# Title

## Inclusive not exclusive: parliamentary committees reaching out to CALD communities

# Abstract

Australia is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world. With one in four people speaking a language other than English at home, it is important for our parliaments to convey information which can be understood across every community. This paper presents some of the key opportunities and challenges for community engagement from the *Global Parliamentary Report 2022: Public engagement in the work of parliament* and examines these ideas within the context of parliamentary committees.

# Biographical details

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**Introduction** [SLIDE 1]

This paper’s focal point is the 2024 Australasian Study of Parliament Group (ASPG) theme of ‘parliament’s resilience in a changing world’. To meet the challenges of the present and the future, parliaments must be increasingly proactive in adapting and renewing their practices to remain relevant to the very people and communities that they represent.

The *Global Parliamentary Report 2022*, jointly issued by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme, provides a comprehensive analysis on the importance of public engagement with the work of parliament.[[1]](#footnote-1) This paper will examine one of the five top-level recommendations from the report – to make inclusion a priority – so that parliament is accessible to all community members, within the context of parliamentary committees.

**Public engagement in the work of parliament** [SLIDE 2]

An important starting point is to consider why public engagement matters to parliaments.

Firstly, public engagement is essential for parliaments to remain relevant in a modern society and to avoid a disconnect between elected representatives and the public they serve. In a world where democracies are increasingly facing challenges such as civic disengagement, political polarisation, the spread of misinformation, and concerns about the integrity of public institutions, parliament’s commitment to democratic principles is more crucial than ever. As Leston-Bandeira (2022) explains, public engagement today is an expectation of politics:

Citizens have an expectation of being informed about politics and to be able to have a say during the time between elections – they may not wish to have a say, but the expectation is that should they wish to, processes should exist to enable this. Not meeting this expectation is simply reinforcing the perception of a gap between governing institutions and citizens.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Secondly, democracy is often said to mean 'rule by the people'.[[3]](#footnote-3) Public engagement is essential to a healthy democracy as it leads to greater participation in democratic processes, leading to people better understanding the role of parliament and its members. When parliaments collaborate with the community, this can lead to co-creation that embeds the community in decision-making processes so that solutions are designed *with* people instead of *for* them.[[4]](#footnote-4) In fact, when done right, public engagement enhances law-making and scrutiny, by enabling a closer link to the reality where policy is implemented and providing policy-makers with a better understanding of how policy is implemented, along with its consequences and outcomes.[[5]](#footnote-5) By extension, this leads to greater trust that the parliament and the people’s representatives will better represent the public’s interest[[6]](#footnote-6) – which is important as we will see on the next slide.

**Public perceptions of democracy** [SLIDE 3]

According to a national survey[[7]](#footnote-7) of 5,000 Australians undertaken by the Australian Public Service Commission in 2023 which looked at trust and satisfaction of Australian democracy, while most Australians highly valued a democratic system and the vast majority agreed that living in a democratic country is important to them, alarmingly, 49% believed that corruption was widespread in Australia’s democratic institutions and processes, and only 44% believed that politicians and government services dealt with the issues that matter to them.[[8]](#footnote-8)

These figures were similar to that of other recent studies and findings, most notably the 2024 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, where only 34% trusted political parties and 46% trusted government.[[9]](#footnote-9) Interestingly, in the same OECD survey, Australians who felt that the current system does not let people like them have a say tended to trust the government 52 percentage points less than those who felt that they have a voice. This trust gap was larger than the 47 percentage points gap on average across OECD countries.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Inclusive not exclusive** [SLIDE 4]

So, who might be the people who feel like they don’t have a voice?

Traditionally, parliaments have focused their engagement on a general audience. They have tended to follow a one-size-fits-all approach, particularly when communicating with the community. Information has been made available through general publications such as newspapers and industry bulletins, or more recently, through digital platforms such as websites and social media.

However, as Hendriks and Kay (2019) observed, the traditional methods used to attract public input tends to only reach those who are already politically active, have the resources, or who have knowledge of parliamentary procedures and practices. Therefore, there is the need for improving the breadth and depth of engagement and participation:

To deepen participation means moving beyond one-way information flows, towards more deliberative conditions where communication is open, reflective and dialogical ... To broaden participation requires reaching out to everyday publics and actively recruiting under-represented or marginalised voices.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In a democracy, it is essential that everyone can participate and that no one is left behind. Inclusive public engagement requires parliaments to connect with the diverse range of communities across the country. Parliaments have a responsibility to reach out to people who face barriers to participation or are underrepresented in democratic processes, as parliaments are the key representative institution in a democratic system. Those that fail to do so are not speaking or listening to all the people that they represent.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This point is emphasized as one of the five top-level recommendations in the *Global Parliamentary Report 2022*, which suggests making inclusion a priority so that works of parliament are accessible to all community members. According to the *Global Parliamentary Report 2022*:

Without a special effort to reach all communities, structural barriers are likely to limit some voices. Inequalities can be widened if engagement does not address existing disadvantages. Parliaments risk speaking only with politically engaged groups and hearing only those voices that can reach them easily – and are often already empowered.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Inclusive and participatory processes allow parliaments to draw evidence and knowledge from a wider base, which contributes to more informed policy decisions and, therefore, to better outcomes. Inclusive engagement ultimately helps to sustain representative democracy by ensuring that it lives up to its promise.

**CALD communities and the parliament** [SLIDE 5]

A survey undertaken for the *Global Parliamentary Report 2022* indicated that many parliaments have recognized the need for more targeted approaches to broaden their engagement and reach people who are disengaged.[[14]](#footnote-14) Almost 30% of parliaments had targeted strategies for women, 40% had rural community outreach programs, and 50% had initiatives for people with disabilities. Almost 80% of parliaments had activities targeted to young people and schoolchildren.[[15]](#footnote-15)

However, less than a third of the parliaments surveyed proactively targeted ethnic minorities, Indigenous communities, or people for whom the official language of parliament is not their first language, even though these groups are substantial segments of the population in many countries. The group least likely to be targeted was illiterate people.[[16]](#footnote-16)

For the remainder of this paper, I will be focusing on the culturally and linguistically diverse community – also known as the CALD community. As we just saw from the figure, the CALD community (which includes ethnic minorities, Indigenous communities, and migrants and refugees), would greatly benefit with assistance to be connected with the works of parliament.

CALD is a term widely utilised in Australia, particularly in government, to denote people who have cultural backgrounds different from the majority or ‘Anglo-Celtic’ Australian culture. This includes individuals and communities who communicate in languages other than English, either exclusively or alongside English. A widely used definition refers to CALD as those born overseas, in countries other than those classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as ‘main English-speaking countries’. These countries include Australia, Canada, Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Understanding the make-up of the community now and into the future is an important part of being accessible and inclusive.[[18]](#footnote-18) When the demographics of a country shift and change over time (which, is especially relevant here in Australia), parliaments need to keep up with the changing profile of the community to ensure that they are informing, educating, communicating, consulting, and involving in ways that meet the needs of various groups within its society. Therefore, parliaments will need to think carefully about how these changes will affect them and their interactions with the people they represent.

For example, there has been a significant increase over the past couple of decades of new community members who were not born or educated in Australia. These people may not be familiar with our parliamentary system or have fled conflict and consequently may be wary of public officials and authorities. With a growing migrant and refugee population, parliaments will need to consider how best to interact with these groups to ensure that they are able to participate effectively in Australia’s democratic processes.[[19]](#footnote-19) Furthermore, according to an ABC article published last month, ‘it takes roughly two to three election cycles for many migrants to have the same level of political literacy as the average person in the Australian population’ and advocates have called for democratic processes and the works of parliament to be more accessible for people from CALD backgrounds.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**CALD communities and parliamentary committees** [SLIDE 6]

Parliamentary committees (committees) are an important avenue for the public to connect with parliamentarians on issues that matter to the community. The *House of Representatives Practice* highlights the role of committees in engaging with the public:

… committees are well suited to the gathering of evidence from expert groups or individuals. In a sense they ‘take Parliament to the people’ and allow direct contact between members of the public and representative groups of Members of the House.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As such, committees could be one place where more detailed work on inclusion could happen. Below, I outline two possible ways for committees to engage with the CALD community. These methods have been inspired by the *Global Parliamentary Report 2022’s* suggestions to use accessible language in communications, as legislation and other aspects parliamentary and committee business often involve complex concepts and technical language. Committees can help to make the CALD community better informed by translating this complexity into communications that the CALD community can easily understand.

Easy English [SLIDE 7 + 8]

The first method is to use Easy English. Easy English, also known as Easy Read internationally, provides the opportunity for many adult Australians for whom plain language is too complex. Features of Easy English include: short sentences of 5-8 words each; all sentences in active tense; use of bullet points, rather than paragraphs or lengthy prose; one idea per sentence; everyday words of the audience; use of examples from the life experience of the audience; lots of white space; and a minimum of size 14 font.[[22]](#footnote-22) In addition, the selection and use of images is an important part of Easy English. Images are used to support a paragraph of content, or individual points. Images need to be clear and simple with white space around them.

The example on the slide is a real-life example of what the Victorian Legislative Assembly’s Legal and Social Issues Committee created for its *inquiry into early childhood engagement of CALD communities*. For this inquiry, the Committee used a variety of strategies to engage the CALD communities in the inquiry process, including an Easy English guide, translated brochures, an e‑survey in plain English, videos in other languages, and consultation workshops with multicultural playgroups.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The target audience for Easy English not only includes people who read English as a second language, but also includes people who have a cognitive disability, psychiatric or mental illness, dyslexia, poor educational backgrounds, or is from the deaf community.[[24]](#footnote-24) The benefits of Easy English also extend to people who are time-poor and want information quickly – in fact, any one of us who is struggling with cognitive load or who are more visual could benefit from Easy English.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Community Languages[SLIDE 9 + 10]

The second method is using the CALD community languages, instead of defaulting to the use of English. Although this option will mean that it will be CALD community specific, unlike the Easy English approach, for certain committee inquiries this may be a valuable way to hear from targeted stakeholder groups.

For example, at the ACT Legislative Assembly, the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion held an *inquiry into racial vilification* between 2021-22. Due to the nature of the inquiry, both the Committee and the secretariat made a commitment to encourage participation and seek the views of the CALD community. This would enhance the evidence received and the overall relevance of the Committee’s findings and recommendations.

As you can see from the slides, the inquiry information was provided in some of the main community languages of the ACT CALD community. A ‘helping you get involved’ page was also set up on the inquiry page to provide additional information about submissions and hearings, and to assure participants that the parliament was happy and willing to assist where it could.

Other points to consider when communicating with the CALD community include:

* Does the database/mail-out include multicultural advocacy groups and organisations, as well as CALD community groups and community leaders? Although it takes strategic and concerted efforts and resources, proactive outreach and collaboration with others can fill the missing links.
* Has there been a consideration to utilise CALD media options to communicate and connect to CALD communities? Minority groups, for example, may not be consumers of mainstream media but might instead rely on media in their own languages or on community-based information services.[[26]](#footnote-26)
* Has there been a consideration to utilise translating and interpreting services, if required?

Ongoing engagement [SLIDE 11]

Finally, public engagement must be an ongoing conversation. The two methods mentioned before of using Easy English and community languages certainly could help to promote committee activities. However, there should also be a continuation of the engagement right through the lifecycle of the work of committees.

For example, committees could use the information that they collect from the community in more engaging ways. Traditionally, committees have used evidence from submissions and hearings only in the reports that they present to parliament, avoiding any broader discussion of that evidence until the report has been published. I believe that more could be done with this information, and for the conversation to continue.

Committees could work with parliamentary engagement staff to produce news stories, feature articles, and videos, for example.[[27]](#footnote-27) These could then be published via digital channels, such as parliament’s website and social media pages. Community members whose evidence is used to produce newsworthy content will see that they are being taken seriously. This should also help community members from feeling like their contribution was taken in (more or less) a one-way transaction and for things to come to an end there. Using evidence in this way could drive more public engagement, with information on the issues that committees are investigating presented to the public in ways that replicate other news content they would usually engage with.[[28]](#footnote-28)

As the Victorian Legislative Assembly’s Legal and Social Issues Committee acknowledged in its final report, “… despite efforts to enhance participation among individuals from CALD backgrounds, they only accounted for a small proportion of overall participants in the inquiry. This process provided some valuable lessons, including that creating awareness about parliament and the work of committees among certain groups in the community is an ongoing process and beyond the scope of one inquiry.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

**Conclusion** [SLIDE 12]

Targeted engagement is not about favouring one group over another. Rather, it is about levelling the playing field. It provides those people who have faced disadvantage, who are in minority or who have been ignored in the past with the chance to participate alongside those who have been at the centre of political discourse for many decades.

Pressure is now on parliaments more than ever before to develop longer-term strategies (not just those correlating to election cycles) and be innovative in the face of mounting challenges. Parliaments cannot afford to be out of step with shifting community expectations if they are to remain relevant to the very people that they represent.

However, parliaments are often conservative and tend to be bound to its traditional way of doing things. This can hamper innovation. Switching mindsets – from the way things have been done for a long time, to the way things could be done in the future – is not a straightforward proposition. It will inevitably require experimentation and innovation, which is often accompanied by the risk of things not working out as planned. This should not be seen as a bad thing if lessons are learned, and if this leads to better approaches in the future. After all, parliaments must be resilient in the face of change, or it will be the ones that are left behind.

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