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BECOMING AUSTRALIAN: FORGING A NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH DELIBERATION

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One of the unexpected outcomes of the ACP was the emergence of a robust sense of shared identity among the deliberators. Research has shown Australians to be ambivalent about their national identity, making the spontaneous emergence of a common sense of identity unlikely in an Australian setting.¹ Other factors augured against this: the ACP discussion topic was about politics, something Australians generally dislike;² there were limited external rewards, such as remuneration and official recognition; and discourse between diverse others was routinely maximized (see the introduction and chapter 2).

Since the ACP's primary research team had no a priori expectation of emergent collective identity, a relevant methodology to track it had to be designed retrospectively. This was made possible through the copious data available, including surveys before, during, and after the ACP, daily feedback notes and daily preliminary reports documenting each day's outcomes, notes from researchers who each observed a number of tables, table inputs to the computer, transcriptions of discussions at each table, online social networking sites following the ACP, and a follow-up survey to all participants one year after the main event.³ All these data sources were drawn upon to explore how this shared identity emerged and its potential role in the final agreed outcomes reflecting the "common good."

Emergence of Identity

It became apparent from the outset that unlike most community engagement initiatives, the ACP tapped into a sense of excitement and pride.

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Rather than responding to the written invitations by e-mail, many participants phoned to express how “excited,” “privileged,” and “honored” they felt at receiving invitations. As one CP noted, “I thought it was a chance of a lifetime.” This was exemplified at the regional meetings through an exchange between an organizer and a CP who requested permission to leave her cell phone on so she could hear from her son, who was in a debating competition state finals. When asked why she was not with him, she replied, “My country has called. I had to be here. My son understood.” It was also evident in the online deliberations, with participants talking publicly about the time, effort, and learning that had gone into their proposals, and their pride in the outcomes. One online participant spoke of the “importance of being part of something bigger” than herself.

On the first day of the ACP in Canberra in the historical House of Representatives chamber of Old Parliament House, a number of CPs spoke of how extraordinarily proud they felt to be “part of history” and to have their views taken seriously. For instance, “We have the [chance] to say something. . . . It’s going to give awareness to the individual Australian people . . . about our democracy.” At the closing session, one CP said the lesson she believed participants had learnt during the process was “We’re lucky we live in Australia. . . . We need to take responsibility to participate, protect, and enhance our system and democracy.” Another said, “I heard about a ‘we’ and an ‘us.’ If I’m sitting here, which I am, then I think I’m becoming a part of the ‘us.’ . . . I hope that we can take this new approach back to our communities.”

The results of a pre-deliberation survey completed by CPs complemented these qualitative findings.⁴ Participants were asked whether they “felt like an outsider here at the Citizens Parliament,” and 87 percent reported that they did not. Only 5.6 percent reported feeling like an “outsider.” Additionally, in the one-year follow-up survey asking, “How important is ‘being Australian’ in describing who you are?,” only 9 percent said it was “not too important” or “not at all important” to them, with 23 percent saying it was “fairly important,” 35 percent viewing it as “very important to them” and the remaining 33 percent reporting that “being Australian” had become an “extremely important” part of how they describe themselves.⁵ Over two-thirds of CPs had woven Australian national identity into their core conception of themselves—even a full year after the ACP. Notably, a strong national identity is rarely reported as part of the makeup of Australians.⁶