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SUPPORTING THE CITIZEN PARLIAMENTARIANS: MOBILIZING PERSPECTIVES AND INFORMING DISCUSSION

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From its inception, the organizers of the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) were conscious of the need to support participants as they explored a complex subject, but in ways that responded to their expressed needs. This was the essence of the project: to analyze the capacity of ordinary citizens to consider a many-sided issue. Too much direction, denying the norm of independent judgment, would have been contrary to the spirit of the project. On the other hand, no access to resources would have hampered deliberation. Thus, one part of this chapter is a descriptive account of how this was done.

But a deeper question may also be relevant concerning the uses and limits of the deliberative approach. Firstly, are there limitations circumscribing the utility of deliberative processes, at least in the case of complex systemic issues? Secondly, would a different evaluative standard apply to a deliberative activity that is advisory or not convened by government, in contrast with one in which conclusions carried authoritative or even binding standing? The ACP's handbook opts for the former: "Deliberative processes are not meant to replace representative or direct democracy but to support it."

Thirdly, deliberative events do not happen in isolation. If the political system as currently structured is corrupted by systemic or structural deficiencies, then problems will arise.¹ In such a context, it may be easy to misuse deliberative processes to legitimize a compromised system. It seems difficult to make a judgment about the efficacy of deliberative activity without

some larger judgment about the efficacy of the system within which it is contained.

These broader evaluative issues arose from a consideration of support arrangements and how they should be judged. An ideal measure might be direct references by the deliberating participants. Although discussions were recorded, there is little specific indication, apart from passing references, of the contribution or influence of the resources provided to Parliamentarians. So we need to look elsewhere. One possibility would be to assess the final outcomes of the ACP against the perspectives that might have been derived from the various resources that were made available to participants. This, admittedly more speculative, route is the one pursued here.

But how is the “quality” of the final outcomes to be assessed? The imposed agenda shaped the discussions. Some of that agenda, but not all, was shaped by participants via the prior online activity. Linking outcomes directly to the support arrangements is tentative at best.

At least three questions are relevant. Were the recommendations normatively defensible—at least from a liberal-democratic perspective? Were they practical—in the sense that they could actually be implemented? And were they sufficiently informed and/or comprehensive—in the sense that they involved logically distinct changes which together formed a (broadly) coherent agenda, one which was sufficiently comprehensive to ensure particular purposes could not be thwarted by the Machiavellian manipulation of seasoned partisans?

But there are further threshold considerations. What is to count as “the” outcome? Stretching over four days, the Citizen Parliamentarians (CPs) identified fifty-one separate suggestions for reform of the system and eleven characteristics of a healthy democratic political system. As deliberations advanced, these latter were ranked and the top five were used to evaluate the leading proposals. This occurred through six iterations: an assessment based on an overall judgment of the individual outcomes, then successively based on their impacts on freedom, transparency, innovation, ease of implementation, and long-term significance. Against these tests four outcomes scored at least three positive assessments and one scored two. But an overall vote resulted in six proposals being selected. There was of course consistency between these final six, the five that emerged from the democratic-rankings exercise and the thirteen that were selected in the first evaluative round of voting. These variations arose as CPs sought to reduce the long list of ideas to manageable numbers and then, within this, to identify the