CAPaD - Awakening Democracy
The Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy

CAPaD Democracy in Action!
Conversation One on 12 May 2024: Report

Key points

- With 2024 being an election year in the ACT, citizens are being asked to consider what kinds of representatives they want to see in local government, and how ACT MLAs can more closely involve the community in decision-making and policy.

- Through an initial series of conversations facilitated by the Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy (CAPaD), ACT citizens have identified important qualities they would like to see in their local representatives such as greater integrity and accountability.

- Citizens participating in the conversation also discussed potential key indicators that show representatives are doing a good job; such as regular community consultations and policies aligning closely with real community needs.

- Next steps include a second conversation for the ACT community to reflect on these findings, before CAPaD engages directly with ACT 2024 candidates about these issues.

Background and introduction

This year the Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy wants people to think about the role of a representative and the qualities they want in their representatives. We are not suggesting that our current representatives are in any way failing. However, given the challenges facing us, we need good representatives who are going to provide good government. For a healthy democracy, voters need to be actively choosing representatives beyond what parties and people promise, looking at the qualities of those representatives and particularly how those representatives are going to facilitate community engagement in policy and legislative decision making.

We plan a follow up conversation to develop a set of criteria for the voters to apply to the candidates who are standing in this year's ACT election. This document reports the outputs from the Democracy in Action! Conversation 1. The second conversation is being held on June 30th.

Two other conversations have been held in Canberra in the past few months, and for completeness of community views we have attached relevant sections from those reports to this report. They are a listening exercise by Active Democracy Bean and a kitchen table conversation held in Yarralumla. A high alignment between these separate sets of community views is noted.

Where relevant, additional points from CAPaD's experience have been added.

The first section is the summary of the outputs from all the tables, both key themes from the collective statements, a summary of the points made and then some key highlights from those. The second section reports the full transcripts from each table.

We asked three questions:
1. What is a representative?
2. What qualities are we seeking in our MLAs?
3. How can we know our MLAs are working for the community?

Summary of the outputs

What is a representative?

Key themes (from Collective Statements)
- *Represents the needs/concerns of constituents*
- *Someone who acts in good faith, in accordance with due consideration and good judgement, free from undue influence such as financial vested interest*
- *A 'voice and ear of the group or community '*

Summary:

- A democratically elected member of the Legislative Assembly who can represent the interests, needs and concerns of the wider community in good faith during processes of policymaking
- A person who forms, implements, administers and advocates for government policy and considers how it tracks through time
- The representative may alternate between being a political delegate, advocate and trustee of the community, depending on which role is needed at any given time

Key highlights: elected, take concerns and needs of their community into policymaking; are involved in developing policy, and establishes a range of roles: delegate, advocate and trustee.

Additional points: not all representatives are in government; there are MLAs in opposition. MLAs' role also involves debating and voting on legislation, and Committee work. Their representative role is to the community not individuals.

What qualities are we seeking in our MLAs?

Key themes (from Collective Statements)
- *Genuine interest in community and people*
- *Courage*
- *Facilitator of community participation*
- *Intelligent, clear-thinking*
- *'A rare beast – 'honest, transparent, independent, available, intellectually competent*
- *Experienced in leadership*

Summary:

- Integrity, honesty, transparency and accountability. This includes things like putting the community first, not being factionally aligned, being resistant to undue influence from vested interests, declaring any conflicts of interest, being transparent about funding sources and spending and supporting accountability processes and public scrutiny.
- Genuine respect and understanding for the members of their community, especially those in disadvantaged groups
- Genuinely consultative and a facilitator of community participation – someone who is an excellent listener, who regularly seeks input from the community, and who then provides feedback to them on issues discussed
- A strong moral compass and evident goodwill
- A strong leader who is courageous (someone who doesn't shy away from conflict) and is hardworking
- A strong and engaging communicator and negotiator with influence
- Intelligent and clear-thinking. This includes demonstrating knowledge of portfolios, sound judgment based on evidence, an ability to discern the true essence of issues and prioritise them accordingly, and an ability to understand and explain diversity of views.
- Collaborative and effective in policy development and implementation
- Someone who is open to new solutions and ways of thinking that can address faulty policy systems
- Flexibility and focus – being open to new information but also maintaining long term policy agenda
- A representative places the community need above ideology, party interests or other vested interests in their policy platform
- A representative stays in close contact with constituents and has an in-depth understanding of their community and the issues that affect them
- A representative is collaborative with the community and negotiates closely with them on policy issues, canvassing and promoting new ideas with them in relation to planned actions and legislation
- A representative discerns the majority view so they can provide consensus views within the Assembly, but is also aware of and acknowledges dissenting views
- A representative actively supports accountability in government
- The MLA is prepared to be challenged on their views and actions and open to reviewing their policy position (they can also reasonably defend their position if it differs to community view)

Key highlights: high levels of personal integrity and positive values set; supports integrity and accountability in 'government'; engaged with, listens to and reports back to their community;

balances competing interests AND puts community above personal and party interests; intelligent, open and flexible.

See also attached documents which confirm these opinions.

How can we know our MLAs are working for the community?

Key themes (from Collective Statements)
- ***They create and publish a highly visible scorecard on their progress and what they said they would achieve***
- ***The representative communicates regularly and clearly via easily accessible means***
- ***They are prepared to be challenged and to review their positions, openly and convincingly***
- ***Genuine consultation and degree of quality engagement with community***
- ***They hold deliberative forums and participatory community events***
- ***By sensing the changes in the community, good quality of life***
- ***The budget is balanced***

Summary:

- When there is ongoing and meaningful consultation with constituents to ensure the representative is aware of issues they need to raise in the Assembly or to other appropriate bodies, and the community is aware of and engaged in upcoming policy processes such as bills and legislation formation
- In-person interaction with constituents that may occur through town halls, citizen assemblies, deliberative forums and community events
- Responding to constituent correspondence meaningfully and consistently
- Ongoing communication through emails, newsletters, social media, surveys etc.
- The community may also be engaged as volunteers if they choose
- When the MLA supports civil society in a variety of ways, ensuring the general community can obtain verbal information/advice to enable them to hold the representative to account
- When the MLA is genuinely responsive to community needs (considering root cause and effect), advocating strongly for them in the Assembly, and reporting back on outcomes and progress
- Adherence (or not) to expert opinion and evidence (e.g. cost benefit analyses)
- When there is full transparency of the MLA's voting records and speeches in the Assembly (e.g. accessible voting scorecards, policy dashboards and Hansard extracts), and this voting history and advocacy is aligned with community consensus, community need and agreed policy deliverables
- Demonstrating progress or achievement in multiple policy domains
- Through unbiased media reports on the MLA's work, as well as interactive media, infographics and community dashboards that demonstrate the MLA's effectiveness
- Through measuring things like speeches (quantity, content, thematic qualitative analysis of how speech relates to community input and ideas received through deliberative forums)
- Through measuring the number of deliberative and input-seeking forums
- When the MLA can provide reasons, clear information, and data for their assembly voting results and other activities in their role
- When the MLA has demonstrated integrity by standing up to those with vested interests
- The MLA divulges any conflicts of interest they may have or other impediments to honesty

- They have limits to personal wealth gathering and don't immediately attain jobs related to portfolios after leaving their political roles
- When the budget is balanced
- When there is strong service provision, visible improved quality of life and positive improvements in the community
- Harmony and inclusivity in the community – lack of serious disagreement between community with policies and nobody feels overlooked

Key highlights: These can be arranged in three domains in ascending level of engagement:

They tell us
Emails, newsletters, social media;

We monitor them and this information is shared into the community
Voting history and advocacy is aligned with community consensus, community need and agreed policy deliverables; adherence (or not) to expert opinion and evidence; speeches (quantity, content, thematic qualitative analysis of how speech relates to community input; media reports on the MLA's work; interactive media, infographics and community dashboards; behaviour matches promised standards;

We are involved personally and, more importantly, as a community
Interpersonal interactions; surveys; consultations with community; volunteering with/for MLAs; measuring the number of deliberative and input-seeking forums; interactive report back to community forums; strong service provision, visible improved quality of life and positive improvements;

Full responses collected from the tables:

What is a representative?

- *Represents the voters, not themselves, their ideology, their party or other vested interests*
- *Someone who acts in good faith, in accordance with due consideration and good judgement, free from undue influence such as financial vested interest*
- *Someone democratically elected by citizens to represent and strongly defend their interests*
- *Someone who understands the people and their issues well and can speak for these people in their interests, not in the interests of the MLA themselves*
- *Someone who represents the electorate in good faith and ensures this is demonstrated clearly to citizens*
- *Different roles – advocate, trustee and delegate to parliament for community, and knows when to take which role*
- *Forms, implements, advocates and administers government policy and considers how it tracks through time*
- *Someone closely connected to the local community so they have an in-depth understanding of issues affecting them*
- *Someone who works to meet community needs through collaboration and negotiation*
- *Someone who truly represents the constituents in the assembly, provides consensus views at various fora*

- *Encourages community responses to planned actions and legislation*
- *They represent majority views but acknowledge differing views to the majority*
- *Promotes and canvasses new ideas*
- *Someone who places electorate as central to their ideas*
- *Someone who 'speaks and acts on my behalf'*
- *Someone in close communication with fellow citizens (actually talks to and listens to them)*
- *a 'voice and ear of the group or community'*
- *A point of contact for members of community, providing a platform to hear and understand their concerns*
- *Someone who is actively supporting accountability processes rather than being beholden to them*
- *Paid to understand community wants and how this interacts with their policy platform*
- *Represents the needs/concerns of constituents*

What qualities are we seeking in our MLAs?

- *Understanding and respect for the community and their opinion*
- *'A rare beast' – honest, transparent, independent, available, intellectually competent*
- *Integrity, honesty, transparency, accountable (e.g. is open about who is lobbying them and decision making processes)*
- *Good communicator*
- *Courage*
- *Influence and negotiation skills*
- *Genuine interest in community and people*
- *Open to changing faulty systems*
- *Hard working*
- *Puts the community before themselves or party agenda*
- *Sincerity – willing and able to commit time needed*
- *Sensitivity towards vulnerable community members / Represents disadvantaged groups*
- *Resistant to pressure from external influences (e.g. corporate interests)*
- *Willing to alter positions if it is in community's interest*
- *Not factionally aligned*
- *Doesn't accept bribes from influencers*
- *Declares funding sources and spending avenues (transparency)*
- *Someone who works for us*
- *Facilitator of community participation*
- *Moral compass, evident goodwill and demonstrating the effort to communicate this regardless of party policy*
- *Intelligent, clear-thinking*
- *Experienced in leadership*
- *Genuine knowledge of portfolios*
- *Understands the concepts of evidence and follows the facts, not opinions*
- *Open to questions/scrutiny by experts*
- *evidence-based decision making but still upholding values*
- *Consultative, good at meeting people*
- *Provides feedback to constituents on how government and parliament are addressing key community issues*
- *Able to explain diverse positions on contentious issues and what constitutes the public good*
- *Flexible yet focused on what is needed*
- *Capable policy administrator*
- *Good judgement*

- *Good listening skills, friendly and engaging*
- *Able to listen and distill the essence of what constituents' concerns are, then convey and support that to Assembly colleagues*
- *Someone who listens to community opinions and tries to further attainment of their needs by advocating for them in an independent way without being too influenced by party policies*
- *Balanced – reflecting the many diverse needs of the electorate*
- *Strong values*
- *Accepts differing points of view*
- *Recognises that conflict is inevitable but can also be productive*
- *Collaborative and effective in policy development and implementation*
- *Knows how to prioritise issues*
- *Reports back and explains when acting as a delegate and when a trustee, reports back on debates and discussions on policy and legislation*

How can we know our MLAs are working for the community?

- *Genuine consultation and degree of quality engagement with community*
- *Responsiveness to community needs, correspondence from community members*
- *Regular reports back to community through public meetings, letters, emails, social media, newsletters, handouts*
- *Regularly holds community meetings/town halls to maintain awareness of community issues, report on progress, flag upcoming parliamentary votes and allow for ongoing input*
- *When the MLA has done the work to listen to community views, represented them in the assembly and has reported back on the outcome*
- *The MLA explains where they have taken a different view to community*
- *Advocate for holding citizen assemblies on issues that are contentious*
- *They hold deliberative forums and participatory community events*
- *Reports and media on community events and deliberative forums*
- *They involve the community through seeking volunteers, surveys and feedback*
- *They create and publish a highly visible scorecard on their progress and what they said they would achieve*
- *They check their priority deliverables against what the community wants*
- *Their work is visible through political gadgets/ tech options/ hansard reports on voting and spending and these outputs are publicised freely*
- *The representative communicates regularly and clearly via easily accessible means*
- *Good assembly voting records – their voting should be aligned with community needs and requests*
- *By following up on assembly debates*
- *The budget is balanced*
- *By talking to other MLAs*
- *The representative can provide reasons, clear information, data for their assembly voting results*
- *They support civil society in a variety of ways, ensuring the general community can obtain verbal information/advice to enable them the representative to account*
- *The issues that community has raised are brought to light in assembly or to other appropriate bodies*
- *They address issues holistically, looking at root cause and effect*
- *They are prepared to be challenged and to review their positions, openly and convincingly*
- *They divulge any conflicts of interest they may have or other impediments to honesty*
- *They have limits to personal wealth gathering and don't immediately attain jobs related to portfolios after leaving their political roles*
- *Being inclusive*

- *Strong community services*
- *Harmony in the community – lack of serious disagreement between community with policies*
- *Through unbiased media reports on their work*
- *Interactive media, infographics and community dashboards that demonstrate their effectiveness*
- *Through measuring things like speeches (quantity, content, thematic qualitative analysis of how speech relates to community input and ideas received through deliberative forums)*
- *Measuring number of deliberative and input-seeking forums*
- *Feedback from parliament (e.g. speeches, committee reports and community events)*
- *When community members personally experience good outcomes*
- *Policy turnaround if original policies weren't popular*
- *Adherence (or not) to expert opinion and evidence (e.g. cost benefit analyses)*
- *Good community feedback, visible positive results in community*
- *Follow through on commitments while taking into account new information*
- *Prioritising issues according to urgency and need*
- *Demonstrating progress or achievement in multiple policy domains*
- *Has the backbone to stand up to unreasonable pressure from interest groups that are not aligned with public good*
- *By sensing the changes in the community, good quality of life*

Attachment 1 From the Voices of Bean listening report

WHAT MAKES FOR A REALLY GOOD REPRESENTATIVE?

Integrity included 'honesty', 'do what they say they will do', 'trustworthy', 'transparency', 'not beholden to donors' and 'ethical'.
'Vested interests on both sides of politics have been able to hijack democracy – reduces the scope for action. Important for the community to regain control.'
The second most important quality, **engages**, included 'listens to the electorate' and 'engages with the electorate'. Engages was the highest-ranking quality for survey respondents.
'Someone who listens, takes action and follows up with the constituent'
Local was the third category: people want a representative who is 'connected to the electorate' and 'local, from the community'.
'Someone who lives in the community they represent and who listens to the needs of their community and is their voice in the parliament.'
Principled, the fourth category, was dominated by the quality 'makes evidence-based decisions', but also included 'fairness, open-mindedness' and 'principled and stands their ground'.
'Not afraid to lose their seat (even though they probably wouldn't). Prepared to do what is best and not be dogmatic.'
Effective mostly represented 'positive change-maker' but also 'politically effective, impactful' and 'purpose-driven'. This was the quality most mentioned by KTC participants.
'Looking to the future not just the next election.' 'Fact based representation, rather than ideological posturing.'
Representative meant 'takes representative positions on issues' and was closely tied to the quality of representing the electorate in its breadth, and not just who voted for them, and representing the people not a party.
'We need more diversity in representation and more representation of lower end of the demographic spectrum.'
Independent was the seventh-highest rating quality, perhaps demonstrating that other things are more important to people, and independence may only be of significance if it is required for the other qualities to be expressed.
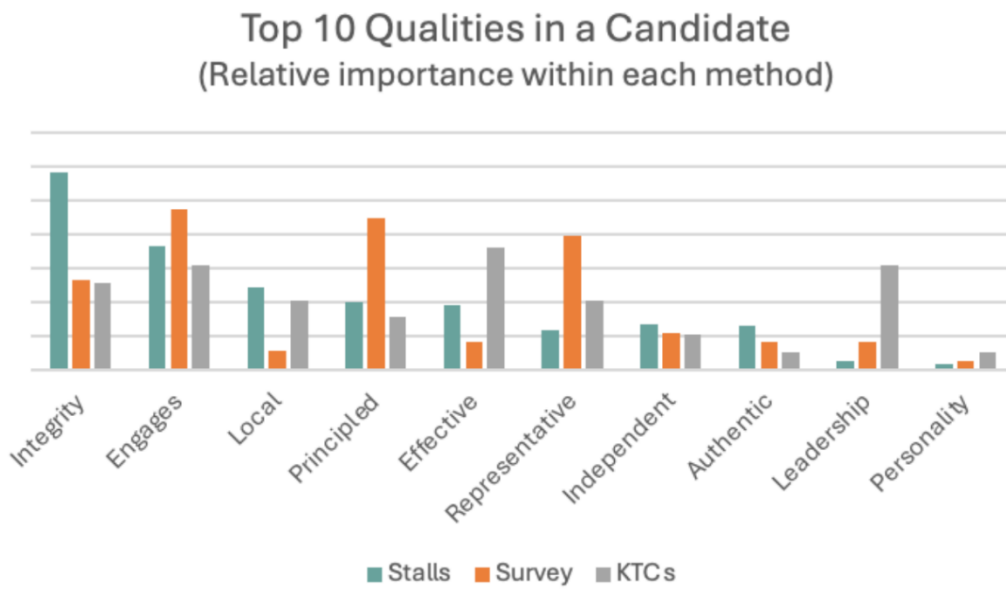Comments such as 'clone David Pocock' were not infrequent, indicating that the ability of Independent candidates to be effective is now recognised.
'Major parties lock their people in, admire Bridget Archer and the Independents – refreshing change.'
The category '**authentic**' was dominated by 'not a career politician'. 'They used to be decent people who want to do good things. Now they're just career politicians, its all just a game, working for the party.'
Leadership was prominent among the qualities nominated by KTC participants, and included 'new ideas', 'vision' and 'courage'. 'Someone who is interested in the power of ideas not the idea of power.' 'Naïve to expect a representative will advocate all views – need an informed, evidence-based formulation of policy and be able to convince people of it.'

Lastly, **personality** is used to represent qualities such as 'nice', 'kind', 'compassionate' and 'serving others'.

Top 10 Qualities in a Candidate
(Relative importance within each method)

Attachment 2 Yarralumla Kitchen Table Conversation 8 April 2024

Representative related highlights.

4. What do you think makes for a really good political representative? Why?

(✓ s signify number of times mentioned)

Honesty, transparency, integrity etc ✓ ✓ ✓

Real life experience, in it for people, real connection to the community, real interaction with community, have to be effective ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓

Equity and fairness, accountability ✓ ✓

Think about artificial intelligence - issue of control of power, and how to manage
Decency and respectability, law abiding ✓ ✓ ✓

Require at least 5-10 years of real life experience before going into politics or being staffer ✓ ✓

On the ground experience and list what types of experience In politics - avoid lowest common denominator - need communication, representation and to be culturally attuned ✓

One Participant's suggested list of Principles, Attitudes, Values, Possible job criteria for prospective candidates
Equity, fairness, equality (of access, intergenerational, $, etc)
Transparency
Accountability
Non-discriminatory
Environmentally sound
Technology-supervised/regulated
Non-ideological
Communitarian/humanist/secular
Role of government (not just a default one) (vs neo-liberalism)
Truth as foundational (eg political advertising)
Fiscal rectitude/no pork-barrelling/cronyism/benefits for the boys etc
Values common good over party's interests
Long-termism vs short-termism/pro the big picture
Capable
Competent
Law-abiding
Patient
Tactful/diplomatic
Ethical/moral
Respectful and respectable
Open/inclusive/tolerant/accepting
Communicates well (cut out the spin - level with the voters)

Honesty, integrity, truthfulness
Respect, decency, civility, integrity
Measured, calm, form (Wong-like)
Approachable
Kind, compassionate, empathic
Curious, intelligent, well-informed
Willing to compromise when needed
Brave and forthright
Approachable, available
Presentable
Industrious
Resilient
Responsive
Proactive and reactive
Wise/exercises balanced and sound judgement