

Statement of MLA and Citizen Expectations v5

We live in a representative democracy, where we elect our political representatives to take decisions on our behalf about the laws that govern us and the expenditure of public funds. Those in the majority also determine who forms the government. But who exactly do these elected representatives actually represent: the constituents who voted for them; their constituency as a whole; the wider polity; the political party that put them forward for election; the less well-recognised interests which backed their election; or their own best judgment? Political theorists have argued about this for centuries and there's no simple answer.

With cynicism about the operation of liberal democracies around the world at an all-time high, the system as a whole is under threat. To protect it, we need to start spelling out what we expect of our elected representatives and playing an active role in ensuring that they live up to these expectations. To give in to cynicism is to abandon any chance of ensuring our democracy works for us. It is the responsibility of everyone within the system – representative and represented alike – to make the system work in the interests of the people as a whole, irrespective of their wealth or influence.

The Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy is calling for representatives who will, with integrity and transparency, truly represent the interests of the community they are elected to serve. We expect representatives to seek to understand and act in the interests of, and to explain and justify their decision to, their electors.

This Statement outlines our considered opinion of what the roles and responsibilities of the MLAs and of constituents are. The two sets of expectations form the basis for an effective working relationship between representatives and the community they represent.

We consider that our representatives should:

1. Be knowledgeable about good governance, policy making and the roles conferred on them.
2. Be transparent about the considerations on which their decisions are based and willing to state when they are giving us facts or their opinions.
3. Support meaningful ways for community members to engage in deliberative policy making.
4. Commit to 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.
5. Explain how they intend to vote on each piece of legislation, and why.
6. Assist the community to monitor the outcomes of policy – which is also fundamental for accountability.
7. Be open to review of their performance by their constituents.
8. Act with integrity, aware of the influence of vested interests and commit to improving and maintaining systems of transparency and accountability.
9. Be open and honest about their own beliefs about democracy and the role of government, and be willing to have these contested.

We consider that as active and engaged citizens, we should:

1. Understand how policies and institutions impact on our lives, and those of others. (ie be policy and system literate).
2. Demand that policies be set out to show the proposed outcomes, the implementation strategies, the expected impacts and measurement strategies, so those can be assessed and monitored.
3. Work with others to set the standards for the way our representatives do their jobs.

4. Expect candidates standing for election to provide detailed information about their background, values and policy positions, and use that information to cast an informed vote.
5. Be informed about our democratic institutions and be prepared to promote and defend their role in protecting a healthy democracy.
6. Be prepared to be part of a system to scrutinise government action broadly and the actions of our representatives in particular.

The Canberra Alliance want to work with people across the ACT to further develop the content of both sets of expectations.