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## GRAFTING AN ONLINE PARLIAMENT ONTO A FACE-TO-FACE PROCESS

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The Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) organizers faced several significant challenges. Among them were the geographic distance between participants living in a vast continent and the commitment to let the participants themselves shape the direction and design of the ACP. To address both these challenges, an Online Parliament was introduced. Whereas chapters 7 and 11 look at the deliberation that occurred online, this chapter provides the larger context for understanding the Online Parliament. Herein, we explain why online deliberation was grafted onto the ACP's face-to-face process, why the CivicEvolution platform was selected, the role it played, the participation process and rates of involvement, the challenges faced, and what would be done differently in a future initiative.

In terms of geographic distance, the ACP involved a randomly sampled person from every electorate across Australia (see chapter 3). Bringing a microcosm to a single location was expensive (airfares and accommodation) but reflected the diversity of the population. However, to tackle the challenge of *participant control of the agenda*, regional meetings were convened in many state capitals. The meetings were brief, providing sufficient opportunity to meet people and be introduced to the ACP but inadequate time to develop the agenda. The Internet offered one way to enable further deliberation, in a different way, before the Canberra event. Whereas some participants would be comfortable with large plenaries and small face-to-face deliberation groups, others would prefer the relative anonymity of being online.

Moreover, to give a clear sense of direction, it was important for each deliberative process to build on the one before it. Months of inactivity between the regional meetings and the face-to-face ACP would not be helpful. Finally, the ACP was tasked to address a very broad question—“How can Australia’s political system be strengthened to serve us better?” Experts on the organizing team could have determined what they thought should be the focus, but it was deemed important that participants should do this themselves and prior to the Canberra event.

A final reason for using online deliberation was that the response rate had been far more successful than could have been predicted. Of the 8,000 randomly selected citizens who received an invitation to nominate to become a Citizen Parliamentarian, an extraordinary 2,762 registrations were received (see chapter 3). However, only 150 were needed—one randomly selected person per electorate. Rather than simply informing the remaining nominees that they had been unsuccessful, they were offered an opportunity to have a role in the overall process. They were invited to join as Online Citizen Parliamentarians (OCPs) to develop proposals that would be the initial focus of the face-to-face ACP in Canberra.

### Selecting an Approach for the Online Parliament

Although there are numerous online participative tools, such as “mash-ups,” Facebook, Twitter, wikis, private social networks like Ning, and survey tools, there are few that could be called enablers of deep or deliberative democracy. The distinctive characteristic of deliberation is that participants listen to each other’s positions and, after mutual understanding and due consideration, generate group decisions based on consistency of rationales.<sup>1</sup> Given the difficulty of keeping participants involved for long enough to have such conversations, it is no wonder that much online participation has more to do with advocacy, dump and run, or populist voting than in-depth deliberation.

We needed online-deliberation software that could deliver deep deliberation and help frame the ACP agenda. A simple aggregation of opinions would not suffice. We wanted a process to lead the participants from discussion to deliberation and hopefully find some convergence. We could not afford the cost and organization of online moderators. However, most available online tools without moderation offer unstructured dialogue and/or