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HEARING ALL SIDES? SOLICITING AND MANAGING DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS IN DELIBERATION

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In any complex deliberative process, a tension exists between welcoming new and different ideas and maintaining a clear focus on the problem at hand. When faced with this dilemma, organizers of the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) hoped to err "on the side of breadth" by privileging varied perspectives, divergence, and innovation over consensus. They hoped to reach a certain level of convergence by its end, but only if that agreement reflected a "collective intelligence" emerging out of rich discussions.¹

Deliberative scholars and activists contend that public discussions between diverse publics can lead individuals to develop greater empathy with one another and a better understanding of their own positions.² Though universal in their embrace of "diverse perspectives," it remains unclear how, exactly, the organizers of deliberative events manage the aforementioned tension between openness and focus—between ongoing divergence and degrees of convergence.

To address that issue, we scrutinize the transcripts from both the plenary sessions and small-table discussions at the ACP. We focus on how event organizers, facilitators, and participants solicited and managed different perspectives and opinions during the ACP. In the end, we will argue that one can distinguish deliberative and dialogic diversity, both of which help to serve three functions—brainstorming, blending, and building.

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Concepts and Method

We begin by making a simple distinction between deliberation and dialogue. Public deliberation—the clear focus of this volume—entails the rigorous and respectful examination of a problem to reach a shared judgment or decision. Public dialogue, by contrast, involves the open-ended exploration of different perspectives and experiences to reach mutual understanding—though not necessarily a decision.³ By these definitions, the ACP was principally a deliberative event, though it contained dialogic features. Herein, we explore both aspects of the event.

To develop a more refined model of the interplay of deliberation and dialogue, we systematically analyzed transcripts of both plenary and table discussion sessions at the ACP. The first author used a method called action-implicative discourse analysis to compare the deliberative practices of the Citizen Parliamentarians (CPs) to the normative ideals of deliberative democracy as expressed in plenary sessions. This method derives from “grounded practical theory,” an epistemology that seeks to reconstruct communicative practices by analyzing contradictions, discursive strategies, and situated ideals.⁴ The first step involved analyzing argument strategies and discursive moves across the long stretches of discourse at the ACP. Next, repeated inductive analyses of the transcripts (and supplementary documents) revealed those discursive practices that might extend or challenge existing theory.

More specifically, our analysis investigated three phenomena: how structural features of the ACP affected the management of diverse perspectives, what expectations were expressed to the CPs during the plenary sessions, and how CPs and organizers dealt with different viewpoints in actual practice.

ACP Structural Design for Dialogue and Deliberation

We begin by considering how structural features of the ACP constrained or enabled the expression of diverse perspectives.⁵ Of the influential structural factors, the most prominent were deliberative format and strategic process design. Previous research has found that the exploratory phases of a public event tend to draw out divergent thinking, whereas consensus seeking tends to be encouraged more during decision-making phases.⁶