



The Queensland Model: Empowering Parliament through Democratic Innovation

By Iain Walker & Kyle Redman, *The newDemocracy Foundation*

What is the problem?

In parliamentary democracies, parties that are outside of the government can have limited opportunities to influence legislation or policy. There is often no way to substantively challenge the government on a decision and have your position tested robustly.

To make matters worse, elections encourage our politicians to focus their time and effort chasing shallow public opinion. The combination of these issues encourages shallow oppositional behaviour that is purposefully destructive and disingenuous. It can manifest in media campaigns, parliamentary behaviour that is procedurally stalling, and collectively damages the reputation of the political system.

What is the proposed solution?

In Australia, most parliaments are bi-cameral, they have an upper house and a lower house, and legislation must pass through both houses. In 1922, Queensland abolished its upper house, the legislative council, and became the only unicameral parliament in Australia.

This presents a unique opportunity to explore options to reinstitute a variant of bicameralism in Queensland. By applying deliberation and random selection, Queensland could address the destructive incentives for opposition parties by providing the opposition a limited use power to

review lower house bills (a role traditionally played by an upper house in the bicameral system).

The Queensland Parliament could provide the Opposition with the right to call three Citizens' Assemblies in a term of government on any Bill before the parliament.

What are the benefits?

Primarily, the model would amount to a 'put up or shut up' mechanism that allows the governing party to call out shallow oppositional behaviour while at the same time empowering the opposition to contest bills on the merits.

It defeats the capacity to run a media campaign with no substance—the Citizens' Assembly would look at both the Government's and Opposition's claims in-depth and 'get beyond the headline'.

It would increase public trust in major decisions by involving everyday 'people like me' in major contested decisions, a role that leads to people standing alongside elected representatives and endorsing the final decision.

How would this work?

The mechanism would be limited to three citizens' assemblies per term (four years). The leader of the Opposition would have the opportunity to trigger the mechanism when a Bill is brought to the floor of the Legislative Assembly.



The Citizens' Assembly would be governed by an independent Chair to guarantee the integrity of the process. The Chair would be supported by a committee comprised of MPs from a mix of parties and affiliations. A stakeholder reference group would be established with approx. 10 key interest groups would be appointed by the committee to supervise the balance of information and process integrity.

The facilitation team could be independent of parliamentary staff initially with internal capabilities trained.

Independent evaluation and learnings would be produced by researchers and an appointed evaluator such as the OECD or newDemocracy.

Who participates?

50 people chosen by democratic lottery such that they are representative of the wider Queensland population by agreed-upon demographic criteria such as age, gender, education, and location—the only exclusion would be for people in paid political employment. Recruitment would be done by the parliamentary staff in a two-stage stratified random selection process.

What do they do?

The Citizens' Assembly best practice process has been well documented elsewhere but in short:

- Attend 5 days of deliberation spread out over three months (per diem paid at \$300 per day).
- Review and read background information.
- Deliberate with their peers to develop recommendations in response to the remit.
- Find common ground (80% support in the room) on final recommendations.
- A subset to appear in the media alongside MPs.

The final report would be tabled in parliament—contributing to the debate over the Bill.