

Genuine Consultation in Australia: What Deliberative Democracy Would Change

A report on consultation, public influence and deliberative democracy across
Australia’s three levels of government

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Scope: This report reviews tokenistic consultation and deliberative democracy across federal, state/territory and local government, with attention to environmental decision-making and community advocacy.

Source base: HOPE background reports, official government material, OECD Deliberative Democracy data, and Australian examples including Victoria, the ACT and Toowoomba.

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Executive Summary

Governments in Australia are not short of consultation tools. Discussion papers, online surveys, submission portals and “Have Your Say” pages are now routine. These tools can be useful for gathering comments, but they often stop at a low level of public influence: people are asked to react to a proposal after the main direction has already been set.

The concern raised by volunteer researchers is therefore reasonable. Consultation becomes tokenistic when it creates the appearance of listening without giving the community a clear role in shaping the final decision. This matters most on environmental decisions, where climate risk, land use, water security, energy infrastructure and biodiversity protection involve trade-offs that cannot be solved by a quick survey.

[Deliberative Democracy](#) offers a more serious model. A citizens’ jury, citizens’ panel or citizens’ assembly brings together a representative group of people, gives them balanced evidence and asks them to weigh options before making recommendations. The [OECD](#) recorded 716 representative deliberative processes across 28 OECD countries between 1979 and 2023, involving more than 80,000 randomly selected citizens, which shows that this is now a practical governance method rather than a theory (OECD, 2025).

Australia already has pieces of this approach. The Australian Public Service Framework for Engagement and Participation recognises deliberation as a distinct form of engagement, Victoria has legislated deliberative engagement requirements for major local government planning documents, and the ACT has used a citizens’ jury for Compulsory Third Party insurance reform (ACT Government, n.d.; Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2021; Local Government Victoria, 2020). The gap is consistency. At present, genuine deliberation depends too much on whether an individual department, minister or council chooses to use it.

1. Introduction

Most people have seen the routine. A government releases a draft plan, opens an online survey, invites submissions, and later announces what it has decided. Sometimes that process is useful, especially when the question is narrow and the community only needs to flag problems or preferences. But when the issue is complex, expensive or controversial, a survey can feel like a suggestion box attached to a decision that is already moving in one direction.

That is the problem this report addresses. Volunteer researchers have expressed concern that consultation across the three levels of government can look busy while still giving the public very little influence. The worry is not that government should obey every submission it receives. The worry is that people are often asked for input without being shown what weight that input carried, what trade-offs were considered, or why the final decision did or did not change.

This article uses the three HOPE background reports as starting material and checks their main themes against current public sources. The 2019 HOPE briefing is especially useful because it explains how a citizens’ jury could be applied in the Toowoomba Regional Council area for climate disruption and local decision-making (HOPE Inc., 2019). The 2025 HOPE report gives a broader national frame, while the Human Rights Law Centre report adds an important warning: community input is weaker when civil society organisations feel pressured not to criticize government policy (HOPE researcher QLD, 2025; Human Rights Law Centre, 2017).

2. Consultation is not the same as influence

A consultation process can be well advertised and still be weak. The real test is not the number of posters, web pages or online forms attached to it; the test is whether people were brought in early enough to affect the decision. If the public is invited only after the key options have been narrowed, consultation becomes feedback management rather than shared problem-solving.

The [IAP2 Spectrum](#) helps explain the difference. Informing and consulting sit at the lower end of public influence, while involving, collaborating and empowering give the community a stronger role in shaping outcomes (IAP2 International Federation, 2018). The [APS framework](#) uses a similar logic by distinguishing between sharing information, consulting, deliberating and collaborating (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2021).

This distinction matters because many government processes are described as “engagement” even when they are mainly information-gathering exercises. There is nothing wrong with asking residents to complete a survey, but a survey should not be sold as deep participation when the public has no access to evidence, no time to weigh trade-offs and no clear pathway for its input to shape the final decision.

Table 1. Engagement tools and public influence. Based on IAP2 International Federation (2018) and Department of Industry, Science and Resources (2021).

Common tool	Usual strength	Main weakness	What would improve it
Information page	Good for transparency	One-way communication	Explain what is open to change
Online survey	Can reach many people	Often shallow and self-selected	Publish results and explain influence
Public submission	Good for detailed evidence	Favours organised groups and confident writers	Summarise themes and respond publicly
Citizens' jury or panel	Good for hard trade-offs	Needs time, money and skilled facilitation	Use for major climate, planning and infrastructure decisions

Public input only matters when it can change the decision

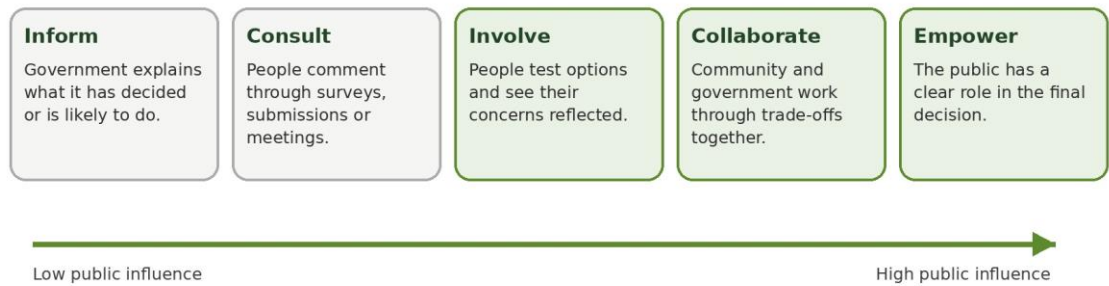


Figure 1. Public input only matters when it can influence the decision. Note. Original diagram prepared for this report, based on IAP2 International Federation (2018), Department of Industry, Science and Resources (2021), and OECD (2021).

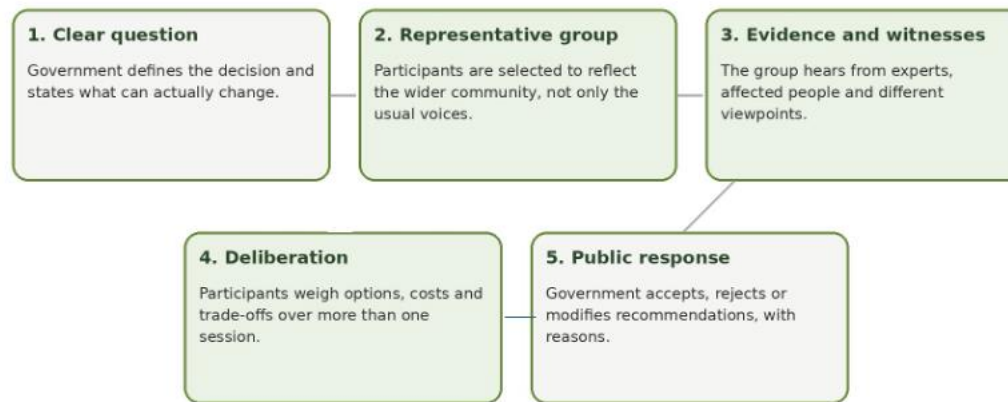
3. What Deliberative Democracy adds

Deliberative Democracy changes the question from “what do people think today?” to “what do people judge after hearing evidence and weighing options?” That difference is important. A citizens' jury or assembly does not simply collect opinions; it creates the conditions for people to learn, question, argue, revise their views and produce recommendations that government must answer.

This model suits environmental decisions because those decisions usually involve competing public interests. A region may want lower emissions and secure jobs, more housing and less habitat loss, cheaper infrastructure and better long-term resilience. Ordinary consultation often records those tensions without resolving them. Deliberation is designed to sit with the tensions long enough for the community to make a more informed judgement.

Furthermore, a well-designed deliberative process improves accountability. If government accepts a recommendation, the public can see what changed; if government rejects it, the decision-maker should explain why. That public response is essential because the value of deliberation is not only the meeting itself, but the visible link between evidence, community judgement and government action (OECD, 2021).

Minimum structure for a citizens' jury or assembly



The point is not the meeting format. The point is the transfer of real influence to a prepared, representative group.

Figure 2. Minimum structure for a citizens' jury or assembly. Note. Original diagram prepared for this report, based on HOPE Inc. (2019), newDemocracy Foundation (n.d.), and OECD (2021).

4. Key numbers that show why this matters

The case for deliberation is stronger when it is tied to numbers rather than broad claims about “better democracy”. Internationally, deliberative processes have moved into mainstream public administration, while in Australia there are already concrete examples at state and territory level. These figures do not prove that every process succeeds, but they do show that deliberation is practical, repeatable and measurable.

Table 2. Key numbers for assessing Australian consultation and deliberation.

Number or requirement	What it shows	Source
716 representative deliberative processes across 28 OECD countries, 1979-2023	Deliberation is now a recognised public governance practice, not a fringe idea.	OECD (2025)
More than 80,000 randomly selected citizens involved in those OECD cases	Sortition can bring ordinary residents into complex public decisions.	OECD (2025)
52 randomly selected participants in the ACT CTP citizens' jury	A small representative group can work through a technical policy issue.	ACT Government (n.d.)
About 290,000 registered motor vehicles affected by the ACT CTP scheme	The ACT jury dealt with a real public-policy decision, not a symbolic topic.	ACT Government (n.d.)
Four key Victorian council plans requiring deliberative engagement practices	Victoria provides a legislative model that other jurisdictions can adapt.	Local Government Victoria (2020)
30 to 50 participants proposed for a Toowoomba citizen jury over 2 to 4 weekends	HOPE's local proposal is modest, practical and scalable.	HOPE Inc. (2019)
Estimated citizen jury costs ranging from \$10,000 to \$180,000 in HOPE's briefing	Cost depends on size and duration, but the model is financially realistic for major decisions.	HOPE Inc. (2019)

5. Federal government activity

At the federal level, the strongest official source is the APS Framework for Engagement and Participation. It is useful because it recognises that public engagement is not one thing; it separates sharing information from consulting, deliberating and collaborating (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2021). That gives public servants language for choosing a stronger process when a decision needs more than quick feedback.

The Open Government Partnership process also matters because it shows that structured partnership is possible at the national level. Australia’s Third National Action Plan for 2024-2025 was co-designed through an Open Government Forum made up of civil society and government members, with commitments linked to public participation, integrity and accountability (Attorney-General’s Department, 2023).

However, the federal gap remains clear. Frameworks and co-design forums are not the same as a standing national citizens’ assembly, nor do they require departments to use deliberative panels for major climate, environmental or infrastructure decisions. The federal government has the language of participation, but it has not yet made deliberation a regular part of high-stakes public decision-making.

6. State and territory activity

Victoria gives the clearest legislative example. The Local Government Act 2020 required deliberative engagement practices in the development of four major local council planning documents: the Community Vision, Council Plan, Financial Plan and Asset Plan (Local Government Victoria, 2020). This matters because it moves deliberation from a nice optional extra into the machinery of local government planning.

The ACT provides a strong practical example. Its Compulsory Third Party insurance citizens’ jury dealt with a technical and contested scheme involving about 290,000 registered motor vehicles, and the process used 52 randomly selected participants to weigh options and make recommendations (ACT Government, n.d.). The lesson is simple: if residents can deliberate on insurance design, they can deliberate on climate adaptation, water security, transport priorities and local land-use trade-offs.

Queensland, by contrast, has a central “Have your say” system where people can comment on government initiatives, policies and strategies. The portal is useful, but a portal alone is not deliberative democracy. It becomes stronger only when government clearly explains what is open to change, how community input will be weighed, and what response will follow after consultation closes.

7. Local government and the Toowoomba opportunity

Local government is where consultation is most visible because residents live with the results: planning approvals, road changes, stormwater, parks, waste services, tree removal, water prices and development decisions. For that reason, councils are also where weak consultation is felt most personally. A resident may not read a national policy paper, but they will notice when a local decision seems settled before the community meeting begins.

Toowoomba Regional Council already uses a “Your Say” model, including consultation on a Climate Risk Management Strategy survey that asked residents about climate risks, priority actions and local impacts (Toowoomba Regional Council, n.d.). This is a useful starting point. However, a survey about climate risk is not the same as a citizens’ jury that hears evidence, tests options and recommends a local response.

HOPE’s 2019 briefing proposed a citizen jury or assembly for the Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) area, focused on climate disruption and local decision-making. The suggested scale, 30 to 50 participants over 2 to 4 weekends, is realistic enough to be taken seriously and substantial enough to produce more than surface feedback (HOPE Inc., 2019). Therefore, a local pilot on climate risk, urban heat, water security or tree canopy could give Toowoomba a practical model rather than another general call for “more consultation”.

Table 3. Current activity across the three levels of government.

Level	Current activity	Strength	Gap
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Federal	APS engagement framework and Open Government Partnership work	Recognises participation, deliberation and collaboration	No regular citizens' assembly requirement for major national decisions
State / territory	Victoria's legislative requirements and ACT citizens' jury example	Shows deliberation can be required and used in practice	Uneven use across jurisdictions
Local	Council engagement portals, surveys and planning consultation	Close to residents and local impacts	Often relies on surveys rather than representative deliberation

8. Civil society voice

Genuine consultation also depends on whether community organisations can speak freely. The Human Rights Law Centre warned that funding restrictions, gag clauses, pressure on charities and attacks on advocacy can deter community organisations from entering public debate (Human Rights Law Centre, 2017). This is not a side issue, because community organisations often hold evidence that government does not have in the same form: service experience, local monitoring, environmental knowledge and contact with people who are least likely to attend formal meetings.

As a result, consultation cannot be judged only by whether a web page is open for submissions. It must also be judged by whether the people and groups with relevant evidence can speak without fearing financial or political punishment. A deliberative process that hears from government, industry and civil society is more likely to expose the real trade-offs behind an environmental decision.

9. Findings

The findings are direct. Australia has consultation channels, but it does not yet have enough public influence. The federal government recognises deliberation in its own engagement framework, Victoria has legislated deliberative engagement practices for key council plans, and the ACT has shown that randomly selected citizens can work through a technical policy problem. Those examples prove the model is available.

The main weakness is consistency. Too much depends on whether a department, minister or council chooses to go beyond ordinary consultation. Therefore, HOPE should focus on measurable standards rather than broad language about listening. The question should be: did the process start early, did it include balanced evidence, did it reach beyond the usual voices, and did government publish a clear response to the public's input?

10. Recommendations

HOPE should ask for changes that can be tested, not general promises to "listen better". The recommendations below are designed for federal, state and local government use, with a strong local application in Toowoomba and similar regional councils.

Table 4. Recommendations for moving from consultation to genuine public influence.

Recommendation	Why it matters	How to measure it
Use citizens' juries or panels for major climate, planning and infrastructure decisions.	These issues involve trade-offs that ordinary surveys cannot handle well.	Number of deliberative processes run each year and whether government responds publicly.
Publish a "what we heard, what changed, what did not change" report after major consultation.	People need to see the link between input and decision.	Every major consultation closes with a response report.
Select participants to reflect the wider community, not only the people who usually attend meetings.	Self-selected consultation often overrepresents organised and confident voices.	Recruitment method, demographic spread and participant support are published.

Fund independent facilitation and balanced briefing material.	A process can be captured if evidence is one-sided or poorly explained.	Briefing papers, witness lists and facilitator roles are public.
Protect civil society advocacy in funding and consultation rules.	Community organisations cannot contribute properly if they are pressured to stay quiet.	Funding agreements allow policy advocacy and public comment.
Pilot a Toowoomba citizen jury on climate risk, urban heat, water security or tree canopy.	A local pilot would turn HOPE's 2019 proposal into a practical test.	A 30 to 50 participant jury runs over several sessions and reports to council.

11. Conclusion

Australia does not need more decorative language about listening. It needs consultation processes that can change decisions. Surveys and submissions still have a place, especially for simple questions or early information gathering, but they are not enough when government is dealing with climate risk, land use, infrastructure, water security or other decisions with long-term consequences.

Deliberative Democracy gives governments a practical way to improve those decisions. It brings a representative group into the evidence, gives them time to weigh trade-offs, and creates a public record that government must answer. This does not replace elected representatives, but it can make their decisions better informed and harder to hide behind vague claims of community engagement.

Lastly, standard should be simple. When government asks people to have their say, it should show how that say affected the decision. Without that response, consultation becomes a management exercise. But with it, public engagement becomes part of democratic decision-making rather than a polite formality.

Author notes

As per HOPE requirements for transparency, AI was used to assist with structure and editing.

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