

Awakening Democracy by Robust Representation

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How can we elect political representatives who are committed to the interests of the whole community, and are not swayed by vested interests?

The Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy (The Alliance), thinks the key is to redefine what good representation is like in a healthy democracy. The Alliance thinks citizens have the power to help rebuild trust in our democracy by building stronger, ongoing, dynamic relationships between citizens and representatives; relationships based on new standards, developed by citizens, and to which they hold those they elect to account. This would create a model of governance that is “government with the people” rather than one based on the idea “we have a mandate so leave it to us.”

Our focus has been on the ACT Assembly, because our intent is to bring about change in our jurisdiction, but we sense that many of the lessons learnt may be broadly applicable to our Federal Government and to other State and Territory Legislatures.

How can we bring about this change? The difficulties that independents and small parties face in winning seats and the majoritarian character of government are factors contributing to the status quo. But that doesn't mean we can't shift it. What we as citizens can do, is develop a clear set of expectations for our representatives, and then vote for those candidates who take representation seriously – who have undertaken to work in the public interest, to listen carefully to constituents and to explore ways to govern “with the people”.

The Alliance has reached these conclusions by asking Canberrans what attributes they seek in their elected representatives, and also from interviewing Members of the ACT Legislative Assembly about how they do their jobs. Some interesting themes have emerged.

The extended interviews with 14 of the current 25 ACT MLA's ([see report on our website](#)) revealed something of the elements and workload of an MLA and the various ways in which they not only seek to understand the needs and concerns of their constituents, but also some of their difficulties in addressing some of these issues. MLAs understood representation as balancing the wants of those who elected them with the overall needs of their electorate and the ACT more broadly, while being consistent with their party's platform. They identified the essence of their job as representatives is to listen to as many of their constituents as possible and to other groups.

From their responses, we distilled four aspects of their role: social researcher, caseworker, advocate and policy maker. Their focus was generally on addressing the immediate needs that constituents raised with them, which did not necessarily translate into formulating good public policy to create systemic change to resolve the bigger issues that were causing constituents' problems. Systemic change was identified as difficult.

There is no formal job description for MLAs or set of written expectations about the role, apart from a Code of Conduct. Each MLA manages the role as best they see fit. They felt that being accountable “at the ballot box” is a sufficient measure of their performance. MLAs make considerable efforts to reach out to the community and be accessible. These were fairly traditional methods such as being in shopping centres, door knocking, newsletters and responding to correspondence.

Regarding the responsibilities of constituents in a representative democracy, the MLAs underlined the importance of the community being reasonably well-informed about the operation of the political system and their capacity to hold their representatives to account. The clear message is that active citizenship is vital to a strong representative democracy and should be facilitated.

Citizens themselves have told us that they want representatives to listen to them, actually recognise and respect their concerns, and to be open and honest in how they respond. There was a sense that if representatives truly listened, they would understand the needs of ordinary people and deliver on those. They wanted more presence at the community level, at local venues and in public spaces, to meet people and hear

their issues. Consistently they wanted elected representatives to focus on the public interest and govern for all people.

Arising from these experiences, the Alliance Committee has developed a “Statement of Expectations” for our parliamentary representatives.

We consider that our representatives should be:

- Knowledgeable about good governance, policy making and the roles delegated to them.
- Transparent about the information they use for decision making and willing to state when they are giving us facts or their opinions.
- Supporting and improving meaningful ways for citizens to engage in deliberative policy making.
- Ensuring their own party sets out its platform so that the expected outcomes and strategies are clear and the impacts can be monitored – this is fundamental for accountability
- Explaining how they intend to vote on each piece of legislation, and why
- Assisting the community to monitor the outcomes of policy – which is also fundamental for accountability
- Being open to review of their performance by their constituents
- Acting with integrity, aware of the influence of vested interests and committed to improving and maintaining systems of transparency and accountability
- Open and honest about their own beliefs about democracy and the role of government and willing to have these contested

The Alliance is also working with people across the ACT to develop a statement of expectations for us, the people who representatives work for. And we consider that we, their constituents, should take active steps to:

- Understand how policies and institutions impact on their lives, and those of others. (i.e. be policy and system literate)
- Understand our different needs as individuals, family and community members, workers (however employed) and shareholders
- Demand that policies be set out to show the links between the outcomes sought, the strategies used and the expected impact, so those can be assessed and monitored.
- Work with others to set the standards for the way our representatives do their jobs.
- Demand the information they need to cast an informed vote and use that information at election time. i.e. be informed about the attributes and values of candidates standing for election.
- Be informed about our democratic institutions and be prepared to defend those.
- Be prepared to be part of a system to scrutinise government action broadly and the actions of their representative in particular (perhaps in turn).

As it did in 2016, in 2020 The Alliance will invite all candidates standing for the ACT Assembly to provide a statement that sets out what skills and experience they bring to the job of MLA, and how they are going to work with us, the citizens, to “genuinely represent us” in policy development and bring about the changes needed to strengthen our democracy. The form that we will offer to candidates this year will shortly be on our website. In the 2016 election, 62 of the 141 candidates who stood, lodged a candidate statement with the Alliance on its website. Of those who lodged a statement, 23% were elected compared with 13% of those who didn’t. Fourteen of the 25 elected members submitted a statement.

Our parliamentary members are there to represent us. We have delegated governing to them, but we need to set standards so we can assess their performance. We also need to demand a meaningful role for citizens in agenda setting, policy making and monitoring. We need to be informed voters who use our power at the ballot box to elect candidates who are ready to adhere to our expectations about how they will do their jobs, and to govern “with” rather than take power over us.

The authors are Committee members of the Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy (www.canberra-alliance.org.au) and members of its Action group on MLA Representation and Accountability.