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Learnings from Prime Minister Julia Gillard's 2010 Announcement of a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change

Research and Development Note

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What is the question?

Why did Prime Minister Gillard's proposal for a citizens' assembly get such a negative reaction and what can be learned to apply to future parliamentary use of citizens' assemblies?

What happened?

During the 2010 Australian federal election, Prime Minister Gillard announced a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change (CACC) composed of 150 randomly selected citizens who would discuss and deliberate on climate change policies. The announcement came in the wake of years of political deadlock regarding climate change policy during Kevin Rudd's term as Prime Minister and remained an unresolved issue. The announcement came less than a week into Gillard's election campaign and was met with extreme criticism from opposition parties, media, industry, and environmentalists in particular.

Critics of the announcement were vocal in saying this was just another stalling tactic designed to avoid responsibility for a difficult decision and would delay immediate and necessary action on climate change. The announcement's timing was poor as the febrile election environment provided opponents with an even greater incentive to attack the proposal to harm Gillard's campaign.

The media quickly voiced criticisms of the assembly, largely stemming from inaccurate perception of what a citizens' assembly is. On the ABC's Breakfast Program, Greg Hunt, an Opposition MP at the time, called it "farcical" and "national policy by lottery," with participants "chosen from the phone book."¹ Paul Kelly, in the Weekend Australian claimed that "the idea of consensus is the great hoax."² Other pundits called the assembly "risible", "pathetic"³ and a "gabfest". The widespread misinterpretation and criticism from various media sources undermined the initial public perception of the CACC's potential effectiveness.

Miranda Devine, in the Sydney Morning Herald, was quick to argue that "We already have a citizens assembly—a democratically elected Parliament"⁴ voicing a common misguided concern. A method which is complementary to elected parliaments was viewed as duplicative.

The poorly executed announcement of the CACC left Prime Minister Gillard and her team no choice but to walk away from the proposal in favour of creating the Climate Change Commission. The CACC was never implemented, and the announcement created more than a decade's worth of damage to the progress of citizens' assemblies in Australia and continues to deter politicians from the idea today.

Proposing a national citizens' assembly now would look quite different, and it would be helped by drawing on the lessons learned from this experience. In 2010, the concept was still relatively new, with limited discourse or knowledge about citizens' assemblies among MPs, media, and the wider community.

Today, the growing experience of citizens' assemblies worldwide has led to more positive perceptions of the concept among journalists. For example, political writer Peter Hartcher has argued that citizens' assemblies can "add to public trust in any eventual governmental action"⁵. Martin Wolf, in the Financial Times, has said that "the introduction of citizens into the political process, in the way that is familiar from juries, could introduce common sense of the public into politics in a way that would be complementary to elections of political leaders."⁶ Matthew Taylor, former head of the Number 10 Policy Unit under UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, argued in The Economist that "In stark contrast to most conventional political performance, deliberation brings out the best in people."⁷ And George Monbiot, in the Guardian, explains that "when they are well designed, they have proved highly effective at addressing issues that left elected representatives floundering."⁸

Often cited is their successful implementation in Ireland, France, Germany, and Belgium since 2010.

This has created a much safer environment for proposing them to address difficult policy issues by demonstrating that common ground can be found.

Irish citizens now have a working understanding of citizens' assemblies as the means by which "Ireland takes tough decisions". Australians have the opportunity to reach the same conclusion if political leaders can have confidence that the events of the 2010 announcement are not going to be repeated.

What lessons can we learn from the announcement and its execution?

The ALP made several errors in introducing the CACC, with **6 major missteps** standing out as the most harmful mistakes.

01.

Proposed during a federal election campaign

The timing of the introduction could not have been worse. Proposing the idea of a citizens' assembly during a federal election campaign invited a wave of campaign-driven criticism. Instead of creating a discussion around the merits of a citizens' assembly, the introduction was used by opponents as a political opportunity to hurt the Prime Minister's campaign which was a particularly vitriolic one - with citizens' assemblies being collateral damage. The CACC announcement was attacked just as any other announcement would have been during a tense election period.

02.

Failed to provide necessary information about how citizens' assemblies work

Without any explanation of the concept or detailed process design, commentators and the public did not understand the citizens' assembly process and were left to speculate and come up with incorrect and damaging presumptions about it. This lack of transparency and clarity led to widespread misinformation, as people began to fill in the gaps with their interpretations. Many of these incorrect assumptions were then amplified by the media, which often sensationalised the narrative to attract attention. The media's incorrect portrayal of the process as flawed or biased further entrenched scepticism and eroded public trust.

This misinformation not only undermined the potential benefits of the assembly but also created a lasting negative perception that hindered future attempts to propose similar initiatives.

03.

Labelled as a policy

Labelling the CACC as a policy exposed it to additional criticism and allowed the announcement to become entangled in political gamesmanship, detracting from meaningful discussions about the idea's merits. Consequently, the true intent and potential benefits of the CACC were overshadowed by partisan attacks. Its label as a policy was also somewhat misleading. It was not a policy itself but rather a method for developing a policy with community support.

04.

Presented as the central strategy

Presenting the CACC as a central strategy for combatting climate change was counterproductive, as it allowed opponents to dismiss it as merely a stalling tactic. The assembly alone was not perceived as a sufficient solution to address climate change issues, making it an easy target for criticism.

Had the announcement been part of a more comprehensive suite of policies with it being the suitable tactic for implementation, the reception would have likely been different.

05.

Framed as ‘only a discussion’

The CACC was framed in a way that made it sound like merely a discussion where no actionable progress would be made to combat climate change. This led to significant criticism, with opponents accusing the government of further inaction on climate change. The perception was that instead of taking decisive steps, the government was using the CACC as a distraction, failing to implement concrete policies to address the urgent climate issue.

In reality, the assembly would have found what tradeoffs everyday people could live with, likely expanding policy options available to the government.

06.

Failed to make the CACC a bipartisan effort

The CACC was not proposed as a bipartisan effort, with Prime Minister Gillard being too closely attached to its oversight. She even stated, “I will lead the debate and lead the advocacy of our approach.”⁹ Such direct oversight by a politician contradicts the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) principles on citizens’ assemblies. However, at the time, the OECD guidelines had not yet been established, leaving Prime Minister Gillard and her team without these valuable guidelines to steer their approach. The CACC’s alignment with Prime Minister Gillard made it seem like it was intended to push the ALP’s climate change agenda, rather than being a genuine democratic opportunity for everyday citizens from all walks of life to be deeply involved in the eventual policy. Consequently, Prime Minister Gillard’s close association with the CACC further drove the entanglement in political maneuvering

Future announcements can now utilise the OECD resource to ensure proper procedures and impartiality.

Proponents (mostly unheard) argued that Parliament is not descriptively representative of the Australian people. The CACC would have brought together a diverse group of everyday Australians, dedicated to learning and able to provide acceptable recommendations. For that reason, citizens’ assemblies provide an opportunity to break political deadlocks, especially on issues like climate change, which politicians are often reluctant to address because of electoral imperatives.



Learnings for what to do next time

The failed announcement of the CACC showed just how important it is to present the idea of a citizens' assembly effectively and how damaging it can be when done poorly.

Proposing a citizens' assembly in 2024 and beyond would be significantly different from 2010 because of the context and the lessons that have been learned over the past 15 years.

Here are some key considerations for governments when proposing a citizens' assembly to support policy deliberations:

01.

When to introduce an assembly

A citizens' assembly should not be announced during an election cycle which creates a peak time for potential combat at all costs. It is a method for governing, not campaigning. Assemblies should be presented early in the electoral cycle so they can be effectively developed over an extended period. This ensures that the assembly's deliberations are free from the immediate pressures and biases of electoral campaigns, allowing for a more focused and deliberative process where the actual merits of the assembly can be discussed.

02.

Provide a detailed process design

It is imperative to provide detailed information about the design and process of the citizens' assembly. The public should understand how the assembly will operate, including participant selection, participant roles, the information provided, how their recommendations will be used, and who will oversee the process. Details help to demystify the process, building trust and confidence in the initiative.

Any proposed citizens' assembly should generally follow the guidelines for citizen participation processes developed by the OECD. These guidelines outline steps for designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating citizen participation processes and should be considered essential when considering citizen assemblies. Making the public aware of these guidelines and that they will be used in a proposed assembly will provide it with more clarity and a better sense of legitimacy.

03.

Emphasise the Assembly as a process that will lead to actionable policy

Instead of presenting an assembly as a policy itself, it should be contextualised as a mechanism to influence and create actionable policy rather than merely a forum for discussion amongst other policies.

Emphasising its potential to break the political deadlock and generate consensus on contentious issues can help frame the assembly as a practical and necessary tool for effective governance. Drawing parallels with successful examples from other regions such as (a) Ireland's use of citizens' assemblies for tackling complex issues like same-sex marriage, (b) French President Emmanuel Macron's Citizens Convention on Climate, and (c) the integration of assemblies into Germany's Bundestag can illustrate how these assemblies have led to tangible policy outcomes, i.e. by providing evidence of their effectiveness.

04.

Promote impartial design and facilitation

To ensure the assembly is perceived as a genuine public engagement tool rather than a political maneuver, it is vital to distance politicians, especially those in power as Prime Minister Gillard was, from leading the process. Instead, the assembly should be designed and facilitated by independent bodies or non-partisan organisations and that should be made clear when one is introduced. Including diverse stakeholders from various political backgrounds in an oversight group can further enhance the assembly's credibility and ensure a more balanced and comprehensive deliberation process.

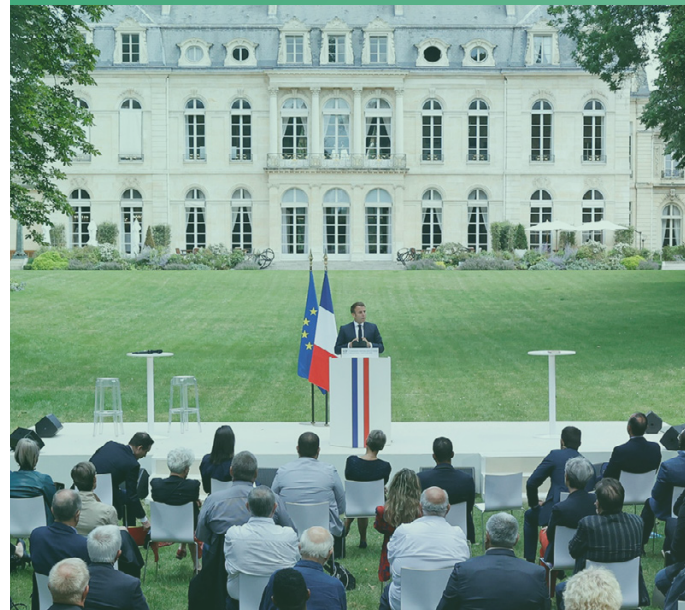
05.

Seek bi-partisan and other support

Securing bi-partisan support is crucial. Presenting the assembly as a collective effort to solve a national issue rather than a single party's initiative can help mitigate political friction and distance itself from political factionalism that derails progress. The assembly should aim for bipartisan cooperation both among political parties and across various issue groups to build widespread buy-in and ensure diverse perspectives are included.

Announcing a citizens' assembly should also be a call for participation and discussion rather than presenting it as a decision already made. This encourages public input and engagement, making the process more inclusive and democratic. A collaborative approach from the beginning helps build a sense of ownership and legitimacy among participants and the broader public.

Seeking support for the initiative from a broad church of people both domestically and internationally will also enhance credibility.



Questions for Further Study and Research

The announcement of a new national citizens' assembly would provide an ideal point of comparison to assess the effectiveness of the proposed strategies in this note. Evaluators can identify strengths and weaknesses in newDemocracy's recommendations by comparing the outcomes, public reception, and media responses to a new announcement with those from 2010.

This can be tested in multiple ways following a new announcement:

01. Did the citizens' assembly survive the announcement?
02. Poll people on their awareness and understanding of citizens' assemblies.
03. Did the announcement and process receive bi-partisan support?
04. When was it announced and how did that change the outcome?
05. Compare the media analysis of the announcements.

This process will help us understand what aspects worked well and what needs improvement, ultimately leading to more effective and well-received citizens' assemblies in the future.

Resources

Carson, L (2013) “How not to introduce deliberative democracy: The 2010 Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change proposal” In Carson, L, Gastil, J, Hartz-Karp, J, & Lubensky, R (Eds) *The Australian Citizens’ Parliament and the future of deliberative democracy*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctt32b9zd>. Accessed 16 July 2024.

Notes

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2. Paul Kelly, “Labor Can’t Be Serious About Citizens Plan,” *Weekend Australian*, July 24–25, 2010.
3. Glenn Milne, on *The Drum*, ABC News 24 (Television), July 29, 2010.
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5. Peter Hartcher, “The Irishman who could shape Australia’s future, to be sure”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 15, 2022.
6. Martin Wolf, “Citizens’ juries can help fix democracy”, *Financial Times*, May 28, 2023.
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8. George Monbiot, “General elections are a travesty of democracy – let’s give the people a real voice”, *The Guardian*, June 6, 2024.
9. Julia Gillard (speech), University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, July 23, 2010).



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