14 Innovations in Australian government communication

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WE FREQUENTLY HEAR Australian political leaders express their government's commitment to communicating with citizens in a manner that is open and honest, centres on engaging citizens, and allows for direct communication between citizens and government. Yet many of the authors in this volume find that such rhetoric does not always match the reality. In considering why this may be, these authors necessarily take a scholarly, empirical and critical approach to the study of government communications. It is undoubtedly true that many government representatives would find this approach overly critical and would wish to point to the good work they do in the area of communications – work that is not always easily visible or much discussed.

This chapter, therefore, considers the innovations that Australian governments have recently made to foster better communication between governments and their citizens. Of course, it does not follow that recognising such initiatives requires us to suspend all critical analysis. Rather, it is important to seek a balance between considering government attempts to improve communications – and acknowledging genuine efforts to do so despite the difficulties such processes can present – and considering the ongoing realities of government administration and competing political factors which can challenge such initiatives.

CURRENT INITIATIVES IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

There are a number of reasons why a government might increase its focus on communication with citizens. Chief among these is a genuine

democratic commitment to dialogue and public participation. There is also, as a result of public policy studies and evaluations, a growing recognition that decision-making without public participation is ineffective and that more relevant policy-making may emerge from consultation. In recent years, governments have also paid greater attention to concepts of social capital, community and localism.[1] Many recognise that communication is a key to meeting 'the challenges of the emerging information society'.[2] The availability of improved communication technologies and the emerging globalisation of 'communications, technology, trade and commerce' encourage such change.[3] There is also increasing recognition of the need for greater cooperation between the government, business and community sectors to resolve complex problems.

The changing political context also plays a role as diminished trust in government leads to greater media and public scrutiny of governments as well as expectations of 'greater accountability from public officials'.[4] More cynically, in this climate, there is also the potential electoral and rhetorical value to governments of being seen to be consultative and the ability to use government resources to reach groups and individuals of key strategic and political value (especially valuable when this communication can be performed at public expense).

Far less cynically, the OECD suggests that better communication between citizens and governments leads to three key benefits: better public policy, greater trust in government, and a stronger democracy.[5] But there are also challenges, costs and potential pitfalls for governments that seek, through improved communication, to foster more active citizenship (see Textbox 14.1), although these risks have to be 'compared with the negative effects and costs of not engaging citizens', which can be far more damaging.[6]

Several studies have suggested that there *is* a growing interest in government communication processes that seek to involve citizens. In Australia, innovation is occurring particularly at the state and local levels. Local governments are experimenting with a range of methods and adapting these for Australian conditions,[7] while state and territory governments also claim to have made impressive achievements. Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, for example, claims that 'Listening to and working productively with Queenslanders are two of the hallmarks of my government'.[8] The ACT Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, has said: 'My Government was elected in 2001 on a platform which included a strong emphasis on community consultation'[9] (see also Textbox 14.2).

Textbox 14.1 Challenges in government communication and community engagement

- Resources
- Time
- Expertise
- Cost
- Need for commitment to the process
- Need for government leadership to be balanced with power-sharing
- Risk that providing opportunities for greater citizen input may generate opposition
- Risk of delay in policy-making
- How to measure and evaluate success.

Source: Adapted from OECD, *Citizens As Partners: OECD Handbook on Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making* (Paris: OECD, 2001), pp. 21–4.

Textbox 14.2 Communication principles

'Good communication underpins our democratic system of government . . . Today, the community expects that government will keep it informed about programs, services, initiatives and matters which affect their benefits, rights and obligations as citizens. The community also expects government to listen – to find out its views, priorities, needs and expectations – and to provide opportunities for participation in government and relevant and useful two-way communications. The community also wants communication that is understandable, and that takes into account the needs of a diverse society.'

Source: Tasmanian Government, *Whole of Government Communications Policy* (Hobart: Department of Premier and Cabinet, issued 9 July 2003; updated March 2006). Reproduced with permission of the Department of Premier and Cabinet Tasmania.

To discover more about government efforts in this area, the federal government plus all state and territory governments were sent a letter offering them the opportunity to outline their five best innovations in government communication for inclusion in this chapter. The letter was sent directly to all premiers, chief ministers and the Prime Minister on 15 November

2005. Whether the letter was answered, how long the reply took and what sort of attention was paid to the question was, in itself, something of a mini-test of government communication. Not all governments responded, some took up to three months to reply, and one needed extra prompting when, instead of answering what was clearly a question, it sent out a brief, generic response thanking me for writing to the premier and stating that 'your comments have been noted'! Other governments answered within a week and several sent comprehensive replies.

The responses received, supplemented by additional research, provide many of the examples discussed in this chapter. Therefore, if some governments are discussed less than others, it is because they gave a less detailed response, did not reply at all, and/or the author could find little information on their initiatives either in the literature or in their own government documents. This chapter is not, therefore, a complete list of government communication innovations in Australia. In particular, it says little about local government efforts, which are important but more disparate and difficult to consolidate.[10] But it does highlight some of the key initiatives, including those that various governments nominated as their best efforts to date.

EVALUATING COMMUNICATION EFFORTS

When considering these innovations it is important to consider at what level of communication they operate. There are a number of ways to conceptualise this and much depends on how you judge communication and interactivity. Public relations lecturer Rosaleen Smith, for example, has argued that over the past few decades the Australian federal government has 'gone from a one-way model of communication . . . to a result-oriented two way model'.[11] Smith cites as evidence of a more 'interactive' approach the government's use of media such as the internet and email and greater use of research findings such as 'demographics and psychographics of the target publics and their media use habits', as well as the increasing use of 'outsourcing' and consultants.[12] While Smith is taking an historical view that communication is more interactive today than it was in the past, others who have analysed how developments such as outsourcing, market research and internet websites are used (including some authors in this volume) have found that these practices are not necessarily enabling two-way communication and may actually (in the case of market research and outsourcing respectively, for example) impede interactivity and undermine accountability.

Textbox 14.3 Levels of community engagement in government communication

Information = Government ⇨ Citizens/community
A one-way relation in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens.

Consultation = Government ⇦⇨ Citizens/community
A two-way process in which citizens and communities provide feedback to government. Based on the prior definition by government of the issue.

Active participation = Government ⇔ Citizens/community
A relationship based on working with government, in which citizens and communities actively engage in the policy-making process.
Acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue. Responsibility for the final decision rests with the elected government.

Adapted from Queensland Government, Community Engagement Division: Directions Statement (Brisbane: Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2001), p. 5. Reproduced with permission of the Queensland Government.

An OECD model of community engagement provides a measure of two-way communication which is useful in understanding communication efforts because it differentiates between *passive* information-sharing by governments (even where governments use media such as email and the internet to deliver the information) and communication that is genuinely *two-way* and enables citizen consultation and participation (Textbox 14.3).

Differentiating further between the final two categories in Textbox 14.3, Lyn Carson and Janette Hartz-Karp argue that three elements differentiate consultation from engagement – inclusion (that citizens involved are representative of the population and include diverse viewpoints), deliberation ('open dialogue, access to information, space to understand and reframe issues, respect and movement towards consensus') and influence (the capacity for the process to 'influence policy and decision-making').[13]

Like the OECD model, the Queensland Government's 'Charter for Community Engagement' argues that there are four levels of consultation and that the influence that citizens exert rises at each stage as governments move from information-sharing (which includes government advertising, newsletters and information on websites) to response-seeking (where government seeks community response to a specific issue through, for example, focus groups, mail, phone or survey) to community input into planning (including through stakeholder meetings, seminars, workshops, advisory committees) and finally, to cooperative decision-making which involves genuine collaboration between government and citizens.[14] At the most passive level of information-sharing, Australian governments have made significant achievements in recent years.

ACCESS AND INFORMATION

Australian governments provide information in a range of ways and in multiple forms (Textbox 14.4). Government publishing, government gazettes and the communication of information in other languages are also important elements of public access to government information.

While the internet is now one of the key ways in which governments deliver information (discussed below and in Chapter 11), there are still some more direct ways of communicating. For example, the ACT government has a display at the Royal Canberra Show which provides advice and information with government staff 'on hand at all times', and the Chief Minister and his ministerial colleagues 'each spend a significant period of time at the display to meet with members of the community'.[15]

Advertising is one of the major ways in which governments communicate in Australia. This is discussed in several other chapters in this book so will not be discussed here except to note that debates about whether government advertising blurs party-political and government communication functions are not confined to television, radio or newspaper advertising. Glossy government newsletters and booklets have also provoked similar concerns.[16] Governments argue that such methods are important in providing information and connecting them with citizens. For example, the

Textbox 14.4 How governments provide information

- official documents (e.g. under FOI, public notices)
- policy papers (e.g. green and white papers, draft law)
- reports (e.g. annual reports from government departments)
- handbooks, brochures, guides, posters
- films, audiotapes and games (quizzes, Q&A)
- statements and speeches
- direct mail (letters sent directly to citizens)
- telephone services (including call centres, tape-recorded information)
- in-person enquiry points (e.g. shopfronts and customer service centres at government departments and public agencies)
- information centres and stands
- events, expos and exhibitions
- advertising
- media releases, media conferences and media interviews
- cooperation with civic organisations (such as NGOs).

ACT government, since 2004, has sent an annual newsletter (timed to coincide with Canberra's birthday) to all homes in the territory. The newsletter includes a message from the Chief Minister but it also includes 'a report against The Canberra Plan' (the government's plan 'for social, economic and spatial development' of the ACT).[17]

Providing information that allows citizens to measure the government's progress is an important element of government communication. There is now some use of devices such as 'report cards', which measure government progress against actions such as the 'number of hospital beds added' or 'number of police officers recruited' or outcomes such as 'reduced waiting times for surgery or crime rate reductions'.[18] For example, the Wyndham City Council in Victoria has designed an annual 'community report card' which 'summarises major initiatives and outcomes during the year and shows whether Wyndham has made substantial progress . . . [as measured against its declared vision for the future] or has just remained stable or even slipped backwards'.[19]

INTERNET WEBSITES

The Premier of New South Wales, Morris Iemma, has argued that 'The Internet has power to bring government closer to the people'.[20] John

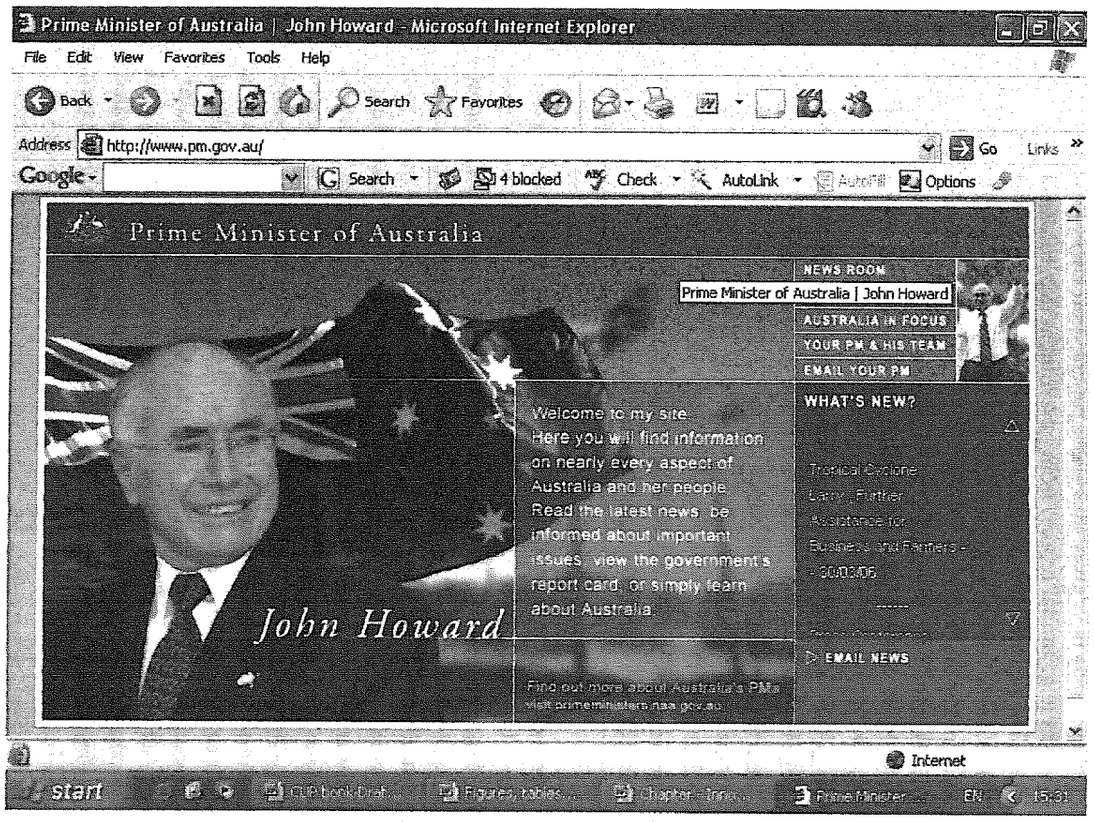

Figure 14.1 Prime Minister's website homepage. (Prime Minister's website, <www.pm.gov.au>, accessed 11 April 2006. Copyright Commonwealth of Australia reproduced with permission.)

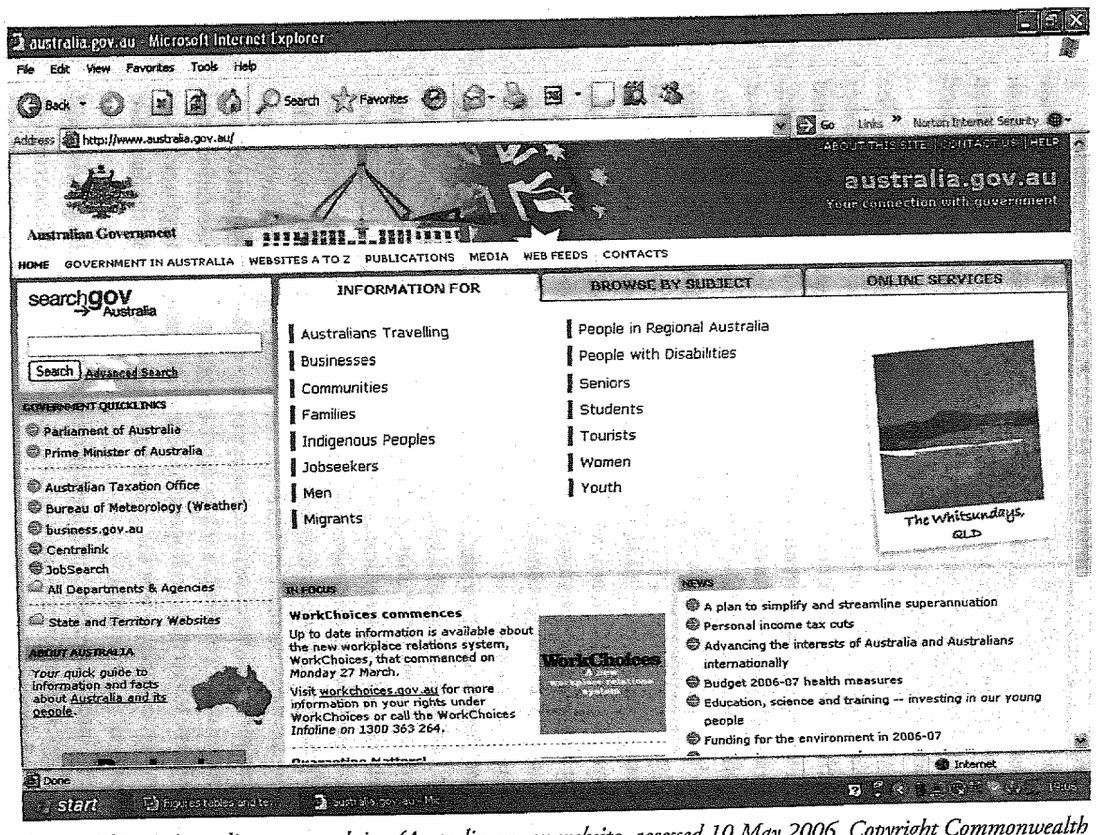

Figure 14.2 Australia.gov.au website. (Australia.gov.au website, accessed 10 May 2006. Copyright Commonwealth of Australia reproduced with permission.)

Howard expressed a similar faith back in 1997 when he launched the new Prime Minister's website by stating that the internet 'brings the Government closer to Australians and provides greater direct access to accurate information for users, particularly in regional and rural Australia'.[21]

The key government portal in Australia is the federal website <www.australia.gov.au> which, under the slogan 'Your connection with government', links to 'information and services on over 700 Australian Government websites as well as selected state and territory resources' and 'searches over five million government web pages'.[22]

However, all Australian governments also have their own websites. The Victorian government portal, for example, went live on 27 September 2003.[23] The NSW government website – under the slogan 'The connected state' – promises that citizens can 'Pay your bills, get HSC information, plan your holiday, check the train timetable, get a birth certificate, pay your traffic fine, order personalised number plates'.[24]

Aside from online portals or access points, several governments are also trialling specific internet projects. The Northern Territory has created an interactive online tool called MARVIN which uses 'text, synthetic speech, audio, video, images and animation'. It was created in 2003 and has been used by the NT government to 'deliver education and health promotion in urban, rural and remote communities' including sexual health and suicide prevention campaigns.[25]

Some projects combine the internet with other methods such as face-to-face communication and telephone contact. In the ACT, 'Canberra Connect' is an initiative that enables 'the community and business to interact with government through a single point of access'.[26] Canberra Connect provides information and services through several shopfronts located throughout Canberra as well as a telephone line and the website. The government states its aim as: 'Through [this] single gateway, Canberrans can access information across the broad spectrum of the ACT Government's activities or make payments such as land tax, rates, dog registration and library fines'. It also plays an important role in delivering emergency information. For example, it was the sole point of contact during the bushfire emergency of January 2003.[27]

Not all internet projects are aimed at citizens; some are designed to aid internal government communication. For example, the NSW Government established the GovLink website to allow NSW Government agencies and public sector employees online access to communicate and to services and information such as legislation, policy and procedures, research and white papers.[28]

While government communication initiatives are using the internet for access to government and government information, there are some older, more fundamental rights that Australians hold that give them access to government. Both parliaments and courts hold their meetings in public in Australia, and Australians have the right to attend these meetings. Although security screening has become more thorough in the post-September 11 world, this ability to physically access the proceedings of parliament is still important.

PARLIAMENT

Since it opened in 1988, an average of a million people visit Parliament House in Canberra every year, including approximately 130 000 schoolchildren.[29] There are daily free half-hour tours, audio guides and a video display. Aside from normal daily attendances, the annual Parliament House Open Day alone attracts more than 5000 visitors.[30]

On sitting days, watching Question Time from the public gallery of the House of Representatives is one of the most popular events. This is not surprising as Question Time is an important way in which the legislature scrutinises the government through Opposition members questioning the Prime Minister and Government ministers about their actions as part of the executive. Aside from (and because of) this accountability, Question Time is also one of the more dramatic and colourful events of parliament. It has been described as a 'bearpit', a form of theatre and a 'test of strength and nerve'.[31]

The broadcasting of federal parliament Question Time on ABC television and the Parliamentary and News Network radio stations, as well as live webcasts of parliamentary proceedings, enables citizens to see and hear their representatives when they cannot attend parliament in person (see Chapter 5). All Australian parliaments also publish a record of events (Hansard) which is available in hard copy and via the internet.

There has been a concerted effort by parliaments in Australia to try to facilitate public access in a range of ways. The federal parliament website (<www.aph.gov.au>) is a major resource of material and has an excellent search facility. It includes Parliamentary Library briefing notes and many information resources. The Parliamentary Education Office holds role-plays in Parliament House for school students, conducts training and creates resources on parliament both in print and on its website. It has produced a special parliamentary website for children – 'Kidsview' – with interactive content.[32]

State parliaments have developed similar initiatives including publications, education programs and visits. For example, the NSW government holds free lunchtime public tours every month for visitors. The Victorian government created 'A Window in Time', which provides a virtual tour of Parliament House online. The NSW government has the similarly named 'A Window on Government' website designed to help citizens 'better understand and participate in the workings of our system of Government', including finding out 'how you can access and influence the system' and 'Who is representing your interests?'[33]

There are many other attempts to make parliamentary information more accessible, such as 'infosheets' on the workings of parliament and Q&A and FAQ resources. At the federal level, for example, members of the public can ask to be sent the parliamentary newsletter 'About the House' or request regular email updates, and explanatory memoranda now accompany government bills when they are introduced into parliament to 'assist members of parliament, officials and the public to understand the objectives and detailed operation of the clauses of a bill'.[34]

Physical access is also changing. In 1999, the Victorian government began a new process of regional sittings of parliament it described as 'taking Parliament to the people'.[35] These were the first sittings outside Melbourne in the parliament's 145-year history and 'the first meetings of any Australasian legislature outside of a capital city'. Since then, Victoria's two chambers of parliament have sat in Bendigo, Ballarat, Benalla, Colac and Geelong. The Queensland government, following suit, held its first regional sitting in Townsville in 2002, which over 8000 people attended.[36] A further regional parliament was held in Rockhampton in 2005.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Aside from access to courts and parliaments, another important right that every Australian holds is a right to access information in the possession of the federal government and its authorities, limited 'only by exceptions and exemptions necessary for the protection of essential public interests and the private and business affairs of those about whom government agencies collect and hold information.'[37] This 'freedom of information' (FOI) right is enshrined in the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Textbox 14.5).

When FOI principles were being debated, the Australian Law Reform Commission stressed that government information is not 'the government's property and none of the people's business. The government holds this information on behalf of the people of Australia.'[38]

Textbox 14.5 Freedom of information

The *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) ('FOI Act') gives you the legal right to:

- See documents held by Australian Government Ministers, their Departments and most statutory authorities . . .
- Ask for information concerning you to be changed if it is incomplete, out of date, incorrect or misleading;
- Appeal against a decision not to grant access to a document or amend or annotate a personal record.

The FOI Act also requires agencies to make available detailed information about the:

- way they are organised;
- functions they have;
- kinds of decisions they make;
- arrangements they have for public involvement in their work;
- documents they hold and how you can see them;
- rules and practices which are used in making decisions which affect you.

You can look at and, if you wish, buy copies of manuals and guidelines which agencies use in making decisions which affect you.

'The Act gives you a right to see:

- documents, no matter how old, containing personal information about yourself;
- documents, no older than 1 December 1977, relating to anything else (they can be older if you need them to understand another document you already have).

Documents include files, reports, computer printouts, tapes or disks, maps, plans, photographs, microfiche, tape recordings, films or videotapes.'

Source: Australian Government, 'Freedom of Information at a Glance', Attorney-General's Department, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2004. Copyright Commonwealth of Australia reproduced with permission.

FOI was a significant step in government information access. However, there has been concern about whether the list of exceptions and exemptions is too long and the costs involved too prohibitive, amid concern that the government is using these aspects of FOI to obstruct access.[39] The *Australian* newspaper tested the federal government's responsibilities under

FOI in the High Court in 2006.[40] Similar debates are also occurring at the state level as the states and the ACT have their own FOI legislation.

TARGETED COMMUNICATION

As the regional sittings of parliament demonstrate, governments sometimes express a specific commitment to communicating with particular groups, including those that may be physically isolated from governments but also other groups that are judged to require special attention. For example, the Queensland government has expressed a particular interest in 'reaching out to those who are unaccustomed, uncomfortable or uninterested in working with government'[41] and the NSW government has developed a 'Communication Handbook' to assist NSW government agencies in 'developing communication strategies that meet the information needs of people with disabilities'.

At the federal level, the government's advertising and information activity guidelines (created in 1995) state: 'The Government recognises that not all individuals or groups within the community are equally well placed to gain access to Government information' and quotes from a 1980 report into departmental information which defined the 'information poor' as 'those who are disadvantaged through low income, poor education, inadequate knowledge of English, physical handicap, geographical isolation or any other reason'.[42] The guidelines state further that 'the Government expects particular attention to be given to the communication needs of young people, the rural community, and those for whom English is not a convenient language in which to receive information'.[43]

In highlighting its communication achievements, the federal government has pointed to its Indigenous communications, its expansion of the use of regional media to 'ensure that people living in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia are not disadvantaged by their location; and . . . standard arrangements to ensure that people who are vision or hearing impaired can receive government information in a readily accessible format'.[44] The government also points to 'campaigns [that] dedicate 7.5% of press and radio budgets to non-English speaking background press and radio respectively'.[45] However, a recent Senate inquiry found, based on analysis of the Howard government's advertising, that these targets for advertising in non-English language media were 'consistently not being met'.[46]

Some schemes for targeted communication involve a more consultative element. For example, the NT government's Community Engagement Division conducts 'Women's Forums' to 'provide women with an opportunity to discuss issues relevant to them and their communities'. Thirteen Women's Forums were held across the Territory between 2003 and 2005, with over 600 women participating. After each forum, the Office of Women's Policy produces a newsletter addressing issues raised and these are sent to participants and local agencies as well as being made available electronically.[47] A second example is the Queensland government's partnering initiatives with Indigenous communities such as Community Action Plans, Community Justice Groups and 'Negotiation Tables' where government representatives and members from Indigenous communities 'jointly plan and take responsibility for community development and service delivery needs'.[48]

Young people are a significant audience for targeted government communication. This is important given research that has identified a declining use of traditional media among young people.[49] South Australia has a specific 'government youth portal' (<www.youth.sa.gov.au>), youth advisory committees and a youth parliament. The Queensland government has an online site called GENERATE specifically for 15–25-year-olds (<www.generate.qld.gov.au>) which averaged just over 9000 users a month in 2004,[50] and the NSW government has a website called 'The Classroom' which includes information on government and communities.[51] There are also various government advertising campaigns targeted at young people including those relating to drugs and alcohol.

ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT LEADERS

As Prime Minister, John Howard said that two of the most important things he had learned in politics were 'the importance of carrying on a conversation with the Australian public [and] the importance of perpetual contact with the Australian public'.[52] Yet a lack of interactivity has been a major criticism of Australian politics in recent times. This becomes most remarked on during elections. For example, the 1996 federal election was described as one where the political leaders had 'little direct contact with "ordinary" voters'.[53] Modern politics in general has been criticised for consisting of 'a few select picture opportunities, a few select media interviews . . . [We have] less community political debate . . . Less stick, less opportunity to thrash out issues face to face with our elected representatives'.[54] As such statements demonstrate, the extent to which government leaders are accessible in person (as opposed to only via the media, focus groups, polls and other less direct methods), is still held to be a key measure of accessibility.

Examining Howard's daily schedule as Prime Minister, which is shown on the PM's website, reveals that it is heavily dominated by media

Table 14.1 Prime Minister John Howard's speeches, 2004

Event/organisation	Number
Community event	29
Announcement	18
Business	11
Liberal/National party event	11
Press conference	6
Opening or launch	6
Defence force or troops visit	5
Government organisation	5
Embassy, foreign policy group or visiting dignitary	4
National public ceremony	4
Thinktank	2
School	2
Multicultural organisation	1
Total	104

Source: Prime Minister's website, <www.pm.gov.au>, accessed 15 November 2005.

appearances, yet he also attends a number of community events, openings and meetings and, over two years from 2003 to 2004, gave 222 separate speeches as Prime Minister. Of the 104 speeches Howard gave in 2004, Table 14.1 indicates the types of event and audiences he spoke to.

Howard rarely speaks at very large public meetings such as the rallies and lunchtime meetings that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, the community events Howard attended in 2004 were much smaller events mostly listed as 'community morning teas' at places such as civic centres from Joondalup to Townsville. Some of the organisations he visited included church groups, RSLs, the Australian Women's National League, Arthritis Australia, retirement villages, surf lifesaving clubs and sporting organisations. The announcements were mainly policy announcements or announcements about funding for the particular organisation he was visiting. But Howard also spoke at national public ceremonies such as Remembrance Day, the Australia Day flag-raising ceremony and the Australian of the Year Awards. While Howard's speeches reflect certain priorities and often have small, even quite exclusive, audiences, the Prime Minister does make an attempt to speak in person at events across the country and averages a speech every three or four days, despite the demands of modern office.

In addition to his speeches, media interviews and press conferences, Howard also makes many appearances on talkback radio.[55] Talkback has become a very popular method for political leaders in Australia, who see it as a modern substitute for direct contact because it allows them to speak directly and uneditorialised with members of the public – at least, those select few who call in and manage to get through the filtering processes at talkback radio stations.[56] Of course, the advantage is that this communication occurs in a format in which thousands of others will hear the conversation, and thus provides important publicity. The Chief Minister of the ACT holds a regular 'Chief Minister's Talkback' segment on the local ABC radio station and every second Friday takes 'calls on air from members of the Canberra community keen to raise issues of concern'.[57] Aside from John Howard and Jon Stanhope, other government leaders such as Peter Beattie, Steve Bracks, Morris Iemma (and Bob Carr before him) have also made significant use of the medium of talkback.

There is much discussion about the merits and shortcomings of talkback and whether it is an interactive, democratic medium or a cynical, stage-managed and manipulated one.[58] It is certainly a communication tool which government leaders in Australia are particularly drawn to. While it has been criticised on many grounds, such as being a poor substitute for real contact with citizens, a method that only allows a select group to speak, and a 'soft' option because it sidesteps journalists asking difficult questions, former Labor speechwriter Stephen Mills has pointed out that talkback callers'

> questions can range across the whole spectrum of policy, and questioners can be rude, ill-informed or stooges of the rival candidate [and] the politician has to speak to them all with politeness and accuracy without apparent hesitation or sidestepping, and in the knowledge that everything said will be transcribed and pored over by the journalists and the opposition party for the vaguest hint of error or inconsistency.[59]

CONSULTATION

While talkback radio allows some citizens to talk directly, if briefly, to government leaders, there are more comprehensive consultation processes which governments use to actively seek out citizen feedback including public meetings and workshops (see Textbox 14.6). In terms of citizen engagement, consultation is an important step up from passive information-sharing.

Textbox 14.6 Common methods governments use for consultation

- unsolicited feedback
- public meetings
- public hearings
- forums
- workshops, seminars, conferences
- citizen advisory councils, boards and committees
- citizen panels
- Community Cabinets
- representations to MPs, Ministers and public service staff
- public surveys
- public opinion polls
- questionnaires
- focus groups
- online interaction
- delegations to parliament
- regional parliaments
- petitions
- parliamentary committees
- negotiation tables
- partnerships including public-private partnerships.

Meredith Edwards argued in 2002 that 'Over the last five years in Australia there has been more involvement of external players, including citizens, in the policy process' (2002: 56) and nominated the federal government's Task Force on Youth Homelessness as an example. Local governments are also making use of consultative methods such as citizen and community panels.[60] For example, Wyndham City Council created a 'Household Panel' which consists of over four hundred Wyndham households surveyed each month who provide responses on topics from substance abuse to shopping patterns and council services.[61] Other councils also use panels but prefer random selection of participants rather than self-selection (which can pose particular issues).[62]

However, it is the Queensland government which appears to have most consistently initiated new strategies for consultative communication. Queensland established the Queensland Government Community Engagement Division in 2001 to 'ensure Queenslanders are heard'.[63]

This was 'the first central agency unit of its kind in the Australian public sector'.[64] The Division then created a 'Directions Statement' and 'Community Engagement Improvement Strategy' for government agencies as well as e-democracy initiatives such as Queensland Regulations: Have Your Say (<www.qld.gov.au>); e-petitions online through the Queensland Parliament website (which have attracted over 10 000 electronic signatures);[65] and ConsultQld 'which invites Queenslanders to comment online about key issues being considered by the government'[66] (see Chapter 11).

Other governments have since adopted some of Queensland's consultation methods. The NT government created its own Community Engagement Division in the Department of the Chief Minister in February 2004 which, it says, is designed to provide 'a whole of government approach to policy priorities and community engagement in relation to young people, women, seniors, migrants and people of ethnic origins'.[67] The Northern Territory also has a Community Engagement Framework which describes how the community can engage with government and 'how Government departments are expected to actively include community participation in their work', and a Community Connections Program which forms partnerships between the community, government and business and has initiated projects on substance abuse, crime and safety, and education, employment and training.[68]

There are a range of newer consultation methods now in use (see Textbox 14.7). Sometimes methods used overseas are adapted to suit Australian circumstances and sometimes several methods are combined. In 2001, for example, during an independent legislative review commissioned by the Minister for the Environment in New South Wales, randomly selected citizens participated in both a televote and a citizens' jury on container deposit legislation, and contributed to the final recommendations of the review.[69]

Aside from the executive arm of government, public sector agencies such as government departments, agencies and local councils also play a key role in the consultative processes. As well as non-government organisations (see Chapter 15), business is increasingly being sought for its involvement through mechanisms such as public-private partnerships which aim for collaboration between public bodies and private companies.[70] The Victorian Government's Neighbourhood Renewal program, for example, involved state and local governments, community groups, local residents, and businesses trying to address the causes of poverty and disadvantage.[71]

Textbox 14.7 Newer consultation and deliberation methods

Citizen juries
A way of 'obtaining detailed, considered views from members of the public, who arbitrate between alternatives'. Numbers vary but often between sixteen and twenty-four citizens constitute a jury who 'hear evidence from a range of "expert witnesses" and from this informed viewpoint, draw conclusions, which they recommend to the public body'.[72] Participants hear from the experts who give presentations and can also challenge them and ask questions. This can also involve background briefings before the jury begins. Juries may last anywhere from one to up to five days.

Household panels
More common in Europe. Aside from the topic, these vary in the selection of participants (random or targeted), their focus (quantitative versus qualitative data), or duration (they can last for a day or, in some cases, for years).

Deliberative surveys
A random sample of hundreds of participants complete a questionnaire and then deliberate on the issues for one to four days. After listening to experts and deliberating among themselves, the participants complete a second survey. An independent researcher draws up a final report after analysing the data.

21st-century town meetings
These meetings use networked computers to link citizens in a format that was used in the USA after September 11 to plan for the future of the Ground Zero site in New York. Small groups participate in facilitated deliberation while networked computers broadcast the key themes to the entire room on large screens. In the USA, individualised keypads are used by participants to select priorities based on the themes shown on screen.

Televotes
This involves a two-stage phone interview. Participants are surveyed over the phone on their existing knowledge of an issue, then they are sent relevant information approved by all stakeholders, and finally they are surveyed again after they have had time to deliberate and even discuss the issue with family and friends.

Note: There is some fluidity in the naming of these methods.

Source: Emma Williams, 'Making international best practice work in Australian communities: Visioning, community panels and measuring progress'; Janette Hartz-Karp, 'Deliberation as a key to community engagement', Americaspeaks, <www.americaspeaks.org>; Lyn Carson (ed.), *Consult Your Community Handbook: A Guide to Using Citizens' Juries* (Sydney: prepared for Planning NSW, Department of Infrastructure, Planning, and Natural Resources, 2003); Lyn Carson, Stuart White, Carolyn Hendriks and Jane Palmer, 2002, 'Community consultation in environmental policy making', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs* 3(1).

As governments look to the private and community sectors to participate in such projects, and to help design and deliver services that were once the exclusive domain of government, it is not surprising that such agencies may, in turn, begin seeking greater involvement in policy and decision-making. As Meredith Edwards has pointed out, 'governments cannot remain as firmly in control of the policy decision-making process as they have in the past and at the same time continue to move toward a more facilitative or enabling role' (original emphasis).[73]

COMMUNITY CABINETS

The Queensland government was the first in Australia, in 1998, to create a 'Community Cabinet' which sees ministers and the Premier visit communities and hold informal meetings with citizens.[74] Since then, over ninety Community Cabinet meetings have been held in various locations across Queensland, attended by over 30 000 people.[75]

Glyn Davis has described how the Community Cabinets work. Government ministers, their advisers and the director-general of each government agency all travel to a particular community in Queensland. The Premier and ministers take questions from the floor for the first hour before moving to their own tables where they meet 'with any community person or group wishing to talk . . . [There are] no suits, special meeting rooms or closed doors . . . This is a cup of tea and casual clothing, in a public space.' The last hour of the day sees formal deputations from groups who have responded to newspaper advertisements placed several weeks before and been invited to meet with ministers.[76]

Many other governments have since taken up this idea and format. In 1999, the Victorian government followed with its own program of Community Cabinet and 'Ministerial Community Consultation' meetings which have now met in over fifty-six municipalities and also involve ministers and senior public servants. The ACT government also holds

regular Community Cabinet meetings in Canberra's town centres and the Tasmanian government holds a number of Community Forums involving Cabinet ministers each year.[77] The SA government says that the 'hallmark' of its Community Cabinet program 'is the time spent listening to the community, through an open forum process [which] allows for any member of the community to ask a question of the Premier, Minister or Chief Executives'.[78]

In 2005, the NSW government announced that senior public servants would begin taking part in its Community Cabinet meetings and the program would be expanded to 'include suburban Sydney to give more people access to the top decision-makers in government'. Premier Iemma said 'he wanted to address a "gap" between the government and NSW voters and "I want the public service to face the public"'.[79]

The Northern Territory also has Community Cabinets. To date, forty meetings have been held around the territory, 'from small bush communities to regional centres' including Wadeye, Kalkaringi, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs where the meetings attempt to bridge vast geographical distances. The Chief Minister, Clare Martin, has said: 'We introduced these Community Cabinets to make sure Ministers had direct contact with people, and did not lose touch with their concerns . . . We have stayed overnight in swags, private homes, and motels. And we have met some of the great characters of the Territory.'[80] Afterwards, a newsletter is sent directly to participants and local agencies and is also made available electronically.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

The consultative element of Community Cabinets is clearly important and puts governments one step closer to the highest level of communication on the OECD model, which sees active participation and a more ongoing, coordinated relationship in which citizens and communities actively engage in the policy-making process. While there are still few examples in Australia which could be said to meet this higher standard, some government communication initiatives involve quite comprehensive attempts to create an interactive process which allows opportunity for citizen feedback as well as input into planning and some longer-term participation. The most prominent example of this is the WA government's *Dialogue with the City*, which was designed to gauge citizens' responses on the future of Perth in the context of major economic growth, population increases and growing urban sprawl with accompanying impacts

Textbox 14.8 The Western Australian Government's 'Dialogue with the City' project

'Dialogue with the City' included:

- an extensive survey to gauge community values;
- a TV 'hypothetical' program about potential futures for Perth;
- an interactive Web site to enable browsers to access information, input ideas and exchange views;
- regular feature stories on the critical issues published in the daily press;
- an information campaign using the local press and radio to educate and encourage debate about key issues;
- a schools art and essay competition to elicit the views of young people;
- listening and learning sessions with special interest groups including youth, indigenous people and those from non English speaking backgrounds.
- The process culminated in a very large interactive forum of 1100 participants.
- The deliberation continued over the following year with over 100 participants involved in creating the planning strategy.
- The planning strategy that has emerged has been accepted in principle by the WA Planning Commission and State Cabinet, has been open for public submissions and will now be re-written yet again to take account of the feedback received.

Source: The Hon. Alannah MacTiernan MLA, 'Dialogue with the City' (Perth: Department of Premier and Cabinet, 19 November 2004). Reproduced with permission of the Hon. Alannah MacTiernan MLA.

on transport, housing and employment as well as sustainability and the environment. *Dialogue with the City* aimed to involve Perth's citizens in 'jointly plan[ning] to make Perth the world's most liveable city by 2030' (Textbox 14.8).[81]

The *Dialogue with the City* forum was described as 'the largest deliberative forum ever held in the southern hemisphere and . . . a case study in deliberative democracy'. It involved a '21st Century Town Meeting' using networked computers linking participants as well as a Consensus Forum, community survey, e-democracy elements, 'multi media awareness raising and education' and 'targeted inclusion of groups seldom included'.[82]

The WA government also held four 'Consensus Forums' to try to resolve community concern about long vehicles and road trains using metropolitan routes in the face of industry interests in maintaining the use of such roads. At the forums people with divergent views were seated next to each other, facilitating small-group discussions and 'empathetic listening' to conflicting points of view as well as a process that sought to develop consensus by having participants deliberate over different options.[83] Western Australia has also been prominent in using citizen juries, deliberative surveys and a process called multi-criteria analysis or MCA. What makes these WA initiatives worth considering as active participation rather than merely consultation is that these processes had a real influence as the minister involved linked their outcomes directly to decision-making by the government.[84]

Lyn Carson and Phillip Hart have identified at least thirty-four other projects which have been used in Australia between 1993 and 2005 which they call 'deliberative, inclusive processes'. These include citizens' juries and deliberative forums (many have occurred in Western Australia which, along with Queensland, has been at the forefront of innovation in this area). Carson and Hart conclude, however, that, compared to international practice, Australia 'is not a leader [and] . . . has lagged behind' countries such as Denmark, Germany, the UK and the USA.[85]

CONCLUSION

Australian governments have developed new initiatives which focus on enabling access to government information and have also shown growing interest in methods that use consultation. It is the 'active participation' or 'cooperative decision-making' phase that poses the biggest challenge. The OECD has described active participation as a 'new frontier' for governments[86] and the experience of Australian governments is similar to that of other comparable countries. The OECD has summarised this by stating that 'the scope, quantity and quality of government information provided to the public [in OECD countries] has increased greatly over the past decade', consultation 'and opportunities for citizens to provide feedback on policy proposals is also on the rise, but at a slower rate', while 'active participation and efforts to engage citizens in policy-making on a partnership basis are rare'.[87]

The key initiatives discussed in this chapter involve different actors, have different aims and use different media and communication tools, but all operate within a complex environment amid the realities of governing and the policy-making process. While many projects increasingly operate on

many levels of communication, few could claim to have achieved active participation. Several of the newer strategies that have been developed in Australia emphasise making government leaders more visible (including methods such as Community Cabinets, regional parliaments and talkback radio) and heightening the leader's public profile. Whether publicity or genuine engagement is the driving motive behind these methods remains to be seen.

There are growing signs of more consultative processes but, as Edwards points out, such initiatives often bring to light important questions about the extent to which these relationships actually involve 'sharing of policy-making power'.[88] Other authors have asked whether initiatives which seem to suggest greater citizen involvement are instead largely the outcome of 'state-directed outsourcing and state-controlled devolution',[89] or have warned about the real communicative value of programs which are top-down, too bureaucratic or only seek public participation 'after the agenda is set and decisions are made'.[90] Some of the initiatives discussed in this chapter show governments moving towards more consultation, but they also highlight some of the challenges.

We should not always assume, for example, that governments necessarily want greater participation or improved communication processes when such attempts may be costly, either economically and/or politically. Ciaran O'Faircheallaigh points out that on some issues, such as engaging with Aboriginal communities on mineral development on their traditional lands, governments will not always be 'willing to engage or to do so in a way that facilitiates public participation'.[91]

Drawing on the experience of Western Australia, Hartz-Karp notes that despite its undoubted value there were disincentives and challenges in holding 'Dialogue with the City'. There was a local media that was 'caustic about "too much democracy"', lobby groups that complained about random samples of citizens rather than those 'who care', and government agencies that 'remained more comfortable with community consultation over which they have greater control'.[92]

In evaluating the Queensland government's citizen engagement strategies, Reddel and Woolcock found that individual programs had 'merit' but that their 'long-term impact' was still 'uncertain'.[93] Davis found from evaluations of Queensland's Community Cabinet meetings that those who attended were 'more likely than the community norm to have completed high school and post-school education . . . more likely to be members of clubs and groups . . . likely to meet with others to discuss community and political matters, and to read about political matters several times a week'.

In other words, they 'already have social capital, build networks and know how to lobby ministers and officials'.[94]

However, evaluations have also highlighted a number of positive factors. The Community Cabinets helped turn protest into dialogue;[95] a 1999 survey found that participants who attended had a high level of satisfaction and felt they had been '"heard and listened to" even if they did not necessarily achieve their desired outcome.'[96] While Community Cabinets have been the major consultative initiative taken up with enthusiasm by the states and territories, no individual program alone will revolutionise government communication in Australia. As Davis argues, governments 'need to find a whole menu of participation opportunities' and, in doing so, may find that the use of more consultative approaches encourages more 'informed critics, tough negotiators, realistic and articulate demands'.[97] Whether governments view this as a potentially risky development or as a part of a healthy and vibrant democratic relationship with citizens, is a significant factor in the extent to which they will experiment with such methods.

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