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## LISTENING CAREFULLY TO THE CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT: A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

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Deliberative public engagement is not yet a topic that is well-known outside its academic and practice communities.<sup>1</sup> Invariably I have to explain what it is before talking more about it. Sometimes I try to describe the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) project, which I helped organize and study. It is rarely an easy task.

My explanations about the ACP often degenerate into defenses of public engagement as a whole. I face oft-told stories about the democratic deficit and voter ignorance, although not always using those terms.<sup>2</sup> In response (and sometimes preemptively), I have paraphrased the survey comments of participants after the ACP was complete. Most, who had never done anything like this before, wrote generously about the process and their experience of it. For instance, one Citizen Parliamentarian (CP) said that the ACP gave “an appreciation of my role in the governance of country. I now feel that I have enough knowledge to participate in a constructive way.” Another used that same word—“appreciation”—when reflecting on the ACP: “It has given me a greater appreciation for the difficulties of governing in Australia” and “restored some faith in our politicians and opened my mind to the other view.”

In my experience of deliberative processes, such appreciation is common. CPs commented more on the effect of the process than on its various outcomes. The activity of public engagement left a lasting mark on them, and to get us past the abstractions of deliberative political theory, we should share their stories.

Thus, my task in this chapter is to open a window to the story of the ACP's participants, from their own perspectives. I take a social-constructionist stance in the research into and rendering of this story. This means that I am not authoritatively claiming a master story from which all interpretation of the ACP should follow, nor am I claiming that the story line presented here is the only one. Instead, I am demonstrating that a reflexive, storied approach to analyzing the events, based on narrative methods of discourse analysis, provides useful insight into the process and the capacities of participants.

## The Plot

The organizers created a comprehensive agenda that included preparatory activities leading to a face-to-face assembly for four days in Canberra. The participants worked through a series of steps to arrive at an outcome that had a predetermined format: a list of proposals for national democratic improvement. This agenda effectively frames the story.

In narrating their story, I have reduced that agenda to five overlapping activities that follow an alphabetical dramatic arc of rising intensity leading to resolution: *Gather*, *Hope*, *Inquire*, *Judge*, and *taKe* (see table 5.1).<sup>3</sup> These activities can be mapped to most deliberative processes, although the emphasis and boundaries may vary.

For the purpose of briefly demonstrating the constructionist method and its usefulness in this chapter, I have prepared a “mini-story” of the

**Table 5.1** Narrative arc of deliberative process

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| Gather:  | Receive an invitation, make contact, enter a hospitable space, meet and begin to know one another. Be welcomed. Set the norms of civil behavior. Feel safe.   |
| Hope:    | Establish why we have been gathered. Express our individual and mutual goals and aspirations. Appreciate what there is. Articulate the problems that we want to solve. Imagine a future. Believe we can reach a conclusion. |
| Inquire: | Explore the facts, concepts, each other, ourselves. Share. Tell stories. Find surprises. Make empathetic, appreciative, inclusive, open, sincere, civil, cooperative gestures. Expand, diverge, envision, emerge.           |
| Judge:   | Harvest, theme, make choices, prioritize, categorize, synthesize, negotiate, seek consensus, collaborate, converge.   |
| taKe:    | Take up and take on. Consent to judgments, prepare outcomes, commit to action, next steps, archive documents, reflect on process, disseminate agreements, celebrate.  |