

SouthFest Vox Pop – what people told us about how our representatives could do a better job.

CAPaD set up a stall at SouthFest, a community festival held in Tuggeranong Town Centre, on 24 November. We asked passers-by to stop and give us one idea about how elected representatives could do a better job of engaging with us as their constituents. We had lots of conversations during the day, and 72 people put their thoughts down on sticky notes and posted them on our whiteboard. A number of recurring themes emerged across these notes and conversations, which are summarised below.

A call for more direct, more diverse and more regular channels of communication with constituents

The message came through loud and clear that people want their elected representatives to come to them and to seek out their views i.e. to be *pro-active* in the way they fulfil their responsibility to represent their constituents. There were lots of positive suggestions about just how this could be achieved. Importantly, no single approach alone stood out, given the diversity of ages, life stages and commitments and communication preferences across the community.

More community level engagement by elected representatives

People want to see much more of their elected representatives in the community, at local venues and in public spaces, to talk to ordinary people and hear their concerns. There were several suggestions about how and where this could happen:

- small local meetings to discuss community issues
- meet-ups in local shopping centres
- talkback Q and A sessions on local radio
- town hall meetings organised by community groups
- door-knocking.

Some of this is already happening, but only patchily. It needs to become a core function of an elected representative to get out into the community and speak to people who would not otherwise be likely to meet or seek out their local member.

More avenues for people to pass their views to elected representatives

Face-to-face engagement in local communities was only one of several ways suggested to improve communication between elected representatives and constituents. Other suggestions included:

- surveys (including on-line, to reach out to the younger demographic) which genuinely explore people's views (not push-polling), and publication of results
- a transparent, non-partisan clearing-house for community issues
- open policy forums – on-line or face to face – to hear people's views and answer questions
- on-line provisions to comment against policy plans or announcements
- consultations with constituents in advance of major policy changes or major budgetary decisions
- youth parliaments to educate and involve young people.

Frustration with the failure to listen and default to “spin”

The widespread and sometimes strongly voiced frustration with the failure of elected representatives to listen to their constituents and to provide clear, honest responses suggested a deeper loss of trust in the political class. People were cynical about the barrage of spin and obfuscation or recourse to platitudes that has become something of a default in the political discourse, and the deliberate recrafting of the facts to manipulate public opinion. They want to be treated respectfully i.e. listened to with sincerity and responded to openly and honestly.

Frustration with politics over policy and the public interest

People saw elected representatives as a group as more preoccupied with maintaining or achieving power and with preserving their jobs than with addressing the concerns of the electorate and taking decisions in the public interest. Comments reflected disenchantment with the absorption in hyper-partisanship and political gameplaying at the expense of the basic business of governing, and the privileging of special interests over the public interest. On the other side of the ledger, there was a yearning for a return to idealism in politics, a commitment to the public good, bipartisanship around sound policies and integrity over expediency.

Call for more diverse candidate selection and improved definition of representatives' role

A few comments honed in on the profile of elected representatives and the definition of their role. It was suggested that the functions of elected representatives should be defined, and that they should be required to meet and uphold a set of core standards – as is required in many other professions. There was a sense that elected representatives are narrowly drawn from the cohort of lawyers and party operatives and that much greater diversification is needed to reflect the breadth of backgrounds and experience in the community.