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## ARE THEY DOING WHAT THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO DO? ASSESSING THE FACILITATING PROCESS OF THE AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT

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The use of facilitators is often a taken-for-granted aspect of deliberation, enabling groups to work through public problems in a way that embodies deliberative ideals.<sup>1</sup> Facilitators help frame the issues being discussed, set ground rules for the discussion, encourage equity and respect, and help groups analyze issues and make decisions. In short, it is assumed that facilitators are an important part of what makes public-participation events deliberative (see chapter 13).

Yet some scholars have raised concerns about the facilitator's role in the deliberative process.<sup>2</sup> Facilitators have power in the group and can influence group interactions by shaping which topics are discussed, who speaks, and how issues are framed. In other words, facilitators have a great deal of responsibility because they can shape both *how groups analyze problems* and *the overall quality of their social interactions*. It is with these concerns in mind that this chapter examines facilitation processes in the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP).

### Conceptualizing and Studying the Facilitator

Whether in organizational, civic, or social-support settings, the general aim of facilitation is to guide a group through conversations that allow them to explore, learn, and act.<sup>3</sup> Toward this end, facilitators should be impartial, fair,

and credible to all group members.<sup>4</sup> Though typically designed to serve as process guides, rather than decision makers, facilitators do retain the power to frame issues and discussion processes. Thus, to create an egalitarian atmosphere, facilitators need to create a neutral ground for discussion by demonstrating that they are open to and capable of encouraging varied perspectives and opinions from participants, creating an enabling atmosphere for free deliberation.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of deliberative events like the ACP, whether facilitators actually behave in a way consistent with these broad guidelines remains a subject of speculation. After all, several scholars have observed that actual communication during deliberative processes needs more systematic examination.<sup>6</sup>

We believe it is imperative to examine the dynamics between participants and their facilitator. One way to examine these dynamics is to adopt a framework that highlights both the *analytic* and *social* aspects of deliberation (see chapter 7).<sup>7</sup> Following this model, the analytic deliberative process affords participants a point of reference for well-informed decisions and solution identification. Good deliberative analysis comes from creating a solid base of information, clarifying key values, generating solutions, weighing solutions, and making a decision. Equally important to deliberation is a well-developed *social* process that provides participants equal and adequate speaking opportunities that can be regarded as a demonstration of mutual comprehension, respect, and appreciation of views of other participants and equality of influence.

Facilitators can have significant impact on both the analytic and social aspects of the deliberative process.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the former, researchers have observed the importance of the whole group being adequately informed about the issue so as to be able to analyze and examine relevant information and claims.<sup>9</sup> Facilitators can help participants critically evaluate the multiple information sources (booklets, plenary session presentations, personal stories, etc.) in a deliberative process.<sup>10</sup> Facilitators can also attend to ensure a more democratic social process by remaining neutral in showing their own viewpoints, leading the participants to critically evaluate different perspectives, and ensuring equal participation among participants.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, an overly directive style can make the facilitator too visible and is likely to shut the participants out of the deliberation processes.<sup>12</sup>

In this study, we aim to discern overall patterns in facilitator communication that can help in assessing the facilitators' role in deliberative analytic and social processes. Specifically, our research investigates three questions. First, what aspects of facilitators' communication demonstrate analytic and