

A FORUM FOR THE PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA

The Prime Minister Julia Gillard has just announced her intention to hold a Citizens Assembly on climate change. But why not the Australia Forum to hold it in?

Peter Shergold

I was proud to be an Australian Public Servant. I thought that a career in public administration, far from being a world of circumlocutious bureaucrats and bumbling officials, was an honourable vocation. I still subscribe to that belief. It requires leaders who, working for the elected government of the day, provide honest and robust advice that they believe to be in the national interest.

Yet as I indicated in my valedictory speech when I left the APS in early 2008, I had increasingly inclined to the view that the traditional framework of representative and responsible government was failing to meet the political challenges of the 21st century. I was persuaded that the delivery of human services through not-for-profit organisations offered bold new opportunities that were not being seized. Although the rhetoric of public service genuflected to the notion of becoming 'citizen-centric' I was frustrated at how difficult it was proving to create genuine community partnerships and citizen engagement. My vision of 'network governance', in which public and social innovation would be driven by collaboration between the public, private and 'third' sectors, seemed as distant as ever. It was foundering on the rocks of risk aversion, short-sightedness driven by 24/7 media control and asymmetrical power.

It was such views that inspired me to establish the Centre for Social Impact. CSI now has a national footprint through the business schools of the University of New South Wales (its headquarters), the University of Melbourne, Swinburne University of Technology and The University of Western Australia. It focuses on the importance of social enterprises in building national prosperity.

It was these views, too, that led me to support the vision of establishing the Australia Forum in our national capital. I was attracted by the joint commitment of the ACT Government and the Canberra Business Council to a visionary project. I agreed to come on board and now chair a Steering Committee of eminent Australians who share a similar perspective: Dawn Casey, Director of the Powerhouse Museum and previously Director of the National Museum of Australia; Peter Cosgrove, who was a distinguished Chief of the Defence Forces and now serves as Chairman of the Australian War Memorial Council; Ian Chubb, Vice-Chancellor of ANU; Virginia Haussegger, ABC news presenter, journalist and author; and Rupert Myer, the Chairman of the National Gallery of Australia.

We are united in our belief that Canberra's wonderful institutions provide a strong foundation of national pride and contemplation. Millions visit the Australian War Memorial, the National Gallery, the National Museum, the National Library, the National Archives, Questacon and National Portrait Gallery each year. Places of fun, as well as of learning, they reflect the richness of our lives, history and culture. They hold a mirror to Australia.

Alongside them, Parliament House – and Old Parliament House – symbolise Canberra as a capital of a nation. They give voice to the political debates of representative democracy.

Yet we are united, too, in our sense that one key institution is missing from the landscape. There needs to be a non-partisan place for public engagement on matters of national and global significance – a place which can act as a democratic counterpoint to the two chambers of Parliament, the Government of the day and the agencies of the Australian Public Service which

delivery its policies. A Citizens' Assembly needs to be a location not just a meeting. It requires a venue for public discourse, a centre of democratic dialogue, which will allow people across the nation to engage and participate in the great issues of the day. That place, in the not-too-distant future, will be the Australia Forum.

Of course, this is an ambitious concept that extends far beyond the Australian Capital Territory. A couple of months ago I attended the Global Foundation's 'Australia Unlimited 2010' Summit and participated in a stimulating discussion chaired by Lt Gen. John Sanderson, who has served as Governor of Western Australia. The debate was about the nature and shape of future governance for Australia and, in particular, how to empower our citizens. There was a general view that our democratic architecture was no longer fit for purpose. There was simply no effective mechanism to allow citizens and communities an opportunity to drive policy-making processes from the bottom-up. The conclusion was that a "non-partisan citizens-led dialogue could be an important and timely first step" to building a more participatory approach to the wicked problems of public policy.

The idea of such a national meeting placing is not a new idea. As far back as the 1920s there have been voices arguing that Canberra, as our nation's capital, needs a venue of the people in which Australians – and guests from overseas – can come together to talk, learn, celebrate and mourn. Other capitals, such as Tokyo, Dublin and Ottawa, have already recognised that imperative. In Australia the challenge still remains to turn democratic vision into a built structure.

The proposed nomenclature, the Australia Forum, is designed to be redolent of the roots of participatory democracy – the ancient Roman fora in which causes were judicially tried and orations delivered to the people and the amphitheatres of the classical Greek city states in which the entire citizenry met to govern. The Australia Forum is intended not just to be a world-class venue but a modern market place for the exchange of ideas on our national future. It is to be the centre of a very new, but also a very old politics.

Let me be clear. The framework for representative government has served Australia well. However it's become ever more apparent that here, as in other modern democracies, levels of civic engagement are falling and trust in politicians is at a low ebb. Democracy is based upon an implicit contract between the state and its citizens: the state offers security and protection, the citizen returns loyalty. Yet there is a growing disconnect between the state and its citizens, driven by a view that in-between the trips to the ballot-box access to governments is dominated by those lobbyists and advocates with the resources or influence to wield political power. We suffer a 'democratic deficit' in which people feel unable to contribute effectively to the active agenda of governments.

Governments share these concerns. The Commonwealth has released a [Government 2.0](#) report which emphasises the capacity of web-enabled technology and social media to empower the citizenry. The recent Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration has canvassed the intention of conducting citizen surveys to provide feedback on public service performance. Senator Kate Lundy of the ACT has already embraced online discussions as part of a 'Public Sphere' engagement process. A plethora of nonprofit organisations are emerging, like the OpenAustralia Foundation, dedicated to creating technologies "to enable and encourage the

Australian public to participate directly in, and affect the political process and solve local problems together in everyday civil life”.

These initiatives suggest an obvious question, and it has been posed to me on a number of occasions. Why cannot the Australia Forum exist only as a virtual construct? Certainly there are exciting developments underway that can use the internet to advance dialogue between governments and communities, hold governments to account for their performance and enrich conversations on public issues.

The web allows new kinds of citizen input which would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Dialogue-based approaches to resolving community issues and stakeholder conflicts allow constructive engagement without the stereotyping and distortive rhetoric that characterise so much Parliamentary debate. There are already existing techniques, that can be delivered on-line, to enable ‘public conversations’ to inform ‘everyday democracy’. There are innovative forms of deliberative decision-making which can provide policymakers with much better information on public preferences. They allow participants to understand the values underlying policy and, if not necessarily come to consensus, accept the legitimacy of the political decisions made. There are new forms of ‘deliberative polling’ which allow citizens to process and consider information on a topic before they proffer their opinions. There are evolving methodologies for the organisation of ‘citizens’ juries’ and ‘citizens’ assemblies’.

The application of new technology to public engagement opens up exciting possibilities. Government consultation, so often honoured in the breach rather than in the observance, can now extend opportunities for dynamic interaction on a national basis. If the democratic ethos of the ‘town hall’ meeting can be delivered on-line, why not forsake bricks for clicks? The Australia Forum is a great idea, I’m sometimes told, but build it in a virtual world.

There are two reasons why I think that proposition is incorrect. The first is practical. There needs, on occasion, to be a venue for large-scale deliberative events that can, through the media, capture a nation’s attention – whether on climate change or the dozens of other areas of complex public policy that are ill-served by the strong language, emotive rhetoric and powerful imagery which often mark the partisan context of political parties. The national capital needs a meeting place that can cater adequately for large events such as the 2020 Summit (for which Parliament House was neither well designed, nor an appropriate location for ‘the people’ to meet) or a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) (which is next to be held in Perth). The Australia Forum needs access to a flexible layout with large numbers of breakout rooms if it is to foster a co-operative and deliberative environment for participants. There needs to be room for exhibitions and presentations by community organisations and associations if they are to participate effectively. There needs to be space for performing arts and cultural displays. Exploring public policy should be genuinely holistic.

The second reason is symbolic. Just as Parliament House and the High Court building represent the physical embodiment of Australia’s legislative and judicial powers, so the Australia Forum needs to stand as testimony to the role of the citizens and their communities of interest. The industry associations, university research centres, policy think-tanks and community groups that will be eager to stage their national and international conferences at the venue will come to a place built on the

principles of participatory democracy rather than the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Their deliberations will be framed within the context of contributing their expertise to matters of public policy. The significance of the Australia Forum, set within sight of Parliament House, and connected to the Parliamentary Triangle, would remind visitors of the purpose of governance. It would place citizens at the heart of democracy.

Of course, the Australia Forum needs to embrace the technological infrastructure that now gives greater voice to democratic dialogue. Web-based programs enable participants to prepare for face-to-face meetings and to help implement post-meeting follow-through activities. The tools for deliberative democracy can be used in advance to set the rules for engagement, select participants, provide on-line discussion and communicate outcomes. New technology can extend and augment the big conversations that will bring people together.

For that reason the Australia Forum must be built to have a reach far beyond Canberra. The premise is for a 20 Hub Network to link key regional locations nationally through online information-sharing, webcasting and videoconferencing. Facilities will be situated in appropriate venues at each of the hub locations.

During conferences it will be possible for public meetings to be held across multiple locations by using networked technologies. The Australia Forum, far from being a single venue, will sit at the centre of an electronic web of participation. It will provide and maintain a new wave of technology for the common good.

There is a danger, it is true, that the ambitious vision of the Australia Forum will turn into a Canberra Conference Centre by another name. The Scoping Study presently underway, led by Ernst & Young/Cox Architects, certainly understands that their design proposals are to be driven by the imperatives of democratic purpose.

It is also proposed that once the Forum is building a Committee for Democratic Dialogue will be established to bring together those Australians who have taken a lead role in promoting deliberative democracy. They will be tasked with overseeing the organisation of 3 or 4 major events each year. The Australian National University – home to the Australian Centre for Dialogue and the world-leading Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance – will be well placed to play a significant role.

The Australia Forum is conceived as a means of overcoming the traditional limitations of conventional political engagement, both through its sense of place (in Australia's capital) and through its embrace of communications technology (across the nation). It will allow big conversations on Australia's relationship to the world and on our economic growth, social well-being and environmental sustainability. It will highlight the significance of arts, culture, religion and sport to our national life. On a national stage it will provide a sense of neighbourhood to the diverse communities that are central to Australia's civic life.

I do not doubt that it will be challenging to win the political and financial support that is required. Yet I have a strong belief that others will come to see that Australian democracy will be well served by having a place in which large numbers of people can be brought together in the nation's capital to

participate in the affairs of their country. It will give voice to citizenry. It will reinvigorate Australia's civic culture. It will be the Australia Forum.

Dr Peter Shergold

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