The Voice and The Vote of the Bush: The Representation of Rural and Regional Australia in the Federal Parliament

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2000 Australian Parliamentary Fellow
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Presiding Officers’ Foreword

Established in 1971, the Australian Parliamentary Fellowship has provided an opportunity for an academic analysis of many aspects of the Parliament and the work of parliamentarians. The work of Dr Jennifer Curtin, the 2000 Fellow, examines the attitudes of rural and regional Australians to the work of parliamentarians and the parliament.

Dr Curtin has a Master of Arts degree with first class honours from New Zealand’s University of Waikato (1992) and gained her doctorate from the Australian National University in 1997. She then held several teaching posts before being appointed as the APF for 2000, and is currently teaching Australian Politics at Monash University.

Much of Dr Curtin’s time as Fellow was spent visiting five large country electorates—Capricornia in Queensland, Grey in South Australia, Mallee in Victoria, O’Connor in Western Australia and Parkes in New South Wales. Using data collected from 85 respondents Dr Curtin analyses attitudes about parliament, politicians and issues of representation. Her monograph aims to give a voice to rural and regional Australians who remain passionate about the importance of representation, but may think they have no voice. This monograph is a contribution towards having these voices heard.

NEIL ANDREW PAUL CALVERT
Speaker of the House of Representatives
President of the Senate

February 2004
Acknowledgements

I have long been an admirer of the work of the Parliamentary Information and Research Service, and so it was with great pleasure and sense of privilege that I took up the Australian Parliamentary Fellowship mid-way through 2000. The support I received for this project from the Parliamentary Library Committee, the Department and Dr June Verrier in particular, was vital to its success.

There are also many others in the Library I must thank. John Kain and the members of the Economics, Commerce and Industrial Relations Group, Cathy Madden and members of the Politics and Public Administration Group, the Statistics Group, in particular Andrew Kopras and Gerry Newman; Judy Hutchinson and those in the publications unit, as well as all the staff who contributed to the organisation of my fieldwork. Several senators and members, staffers and members of the press gallery gave me useful insights both individually and at my two work-in-progress presentations.

My academic advisers Dr John Uhr and Dr Rolf Gerritsen were invaluable during the early stages of this work. John Uhr also provided me with critical feedback on the final manuscript. I owe a debt of gratitude to Assoc. Professor Brian Costar in his capacity as external reader. His support and insights were invaluable. I am also grateful to Craig Symes for his intellectual input and his endless reading of drafts. Any remaining errors are my responsibility. I must also acknowledge my current employer, Monash University, for the project completion grant to fund the transcribing and initial data analysis, and the School of Political and Social Inquiry’s Academic Women’s Writing Retreat, where was given considerable collegial support.

This is an outward-looking project rather than an inward-looking one. By this I mean that much of the work of previous Parliamentary Fellows has focused on what the Senators and Members themselves think or do. This project is about the parliament, but much more from the citizen’s perspective. I am grateful to the Parliamentary Library for taking a chance with this focus, and funding the fieldwork. The project was always going to be an ambitious one in terms of research content. The ‘fieldwork’ component (visiting 5 large country electorates, driving around 2000 km over 4 days in each, interviewing
70 people, and receiving written responses back from 15 more) was, not surprisingly, time-consuming (although I know numerous federal politicians undertake this travel schedule frequently). So I thank those 85 respondents who gave me so much of their time and were willing to talk freely and passionately about parliament, politicians and issues of representation. I hope they feel I have done their voices justice in my reporting and analysis.

Much of the writing up of this work took place after the term of my fellowship expired. The writing process has been interrupted by a number of minor and major events, including a move to the big-city lights of Melbourne, a new teaching position at Monash University, but the most significant being the birth of my second son Isaac. So I am grateful to my family, Craig, Reuben and Kay for their support and understanding, and to June Verrier for her patience and belief that this work would ultimately appear in print.

And here it is. In a sense I feel the delay in publication was a blessing. In the 12 months leading up to the 2001 election there was much speculation as to what might happen with the rural and regional vote. In this context, the material here would have made interesting pre-election reading. But with the near-arrival of asylum seekers aboard the Norwegian freighter Tampa, and the events of September 11 2001, the focus of the November 2001 federal election was diverted elsewhere. Indeed some in regional Australia felt their issues were overlooked almost completely.1

Since the 2001 election, the issues of telecommunications in the ‘bush’, the ongoing survival of country towns and family farms in the face of drought, commodity price fluctuations and deregulation of several rural industries continue to have a profile. Indeed, while there may have been no ‘rural revolt’ in the 2001 federal election, the results did throw up some new ‘representational’ issues such as the rise of Independents in the House of Representatives.2 Publishing this in 2004 has meant that I have been able to link these emerging trends with the points being made by my respondents in late 2000 and early 2001.

This was an inspiring project. There are many rural and regional Australians who are disillusioned with their democratic institutions, but they believe that they are worth saving. These are citizens who remain passionate about the importance of representation, but many think they have no voice. This monograph is a contribution towards having these voices heard.
Endnotes

1. ‘Time we were put in the picture’, *Weekly Times*, 17 October 2001, p. 22.

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Introduction

Rural and Regional Politics in Australia

The sense of alienation, of being left behind, of no longer being recognised and respected for the contribution to the nation being made, is deep and palpable in much of rural and regional Australia today.¹

This statement made by National Party Leader John Anderson in 1999, reflects the political recognition of discontent exhibited by rural and regional constituents in the 1998 election. Demands for recognition and representation by those in rural and regional Australia are not new. The formation of the Country Party in 1920 was explicitly about the right of rural communities to have separate representation in parliament and to allow rural communities a voice in the formation of national policy.² As a political movement, those who formed the party were looking for two things: socioeconomic concessions, and to register a protest by the agrarian community against metropolitan dominance.³ In this way, the Country Party was able to harness the sense of difference from the city that many in rural and regional communities felt. As a partner in various coalition governments, it was able to influence policies on tariff protection for manufacturing, supports and subsidies for rural industries, and compulsory marketing boards for primary products.⁴ Over time, these policies became so entrenched that incoming Labor governments seldom tampered with them.

More recently, with the rise of a new form of economic orthodoxy, all three major parties have tended to shy away from such policies. While restructuring of the rural sector has been underway since the 1960s, with international market pressures forcing farm rationalisation and a contraction of private sector services in rural areas, over the past decade this process has been accompanied by the removal of some government offices, local government amalgamations and decreasing access to over-the-counter banking, postal and telecommunication services. These changes in turn have led to a further decline in town populations.⁵ Low commodity prices, adverse terms of trade, increasing costs (especially fuel) and high unemployment have meant that the
results of a strong and growing economy have not appeared to be trickling down to rural and regional Australia.

These developments have enhanced the perception of those living in rural and regional Australia that there now exists a growing divide between city and country Australia. Politically, this perception was most graphically illustrated in the rapid rise of, and electoral support for, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party (PHON), and seems to have continued through the (re)surgence in popularity of independent candidates in rural and regional areas.

The aim of this monograph is to investigate in some depth, using qualitative data, the various dimensions of political discontent that seem evident in rural and regional Australia. Studies to date in this area have focused solely on vote, on policy developments, or on survey responses to questions of political trust, political interest and party identification. While these works provide a solid basis for understanding political trust in Australia, I would argue that the lack of an in-depth citizen-centred perspective means that previous literature only provide us with part of the story, especially with respect to rural and regional Australians. Political scientists seldom visit citizens and talk with them in depth in order to see the world as they see it. Yet, by adopting their vantage point on politics and political representation, we can gain a more distinct and complete picture of political discontent in rural and regional Australia. As such, this monograph is both descriptive and analytical, with the focus very much on the discussions held with various country Australians (see below for methodological note).

In the chapters which follow several perspectives on the representation of ‘country’ Australians and their discontent are presented. Chapter One begins by providing an overview of rural and regional voting patterns in Australia and canvasses some of the literature on political trust and how it might be renewed. Chapter Two looks at the dimensions of dissatisfaction with political institutions as expressed by respondents, with a particular focus on government, political parties and politicians. Several paradoxes emerge from the numerous discussions and these are analysed to show the extent to which they reflect existing analyses of political trust.

Chapter Three deals with possible alternative avenues for enhancing the representation of rural and regional Australia. While the emergence of independents on the political scene is not new in Australian politics,
independent candidates were identified by respondents as having the potential to offer rural and regional electorates a more responsive form of representation. The role the Senate plays in representing rural and regional Australia is also explored. To date, discussions of representation and responsiveness have tended to focus on the House of Representatives, while examinations of the Senate have concentrated on the changes wrought by electoral reform, the presence of minority parties, and the emergence of the Senate as a powerful House of Review. Apart from references to minor parties, the representational role of the Senate is seldom discussed. This oversight is reflected by respondents who questioned the visibility and relevance of Senators to country Australia. Less surprisingly, the under-representation of Indigenous Australians was also deemed inadequate. Despite this gloom, discussions with respondents revealed that many believed a number of possible reforms had the potential to rejuvenate the representative process.

Chapter Four takes up the issue of the tyranny of distance. The sense of remoteness from and disconnection with the place of parliament was clearly expressed by respondents. One critical aspect of this was that people felt they were not being listened to, but they intimated this problem could be ameliorated by communication technologies. The extent to which new technologies, such as the Internet, and ‘old’ technologies such as rural and provincial newspapers, could be used to create stronger connections between politicians and people in rural and regional Australia are examined. The Internet is often hailed as the answer to the isolation and the tyranny of distance experienced by many in a country as vast as Australia. Issues of equity and access suggest caution is required in seeing the Internet as a panacea to communication between politicians and voters. Nor can technology replace human contact. Nevertheless, both the Internet and, perhaps surprisingly, provincial papers have the potential to enhance the representative’s relationship with their electorate.

In conclusion, I argue that a strong feeling of distrust of political parties and politicians was evident amongst those interviewed in country Australia. This distrust was not only related to the performance of individual parties and politicians, but also reflected a sense of isolation and of being forgotten. There was a yearning for politicians to listen and to recognise the small communities as well as the large ones. There was also a desire to be connected with the political institutions that currently seem so distant from them. This contrasts with research which has indicated that rural residents in times past were politically aware and felt connected to their community and their political
representatives. In the Conclusion these desires and the possibilities for reform using a set of principles drawn from deliberative theory are re-examined, and a set of recommendations for thought and action, aimed at enhancing the representation of rural and regional Australia is put forward.

Methodological Note

For the purposes of this research, rural and regional Australia is defined as all those regions outside State capital cities. However, rural and regional Australia is far from homogenous. Degree of remoteness brings with it differential delivery in educational and social services, and there is evidence that the economic circumstances of Australians vary considerably within regions. Likewise, within the categories of farming and agriculture there are wide differences. In some states, broadacre and dairy farmers have experienced considerable increases in farm family income. In others areas, many have not been as lucky.

There are numerous reasons for this variation, including size of farm, climatic conditions, including drought, and changing commodity prices. Such phenomena are not new. However, these factors have been exacerbated by a continued decline in the terms of trade, whereby the prices paid for inputs are increasing at a faster rate than the prices received for the products of agriculture. Deregulation, decreasing government intervention and increasing demands for international competitiveness have accompanied this decline and have exacerbated the situation. In addition to demands for efficient production and a reduction in expenditure, many farms have had to supplement income through off-farm work with approximately one third of farms sustained, in some way, through off-farm income.

A focus on farming and agriculture has often overshadowed the country towns that also make up rural and regional Australia. Considerable attention has been given to the future of country towns of late, most of which has highlighted the significant changes that these towns face if they are to stem the decline that has intensified in the last decade. While the activity of rural industries has affected many of these towns, it is not the only contributory factor. Government action and inaction, demographic changes, and exposure to globalisation are also significant factors. Consequently, we cannot assume country townspeople have the same attitudes and interests as those people directly involved in rural production.
In an attempt to capture the diversity of rural and regional Australia, the material presented here is drawn from 70 semi-structured interviews (and 15 written responses) with people from five rural and regional electorates. At least three towns/areas were selected in each electorate and at least 13 interviews conducted in each electorate. Population criteria similar to that of the Australian Bureau of Statistics are used for the selection of areas and towns: rural areas (under 500), rural towns (under 5000), and regional centres (over 5000).

Interviews were conducted between August 2000 and March 2001 and offer a ‘snapshot’ view of rural and regional political discontent. ‘Key informants’ were selected from local government, local media, small business, the farming community, women’s groups and indigenous communities. These key informants do not constitute a representative sample. The aim is not to make predictions or generalisations, but to illuminate the range and depth of sentiments across rural and regional Australia by selecting people who have a sense of what the community might be thinking and feeling about issues of political representation. Research such as this has more of an exploratory emphasis than an explanatory one. It does not aim to test an existing hypothesis, but looks instead to formulating questions or hypotheses than others may want to test.17

No questions were asked about party identification or how respondents voted. Responses remain anonymous: neither the source nor the person or electorate referred to can be noted. I promised to protect the identity of respondents, and by not naming particular electorates I aim to shield particular politicians from criticism. I acknowledge this may detract from the interest this work may have otherwise generated. However, in selecting which quotes to include, I have ensured that responses are reflective of the range of electorates as well as the diversity of respondents.

The most difficult task was choosing which electorates to visit. There are 25 electorates listed by the Australian Electoral Commission as rural, and another 11 categorised as provincial, but these also cover quite large sections of rural Australia. Again, focusing on the importance of representing the diversity of rural and regional Australia, selection was based on the following criteria: representation across political parties and states; geographical diversity (a mix of rural, regional, coastal, inland and variation in size); a mix of marginal and safe electorates; variation in primary industry; and demographic dimensions. The five electorates chosen were Parkes in New South Wales, O’Connor in
Western Australia, Capricornia in Queensland, Mallee in Victoria, and Grey in South Australia (see also Appendix One).

The title of this monograph is *The Voice and the Vote of the Bush*. In reporting the responses received I have let their words speak. In addition, because this ‘data’ is not quantifiable, most of the material is presented in the form of quotations. Some are lengthy, others repetitive, and reading them may seem tedious to some. But they are the thoughts and expressions of people who want to speak, and they are no less worthy of examination than other kinds of ‘data’. The reader may learn nothing new from these quotations, but I hope that they, like me, will get a ‘feel’ for what it was to be a voter in rural and regional Australia in the first year or so of the 21st Century.18

Many might say they have heard before all of what is said here. However, the nuances and different dimensions of rural and regional political culture have been overlooked for some time now, or these dimensions have been labelled populist and dismissed. Rural and regional discontent may have been popularised by the rise of One Nation, but it may also signify a deeper malaise amongst country Australians about the practices of representative democracy.

This monograph offers a ‘voice’ to many who feel neglected and, in doing so, highlights the complex nature of political representation along with the unlikelihood of finding a single solution to renewing civic trust in either country or city Australia. I hope, however, that this project will contribute to the debate on how parliamentarians can (re)establish a relationship of trust with rural and regional Australians and, in a broader sense, how the parliament–people connection can be strengthened across the country.

**Endnotes**


2. While 1920 was the birth of the federal Country Party, at the state level, Country Party candidates had been elected to the WA Parliament as early as 1914, see, for example, D Woodward, ‘The National Party’, in J Summers, D Woodward and A. Parkin (eds), *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia*, 7th edn, Pearson Education Longman, Frenchs Forest NSW.


5. R Gerritsen, ‘Deregulating Australia Post: Another attack on Regional Australia?’., ACLGS Monograph 1, University of Canberra, 1998.


7. D Aitkin, The Country Party in NSW, ANU Press, Canberra, 1972; D Aitkin, Stability and Change in Australian Politics, ANU Press 1982. Moreover, evidence presented by Goot counters arguments made by Hugh Mackay that political discontent has been in permanent decline in Australia.

8. This definition replicates the one used by the current Federal Government and closely matches the divisional categories adopted by the Australian Electoral Commission.


12. The Productivity Commission Report, Impact of Competition Policy Reforms on Rural and Regional Australia, indicated that National Competition Policy has had a differential impact across rural and regional Australia, with Gippsland particularly disadvantaged. (Melbourne, 1999).

13. G Lawrence, ‘Rural Australia: insights and issues from contemporary political economy’ in G Lawrence, K Lyons and S Momtaz (eds), Social Change in Rural Australia, Rural Social and Economic Research Centre, Central Queensland University, 1996. Although figures fluctuate depending on commodity prices. See P Connell, J Garnault, R Lindsay, Country Australia: influences on population and employment, ABARE, Canberra, 2000.


17. Fenno, op. cit.

18. This methodological approach is used by Fenno in his participant observation work on American politicians (Fenno, op. cit). Fenno's work has also informed that of Rhodes in his (re)analysis of policy networks and the bureaucracy (RW Rhodes, 'Putting people back into networks', Australian Journal of Political Science, vol. 37, no. 3, 2002.)
Chapter One: Rural and Regional Discontent: Setting the Scene

In order to put this research into context, two manifestations of political discontent are reviewed here. The first is the electoral behaviour of rural and regional Australians and how this has changed over time. The second is citizens’ feelings of trust in the political process. The chapter examines what is considered to be the cause of such distrust, and explores what solutions might be possible in restoring citizens’ political trust.

Country Australia and the Vote

Don Aitkin once argued that there were two good reasons for paying particular attention to the urban–rural dimension in Australian politics. First because of the continued existence of the National Party (modern agrarian parties being rare creatures), and second because tensions between city and country have always existed both in Australia and elsewhere. Kemp also claimed in 1978 that the potency of the rural–urban division in Australian politics had been sorely neglected by political analysts. Both Aitkin and Kemp attempted to put this right by dedicating considerable attention to the electoral behaviour of those residing in country Australia.

Aitkin described rural Australia in the late 1960s: no large cities, little heavy industry, primary producers, less formally educated, more likely to be Protestant, churchgoers and possessors of conservative social attitudes. Describing country people as inward-looking, slow to accept new ideas, less volatile in their voting patterns, and strongly anti-Labor, Aitkin pondered the importance of community homogeneity to party identification. He suggested that the political outlook of farmers for example owed its character principally to the fact that most farmers’ friends and neighbours were other farmers. Further, he argued that despite population changes, the particular identity of such communities would remain intact over time.

However, since the late 1960s, rural Australia has changed considerably. The process of urbanisation has continued, with the proportion of those living outside urban areas accounting for only 13 per cent of the total population.
Similarly, rural production, which absorbed 25 per cent of the workforce in 1933 had dropped to 9 per cent in 1966 and is now estimated to be around 4 per cent.4

The process of urbanisation strengthened the non-Labor parties hold on the ‘bush’ vote. Most of those who left the country were members of the rural working class, rather than traditional conservatives. Country townspeople were employed in small industries rather than large unionised ones and so where unlikely to be strong Labor voters.5 Kemp also argued that there was a tendency for blue-collar workers in rural communities to give less support to the ALP because of their association with farmers and graziers who were unlikely to be Labor supporters.6

Population decline in rural Australia has not been uniform. Some regional centres have experienced growth while others have been reduced to small towns barely able to meet their remaining infrastructure costs. There has been population growth in regional coastal areas, particularly in Queensland, New South Wales and the south west of Western Australia, where horticulture, tourism and other services are expanding and where the number of retired people moving to these areas is increasing.7 Meanwhile many smaller rural and remote country towns are fighting to survive.8

Despite such decline, the population of rural and regional Australia is a significant minority of the total population (33.6 per cent).

**Table 1: Population Distribution in Australia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital cities</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major urban areas</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional towns (a)</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural towns (b)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural areas (c)</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/regional (a+b+c)</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Lloyd, Harding and Hellwig.9
The Australian Electoral Commission groups electorates (or divisions) into four categories: inner and outer metropolitan (located in capital cities), and provincial and rural.\textsuperscript{10} Just over 30 per cent of enrolled voters live in ‘rural’ electorates (labelled as such because they are divisions without a majority of enrolment in major provincial cities). Combining this with provincial electorates (those with a majority enrolled in major provincial cities), means 42 per cent of voters live in rural and regional Australia (64 electorates).

There are some difficulties with these categories. For example, the 42 per cent encompasses cities the size of Newcastle and Wollongong, while electorates like McMillan, Burke and Flinders are considered rural despite their proximity to Melbourne. In contrast, Capricornia is classified as provincial because 70 per cent of the population live in or around Rockhampton, but geographically it spans a huge area, most of which is low density rural and some extremely remote. The Government currently defines regional Australia as everywhere outside capital cities. This definition encompasses 85 electorates.

Given that rural and regional Australians are a significant minority of voters, what patterns have we seen emerge in the last two decades?

\textbf{Figure 1: Rural Vote for Major Parties 1984–2001}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{rural_vote.png}
\caption{Rural Vote for Major Parties 1984–2001}
\end{figure}

Source: Newman and Koprak.\textsuperscript{11}
Looking at the vote for major parties in rural divisions since 1984, it is clear that the National Party has fared worst, given this is their home constituency, dropping from 26.1 per cent of the primary vote in 1984 compared to 16.1 per cent in 1998 (Figure 1). Most of this decline occurred at the 1998 election and there was only a minimal recovery in 2001 (17.8 per cent). So despite the Tampa affair and the international situation surrounding the 2001 election, the Nationals were unable to regain the votes they lost in 1998. In contrast, the Liberal Party has held its own amongst voters in rural divisions, showing a slight increase from 27.1 per cent in 1984 to 29.9 per cent in 1996. Rural support for the ALP has continued to decline since 1984, with little evidence of recovery, despite the (re)emergence of Country Labor.

The ALP also experienced a constant slide in support amongst voters in provincial electorates (Figure 2). Even in 1998, when Labor came close to winning the election the vote in provincial divisions did not significantly increase. Similarly the Nationals have experienced ongoing decline in regional Australia. It is the Liberal Party that has made considerable gains over the last 15 years. So while two of the three major parties have endured a decrease in support in both rural and provincial electorates, this has not been the case for the Liberal Party.

**Figure 2: Provincial Vote for Major Parties 1984–2001**

Source: Newman and Kopras.\(^12\)
There has been ongoing speculation that Australians generally are not happy with the two-party system largely on account of its adversarial nature, most evident through the decline over the last 40 years in the primary vote for the major parties. In the 1990s, the major parties polled 84.4 per cent of the primary vote in the House of Representatives compared to 94.2 per cent in the 1940s.13

Strategic voting (where voters support a major party in the lower House but vote differently in the Senate) has also become commonplace amongst many voters at federal elections, suggesting that many citizens are looking to check government power. Senate results show a considerable and continuous decline in the major party first preference vote between the 1940s and 1990s. The average major party vote in the Senate in the 1950s stood at 92 per cent. By the 1990s this figure stood at 80.5 per cent. In 1998 25 per cent of voters chose a minor party or independent in the Senate.14 In the 2001 election, across rural and provincial divisions, the average major party vote for the House of Representatives was 80 per cent, compared to 77 per cent for the Senate.

Not surprisingly this drop has coincided with a similar decrease in the levels of party identification. Since the 1960s, the proportion of non-party identifiers has almost doubled (from 8 per cent to 14 per cent). However, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, the percentage of those who strongly identify with a political party has only shown a significant drop since the mid-1980s.15 Amongst those who live outside metropolitan areas, there has been a drop in those who identify very strongly with a political party between 1987 and 1998, but no significant increase in those who do not identify.16

Inglehart has argued that the decline in support for established political parties reflects a broader decline in respect for all authority, which is a result of attitudinal change amongst much of the voting public. There is now a cohort, he argues, who take economic prosperity for granted and focus instead on politics and quality of the physical and social environment. These voters have become more critical of how governments manage quality of life issues.17 In a comparative analysis, Inglehart argues that while there is decline in support for established parties, there is not a decline in political interest. Rather, established political parties have lost the capacity to mobilise those who have been identified as post-materialist.
The post-materialist argument has become a popular, albeit contested, one amongst political scientists in Australia in recent years in an attempt to explain the increasing attractiveness of minor parties amongst voters, particularly the Democrats and the Greens. Drawing primarily from Australian Election Survey data, these authors have sought to demonstrate that new politics, derived from an increasing concern for personal satisfaction and fulfilment, has come to outweigh old politics, derived from economic concerns, law and order and class. In particular Bean and Papadakis suggest that there is the potential for realignment in a new politics age toward parties like the Australian Democrats, where social location is decreasingly relevant to political alignments. Some argue that the Australian political system has never been as stable as conventional wisdom dictates, but it remains the case that the electoral system in the House of Representatives has ensured it is difficult for minor parties to gain a regular and continuous presence.

**Figure 3: Vote for Non-major Parties and Others in House of Representatives by Division 1984–2001.**

While those in rural electorates have been described as the most loyal of all voters, Figure 3, demonstrates that since 1990, this trend has begun to reverse. At the 1990 election, support for non-major parties and others in rural divisions doubled, (as was the case in provincial and metropolitan electorates).
In 1998, with the inclusion of Pauline Hanson One Nation (PHON) in the electoral contest, the vote for non-major party candidates again almost doubled, reaching close to 25 per cent. Interestingly, in 2001, the major parties won back very little of this vote, despite the drop in support for PHON.

Finally, if we take PHON out of the picture, and look only at the support for ‘other’ candidates, which includes independents, in the House of Representatives, we see that up until 1998, rural voters have tended to provide less support for this category of candidate compared to metropolitan voters. However, rural votes for others have steadily increased since 1984, with surges in support evident at the 1990 and 2001 elections. Overall, since 1984, rural support for other candidates has increased from 2 per cent to over 7 per cent. Whether this trend continues upward remains to be seen, but it does seem that some rural voters are looking beyond the three major parties when considering their voting preferences.
Political Trust and Political Institutions

Voting is one way of analysing rural and regional discontent. Another is to look at political trust. While there exists a consensus that democracy as a value system is acceptable, research and opinion polls have suggested that an identifiable discontent amongst voters remained: what some labelled a sense of alienation or ‘angst’. This discontent focused on the institutions of governance, with political leaders, political parties and politicians generally (as well as other public and some private institutions) experiencing a decline in public confidence.23

Hugh Mackay has suggested that the appearance of distrust is not a particularly new phenomenon in Australia. His belief is that there has been a long history of cynicism amongst Australians about the integrity, quality and vision of politicians.24 Dean Jaensch is of a similar view (albeit less pessimistic than Mackay), arguing that apathy and scepticism towards political actors and institutions have long been integral components of Australian political culture.25

There are numerous reasons offered in the literature, which seek to explain the general decline in trust in institutions of governance. First, citizens in Australia and elsewhere have considerably higher levels of education than in previous decades, which may well be associated with the widely reported long-term slide in confidence in government and associated institutions. Education encourages people to question, and it is argued that the result is that citizens may become more critical of what they are told and less deferential to all sources of authority. In other words, citizens have become more conscious of their rights and more sceptical about government decision-making processes, leading to a decline in political support.26

Second, distrust in government has been linked to governments themselves becoming overloaded. Citizens’ expectations have increased substantially in recent decades, but many of the demands placed on government are incompatible and often impossible to solve. Overseas research suggests that when this phenomenon is combined with the slowdown in economic growth, governments are unable financially to meet citizens’ demands.27

Third, while Inglehart has cited post-materialist values as an important predictor of decreasing political support, others have maintained that the changing nature of citizens’ material interests remain relevant. The rise of
global competition, particularly with respect to agricultural markets, has led to the perception amongst many citizens that they no longer have control over their lives. This sense of powerlessness leads to a sense of insecurity and anxiety and blame for this is often placed on governments.28 In the Australian context, this argument has been most clearly put in the book entitled *Land of Discontent.*29

Fourth, the work of Robert Putnam has stimulated a renewed interest in the relationship that may exist between social or personal trust and political trust. Putnam, who wrote about the crisis of ‘civic engagement’ in the United States, claimed that American’s direct engagement in politics had fallen steadily, which he attributed to an erosion of social capital and social connectedness.30 While a number of commentators accept the argument that there exists ‘an intimate, even constitutive relationship between trust and democracy’,31 there has been less support for Putnam’s suggestions that recent social and cultural change has brought with it a decline in social and political interaction and that this in turn has resulted in a decline in political support.

Fifth, increasing distrust has been linked to citizens’ perception of political dishonesty and corruption amongst political elites. It has been suggested that many people believe politicians lie and make promises that they break once elected.32 Orren has argued that due process appears to have been undermined by ‘excessive influence and underserved privileges’ being granted to special interests.33 This perception became a central tenet of the 1996 election campaign, and the phrase ‘governing for all Australians’ has since been picked up by both major parties. Politicians have also been identified as filing false travel returns, not declaring financial conflicts of interest, inappropriately distributing government money (for example, ‘sports rorts’) and increasingly voters are told (through the media) about their sexual indiscretions.

Finally, a related explanation for declining political trust has been the increasing use of various media by politicians and governments, through ‘spin doctors’, to deliver their message.34 In addition, tabloid journalism and the requirement for short snappy news bites may have attracted more readers and viewers, but it has also had the capacity to alienate voters.35 While most Australians appear to have little confidence in the press, there has continued to be an increase in media coverage of political corruption and inefficiencies in government, stories that encourage distrust in both government and media institutions.36 For example headlines such as ‘You Can Always Trust A Politician (to Lie)’37,
and “When are Australian politicians going to shape up?” have done little to generate voter support for politicians.

**Measuring Political Trust**

There has been an increase in academic and popular interest in the importance of political trust to the workings of a robust democratic polity. With this have come questions as to how best to conceptualise and empirically test the ‘crisis of democracy’ thesis and the dimensions of the alleged decline in political trust. There is recognition that evidence of political distrust may be no more than dissatisfaction with the incumbents in office—a normal and healthy aspect of the democratic process—and not an indicator of a failing political system.39

There is also a widespread recognition that political trust cannot be thought of as ‘if it is all of one piece’. Rather, the concept of political support or political trust is best thought of as multi-dimensional: that is, citizens have the capacity to distinguish between different levels or objects of support. In order to capture the different dimensions (using a positivist approach), Easton outlined three objects of political trust:

1. the political community (a citizen’s sense of belonging and attachment to a particular nation-state)

2. the political regime (the principles, values and institutional presence of representative democracy)

3. the political authorities (those elected and non-elected officials specific to a particular time and particular institution).

Researchers have designed questions which would represent each of these three dimensions. Results indicated that citizens may support democratic ideals, but have had less favourable views on the performance of the institutions of government. In the American case, they may support the institution of the president, but feel disenchanted with a particular president. In the Australian case, this dissonance has been reflected in citizens’ regard of political parties. People articulated distaste for the adversarial nature of two-party politicking. Yet party identification for the major parties, although in decline, remained the primary predictor of how people would vote.
In addition to identification of the object of political trust, analysts have highlighted the importance of identifying more precisely the nature of this political support or trust. For example, is it diffuse, in that it is a cemented set of beliefs that are not easily shifted? Or is it specific support, in that it refers to particular actions or performance of particular institutions or elites and may easily change.43

Dalton argues that such distinctions are necessary since all governments at some time fail to meet the public expectations of them. This in itself does not constitute political discontent or decline in support for the various institutions of governance that exist within a polity. Rather, political systems retain a critical amount of diffuse support, irrespective of dissatisfaction with a particular incumbent. However, this diffuse support can be eroded over time, as dissatisfaction with core institutional structures or the process of representative democracy becomes the norm.44

According to the World Values Survey conducted in 1995 support or commitment by Australians to the nation (political community) stood at 73 per cent of those surveyed. In terms of national pride, Australia was ranked second (97 per cent) behind the United States, a decrease of only one percentage point between 1981 and the mid-1990s.45 Confidence in the ideal of democracy also seems to be holding strong in Australia. Around 80 per cent of those surveyed in 2001 believed that democracy is the best form of government. When asked how much confidence they as voters had in the Australian political system, around 54 per cent of responses were positive.46

There has been increasing attention given by Australian researchers to questions of trust in the political institutions associated with representative democracy. Drawing primarily on survey data, their findings suggest several points of interest here:

• Civic engagement with the political process, if measured in terms of voter interest in politics, discussion of politics, and commitment to vote if voting were voluntary, has not declined substantially over the last 20 years. Nor is there any indication of a relationship between life satisfaction and political satisfaction.47

• Support for politicians as an occupational group has declined in recent years, although it has not been particularly high over the past 30 years. Moreover,
there has been a more general decrease in the levels of trust exhibited by respondents for a wide range of professionals, not just politicians.48

- Citizen’s expectations of politicians are much higher than the politicians’ expectations of themselves, suggesting we will always be disappointed.49

- Governments tend to garner high levels of trust when they are first elected, but this support dissipates the longer that government is in office.50

- Parties still matter in Australian politics despite the vote for major parties gradually declining in the House of Representatives and a more substantial decline in the Senate. Part of the explanation lies in the attraction of party leaders, with strong leadership resulting in higher levels of party support.51

So while Hugh Mackay’s work has viewed citizen dissatisfaction with politics with some pessimism, other Australian commentators are more optimistic, suggesting instead that citizens are still connected with the institutions of representative democracy.

If the current state of political discontent in rural and regional Australia can be explained away as nothing more than a blip in the lifecycle of a Coalition government, does this mean that this discontent is not worthy of further investigation? I would argue not necessarily. While survey data gives us the opportunity to gauge historical trends, it provides little understanding of the complex relationship between democracy and trust and how this might be strengthened. Some political scepticism is no doubt healthy; indeed, liberal government was based on a distrust of centralised authority. But that does not mean our democratic processes are sufficiently robust. The ‘if it’s not broke, don’t fix it’ mantra might be comforting, but it offers little in the way of ideas and direction if our aim is to alleviate political discontent and create a stronger connection between citizens, urban and rural, and their institutions of government.

Trust and politics have an uneasy association. Mark Warren has argued that social relationships of trust can incorporate elements of familiarity, confidence and mutual understanding, which minimise the sense of risk and vulnerability that are associated with the giving of trust.52 In contrast, he says political relationships are more fragile; they involve the unfamiliar, the unknown, but are also more visible and potentially exploitative. Representation of an increasingly diverse group of voters across large electorates is not necessarily conducive to
relationships of mutual understandings between an elected representative and voters. Two other reasons for the fragility of political trust are also important. First, successful campaigns require candidates to manufacture a relationship of trust within particular communities, but once elected they must then reach beyond these groupings to other voters whom they also represent. This broader representative requirement involves compromise, which could be read as a betrayal by supporters. Second, while campaigning focuses on the big issues of interest, governing focuses more on the minutiae, which is often less transparent to voters.53

Nonetheless, trust remains a fundamental and desirable element of democracy, because trust can create a positive environment within which change associated with politics and policy development can be undertaken. The question then, according to Warren, is how the tensions between trust and politics can be ‘mitigated, diffused or transformed’ and allow for a stronger democracy.54 His answer, and one that I use to frame my conclusions, lies within the theory of deliberative democracy. John Uhr has also drawn on the ideas and opportunities offered by deliberative theory in his analysis of how Australian parliamentary democracy can become more effective.

Drawing from Uhr, deliberation can be defined as a process of ‘public reasoning, with procedures for free and reasoned agreement among equals. … It is a form of open politics in which argument features … protected by institutional practices which allow peaceful dissent’.55 Without delving into the theoretical the practical features that can be derived from both Uhr’s definition and Warren’s positioning on trust and politics are that deliberation:

• can be time consuming, but if participation is reserved for issues that are highly politicized, the benefits of deliberation will outweigh the costs

• requires cognitive resources, but which could be provided, ultimately generating more interest and participation in politics, which leads to more trust in the democratic process. There is a crucial role for communication in underwriting trust. Trust will thrive when institutions are structured so as to provide the necessary transparency and institutional means for challenging authorities, institutions and trusted individuals
which provokes a challenge may initially expose conflicts of interest and identity. But during this process the perspectives of individuals may be extended by introducing them to new ideas, voices and knowledge;

through fora, unlike the mass media, provides opportunities to explain oneself, to provide assurances, to harness the mutual respect and tact that are more likely in face-to-face relations. This can lead to a focus on shared commonalities and predicaments rather than on differences, which may moderate the feelings of vulnerability or isolation.

has a public and transparent nature which allows officials to offer public and visible justifications, reasons and motivations. Explaining the compromises can make these compromises acceptable to those who imagined a betrayal of confidence.

Finally, the process of deliberation ensures a kind of ‘politics of recognition’. By communicating, there is a recognition of the other person as a speaker, and by extension, suggests an initial extension of trust that may become the first step towards generating more trust.56

Thus, Warren suggests that trust complements and supports deliberative resolutions of political conflict and that deliberative approaches to political conflict can generate trust.57 A virtuous circle in a sense.

A focus on the benefits of deliberation therefore, has the potential to increase voters’ trust in institutions such as parliament and political parties and government. However, to succeed there is a need to personalise the political process, through communication that is open, interactive, respectful and personal. While the women’s liberationists three decades ago were claiming the personal is political, rejuvenating trust in democratic institutions may be about making the political personal. Initially, the onus may seem to fall on the individual elected representative to make the connections between the parliament and the people. But this need not be the only avenue for reform. Senators, ministers, shadow ministers, bureaucrats, staffers, public intellectuals, and citizens themselves, all have an opportunity to imagine and practice an expanded and more deliberative process of representation. The snapshot provided here suggests that amongst some in rural and regional Australia there is a belief that the remoteness of the parliament and its players can be ‘imagined’ differently and as more inclusive.
Endnotes


3. Aitkin, op. cit.


5. Aitkin, op. cit.


8. See for example MF Rogers and YMJ Collins (eds), The Future of Australia’s Country Towns, Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities, La Trobe University, 2001.


11. G Newman, and A Kopras, ‘Federal Elections’ (various years), Research/Background Papers, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra.

12. ibid.


14. ibid.


22. ibid.


24. H Mackay, Reinventing Australia: The mind and mood of Australia in the 90s, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1993, p. 169.


28. Nye, ibid. McAllister however finds that while economic conditions are more important than social ones, they are not significant in predicting popular confidence in democratic institutions; rather political culture and historical circumstances are important in shaping popular perceptions of the workings of their political system. (I McAllister ‘The Economic Performance of Governments’, in Norris (ed), Critical Citizens. Global Support for Democratic Government, op. cit., pp. 188–203).


32. Goot, ‘Distrustful, Disenchanted and Disengaged?’, op. cit.
33. Orren, op.cit.
34. Nye, Zelikow and King, op. cit.
35. R Leone, ‘What’s Trust Got to Do with It?’, *The American Prospect*, no. 17, Spring, 1994, p. 79.
42. Goot, ‘Distrustful, Disenchanted and Disengaged?’, op. cit.
43. Easton, op. cit.
44. Dalton, in Norris, op. cit.
47. Goot, ‘Distrustful, Disenchanted and Disengaged?’, op. cit.
48. ibid.
51. Bean, ibid.
53. ibid.
54. ibid, pp. 315–317.
57. ibid., p. 337.
Speculation as to how rural and regional Australians would vote in the 2001 federal election was rife after 1998, the election in which those in rural areas were twice as likely as others to vote for Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. While parts of the rural community have voted for minor parties before, over 15 per cent voted One Nation in some rural areas in 1998, and not all preferences flowed back to the Coalition. In late 2000, Michelle Grattan reported that the major parties recognised that their traditional groups of voters had shrunk and that there were more ‘soft voters’ in rural and regional Australia with a very ‘hard edge’.1 Another commentator labelled these voters ‘politically promiscuous’.2

Rural and regional discontent was also apparent at the ballot box at state level. In the 1999 Victorian state election, there was a swing to the ALP in the regional cities of Bendigo and Ballarat and independents polled 17.5 per cent of the primary vote in regional Victoria culminating in the election of three independents.3 In 2001, the West Australian election result provided Labor with a record number of districts in the Legislative Council and in the Queensland state election which followed a week later, the National and Liberal parties each received only 14 per cent of the vote, compared to Labor’s 49 per cent.4 In both elections, the non-major party vote was significant (29 per cent and 22 per cent respectively)5 As in Victoria, it was in Western Australia’s non-metropolitan seats where electoral volatility was most apparent.

Since 1998, ‘rivers of ink have flowed in analysis of the rise of Hanson and her party.’6 Some commentators argued it was a backlash against Paul Keating, and his perceived arrogance, political correctness and pandering to cultural and other elites. Others blamed poor performance by Prime Minister Howard, economic rationalism and the primacy given to the free market, and the emergence of a deep-seated racism.7 A common theme that emerged from these analyses was that a social cleavage was appearing within the nation, albeit labelled in a variety of ways: between the haves and have-nots; between elites and mainstream; between city and country.
Even before the rise of One Nation, commentators in both Australia and overseas, maintained we were living in an era of political discontent (as outlined in the previous chapter). However, it was the rapid rise of One Nation that gave the discontent in rural and regional Australia its profile. This Chapter explores how country respondents expressed and made sense of the discontent that had been attributed to those living in rural and regional Australia as a result of the strong electoral support given to One Nation. As such, it is largely a descriptive exercise, focusing on perceptions, but some interesting themes become apparent.

First, although country respondents valued strongly, and unanimously, the presence of democracy, they appeared less confident in the way democracy was practiced. Government, the major political parties and politicians were all subject to criticism. Second, One Nation and Pauline Hanson featured significantly in most of the narratives and the reasons given for the Party’s apparent support were several. Partly it was an expression of discontent with the institutions of representative democracy and the attention given to ‘special’ interests, but it was also described as resulting from a broader, less tangible sentiment of isolation and being forgotten, that was not targeted at any particular government. Third, little of this negativity was directed at their local federal MPs. Indeed, many respondents felt sympathy for their representative, acknowledging the arduous task of traversing large electorates.

These themes indicate that the presence of political discontent and distrust is not easily categorised or quantified as some analysts have suggested. The picture presented here, while only a historical snapshot, highlights the importance of the ‘personal’ and the ‘local’ to a sense of connection with political institutions.

**Lest Government Forget**

Both internationally and in Australia it has been argued that political discontent has manifested itself most starkly in public distrust of political institutions, government and politicians themselves. Evidence from the United States has suggested, for instance, that while over 60 per cent of respondents in 1964 believed that government would generally try to do ‘the right thing’, by 1994 this figure had fallen to 10 per cent. According to opinion polls in Australia in 1999, less than a third of respondents felt that the government was doing ‘a good job’, while almost half said they did not trust the government.
Investigation of political trust in Australian institutions of government began in earnest over a decade ago, once suitable empirical survey data became available.\textsuperscript{11} The findings of current Australian literature demonstrate that there was a sense of discontent and distrust amongst voters in Australia, although the nature and objects of this discontent were not uniform. For example, between 1983 and 1995 a gradual although not consistent decline in confidence in the federal government, legal system, press, and public service was evident. More specifically, Clive Bean and Murray Goot have argued that voter distrust in government has been related to the life cycle of Australian governments. That is, with the arrival of a new government, some sense of trust is restored—people were more likely to feel positive—but once that government began its second term, two thirds of respondents became more sceptical of the trustworthiness of government.\textsuperscript{12}

In an analysis of the same data from a rural–regional perspective, a similar pattern was evident (see Table 1). In 1993, during the second term of the Keating Government, 45 per cent of those surveyed in country Australia thought that government primarily looked after itself. In 1996, with the arrival of the Coalition Government, this figure had dropped to 29.5 per cent. However, by 1998, almost half of those surveyed believed government was for the most part self-interested.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People in government can be trusted to:</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always look after themselves</td>
<td>45 (42)</td>
<td>29.5 (30.0)</td>
<td>47 (42)</td>
<td>42 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes look after themselves</td>
<td>23 (23)</td>
<td>21.5 (23.5)</td>
<td>22 (22)</td>
<td>27 (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes do the right thing</td>
<td>22 (27)</td>
<td>33.0 (33.0)</td>
<td>21 (26)</td>
<td>20 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually do the right thing</td>
<td>10 (8)</td>
<td>16.0 (13.5)</td>
<td>10 (10)</td>
<td>11 (11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{*}city denoted in brackets. Data from Australian Electoral Surveys, Social Science Data Archives, Australian National University.\textsuperscript{13}

These trends reflect those identified by both Bean and Goot. However, one interesting point is that when trust was in decline, the rural-urban split became more pronounced, with respondents in rural and regional Australia much more
likely than their city counterparts to express a lack of trust in government, particularly in 1993 and 1998.

In 1996, after 13 years of a federal Labor Government, citizens in rural and regional Australia no doubt had high expectations that the incoming Liberal-National Government would address the problems affecting rural Australia in the new global and deregulated environment. However, many of the macroeconomic policies implemented by Labor including decreased protectionism, tariff reduction, scaling back public sector services, privatisation and the deregulation of rural industries continued under the Coalition.¹⁴

Commentators argued that the results of these policies exacerbated the socially adverse effects of globalisation and ‘proved deleterious to Australia’s rural and regional communities’.¹⁵ Nor were the economic spin-offs evenly distributed. For example, regions were differently affected by the introduction of national competition policy,¹⁶ while in terms of economic well-being; the biggest losers appeared to be the residents of small towns rather than farmers.¹⁷

A significant number of respondents in the process of this research believed country people were hurting as a result of government policies on telecommunications (almost all respondents cited the sale of Telstra as problematic), gun laws, the GST and more broadly by the economic insecurity that they perceived was the result of globalisation and a lack of government protection. They said:

> Fuel is a bit of an emotive issue because it was one of the things that the GST was sold on, that fuel in fact would be cheaper … and it’s not. The whole GST thing, most people feel that they’ve been sold a bit of a pup. They are not against the GST but they were told that it would be good for the farming community, but no one can see how it’s good for the farming community.

> Because of the campaigns that have been run about roads … people are quite aware that 50 per cent plus of what they pay at the pump is going directly into federal coffers and is not coming back to the states or to roads at all. That’s what upsets people particularly now that the prices are so high.

> We think that in rural areas you do miss out on a lot, like telecommunications, good mobile phone coverage and so on. It makes it hard for business and for a farmer, it’s life or death really.
Telstra … should always remain a public utility because communication and roads are the two single most important things because of our size and our population.

A raft of other, often more localised policy issues, such as drought, irrigation, tourism, sugar, declining population, youth unemployment, family trust legislation, access to services and the sale of the wheat-marketing board, were also raised and discussed passionately. Several respondents expressed a desire to be included in some way, in discussions on these issues with bureaucrats and elected officials, even if a resolution was not forthcoming.

Amongst the respondents, almost all saw the value of a democratic system of government (the exceptions were several Aboriginal respondents. Their views are discussed in more depth in Chapter Three). But there was a sense expressed that rural voters had little influence or voice.

People here are not against politics, they are all for democracy, they are all for the system we’ve got in Australia—it’s been a good system—but there’s that feeling of ‘my voice isn’t important’ coming through.

That many respondents perceived that there was a problem with the government’s performance did not mean there existed a problem in reality. However, in politics, perception is important, and in this case, government was thought to be neither acting in their interests, nor listening to their concerns. This notion of being forgotten, or not listened to, was a theme which resonated through most of the interviews.

If they would just come out and stand still for five minutes and really, really listen to local issues and really take on board the local issues then things might be a bit better if they really understood it.

Aboriginal people would feel they had more of a voice if they did get to see their politicians more often. Politicians should go out of their way to talk to and listen to people. I don’t think a lot of people truly understand what politicians are supposed to be doing for them. And maybe that’s one thing they could do better is market themselves a bit more, telling us about how they can help us.

If you could get parliamentarians to come and be involved in a discussion, it would go a long way towards breaking down the feeling that they weren’t being listened to, yes.
One state representative commented that, ‘Country policy wasn’t being determined by country people, it was being determined by what marginal city seats could afford to do’. This theme was repeated by a number of respondents, for example:

It wouldn’t matter who is in there. It’s the fact that it’s so sparsely populated out this way means that when politicians come out, they promise the world they say ‘oh yes, we’ll do this for such and such little community, isn’t that wonderful’. But when they get back and they do their sums and ‘oh we’re going to get more votes if we do something somewhere else’, so they forget about us.

Many respondents suggested it was this sense of ‘being forgotten’ that One Nation had been able to harness. That post-1998 the Coalition Government appeared to pay more attention to the bush only confirmed for many respondents that a protest vote could have an impact on government. Irrespective of whether voters were in a marginal or safe electorate, a vote for One Nation was seen as a ‘wake-up call’:

Pauline Hanson’s One Nation raised the politicians’ awareness of the rural areas. All of a sudden the rest of them are showing more interest than they did before Pauline. So we have a lot to thank her for.

It is one thing that has to be attributed to One Nation, that it was made clear to the government that the regions needed more attention. If nothing else they would give that credit to One Nation. So even though the bush has got so much attention lately, they read that as we have been ignored for so long we are just catching up.

They [PHON voters] were the people who were disenchanted because of what was perceived as a fairly intense neglect of country areas over a long period of time. I think that’s what led people to record a dissenting vote.

Moreover, Pauline Hanson was credited with giving the impression she was listening to country people:

The key to her success is the fact she talked to people about the things they wanted to hear and the fact that we’d had a really bad season, everything was going wrong. She really talked about it, she understood it. She is a battler and she was talking to them as a battler.
Certainly One Nation offered voters a simple message. Labelled by Stokes as a form of ‘conservative populism’, Pauline Hanson’s political rhetoric took social and economic complexities and reduced them to simple generalities:

Their perception is that Pauline Hanson is listening to them. It wouldn’t matter that they’ve never met her, that the closest they’ve come to seeing her was on the TV dressed in her mother’s curtains at the electoral office on the night of the election. But because she echoes or mirrors, not every thought they’ve had, but the occasional thought, they think she’s listening.

One Nation took pub rhetoric that you hear in any bar in any rural or regional community at 9.30 pm on a Saturday night, and made a platform out of it.

In addition, Hanson directed her message to ‘ordinary Australians’ defined as those who were not members of the intellectual establishment or the ruling political elite; nor were they members of Aboriginal or migrant communities. The message itself was couched in terms of grievance, blame and protest, with an emphasis on abandonment of the people by elites and the virtue of honest political leadership: a leadership she sought to provide as an ‘ordinary Australian’:

Because to put it simply, she hit the nail right on the head. With the law and order, with the immigration and that sort of thing. She’s not racist, I don’t think so, and I’ve been to one of her meetings and they’re all middle-aged people who have probably been self-funded. There are no radicals there. They’re all, you know, just ordinary people.

The perception of at least two-thirds of respondents was that the support for Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party was most influenced by her position on race. One Nation saw difference as problematic and government recognition of this difference as a form of ‘disrespect to Anglo Australia’. Government funding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and other targeted programs were seen as perpetrating unequal treatment, being paid for by taxpayers who themselves were suffering. Several respondents linked the race issue to the issue of country people hurting, suggesting welfare policies aimed at ameliorating disadvantage were being misdirected:

We’re sick and tired of all of these grabs for, you know, I’m not picking on Aboriginal people or anything, but all this—the money perk, you know, all sorts of causes and you know, they’re just sick of all of that.
The only thing I dislike about government at the moment, it’s my money that’s paying for all this … what do you call them, the small groups—all the minorities around getting all the support they do. I thought governments were for the vast majority, not for the minority, it flies in the face of the general people.

The key to me for One Nation and why people voted for her, Pauline Hanson said one thing and I think a lot of people would agree with, and that is, why aren’t we all just Australian and why aren’t we getting all the same treatment. But I think there’s a basic misunderstanding there that we all come from different backgrounds and we all have different backgrounds and that’s including Aboriginal people.

While Aboriginal communities were targeted for considerable comment, there was less expression of discontent concerning immigration, particularly in rural areas that were dependent on itinerant (often immigrant) labour. Interestingly, recent research on One Nation supporters has suggested that opposition to government help for Aboriginal people was a stronger influence than beliefs about reducing the immigrant intake.

There were a small number of non-Aboriginal respondents who felt that One Nation had undermined the harmonious relationship between Aboriginal communities and others in country areas:

This is a great community that has very little racial problems. A third of our town population is Aboriginal. And one of these ladies and myself [a woman] actually told the One Nation guy to pack up his stuff and piss off out of town because we didn’t want him here, and he did. … We don’t need that you know, our kids get on well, our sports are played well and in a crisis they’d be beside you as much as anybody else.

Tony Windsor was approached by PHON to be a candidate at the 1998 federal election, but he refused, arguing that ‘one of the problems I’ve had with One Nation is when things hit a rough patch they pull out the race card. That’s division. We can’t afford to do that in the country. We either unite or continue to be marginalised’.23

Of the nine Aboriginal community respondents interviewed, two were surprised with the support One Nation received in their areas:
And talking about us the way she did and the wasting of money, surprised us. This is not South Carolina with the Ku Klux Klan.

I was very surprised that they had the power and support they had. You know, they talk about being a free country and there’s no discrimination. And then you turn around and you get someone like Pauline Hanson who jumps up and says these things degrading Aboriginal people—and then has all this support.

In the main, however, Aboriginal respondents were disappointed but not shocked by the level of support that emerged for One Nation. There was also an acute feeling that any references made about law and order as a community issue were implicit references to race:

One of the boys went into the pub and saw a One Nation poster there. We weren’t surprised in this community that there was support for One Nation. It’s quite conservative there. This isn’t a Labor community. They are way more to the right.

One Nation did cause a stir and a split in the community. One businessman said he would vote for them and so lots of Aboriginal people boycotted his business. We were not surprised though—there are lots of rednecks up here.

Yet despite the discussion of race, only one respondent out of eighty-five mentioned Native Title as a policy issue of concern. While most of the media attention was on One Nation’s opposition to benefits for Aborigines and high immigration levels, particularly from Asia, PHON also appealed to those disaffected with the economic policies of both major parties. One Nation policies were anti-privatisation, anti-tariff reduction and anti over-regulating bureaucratic procedures, differentiating them from all the major parties. Geo-political analysis has suggested that a vote for One Nation was a ‘vote of despair by the truly rural disadvantaged’. However, where voters live was only part of the story. Electoral behaviourists have marshalled evidence to suggest that while some support was drawn from the economically marginal groups who were being most affected by economic change, the predominant motivation voters possessed for defecting from the major parties was One Nation’s stance on immigrants and Aboriginal people.

Some respondents acknowledged that One Nation did not have the answers to the various negative effects particular policies were having on rural Australia. However, the message Pauline Hanson was delivering and the ‘noise’ she was
making on behalf of rural Australia was seen as an end in itself. She was seen to have put country Australia and regional Australia ‘back on the map’:

I think One Nation gives the perception that they are listening. I mean, they don’t have to deliver, but they can listen, and I think that’s what people want. They don’t like being taken for granted.

**Party Disenchantment?**

In many electoral studies, party identification is taken to be a measure of both diffuse support for the party system as an institution and specific support for a particular party. In Australia, while party identification remains the most significant predictor of how people will vote, it has begun to decline in recent years, most significantly in elections for the Senate. However, party identification is also beginning to decline in the House of Representatives and the numbers of those who describe themselves as not having any party identification has increased significantly.26

A strong anti-party sentiment was expressed by most of the respondents:

I think some of the ways that the system is used, abused or utilised by political parties is a bit of a worry. I think a lot of people are disgruntled with perhaps the … party system, that’s where there’s a lot of dissatisfaction, it’s not actually with the political system but with those things [which] exist within.

But again you got party politics, you know, they stick to the party line and at the moment Aboriginal people just don’t buy votes for them. But privately they’ll tell you they support you, but when it comes to party lines, well, they just toe them.

Well, why they don’t have trust, well, one particular grazier’s statement was … they’re [the local politician] elected to do a job, but they’re not allowed to do it. The party machine, irrespective of what side of politics they are on, the party machine either squashes them or corrupts them.

The party system that’s where the cynicism’s at, that level. We put a good person into Parliament but no matter how hard we try we doubt that [local] people would be able to do a lot to change things. It’s hard to explain.
Again, Pauline Hanson was deemed the recipient of this anti-party sentiment. In this sense, the support for One Nation was expressed as a protest vote of sorts, expressing country people’s disenchantment with the major parties:

One Nation just provided an alternative debate, they put the cat amongst the pigeons, and so the voters said ‘Look I don’t like what either major parties are saying, so I question what you both are saying and I’ll go down the middle, stir things up and wake the other parties up’.

I feel it was a protest vote … people said to me, we’re voting One Nation, we’ll put your party number two, … if they said they were voting One Nation there was no point in trying to talk them out of it, because that was it. They’d made up their mind. They were going to teach the government a lesson, … they maintained they hadn’t really been looked after.

The result? Gleeful looks at the prospect of seeing some of the politicians who had been there for a while put under pressure by someone who was not playing the game by the rules.

The National Party in particular was singled out as being the target of the protest vote:

There were a lot of people who felt that One Nation was what the National Party should be.

The general public felt neither of them were doing much of a job and they wanted to give them a bit of a kick in the tail. Most of that kick came from National Party voters because National Party people said what Pauline Hanson was saying, and what Pauline Hanson was preaching was what we were saying.

Clearly then, there was a sense of disenchantment with the major parties. However, this disenchantment was not represented as related to party identification, or as a result of few identifiable differences between the major parties in terms of policy (as analysed by Goot). Rather, respondents took issue with the role of parties as gatekeepers and disciplinarians, precluding or subsuming the possibility for the representation of local interests.

Ian Ward has argued that the nature of party organisation is such that the emergence of ‘machine men’ and ‘career politicians’, the declining influence of
local branches feeding through the ideas and opinions of local members, have become permanent features of the major political parties. Following this line of argument, local interests will only gain attention if they intersect with broader public opinion. Thus, it seems unlikely that the juggling act undertaken by local representatives in serving their constituency interests and their party’s interests is unlikely to become any easier. In fact, it may become more difficult if declining party identification amongst both rural and urban voters means fewer seats are safe seats.

**Why Trust Politicians?**

Scepticism and doubts about political elites, both politicians and political leaders, seems to be a common development in advanced industrial democracies. Dalton has argued that the increase in public scepticism is ‘most dramatic’ for evaluations of politicians.

Reasons given for this negative view included a perception of dishonesty and government non-performance, the end of economic certainty, a more penetrative and negative coverage of politics by the media and unethical conduct. Amongst those interviewed a strong perception emerged that as a group, political representatives are indeed unethical and self-interested:

> There is a mind-set that they are all the same. Once they get in there they just look after themselves. There are some politicians that are humanitarians and are there for the right reasons (at least originally), but sometimes they lose their way.

> I am sure that when people look at politicians they see the overseas trip, the dinners, the travelling around the country, meeting important interesting people …

> They see them getting their super and looking after themselves, they don’t trust them at all. There is a sense that they are looking after number one.

> People have an inherent disbelief and inherent suspicion of what goes on and it doesn’t matter which party’s in Parliament, they’ll always suspect that the buggers are getting a better deal than we are.

Dishonesty was also seen as an issue, although featured less than perhaps might have been expected:
Politicians, ... they're all liars. They will promise you the world, won't they? When you're standing for election, you can promise anything you like. When you get there and have to do it, it's a different situation.

However, it was inappropriate behaviour that respondents cited most often in their descriptions of why politicians were perceived to be untrustworthy:

I mean the best thing that parliament could do to make people feel they can trust politicians is to stop showing Question Time because they're like a bunch of kids. I'm an ex-teacher and I reckon that's just disgusting to watch. Most people think the same. You couldn't get a worst behaved pack of people and they're supposed to the leaders of our country.

It's not a good view on TV, they look like schoolboys ready for a dust up. You end up not believing anybody.

I watch parliament on the ABC. Now, I'm horrified at their behaviour and attitudes. I mean, their manner or behaviour ... The one who can shout the loudest is right. Whether you're right or wrong, if you can scream and shout and yell you get your way.

What a joke, what a joke. I thought televising Question Time would pull them into order and make them perform like paid politicians, but I think if my kids performed that way they would have got a hiding. To me it's an insult to the intelligence of the average Australian that politicians can sit up there and procrastinate and carry on like a pack of rabblerousers.

These sentiments are not unique to those in rural and regional Australia. While often thought of as an avenue of accountability, John Uhr's work indicated that Question Time also functioned as a forum whereby 'each side pursues opportunities to raise questions about the capacity of their opponents to govern the country, and try to win the battle for a greater share of public opinion'. Opposition questioning is part of the accountability process, but public opinion has been less overtly committed to its value, with voters 'aggrieved by the boorish behaviour on the floor of the various parliaments'. It is in Question Time where the adversarial aspects of party politics are most 'rancorous and uncivil' and it is possible that this, combined with it being televised, has undermined the status of politicians in the eyes of the community.
In addition, there was recognition amongst most respondents of the role the media played in undermining the perception of politicians:

The media representation is often negative. Lots of what is good is reported as bad. They have too much power. They make and break politicians.

They used to respect politicians and they respected the local policemen and they saw social status as quite important and that has gone and it really hasn’t been replaced by anything in particular and I really do think that the press and communications haven’t done a lot to help.

I think that they see through the media politicians portrayed as a group in a particular way, as self-serving, over paid, lazy, getting too many perks and lurks.

In contrast, the negative media portrayals of Pauline Hanson only served to enhance her reputation as a politician:

I mean, she was bashed by the papers, she made comments that they regarded as racist, but they were a true statement of the way in which people felt on the streets.

Part of the explanation for this may lie with Hanson’s visibility in local electorates, in person, not just in the media:

She came here for two days, we had our local show and so she was on the stand but she also spent a lot of the time at the bar. She had a can of beer in her hand but wasn’t really drinking that much and stayed there till 9.30 at night and then she’s back here at 8 o’clock in the morning. And she really worked the area. She went round everywhere, she introduced herself, she was very easy to identify, just in jeans and a pink shirt and she really talked to everybody, just really made a big hit. All the kids followed her. It was like the Pied Paper.

Indeed, a number of respondents noted that:

She [Pauline Hanson] was more visible than [local member], but she also drew with her an automatic aura because she was the red headed vampire (for want of a better term) that people had wanted to see.
This direct connection or contact between citizen and representative was one reason given as to why local members were more highly regarded than politicians generally:

Their only real contact with politicians, person to person, is with their local member. That is why you will find people who are very critical of politicians will also defend very stoutly quite often their local member, if their local member is doing their job.

People round here will probably see a local politician as being more honest than say government ministers. I mean, people like it when the local politician comes here so if ministers or senators came to their area that would help their reputation I’m sure.

Overall, around 90 per cent of respondents expressed very positive sentiments about the work their local federal MP did on behalf of the constituents. Many acknowledged the numerous difficulties local federal MPs faced in their job, including servicing large electorates, having to adhere to party discipline, and in being a backbencher:

I think people like their representative and the people I speak to certainly think that s/he will do as much as they possibly can. The local member is as visible as possible given the size of the electorate.

The local politician does a marvellous job. The voters give our representative support regardless of the political party they voted for. … Our local politician is fair dinkum, and I think a lot of people trust our member.

Our local politician is quite good. But people don’t translate the positive feelings about our representative more broadly to the political process. S/he would fight for them, but then s/he gets ignored or suppressed when s/he tries to get something done. People accept that s/he is doing all he can. Wow, I can’t believe I am praising a politician.

Our local politician is very well respected in the community and has made quite big inroads back into the problems that this electorate had. The local politician is very attentive, works very hard, and is getting across a lot of the remote areas that weren’t very well represented previously.
Ironically perhaps, while the visibility of the local candidate featured in the narratives of many respondents, Pauline Hanson’s campaign focused little on the various local candidates. Instead the focus was solely on her as leader:

The party was the Pauline Hanson Party and that’s why she’s so successful. There were no posters of the local candidate, the posters were Pauline’s. That’s the way they did it. It all focused on the Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party.

It was definitely a figurehead thing because the local people that stood for One Nation certainly weren’t all that well known in the community and yet they polled very well.

There appears to be somewhat of a paradox here. In many of the narratives, rural and regional Australians held negative opinions about politicians as an occupational group, but they expressed positive feelings about their local federal MP. Aitkin’s work revealed something similar in 1967. Malcontents with the local MP were uncommon but, unlike my respondents, constituents in his survey described their own federal MPs as ‘remote and insubstantial beings’. We can only speculate as to why this puzzle has emerged. It might be that the high expectations people place on politicians as a group are tempered when applied to the local MP. For example, country respondents felt the local member’s efforts were constrained by exogenous factors, such as party discipline and the size of the electorate.

A second explanation might be the ‘experience gap’: that is the gap between what people report as their personal experience (often positive) and their general attitudes (often negative). If personal experience is one answer to restoring trust in politicians as a class, then this suggests that electoral reforms which reinforce the role of parties (albeit minor and major) may not solve the malaise people feel. Another response may be one that seeks to expand personal experience of the political through strategies that encourage more participation and deliberative interaction between citizens and politicians.

**Conclusion**

The decline in support for the major political parties initially led Inglehart and his proponents to attribute this shift to those with post-materialist values: that is, those who feel economically secure, who are educated and who seek to promote quality of life issues. In the past, Australian commentators have suggested these voters have tended to support minor parties positioned on
the centre and left of the political spectrum. However, we have seen emerge on the Australian political scene (and elsewhere) a group of dissenting voters who seem concerned with materialist values, such as economic insecurity and perceived threats from minority groups. One Nation gave these voters a minor party to vote for, which has not really existed since the demise of the Democratic Labor Party. And while support for One Nation was halved in the 2001 election, the volatility of a core of rural and regional voters may prove a long-term feature of Australian politics.

According to Easton’s framework outlined in Chapter One of this monograph, distrust of specific political authorities or institutions is not supposed to challenge the overall belief people have in democratic principles and practice. In the responses received from rural and regional Australians, there was a sense of satisfaction with particular local incumbents and the ‘idea’ of local representation, but they expressed a distrust of politicians as a group and the major political parties, two institutions which act as a link between citizens and the government. It is argued that if public trust in politicians as a class and parties as political institutions continues to decline, it could lead to a belief amongst citizens that the system is failing them.

American political scientists, Lipset and Schneider, have suggested that a loss of political trust is not a result of what the problem is, but what people believe the problem to be. In other words, it is about perception. This chapter has drawn out some of the reasons why there is a perceived lack of political confidence in the minds of a range of country Australians. So what kinds of experiences will it take to close the confidence gap? Are there possibilities for rebuilding country people’s confidence in the representative elements of representative democracy? The two chapters that follow investigate these questions further.

Endnotes


5. ibid.


13. These tables use data from the Australian Election Surveys. These are mail-out surveys conducted after each election, with approximately 2000 responses per survey. The data cannot be assumed to be exact, only politically indicative. See http://assda.anu.edu.au/


15. ibid.


20. This is in reference to Pauline Hanson’s election night appearance in Western Australia, which drew a lot of attention, largely because of her ‘dramatic’ entrance in a long floral dress. B Adams, ‘Fashion victim won’t change a thing’, AAP backgrounder, April 20, 2001.


23. Wahlqvist, op. cit.


According to Goot and Watson, One Nation voters were more likely to be older, male, from rural Australia and in blue collar jobs. They were also much more likely to express anti-immigration and anti-Aboriginal sentiments, compared with Democrats’ supporters. See M Goot and I Watson, ‘One Nation’s Electoral Support: Where does it come from? What makes it different and how does it fit?’, Australian Journal of Politics and History, vol. 47, no. 2, 2001.


27. ibid.


33. M Goot, ‘Distrustful, Disenchanted and Disengaged?’, op. cit.


38. The New Country Party, which is currently seeking registration, is said to have links with the National Civic Council, whose previous links were with the Democratic Labor Party (The Australian, 11 August, 2003).


Chapter Three: Roads to Representation: Alternatives to ‘Traditional’ Party Politics

Traditionally representation was perceived as best undertaken by the wise and knowledgeable. While participation by the masses was acceptable in theory, in practice, the emergence of large electorates was deemed a positive outcome, since it would ensure that the elected would be thoughtful and educated and not susceptible to the influence of local interests and concerns. That this might lead to a sense of remoteness of government from local concerns of electorates, or a disconnection between representatives and voters, was largely ignored.¹

However, in the last twenty years, the emergence of new political voices within Australia society has given rise to new demands on parliament to more broadly and effectively represent society. Social movements have sought to politicise the absence of particular groups from our governing institutions, groups based on gender, race and ethnicity for example. Thus identity rather than geography came to dominate discussions of representation.²

Yet it seems a little premature to discard geography as a relevant ‘identity’ category of its own.³ There has long been a particular perception of what constitutes ‘rural identity’ in Australian politics. ‘Country mindedness’ or the ‘agrarian myth’ of struggle, scarcity and moral virtue is one that has been used to foster rural solidarity: geographical location (articulated as a city/country divide) as well as dependence on rural industries helped to constitute a particular political identity.⁴

In terms of electoral representation it has been the National Party—and before it the Country Party—that positioned itself to benefit from this solidarity. Don Aitkin identified how those who might otherwise have voted Labor did not because of their identification with their local community rather than ‘their’ party.⁵ Obviously the notion of rural solidarity has been selective about its inclusiveness. Indigenous Australians for example, did not have a place in the agrarian myth, and neither have they demonstrated the electoral behaviour patterns associated with ‘country mindedness’.
While the homogeneous ‘identity’ of country Australia was challenged only marginally by the presence of Indigenous Australians, a more significant challenge has come from ‘exogenous’ factors of a kind. The (re)emergence of a more globally competitive world market, a decline in national dependence on agriculture, and domestic policies directed at facilitating these trends has led to an increasing awareness of the diversity of interests within regional and rural Australia. The declining fortunes of some parts of rural and remote Australia, combined with the spectacular growth in many parts of regional Australia, has complicated the idea of rural representation (especially for the National Party).

This chapter is concerned with how informants presented their thoughts on the fairness of the current system of representation of country Australians and what alternative modes of representation they believed had potential to ameliorate their sense of remoteness. Three alternatives were discussed: supporting independent candidates, expanding the representative functions of senators, and reserved seats for Indigenous Australians. What became apparent was that for many ‘country’ Australians at least, the importance of geographical location to identity, community and political representation has remained one of some significance. Moreover, while remoteness from federal politics was described by respondents mostly in geographical terms, the physical remoteness was considered tolerable, if sufficient psychological or personal connection could be made with the federal political arena through a local representative, whether they were an independent Member of the House of Representatives (MHR), a senator or an Indigenous representative.

**Fair Representation for Country Voters**

Elaine Thompson has suggested that a simple test of how people feel about the representative nature of their political system is whether or not there is agreement amongst voters that the system is fair. She has defined fair as referring to legitimate and acceptable election outcomes, that parliament is seen as representative of those who elected it; and that the government received majority popular support.

When I asked respondents about fair representation, most included some account of geographical under-representation as their major element of concern:
Our electorate has particular problems in terms of representation because of its size. It’s just so big that it’s very difficult for any human being to adequately represent it and because of the, you know, the continuing loss of population it’s going to get worse and worse.

There needs to be a way of remedying the fact that some politicians cover such a vast area. There needs to be some kind of formula to take into account the area to cover, the number of communities in that area, maybe even account for diversity, say, how many remote Aboriginal communities there are in an area.

Well, the big thing we look at out here is the distances. It is not fair when you’ve got one person covering half the state, yes, damn near half the state.

Certainly, what might be considered ‘fair’ when drawing up electoral districts has long been contested? Should electorates have equal numbers of voters (one vote one value) or should rural areas be entitled to electorates containing fewer voters to ‘compensate for the problems of distance, area and isolation’?:8

From a city person’s perspective, that there’s an unfair loading in favour of country may not seem right. But if you come from the country and you say well, we have such vast distances that perhaps it is fair.

These are not new questions, and have tended to be party-specific with Labor arguing for equality and the Nationals historically supporting a form of rural malapportionment in the House of Representatives. Until 1974, the allowable deviation rate from the average enrolment in each state was 20 per cent, when it was then reduced to, and remains at, 10 per cent. The reduction in the deviation rate, combined with the existence of the 5000 sq km rule (prior to 1984), ensured the over-representation of rural areas in terms of population.9

In 1984, changes to the Electoral Act removed the 5000 sq km rule and, in doing so, further entrenched the one vote one value principle. One result was to accelerate the decline already apparent in the number of rural electorates—the impact of this has been felt most acutely by the National Party.10

The sense of under-representation expressed by many respondents was mostly about the implications of further population movement away from rural areas and the further entrenchment of a city-country divide. There was a belief that metropolitan electorates could overshadow rural electorates and their interests. With this came a fear that their material and welfare interests might be
overlooked or ignored as a result of their seemingly ‘marginal’ status: something to which rural constituents have been unaccustomed to in the past:

No, I think they don’t think it’s fair and the reason they don’t is because we’re so under-represented as a proportion of politicians in all parliaments, that they really feel that even with the best will, even if they’ve got the best local member in the country, there’s a limit to what they can achieve because there’s such a strong bias to where most of the seats are, namely in the metropolitan areas.

The issue of electorate boundaries was also identified by several respondents as important in terms of representation and their community of interest. Scott Bennett has argued that the existence of particular regional attitudes can cause resentment amongst those whose electorate positioning changed as a result of redistribution. People in these communities (he identified Wagga Wagga and Devonport as examples) viewed their community of interests as being disrupted by boundary changes.\(^{11}\)

In at least two of the electorates visited, the boundary changes were interpreted as having undermined the possibility of effective representation. In another there was a desire to see the boundaries redrawn significantly to separate the rural part of the electorate from the large regional centre that was 2000 km away. Respondents in this electorate said they would rather forfeit seeing their member as often and be in an extremely large rural electorate with other areas that shared their community of interest, which they defined as built around small town, grazing and water rights issues. Respondents in a bordertown expressed similar sentiments, although they were aware of the constitutional constraints preventing the redrawing of electorates around their defined community of interest areas.

So how might this sense of remoteness and ineffectual representation be remedied?

**The Rise of Independents?**

One Nation has not been the only avenue for voter protest in recent years. With the arrival of Ted Mack and Phil Cleary in the early 1990s into the federal parliament there was some discussion on the place and value of independents in Australia’s democratic system.\(^{12}\) Yet despite the rush of media interest at that time, independent members have been a feature of Australian parliaments for many years, particularly at the state level. Defining an independent as
winning at least one election as a non-party candidate, then at the federal level it has been the election and re-election (twice) of Peter Andren in the electorate of Calare; the election in 2001 of Bob Katter and Tony Windsor as independents; and independent Senator Harradine’s longevity of service, that seems to have increased public awareness of independents as an alternative to the major political parties. Indeed, since 1980 fifty-six elected independents have served in the Australian the parliaments, with 33 of the 56 (60 per cent) elected by rural or regional constituencies. In federal rural electorates, the vote for non-party, independent candidates has steadily increased since 1984, peaking at just over 5 per cent in 1993. In the 2001 election, the vote share for independent candidates in rural electorates was higher than the vote for each of the minor parties.

Discussions with citizens in rural and regional Australia took place in late 2000–early 2001, well in advance of the 2001 federal election. Yet, even then over half of the respondents talked about the possibility of an independent standing and being successful:

Perhaps we’re becoming a little bit more aware of independents and the power that they can have, if the candidate comes up to scratch.

They’ve got more chance of being truly independent too, I would think, with important issues; they’re more likely to follow it through.

There’s such disenchantment with both sides, that the swing will be … toward independents and/or minority party groups that they think are going to do something.

I hope I’m wrong but credible sounding single-issue politicians and independents will get a lot of votes I think.

Interestingly, the enthusiasm for independent candidates was often qualified with the stated requirement for the person to be the ‘right’ candidate. The ‘right’ independent was identified as someone who could demonstrate a commitment to the electorate: a necessary condition if voters were to trust the candidate’s capacity to represent local concerns.

At least half of those who supported the idea of independent candidates felt that an independent would be a more effective representative because party
discipline ensured their current local members could seldom get their issues addressed within parliament or by government:

Party politics takes over. It swamps his ideas. As far as I’m concerned the only way he could truly represent us and to be able to stand alone at times in doing that is to be an independent. And I think party politics does not allow that. You just have to do as you are told. Toe the line and all that.

So you get in there and the majority of your party say no that’s not what we are going to do and that’s the end of it. That’s where the whole game of politics is a misrepresentation. The individual is no longer an individual once he gets here.

People have felt betrayed by the normal representation, felt they have missed out, are not heard, not listened to, so they tried out independents, and that will stay for a while. Major parties have a lot of work to do, marketing, making themselves really visible—they need to connect with constituents more closely and effectively.

Research has suggested that constituency service was seen by independents to be a vital indicator of performance amongst voters, with their re-election dependent upon this. This can be contrasted with how members of major parties have often viewed themselves, particularly if they held safe seats. Incumbents of marginal seats were more inclined to become closely involved with local issues and the problems of individual constituents than were representatives in safe seats. Several informants recognised this, with one saying:

There is no power in being in a safe seat. Even though they may have voted for the party that holds the safe seat, people think there cannot be a strong voice for rural people in parliament because the party system grinds them down and there is no way they can stand up and be counted.

Only a few respondents were fatalistic about the continuation of major party dominance, or dismissive of the value of independents.

When decisions are made they are made within party meeting rooms, and independents sitting in corridor are not consulted.

I think our party system has its problems, but at least you know where you are at with them—rather than loose cannon independents.
Perhaps the most high profile independent candidate in 2001 was Bob Katter who, in July of that year, left the National Party with a view to standing for re-election in the seat of Kennedy. Media coverage of the defection included local sentiment on the Katter move. It was claimed that the National Party ‘has become city orientated and forgotten the country’, while Mr Katter was ‘one of the hardest-working politicians around and has always done the right thing by us’. The ABC’s Bush Telegraph radio program also featured a session on independents as political representatives in rural and regional Australia, suggesting ‘there is growing evidence of a new mood in Australian electorates—one that sees voters prepared to elect independents as their political representatives’, and labelling this as a ‘new phenomenon’.

Yet even before his decision to become an independent, Bob Katter was seen by some respondents as having resisted the party regime.

In the electorate he’d be the most popular person. All sides of politics would vote for Bob Katter because what he says is what he’ll stand up and fight for [us] until the next election, irrespective of the party machine and that will always keep him there, because he’s getting votes from all sides, for that reason.

The move made by Katter was not unique, in the sense that it has not been unusual for disendorsed or disgruntled major party representatives to stand as independents. Some in the literature regarded these renegades not as ‘genuine’ independents. Yet it may often be a desire to represent constituents’ local interests against party lines that prompts a Member’s defection. Green also noted there were problems with labelling a particular group of independents ‘pure’ since by association it suggested those with previous political affiliations were somehow impure, despite the fact that many have ‘since behaved impeccably as independents on the floor of parliament’.

Just as the 1998 election result was interpreted as a protest vote against the National Party, a number of respondents felt the increasing support for independents also represented a statement of protest against the National Party:

I believe an independent would do quite well because there’s a lot of discontent with the National party. Very, very much, they have had a gutful of the coalition. They see the Liberal party driving all the policy and they’re pretty disenchanted with that, even some of the party members are cheesed off.
National voters may not switch to Labor but they will switch if there’s a good independent.

I really do think that the two-party system is fragmenting slowly, in favour of independents at this stage but also the National Party as a result is taking on a different complexion [at state level].

While National and Liberal candidates seldom acknowledged Pauline Hanson’s One Nation by name during the 2001 election campaign, Prime Minister John Howard did directly address the challenge being made by independents, emphasising the political repercussions of electing an independent.20

When Russell Savage was elected to the Victorian State Parliament as an independent in 1996, Premier Jeff Kennett allegedly claimed that electing an independent was futile:

Kennett said to me ‘you people could have had everything you wanted but no you threw him out and you’ve voted in a nobody. How on earth can you expect an independent to get you what you want in a parliament that’s divided by Labor and Liberal?’

Savage himself promised that ‘I would always represent their views and I wasn’t going to abandon them after I got elected … “Elect a representative not a politician” was one of the slogan’s I used.’21

In two of the five electorates visited, independent representatives had been elected at the state level. It was evident from some of the responses given that this appeared to have influenced the way some voters viewed the potential of independents to deliver at least some visibility and voice to local concerns, despite the candidate never making it into government:

We’re in a very unique situation because of our state representative being an independent. Our member gets a lot of press in the capital city, … in the political equation they’re very important state wise. So yeah we’re probably more listened to than most regional towns because we have an independent.

What we’ve found up here since our local independent has been in power is that we’ve had more political visits, more political promises, more things have happened than under the previous government member.
We have more Ministers visit here than ever before. It’s in their interest to keep our independent happy. So yes, I think in recent times the voters here can see the value of having an effective independent voice.

So, in this sense, voters have had the opportunity to see how significant independent candidates can prove to be in the governing process. To date the involvement of independents in minority government has occurred primarily at state level. However, researchers have highlighted the importance of the federal system on the preferences of voters, in that it provides citizens with the opportunity to use state and federal elections to flag different sets of political interests.  

There was a clear perception amongst those interviewed that voting for independent candidates was a means of expressing discontent, and one that was seen as loaded with potential. As argued in Chapter Two, political discontent does not automatically suggest lack of political interest. Rather, it may be that people were interested in voicing their discontent in a way that would make the major parties notice.

In the 2001 federal election however, the major parties were put on notice by the challenge offered by independent candidates in rural and regional Australia. In the seat of Calare, independent Peter Andren increased his primary vote by 15 per cent to 51.5 per cent, while Tony Windsor was elected with a primary vote of 45 per cent in the electorate of New England. The latter electorate had once been the stronghold and symbolic home of the National Party.  

The election of these two independents received considerable attention, but it is worth noting that there were other independent candidates in the NSW electorates of Eden Monaro, Gwydir and Page who challenged the major parties by gaining over 8 per cent of the vote.

An independent streak was also evident in Queensland. Apart from Bob Katter winning back his seat of Kennedy as an independent, other rural and regional electorates of Fairfax, Fisher, Herbert and Hinkler had independents who attracted approximately 8 per cent of the vote, (almost 10 per cent in the case of Hinkler and Fairfax), while in Wide Bay, three independents between them drew over 10 per cent of the vote. In Victoria, the electorates of Indi and Mallee saw independent candidates receive significant voter support, but it was Gippsland that provided a most diverse and localised campaign. There, six independent candidates stood against National Party MP Peter McGauran
(as well as five other candidates), with independents capturing 13 per cent of the vote. This ensured a broad range of local issues gained a profile during the campaign: Basslink, river flows, coastal subsidence, logging, gas and local roads alongside the national issues of privatisation of Telstra, GST red tape and competition policy.24

Winning federal rural or provincial electorates as an independent is not without its difficulties: the task for non-party candidates of becoming known around the sizeable rural electorates, without being a ‘local notable’, a defector or someone with a previous political career, is no easy one. In addition to the electoral system thwarting independent representation in the House of Representatives, the House of Representatives, redistributions in rural areas in rural areas can also hinder re-election prospects for rural independents (given their lack of party machine).25 There are also a number of other institutional and cultural hurdles facing independents that do not exist for either the minor or major parties.26 However, the narratives presented here suggest there was a desire to see more of a focus on the local, and supporting independents was identified as one means by which this kind of representation could result.

Rural Representation and the Senate

The representative nature of the Senate has been questioned by many in the major parties because of the lack of one vote one value, and the now-enduring presence of minor parties, which have usually held the balance of power. Paul Keating was renowned for his views on the Senate, labelling it ‘unrepresentative swill, defamers, cowards, pansies’.27 Academic analyses of the Senate have tended to focus on how this minor party presence has enhanced the accountability of government and brought a more diverse range of representatives into the parliament, but little attention is given to the representative function of senators themselves.

Equal representation for the States, irrespective of their populations, was an integral factor in determining the representative nature of the Senate in the new federation. This made it impossible for a majority in the Senate to be formed with representatives from only one or two of the more populous states, that is, New South Wales and Victoria. The concept of a ‘geographically distributed majority’ was embodied in a number of other provisions.28 Alterations to the Constitution require a majority of votes in a majority of states in a referendum, and the nexus provision guarantees that the membership of the House of
Representatives shall be as nearly as practicable, twice the number of senators. This latter provision ensures that as the population increased so did the size of both Houses of Parliament. One unintentional consequence has been that the process of urbanisation (and the decrease in the number of rural electorates) has not had a corresponding impact on Senate.

Just as geographical representation informed the institutional design of the Senate, so too did proportional representation feature as the preferred electoral system for many of the framers of the Australian Constitution. The Barton Government’s 1902 Electoral Bill included proportional representation for the senate; a small group of Tasmanians and South Australians argued for the introduction of proportional representation (PR) in the House of Representatives. Indeed, Country Party representatives often led the charge for electoral reform. In 1922 Earle Page had a motion to introduce PR adopted by the House of Representatives, while in 1939 another County Party member, Thomas Paterson, was critical of the preferential method used in Senate elections. He argued that something needed to be done to improve ‘a system that allowed a party with 49 per cent of the total votes to be left entirely without representation’.

Since the introduction of proportional representation in 1948, the Senate has become a ‘multi-party’ house. Much of the discussion about proportional representation has revolved around the opportunities for a presence in politics that it affords minor parties and minority groups (such as women, Indigenous Australians and those from non-English speaking backgrounds). Few have recognised that the introduction of proportional representation to the Senate has had particular outcomes for the representation of rural and regional Australia.

Although labelled a ‘states’ house, it has been rare for all the senators from a state to vote as a bloc irrespective of party affiliation. However, Sharman has argued that minor party and independent senators often have distinctive regional constituencies and have used the Senate to bring national attention to their particular state-based concerns. He identified Senator Brian Harradine as an ‘outstanding example of a senator who has used the Senate to further what he believes to be in Tasmania’s best interest’. The Democrats’ role in amending the GST legislation and blocking the sale of the remainder of Telstra might also be considered as representative of the concerns of many Australians, including those in rural and regional Australia.
Despite evidence of ‘strategic’ voting patterns as outlined in Chapter One, the visibility of senators in the rural and regional electorates visited appeared to be limited at best. 34 Two thirds of respondents said they had rarely if ever seen a senator. Of those who had, it was often a result of their position, that is, as a CEO of a local council, or head of the Chamber of Commerce for example. Those senators that were seen tended to be Ministers or from minor parties.

Some respondents were unaware that they had 12 senators representing their State in parliament and no one could name more than two senators from their own State:

No I can't name them for you and I actually checked the web site to see who they were, went through to the Electoral Commission web site to see who were the senators of our State and then I thought across the board of how much these guys had had to say that I picked up on and the score was not good. And I'm someone who is interested in politics.

They wouldn't even know they'd have a local senator. They don't comprehend it as being representational. They can comprehend it as being perhaps a review, but they don't comprehend them as being someone who will listen because they don't have that access to a senator.

I mean, we would never have seen senators up here as the senator that represented Victoria. It is usually senators who are in charge of things, like water, that they might know, if they know of them at all. It’s certainly not just as your representative.

There was also a perception that few senators displayed any connection, tangible or otherwise, with rural and regional Australia:

The Senate is just something that is so remote that—I mean, I don't know how they do their—you know, do their polling and reference back to their communities, but we’ve never been asked by a senator what our opinions are on an issue. They just trundle off to the little old Senate over there and stick their hand up on party lines, or whatever they do, and out pops a new law. I mean, we don't feel as though we've got any part of that process.

I think there's probably a perception at the moment that the Senate is remote. I'd support that perception. I think that's the way most country people would
see it unless you have a senator from your town or somebody that’s got a profile in your area well the Senate is just a remote intangible thing.

Look, I think most people view senators as being untouchables, they’re away in the distance, no one knows even who they are unless they get up and make a bit of noise.

What these accounts and others highlighted was that, in contrast to previous narratives about geographical isolation of rural electorates, discussions of the Senate were articulated in terms of the Senate as a place being isolated from the people. In other words, the people felt that senators were irrelevant and remote from their lives as both citizens and as voters.

**Senators and State Service?**

Reform of the Senate is a perennial issue. While proportional representation was rejected at the time of federation, debates about its adoption continued periodically until 1948. Since that time, there have been continuing discussions about the role of minor parties, while the passage of government legislation through the Senate continued to be a subject of interest in both academic and political circles.

Since 1981 no government has held a majority in the upper house. As a result, there have been a number of suggestions for reform of the Senate that have emerged. Many of these have been procedural rather than constitutional, with several focusing on electoral reform. For example, in 1999, Senator Colston introduced the Electoral Amendment (Senate Elections) Bill in which he proposed to divide each of the States into six wards, each ward having two representatives in the Senate. Voters would only elect senators from their particular ward, using the preferential voting system at half Senate elections and proportional representation following a double dissolution. This was reflective of Prime Minister Keating’s threat in 1994 to change the Senate’s voting system. His plan was ‘to divide each state into 12 electorates, electing just one senator each’, probably rendering minor party representation obsolete.

These reforms would have provided country and city voters with smaller Senate divisions, while giving senators a defined constituency to which they could be specifically responsive. However, the Keating/Colston reforms would also have meant replacing the proportional representation electoral system, which as already argued, provides those in country Australia with particular
representative opportunities. Nevertheless, the idea of providing individual senators with a designated area within their state, and within which they could undertake constituency service, is one that has potential to reduce the invisibility of senators and the sense of remoteness expressed by a number of respondents:

It’s nice to see them when they come, it’s excellent. But what happens? We’re forgotten again for another six months, 12 months, 10 years. … Well, we all want representation and the only way that we have the concept of representation work in practice is if we see these senators every now and then.

In interviews, respondents were asked to give their thoughts on the possibility of informally dividing the state into six areas, with two senators designated to each, on a two year rotational basis. Such a practice would not require legislative changes to the electoral system, nor would it be compulsory, just as committee service is not compulsory. Perhaps not surprisingly, all participating were positive about the idea. There was a sense that the process would create an awareness of what the Senate does and provide access to senators from all the parties:

Maybe if these guys were allocated certain regions to deal more specifically with the people in those regions, we might get a more perhaps an honest approach or a clearer picture of what does go on.

I took the senator and two pastoralists around the property to show him what the property looks like, that’s made a big impact on him, seeing the land, meeting the people, just getting out there, seeing how hard it is. All it takes is a few senators to come out to look and listen.

When you think there are 12 of them you’d think that they could be a bit more active out here. Allocating areas to them is a good idea. It would make them accountable to their people. So they just don’t hide behind this mass of Western Australia as a land mass. And I don’t think it would hurt to have opposing or different parties’ representatives out here.

Yes, well they might actually get some things done particularly if they sent a Labor and a Liberal or National Senator out together. That would be good, because they would take back an honest view and people would probably come good with constructive type questions and they’d get constructive answers as well.
There was also a perception that increasing the visibility of senators would help to reduce the country–city divide that filtered through many respondents’ views on the politics of representation:

To have offices somewhere else besides the city then business people would think new face, new person to lobby, that’s the thing, just don’t see them enough.

Seems to me senators are city-based. As far as senators go, they may as well be in Canberra. You never see them. You only see the occasional press release from them and it is predominantly to do with urban based activities.

If there was a senator at Swan Hill, Bendigo or Mildura I would make damn sure that they were involved. We need a senator, someone we can identify with, but I wouldn’t know where to go and look for one. They are one part of parliament, its ridiculous that people who help make the decisions for this country are all based in capital cities.

In 2001, there were 14 senators (out of 76) whose electoral offices were outside the state and territory capital cities (as listed on the Parliament House web site). Seven of the 14 were in Tasmania, and there were few, if any, in either South Australia or Victoria. Senator Judith Troeth of Victoria presented herself in the provincial papers as a ‘country’ senator, (despite having an office in Melbourne) but this was largely possible because of her parliamentary secretary responsibilities in agriculture. Apart from particular individual initiatives, most political parties operated a ‘duty senator’ system whereby senators were designated electorates or areas that they were expected to shadow. These functions were informal, and were considered sufficient by some party officials, although few respondents knew of this. And there was recognition amongst those interviewed that there was unlikely to be much political will for such reform:

I suppose it would be up to parties to adopt it themselves, it couldn’t be imposed. But it has got to be better than what we have now.

I mean, members of the House of Representatives are invisible enough, but the Senate is certainly totally invisible. I mean, I think we’ve had a Greens Senator out here once. I think the Senate is more a case of they’re there because of their party affiliation, not really because the people particularly like that person or that person or somebody else.
I honestly think to the average person a senator doesn’t mean much. Well, people don’t directly vote for senators, do they? That’s right, just a tick. Whereas with members of parliament you vote directly for them.

Any major alteration to our political system requires constitutional reform, a difficult task indeed according to history. However, requiring a more direct connection between senators and their rural and regional constituencies would be one reform that could have an immediate and potentially positive impact on voters and their perceptions of the Senate. However, the feasibility and political popularity of such an option remains untested.

**Accountability and the Role of the Senate**

The Senate plays a vital role in holding government accountable to parliament and the people. In addition to a government needing to negotiate its policies through the Senate, there is a range of other mechanisms, which ensure considerable scrutiny and deliberation. The Senate Committee system offers the most direct access for community participation in the deliberative process. Established in 1901, but considerably revised in 1970, Senate committees can investigate matters of public concern not on the government agenda as well as proposed legislation. The current composition of the Senate means that opposition and the minor parties often have the majority on a number of committees. Reforms to the selection of Chairs of References Committees in 1994 cemented the role of non-government senators.

Senate committees enhance community involvement in the deliberative process through their gathering of information and evidence, and by taking the parliament to the people. Committees advertise the terms of reference of their inquiries and invite written submissions from the public. Evidence is then taken in person via public hearings, which often take place outside Canberra.

How important the function of community involvement is to the work of the Senate is contested. Uhr has argued that the primary purpose of the Senate should not be seen to be about ‘building bridges with the public’ but about ‘buffeting government’. He suggested that taking parliament to the people should be interpreted as an idealistic goal. Instead, generating community support around a particular issue under investigation by a Senate committee should be conducted as part of the broader goal of holding governments to account. 41
It seems the Senate need not fear that people expect their primary function to be ‘taking the parliament to the people’. Of those interviewed in country Australia, few had been involved in the senate inquiry process, and even fewer expected them to be a link between themselves and the parliament:

Yes, we went to one and I distinctly remember that … it was so pompous and so remote, so full of their own importance … I don't think ordinary people want or have the opportunity to go.

I know of Senate committees, but I have never heard of one stopping by. They tell us they do but I haven't seen one. The HREOC Bush Talks were great, a bit more of that would be good, if senators came around and talked to people in smaller community groups.

I haven't seen much of that sort of thing. You hear of senate committees all the time and that seems to be what appears to be the bigger role of the senate. But I wonder whether they get a fair representation of electorates.

There was also a sense that some sort of education program, or capacity building exercises, would be needed to provide citizens in rural and regional communities with the skills and the confidence to participate in this form of deliberation:

I went and I mean, there were only 12 submissions and I couldn't believe it. … I was amazed that so few people and organisations had actually put submissions in and spoke to it, because, you know, there were so many others that could have, but I think they are daunted by what they have to do.

We encourage our clients to go forward. But many do not feel able to put their point of view in a forum. I don’t think that's correct because I’ve seen Senate enquiries accept anyone. So that's more ignorance and an education campaign would be useful in overcoming that perception.

Senate committee inquiries? I haven't seen them this far out. But few people would be comfortable about making a presentation … they would need skills training to feel comfortable enough to attempt it.

Selected groups, peak bodies, and individuals are often invited to present evidence. In addition, the most common form of advertising an inquiry is through metropolitan newspapers (although there is no set practice for this
process). The combination of these methods could lead to a committee attracting the ‘usual suspects’ and could give a sense of ‘insider trading’ or ‘anti-democratic elitism’. However, soliciting input from particular groups was considered necessary and justifiable if done with ‘public responsibility’.

There is no guarantee that sufficient interest or participation will result when inquiries went ‘bush’. However, nor is it the case that those outside Canberra would be intrinsically less likely to participate in Senate inquiries, especially if the inquiry was relevant to their lives in some way:

Say there was [a] senate inquiry looking into whether sandmining leases should still be held or if they should be revoked. I think you’d get huge community response, because it’s a very local issue, it affects a lot of people. The local groups would mobilise and put a lot of information out into the community and they would get people interested.

It would have to be something extremely contentious or directly relevant otherwise you’d be lucky to get a half a dozen people to go along. ... Well, people are generally motivated out of necessity or self-interest.

Inquiries conclude with the presentation of a report to the Senate. The report will usually contain recommendations directed at any relevant bodies, but most often at the federal government. Successive governments have undertaken to inform the Senate of their response to committee reports within three months but this time frame is seldom adhered to. The responsiveness on the part of government to such inquiries is often invisible to the public. A number of respondents recognised the value of the inquiry process, but felt concerned about the lack of feedback:

As information-gathering exercises yes, I think that’s an important role. It gives the community a feeling of having an opportunity to participate. But I think that, if the results don’t reflect some of their feelings well, I know that there’s a fair amount of cynicism in the bush as to just whether or not it was worth their effort to put the time into it that they did.

Senate Committees are information-gathering exercises. But people perceive these things as money wasted because they don’t see any results. It is just a report, and unless it is spectacular and makes the media, we don’t hear a huge amount about what comes out, and we don’t see actions being taken. The general perception is that nothing results.
The Senate committee system has contributed to the accountability of the government in a parliamentary system where the executive dominates the House of Representatives. The inquiry process allows for scrutiny and deliberation, most of which occurs in public view, although it is not clear that citizens are fully aware of this. According to Uhr, this activity represents a particular type of responsiveness, one that works on behalf of the broader public interest rather than particular constituency interests. Moreover, matters of public concern may not be on the formal government agenda, but the Senate, through its committee work, often acts as a mechanism for making them such through their inquiries into matters of public concern.

Media attention is a critical part of this process whereby public support is mobilised to the point where it becomes difficult for governments to ignore the issue. Both the content and process of interrogation undertaken in recent inquiries and estimates committees have ensured the committee process a high media profile. This attention may eventually result in more public interest in, and understanding of, the work of the Senate.

However, the opposite may also result, since the media’s interest is most often focused on conflict in politics. In the past, the Senate committee process allowed for a relaxation of the two-party adversarial approach to politics most obvious in the lower house. Partly this was a result of the presence of minor parties and partly because the regular interaction within committees meant that a consensus was built and policy conflicts were contained. Recently however, some Senate committee hearings have resembled ‘political bear pits where rival senators attack with excessive vigour the evidence and motives of witnesses’. While the media have found this ‘vigour’ attractive to report, the paradox is that adversarial politics is part of the reason why many respondents said they have little faith in politics or politicians.

Francis Sullivan, in his essay on lobbying the Senate, asked what perception ordinary people had of the upper chamber and senators in particular? His answer was that senators, like politicians generally, were not held in high esteem, and he argued that there was little community appreciation for the Senate’s ‘legislative watchdog function’. The responses presented here suggest a similar perspective. Senators were not seen as connected with country Australia, representative of local issues, nor accountable to voters directly.
Thus, the perception that the Senate is a ‘vibrant and active’ chamber seems to be limited to academics and other analysts.\textsuperscript{51} Perhaps this is not surprising given much of this vibrancy and activity is internal to the parliament. In other words, the main participants in the process of scrutiny and deliberation are often public servants, ministerial advisers and parliamentarians.\textsuperscript{52} There is little public viewing of the Senate Estimates Hearings for example. So while the Senate acts in the public interest by ensuring a more responsible form of government, the Senate’s relationship with citizens remains very much an indirect and invisible one. To date, Senate reforms seem to have done little to reduce the sense of disconnection and remoteness expressed here.

**Indigenous Australians in Rural Australia**

Aboriginal people … we are a minority with little say, but there are other minorities that all have say, so the system is unfair.

Before you came I spoke with some senior people in the community, asked them their thoughts, and they think that Aboriginal people are not well represented … they are used as political footballs at times. Somehow Aboriginal issues are plucked out of the air and then used to take the heat off something else, like petrol prices.

Introducing measures to improve Indigenous representation in the Australian political system is not straightforward. Anthropologists, political scientists and policy makers have canvassed a range of options and presented a number of arguments for and against particular models of inclusion. Tim Rowse has provided a succinct review of these debates.\textsuperscript{53} On the one hand, there is an ethnographic tradition maintaining the Australian system of representative government that is alien and difficult for Aboriginal people to embrace, largely because of the importance of localism to Aboriginal politics. One the other hand, alternative anthropological and political perspectives have suggested Aboriginal Australians are capable of adapting themselves to the Australian form of representative government. Both intellectual approaches were taken into account when policy-makers in the late 1960s and into the 1970s became intent on designing ‘culturally appropriate’ political institutions in Indigenous affairs that could operate alongside mainstream representative bodies. One institution eventually to emerge was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) established in 1989 was labelled a form of parliament in its own right. Indigenous peoples voluntarily participate in direct elections for regional councils. Regional councillors then elect regional council chairs and national commissioners. The board of ATSIC commissioners has been the major policy-making body on most Indigenous issues, in conjunction with the Federal Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, and supported by an administration of public servants.  

John Uhr has claimed that through the establishment of ATSIC, the Australian Parliament recognised ‘the potential which an Aboriginal parliament or representative assembly can play in mobilising self-government among Aboriginal communities’. He also argued that with adequate funding and closer links with various governments’ ministers, ATSIC could consolidate itself as the legitimate political voice of black Australia.

Of those interviewed from Aboriginal communities, most identified (without prompting) ATSIC as the important organisation in the representation of their communities’ interests as well as in delivering services to Aboriginal communities:

- They see ATSIC as the be-all and end all of Indigenous issues. ATSIC is their voice in the region.
- Not every town has a representative elected … so I guess unless there’s a regional councillor in their community some might feel left out. But they’ll come to see ATSIC staff because the staff are out there all the time and build up a relationship with them.
- MPs and senators should be talking and visiting lots more with local organisations such as ATSIC, they know what Aboriginal people need and want.
- ATSIC is an accountable body, they get scrutinised and audited often and most times they come out okay. ATSIC is doing its job. We are seeing improvements and the findings should be relayed out to the general public. ATSIC should be seen as a body that runs specific programs for Aboriginal people because they are probably the best body to do it.

Several conceded that ATSIC politics often involved particular rivalries and factionalism between those who stood as candidates. Such comments
reflected what has been recorded about the advent of ATSIC, in particular, the institutional design difficulties that went with its creation, and the difficulties with claiming an Indigenous mandate.\textsuperscript{56}

However, this is no different from mainstream politics and there was a broad consensus amongst Indigenous respondents that some specific Aboriginal representation was necessary if their communities were to accept the current system of representative democracy as inclusive of them. All Aboriginal respondents said that Indigenous people felt more at ease dealing with other Aboriginal people:

It's easier yes to get views across when it is an Aboriginal person representing an Aboriginal person. White politicians don't understand us, they'll never understand us. Most Aboriginal people feel more comfortable talking with other Aboriginal people.

If you see more politicians, white politicians than Aboriginal politicians, Aboriginal people are just going to lose heart. But if they put black faces in there, well, it will give us something to sort of jump up and rise about and say, well, okay, he's doing something to help.

Proportional representation has been advocated as one avenue for minority ‘identities’ to achieve representation. However, the onus has remained on political parties to preselect a diverse range of candidates if a politics of presence for minority groups is to occur in practice. During one of my interviews, Warren Mundine was being considered for a place on Labor’s Senate ticket in New South Wales. This was greeted with some ‘hope’ by several Aboriginal respondents. Ultimately, Mundine was listed third on the ticket, deemed by most an unwinnable position.

Moreover, the established minor parties have difficulty in obtaining a quota in their own right. This means it would be virtually impossible for an Aboriginal independent candidate to win a Senate place since the quota needed in half-Senate elections is 14.28 per cent. This feat was almost achieved in 1983 when the quota was 9.1 per cent in a double dissolution election by Australia’s first federal Aboriginal parliamentarian, Senator Neville Bonner. He stood as an independent in the Senate in 1983, after he was shifted from first to third on the Liberal Party ticket, a move made by the party machine because Bonner had become increasingly critical of Coalition policy on Aboriginal issues.\textsuperscript{57}
However, it is often difficult for parliamentarians from minority groups to juggle the demands of being a representative of a broad constituency as well as a particular identity group that span electorates. Neville Bonner not only displeased his own political party, but at times also attracted criticism from Indigenous groups who were concerned at his lack of radicalism. 58 There was awareness amongst respondents that this is no doubt a problem faced by Senator Aden Ridgeway, a Democrat Senator from NSW elected in 1998:

Lots will feel there is finally a voice, Aden Ridgeway does actually represent an Aboriginal voice, even if we do, or do not agree with what he says, but at least there is now an Indigenous person in parliament, but would of created a lot more activity of people being prepared to deal with federal parliament.

It could backfire, like Aden Ridgeway, certain issues that he’s taken the party line and a lot of people think, well, that’s not in the interests of Aboriginal people especially on this reconciliation issue.

Bonner’s experience is often cited as an example as to why reserved seats are an option worthy of consideration to overcome the dilemmas associated with Indigenous representation.59 The strategy was canvassed by some Indigenous groups in 1938, and has been revisited several times since Bonner’s time as a senator. In 1995, ATSIC supported a recommendation for designated seats while in 1997 the NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues investigated the possibility of creating special seats for Indigenous Australians in their state parliament. No reforms have emerged however, and Queensland and the Northern Territory both explicitly rejected the idea of reserved seats.

This is a strategy that has been in place in New Zealand since 1867, when four Maori seats were created, with the number increasing to five with the advent of a new proportional representation electoral system in 1996. In the Australian context, the adoption of special seats would require more complex constitutional and legal reform. Furthermore, just as happened in New Zealand where for many years the reserved seats were held by Maori from the Labour Party, so too there is a fear here that party dominance and electorate size would prohibit any particular benefit accruing to Indigenous communities. 60

Despite such difficulties, almost all the Aboriginal respondents were positive about the potential such a strategy would offer Indigenous people.
It would mean more of a foot in the door. And Aboriginal people would feel more comfortable approaching an Aboriginal person, even if they are from different communities.

Aboriginal people’s presence in parliament is important. Many Aboriginal people would like to see more black faces in parliament. Lots of people would say yes to reserved seats, but also Aboriginal people should be encouraged and trained to help them enter parliament.

This was the country of the Aboriginal people but now we are only 1 per cent of the population, so how are we going to get into the federal parliament? Without reserved seats I can’t see how we will get Aboriginal representatives in my lifetime. Lots of people round here big on this.

We have to have our people in parliament but one or two is not going to be enough because there’s still always six or 12 others around the table. They might say, yes, you’re got an Aboriginal fella there in parliament, aren’t you happy with that? But you’ve got 11 white men. So there’s only one fella, only one vote for anything that he wants to fight for, for our people. We need as many blacks as there are whites in the political stand before we can gain anything, really.

If parliaments were to include more Indigenous representatives, how would this ensure the representation of the interests of Indigenous Australians? Anne Phillips has argued that members of politically marginalised groups should be represented in parliaments to give voice to the interests of their group and to help define and construct policy agenda to take account of these interests. Empirically it is difficult to test the impact of political presence of Indigenous representatives, since there have been so few elected to Australian parliaments. Research has suggested gender and ethnicity is important to representation, with women representatives and those from ethnic backgrounds displaying a greater degree of parliamentary responsiveness to their respective sub-constituencies.

While proportional representation might be touted as the means by which the politics of presence can become a reality for minority groups such as Indigenous Australians, this is unlikely unless a special (lower) quota is put in place for Indigenous political parties, or the existing parties revamp their preselection procedures. Reserved seats, while tokenistic or symbolic in one sense, ensure Indigenous representatives can speak for Indigenous people.
Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that the separation of geography and identity in discussions of representation is problematic. Self-identification was described by respondents in terms of geographically-connected communities, meaning that physical remoteness was only part of the problem of under-representation. Rather, feelings of remoteness were exacerbated by a representation that did not include sufficient understanding and promotion of local communities, identities and interests.

The literature on democratic representation, both old and new, has suggested that attention to local issues, identities and interests, by elected representatives is not ideal in that it leads to populism and parochialism. While this may have been the case with Pauline Hanson's One Nation, it may not necessarily be the case with elected independents. One political analyst has maintained that the election of independents to Houses of Representatives, in sufficient numbers, could lead to a more transparent process of deliberation and negotiation, which would in turn undermine the party discipline hated so much in the electorate. Peter Andren, as independent member for Calare, has not taken the 'popularist' position on many controversial issues of late. He has however, attended to the local needs of his electorate and has sought to encourage discussion and debate around parliamentary superannuation reforms.

This chapter has also argued that in theory the Senate provides 'special' representation for country Australians in that all states are represented equally, irrespective of population. Yet in practice, insufficient attention has been given to the representative functions of those elected to the Senate. Few of those spoken with in rural and regional Australia saw senators as representative of local areas, issues or viewed Senate inquiries as accessible.

Harry Evans, Clerk of the Senate, argued that there were areas in which the Senate's performance could improve. He said that while the committee system provided a valuable opportunity for the public to participate in the legislative process, more time was needed for deliberation. But he noted it was as much up to citizens as the parliament to push for improvement. At least some citizens in rural and regional Australia have indicated their support for reform of the Senate to include senators representing more visibly those who live outside the capital cities. However, while parties, rather than voters, control the Senate tickets, although Tasmania has for long been an important exception, those elected will consider themselves party representatives. It could be possible to
link public funding of political parties to adequate state service (an adaptation of a proposal suggested by John Uhr to prompt parties to achieve gender equity). If such a reform were initiated it would provide an additional avenue of representation and ensure that committee work was not the only means by which Senate is seen as responsive to the people—country and city.

Alternatively, commentators have suggested that another option is for country Australians themselves to recognise that the Senate is ‘an independent and highly effective component of the Commonwealth legislative service’ and as such, can be harnessed, through the representation of minor parties, to further the interests of those whose voices are a minority in the House of Representatives. As Richard Mulgan has stated:

> It is optimistic to expect sufficient critical independence in a party based lower house where the government can rely on a cohesive party majority. An elected upper house such as the Senate in which the government does not have a majority provides an analogy to the critical chamber of independent elected representatives on which the earlier theorists relied.

Finally, it is impossible to discuss the intersection of representation and remoteness without some reference to Indigenous communities in rural Australia. Clearly, it is impossible for them to use their vote in the way that many non-Indigenous country Australians have been able to do to lodge their protest. In a sense, while most of the non-Indigenous views presented here seemed to articulate a desire for a representative who thinks like them and can understand them, for many Indigenous people, independence from party politics is neither necessary nor sufficient. Rather, visibility and connection with the federal political arena has come, perhaps surprisingly, through an intermediary organisation, ATSIC. More direct and visible Indigenous representation in the federal parliament was considered elusive unless a strategy such as ‘reserved seats’ was introduced.

**Endnotes**


6. For example, the intersection of politics and geography has stimulated a flurry of interest amongst geographers in the locality of One Nation voters. See R Davis and R Stimson, ‘Disillusionment and Disenchantment at the Fringe: Explaining the geography of the One Nation Party vote at the Queensland Election’, *People and Place*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1998, pp. 69–82.


9. This rule states that no electorate larger than 5000 sq km in area can, at the time of drawing the boundaries, contain more voters than a small city electorate. (ibid.)


11. ibid., p. 65.


27. P Lyneham opening an interview with Paul Keating, then Prime Minister, on the ABC’s 7.30 report, 5 November 1992.)


31. J Faulkner, ‘A Labor Perspective on Senate Reform’ in M Sawer and S Miskin (eds), ibid., p. 121.

32. Although Uhr has suggested that the proportional representation and the resultant election of minor parties was intended as an ‘instrument to help form a broader coalition of democratic, as distinct from simply majoritarian, interests’ (Uhr, ‘Proportional Representation’, p. 139).


34. As noted in the Introduction to this monograph, no respondents were asked how they voted, so no connections can be made about respondents voting patterns in the Senate and their views on representative functions undertaken by senators.
35. Gareth Evans labelled the Senate a House of Destruction rather than Review when referring to 1975 and Senate Reform, ‘So at any time at any budget we could confront the situation once again that we confronted in 1975—that power not of review but of destruction’. Senator G Evans, Senate, Debates, 17 March 1994, p. 1866.


38. Mark Bannerman reporting Mr Keating’s outline for reform, ABC’s Lateline, 17 March 1994.)


40. I spoke with several staffers from the major parties about this option.


44. ibid.


47. ibid.


49. ibid.

Chapter 3: Roads to Representation
Alternatives to ‘traditional’ party politics

51. See B Costar (ed) op. cit.; C Sharman, op. cit.


56. T Rowse, op. cit.


58. P Read cited in ibid.

59. ibid.


62. In the 2001 Northern Territory election the number of Aboriginal members elected increased to eight out of 25 (see G Worthington, ‘Northern Territory Election 2001’, *Research Note* 3, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, August, 2001.


64. Zappalà, ‘Challenges to the Concept of Representation’, op. cit., p. 17


66. I Marsh, op. cit.


68. Taylor and Johnston, op. cit.

69. Uhr, *Deliberative Democracy*, op. cit., p. 237

70. Sharman, op. cit. p. 151.

There are obvious representational difficulties that go with geographical vastness, albeit not unique to Australia. What is unique about Australia is that it is densely populated in areas situated around the south-western and eastern coasts, leaving vast tracts of the inland areas underpopulated, and physically ‘remote’. As a result, many of the people who live in country Australia are situated a long way from Canberra, the seat of federal parliament. A significant number also live some distance from their state parliaments and, in some cases where there has been considerable restructuring of local government through amalgamations, even the level of government that was traditionally closest to the local community is often no longer that close at all. So it is not surprising that few respondents felt any connection with the federal parliament.

While communication with constituents is an issue for all politicians, it is especially so for those representing low-density electorates, where the element of ‘remoteness’ means indirect interaction is necessary to strengthen the connection between constituent and representative.

According to some commentators, the increasing, albeit necessary, use of various media by politicians and governments to deliver their message, rather than in a direct way, has had an impact on the sense of disconnection with the political system. Arguably, the mass media have the potential to both inform and alienate. For example, during election campaigns most voters get their information through television, radio or the newspapers. However, much of the news is focused on government or political failures rather than successes, which of itself can undermine confidence in government and the political process more generally.

This chapter looks at the extent to which country Australians felt geographical remoteness has contributed to their sense of lack of connection with the federal parliament. Given that this physical remoteness cannot be altered, respondents’ accounts of the possibilities and problems associated with the
Internet as a means of overcoming this sense of distance, and for accessing political information and enhancing political participation or involvement in broader democratic practices beyond voting are examined. The chapter also revisits one of the old technologies for information provision and connecting people, the provincial newspaper, with a particular focus on regional dailies and regional/rural weeklies. Both the new and old technologies were seen by respondents to be valuable, but supplementary rather than a substitute for personal contact with political representatives. I argue that while news media may be a key variable in the decline of trust in public institutions including the parliament, there is also a possibility, even an expectation that to establish a stronger connection between parliament and the people, politicians could use media technologies more efficiently and creatively.

**Tyrannies of Distance**

Research has indicated that distance from the place of government does matter to feelings of political trust. Surveys show Western Australian and Queensland respondents reported greater trust in their state governments than the federal government, compared to the rest of respondents, while those from New South Wales and Victoria were more likely to trust the federal government, compared to remainder of respondents. Moreover, evidence suggested that voters in the more populated states closer to Canberra paid more attention to national politics and were more supportive of the federal government, while voters in the more distant states, particularly Western Australia, were less informed about national politics and were more distrustful of it. This was similar to trends in the United States. Indeed, Nye suggested that one of the puzzling aspects of the relationship between declining public trust and political institutions was the distance people say they feel from the place of government.

The issue of distance and remoteness was a recurring theme in responses to questions about parliament. This was expressed as being more than just a physical distance, but also as an emotional or psychological detachment:

> I think we’re quite far removed and actually we often laugh about wise men from the east coming over. Yes, we use that a lot here and I don’t know if it’s just us, if it’s our parochialism, but things in Western Australia are different than they are — if we have a state that we’re most similar with, perhaps it’s Queensland and I think that’s got a lot to do with size and demographics.
I feel that they represent the people as best they can but then you feel like Canberra is so far away you feel as though you’re not part of the system.

No, we feel that we are at the end of the line, forgotten. It’s a tyranny of distance thing —being so far from Canberra. There are not a lot of us in rural areas any more, and we get overlooked.

In addition, while some, like those cited above, spoke of country citizens feeling isolated from parliament, others expressed a sense of remoteness in terms of parliament’s distance from the people. For example,

I think parliament is very distant, untouchable. Yes, I think people here feel detached from it, that even though it does affect their daily lives, that there’s nothing that they can do about it.

There is no sense of connection with parliament in Canberra. There is a feeling of isolation that we’re here and they’re way up there and somehow in some way what people would like to see happen is lost in that distance. And it’s probably a feeling that a lot of parliamentarians, through no fault of their own, are distant from your electorate, both geographical and physical and sometimes an emotional distance too.

There was also recognition of how such distances have an impact on the ability of their local representative to attend to the needs of the electorate:

It’s so hard isn’t it —you’ve got to be in Canberra, in parliament and when you get a free moment you race back to your electorate. So how are you going to get around outback Queensland or wherever as well?

I think the people here realise the tyranny of distance impacts on representation. That [is] because flying back from here to Canberra when parliament’s sitting and things like that, then the chances of getting out on a regular basis is hard.

Part of this feeling of disconnection with the parliament was identified as related to a lack of understanding as to what parliament did:

Business people feel disconnected and remote from parliament. They don’t know much about what goes on in Parliament House. They would approach their local member, but not the parliament in any direct way through submissions or anything.
I think they have a vague understanding but really, I mean, parliament is broadcast on the ABC in the afternoons and things like that but there’s no commentary with it, there’s no explanation about why they’re talking about various things, it’s just broadcasting. Therefore unless there’s some sort of explanation of what they’re talking about, and about how things work, then I don’t think anyone has any great understanding of it nor any great interest.

They don’t have a problem with the parliament; they just wonder why it takes so long to get things done. They don’t always understand what happens inside there.

Some analysts refer to Parliament House as a democratic building because of it having being built into Capital Hill, symbolic of parliamentarians being subordinate to the citizen. Others however claim the opposite, that its design and features are inherently undemocratic and imposing. Smith says while these are interesting interpretations, they tell us little about what meanings Australians take the building to represent. When asked about trust in parliament, several respondents referred to the building itself as both a place of interest and intrigue:

I can understand, having been to Canberra and Parliament House, how parliamentarians can get remote from their electorates, because it is such a different world. When they get with one another all these ideas seem really good, and they think we should accept [them], they don't even tell us half the time what they are doing, and the people that put them there don't get consulted.

The ones who have been to Canberra think the building is great, although they are cynical about who occupies it, that is both the building and Canberra itself, and the number of bureaucrats that they’ve got there.

Well, in terms of the physical structure I think it is an icon; it’s an icon for Australia. I think it’s recognised as the place where a lot of decisions are made, but you know … its kind of mystical.

People might feel connected with the physical building that’s in Canberra but I don’t think they’re connected with the processes that go on in there.

How much this sense of disconnection with the place of parliament affects the trust country Australians have in parliament as an institution is difficult to
gauge. In the mid-1990s confidence in the institution of parliament stood at 30 per cent, but this represented a decline of 25 percentage points since 1981.7 The question asked of survey respondents was ‘how much confidence do you have in parliament?’8 This tells us little of what people understand parliament to be about when they answer this question. Nor is it clear that they separate out their feelings for politicians, who are their tangible link to parliament, from their overall confidence in parliament. The respondents cited here saw it as a building, the seat of government, but knew less about the business of parliament.

Smith has suggested that assumptions about parliament have far less to do with Parliament House itself and more to do with the projections of parliamentary politics by the media.9 In other words, people’s perceptions and understandings of parliament are necessarily influenced by both the process and medium of communication.

**Politics and New Technology**

New developments in information and communications technology are often presented as the panacea to the tyranny of distance. Internet access is considered to offer, to those outside urban centres, a raft of possibilities in terms of interactive communication, including access to goods and services, information and conversation. Increasingly we are seeing discussions about how new technologies may in turn lead to more connections beyond the material—democratic connections—offering voters increased access and participation to the places and processes of political decisions. The idea is that, as a medium, the Internet not only offers citizens more information, in a more direct manner, but that it has the potential to be used interactively. In other words, the Internet might encourage more participatory styles of engagement between political institutions and citizens at large.

Cross-nationally, many government services are available online and most political parties now have their own web sites. In some instances, citizens can discuss political issues in chat rooms, e-mail petitions are becoming a popular way of mobilising support and electronic voting has been tested in a number of democracies.10 The ‘success’ of groups protesting outside various World Trade Organisation meetings over the past few years is attributed to the capacity to organise protest events using online resources. All this is possible because the Internet overrides not only geographical boundaries but also traditional
political boundaries by bringing diverse groups together creating virtual communities of interest.

The combination of high increases in Internet use in Australia, combined with geographical vastness, means that numerous possibilities are available for both citizens and officials to gather, disseminate and share information. Unfortunately, we still know relatively little about Australians’ use of the Internet for political purposes. In the 2001 Australian Election Survey (AES) only one third of respondents said they had used the Internet for political purposes. Of those, around 50 per cent had sought online information about politics or government services, 14 per cent had accessed information on political parties or used it to contact public officials and approximately 17 per cent had used the Internet for political discussions.11

Amongst country users, television and newspapers appear to have been the main sources of election information in both the 1998 and 2001 elections, (although there appears to have been a decline in newspaper use in 2001). A similar pattern is apparent amongst city users, although the latter are more likely overall to access political information (Table 1).

Table 1: Access to Federal Election Information, 1998–2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lots/Some Use 1998 (%)</th>
<th>Lots/Some Use 2001 (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet12</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Internet access</td>
<td>80.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AES 1998; 2001

In comparison to other media, few people made use of the Internet to access election information irrespective of where they lived. City residents were more likely than those in country Australia to make use of the Internet, while those in the country were less likely to have Internet access, compared to those in the city. However, in the space of three years, some interesting changes in Internet use have emerged. For example, in both the city and the country, the percentage of those using the Internet to access election information has
increased, especially amongst urban respondents. There was also a decline in the proportion of respondents without Internet access, in both the city and the country.

Within the rural and regional category (Table 2), those in large towns were more likely to use the Internet than those in rural areas or small towns, although the percentage of use in both cases remained small.

Table 2: Rural/Regional Access to Federal Election Information, 1998–2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lots/Some Use 1998 (%)</th>
<th>Lots/Some Use 2001 (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural area</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>46.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AES 1998, 2001

While the Internet may be under-utilised for accessing political information and ‘communication’ with politicians, at least half of the respondents said they thought the Internet had potential to overcome the difficulties of distance and facilitate more consultation and discussion between officials and citizens in rural and regional areas:

I don’t want to drive three and a half hours to my major city for a 20 minute meeting with somebody … If you’re going to talk to representatives from a cross-section of rural communities, why not do it online?

Of course we have to remember those who are not connected to the Internet but for those who are and who are isolated and cannot get to or afford to get to meetings this is a wonderful way to build a bridge between government and the community.

New technology is a marvellous way of sharing information. The Internet and e-mail opens up boundaries far and beyond where we live.
In one instance, online interaction for political communication was already considered successful in one small country town:

[The state politician] ran a women’s forum day online and it was hugely popular. We had about eight women in here online looking at the chat room and contributing. The perception was that s/he was talking to people out here in the region. It was hugely popular.

For others, there was also a sense that political interaction online would become more acceptable once those in country Australia were comfortable with using the Internet generally, and e-mail in particular:

Accessing parliament and the local member through talking by e-mail and chat-rooms could be a next step; a natural progression for people out here.

I think there’s probably a good possibility if the politicians’ staff used e-mail for surveying they would get more responses.

The politicians could use moderated groups that were closed online forum, and others that were open.

While most respondents were optimistic that the gap between those who did and did not use the Internet for political purposes would close over time, there were a few who were less so:

Country people use it for business, but I can’t imagine anyone sitting on a computer going to look for information on the political process. They wouldn’t go into web site and send the local representative an e-mail. It’s a time factor.

The more people find out about new technology the more they realise the opportunities that are there. But hell no, they would not think about using it to find out more about parliament or corresponding with their politician.

It is not going to be any different from people who are writing letters to MPs now. … People still actually have to sit down and communicate with politicians or communicate with parliament. It is still going to take some effort.

There was also a perception that members of parliament and the parliament itself needed to take more responsibility to better inform citizens of what was
already available online, ‘market’ their Internet presence, and extend the kinds of ‘interactive’ services that could be accessed:

I hope it would be offered and available because that’s how people are accessing information, and it’s important for establishing connections. But it would need to be advertised more widely so that people know it’s available. It has to be marketed.

I see a number of ways the relationships could be enhanced with a member of parliament: through the use of newsgroups for example on topical issues, but the politician would need to be proactive and invite comment.

For example at the end of the Footy Show they’ll say ‘we’ve got James Hird in our studio and you can have a chat to him online’. I could see a benefit in parliament saying ‘OK we have Ron Boswell and Martin Ferguson here; those who want to talk about daffodils we’ve got both sides of politics online, you’ve got forty minutes, chat away’.

Few respondents believed members of their communities were aware that, at the federal level, all major political parties had web sites which provided details on leaders, candidates, policies, and offered feedback channels, usually through e-mail. Perhaps this is not surprising given that recent research into Internet use by political parties has suggested that attempts to gather information from, or be interactive with voters was limited and has been described as ‘techno-inertia’.

In the Federal Parliament, live television broadcasts of both houses and up to four committees have been available via the Internet since 1999. In addition, the Department of the Senate has improved the range and accessibility of information available to the public via the Internet, with an explicit focus on enhancing public knowledge of the role of the Senate, its committee work, and the place of parliament more generally. To this end, the Senate now allows senators to present electronic petitions to parliament and to committee deliberations, and these carry the same weight as those signed by hand.

Each parliamentarian has a parliamentary home page, which includes their e-mail address, biographical information and terms of service as well as links to the relevant political party. Senators’ and members’ personal home pages may also be linked to their parliamentary home page but these personal home pages are not hosted by the parliament.
Personal home pages are one mechanism that senators and members can use to bring the parliament closer to the people by delivering information to citizens about their activities in Canberra and in the electorate. Home pages can also stimulate and incorporate more open democratic interaction, through the use of chat rooms, surveys and other feedback channels. However, at the time this research was conducted, there was little indication that Australian parliamentarians were interested or active, independently of their parties, in pursuing the electronic connections with voters. In 2001, 34 members (23 per cent) and 14 senators (18.5 per cent) had their own personal home pages connected to their parliamentary home page.\textsuperscript{16} What these personal home pages included was variable. Some were very basic, providing links to other sites, uncut media releases and verbatim speeches given in the parliament. In these cases, e-mail was the only channel for voter feedback. Others went beyond the basics, providing photos, informal summaries of their activities in parliament and the electorate and a diary of upcoming events. Fourteen of the 48 personal home pages gave constituents additional channels of communication beyond e-mail, providing survey feedback forms, chat rooms and web site question and answer sessions. However, more research is needed to evaluate the extent to which these web sites are being accessed and utilised by constituents.

It seems then, at least at the time of this research, that interactivity was not a dominant feature of Internet use. This reflects findings in both Australia and overseas, where election campaigns in which Internet use has featured, have failed to promote ‘real interactivity’.\textsuperscript{17}

If new technology is to facilitate the growth of civic engagement and deliberative forms of democracy, (as opposed to just providing information or the means for electronic voting), then a range of forums is required to encourage active and regular interaction amongst citizens and between citizens and their representatives. However, just as democracy in the industrial age required universal suffrage, so interactive online democracy requires universal access to the relevant technology. The Internet can only fulfil the promise of enhanced political participation if it is truly socially inclusive.

A review of the socioeconomic aspects of Internet access in rural and regional Australia in 2001 concluded that Internet access and use has yet to become socially inclusive in Australia.\textsuperscript{18} In summary, metropolitan Australians had the highest access rate (40 per cent) with other urban areas, that is, provincial centres with populations greater than 2500, showing the lowest rate of access
The access rate for rural areas sat between these two, at 33 per cent. In projecting who was likely to remain unconnected to the Internet, it was the unemployed in rural Australia who were much less likely to have Internet access at home compared to the unemployed in metropolitan areas. While there has been an increase in the percentage of people in rural and regional Australia who have access to computers at home, there remained a gap between them and those who live in capital cities. Similarly, the percentage of country people with access to the Internet had more than doubled between 1998 and 2000 (with significant growth between 1999 and 2000), although it had yet to reach the level of use in capital cities.

Table 3: Computer and Internet Access in City/Country Areas* (%)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Access to Computer (%) (at home)</th>
<th>Access to Internet (%) (at home)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1998</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1999</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2000</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*City refers to capital city statistical divisions. Source: ABS 8147 Feb 2001

Living in rural or regional areas of Australia does not in itself determine Internet access. Levels of education, employment and income were the key explanatory variables. However, there can be no doubt that a regional dimension to the digital divide exists. In 2000, of those citizens with tertiary qualifications 11.5 per cent lived in rural electorates compared to 23 per cent in metropolitan electorates. Rural and provincial electorates had higher rates of unemployment and a higher proportion of low-income families than city electorates. Unemployment was around 11 per cent in provincial electorates, compared to 8 per cent in metropolitan electorates. Those people out of work and usually on low incomes, were much less likely to have Internet access at home (27 per cent), compared to those in work (57 per cent), and so were more dependent on other sites such as public libraries. There are almost 10 per cent more families with incomes of less than $500 per week in rural and provincial electorates than in city electorates.

Given that evidence both here and overseas has revealed that those on low incomes were significantly less likely to have Internet access at home, cost of
access remains an important issue if all Australians, including those in rural and regional Australia, are to participate in the new information economy. Cost featured as an important aspect in discussions of Internet use in all electorates visited for the purposes of this research:

Accessing the Internet costs more than just a local call. It is the same as STD rates and the actual infrastructure is very poor and not reliable.

We went to the Inquiry and asked about the cost of calls, and one of the officials got up and said if you want cheap telephone calls you shouldn't live in a place like Ouyen. He said, ‘if you want cheap calls you better go and live in Melbourne’.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission also found that the high cost of linking outlying rural homes and schools to the Internet had a negative impact on the survival of many small towns, as well as cementing disadvantages faced by children in these small towns.

Internet access and regular use were also complicated by infrastructure issues:

If you've got graphics forget about it. You can go and cook the tea, prepare tomorrow’s casserole and probably take the washing off the line while you're downloading a picture. So that’s expensive, inefficient, time consuming and extremely frustrating.

If you're on the outskirts of town you might only get speeds of 20 000 (kbps) because of the distance from the exchange. … You’ve got no hope unless you hook up to satellite systems and pay a fair bit of money. So yes, rural people are still pretty disadvantaged when it comes to the one thing that could get them government services and business opportunities.

Given that we know education, income and geography influence the propensity to be connected to the Internet, it is unlikely that all parliamentarians will see a need for the provision of online information and communication services, at least at this stage. However, Internet use is growing in both rural and urban areas in Australia and it is clear that the potential for the Internet as a medium to ameliorate some of the effects of distance and disconnection has yet to be fully explored.
Country Newspapers: Old Technology, New Opportunities?

Research has indicated that the use of online news supplemented rather than replaced conventional channels: citizens who wanted political news continued to turn to the evening news and read the daily newspaper. This section examines the extent to which the rural and regional press (as opposed to the metropolitan dailies) can contribute to the provision of political news and enhance the connection between representative and constituent.

There has been an ongoing debate as to whether television has taken over from the press as the main source of news for most citizens. The increased use of electronic media, concentrated ownership of the press and an erosion of news standards is considered to have undercut the popularity of the newspaper. One concern for those interested in the impact this development might have on political communication has been that newspapers rather than television are more effective at conveying the detailed information necessary to understand complex political and policy issues. Consequently, a shift away from newspapers could undermine critical civic understanding and engagement.

In Australia, newspaper circulation has declined significantly in the past half century. Of the 24 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries for which there is data, Australia was ranked 20th in terms of newspaper circulation in 1996. In 1950 newspaper circulation was 416 per 1000 people. By 1996 this had dropped to 105 per 1000. Alongside this there has been an increase in the number of daily newspapers available from 54 in 1950 to 65 in 1996.

Unlike the decrease in circulation experienced by metropolitan newspapers, regional dailies have not experienced the same decline. In the decade to March 1993, total circulation for regional dailies increased by 9.3 per cent with a significant increase in the employment of journalists in regional newspapers throughout the 1980s. However, during the rest of the 1990s, circulation rates of regional dailies began to decrease. Between 1990 and 2000, of the 35 regional dailies in production, 27 had experienced a decline in circulation, in some cases quite sizeable (over 20 per cent), with the average decline for this period standing at 12.5 per cent. Eight regional dailies experienced an increase in circulation, with significant growth evident for the Gold Coast and Shepparton newspapers.
The reasons for such a decline and the strategies in place to halt it have been discussed in depth elsewhere.\textsuperscript{30} It is worth noting however, that despite the general slump that has taken hold amongst regional dailies, overall, the circulation of the provincial presses remains relatively strong compared to the circulation of the metropolitan dailies (Table 4). The total circulation of the provincial press stood at over four million in 2000, compared to the 2.5 million in urban Australia. This figure does not take into account the rural industry newspapers such as the \textit{Land}, the \textit{Weekly Times} and the \textit{Stock and Land}, whose combined weekly circulation is estimated at 135,000.\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lcc}
\hline
 & Number of Papers & Circulation  \\
\hline
Metropolitan Dailies & 11 & 2,589,285  \\
Regional Dailies & 38 & 643,950  \\
Regional Bi-tri weeklies & 85 & 487,843  \\
Rural/Regional Weeklies & 185 & 3,183,040  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Number and Circulation of Australian Newspapers 2000}
\end{table}


In this sense, based on circulation figures alone (and taking into account that readership figures are generally considered to be higher again), provincial newspapers have the potential to be a valuable channel for political communication. Commentators have suggested an intimate relationship exists between country readers and their local papers, with the former providing a form of ‘peer group pressure’ over editors, a feature often less noticeable in more heterogenous, urban communities.\textsuperscript{32} Rather, ‘the provincial paper is an integral part of the make-up of the community, essential to its progress and the mirror of its local life’.\textsuperscript{33}

Many respondents commented that it was the social and cultural content of a rural community newspaper that drove its popularity:

> People here read the local paper before they read anything else. That’s where they get their local information, people rely on the paper for that … So if there was more information on what was happening politically, it would at least be put in front of them.
The metropolitan papers, they're big newspapers, but how much in it would really interest us? Whereas with a country paper round here, just about the whole paper interests people because we run pictures of people that just about everybody knows.

Somebody at a workplace will buy our daily and its pick-up value is enormous because five or six of his mates who aren't newspaper buyers, during a smoko will pick up the paper and say ‘look at this idiot playing cricket, that's my mate’ and they relate to the paper. To get a better feeling about what happens in the federal parliament, the daily would be the ideal way.

The importance of reflecting community social, cultural and moral mores has not precluded provincial papers from publishing political news. In 1927 Sidney Barton, managing editor of the *Bundaberg Daily News and Mail*, noted that the role of a provincial newspaper was to ‘lead, probe, support, condemn, investigate praise, blame, aid, educate and review’.34 While new technologies have emerged in competition to the newspaper, Rod Kirkpatrick has argued that the local dimension was never forfeited and continued to be what distinguished rural community papers from the urban-based dailies.35

Not surprisingly then, content analyses reveal an extensive coverage given to local government politics and a tendency to act as a ‘ratepayers’ watchdog’. Local government respondents interviewed also noted the importance of the local newspaper to their work and dissemination of information. The overriding aspect to the reporting of broader political issues was the local relevance of such stories:

Our local paper reports from all the media releases but they localise it and the ABC does the same thing. So they sort of localise everything and that's the real news on the local background and all the politics.

One newspaper editor commented:

That's half the trouble with some of the press gallery stuff that we see out here in the country is the way the big city media, television, national television, national papers, report politics. I mean we get the view they're more interested in the game rather than what's actually happening, the consequences of the decisions.
Another noted:

The metro papers are obviously representing metropolitan interests; they aren’t picking up the basic concerns of people in the country, the things that are worrying them. . . . I think country people don’t feel the media’s on their side. . . . I think it’s more like ‘does that really relate to me?’ It’s not relevant. I think country people want to hear of things that are relevant.

Given that the country newspaper was considered to be the first point for many country readers wanting local news, it was not surprising that most of the newspaper editors I interviewed suggested their paper could be put to more use by their federal parliamentarians:

If the local member or the senator were given a charter that they should give a column to the local paper every week, you would find ocker Joe who understands bugger-all about Federal Parliament would subliminally be picking up messages about parliament if it was done that way.

We run a lot of columns and if our member wrote us four hundred words a week, s/he would have access and as long as he made it easygoing, with a bit of humour and a lot of local issues like oranges, water and the single desk issue for example.

Our newspaper said we’d run a column for our member but s/he never took it up.

But again, respondents considered the presentation of such a column or story to be of vital importance:

What I’d like to see in the paper once a fortnight is our member saying what’s happening in Canberra. You know, just a little short piece, probably two sentences on this and on that and its local relevance. Then, ‘if you want any more information on this, ring my office’. I think that would be excellent, because people will read those but they won’t read a great big article.

If the politician wrote it, if it was his/her words then I think that would be interesting. The only thing is of course, they (the people) would say, yes, that’s the party machine talking. The local politician wouldn’t be game to say it otherwise.
Bland media releases to do little to engage the community. They need to deliver information in a more fun way if that is possible, which would mean thinking about innovative new ways to get a message across. It would mean linking the information into something that rural people enjoy, trust and like.

Feedback from respondents in all electorates visited suggested that their federal representatives have not recognised the potential of provincial newspaper. For example, most thought that their federal politician was seen in the local newspaper ‘occasionally’, but often the story was the result of a press release or a ‘photo opportunity’ rather than a column explaining the relevance of current federal issues to the local community. Respondents suggested their state politicians were more adept and prolific in using the local newspaper to provide commentary on an issue. A few respondents noted that they saw their federal member so rarely in the local newspaper outside of election time that if they did see a story it would ‘make them suspicious’.

It has been suggested that people have little confidence in the press, and this general feeling was borne out in the responses received, as reported in Chapter Two. However, just as country voters vary their levels of trust for politicians according to whether they are the local representative or not, their levels of confidence in the press also vary. For example, most respondents were more likely to trust their local country newspaper than the metropolitan dailies in providing country communities with the news and perspective that they thought mattered. They were also open to communications from politicians if they had a local resonance and were not a blatant party message.

**The Personal Touch**

Increasingly in the political domain, interaction between politicians and voters occurs indirectly, rather than directly, primarily through the mass media, (and the Internet has the potential to increase further this indirect contact). Face-to-face contact between ‘concrete individuals’ in modern society is slowly becoming obsolete. Yet concrete contact has been identified as an important component in garnering trust.

The desire for ‘human contact’ was a theme that recurred throughout discussions of new technologies with respondents. Of those who spoke of the potential of the Internet for political engagement, three quarters felt it could not replace the importance of face-to-face contact with constituents by their local representative:
The Internet is going to be a major means of communication, sadly enough, I still think the best way to agree is to sit down and discuss it, … you get a truer understanding of people’s feelings.

If you want to get the emotion across, talking face-to-face is very important.

Aboriginal people may start to use the Internet politically. But it would not be able to replace the face-to-face interaction. We need to see the body language. We need to express concerns and anger so that the politician can feel it as well as hear it. That’s part of the pressure.

So while the Internet has the potential to transcend geographical vastness, it is unlikely to replace the requirement for politicians to visit the far-flung corners of their electorates. There was a feeling for example, that personal contact was particularly important for the establishment of trust in the relationship between politicians and constituents in rural Australia:

It might be a country thing simply because it’s a more personal environment. You know, people see their friends in the street. You know, a lot of the people in the city won’t even know who their next door neighbours are, in the country it’s far more personal.

I think it is a particularly country thing. I don’t think city people require the same intimacy to trust someone. It might be just a rural culture thing.

Aitkin’s work on political attitudes undertaken in the late 1960s suggested that amongst many in country electorates, there was a ‘culture of contact’, with MPs reasonably well known and political interest relatively high. A study such as this cannot judge whether the same can be said for country respondents today. However, if we assume that it is through deliberation and discussion that mutual respect occurs and new understandings take place, then it is plausible that the personal touch remains important to generate a stronger sense of trust and confidence in the institutions of governance. The discussions reviewed here suggest that this may indeed facilitate a stronger connection between rural and regional Australians and the federal parliament.

**Conclusion**

Most of the citizens I spoke with in rural and regional Australia understood the difficulties facing politicians in getting around their electorates, and
their expectations were accordingly realistic. They recognised that they were geographically remote from the place of parliament: and the work of parliament itself was also seen as remote from them. Partly this was attributed to a lack of knowledge on the part of rural and regional citizens about the functions of parliament. But parliament was also seen as an environment that was foreign to them, separate from their lives. There was little personal connection with the place of federal parliament.

Research has suggested that MPs already face an overwhelming schedule, balancing commitments to constituents, the Parliament and their Party. And perhaps surprisingly, given the issue of distance, rural MPs, at least historically, have tended to be more visible than their city counterparts. So while respondents felt Senators should be more visible, it seems unlikely that many rural MPs can increase their visibility ‘in person’. In addition, commentators have argued that there is such a wide gap between the political process and the normal life of individual citizens that it is unlikely that personal experience can reconnect people with politics. However, the use of both new and old technologies could facilitate such an attempt. More country people are accessing the Internet, and there has been an increase in the use of the Internet to access electoral information since 1998. While the jury is still out on whether there is a causal link between increases in information and increases in popular political action, there appeared to be a sense amongst some in rural communities that the Internet could further political engagement. In addition, there is strong evidence form this research to suggest that more targeted use of the local newspapers could be a means of enabling some electorate MPs to get their message to the voters directly, without party or negative media spin.

Overseas research shows that the more attention people pay to the news media, in its variety of forms, the more faith they have in democratic principles. Norris argues that the process is like a ‘virtuous circle’: the most politically knowledgeable, trusting and participatory citizens are most likely to tune into public affairs coverage. And those most attentive to coverage of public affairs become more engaged in and trusting of the political process. Certainly many of the respondents in this study expressed a desire for more political communication about the importance of politics to their lives. The various media technologies are one way that politicians, parties and parliament can create more communicative relationships with constituents. The end result might be an increase in trust and confidence in the political process.
Endnotes


5. Johnson in Smith, op. cit., p. 23; For summary of research on this see Smith, pp. 27–32.


8. The surveys also included questions about confidence in the federal government and political parties. ibid.


12. The survey question relating to the Internet had different categories to the others; ‘no use’, ‘one or twice’, ‘on several occasions’ and ‘many times’. The latter three categories were combined under ‘lots/some use’.


15. Senators and members have had desktop access to browsing facilities and external e-mail in their Parliament House offices since 1997. See K Magarey, 'The Internet and Australian Parliamentary Democracy', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 3, 1999, pp. 404–428.

16. This count only includes those Parliamentarians who have their personal home pages linked into the Parliamentary site. It does not include Ministers or Parliamentary Secretaries who have links to their Departmental Websites.

17. EC Kamarck ‘Catching voters in the web’, in EC Kamarck and JS Nye, *Governance.com: democracy in the information age*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, 2002; see also Gibson and Ward, op. cit. A survey of 76 parliamentarians’ offices in 1999 revealed that there was minimal interest in using the Internet in an interactive way. There were also
concerns about the limited reach of the Internet, and about the legitimacy of, and amount of work generated by email communication (Margarey, op. cit.).


20 ibid.


26. For a summary of these debates see Norris, op. cit.

27. ibid.


30. ibid.

31. This estimate was provided by an industry source and refers only to those three newspapers listed (whose circulation is largely limited to NSW and Vic).

32. Various chapters in P Share (ed), op. cit.


34. ibid., p. 225.

35. ibid.

36. Papadakis, op. cit.


40. Aitkin, op. cit.

41. Kaase, op. cit.


43. Some rural politicians may already utilise this resource. This recommendation draws only from the responses I received in the five electorates visited. A content analysis of country newspapers would reveal more on this: a topic for further research.

Conclusion

Prior to the Tampa incident and the terrorist attacks in the United States of September 11 2001, some thought the bush would be the Coalition’s biggest electoral challenge. Noted election analyst, Anthony Green, went as far as to suggest that the ‘political mood in rural and regional Australia is more volatile than at any time since the creation of the Country Party’.1 The Coalition’s four most marginal seats (held by margins of less than 0.5 per cent) were in rural and regional Australia. Of the 30 Coalition seats held by margins of less than 5 per cent, 19 (almost two thirds) were rural or provincial seats. Yet, the 2001 election results indicated that the Coalition was able to hold its own in country Australia, at least in terms of vote. The National Party vote increased slightly from 5.3 per cent to 5.6 per cent while Pauline Hanson’s One Nation vote was almost halved, dropping from 8.4 to 4.3 per cent and Labor was largely unsuccessful in harnessing the regional discontent.

Does such an outcome mean that the political discontent expressed by rural and regional respondents was specific to the Coalition Government and not suggestive of a broader malaise with the institutions and processes of representative democracy?

Given the unusual international circumstances that surrounded the 2001 federal election, it is too early to conclude that rural and regional discontent has disappeared. For example, there were several features of the 2001 election outcome that suggested rural and regional voters were not ready to recommit to their traditional party loyalties. While the vote for PHON in rural electorates dropped by around 5.5 per cent, vote for the National Party increased by only 1.5 per cent. However, the vote for independent candidates and the Greens increased by 2.5 per cent and 2 per cent respectively. The outcome was more significant than the figures suggest. The National Party lost three seats, two of which were won by independents, Tony Windsor and Bob Katter, while Tim Fischer’s seat of Farrer was lost to the Liberals. Peter Andren’s primary vote in Calare increased to 51.4 per cent, an increase of just over 15 per cent, with his two-party preferred vote reaching 75.04 per cent, implying that the National Party candidate was not a serious threat. The election of three independents.
bodes ill for the Nationals, since it will allow for three-cornered contests in subsequent elections. Furthermore, Andren’s re-election for his third term as an independent suggests that voters are prepared to reward a responsive constituency representative.²

In an attempt to regain their status in country Australia, the Coalition put increased effort into targeting regional areas, both symbolically and financially.³ This targeting increased in intensity toward the end of 2000 and into 2001. Previously, in October 1999, the Regional Australia Summit was held at which 282 delegates from a range of community, government and business organisations met to discuss problems and challenges facing regional Australia. Partnerships, local empowerment, equity of services and economic and business development were key issues defined as warranting government attention by the Summit. An $83 million fund was set up following the Summit, with the aim of ‘kick-starting’ local community projects in struggling electorates.

Prime Minister Howard then undertook a ‘listening tour’ early in 2000. The relay of the Olympic Torch and the Queen’s visit in August 2000 also included a number of rural and regional stops. A number of respondents maintained the latter two events, in particular, boosted local morale and demonstrated to local citizens that they mattered. In addition, two parliamentary committees looked specifically at employment and infrastructure issues in regional Australia.⁴ The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission conducted an investigation into educational services for children in rural and remote Australia, while the Inquiry into Telecommunications in Regional Australia by Besley was commissioned and reported in late 2000. Part of the Government response was a commitment that the remaining sale of Telstra would not go ahead until the Besley recommendations were met. These inquiries, while not all government-sponsored, and not all resulting in any significant government response, did provide opportunities for consultation with rural and regional citizens on a range of issues directly affecting their immediate material well-being.

In terms of policy and financial commitments, the Alice Springs–Darwin railway was launched, while the Natural Heritage Trust, funded by the proceeds of the partial sale of Telstra, provided significant monies to projects in regional Australia, particularly in the area of Land Care. Moreover, the Coalition undertook a range of policy initiatives from late 2000, which were significant to the ‘bush’.⁵ For example, in terms of expenditure in
the regions, the Government increased funding for some ongoing regional expenditure programs and outlined a large number of new spending initiatives targeted at improving the welfare of those living in rural and regional areas.\(^6\)

In early 2001, the Government chose to suspend the February indexation of the fuel excise; additional money was also given to local governments in regional Australia for roads ($850 million). The 2001 Budget continued these expenditure patterns, with $163.1 million committed over four years to the area of telecommunications, while self-funded retirees, many of whom live in marginal coastal electorates, were provided with tax cuts and wider access to concessional pharmaceutical benefits.

In launching the National Party’s election campaign at Tweed Heads in October 2001, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the National Party John Anderson, urged voters to remember his party’s record in government, which he claimed included the investment of more than $28.5 billion in over 300 separate regional programs.\(^7\) The political discontent expressed by rural and regional voters through the ballot box, stimulated a range of election commitments from the Coalition Government in an effort to demonstrate that they were ‘listening’ to their country constituents. Moreover, throughout the 2001 election campaign, all three major parties were pitching their campaign beyond the interests of farmers: the focus was on education, health, aged care, telecommunications and equity of services to those in regional and rural Australia. In other words, the complexity and diversity of the needs of rural and regional Australians had been explicitly recognised by party strategists.

**Lingering Political Discontent?**

As outlined in the introduction to this monograph, most of the research to date has suggested that voters have confidence in their nation state and are satisfied with the principles of representative democracy. Survey research interpreted by Goot, Bean and Papadakis\(^8\) indicated there was less satisfaction with the performance of their political institutions such as government, political parties and politicians. The perspectives represented in this monograph suggested something similar. Most respondents did not feel the incumbent government had been sufficiently responsive to the needs of country constituents, especially as this grouping were seen as the traditional electors of the National and Liberal Parties in rural and regional Australia. Their accounts support the work of the various Australian commentators who argue that that the decline in trust in
government is related to the government’s ‘life-cycle’: the longer a government is incumbent, the less satisfactory or trustworthy it is perceived to be.

Most respondents also reported a high degree of dissatisfaction with the major political parties and politicians as a group. While local politicians were generally exempted from these negative comments, this did not seem to prevent the expression of political support for PHON. This was one of the paradoxes to emerge: respondents had little that was positive to say about politicians as a group, but they were very supportive of their own politician and liked their local member. While they supported their local member, they also acknowledged the attraction PHON had within their communities. They accounted for the support of PHON in terms of a protest against political parties, the government, and their sense of being ignored or forgotten. No one indicated it was in response to the inadequacies of the local member. What they did note was that the fault lay with their local member’s party. The party was deemed to have made it impossible for the local member to adequately represent the local issues of concern. So, if the issue is not with local representatives but with the major political parties, it should come as no surprise that independent candidates would be the favoured replacement to PHON.

Don Aitkin suggested that in the 1970s, the citizen’s link with the parliament and the political system was through their party identification: ‘the Member of Parliament is the party’s standard-bearer, but not much more than that’. Other research has indicated that the fortunes of local representatives lie not with their personal vote but with their party’s electoral success or failure. With party identification in decline in voting for both the House of Representatives (albeit gradual) and the Senate, and a declining number of what might be labelled ‘safe’ seats, the fortunes of local party representatives have become less secure. This suggests that strong party discipline may ultimately undermine the reputation of the major parties in the electorate: they may be sowing the seeds of their own destruction. If parties were to allow members more independence, then perhaps the challenge from independent candidates would be diminished? Perhaps the answer is a broader party understanding of what has up until now been narrowly characterised as a conscience vote?

However, feelings of distrust were also expressed in terms of something less tangible that an inability of a particular government to deliver policy outcomes. Their sentiments reflected a belief that governments were no longer listening
Geographical under-representation, in terms of the proportion of country seats was considered important, but there was also a perception that the distance from the seat of government was felt both physically and psychologically: that their view of the world no longer mattered.

In contrast, the inverse was the case with the Senate. That is, almost all respondents suggested rural communities perceived the Senate to be remote. Senators and the role of the Senate were seen as having limited relevance. Few senators could be identified, and even fewer had visited their communities. While there was some understanding of the role of committee inquiries and its contribution to the accountability process, few felt that these investigations provided realistic avenues of influence or voice for them. Similarly, in their discussions about parliament, respondents focused primarily on the physical structure and what it represented symbolically and culturally, rather than what took place within. Indeed there was a belief amongst some that many in their community had little understanding of what did take place in parliament. A few thought that once their local member walked into the building, they walked into a different world, cocooned from rural realities.

Finally, those respondents from rural and regional Aboriginal communities maintained the current system of parliamentary democracy was extremely remote for them. This was partly because there have only been two Aboriginal representatives to date within the Federal Parliament. It was also because their numerical presence in rural Australia was dispersed and small in number that they felt their vote was irrelevant; especially in electorates where many voters had supported PHONP—a party that was explicitly hostile to their issues.

Many respondents believed they could act to lessen the sense of remoteness and disconnection they felt politically, by focusing on the local, by demanding more local representation rather than less. This focus on the local has been attributed in part to the process of globalisation. Alongside the opportunities, the trend towards increasing globalisation has also brought with it some fears for citizens in rural and regional Australia. Many believed that internationalisation of trade and capital has meant that national or state governments have less control over the direction of policy. The emphasis given to competition has led in some instances to the perception that the welfare of those who are not competitive matters less. Whether these outcomes have actually occurred is not the point; rather, it is the perception of such outcomes that has encouraged
or forced many who feel overwhelmed by these trends to focus and trust only what they know and understand; that is, what is local.\textsuperscript{11}

We have seen in recent years a policy shift, whereby the federal government has asked, and expected, rural and regional communities to participate more actively in promoting their own sustainability, and reinvigorating local industries.\textsuperscript{12} But alongside this changed emphasis must go an increased emphasis on local representation at higher levels to ensure both national and international bodies are answerable to local publics.

During periods of political discontent, the gap between perception and reality can grow.\textsuperscript{13} The reality is that most of our parliamentary procedures ensure responsible government is adhered to, with the Senate in particular playing an important part in this process. Yet, the perception of the overwhelming majority of those I interviewed was that our political institutions, and the elected officials who work within them, were unresponsive and unrepresentative to those who live outside our capital cities. So, despite the diverse dimensions of what constituted rural and regional Australia, which I sought to capture by targeting a range of rural areas, towns and centres, there was little difference in the overall sense of political disconnection.

Why Deliberation?

Mark Warren has argued that political relationships are more fragile than social relationships because the former involve the unfamiliar and the unknown, which complicates the development of political trust. Therefore, creating and maintaining a strong and healthy relationship between the voter and the elected representative is not an easy task. However, it is a desirable goal and, according to Warren, achievable through the process of deliberation.\textsuperscript{14}

John Uhr has argued that there is already an emerging deliberative culture within parliament, best reflected in the Senate where the minor parties in particular have invested considerable effort in the committee process to ensure deliberation and scrutiny.\textsuperscript{15}

In their discussions of distrust many respondents from rural and regional Australia ‘imagined’ and identified what they thought was needed to reconnect country citizens with the political process. In the remainder of this chapter I reconsider the various dimensions of discontent expressed in this monograph using the deliberative framework outlined by Warren (see my Introduction).
Deliberation as Public Discussion and Debate

Returning to Uhr's definition, deliberation can be understood as a form of public reasoning; a process that enables free and reasoned argument and agreement among equals. In other words, it is about talking together, and listening to each other, and seeking to understand and be open to diverse views.

We know people are interested in politics, consuming it through the media and talking about it with each other: survey research tells us that. And this is something that has not changed over time. Respondents from rural and regional Australia also stated that they were interested in politics. They talked about politics with me, and with each other, and expressed a desire to talk more with politicians about their issues of concern. They were open to more political communications, if the process was to include listening as well as talking.

Building Political Capacity

Deliberation requires that individuals and communities learn what they need to know about a range of complex issues in order to fully participate, which is both time consuming and intellectually demanding. A number of respondents recognised that the relevant skills and confidence levels of many in their communities were an impediment to greater community involvement in making submissions to committees of inquiry, or becoming more involved in other avenues of consultation. Many also acknowledged that people in their community had a political opinion that they wanted to voice, they just did not know how. This suggests an increased role for the state in building political capacity, to encourage more civic engagement in both city and country.

Making Time for Politics

Deliberation can be time consuming. Ask a bureaucrat about the process of consultation and they will no doubt tell you that that consultation sets the schedule back. Moreover, the existing processes of deliberation in the Senate often frustrate governments because they feel the need to produce political outcomes if not policy outcomes, in their first term. So time pressures exist within institutions of governance. And we can assume that parliamentarians, both senators and members, are time poor, all of which may undermine opportunities for deliberation.
However, Warren argues that if participation in deliberative forum were reserved for issues that were highly politicised, the benefits of deliberation would ultimately outweigh the costs. This was supported by my research. While respondents questioned whether members of their community would really be able to find time for politics in amongst all the other things that they did with their lives there was, nevertheless, a belief amongst many that if the issue were of concern to their community then they would make time to talk about it with the relevant political actors.

Communication Builds Trust

“The supports of trust are mainly found in opportunities for effective communication”. Warren argues that political trust will thrive when institutions are structured so as to provide the institutional means for citizens to openly challenge authorities, institutions and trusted individuals. My discussions with rural and regional citizens indicated that many believed the only way they could challenge their ‘trusted’ authorities was through the ballot box. But they expressed a desire for more opportunities for challenge and debate, not less.

The idea of allocating individual senators a designated area within their state, where they could establish a more direct and interactive relationship with country constituents, is one institutional reform that has the potential to increase the visibility and perceived relevance of senators to those in rural and regional Australia. It would also provide these voters with more opportunity for challenge and debate, and ultimately trust. Respondents greeted this suggestion of Senate representation with considerable enthusiasm, albeit tempered with a recognition that political parties would need to embrace such a reform if it were to happen. Elsewhere, John Uhr has recommended that legislation be introduced linking parliamentary parties accountability on gender equity in representation to their access to public funding. Similar legislative requirements could be introduced requiring parties to account for senators’ attendance to rural and regional areas.

Deliberation as Considered Explanation

Under the deliberation model, elected officials are required, once elected, to represent their entire electorate in all its diversity. This process can involve compromises, which may be interpreted as betrayal by traditional constituents.
However, Warren argues that the public and transparent nature of deliberation means when officials, elected or non-elected, offer public and visible justifications and reasons for their actions, then these compromises become accepted by those who had felt undermined. This is a strategy arguably used well by independent Peter Andren, who has taken a non-conservative stand on a number of issues (such as the Republic and the treatment of asylum-seekers) which does not reflect the perspectives of many in his electorate. However, he has taken some care in explaining to the constituents of Calare why he has taken particular positions. His constituents may not have accepted Andren’s position on some issues, but they appeared to respect his way of presenting his views to them. Independent senators and members are not constrained by a party position, which may make this process of public justification easier. However, most of the respondents I talked with expressed a desire to have the reasons for various policy directions explained to them. They accepted that not all political decisions would reflect their interests but that some explanation from their local member, or relevant bureaucrats, would help them to feel as though there had at least been some consideration of their point of view. Undertaking such explanation would make the process of politics and governing more familiar to voters, and enhance their confidence in the system.

Deliberation as Stimulating New Perspectives

The process of discussion, debate and argument, while fraught with the possibility of conflict, can, according to Warren, also expose individuals to new ideas, perspectives, voices and knowledge. My methodological approach in this monograph lent itself to this, by exposing me as a political scientist to a range of views that would have remained invisible had I relied solely on survey research. The process of travelling to these communities meant that I came to understand the tyranny of distance faced by elected representatives and by those who live far from the place where policies about their lives are made. Respondents commented on how much they felt members of parliament and bureaucrats would come to understand their situation and concerns if they only ventured beyond the capital cities. If they drove on the roads that needed rescaling, or tried to make mobile phone calls, or saw the state of the livestock or the crops because of the drought; then, respondents suggested, these experience would foster a ‘real’ understanding and would add context to the policy deliberations that were already taking place in parliament or amongst bureaucrats.
Respondents in rural and regional Aboriginal communities argued that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) should be more widely acknowledged as the primary representative body of Aboriginal voices and interests. Including ATSIC more broadly in a deliberative context could expose both politicians and citizens to a range of new perspectives on current policy issues, which could undermine the potential for the ‘backlash’ politics best represented by PHON. According to John Uhr, recognising more fully the potential of ATSIC could dilute more radical demands for reserved seats, although I would argue the latter measure is hardly radical, given its conservative origins in the New Zealand context.

Promoting Mutual Respect

Unlike the mass media, deliberation that is undertaken face-to-face can provide participants with the opportunity to explain oneself, to provide assurances, and to harness mutual respect. Warren argues that the process of sharing can allow for the recognition of both diversity and commonality, moderating feelings of isolation, and helping to build a relationship of trust.

The personal dimension of representation was seen as irreplaceable by all respondents. However, most tempered the desire for more visible representation with an acknowledgment that the tyranny of distance makes more in-person contact with elected representatives and those implementing government policies difficult. Thus, geography would limit the opportunity for face-to-face forum for deliberation; restricting it perhaps to highly politicised issues as mentioned above. As a result, some form of mediated interaction becomes necessary to overcome the sense of isolation.

The role of the media in the lives of voters generally and those respondents I spoke with was somewhat paradoxical. The mass media both informed and alienated. During election campaigns most voters got their information through television, radio or the newspapers. However, during the governing period, much of the news concentrated on political failures rather than successes, which has been judged to undermine political trust. Furthermore, it is unlikely the mass media would communicate news and information in ways that would allow citizens and parliamentarians to interact with each other, provide each other with assurances or harness mutual respect.
However, respondents identified other forms of media that had the potential to enhance the connections between country Australians and their parliamentarians. While still not universally accessible to those in rural or urban Australia, Internet use has increased significantly amongst country Australians and was acknowledged by a number of respondents to be an avenue for overcoming the difficulties associated with remoteness and communication. To encourage deliberation however, more interactivity in online forum would need to be offered to citizens. Similarly, provincial newspapers were also seen by many respondents as underutilised by parliamentarians. While research has indicated that rural MPs have an advantage over their city counterparts in being able to gain access to local media outlets, the onus is on the parliamentarian to make use of this avenue of communication. Moreover, unlike the mass media, the provincial newspapers had not only considerable reach, but they were trusted by local communities to recognise community interests and sensitivities. As such, they had much to add to the development of political trust.

The relationship between deliberation and trust has been identified as a reciprocal one. Deliberation generates trust, and trust supports the deliberative approach. In addition, deliberation may offer rural and regional Australians a means of self-representation, which would complement rather than undermine traditional institutions of representative government.

It has been argued that while interest and awareness of politics increased after the Whitlam dismissal in 1975, levels of political participation did not. And while this may be because people then lost interest (although the election survey data does not show much of a decline in interest), Aitkin suggested it was because there was no place for the interested citizens to go; political structures did not allow it.

Today the major political parties are less interested in building their membership numbers: grassroots policy development, fundraising, and mobilisation are largely things of the past. Instead parties have become ‘professional’ organisations, employing experts to undertake their opinion polling, information gathering and the recruitment of political donors. However, this change has made party structures appear at best meaningless, at worst hostile, to ordinary voters, and has no doubt helped to fuel the feelings of political impotence and distrust that many citizens feel.
Less adversarial, more collegial behaviour on the floor of parliament or more time spent in electorates may never be forthcoming, but this should not preclude politicians from enhancing citizens’ personal experience of issues political or parliamentary through an expanded use of communication technologies. Nor would it prevent parliamentarians thinking more laterally about how they might connect, consult and deliberate with rural and regional voters who, like all voters, yearn to be listened to.27

Nugget Coombs wrote of his experiences in 1976:

I listened to views expressed by people in all parts of Australia, people of widely differing economic and social backgrounds, political convictions and ethnic origin. Among them all, almost without exception, was a conception of government as something distinct and separate from themselves, as an alien ‘they’ to their own ‘we’: impersonal, unresponsive, frequently unpredictable and almost always beyond the reach of influence or persuasion.28

Some might read this quote and say, so what has changed? Perhaps nothing. I listened to views expressed by 85 people across five electorates, people of widely differing economic, social and cultural backgrounds and political leanings. Similarly to Coombs, I found that almost all perceived government as something separate from themselves—remote, disconnected, impersonal, unresponsive, and even unfathomable. However, that these sentiments are not new is part of the problem. It is too easy to say that political discontent has been around for years and that it is just a response to the current incumbent government. The criticisms of the institutions of government as presented here should instead be read as a challenge to the Australian polity to institute reforms, both structural and behavioural, that strengthen the connections between people and the political process. The onus is on the parliament, political parties, elected representatives and citizens to achieve this.

Endnotes


6. An extensive listing of the government’s rural and regional programs is provided in Department of Transport and Regional Services (DoTARS), The foundations for Future Growth, Commonwealth Programmes and services in Regional Australia, 1996–2001, 2001. Some aggregate expenditure figures are listed, but the cost of individual programs is not specified.


12. see (for example), The Hon J Anderson MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, Foreward, DoTAR, The Foundations for Future Growth op. cit.


19. Uhr, op. cit.

20. Peter Andren, personal communication 5 June 2001; see also Browne, op. cit.

21. Uhr, op. cit, p. 236.


23. Browne, op. cit.; see also Aitkin, op. cit.


27. Some examples already exist, for example the Regional Forums Australia Program (cf Andrew Beer, ‘Listening, Talking and Acting’, *Australian Planner*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2000; P Bishop and G Davis, Mapping Public Participation in Policy Choices, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 61, no. 1, March 2002. There are a number of articles in this issue discussing opportunities for citizen involvement and representation in the policy making process.

Appendix: Fieldwork

Discussions were held in the five electorates listed below, at the towns or centres indicated, as well as with people in surrounding rural areas.

Capricornia, Queensland
Alpha, Capella, Clermont, Dysart, Longreach, Rockhampton, Yepoon

Grey, South Australia
Burra, Clare, Kimba, Lock, Orroroo, Petersborough, Port Augusta, Roxby Downs, Whyalla

Mallee, Victoria
Charlton, Horsham, Mildura, Ouyen, Patchewollock, Rainbow, Warracknabeal.

O’Connor, Western Australia
Collie, Corrigin, Geraldton, Katanning, Moora, Mt Barker, Quairading, Tambellup

Parkes, New South Wales
Bourke, Cobar, Dubbo, Forbes, Nyngan, Narromine

In each electorate, at least 14 interviews were undertaken, although in some electorates I received additional responses because people volunteered to send in responses via fax or e-mail or travelled some distance to meet with me. In addition, several councils and Aboriginal communities organised roundtables, so that I could receive a range of perspectives from a number of groups and people from outlying areas. I am deeply appreciative to all of these people for their enthusiasm for my project.
Eighty five responses were received in total. Those recruited for interviews were:

- non-elected officials from local councils
- editors of local newspapers or announcers from local radio
- representatives from Aboriginal communities
- rural women and women from Country Women’s Association
- rural counsellors and individual graziers and farmers, and
- members of various business organisations.

In each electorate, attempts were made to ensure that interviews were conducted with people from rural areas, small towns and larger towns or regional centres.
The elected representatives of the electorates chosen were all given the opportunity to speak with me about this project and I am grateful to Mr John Forrest MP, National Party of Australia, Member for Mallee, Victoria, and Mr Tony Lawler, then National Party of Australia Member for Parkes, NSW, who gave me considerable insight into the workings of their electorates. Thanks also to Mr Peter Andren MP, Independent Member for Carlare, NSW, for his comments.

The interviews lasted at least 45 minutes but some went for over two hours, such was the interest in the topic. All electorate interviews were transcribed, but anonymity was promised to respondents, so it has not been possible to source each quotation here. However, I can guarantee that the quotations selected represent the full range of electorates, as well as the diversity within each electorate.
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