and facilitated by one person: Janette Hartz-Karp, most of them with the *imprimatur* of the minister. The 36 DDPs which Hartz-Karp convened do not include participatory processes which could not be classified by the researchers as DDPs so their productivity is even more impressive than these statistics suggest. This is such a curiosity that it is discussed in greater depth under **Findings**.

There have been five other DDPs convened in WA and when these 41 are compared with other states a stark contrast is evident. Although WA has less than 10% of Australia's population, it has been responsible for 52% of DDPs. NSW, with 34% of the population has convened only 19%.

### *Commissioning/funding body*

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	ACT	TAS	NATIONAL	TOTAL
Federal govt	3	1	3						7
Local govt	3				3				6
State govt	3	1	1		33	1			39
Govt agencies					2	2			4
Research orgs	4	2		1	2	1		2	12
Non-govt orgs	2	1	1		1	1	1	3	10
TOTAL	15	5	5	1	41	5	1	5	78

**Table 2 DDPs by commissioning or funding body**

It is evident from Table 2 (above) that state government is responsible for funding 50% of the Australian DDPs. However, if WA is removed state government has been an inadequate supporter of these processes.

*Types of DDPs*

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METHOD	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	ACT	TAS	National	TOTAL
Citizens' jury	9	5	4		8	3			29
Deliberative poll				1		1		2	4
Deliberative survey	1				5				6
21 <sup>st</sup> century dialogue					10				10
Consensus conference								1	1
Consensus forum (includes enquiry by design)					12				12
Multi-criteria analysis conference					3				3
Deliberative forum (includes world café)	5		1		3	1	1	2	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>78</b>

**Table 3 Various DDP methods by location**

**INVENTORY – FINDINGS**

It was noted earlier that Western Australia is responsible for more than half of the processes summarised in Table 3 and that this is because of the extraordinary activity of one process champion and consultant, Dr Janette Harz-Karp, and one enabling leader, the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, The Hon. Alannah MacTiernan MLA, and can be traced back to a fortuitous combination of circumstances (uncovered during follow-up interviews with Hartz-Karp and MacTiernan).

MacTiernan's interest in DDPs was sparked by a conversation with Hartz-Karp prior to her party's election to government and her subsequent elevation to Minister for Planning and Infrastructure. She expressed great interest in trialing these methods if she was ever in a position

of influence. Fortunately, planning was the portfolio she was offered when her party, the Australian Labor Party, came to power.

MacTiernan and Hartz-Karp share a deep commitment to citizen involvement in decision making, whether that is deciding where to locate a town hall in a regional centre or developing a plan to make the state capital the world's most livable city. What is remarkable about MacTiernan is the way in which she delivers on her promise to citizens—if she promises that their decision will be final, she delivers on that promise. She has demonstrated how an elected representative can integrate citizens' common sense and their willingness to learn in a manner which strengthens rather than diminishes the current political system.

There is no equivalent in any other state of Australia, and possibly in the world, where a single politician has embraced DDPs with such enthusiasm during her term of office. Given that the party of which she is a member was re-elected to government in February 2005 this may continue until the next election. This situation confirms the catalytic nature of combining a skilled process champion with an enabling leader (Carson 2006a).

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It was found that representativeness and deliberativeness are the principles that have been best fulfilled. Given that a high degree of both was essential for a process to be included in our inventory this is perhaps unsurprising.

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Influence scored far lower on our assessments. It is probably not surprising that this score should be lower than the others; it requires wresting some level of control over the outcome from the sponsors and/or decision makers. Sponsors are not always those charged with making decisions but when they are, they may be expected to be reluctant to put themselves in the hands of a group of unknown people in whom the sponsor may have little trust.

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## CONCLUSION

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It is interesting to note the burgeoning global interest in this field and the commensurate desire to track the implementation of DDPs. However, Australia is definitely lagging behind. Without the anomalous experiences in WA, the rate of take-up of DDPs in Australia would be far less impressive. This is an area for future investigation: the comparative indifference toward DDPs by Australian decision makers, as well as an investigation of the sphere of government (local, state, federal) that is most conducive to this form of community engagement.

The three ideals with which this paper and the inventory began are all difficult to achieve. *Representativeness* and *deliberation* though difficult to achieve are perhaps less threatening to decision makers than ceding *influence*. Given the challenges associated with achieving influence and the importance for participants of doing so, perhaps DDPs should be renamed DDPIs to accommodate this ideal: deliberative, inclusive, influential processes.

Robert Goodin introduces his book, *Reflective Democracy*, with the following words

Democracy is a much-contested concept. Fundamentally, though, it is a matter of making social outcomes *systematically responsive* to the *settled preferences* of *all affected parties* (Goodin, 2003: 1, *our italics*).

This is the deliberative democracy project in a nutshell and the framework for this paper. Citizens can have real *influence* when decision makers are *systematically responsive*; however this means that a representative grouping must be found from amongst *all affected parties*; and their discussion must be geared to determining *settled preferences*. Goodin follows this introductory sentence with another:

Voting is the classic mechanism for ensuring systemic responsiveness of that sort (Goodin: 2003: 1).

Unlike the kind of internal, individual deliberation that Goodin advocates, we contend that democratic, deliberative processes provide a robust mechanism for moving beyond the empty ritual of voting. The ballot box is only one democratic practice, one designed to confer political legitimacy on legislators. Democratic, deliberative processes place citizens at the centre of policy making, working in tandem with elected and non-elected officials. Our inventory demonstrates that Australia still has long way to go but it has exposed one extraordinary achievement which demonstrates that it is moving along that path.

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