



AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP (Queensland Chapter)

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES IN QUEENSLAND: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECTS 15 YEARS ON

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

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Ms Nonie Malone: Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome you here this evening. My name is Nonie Malone, and I am the chair of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group. Before I proceed to introducing our guest speaker for this evening I would like to tell you a little about the Australasian Study of Parliament Group. The group was established 13 years ago in Queensland. It is a federated group from Australia and New Zealand. Our charter is to bring together parliamentarians, academics, parliamentary staff and other interested members of the community in discussion and debate about our political system, our democratic values and how we might promote the sustenance of the Westminster system in our individual parliaments.

This evening we are to be addressed by Dr Lesley Clark. Lesley Clark is the member for Barron River. She has been the member for Barron River for two periods—from 1989 to 1995 and then again from 1998 to the present. She has served the parliament in a range of roles, has very wide-ranging committee experience and has experience as a parliamentary secretary. Tonight she is here to mostly give us her reflections on her committee experience.

In Queensland we now have a very well-established committee system. It really has arisen from the findings of the Fitzgerald inquiry. It is quite an interesting coincidence that Lesley joined the parliament just shortly after Fitzgerald brought down his findings. In the early stages of her parliamentary career Lesley found herself in a leadership role chairing the Parliamentary Committee for Electoral and Administrative Reform. It was charged with a lot of changes in Queensland but, amongst them, the establishment of some kind of workable parliamentary committee system that would bring more openness and accountability to our system. Lesley has been here in very interesting times. She has seen and overseen a great deal of evolution. We are very grateful, given that our organisation is devoted to fostering an understanding of the Westminster system and its underlying principles, to have this opportunity to hear the reflections of someone who has been involved in such a fundamental and committed way in fostering the mechanisms and practices of our modern parliamentary system.

I would like to tell you a little about Lesley before she speaks. Lesley came to parliament through a passion for the environment but also from a profession in which she was engaged in fostering Indigenous education. She has brought those passions into her roles in the parliament. Most of you will know that Lesley has announced that she will be retiring from the parliament at the next election. There is a rounding off here. We are approaching the end of what I think has been an extraordinary parliamentary career. Lesley has chosen to talk to us tonight about 'Parliamentary committees in Queensland: retrospect and prospects 15 years on'. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Dr Lesley Clark.

Dr Lesley Clark: Thank you, Nonie. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you tonight. Can I first recognise my parliamentary colleagues Lindy Nelson-Carr, Andrew McNamara, Terry Sullivan and Paul Hoolihan. I am not sure whether they are here to contradict me, argue with me or support me. I hope it is the latter. I hope we are going to have an interesting and engaging debate on this issue.

You have heard that I am retiring. I should preface my remarks by saying that these views are my own. I think I can, at this point in my career, claim them as my own. One of the things that one looks forward to when one leaves politics is again being more one's own person and being able to speak more directly from one's heart on things that one believes in and not necessarily fear the consequences of being so open. Yes, they are my own thoughts and they are the thoughts that, as Nonie said, have been shaped by a career in state politics which began in 1989, which is now more than 15 years ago. You wonder where the time goes.

I think it is also relevant to remind you, though, that my experience has only been as a member of the government. I have never been part of an opposition which, of course, is a very different experience both as a member and as a member of a parliamentary committee. I have experienced two terms with Wayne Goss and this is my third term with Peter Beattie. As you heard in the introduction, the majority of my committee experience has been in the legal, constitutional, electoral and administrative area as a foundation member of the Parliamentary Committee for Electoral and Administrative Review. When I speak I will call it PEARC because that is how I am used to talking about it—I know that there are other ways of referring to the acronym so you will just have to bear with me—but that is not actually the way it should be. I have never been able to adjust to saying PCEAR.

So bearing those provisos in mind, I did choose the title for my address—'Parliamentary committees in Queensland: retrospect and prospects 15 years on'—because I wanted to use this opportunity to look back and see where we have been and what we have achieved and examine the challenges for the future and consider the role of parliamentary committees in meeting those challenges. Not surprisingly, our committee system has been shaped by our unique political history and the unicameral nature of our parliament.

The abolition of the Legislative Council in 1922 saw the demise of a comprehensive committee system. It is not particularly well known that we did once have such a thing. It was lost. It was not until 1988, some incredible 66 years on, that the Nationals created the Public Accounts Committee under Mike Ahern's leadership followed shortly after by the Public Works Committee. I remind people that it is to the credit of the Liberals—and it is a pity that none of our Liberal members of parliament are here tonight—that they actually and literally died in the ditch for a Public Accounts Committee when in 1983 they actually fought the 'don't you worry about that' style of the Bjelke-Petersen government and opted to end the 26 years of coalition when they lost their fight for parliamentary accountability by way of a Public Accounts Committee. That is something that I think does need to be put on the record.

The Fitzgerald inquiry is best known for exposing the corruption that was endemic in the police force and the National Party government. However, even more importantly, Fitzgerald identified the need for electoral and administrative reform of the system of government and parliament that had allowed that corruption to flourish. As part of that reform, Fitzgerald recognised the need to introduce a comprehensive system of parliamentary committees to 'enhance the ability of the parliament to monitor the efficiency of government'. It fell to the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission to take up this and the other many recommendations for reform alongside that other key new body the Criminal Justice Commission, which was also recommended by Fitzgerald. Its primary charter was to investigate police corruption and official misconduct.

I was on the Parliamentary Committee for Criminal Justice for half a term when I came back in 1998 and before I became parliamentary secretary. So I had some experience with the Parliamentary Committee for Criminal Justice as well. For me it was a privilege to have the opportunity to contribute to there form of government and parliament in Queensland that has occurred in the last 15 years. We take pride in the fact that Queensland is no longer the butt of jokes of those in some quarters, in some southern states, who considered themselves more enlightened than Queenslanders. There is no question that both the CJC and EARC parliamentary committee have played an important role in reforming Queensland and bringing it belatedly, one might say, into the modern era with new accountability mechanisms.

I must commend the work of the EARC commissioners, Tom Sherman and David Solomon, whom I came to know quite well in that time, and the incredible staff who committed themselves to this massive reform agenda and provided us with a stream of reports to consider. Serving on PEARC in the first term of the Goss government with Matt Foley was a heady experience when you think about the agenda that we had. It still makes my head spin when I think what we achieved. In that three years we produced 16 reports. Those of you involved in committees would know what it means to achieve such output in that period of time.

The government did act pretty well immediately on our key recommendations reshaping Queensland with a fair electoral system, the right to peaceful protest, whistleblower protection, freedom of information legislation, reform of local government, public sector auditing and judicial review. All this was established in that first term of the Goss government. I think, looking back on that, that the Queensland community and Public Service were not really prepared for the radical nature and pace of that change in the early 1990s. I think those reforms in fact contributed in some measure to the later demise of the Goss government. I think in particular the pace and enormity of reform in the Public Service was just too much for it to handle in such a short period of time. They became very alienated and there was a lot of discontent.

The reform of local government in the shape of forced amalgamations and new boundaries also caused a storm of protest the length and breadth of Queensland. I still have very clear memories of us going to public meetings and being greeted by angry protesters with placards as we got off the bus. They made it very clear to us what they felt. In the regional centre of Gladstone the Calliope shire mayor was Liz Cunningham. If she were here tonight I would have checked with her whether she considers the campaign that she spearheaded led to her coming to this place. I suspect that is the case. She certainly made a name for herself as she opposed the government on the issue of council amalgamation.

I can share with you—and I do not think it is necessarily a secret—that, of the government members of that time, I really was the voice of reason after having just served five years in local government on the Mulgrave Shire Council. But Matt Foley was not to be denied. He was on a mission and so was the government. For Matt it was very much the Whitlam approach of 'crash or crash through'. He was determined that Council's needed reforming. He was not going to see the good things in local government.

Looking back, I can say that there have been advantages from amalgamation. There has certainly been some loss, and some people would still say that there have been losses there. But I think it speaks for itself that today the government does not force amalgamations on local government. We learnt the hard way that you actually do not do that; you work with local government. They are very powerful. It certainly was a key issue at that time.

After that first term I became chair of PEARC. The pace of reform did slow somewhat. You could say

that most of the sexy things were done. I produced only eight reports in my three years as chair. They were still very interesting times. One of the reports we produced was the review of parliamentary committees which we produced in 1993. EARC had recommended a comprehensive portfolio based parliamentary committee system to review policy proposals and activities in the following areas: proposals for new or amending legislation including bills and subordinate legislation; budget estimates and financial administration generally; and policy and administration in all areas of public policy. To achieve this, to remind you, EARC recommended five public administration committees covering a wide spectrum of portfolio areas and the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee together with select committees, as needed, for consideration of specific issues.

As a committee we visited New Zealand, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. We did look very comprehensively at what was happening elsewhere. Certainly, the New Zealand committee system had a lot of attractions because it is a unicameral parliament. It certainly was something we looked at very closely. Ultimately, what we decided was to strengthen and extend the existing system which had been so recently established. So rather than totally changing the ground rules we decided to focus on what we had and build on that. Particularly in light of the past history of abuse of power by the executive, we believed that the focus should be on accountability and scrutiny rather than policy areas, which some of the committees in those other jurisdictions had more focus on.

As you know, the government did subsequently adopt our report with some variations, but essentially intact, and we have the current committee system as set out in the Parliamentary Committees Act 1995. There have been no changes to the Queensland parliamentary committee system since then. It currently comprises seven permanent committees and three select committees. For those of you who are not necessarily as familiar as some, I will go through those. We have the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee; the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee; the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee; the Public Accounts Committee; the Public Works Committee; the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee; the Standing Orders Committee; the Select Committee on Travelsafe; and, more recently, the Palm Island Select Committee and the Impact on Petrol Pricing Select Committee. In addition, the parliament is able to scrutinise the government's budget through six estimates committees, replacing the previous cursory examination of budget proposals by the Committee of the Whole House.

Janet Ransley, the original research director of PCEAR and now senior lecturer at the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University, presented a paper last year at the Fitzgerald retrospective conference organised by the University of the Sunshine Coast which posed the question: 'Parliamentary committees: promise unfulfilled?' The promise that she was referring to was Fitzgerald's intent to restore parliament to the idealised Westminster system where an independent parliament scrutinises the executive, checking its powers and holding it to account.

She concluded, quite rightly in my view, that, while there have been some improvements, this promise of executive scrutiny has not been fulfilled in any significant way by our parliamentary committee system, despite their 350-plus reports, many of them very good, which have been published since 1995. But as Ransley points out, again quite rightly, Queensland is hardly alone in this regard. Indeed, the idealised Westminster model is a 19th century model that no longer operates in real life in any modern democracy where strong party discipline determines outcomes and indeed gives the executive enormous powers.

It is frequently alleged that there would be a greater scrutiny of the executive if Queensland restored its upper house. We are very familiar with that argument. In my view, this is really something of a red herring. Reintroduction of the upper house cannot guarantee the fettering of executive power. Why not? We just have to look at the actions of the Australian government, which now has control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. It confirms my point. Just last month the government banned officials from answering questions about the AWB kickbacks at the Senate estimates committee hearings. If a government has the numbers then in reality it will use them, giving the Prime Minister or a premier the ability to pass legislation in parliament and to enact the government's political agenda regardless of any opposition. They will also take any action they can to limit adverse media attention and community criticism. The existence of independent parliament is a myth, and scrutiny of the executive will always be constrained in any Westminster parliament where the governing party has a clear majority. I think I am honestly setting out the facts as we know them.

Looking back now, I think it probably was naive of me to think that the committee system that PEARC proposed would provide for serious scrutiny of the executive. I believe now that it is quite simply an unachievable goal and in fact Fitzgerald's expectation was misplaced. I agree with Ransley that to be realistic is to acknowledge that in the modern era executive accountability comes more from extra-parliamentary agencies, including the media, rather than from parliament itself.

So what then is or should be the role of parliamentary committees in the 21st century? To answer this question I think it is necessary to step back and to first consider the role of parliament itself and, even more broadly, the state of liberal democracies in the world today. By any measure, democracy as it is practised

today is in trouble. There is a major disconnect between citizens and the democratic institutions established to serve them. We cannot have failed to notice that.

The debate going on at the present time in the US, Canada and the UK has documented and analysed this disconnect and loss of confidence and trust in elected government more rigorously than here in Australia. The lack of compulsory voting in those countries makes the disengagement from party politics, politicians and parliaments more obvious. The drop in voter turnout, particularly among the young, is stark and compelling in the message that it sends. As I have said, representative democracy as it is currently practised is in trouble.

In Australia, the compulsory voting system that we have masks the level of disconnect but I have no doubt that it is real—and as real as in those other democracies. The ANU's democratic audit of Australia, begun in 2002 within the university's Research School of Social Science to assess Australia's strengths and weaknesses as a democratic society and has a web site which functions as one of the best sources of ideas and debate around this issue in this country. I recommend it to you.

I have had the chance to read some of the extensive literature on this issue during the course of LCARC's current inquiry on engaging young people in democracy. I had the opportunity last year to attend two international conferences on community engagement—one in Perth and one in Brisbane—which have influenced my thinking and, consequently, the course of our inquiry. Hearing directly from young people on the extent of their alienation from politics and the depth of their contempt for politicians has been a very sobering experience.

I would like to make particular reference to two recent publications in the UK. The first is a report of the Power inquiry, released just this month by the Joseph Roundtree Trust, which sought to understand and address this issue of lack of engagement with representative democracy. The second is a report on the same issue by the UK's Hansard Society. Incidentally, both of these are independent charitable trusts with considerable standing in the community.

These reports confirm findings from other democratic countries that the lack of engagement is not the result of apathy—far from it—but a profound disquiet, and even disgust, that democratic institutions in fact are no longer capable of enabling people to have any meaningful say or influence decisions that affect their everyday lives. Formal politics and parliament are no longer seen as providing the means of effecting change because they are no longer considered responsive to the concerns of individuals in a complex, changing world.

Political power in the UK is seen as increasingly concentrated in the hands of the elite few who are around the Prime Minister, and MPs themselves have little say about the decisions that are made. Political structures and parties were considered out of step with the way people now lead their lives, being based on polarised ideologies that developed in the industrial age which no longer reflect the way the world or society operate in the information age.

In Britain, as in other Western democracies, there is much greater cultural diversity, and global corporations and other international institutions have taken power away from elected governments. People are much more likely to be motivated by and concerned about specific issues rather than the broad ideologies of labour and capital that characterised the 19th and 20th centuries and their parties and parliaments.

However, my colleagues will be pleased to know that the Power commission, which travelled the length and breadth of the UK talking to thousands of people, rejected the popular view that all politicians lie, break promises and pursue nothing but their own careers. According to the commission the problem is systemic, not personal. I quote—

Disengagement has arisen because a disjunction now exists between the way formal democratic politics is structured and conducted in Britain and the values, interests, expectations and lifestyles of the British people. The failure of politicians is not the way they behave in their professional lives but the fact that they have not yet developed a strategic and thoroughgoing response to address this disjunction.

The findings of the Power inquiry could, I am sure, be replicated here in Australia. Personally, I believe such an inquiry would provide a valuable basis for wider community debate about the state of our democracy and the need for reform to re-engage and empower the community.

The Power commission produced 30 recommendations for democratic renewal across three broad areas including the rebalancing of power that returns authority and influence to elected representatives and parliament, reforms to ensure that political parties and elections reflect the cultural diversity and complexity of modern life, and a downloading of power so that people have a greater say over the policies and decisions that affect their lives through innovations in participatory democracy. While the commission was at great pains to say their proposals must be adopted as a package, I need to return now to my theme and ask what this all means for parliamentary committees here in Queensland, particularly in light of my conviction that there are currently real limitations in the extent to which they can more effectively scrutinise the executive in the absence of wider reforms to political parties and the electoral system.

Here John Uhr's concept of parliament as a deliberative assembly struck a chord with me, particularly in light of the results of the Power commission. Uhr, a self-styled academic analyst of government, in his contribution to reforming parliament has suggested that parliament should be seen as the primary deliberative institution for our shared democracy. But for parliament to work in this way he contends that it has to take public deliberation as its primary task. According to Uhr, parliament has to become proactive and seek out the views of the community on policy options, amongst other things. But those policy options must be around issues of major concern to the community—those things that touch their lives.

Our current committee system was designed more than a decade ago in response to the burning issues of the day as spelled out in the Fitzgerald report. However, the Queensland of today is a totally different place, with new priorities and new challenges. The rapid population growth of the state, the need for new infrastructure and improved government services, the emergence of knowledge based industries like biotechnology, the need for ecologically sustainable development, an ageing demographic, a skills shortage, and changing patterns of work and family all generate new challenges and issues that are of great concern to the community requiring difficult choices amongst competing policy options particularly in areas such as health, water supply, transport, housing and employment.

If parliament is to become more than a permanent wasteland of adversarial partisan politics then it must engage with the community around these issues and become a conduit for their voices to be heard and considered in the deliberations of our House and the government. Parliamentary committees, then, in my view, are the obvious and necessary vehicle for this critical task of community engagement. The work of the Travelsafe Committee—and I am sorry that Jim Pearce is not here to hear me say this—while narrowly focused, confirms that people are very willing and able to engage with parliament to address road safety issues when offered the opportunity because this is something that touches everyone's lives.

The recent appointment of two select committees to address issues on Palm Island and rising petrol prices are other examples of the recognition by government of the role of parliament in finding solutions to difficult issues of community concern. I am aware of course, too, that the government has its own program of community engagement, including its e-democracy project, which covers a very wide range of issues and initiatives like the more recent one of the safety of young drivers. I went along to community consultation on that in Cairns. In addition, Labor backbenchers have been appointed to chair government initiated task forces from time to time to investigate particular issues such as the ones on violent youth parties and childhood obesity.

I believe that these government initiatives actually run the risk of perpetuating the adversarial debates in the parliament, because non-government members have no useful role to play but opposition to any measures the government brings forward, no matter how well the community was engaged on indeed the merits of the proposed recommendations. I believe the community is crying out for a mature, bipartisan approach to the challenges confronting our state and our nation. They want politicians to agree on solutions rather than continue with interminable conflict and blame games. My point here is that government could be asking more of the parliament, recognising it could take a stronger and hopefully bipartisan role in exploring policy options to address key issues of concern to the community, thereby making a positive contribution to meeting the challenges of the future that I have discussed.

To this end, I believe that the time is now ripe to review our committee system and consider embracing a portfolio based model that will be able to cover a wide range of these policy areas. We should revisit the EARC's model and consider again models like that used in New Zealand. While I have my own ideas about the details of such a model and how it might look in our parliament, it needs detailed consideration, maybe by the LCARC of the next parliament.

Factors for consideration would include the best means of also providing the oversight of bodies such as the CMC and the Ombudsman which could be achieved either by a separate oversight committee or by including it in the role of the portfolio based committees I have referred to. Again, the future of the estimates committees would require similar consideration.

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that committees abandon any attempts to scrutinise the executive, however difficult or indeed doomed to failure they might be, but that a revitalisation of democracy, surely our most important task now, requires a change in emphasis on the part of the parliament with priority being given to engaging with the community in a way that enables it to have a real influence on government decisions. However, for the parliament to successfully engage with the community in this way it will not be enough just to focus on the relevant issues of concern. Committees will also have to radically change the way in which they do business, using a wider range of methods, including the innovative use of ICT and participatory methods of community engagement, to reach beyond the usual stakeholders and lobbyists. The traditional inquiry method of calling for submissions, holding public hearings and then reporting to parliament is no longer sufficient. As Robert Marleau, the former Clerk of the Canadian House of Commons, asked in 2000—

Can the model of 15 members around the table with a clerk, a chairman and a witness survive in the next 20 to 25 years as a method of consultation? Is it the most efficient to reach citizens or groups of people who are interested in the committee business? That is a question we must ask and it is an issue we must anticipate.

Six years on, the community has answered his question with a resounding no. Parliament must now come to the same conclusion.

Studies of alternative innovative methods being used in Australian parliaments suggest there is along way to go. Beverly Duffy and Merrin Thompson, committee staff of the New South Wales Legislative Council, undertook a study of committee inquiry methods in New South Wales and Australian parliaments in 2003. They concluded that innovation occurring in these parliaments can best be described as modest and did not in fact include any innovative use of information technologies at all. More discouraging, they found that what innovation is occurring is limited in scope and is not gaining in momentum over time. Innovation was not identified as a priority or a goal for the committees they studied.

It is clear that we need to look outside Australia for best practice with respect to community engagement by parliaments. While there may be others, the Scottish parliament has much to teach us. No doubt they had an advantage as a new institution learning from the failings of older, more established Westminster systems. The Scottish parliament has been recognised as innovative in respect of its functioning and its committee system is no exception.

In 2004, the Participation Services Unit—imagine having such a thing in this parliament—introduced a participation handbook to offer guidance on a wide range of practical strategies for committees and their staff to reach individuals and groups not currently engaged in the political process. The concept of participation that underpins this handbook is critical and challenges traditional thinking about community consultation as it is currently practised by our committee and the Queensland government. I quote—

Participation is viewed as an active relationship and dialogue between people and the state. It is not only gathering evidence and opinions but it is an educative, discursive and inclusive process that has value in itself in building fuller citizenship. It is seen as a means of strengthening representative democracy rather than being in opposition to it, or offered as an alternative model.

This critical need to build active and informed citizenship is in fact central to the future health of democracy and is a key learning of the current LCARC inquiry into young people's engagement in democracy in Queensland. A quick listing of consultation methods described in the Scottish handbook gives some appreciation of the range and diversity being encouraged. How surprised we would be if we were to read these in the handbook of Queensland parliament. The methods for individual views include: written evidence, surveys, listening surveys, interviews, citizens panels, video box and street stalls. The methods for group views include: focus groups, group interviews, round table workshops, sounding board panels, specific interest groups and nominal group technique. The method for larger meetings include: public meetings, open space, local sustainability model, planning for real, future search, whole system conferences, fishbowls and brainstorming solutions workshops. Activity engagement methods include: interactive displays, mapping, popular education, forum theatre, graphic recording, story dialogue, banner-making and image.

I understand that we have someone from the Western Australian parliament here tonight. I acknowledge the work that has been done by the Western Australian government. I think it really is leading Australia in its work with the use of deliberative democracy processes of engagement.

I have had the opportunity, as chair of LCARC, to walk the talk, as they say, with the support of all the members and a committed and enthusiastic staff in the form of Julie Copley, who is here tonight, and Renee Giskes. We have enjoyed the challenge of trying more innovative methods of community engagement. I will outline some of the innovative methods used by LCARC in recent and current inquiries.

For inquiries into whether the Queensland Constitution should have a preamble, the committee convened a round table discussion of relevant experts, legal practitioners representing the Bar Association and Crown Law, and academics in constitutional law, human rights and electoral matters. For the current inquiry into the accessibility of administrative justice in Queensland, the committee is convening a conference next month at which experts and people with everyday experience on issues under consideration will come together to discuss in small groups their concerns and come up with practical ideas for reform reporting back their ideas using information technology.

For the current voices and votes inquiry into young people engaging in democracy in Queensland, the committee utilised graphic design and music produced by young Queenslanders, a multimedia CD-ROM, an online response form, an online poll and a series of workshops around Queensland which all of the members of the committee attended. We did go as a group. There were one or two of us at each of the 10 workshops, where we listened to what young people had to tell us about their views on a range of issues relevant to the inquiry. Finally, we held a youth jury at which 10 young people over a four-day program had the opportunity of hearing information from people with expert knowledge about young people and democracy and then deliberate—and that is the key issue—on this information and formulate recommendations to the committee on

how democracy can better serve young people in Queensland. This is the first time, as far as I am aware, that a parliamentary committee has attempted a citizen's jury. The methodology is by no means new but it was only the second youth jury attempted in Australia. I am pleased to say that the evaluation from the young people was very positive.

I believe the health of our democracy depends on how well we can re-engage and empower the community and restore the link between voters, their representatives and decisions. This is indeed the challenge of the 21st century. To encapsulate that challenge I cannot resist quoting from a book by Ryan Heath, a contemporary young innovator who has recently published a work with provocative title *Please just F* off: it's our turn now*. He is referring to people like me, the baby boomers. It is a question of moving over. He seems to have captured well the prevailing sentiment on the reasons for this disengagement of people from, as he calls it, 'beige town politics'. He says—

It has nothing to do with a lack of SMS voting. We are trying to use systems designed in the early 20th century for people living in the 21st. I don't use an icebox because it wouldn't meet my needs, and many people ask why they should spend a lot of time worrying about who is in parliament when few of its members address their concerns or are willing to respect their confidence and intelligence. It's not rocket science.

Thank you, Ryan. That really expresses it well. It is undoubtedly young people that we need to re-engage with. If we can meet that challenge then the future of our democratic institutions will, I believe, be much brighter.

I would like to finish with some comments from our young people and their responses in the evaluation of the youth jury. Here they are— Participating in the youth jury has shown me that there is so much opportunity to get involved in democracy. I'm now excited about having a say. I want to help get other young people excited too about voting and just getting involved. I am interested in joining future youth juries and possibly becoming involved in the youth council.

Another member stated—I think primarily it has given me the knowledge and experience I need to boost my confidence and fuel my desire to make a positive change in my community. It has also given me a stack load of information and experience that I can hopefully use to inspire and inform people that I know.

Parliamentary committees, then, can, and indeed must, be at the forefront of strengthening democracy. I sincerely hope that the Queensland parliament will become a model in how that can be best achieved.

Ms Nonie Malone: Thank you, Lesley, for that both sobering and uplifting excursion through parliamentary committees and our democratic system and for your views on how it can be in future.

Question: How do we get young people, particularly the 20- to 30-year-old age group, re-engaged?

Dr Lesley Clark: I think the principles that I have announced are the ones to start that quest for re-engagement. It is addressing issues that are of vital concern to them and then finding ways to talk to them about those issues, enabling their voice to be heard and their opinion to be voiced. Allowing people to have a say is not enough to restore that confidence. They have actually got to see that their ideas have influenced an outcome—that they have been heard and that it has been acted upon.

Obviously, we as a committee have not been able to guarantee that to our young people. We have only been able to guarantee them that we will consider their views in our report and our recommendations to parliament. If you are at least honest with people in terms of what you can and cannot do when you listen to them, that is also part of engaging with people in an authentic, honest way.

Many of us hear that complaint about consultation: 'Why did you bother talking to me because you have made up your mind already?' That is a very common one that is heard. I think we do need to revisit the way that we consult with people and then feed back to them so they can see what has happened to their ideas and where they have been incorporated and if we have not been able to incorporate them why not. People can see that they have been listened to and seriously considered.

Question: In 1993 you published a report on your proposals for the committee system, most of which were adopted except for one interesting point. You recommended a committee to oversee the Public Service. I wonder how history might have changed if that had been adopted.

Dr Lesley Clark: The PSMC might have had a different history. I am not sure, because in fact what we proposed that committee do was probably largely taken up when administrative review was added to the responsibilities of the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee. It was really incorporated into that committee and had a wider purview.

It is interesting that one of the recommendations of EARC—to have a review of administrative decisions and look at our appeals tribunal system to introduce comprehensive merits review is still on the agenda. We wrote a report which was never been adopted by the government. We actually recently wrote to Linda Lavarch, the Attorney-General, about this. She said, 'Yes, we are actually still thinking about that.' It is interesting that 15 years on there is still some of that Fitzgerald reform agenda which is still sitting there yet to be acted on. I think that is the only outstanding one, unless someone can suggest some other ones.

Question: You were suggesting that maybe it is about time that we again looked at the idea of adopting that New Zealand system. South Australia has a portfolio based system. Of course, New Zealand has two ways in which it differs from most of these. It has a portfolio based committee system and it has MMPs. Do you think portfolio based committees would have any more impact than anything else does? In Queensland we have an election system that can produce a majority of 66 to 23.

Dr Lesley Clark: You have touched on an important issue here by identifying the question: even if you had policy based committees, would that really make a difference if you have the numbers in the House? To a large extent, as long as the government always has the numbers on committees you are still going to have the same outcome in the sense that there will be that majority view. The difference would be that parliament would be more out in the community raising these issues and engaging debate about and around policy issues that are of key relevance and importance to people. The actual profile of parliament and the work that politicians do and the issues that they are concerned about will create a greater authentic relationship with the community. It will be seen to be responding to key issues that are out there. I think there is a genuine attempt in our Parliamentary Committees to have as bipartisan an approach as is possible. I would hope that there would still be more that you would agree on than you disagree on. So recommendations that had bipartisan support coming to the government, even though it still has the numbers, would still be more likely to be adopted.

Ms Nonie Malone: Thank you very much, Lesley. I would now like to call on Paul Williams, the newest member of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group executive and lecturer in politics from Griffith University, to give a vote of thanks to Lesley.

Dr Paul Williams: Madam Chair, Dr Clark, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. When I was preparing for tonight I did a quick internet search for some memorable, perhaps humorous quotes on committees. Much to my surprise, or not to my surprise, I found that most of them were very derogatory, pejorative. Most of the quotes referred to committees as being cumbersome, bureaucratic and ineffective. It struck a chord that that is what the attitude must have been entirely in Queensland, certainly before 1990 because Queensland political culture did not sit comfortably with committees and committees did not sit comfortably with Queensland political culture.

For those of you who are not terribly familiar with Queensland—I know that we have some international visitors tonight who are new to Queensland politics—I point out that Queensland political culture, certainly pre-Fitzgerald, pre-1990, was very much about the politics of things and not ideas. It was about the politics of strong authoritarian rule and not about group consensus. It was the politics that demanded immediate action and not reflection or due process. It was certainly the politics that demanded obscurity and not transparency—the sorts of things that do not lend themselves to a parliamentary system.

So there was an inherent paradox in Queensland political culture. That paradox was that Queensland was probably the most suspicious state and the most unfamiliar state with parliamentary committee systems. Yet, paradoxically, it was state that needed it the most. That was Queensland political culture before 1990. In many ways, as Dr Clark suggested, Queensland post-1990 is very different to Queensland pre-1990. In many ways it is unrecognisable.

I acknowledge Dr Clark's view and assertion that, in many ways, Queenslanders, as are many Australians, are disconnected from their government. Citizens feel a disconnection from their governments and their parliaments and other democratic institutions. But I would also add as a postscript that in the 15 or 16 years that Queensland has enjoyed a parliamentary committee system Queenslanders have reacted quite favourably and embraced quite favourably their committee system. Not only the committee system but also other instruments of parliamentary reform are there to keep governments in check, particularly governments that come in with a big majority.

I cite as evidence e-petitions, for example. E- petitions seem to be embraced with an incredible amount of enthusiasm in Queensland. A quick examination of the parliamentary web site will show that any number of e- petitions have been launched and signed. There is one petition that has gathered more than 7,000 electronic signatures. It probably would not surprise you to learn that it is the anti-daylight saving petition. Nonetheless, it has captured the public imagination. So my argument would be that, despite the misgivings that some of us might have about executive dominance of parliaments and perhaps committees' ineffectiveness, committees have gone a long way in restoring the public's confidence in parliament as a cornerstone Westminster institution.

Let me go back to where I started. Let me go back to the quotes. I did find one quote that I thought was memorable and worth reciting. It was made not by a politician but by a politician's wife. It was made by Lady Bird Johnson, the wife of former American president Lyndon Johnson in 1960s. Lady Bird Johnson said—

Any committee is only as good as the most knowledgeable, determined and vigorous person on it. There must be somebody who provides the flame.

Now, to me this quote underscores the very nature of parliamentary committees. To me parliamentary committees have twin incarnations. In one incarnation a parliamentary committee is a collective—a group of individuals who are there to complete a task, perhaps often a single task. But, on the other hand, a committee is also a group of individuals, with the emphasis on individuals, who come to the committee with very disparate ideas, political values, personalities and so on. Harking back to Lady Bird's quote, they bring to the committee each their own flame.

On that note, I would like to bring it back to Dr Clark and thank her for bringing her own flame to the Queensland parliament over the past 16 years, generically. Specifically, all of us would like to thank Dr Clark for addressing us tonight through a very inspiring and wonderful address. Thank you, Dr Clark.

Ms Nonie Malone: That brings our proceedings for this evening to a close. Before we finish, I suppose that many of you, as I do, would like to look in more depth at what Lesley said tonight. She certainly gave us plenty of food for thought. The transcript of the speech she gave tonight will be on our web site within the next two to three weeks, along with the transcripts of other forums that we have held over the past 13 years. It is easy to get to the site. From the parliament's home page just follow links and that will take you immediately to the Australasian Study of Parliament Group, Queensland chapter. It will be very easy to find the transcripts from there. I thank you all very much for your attendance. I thank Lesley again for addressing us this evening. It has been a very special evening. I look forward to seeing many of you at our next function. Good evening.