

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION BY NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS IN AUSTRALIA'S PUBLIC LIFE THROUGH SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRIES

I THEORY

Public participation in the political sphere is a core tenet of democracy, and includes allowing the broader public's views to inform the day-to-day decision making of the Parliament.¹ Submissions to Parliamentary Inquiries provide one means for public engagement, although little research has been conducted into the perceived effectiveness of that process for enhancing participation.² The present research canvassed the views of not-for-profits who submit to Inquiries on behalf of disadvantaged Australians, focusing on three tenets of public participation in the submission process – whether it is open (fair), flexible and informative to the public.³

II RESULTS

A Openness

Time spent on submission-writing varied amongst all participants, including from days to months, demonstrating perhaps the complexity of some submissions. Factors determining time spent on submissions were generally consistent across participants, and included: the significance of the topic to members of the organisation (64%) size and complexity of the task (45%), current workload (45%), familiarity with the topic (45%), and whether consultation was required (27%).

Additionally, the majority of respondents perceived that their submissions had an impact on the Committee's final report presented to Parliament. Nonetheless, some respondents expressed concern with the transparency of the way in which submissions are used in tabling the Committee's report, along with the impact of that report on Parliamentary decision-making.

Finally, the three most common forms of communication identified by respondents are consistent with the means by which Parliament communicate with the public about inquiries (namely through: the Committee's webpage, paid advertisements in the newspaper, and personal communications). Despite this, it is unclear whether the use of personal communications as a form of advertising excludes the wider public.

B Flexibility

Overwhelmingly the means by which evidence was taken was considered flexible (91% of respondents indicated this), with formal hearings being the most commonly identified method. Some respondents (18%) indicated that formal hearings can be intimidating, especially if there is a lack of expertise in this type of proceeding.

¹ Nancy Roberts, 'Public Deliberation in the age of direct citizen participation' (2004) 34 *American Review of Public Administration* 315; The Australian Collaboration, *Democracy in Australia – Citizen participation in Democracy* (July 2013) The Australian Collaboration <<http://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/pdf/Democracy/Citizen-engagement.pdf>>.

² House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, (October 1999) (It's your House); Mark Rodrigues, 'Parliamentary Inquiries as a Form of Policy Evaluation' (2008) 23 *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 25.

³ Robyn Weber, 'Increasing Public Participation in the Work of Parliamentary Committees' (2001) 16 *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 110.

C Informativeness

Participants reported that submission writing is informative about the parliamentary process to those making the submission as well as those who communicate with the entities making the submission. (82% and 52% respectively).

III DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By and large, the results suggest that submission-writing by NFPs to parliamentary inquiries is an effective means for enhancing and realizing public participation in the democratic process.

However, a number of issues were raised that lead to several recommendations.

- 1) Means to expedite submission-writing could be explored, including more opportunities to utilise past research conducted by similar entities.
- 2) Parliamentary Committees should investigate opportunities to take evidence other than through written submissions, for example through more informal public hearings. These could reduce time spent on submission-writing, whilst creating less intimidating ways of giving evidence than a formal hearing. This might improve the quality of the evidence received in some cases.
- 3) There should be investigation into the means by which inquiries are advertised to the broader public, especially concerning the creation of invitation lists, with a view to broadening this process.
- 4) Investigation into the transparency of the parliamentary process, including how submissions are dealt with in tabling a report and how those reports impact upon parliamentary decision-making.