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**Business Item 3:  
The Public Image of Parliamentary Government:  
Partnerships in Improving the Understanding and Image of Parliaments**

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**THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT: PARTNERSHIP  
IN IMPROVING THE UNDERSTANDING AND IMAGE OF PARLIAMENT**

**INTRODUCTION**

There is widespread recognition today of the importance of improving the public's understanding of parliament and the image of parliament in the community. The common view seems to be that the public has a low regard for parliament, or certainly for politicians, despite having a high interest in politics and political issues. There is also a view that if our systems of government are to be trusted and respected, they need to be widely understood.

In this paper I examine available data on the image of parliaments and then look at some of the work done by the Australian Parliament aimed at improving public knowledge and understanding of its work and at developing active citizens. As Deputy Speaker of the House, and in keeping with the partnership theme, I focus on two areas—promoting the work of the House of Representatives and the work with our colleagues in the Senate on parliamentary education. This can be seen as the parliament working in partnership with the media and with the education sector. Thinking in terms of partnerships can be useful in developing strategies to promote greater understanding of parliament.

In focusing on these two areas, I should emphasise that the Australian Parliament uses a whole gamut of approaches to improve public knowledge and understanding—including providing information to the public, publications, exhibitions, seminar programs, direct broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings and a comprehensive parliamentary web-site.

**PUBLIC IMAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT**

There is not a great deal of data available on the public's image of the institution of parliament, as distinct from governments, public institutions, politicians and so forth. Many people may not have a concept of parliament that is distinct from concepts of government and politicians.

A recent international survey of trust in institutions placed the level of trust in parliaments below that of trust in international corporations which was in turn below the level of trust in governments. Governments were ranked about mid-way in the list of institutions assessed, and parliaments near the bottom of the list. Only aggregated data were available so it is not possible to know how particular countries rated their parliaments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Sylvan, L. Australian Public Service Commission SES Breakfast Seminar, 2002.

However, data on public trust and confidence and interest in 'public institutions' which presumably extends to parliaments, indicate generally declining levels of confidence.

In the 1981 World Values Survey, 39 per cent of European respondents expressed 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' of support and confidence for public institutions. By 1990 that had fallen to 25 per cent. In 1981, 50 per cent of Americans expressed high support for public institutions. This fell to 32 per cent by 1990, and 21 per cent by 1999. In 1981, 37 per cent of Canadians expressed high support for public institutions, a figure which fell to 29 per cent by 1990, and to 22 per cent by 1998.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, however, survey data also reveal increasing levels of interest in politics and government, and it has been suggested that this growing interest may be a factor in explaining some of the decline in confidence.<sup>3</sup>

A review in 2000 of the results of nationally conducted, time series, survey-based research in Australia, concluded that public opinion on politics, politicians and parties had changed relatively little over the past 30 years.

Voters are no more disengaged from politics now than they were in the years before Whitlam [30 years ago] ... The data do point to a decline in the reputation of politicians for ethics and honesty, they suggest an increase in electoral cynicism around the credibility of election promises and they document a weakening of attachment to party ... [however] As much as they ever have in the post-war years, voters continue to think that elections matter, they continue to think of the two major political parties as different, and they continue to be influenced by the parties in their judgments of political issues ...<sup>4</sup>

The data in relation to a decline in the reputation of Australia's politicians for ethics and honesty comes from a national opinion poll (Morgan Poll) asking respondents to rate (as 'very high', 'high', 'average', 'low', or 'very low') a wide range of occupations for their 'honesty and ethical standards'. For the period 1976 to 2002, the ratings of federal and state politicians fell marginally from a low base. The ratings fell most significantly in the 1990s and they have risen recently. In 2002, federal MPs were rated 21<sup>st</sup> out of 28 occupations for 'very high' or 'high' standards of ethics and honesty and their ratings (16%) were low by comparison with the most respected occupations, namely nursing, pharmacy and medicine. The latter occupations received ratings of 90%, 89%, and 80% of respondents, respectively. By contrast, at the bottom of the list, newspaper journalists, estate agents and car salesmen, received ratings of 9%, 8% and 3%, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Australians have traditionally not had a high opinion of their politicians.<sup>6</sup>

If we accept that there have been declining levels of confidence in our institutions including our parliaments, for whatever reasons, then we need to look for ways to restore public confidence and trust. This assumes that our institutions and our parliaments warrant higher levels of trust, and in Australia I believe they do.

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<sup>2</sup> Zussman, D. Confidence in public institutions: restoring pride to politics. Papers on Parliament, No. 38, April 2002, (pp 59-75), p 61.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p 63.

<sup>4</sup> Goot, M Distrustful, disenchanted and disengaged? Polled opinion on politics, politicians and the parties: an historical perspective. Papers on Parliament, April 2002, No. 38, (pp 17 – 57), pp 49 – 50.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.roymorgan.com/news/pols/2002/3581/>

<sup>6</sup> Brady, A. *Democracy in Dominion: A comparative study of institutions*. Toronto University Press, Toronto, 1958, p. 1, cited in Phillips, H. Low public ratings of parliament and parliamentarians: the utility of an integrity commissioner. Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the ASPG, 18-19 July 2003.

## CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE PARLIAMENTS

At the recent Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Bangladesh, the moderator for the workshop on the subject 'Parliament and the Executive: Building a more effective partnership', the Hon Michael Tshpinare of Botswana, suggested that parliaments must meet some basic criteria to be effective. They must:

- be clearly representative of their citizens;
- be proactively engaged in law making;
- have both the institutional capacity and the political will to exercise oversight of the Executive; and
- be engaged with the public.<sup>7</sup>

While there may be considerable debate on how our parliaments rate on these criteria, and there certainly would be a deal of debate on several of these criteria in Australia, I believe that the Australian Parliament fares reasonably well, at least in comparative terms.

I now turn to our approaches to promoting the work of the House of Representatives and to parliamentary education.

## PROMOTING THE WORK OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Two years ago Australia's the House of Representatives department won its second consecutive award for public sector marketing. This was a significant achievement, particularly as the department was potentially competing against major government agencies and large marketing budgets.

What was the background to our work in this area?

The impetus for change had its origins five years ago in concerns expressed by many members of the House about growing public disenchantment with and disengagement from the parliament and its work. This disenchantment was reflected in a number of ways but was most starkly portrayed in the annual Morgan Poll that for the first time placed politicians only above car salesmen in terms of trustworthiness as a profession.<sup>8</sup>

Correspondence to the Speaker reveals that people focus on the combative nature of parliament, illustrated most vividly during Question Time and seen in nightly television news clips and newspapers, rather than the cooperative work of parliament, as demonstrated through its legislative program and its committee investigations.

Many members regard parliamentary committees as the workhorses of the parliament. They see committees as a primary means for parliament to engage with the public and for members to help shape public policy. Five years ago, however, the House needed to face up to some stark realities, including:

- modest levels of public participation in many parliamentary committee inquiries, despite significant funds being directed to the public advertising of those investigations;
- lack of appreciation of the positive contribution that parliamentary committees could make to public policy development; and
- limited media interest in committee inquiries and their outcomes.

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<sup>7</sup> Report of the Australian Parliamentary Delegation to Sri Lanka and to the 49<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, Bangladesh, 2003, pp 48 – 49.

<sup>8</sup> In 1998, federal (and state) MPs were each rated by 7% of respondents as having 'very high' or 'high' levels of ethics and honesty, on par with 'advertising people' and above car salesmen (2%).

The significance of all this was that a large body of the parliament's positive work was unrecognised and even ignored within the community.

The House of Representatives Procedure Committee took on the challenge of investigating what could be done to improve public participation in the work of the House and its committees. The recommendations from that review helped pave the way for a new approach in engaging the public in the work of the House.

One submission to that committee encapsulated why public disengagement was such a serious issue and warranted our urgent attention.

“The consequences of community alienation from the institutions of government are potentially disastrous,” wrote Dr Andrew Brien from Charles Sturt University's Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics. “Democracies—and the benefits they provide—are sustained only through the consent and participation of their citizens. Participation takes many forms from joining political parties, making submissions, voting, calling on their local members and senators and, importantly, paying taxes. If citizens withdraw that consent or diminish their participation, either directly or through apathy, then the door is opened for more repressive systems of ‘government’.”<sup>9</sup>

## WHAT WAS DONE?

There was focus on two areas: increasing people's understanding of the mechanisms by which they could participate and, at the same time, generating sufficient interest in that work to motivate people to get involved.

The challenges included:

- working within limited resources;
- overcoming public and media scepticism and disinterest; and
- bringing members and parliamentary staff along with our new approach.

One of the key decisions at the outset was to dedicate specific resources to this task by establishing a small office that was given responsibility for marketing the House and its committees to the media and the community. It was a task that needed a full-time focus and was not something that could simply be serviced through existing administrative structures.

The aim of the office, called Liaison and Projects, was to develop an overall marketing and communications strategy that would assist in promoting the work of the House and its committees to the media and the community.

I recognise that some people would reel back in horror at the thought of parliament getting into marketing—that for many people it creates the image of spruikers out there doing anything they can to sell their product. Let me assure you that the term marketing is used to indicate the need for a more strategic approach to informing the Australian public about their parliament and the opportunities they have to participate in it. The new office focused on developing and implementing a new strategy for marketing the House to the community.

An important part of the strategy was to improve links between the media and parliamentary committees. The aim was to get messages about the real work of parliament out to a broad cross-section of the Australian community and to do that effectively we needed a partnership with the media. To build that partnership the department employed a media specialist.

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<sup>9</sup> *It's your House: Community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House of Representatives and its committees*, November 1999, p

When the media adviser started talking to media representatives about the lack of media interest in the work of parliamentary committees, the clear message that came back was that committees were a bit of a mystery to the media. The media didn't know a lot about the processes committees used to conduct their inquiries, nor did they consistently find out about the issues they were investigating.

Too often the media would hear about a new committee investigation being announced but then would hear little more until the tabling of the committee's report. This meant that the media had no real opportunity to take an interest in the work of the committee over the course of its inquiry.

Some would argue that this should not be a major concern as committee investigations are not there to generate media stories. An alternative argument is that if the public inquiry processes of committees are to operate as effectively as they can, then informing the public through the media about those inquiries at the beginning, during and at the end of an inquiry are part and parcel of maximising the opportunities for people to become involved with the work of committees. It also maximises the opportunities for committees to benefit from the knowledge and experience that different sections of the community can bring to committee investigations.

Another reason for employing a media specialist was to give committee staff access to professional expertise about the best ways to deal with the media. For those who are inexperienced with the media or who only have casual contact with it, the media can seem a daunting beast. An adviser well-versed in the ways of the media has proved extremely useful in demystifying the media for House staff.

What is now in place is a framework for dealing with the media that is resulting in increased and more accurate media coverage of committee work. That framework includes:

- regular provision of information across all stages of committee inquiries, framed in a news style that is familiar to and easily picked up by journalists;
- a reliable, single point of contact through which media queries and requests can be coordinated; and
- quick and widespread dissemination of information.

As one example, there are now hundreds of media organisations linked to a regular email alert service on the work of committees. In fact, the alert service has proved so popular it has been extended to other organisations and individuals who wish to follow the progress of committee work. There is, of course, no guarantee of instant media coverage of committee work. Committee stories still need to compete against other news items for coverage. And not all committee work is particularly newsworthy. As the comedian Jerry Seinfeld so aptly said: "It's amazing that the amount of news that happens in the world every day always just exactly fits the newspaper."

But at least if the fundamentals are right in terms of putting regular information in front of the media, in a manner that is packaged to meet their needs, there is a better chance of gaining improved public exposure for a part of parliamentary work that has for too long remained in the shadows.

However, we cannot always just rely on the media to get information about the real work of parliament to the public. Acknowledging this, the department embarked on a media venture for the House. The *About the House* magazine, which to date has had 19 editions, gives people news and feature stories about legislation before parliament, committee investigations and issues members are raising in the House.

Produced five times a year, the magazine has struck a positive chord within the community because, as one reader recently said, it gives people access to information that is not otherwise available to the public. We estimate that readership is above 50,000. Importantly, it continues to grow.

In a recent survey of the magazine's readership, well over 90 per cent of readers rated the magazine as excellent or good in its range of topics, content, readability, layout and design.

A strong emphasis of the magazine is to make the work of the House both accessible and interesting for people. It is not an academic journal. Within that approach the editorial team has initiated the practice of using expert articles to help explain the scope of committee inquiries, legislation and other parliamentary issues to the readership. This has produced some interesting results.

Recently, articles that have appeared in the magazine have been picked up by sections of the media and either been reproduced in the media or featured as discussion topics for talkback radio. One article, relevant to a committee's inquiry into sustainable cities, got such a positive response that the Premier of New South Wales invited the author to a meeting to discuss the issues raised in the article.

There is a very real sense of partnership developing in relation to the magazine. People who are being asked to write articles feel that they are contributing in a positive way to the work of parliament. Committees are getting a reliable avenue for the publicising of their work and are getting articles written that help outline in clear terms the scope of their investigations, thereby generating interest in those investigations. The media and the public are getting access to information and stories that may not otherwise be unearthed. And through columns such as *Hillside*, which cover the local issues members are raising in the House, members are finding that the interesting statements they make in the House are getting a broader public airing.

Interestingly the cost of producing each issue of the magazine translates roughly to the cost of advertising two committee inquiries nationally. We feel that we are getting much better value through the magazine than simply placing one-off advertisements in newspapers. The growing readership and positive survey results indicate that the public feel the same way.

Increasing opportunities for personal contact between the parliament and the community is also an important part of the marketing strategy. This includes direct training on how the parliament actually operates through a series of seminars, primarily targeted at public servants. Recently Australia's Public Service Commissioner commented about the importance of public servants gaining a better understanding of the processes of parliament and the need for public servants to undertake more training in this regard. I was pleased to note the Commissioner's observation that attendance at courses conducted by the House of Representatives had increased last year, while attendance at other similar courses had decreased.<sup>10</sup>

Another partnership the House has been developing over the past three years is with tertiary institutions. It is important for the parliament to connect more effectively with the up and coming talent of our nation and with those who are educating them.

To this end we have established a university lecture program whereby members of the House and senior parliamentary officials visit universities free of charge to provide lectures on the realities of working in today's House of Representatives. The program was trialled with a few universities and proved such a success that it has now been extended to tertiary institutions throughout Australia. A small and manageable number of universities is visited annually.

New technologies, such as the Internet and digital television, present even further opportunities to engage with different sections of the community. As previously mentioned, the Australian Parliament has a comprehensive web-site providing access to most recent parliamentary material. On this site, 'House News' provides information on new developments in the House to back up the information provided to the media. In addition, recent experience in producing a documentary and CD-ROM on the first 100 years of the House, and the large number of orders received for the two products, show that the Parliament presented in interesting ways can capture the public imagination. Production of the documentary and CD-ROM involved collaboration with broadcasting colleagues in the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff; contractual 'partnerships' with the private sector (multi-media

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<sup>10</sup> Australian Public Service Commission *State of the Service Report 2002-03*, p 45.

company, design company; marketing and distribution companies); and commissioning of original music and actors.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Details of the CD-ROM and documentary are available from: <http://www.houseforthenation.gov.au>

## LESSONS LEARNED

There are a number of lessons that can be learned from Australia's experience in this area. Chief among these is that there is a high level of interest in the work of the Parliament among the public, as evidenced by the large number of requests for the *About the House* magazine, the growing number of people who are joining the email alert service, the increase in registrations for seminars and the growing list of universities participating in the lecture program. What the public appreciates is that they are receiving information about the Parliament and its work in a way that is not regarded as politically biased and is not devoted simply to the political contest within parliament.

This may be a message for the media too. While there will always be a place for the media to cover the day to day political battles within parliament, they should not just act as "theatre" critics. The substance of parliament's work should not fall victim to the desire to portray the parliament as an arena of political combat.

Another lesson learnt is that it is worth the risk of being innovative in the way parliament communicates with the community. There is always a danger that people will look on efforts to increase the profile of parliament in a cynical way. But Australia's experience shows that improved communication between the parliament and the public can be seen as a breath of fresh air by those seeking genuine discourse about the issues that matter.

Of course the resources that are devoted to this task need to be well targeted, but they also need to be adequate to ensure that innovative approaches do not wither through lack of funding. Informing the public about the work of the Parliament should be seen as an investment in the future strength of our democracy. The question should not simply be: 'Can we afford to do it?'; the question should also be: 'Can we afford not to?'

## PARLIAMENTARY EDUCATION

As Deputy Speaker, I chair a group of members and senators called the Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) Advisory Group. The Group provides advice to the Presiding Officers on the direction and operation of the PEO.

The PEO aims to provide a comprehensive service in parliamentary and citizenship education to schools and to assist senators and members to inform constituents about the parliamentary process. It can be seen as working in partnership with teachers to assist students (and teachers) to:

- understand the significance of the Australian Parliament;
- understand how the Australian Parliament works; and
- take an active role as citizens in our democracy.

The PEO carries out its national role by:

- conducting active learning programs for student visitors to Parliament House. These one hour programs take place in a dedicated venue—the Education Centre—and engage students in role-plays about parliamentary processes and concepts;
- conducting outreach programs for students and teachers in their own classrooms in schools throughout Australia. These programs show how teachers can use the parliamentary process of decision making as a teaching/ learning strategy in the classroom;
- producing and publishing state curriculum based parliamentary education resources for teachers. Many of the resources are published on the PEO website (<http://www.peo.gov.au/index.html>);
- delivering professional development programs for school teachers, trainee teachers and tertiary and community educators in schools, technical and further education institutions and universities;

- providing fellowships that give opportunities for young professionals including Aboriginal and other community leaders, teachers and journalists to further their knowledge of parliamentary processes;
- conducting a range of special activities and events, including symposiums and Conferences, an annual forum on the subject of the Budget, sessions of the National Youth Science Forum, *Heywire* (an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio program for rural youth), the Rotary Adventure in Citizenship, and Talk-back classroom (a program where senior secondary school students interview senior politicians and other community leaders for broadcast on the national ABC youth radio network). Further details are available from the PEO website; and
- maintaining a very useful website.

As would be apparent from this range of activities, the PEO works closely and pro-actively with schools systems, universities and teacher organisations on a number of levels. It seeks to work collaboratively with the relevant professional education networks. The scale of the work is significant and the quality high, and to illustrate this I will refer to three areas:

- services for school groups within parliament;
- a new education resource for primary school students, Cockatoo Island; and
- the PEO's new web site.

## **SERVICES FOR SCHOOL GROUPS WITHIN PARLIAMENT**

In recent years, more than 100 000 students have visited our national Parliament House in Canberra each year as part of an organised school group. Based on recent survey data, this represents more than 80% of inter-state student visitors to the national capital.<sup>12</sup> A comprehensive Visitors' Services Section in Parliament House conducts tours, explains and interprets the Parliament and provides written materials.

The PEO provides Education Centre services for almost 80 000 of the visiting students. Included amongst them are about 16 000 students (from 550 schools) who live a long way from the national capital and whose travel to parliament is partly subsidised under a program called the Citizenship Visits Program. The program is run by the Australian Parliament, and total expenditure last financial year was \$1.02 million.

PEO Education Centre services began with the occupancy of the present Parliament House building in 1988. They have evolved over time, and the current programs now include:

- debating a bill role-play (with a choice of five bills for primary, and eight bills for secondary, although others can be used);
- committee of inquiry role-play (with one topic available for primary, and eight bills for secondary, although others can be used); and
- Question Time role-plays.

Importantly, professional educators are involved in delivering the programs. For most visiting student groups, from all states and territories in Australia, the parliamentary education program is linked directly to primary and secondary social science curricula.

External and internal evaluations of the Education Centre program over the period have demonstrated that the program is achieving its aims of encouraging students to become active and informed citizens. Last year, an external evaluation, indicated a 97 per cent level of satisfaction by school groups participating in PEO programs.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Discover what it means to be Australian in your National Capital: Size and effects of school excursions to the National Capital, 2002, Centre for Tourism Research, University of Canberra, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Visiting school groups have the opportunity to meet with their elected representatives during their visits to Parliament House. An automated booking system advises members and senators about bookings for schools visiting from their electorates or States/ Territories, and a refinement to the program will allow for an electronic reminder close to the visit. This enables members and senators, if they wish, to make arrangements to meet with the students.

I should also say that all members of parliament in Australia consider visits to schools as among their most important duties. To assist members and senators in this regard, the PEO has produced facsimiles of the Despatch Boxes in the House of Representatives' Chamber, for use as an education resource. The facsimile boxes include a range of parliamentary information, props, photos and other materials for use during visits to schools and other community venues. The boxes are produced in response to orders for purchase from individual members and senators and are sold on a cost recovery basis.

## **COCKATOO ISLAND**

Last year, our Presiding Officers launched Cockatoo Island, an exciting new resource for young school children produced by the PEO.

Cockatoo Island is an imaginary island run by a parliament of Australian birds. Three colourful 'Big Books' introduce students to a diverse and democratic society. Illustrated by central Australian artist Kaye Kessing, they tell the story of how the birds organise life on the island to be fair and tolerant with opportunities for all and the right to be heard. Birds Australia has enthusiastically supported the project, and provided advice which has ensured that the ornithological details in the teaching notes are accurate.

Teachers' 'In-Flight Guides' are provided with background notes about parliament (and the birds), curriculum outcomes, portfolio pages and role-cards. The stories and the activities that go with them have been trialled in schools over the last three years with great success. PEO staff members are now visiting different regions to introduce the resource to classroom teachers.

The Cockatoo Island package is now being sold throughout the country through Thomson Learning. Under the contract, the project has been undertaken at minimal cost to the Australian Parliament. Details about how to order the product are available from the PEO website.

Studies of citizenship education have concluded that it is not what we teach in schools but how we run them that determines whether students will emerge as active, participating citizens.<sup>14</sup> The Cockatoo Island resource is a significant addition to the resources available to teachers to encourage their students to develop concepts of democracy. It complements a major curriculum initiative in the late 1990s by the Australian Government entitled 'Discovering Democracy'. The Cockatoo Island project demonstrates that innovative programs are the key to engaging young people's interest in the parliament.

## **PARLIAMENTARY EDUCATION OFFICE WEBSITE**

The PEO website has recently been redeveloped. The site continues to provide comprehensive, accurate and useful information on PEO programs, activities and events and a range of resources for teachers, primary and secondary students and internet resources. (For example, it includes photographs and other materials that students can download for their school projects). The site is logically structured, visually appealing, easy to navigate and easy to use.

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<sup>14</sup> Senator the Hon. Margaret Reid Taking Parliament to the People and Bring People to the Parliament. Paper presented to 30<sup>th</sup> Conference of Presiding Officers and Clerks, Fiji, 16-24 July 1999, p 11.

As a new development, the site also now includes an interactive sub-site for upper primary students, called *Kidsview*, which includes a number of features designed to interest children.

Content is arranged across five main themes: Representation, Law-making, Democracy, Parliament House and Parliamentary Artefacts. *Kidsview* includes complementary teaching material for teachers and parents. It links directly with State and Territory social science curricula, assisting teachers, parents and students in achieving curriculum outcomes.

## **COMMENT**

Australia's experience with the PEO demonstrates that a relatively small group of professional staff dedicated to the task of parliamentary and citizenship education for schools, can make a significant contribution. We consider the investment to be both important and necessary to contribute to the task of sustaining our system of parliamentary government.

## **CONCLUSION**

Data on the public image of parliaments supports work by parliaments to promote greater public understanding of their role and to encourage increased input from citizens. The Australian Parliament has invested a deal of resources in this area and has gained leverage from actively targeting the media and working with the education sector. This work can be seen as investing in wider community partnerships, and thinking in these terms can be a useful strategy.

I am reminded of the words of American educator Robert Maynard Hutchins who once said, "The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference and undernourishment."

Nourishing the public image of parliament will benefit its work in the short and long term, to the advantage of us all.