

CONCLUSION: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS
OF THE CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT EXPERIENCE

Janette Hartz-Karp, Lyn Carson, John Gastil, and Ron Lubensky

It was evident from the outset that nothing would go as planned for the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP). When more than a third of those who received an invitation to participate rushed to their phones and computers to accept, the organizers knew the experience would be an exciting challenge for all. In the end, the ACP proved to be an important case study through which core hypotheses and accepted tenets of deliberative democracy were tested, and this book has reported the results of those tests. Its various authors have shown how deliberative exercises can lead to personal transformation and deep learning; however, many authors also have exposed the ACP's shortfalls as an instance of democratic deliberation.

In this conclusion, we review the findings of this book by addressing the central questions of this project. First, we reflect on what the ACP achieved and where it foundered. The second question asks about the character of deliberation the ACP generated. That, in turn, raises the question of what caused and resulted from the ACP's deliberation. After asking what the event means for critics of deliberation, we consider the efficacy of the methodological pluralism present in this volume. We conclude by reviewing the key practical insights the ACP has yielded regarding the design of deliberative democracy.

What Did the ACP Achieve?

In terms of intent, design, and execution, the ACP was firmly based on the principles and ideals of deliberative democracy. It was a mini-public acting on behalf of the whole community—in this instance, a whole nation. The

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participants had in-depth conversations on Australian politics, and they tried to speak with a coherent public voice so that the larger community and government could hear what they had to say. Given the external constraints they faced, they mostly succeeded.

Some aspects of the ACP were unique. It was initiated and run by a non-governmental organization and a collaboration of academic researchers from multiple universities. The organizers and researchers had to do deliberative democracy in order to experiment with it. Citizens were brought into the mix at an early stage to frame the content of the proposed deliberations. Later, interested researchers from across the globe helped develop and analyze the data that were gathered. We hope that such a multifaceted collaboration becomes the norm, but it remains somewhat unusual.

Volunteers from across the nation played a variety of crucial support roles throughout the ACP. The deliberation process was innovative, involving pre-event regional meetings of participants and self-managed online deliberations involving many of those attending the face-to-face ACP in Canberra, as well as others not chosen in the final random selection. This Online Parliament developed proposals that provided the initial content for the face-to-face ACP, a four-day deliberative process that integrated a broad array of dialogic and deliberative techniques.

The goodwill and dedication to the task by both the participants and support team were outstanding, especially given the extreme difficulties of a highly oppressive heat wave, unprecedented, catastrophic bushfires that deeply affected participants, and a demanding agenda, day after day. Finally, the outcomes were more empowering than expected. As the ACP developed, an unexpected shared identity of “being Australian” evolved, unusual among Australians except at sporting events, which enabled participants to deliberate across political and cultural differences and arrive at a coherent voice. Additionally, many participants experienced transformational shifts in their political self-confidence, identity, and view of Australian politics as a result of participating in the ACP. A full year after the ACP had concluded, they still felt these changes within themselves.

At the same time, the ACP fell short of its aims. The organizers were unable to adequately sustain the commitment to participate from the first point of contact through to the main Canberra event. As with most mini-publics, therefore, the recruitment effort yielded a near-random cross-section that approximated but could not quite match the target demographics. Likewise, the Online Parliament did not involve as many as initially hoped, and those who did participate tended to visit intermittently, rather than