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# Why the Political System Needs New Media

Ian Marsh and Sam McLean

**This chapter describes** the roles that new media might play in rebuilding links between Australia's diverse publics and the formal political system. We will show that democratic engagement has been hollowed out. This is partly an unintended consequence of the significant (broadly bipartisan) policy reorientation that has occurred since 1983; and partly a consequence of the new diversity in Australian society. Rebuilding links between the formal system and its publics is critical if the quality of democratic experience is to be restored. Further, this is a twofold challenge — one aspect of which concerns access to the formal political system, and the other ensuring that new media platforms are readily available to citizens.

Effective engagement requires replicating in political and policy space what a wide literature on open source innovation describes in commercial space. That requires a political structure that is more transparent and more open to external intervention. But engagement must not exacerbate populism; on the contrary, engagement needs to occur at appropriate points in the policy cycle — that is, as issues jostle for a place on the public agenda and as they are refined and developed or discarded as deliberation advances. This needs to be associated with a chance of real influence on the part of proponents. It also requires the widespread availability of capacities that would

allow groups of like-minded citizens to mobilise and develop their shared concerns into a coherent case for policy change.

In the first instance, this would require a capacity to influence the emerging agenda. In addition, there needs to be much enhanced access to governments' own internal (and now almost wholly closed) policy reflections. Moreover, engagement ideally needs to be focused on the real dilemmas that governments (and oppositions) confront as the policy cycle unfolds.

This is in contrast to the present situation where the political conversation is almost wholly disconnected from the reality of the policy issues that are ostensibly the subject, and fake or manufactured differences that reflect only the short-term political advantage of the rival protagonists dominate.

The first section of this chapter explores the background institutional and organisational causes of the present, largely populist, political conversation. The second section concerns the new media. What are its current and potential contributions? What general steps are required of to realise these outcomes? A third section then explores particular systemic changes that could be introduced to broaden and deepen citizen engagement in the policy process.

## Why has citizen political engagement declined in Australia?

The decline in the quality of Australian democracy is evident in the changed dynamics of political agenda-setting in the post-war period.[1] This has occurred through three major phases.

The first phase occurred in the immediate post-war period and ran to about 1966 when Sir Robert Menzies retired. In this phase, two mass-based and programmatic parties sponsored somewhat different visions of our domestic future. In mobilising public loyalty, support and engagement, the two organisations, their associated party brands and the party loyalists that they inspired did most of the work.

What did this involve? Recall the condition of the party organisations in their mass moment. Their memberships together mobilised around 10% of the Australian community. Party identification was even stronger. Nearly 90% of Australians had strong or very strong identification with one or other of the major parties, save for the Labor split over Communism in the mid-1950s.

The party brand had tremendous resonance, thus qualifying celebrity leadership. Moreover, the party organisations were active sites for social and political engagement. Labor social clubs proliferated. The Liberals had a national structure of over 2000 branches and Labor had even more. Through its trade union affiliates Labor's reach was further developed and extended. Party organisations developed from branches through regional and state councils to a federal conference. Here policy and platform were debated, often furiously. This is well recognised in the case of Labor. The Liberals may have been a little more genteel, but their historian Ian Hancock documents the arguments that raged in state and federal council meetings, particularly in the party's early decades, after Menzies retirement, and in the 1970s.

Party organisations on both sides made two further contributions. They mobilised and socialised activists and those with political ambitions, and they mobilised and integrated interest groups, although the pattern varied between the two parties.

A new phase occurred from roughly 1966. After this time, the new social movements emerged and became much more prominent in mobilising and engaging the Australian community. The two major parties increasingly assumed brokerage roles — the social movements now undertook primary agenda-setting and mobilisation. This involved the women's, environment, gay, Indigenous, ethnic, consumer, animal liberation and peace/third world movements. All came into prominence over

this period, all created umbrella organisations and widely based coalitions, and all were very successful in community engagement and mobilisation.

Horne (1980) captured this moment in all its florid extravagance in a marvellous chapter entitled 'The Permissive Decade' in his book *Time of Hope*. He recalls the musical *Hair*, the magazines *Cleo* and *POL*, the Beatles' Australian visit, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and perhaps one culminating moment when the *Women's Weekly* appeared with a male centrefold. So did Ita Buttrose leave her mark. But there were many elements.

Think of the WEL campaign in 1972 when questionnaires were circulated to aspiring parliamentarians and their positive or negative scores widely used in campaigning. No less significant of course was the environment movement, which was a coalition of like-minded organisations from Friends of the Earth, the Wilderness Society, Greenpeace and local neighbourhood conservation groups. Recall the Franklin Dam campaign. Coordinated through the ACF and with a total membership far exceeding that of the major parties, these organisations created public awareness of the environmental agenda. They performed the agenda-setting role that was once in the care of the mass party conferences.

As a result of the advocacy of these social movements, all the new political agendas that emerged in the post-70s period originated with them. In turn, the movements encouraged a host of counter formations — anti-abortion, anti-gay rights, pro-economic development, anti-euthanasia, anti republic and so forth.

The result is a significant (and positive) pluralisation and differentiation of attitudes in the wider Australian community. Note also the qualification of social class as the only salient political identity that was also involved. This was a consequence of social movement advocacy and, as a byproduct, loyalties to the major parties have naturally weakened.

The third phase occurred after 1983. Partly in reaction to the social movements, and partly in reaction to globalisation imperatives, the neo-liberal think tanks emerged as primary agenda setters. They achieved influence primarily though elite mobilisation. They left mass mobilisation to the (now eviscerated) major parties. Meantime, Australia's pro-globalisation agenda was implemented primarily via major party bipartisanship, which was often tacit. The perception of crisis sustained this phase more or less to 1996.

Thereafter the perception of crisis receded, the decline of the major parties continued, celebrity politics became increasingly prominent, and populism and manufactured difference became increasingly the basis for differentiation between rival political elites (e.g. Wear, 2009).[2]

In another perspective, over the post-war period the capacity of the major parties to lead the development of public opinion has slowly but progressively atrophied. Hence the need for focus group–driven celebrity politics. Meantime, the loss of integrating, agenda-setting infrastructure to link the people to the emergent agenda was masked for around a decade by elite bipartisanship.

Now the perception of a moment of crisis has passed. So the (resumed) normal play of the political incentive structure has driven the major parties into increasingly fake, manufactured or opportunistic rivalry.

This is occurring in a much more differentiated value context. Look at the current agenda of issues. Climate change is an environmental issue, a cause that first gained a place on the political agenda in the 1970s. Live cattle exports reflect new concerns about animal rights and the decent treatment of non-human life. Gay marriage concerns the equal rights of citizens whose identities are other than or supplemental to social class. Not that class and gay identities or environmental or animal rights sympathies are mutually exclusive. Rather,

citizen identities have multiplied and differentiated in a way that older class orientations to politics do not recognise and have trouble accommodating.

Similarly, current attention to the role of women on Australian boards and in senior management or the work arrangements that are compatible with time out for having babies, are all issues that originated with the women's movement of the 1970s. Finally, rights for refugees and for Indigenous Australians are concerns that also originated with the social movements of the 1970s.

Now the major parties try to assimilate an array of issues for which they are ill equipped by basic orientation or program. There is no Labor or non-Labor canonical platform or tablet of principles from which you could infer appropriate action on any of the above controversies. Moreover, their decisions about what position to back come from organisations that are hollowed-out shells of their former selves.

In a nutshell, the infrastructure that once linked the formal political system to its publics (and gave the broader political system its reach and effectiveness) has been effectively jettisoned — and no functionally equivalent infrastructure has been introduced. At the same time the political incentive structure has increasingly favoured populist and opportunist approaches on the part of the political leadership. The capacity of the political system to lead the formation of public opinion has dwindled.

From the perspective of building a prudent public opinion, media influence is almost wholly malign. Media focus is short term, there is an incentive to sensationalise and trivialise, it is impossible to sustain a complex argument via this channel, they have commercial imperatives which are hardly consistent with good public policy, and sound-bite politics is inevitably lowest common denominator politics.

Meantime of course, the political class is well aware of their systemic problems. They are well aware of the worrying gulf that now separates them from the voters. So what is their solution? In both the Labor and Liberal parties those who are speaking of reform — Cavalier, Reith and Faulkner — cannot imagine a world in which the mass parties are not key agents of linkage.

New media invite a more imaginative response. As foreshadowed earlier, they create many opportunities for citizen engagement at a variety of stages in the policy cycle. In this sense they offer to replace the linkage and policy development infrastructure that was formerly embedded in the mass party organisations. But the new media offer more. They offer a variety of channels and modes of access that would recognise the more differentiated, educated and engaged community that Australia has become. For this contribution to be fully realised, wider structural changes that would enhance and deepen citizen access to the policy cycle are also required. These are discussed in the following two sections.

## The opportunities created by new media

After a campaign that revolutionised political use of new media, President Obama received, after Innauguration Day 2009, a 'Citizens' Briefing Book'. The book was a project of the President's Transition Team, and the idea was that Americans would vote online to collectively prioritise the issues they wanted the President to consider.

The project became a laughing stock, and since, an oft-cited example of new media in politics gone wrong. In a time of war and looming economic crisis, the most popular idea in the Citizens' Briefing Book was … legalising marijuana. Regardless of the other top-rating ideas, (which included, in order: 'commit to becoming the "greenest" country in the world', 'replace government sponsored abstinence education with age-appropriate sex education', and 'the permanent closure

of all torture facilities') the marijuana suggestion made a joke of the process.

At the same time, here in Australia, the Federal Government's Human Rights Consultation was taking place. It asked which human rights ought to be protected in Australia, whether they are sufficiently protected, and how we could better promote human rights. 'Never before has a public consultation generated so much interest: the Committee received more than 35,000 submissions,' consultation chair Father Frank Brennan announced.

As the consultation took to the road, meetings in cities and regional centres across the country were overfilled: some consultations literally spilled onto the street. Many could not get to the consultations in person, so on 11 June, 267 simultaneous meetings were held in lounge rooms, pubs and town halls across the country. Strangers who shared a postcode and a concern for human rights met for two hours to discuss human rights policy. Young gay men told of discrimination. Parents related their children's experience in the mental health system. Prison workers spoke of the fate of Indigenous women in the justice system. Many groups drafted consensus statements and mailed them to the consultation. The local meetings were organised using GetUp's website, and many of the 37,000 submissions were facilitated by community groups like Amnesty International, or the Consultation itself, using social media.

The point of the comparison is not that human rights advocates did a perfect job (far from it, evidently, as the government subsequently declined the opportunity to enact a charter of human rights). Rather, it's that new media is a toolset with enormous and unrealised potential to enrich our democracy — but like most tools it can be used well, or used poorly. This section discusses how new media, used well, can benefit Australian polity.

It's easy to be carried away with the promise of technology, and of cyber-utopians there are none more devout nor more qualified than Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales. In a manifesto announcing his foray into the political domain, a project called Campaigns Wikia, he wrote: 'If broadcast media brought us broadcast politics, then participatory media will bring us participatory politics.'[3] So say many others withal.

His first assertion ought be granted: broadcast media has brought, or at least worsened, a broadcast politics geared for the soundbites and the distribution of 'daily messages' and 'talking points' while grassroots membership decreases. But in what way is new media participatory? And what kind of participation might it herald for politics?

In this section, we'll make two distinctions between types of new media participation. The first is between the expressive and the deliberative. Much of our new media experience is expressive in nature: we voice our immediate thoughts and feelings on social networks, sign online petitions, and vote in online polls (perhaps for legalisation of marijuana). This kind of engagement is much derided and not the kind of informed and considered participation most of us hope citizens to have in shaping policy. The Citizens Briefing Book is an example.

For those interested in a more participatory politics, deliberation is what we're after. Ideas should be debated, experts consulted, confluences achieved! In the offline world, we don't expect this to happen spontaneously. Communities don't all of a sudden converge on town halls to discuss reform, or to plan how to combine their power to create change. Community organisers (both professional and amateur) make that happen by helping communities realise their power to participate in politics. Organisers do the same thing using new media.

Often this starts with simple expressive acts like petitions or polls. Online movements often work on a model based very closely on community organising of old, rooted in the philosophy and practice of the Saul Alinsky school of community organising: the kind of organising behind so many of the transformative movements of the 1970s. Simple, expressive actions like petitions are about giving an opportunity for self-identification with the values and mission of the movement. People are then offered increasingly involved actions until they build the knowledge, passion and networks to host local meetings (about human rights consultations, for example), meet with politicians, share personal stories, and to connect those stories with policy proposals for which they advocate. That is to say, they move up a ladder of engagement toward deliberative involvement.

Too often, new media political engagement doesn't get far enough up that ladder. But there are ever more promising examples of deeper, deliberative engagement. Consider the Tea Party movement in the United States. Here is a movement that sprung from the failure of the two major US political parties to represent and mobilise a huge swathe of Americans. Notwithstanding its substantial funding from vested interests, notably multinational oil companies, the Tea Party has been a genuine grassroots movement, mobilising hundreds of thousands of Americans in local activism. Especially in its early months, the movement, such as it is, grew largely through the channels of the growing home church movement in the United States. Since then, new media has been an essential tool in the coordination of the movement. A small community of largely libertarian software engineers, with substantial financial support, created a swathe of very advanced social networks to facilitate the movement's coordination and growth. FreedomWorks has emerged as the primary among the networks created, and has functionality in some areas to outstrip that of Facebook. Tea

Party Patriots and other coordinating groups rely on mass online webinars and web-conferences to hold huge phone meetings of local chapter coordinators. Among participating groups, online polls are often used to contribute to the direction of strategy and tactics. Tea Party Patriots claim that the group's constitution was written collaboratively using a wiki. It's not clear how many contributors meaningfully participated in this drafting process, nor how or by whom the final drafts were edited, but the process is indeed a cutting edge example of new media deliberative politics.

On the other side of the world, the Indians Against Corruption movement that so captured the national imagination in India in 2011 adopted similar tactics. Behind the movement's figurehead, Anna Hazare, an ad-hoc team of some 15 young activists, almost all of them students of software engineering, built an impressive campaign infrastructure. Sympathisers could register their support by placing a simple missed call to the campaign's phone number. They would then be alerted by SMS or phone-calling-tree to local rallies and meetings. Organisers claim that meetings were used collaboratively to draft and refine the Jan Lokpal bill, by providing grassroots guidance that was digitally passed on to the team of N. Santosh Hegde, the former Supreme Court Justice charged with writing the movement's proposed legislation.

Our second distinction in types of participation is between creating and curating. Many discussions of new media focus solely on those who create content. The vast majority of us, however, are not online *creators* in any meaningful sense. We are *curators*. That is to say, we do not write detailed policy blogs, do not organise rallies or fundraisers, nor leak state secrets; we consume information and then we share it.

Curating is of enormous power. News editors curate our TV bulletins, but our peers curate our new media bulletins. They determine which news articles, blog posts, videos and events appear on our social networks and in our email inboxes, and even tell us with which to agree and to disagree. Our social networks create for each of us an information bubble, determining which tiny section of the new media world we view.

These bubbles are not new. It's natural to hear what we want to hear, read what we've read before and to associate with those who share our views. But at the end of the day, broadcast media had most of us sitting down to a very limited selection of very similar news bulletins, produced by a small stable of journalists. What newsroom editors did for broadcast media, our friends do a great deal of for new media.

The power of curation is enormous; it's one of the most promising dynamics for participatory politics. But it's a power under threat. The story we've told about the internet for over a decade — that it rescinds the power of companies to filter our information — now needs to be rethought. Increasingly it's not just peers curating our new media experience, but algorithms too, creating with opaque complexity ever smaller bubbles of information around us based on myriad data points of demography and history.

It's widely understood that Google's PageRank algorithm was the company's founding innovation and determines which results we see when we use the search engine. But few realise that there is no longer one PageRank algorithm for all, but one for each of us. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in August 2010, Google CEO Eric Schmidt predicted that soon filter 'technology will be so good it will be very hard for people to watch or consume something that has not in some sense been tailored for them'.[4]

It's not just our search results; our every new media experience is now personally customised by algorithms in some way. For example, Amazon recommends books based not just on purchasing history, but also by what particular pages and chapters we have read and highlighted on our Kindle devices. So we read more and more of what we have already read. Facebook filters by what we 'like' so we see only those political posts and shares by friends whose points of view we have 'liked' in the past. FaceBook's new 'sponsored story' feature now allows advertisers pay for organic posts by our friends to receive higher prominence on our FaceBook news feed, if the content is flattering to advertisers. The Washington Post and other online newspapers tracks the columnists you and your friends prefer to show you a homepage of news headlines to match.

Increasingly complex algorithms make crucial judgments for us in new media, but these algorithms are not understood, and in fact most people aren't aware of their existence. New media, like old media, is owned and paid for by corporations; by the same people who spend money on lobbyists. In new media we live in a bubble created partly by our peers, and partly by complex algorithms, the workings of which we don't understand and the motivations of which are the motivations of the corporations who write them.

Eli Pariser, the president of pioneering online campaigning group MoveOn, calls this phenomenon 'filter bubbles' in his recent book on the topic.[5] Filter bubbles in new media, he argues, are a huge threat to our public discourse. In many ways, this form of corporate curation is more troubling than broadcast media control. First, the degree of personalisation on new media is far more minute. Second, the bubbles are invisible. Most users don't realise that when they search for a term on Google, they will receive vastly different results to a friend sitting right next to them. Nor do we understand the degree

that difference, nor on what basis it is decided. Third, these bubbles are not chosen. When picking up a copy of *The Sun Herald*, most Australians understand that this is a newspaper with a particular ideological point of view and editorial tendencies. Not so when our news is filtered for us online by opaque algorithms. Finally, broadcast media editors have codes of journalistic conduct, enunciated and uncultured over a century. Many (but clearly not all) broadcast editors feel obliged to serve us some news vegetables with our news dessert; we may want celebrity news and cute puppies, but we have to eat a serve of updates from Afghanistan first.

Marshall Van Alstyne pondered the social impact of new media becoming a 'cyberbalkans'[6] 15 years ago, but he conceived of opt-in partitions rather than opaque ones imposed by corporations. The allure of new media as a tool for more participatory democracy may be dulled if the 'filter bubble' trend continues unchecked.

Notwithstanding this concern, new media means our niche interests can be more specific and are better catered to. That's true of online shopping, dating, music, hobbies — and it's true also of politics. Broadcast media has driven broadcast politics. So too will a fragmented media — new media — drive fragmented politics. Indeed, political cohorts are already fragmenting. Now parties have to speak to multiple value sets, and do so in multiple, relevant media. This greatly benefits niche players in politics. They are able to micro target values and speak to constituencies about their particular interests in their particular community and medium.

Consider also that the young are more adept in new media than the old, and women arguably more adept than men. Online, small-dollar fund-raising now makes it possible for third-party community groups to raise several million dollars in an election cycle by encouraging tens of thousands of contributors to give just $30 to $50 each. The email reader-

ship of many online movements now far exceeds several masthead newspapers. The scale of new media makes it easy to mobilise, monetise and institutionalise movements based on the smallest segment of interest or ideology. As a result, our non-proportional electoral system is among the only major structural barriers to community movements forming powerful and electable minor parties to further disturb the political oligarchy of our two major parties.

Given this, consider what the major social movements of the 1970s might look like were they to occur in today's new media environment. Of the major movements of the era, only environmentalism formed powerful political representation of its own, in the Australian Greens, who subsumed the value sets of the other movements. One imagines that if those transformative movements of the 1970s took shape in today's new media environment, it would be far easier for them to find unique political representation.

'If broadcast media brought us broadcast politics, then participatory media will bring us participatory politics,' wrote Jimmy Wales, and with cautious optimism we embrace his vision. Governments and bureaucracies, however, are reluctant to *give* power to citizens, or to *create* more participatory democracy. That kind of power often must be earned, created and fought for — and governments will often fight *against* the most powerful examples of new media, as seen in the aggressive reaction to WikiLeaks. Assuming, however, that governments want to engage more deeply with their publics, what structures might facilitate this? The following section explores some possibilities.

## Opening political structures to re-engage citizens

So new media offers fresh opportunities for more effective citizen engagement. But how could this be orchestrated? For a start, think back to the roles that the major party organisations played in their mass moment. This provides some initial guidance about the systemic capabilities that have been lost. If citizen engagement is to be a reality, it also gives some rough indication of the scale of the infrastructure that needs to be created, but now in a form appropriate to contemporary social circumstances and technological possibilities. In their mass moment, the major parties were unified and animated by platforms that provided both a broad statement of values and a general direction for social development. These narratives were typically sufficiently vague to create broad social appeal, but sufficiently resonant to create a logic for widespread citizen identification.

The days when Australians embraced one of two broad ideological positions are surely past. Now Australian society is much more differentiated and pluralised. There are now no overarching ideologies that can command the relatively unambiguous loyalty of a broad cross-section of the community. There are rather a variety of competing narratives, norms and values. On particular issues there can be cross-cutting conflicts. Think of the examples listed earlier: climate change, live cattle exports, euthanasia, marriage equality and refugees. There are other issues like innovation, the impacts of the resource boom and euthanasia on which expertise and concern is widely distributed throughout Australian society. On such matters there are no overarching narratives to which most citizens might look and from which they might be guided towards a specific response.

Australia's new diversity of identities and the accompanying pluralisation of citizen values and opinions is a democratic and liberal plus. But to facilitate choice and action and to

avoid facile populism and/or gridlock, the challenge of connecting citizens into broader groupings remains. New and wider opportunities for dialogue and exchange are required. This would involve sites at which new measures can be advanced and discussed, if possible, free of immediate politicisation. Elsewhere, the former head of the Prime Minister's department, Michael Keating, has written of the need to create a 'contemplative' stage in the unfolding of particular policy issues (2004, p. 128). By this he means a phase in which a public conversation can occur *before* party positions solidify and before partisan advantage becomes a primary consideration. There are a number of opportunities in the processes through which public policies arise and become resolved for such 'contemplative' moments. These are discussed below.

Through such processes, understanding of uncertainties and interdependencies between the more particularised or sectional concerns of citizens can be explored. The intersubjective dimensions of many issues present particular opportunities for expanding and widening understanding and support.[7] Of course, strong differences will doubtless remain. Think of the mining tax or poker machine restrictions in their various manifestations. That is why complex political processes need to be introduced. But in advancing these processes in our newly differentiated society, the curatorial and participatory opportunities that are opened up by new media will be critical.

In such a setting, the task of political debate is to mobilise relevant identities and to create a public conversation that is congruent with the needs and significance of the issue at hand. This conversation should be like a snowball: it should grow in scale and force as it gathers momentum. In advancing understanding, it should also advance possibilities of action. In the process, it should expose issues and contexts. This could involve some combination of the following three features: first, the dialogue should explain why particular values should be

accorded priority; second, in defining a public policy 'problem', it should explain why a particular causal theory should be accorded priority;[8] and third, why, in the context of a specific issue, particular facts or empirical developments should be treated as most relevant and persuasive. This conversation must be reciprocal. No one protagonist automatically occupies higher ground. And because the issues are politicised, some or all of these considerations will be deeply contested.

An additional dimension of this activity concerns coalition building, which is a particularly important activity in our pluralised and more fragmented society. Coalitions demonstrate that values are widely shared. The social movement campaigns of the 1970s and beyond illustrate, in a more pluralised environment, the power of coalition building. Coalitions testify to widened public support. For example, current campaigns on marriage equality illustrate this process in practice, but largely beyond the formal policy-making system. New media offers the potential to renew this activity — to make it a routine part of policy-making in a 21st century democracy.

All of this would require structural change to open up the policy-making and political system to wider citizen engagement. How might this be done? The following seven points suggest forms of connection that need to be established, how this might be facilitated by new media, and how this might be accomplished in Australia's parliamentary political system.

### *Create opportunities for citizen dialogue and for the preparation of a case for policy action*

New media capacities include software that could be freely available to citizen groups to help them frame detailed proposals for policy action.[9] Via reciprocal exchanges, these create the essential framework within which processes of opinion registration, development and refinement can advance. In the first instance these exchanges can be between citizens themselves.

Place was formerly privileged as the primary site for the expression of affiliation, as, for example, in place-based electoral districts. However, new media creates opportunities for citizens who are physically distanced from each other but who identify with a particular concern or issue (e.g. euthanasia, climate change) to link together and develop their case for action.

Public funding of political parties now includes funds for research. But the parties mobilise very few citizens. Another dimension of citizen engagement could involve the establishment of a public fund (like the Australian Research Council), which would be open to bids from citizens who wanted to prepare proposals for wider consideration, but who need expert analysis beyond that which could be mustered from their own resources. This would facilitate the development of a technical case and allow ad hoc groups of citizens to mobilise virtual think tank-like capabilities. Similar processes might be available for the development of draft bills.

*Create opportunities to propose a new agenda*

As indicated in the discussion of the linkage and developmental potential of new media, citizens might band together and deliberate about a new issue. But they then need opportunities to advance their ideas through the political system. How can openings be made available for this to occur? What forms of access and enquiry might be appropriate to advance consideration and engagement? Some mechanisms have been tried and demonstrate how not to do this. For example, David Cameron's conservative government in the United Kingdom has introduced a scheme whereby petitions that attract 100,000 signatures can trigger a parliamentary debate. The difficulties in this approach by itself are already apparent. His predecessor, Tony Blair, encountered similar problems with an e-petition website. In November 2006 an e-petition system was set up on the No. 10 website. A petition was submitted: 'We the undersigned

petition the PM to scrap the planned vehicle tracking and road pricing policy'. This received press coverage. It closed on February 2007 with over 1.8 million signatures. Stephen Glaister's (2007) assessment neatly summarises the shortcomings of this form of populism:

> It was plain through the mechanism of the e-petition that the government had managed to procure a strong public reaction against a policy that the public could not possibly have understood not least because the government itself had not begun to resolve fundamental questions; and it had certainly not explained what is a very complex proposition.

Citizen-initiated referenda face similar problems. The California model has been a disaster and the more nuanced New Zealand approach has significant drawbacks.

In both cases signatures are gathered around a single and overly simplified proposition. The challenge rather is to create a framework for engagement that is more discursive and deliberative and that requires proponents to develop a credible case for change. At the same time, this needs to be embedded in a process with opportunities for real influence and for redress in the case of rejection. But the process would also need a capacity to discard frivolous proposals, and there would need to be appropriately significant obstacles in the process of establishing the democratic merit of particular suggestions.

One solution in Australia might be to link an access site where a case for policy change could be lodged to an all-party parliamentary agenda-setting committee. This committee might function along the rough lines of the agenda committees that formerly filtered branch motions for the major party conferences. It would review cases for policy action (formulated via one of the software engagement packages reviewed above) that attracted the support of more than a designated number of citizens (say 3% of the electorate) and perhaps satisfied a number of other process hurdles covering engagement

and analysis.[10] Ideally, for reasons explained later, this would be a committee of the Senate. These proposals for policy change would be assessed by the committee. If members felt more development was required the submission would be referred back for elaboration. Once the committee was satisfied of the initial merit of the proposal, the submission would be passed on to a relevant Senate committee. Submissions that were rejected on other than frivolous grounds would need to be given explanations of why they were not further considered.

In turn, in the case of initial rejection, procedural fairness requires that opportunities remain for the proposing groups to respond. Could opportunities for further consideration and redress be based on the scale of support? At each stage of the process, this might be set at progressively more demanding levels. Thus, to challenge a rejection by the relevant Senate committee, as well as responding to the negative arguments, community support equal to or greater than 5% of the electorate would be required (or say a number equal to a Senate quota in a full Senate election). Following a further rejection, both rebuttal arguments plus the support of 10% of citizens (or a number equal to a Senate quota in a half Senate election) would be required to sustain the exchange. If this total is achieved, funds for a draft bill or motion (or budgetary allocation — whatever action is appropriate) could be advanced. The resulting proposal would automatically qualify for a vote of the Senate. The mechanism by which public funds might be allocated for this task was discussed above. Such arrangements might be introduced for a trial period and then reviewed in the light of experience.

Interaction between committees and the proponent citizen groups might be established via an online dialogue site. The task of committee secretariats would include facilitating this online dialogue; for example, by notifying relevant interest groups not immediately involved of the discussion and identifying key

issues around which particular online conversations could be orchestrated. The secretariat would also have the responsibility of referring dissenting or official or alternative views to all protagonists. These conversations would precede decisions by committees concerning particular proposals. If a committee inquiry was held, there would also be opportunities for town hall-style online engagement, as well as direct public evidence.

The Senate would seem to be a particularly attractive site for such committee activity. It has co-equal powers with the House and it is elected on a proportional basis, albeit on highly unequal state-based constituencies. Ideally, it might develop its focus and capacity by becoming a committee house, with ministers drawn only from the Representatives. This was proposed some years ago by the late (Liberal) Senator David Hamer.[11]

In a pluralised political environment, parliamentary committee inquiries could generally act as a point of engagement, complementing online citizen deliberation and providing a focus for this activity. After a particular submission becomes the subject of a committee hearing, stakeholders would be engaged in a process of advocacy and (reciprocal) social learning. At the outset, different groups might perceive themselves to be winners or losers or just interested parties. Others, more remote from the immediate issue, may have failed to recognise their stakes. Through a process of online engagement and public inquiry, participants might gain deeper understanding of each other's perspectives and the opportunity would thus open to develop more encompassing approaches or other modes of accommodation.[12] The fact that parliament is the setting for this process, that parliamentary opinion can influence the outcome, and that votes on the floor of parliament can occur independently of the executive, would be vital for its impact on citizens, interest groups, departments and ministers.

Through structural changes such as these, the links between citizens and the formal policy process might be renewed. These are substantial and elaborate proposals. Thinking back to the scale of the infrastructure that was created in the mass period to mediate an analogous task, this should not be a surprise. The surprise might rather be that the political system in its present hollowed-out form could be expected to deliver anything other than populist and (at worst) corrupted governance. The new media, in conjunction with appropriate structural changes, offer an escape from this imbroglio.

*Create openings for community engagement at the strategic end of the official issue cycle*

The present policy development process is largely closed and such consultation as occurs is often not very effective. Take a recent case involving the development of the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy. The approach that was adopted reflects the current standard assumptions about strategic policy development in Australian public administration. In May 2010, the responsible departments, FaHCSIA and DEWR, issued a discussion paper. They called for written submissions and attracted some 95 responses. In November 2011 the government released its strategy. There were public hearings, but again these were designed to hear views rather than engage in a process in which the steps in the evolution of opinion were transparent. Indeed, there was no further engagement with the folk who had made submissions, and no opportunity for interaction with them. This was despite their, in many cases, detailed and substantial character.

In the *Australian Policy Handbook* (2007), Althaus, Bridgman and Davis discuss the varied forms of consultation. Their consultation ladder consists of eight steps in ascending order of depth of participation, exchange and transparency. The present approach — release of a discussion paper and a call for written

responses — stands at the second lowest level, only one up from sharing information. This is hardly a process designed to illuminate strategic options and choices, to uncover implicit premises and frameworks, and to promote dialogue and, if possible, consensus.

More generally, recent literatures and official reports stress the need to develop departmental strategic capacity (e.g. Mulgan, 2009; Barber, 2008; Fischer et al., 2007; Moore, 1995). Perhaps the most radical suggestions lie in a UK report, *Shaping Up*, from the Institute for Government (Parker et al., 2010). This proposes a variety of political, administrative and technical steps to buttress the capacity of ministers and governments to think strategically, including the creation of strategy boards for departments and a small number of strategy ministers. A later Australian report radically extends the strategy envelope. It defines the strategy challenge for the public service as anticipating developments at least a decade ahead. The reasons include the emergence of an agenda of issues that cross-cut class cleavages that lie beyond distributive and materialist concerns, and that have a life span beyond any single government — for example, environmental or rights issues or, more narrowly, social exclusion or obesity. Another reason lies in the emergence of systemic analysis that highlights the inadequacies in silo-based approaches to policy development.

How could enhanced citizen engagement in strategic deliberation be orchestrated? One possibility could involve each department (or clusters of departments) creating a website on which its assessment of key emerging issues in its area of responsibility would be registered. It would indicate its reasons for nominating the issue, primary evidence, primary theory and the key sub-issues. Groups of interested citizens could then initiate an exchange along broadly the same lines as proposed above in relation to new issues and Senate committees. If citizen views were rejected, there could be a process for

further engagement and reconsideration. The trigger points might again be based on an escalating scale of citizen support. In the end, if disagreement persisted and sufficient citizen support was mobilised, a reference to an appropriate parliamentary committee could be automatically triggered.

For example, departments might be obliged to host an online and public dialogue around any issues that attracted interest from initially more than say 3% of enrolled citizens. The process might unfold as in the case of citizen-initiated proposals discussed above. The department would have the right to reject the submission with reasons, but citizens could respond and would have a right to be heard if they attracted more than say 5% of the electorate. If a third iteration proved futile, the matter might be referred to the relevant Senate committee. If the Senate supported citizen view but the Executive opposed, the matter could be voted down in the House and the normal mechanisms for resolving inter-House disputes could come into play. Obviously, not many cases would be expected to reach this stage. By the same token, if there is no mechanism for citizen redress, the whole system will not be taken seriously by its publics. Again, the justification for such elaborate arrangements lies in the now jettisoned infrastructure that once allowed the memberships of mass party organisations to play influential roles in agenda-setting around particular issues. The approach could be introduced for a trial period, perhaps affecting only one department, and refined in the light of experience.

*Create opportunities for relevant interactions as the policy/legislative cycle unfolds*

Here again the committee process through the legislature could provide opportunities for online engagement. Perhaps if more than a certain number registered interest in a bill this could trigger establishment of a public engagement timetable. The government would need to be able to have recourse to a process

to trigger urgency: first and second reading speeches plus a draft bill could be registered on a website and a period (maybe 3 weeks) allowed to elapse from second reading to committee stage of debate. The Senate again could be the House where these rules are enforced. In this period, groups of citizens would have the opportunity to submit detailed views and these could be summarised for members prior to debate. Citizens would be notified of the outcome of their submissions.

*Create opportunities for engagement as contingencies arise*
Where contingencies arise and public consultation is desired, the facilitating software described in the second section could be used.

*Create opportunities for coalition building among community interests*
The processes described above should stimulate this.

*Create opportunities to allow impacts on broader public opinion*
The shifting of proposals through a cycle from public mobilisation to parliamentary processes should allow this. As discussed earlier, the fact that the Senate can propose legislation to the House would be critical.

## Conclusion

Without deliberate intent, the transformation of Australian politics post-1983 has marched in step with a profound evisceration of democratic political life. The infrastructure that, through mass and catch-all party systems, once mediated linkage between citizens and the formal political system has been lost. No new infrastructure has developed. The media have filled the resulting void with generally malign consequences; this is a development that will continue to undermine Australia's hitherto robust democracy. Since 1983, political conflict has increasingly come to focus on the short term. Opportunism and manufactured difference now

dominate the argument between the rival parties. Public trust in politics and public disaffection from politics has grown. There is a large international and domestic literature that documents present citizen disaffection and that underwrites the urgent need to find new ways to link citizens to the formal policy making and representational systems (e.g. Marquand, 2002; Heclo, 2009; Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006). Without systemic change, this undermining of effective political and policy capacity can embed destructive cynicism and untrusting disengagement. It will cauterise citizen affiliation to the formal political system and our collective ability to respond to pressing longer-term issues.

The new media, in conjunction with appropriate structural changes, can create many opportunities to renew the engagement of Australian citizens in the political process. Looking to the future potential of new media, this chapter has outlined a transformative agenda. Democratic renewal is surely the central contemporary political challenge. In this perspective, change that stretches and deepens the practice of citizenship will be the keystone of a robust 21st century democracy.

## Endnotes

1 This section summarises developments that are surveyed in much more detail in Marsh and Miller (2012).

2 For example, describing John Howard's approach to building public support, Paul Kelly (2005) wrote: 'The defining quality that Howard brings to Prime Ministerial government is a pervasive commitment to political management … The source of Howard's authority rests with the people and he has transformed the office of Prime Minister by creating a continuous dialogue with the people … he uses the media as an instrument to reach the people. He spends more time on the media than he does in the Parliament or in cabinet. His innovation is the permanent campaign — fighting the 24-hour political cycle for the 1000 days in each three year term … Winning each 24-hour political cycle demand a flexible yet focused media message and a rapid response … Howard has his favourite talkback host in each capital city. He markets his ideas, defends his policies and is a commentator on the nation's condition with views from cricket to the curriculum. His core tactic is to set the agenda and have his opponents defined according to that agenda.'

3 'Let's ramp up the intelligence of politics: An open letter to the political blogosphere', Jimmy Wales, 4 July 2006, retrieved from http://campaigns.wikia.com/wiki/Mission_Statement accessed 4 February 2011.

4 'Google and the Search for the Future', Holman W. Jenkins Jr, *Wall Street Journal,* 14 August 2010.

5 E Pariser, *The filter bubble: What the internet Is hiding from you*, Penguin Press, New York, 2011.

6 Marshall van Alstyne and Erik Brynjolfsson, 'Electronic Communities: Global Villages or Cyberbalkanization? (Best Theme Paper)' (1996). *ICIS 1996 Proceedings*, Paper 5, retrieved from http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis 1996/5

7 Culpepper (2008) describes some of the dimensions: 'Uncertainty springs from the inability to gauge the performance of new institutions, the actions of other players, or the causal consequences of what we will gain if we do change our behaviour' (2008, p. 7). And elsewhere: 'Actors in this new setting are not simply unclear about the sort of people with whom they are interacting; they may also be unclear about what game they are playing and consequently how they should understand their own stakes in the game.' (p. 16). And in a third framing: 'Actors not only need a way to estimate how well new political institutions and new practices will work, but they also need a mechanism to help coordinate their expectations about what other actors will do'.

8 James Q Wilson describes the contribution of theorists to political elites in the following terms: '(They contribute) the conceptual language, the ruling paradigms, the empirical examples (note I say examples, not evidence) that become the accepted assumptions of those in charge of making policy. Intellectuals frame, and to a large degree conduct, the debates about whether this language and these paradigms are correct. The most influential intellectuals are those who manage to link a concept or a theory to the practical needs and ideological predispositions of political activists and government officials. The most important source of intellectual influence on public policy arises out of the definitions of what constitutes a problem … What intellectuals mostly bring to public policy debates is not knowledge but theory… Some theories, if adopted, will make us better off. The problem is to know which ones.' *Public Interest,* 64, 1981, pp. 31–47.

9 See, for example, new Democracy Foundation (www.newDemocracy.com.au) report on the online deliberations it hosted prior to a face-to-face Citizens Parliament. These were interactive web based conversations supported by policy development software. This conversation led to detailed submissions that provided an initial agenda of issues for the subsequent Parliament.

10 This and other figures included in the paper are intended to illustrate the kind of hurdles that might be established. More reflection is needed to establish appropriate benchmarks. The key point is that forms of

redress should be available to groups of citizens, but at each step in the process these should require proponents to demonstrate significant popular support.

11 Because the structure of power is based on convention, not on constitutional provision, this possibility depends solely on changes in the power relationship between parties and on their political imagination. For example, change could come about if a minor party, which included among its planks a commitment to enhance citizen participation, gained in voter support and, via a preference deal, used its leverage in lower house elections to achieve appropriate Senate procedural and structural reform.

12 Beyond agreement, these could include issue transformation, time limited experimental change, acceptance of defeat based on procedural fairness, log rolling, compensation, and so on.

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**Ian Marsh** is an Adjunct Professor at the Australian Innovation Research Centre, University of Tasmania. He has worked as a political staffer, consultant and for a major Australian political party. He is currently working with remoteFOCUS on the governance of remote Australia. His most recent book (with Raymond Miller) is *Democratic Decline and Democratic Renewal: Political Change in Britain, Australia and New Zealand*.

**Sam McLean** is the Deputy National Director of GetUp, an advocacy organisation aiming to build a more progressive Australia. Sam has also worked with the United Nations Youth Association and Vibewire Youth Inc, and as a climate change campaigner at global advocacy group, Avaaz.