Parliament, Meetings and Civil Society*

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Today I'm going to talk about meetings—'meetings, bloody meetings', as John Cleese's training video describes them—and their relationship to what happens in our parliaments. What is the relationship between the procedures of our national, state and territory deliberative assemblies and those followed by the deliberative assemblies of our civic and economic life? And what are the implications of this relationship for people's attitudes towards parliament?

Once this relationship was close. Meeting procedures were based on simplified forms of parliamentary procedure and so participation in the many meetings of civil society familiarised citizens with the ways parliament operated and helped to build a sense of legitimacy for parliament's deliberative strategies. However, I will argue, this closeness no longer pertains. Meetings have changed, in both their form and their location. Where once they were formal and adversarial, like parliament, they are now informal and consensual; and where once they were primarily located in people's civic and community life, they are now a ubiquitous feature of working life. As a consequence of these two shifts, meetings no longer work to familiarise people with the procedures of parliament and to endow them with conviction; in fact quite the opposite. The public seem to be becoming increasingly impatient with and alienated from parliament's adversarial procedures which no longer accord with its commonsense understandings and practical experience of the way good decisions are made.

This lecture is organised into three parts. In the first and longest I discuss the rise of the meeting and its relationship with the history of parliament. This takes us from the Eighteenth Century to some time after the Second World War. In the second section I discuss contemporary meeting practice as it has developed since the War. In the third, concluding section I discuss the implications of the argument for popular attitudes to parliament. I had been thinking about meetings for some time as part of work I was doing on ideas of citizenship and their relationship to people's practical political knowledge and experience, when I came across a book called *Meetings, Manners and Civilisation: the Development of Modern Meeting Behaviour* by a Dutch man, Wilbert van Vree.[1] This book surveys the development of European meeting practice and has been enormously helpful in the development of my argument.

Origin and Development of Meetings

So, to begin with the origins of meetings: what are meetings? Meetings are occasions when people come together for common discussion and for non-violent decision making. Their medium is regulated talk, which occurs according to certain rules with which the participants are more or less familiar. And their intended outcome is some sort of decision. The explicit regulation of talk marks meetings apart from informal talk, from gossip, chit chat or conversation, and bestows their decisions with a degree of legitimacy which binds participants to the outcomes. Meeting procedures are ways of giving legitimacy to the decisions of deliberative bodies; those who lose the argument accept their loss, and those who win know that they can now legitimately act on the outcome of the meeting—further even that they are expected to act on the outcome.

The meeting developed as part of the broad historical process of the pacification of politics in which rule-governed talk was substituted for force and violence as a way of settling disputes within increasingly large territorial units.[2] Its history includes the increasing need for orderly and co-ordinated decision-making procedures among the European ruling elites of church, town and state, the Reformation and the Protestant Meeting Order which spread meeting discipline among the lower classes, and the emergence of national parliaments as deliberative bodies in which conflict is settled by talk rather than force, a process sometimes referred to as 'parliamentarisation'. As monarchs asserted their monopoly over coercive force, other, more peaceful means were needed for the members of the ruling elites to settle their differences and display their prowess. Tournaments and duels were replaced by debates and oratory. One attacked the words of one's opponents but not the opponent himself.

Organised sport and parliaments developed hand in hand, both providing arenas in which military combat could be replaced by other forms of combat. Fighting with weapons was replaced by playing sport and fighting with words, and both sport and parliament were organised around adversarial teams which competed for an outcome, and which provided opportunities for the display of individual prowess. They subsequently followed their own lines of development, but the deep shared history of

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[1] Leicester University Press, London, 1999.

[2] The following summary account is based on Wilbert van Vree's introduction to *Meetings, Manners and Civilisation*. Van Vree situates the development of meetings within the broad process of historical change described by Norbert Elias in *The Civilising Process* and subsequent publications.

the two social forms meant that sport has remained a rich source of analogy for descriptions of parliamentary events and behaviour. As he struggled with the instability of the first federal parliaments, Alfred Deakin famously complained 'What kind of game of cricket ... could they play if they had three elevens instead of two, with one playing sometimes with one side, sometimes with the other, and sometimes for itself? It was absolutely imperative that as soon as possible the three parties should somehow be resolved into two.'[3] This resolution occurred at Fusion in 1909 when Australian politics took on the two-party shape of labour and non-labour which it has held to ever since. As this anecdote reminds us, disciplined political parties are now central to our experience of the adversarial forms of parliament, particularly in Australia. And as organised groups learned to operate the adversarial forms and procedures previously operated by individuals, the forms and procedures changed, becoming more rigid and mechanical, with majorities on the floor predetermined by the balance of party numbers.

The spread of the meeting from the ruling elites to the lower orders was in the main the result of the rise of the voluntary association in industrialised societies. Voluntary associations in the form we know them today emerged in the Eighteenth Century, as a response to the increasing complexity and rate of change of social and political life. Their formation intensified in the first half of the Nineteenth in both numbers and public importance until they had become the pervasive and easily recognised social form Charles Dickens satirised in *Pickwick Papers*. The basis of their growth was the adult male urban classes, but the social form was easily adaptable to purposes ranging from the special interest hobby group like pigeon fanciers to a political association or a workers' co-operative. All that was required was a purpose, a set of rules, and a membership defined by a formalised act of joining. Even children could form a club, as the Marsh girls did in *Little Women*, to rehearse the skills and forms of adult life. Acting independently of both the family and the state, the activities of these organised groups contributed to the network of formal and informal associations and institutions which makes up civic society.[4]

Australia was settled after the rise of the voluntary association in Britain. Nineteenth Century colonists brought this experience of voluntary associations with them and turned them to the purposes of community-building in the new land. They had perhaps even more need for them here than at home; with no traditional ruling classes to rely on, if anything were to happen it had to be made happen by the colonists themselves. Like the settlers in the United States, they were building a new society, and Alex de Toqueville had observed on his visit to America in the 1830s the range and effectiveness of American associational life. He saw this enthusiasm for voluntary associations as the basis of their successful democratic life: 'In democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge.'[5]

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[3] Alfred Deakin, *Age* (Melbourne), 9 February 1904, cited in J.A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: a Biography*, vol. 2, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1965, p. 363.

[4] R.J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations' in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1990, p. 395–6.

[5] Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, (1835) Harper & Rowe, New York, 1966, p. 485–8.

In new areas of settlement, both rural and urban, public resources were limited and the provision of many essential services, such as hospitals or fire brigades, depended on voluntary effort, or on convincing the government of the local area's urgent need. By the end of the Nineteenth Century the typical Australian country town and suburb had a plethora of community organisations: sporting clubs such as cricket, football, horse racing, tennis and lawn bowls, musical societies, literary and debating clubs, public halls, mechanics institutes and subscriber libraries, agricultural societies to organise the annual show, and so on. As well, there were the churches, which supported their own range of organisations, and the women's auxiliary fund-raising organisations attached to institutions such as schools, hospitals, fire brigades and children's homes. There were also associations with an economic purpose: trade unions, chambers of commerce, farmers groups.

A survey during the early 1940s of 180 Victorian country towns ranging in size from 250 to 10 000 people found well over 3 000 social organisations and 1 700 sporting organisations, as well as boards, councils and trusts and the more formal organisations of political and economic life. Of the 180 towns surveyed, 161 had a public hall.[6] And a national survey in 1967 found that Australian membership of organisations of all kinds was higher than found in any of the five countries which had been surveyed by Almond and Verba for their classic account of the Civic Culture, including the United States.[7] All of these organisations required people to run them, people who knew how to combine. Each required at least a president, a secretary and a treasurer, and although there was some doubling up, people also took turns. As one meeting manual put it:

> To be able to acquit oneself creditably as the chairman of a meeting of any kind is ... not only a useful accomplishment but also a necessity of modern times [for] there are few persons who do not belong to some local council, association, society or club over whose meetings he or she may not be called upon to preside.[8]

The first woman parliamentary candidate for the Country Party in Victoria, Helena Marfell, who unsuccessfully contested the Victorian federal seat of Wannon at the 1949 election, is remembered by her daughter as always between meetings:

> Mother would return home from an afternoon meeting, and, not even stopping to take off her hat, would get the tea, make a couple of sponge cakes, sandwiches or biscuits, eat and rush off again to an evening meeting ... She ate most evening meals with her hat on.[9]

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[6] A.J. & J.J. McIntyre, *Country Towns of Victoria: a Social Survey*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1944.

[7] David Kemp, *Society and Electoral Behaviour in Australia: a Study of Three Decades*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1978, p. 351.

[8] Morton F. Parish, *The Chairman's Pilot and Chart: a Practical Guide to Procedure and Law*, 2nd ed., Sweet and Maxwell, London, 1936, p. 1.

[9] Mirth Jamieson remembering her mother, Helena Marfell, cited in Heather Gunn, ''For the Man on the Land': Rural Women and the Victorian National Party, 1917-1996', Ph.D. Thesis, La Trobe University, 1996, p. 139.

Helena Marfell was a good public speaker and she could run a good meeting. Meetings were particularly important for women, providing them with opportunities for casual talk and sociability. The survey of associations in country towns referred to above noted that the majority provided a cup of tea at their meetings. Meetings were also women's main means of acting politically. The pacification of society of which the development of the meeting is a part enabled women gradually to participate in public life, to learn the skills of rule-based debate and decision making, and to turn these to their own purposes.

It is an intriguing historical question how people like Helena Marfall and countless other Australian men and women learnt to run meetings. All the more politically oriented clubs and societies saw training in the skills necessary for political participation as part of their purpose. The Australian Natives Association, for example, educated its members in the various forms of political life through Mock Parliaments and Mock Banquets,[10] debating societies were popular with their formal speeches for and against particular motions; and the political parties had sections devoted to training, with speaking and debating clubs where political activists could learn the skills needed for the hustings. After women were enfranchised, women's political organisations such as the NSW based Women's Political Education League established classes in speaking and debating and ran schools for citizenship.[11] Later organisations such as Rostrum developed to give people specific training in such skills as chairmanship,[12] and as a teenager I was a member of a YWCA organisation called The Girl Citizens in which we were taught how to run meetings. It is likely, though, that most people learned on the job, beginning from participant observation as ordinary members and then serving in understudy positions such as vice president or acting treasurer. Some people, of course, already had relevant education and work experience: treasurers could generally be drawn from people with book-keeping experience, and larger organisations might be lucky enough to have a trained accountant. Participation in trade union activities gave on the job education in political skills for many workers. There has not, as far as I know, been any systematic investigation of the way knowledge of and skills in meeting procedures were disseminated through society, either in Australia or elsewhere.

Many, however, would have had recourse to manuals like J.P. Monro's *Guide for the Chairman and Secretary*, particularly when they had to take up an office. Monro's *Guide* was part of a series of Everyday Useful Books which contained other titles by Monro, on *Model Speeches and Toasts*, and on *Model Letters and Invitations*, as well as a guide to Australian etiquette and a book on what to name the baby. Monro's book was first published in Australia in 1934 and still in print in its fourteenth edition in 1958.[13] Such manuals began to appear during the Nineteenth Century. They served a

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[10] Marion Aveling (Quartly), 'A History of the Australian Natives Association, 1871-1930', Ph.D. Thesis, Monash University, 1970. p. 266.

[11] Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 147.

[12] The Rostrum Movement was founded in 1923 in England and inaugurated in Australia in 1930. Rostrum leaflet (1983) in my possession.

[13] The copy in my possession is the fourteenth, revised and enlarged, published by J. Pollard, Melbourne, 1958.

similar function to etiquette manuals which had diffused throughout society the manners first developed in the dense and complex social interactions of the European courts. Meeting manners similarly instructed the lower classes in forms of behaviour already developed amongst the elites, and they are a valuable source for investigating the values and self-understandings associated with this new form of political behaviour.

The very early manuals focussed as much on meeting manners as on procedural issues such as the order of motions; one should not arrive late or depart early, fall asleep, fight, shout, spit or swear, but should rather endeavour at all times to listen attentively to the views of others and to maintain a calm and dispassionate demeanour when stating one's own.[14] Meetings were about rational talk, and to participate in them successfully one had to learn to talk and listen in appropriately rational and reciprocal ways: to take one's turn, to control ones' outbursts of scorn or temper, to subordinate one's own interests and views to those of others, or at least to appear to do so. As innumerable meeting manuals told their readers, 'Common sense and common courtesy are the foundations of good meeting procedure.'[15]

As meeting manners became more widely known and more people knew how to conduct themselves—knew not to spit or throw things or interrupt and shout abuse—attention shifted from instructing the ordinary members and participants to advising the chairman, the person ultimately responsible for the effective and orderly conduct of the meeting. As the advice made clear, knowing how to run a good meeting is far more than knowing formal procedural rules. It is knowing how to balance competing interests and views; how to achieve an effective outcome; how to handle a potentially disruptive outburst of anger, or even violence; how, that is, to maintain public order, prevent it from descending into chaos and still get things done. Meeting manuals thus mix exposition of the various rules with advice to the chair on such matters as how to control passions and passing impulses in oneself as well as in the meeting under one's charge. *Roberts' Rules of Order*, the standard United States manual, concluded its list of 'Parliamentary Don'ts for the Presiding Officer' with 'Don't lose your calmness, objectivity and impartiality.'[16] Some manuals also included advice on dress and deportment, so that the Chairman would be able to project the necessary authority. 'The Chairman should be neatly dressed, otherwise the dignity of the position may suffer', advises J.P. Munro. He does concede that he has met in the ranks of Labor many very able Chairmen who at an emergency have presided at a stopwork in their shirt sleeves, but notes that at their union meetings in the Trades Hall the presidents and secretaries are neatly dressed.[17] This observation concurs with what is known of the early commitment to meeting discipline amongst the English working classes. They too learned to substitute meetings for violence: 'The poor, when suffering and dissatisfied, no longer make a riot, but hold a meeting—instead of attacking their

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14   See van Vree, op. cit., p. 256 passim for a close reading of meeting manuals in terms of Norbert Elias's concept of the civilising process.

15   See, for example, '*M.P.*', *The Young Men's Parliamentary Guide*, Macmillan Co. of Canada, Toronto, c. 1919, p. 6; Marjorie Puregger, *Mr Chairman*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1962, p. 10.

16   General Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order*, (1876), Spire Books paperback edition, 1967, p. 167.

17   Monro, op. cit., p. 14.

neighbours, they arraign the Ministry' noted an observer of the Manchester working class in 1819 on the eve of the Peterloo massacre.[18]

In the main, the procedures for the meetings of civil society were based on modifications of the procedures parliament had developed to guide its decision making. Parliament was the model of how ordinary meetings should be conducted and many modern meeting manuals still evoke its history in their introductions. And although the development of meetings was a European-wide accompaniment to industrialisation and modern state formation, manuals produced for the Empire generally present it as an exclusively British development. Marjorie Puregger's widely used *Australian Guide to Chairing Meetings* begins with a brief overview chapter on the history of parliamentary procedure under the heading 'The distilled wisdom of the centuries', and commences: 'The system of meeting procedure in use today is largely derived from the proceedings of the Houses of Commons.'[19]

After a brief nod to Indian, Greek and Roman precedents, she places the development of meeting procedure firmly within the history of the English parliament, with its origins in the folk moots of the Anglo Saxons and its development through the Magna Carta, the Tudor, Elizabethan and Stuart parliaments, the Civil War and the Commonwealth to the 1832 Reform Bill. Earlier meeting manuals similarly implicitly claim meeting procedure as a manifestation of the slowly evolving wisdom of the British parliamentary traditions. The standard Canadian meeting manual, *Bourinot's Rules of Order*, first published in 1894, claims that 'On the basis of common sense and fair play, the British Parliament slowly, through the centuries, evolved a system of rules and conventions upon which are based the procedures and usages of all free parliaments.'[20] A manual published in London about the same time links the development of the meeting to the right of the British 'to assemble at pleasure for the purpose of discussion', a right confirmed by the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, which acts the author stresses are not to be seen as the origin of such rights but as their confirmation.[21] Another claims that the word 'Parliament'... embodies the spirit that has characterised the British people at home and abroad, through the generations'.[22]

Such claims and narratives drew meeting participants into the much larger historical narrative of the development of the British system of parliament as the expression of the wisdom and common sense of the British people. The reader of such manuals could be in no doubt that knowing how to run a meeting was valuable knowledge, linking them to the deep history of their nation and its political institutions. In one's local meetings one followed procedures developed in the mother of all parliaments at

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[18] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, 1968, p. 456.

[19] Marjorie Puregger, *The Australian Guide to Chairing Meetings*, revised edition, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld, 1998, p. 1; this is the 6th revision of a guide first published under the title, *Mr Chairman*, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1962.

[20] Sir John George Bourinot, *Bourinot's Rules of Order*, (1894), revised by J. Gordon Dubroy, McClelland & Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1963; from Introduction to the first edition, p. x.

[21] James Tayler, *A Guide to the Business of Public Meetings*, Effingham, Wilson & Co., London 1893, pp. 5–6.

[22] *The Young Man's Parliamentary Guide*, p. 5.

Westminster. The smallest and the greatest meetings of the land were linked by their shared deliberative procedures. *Robert's Rules of Order* has a frontispiece with three simple words: CHURCH—CLUB—GOVERNMENT. His *Rules of Order* are sufficient for each, a shared woof and weft which holds them together in a single cloth. Meeting procedures thus embedded in the day to day life of the community a knowledge of and commitment to parliamentary proceedings as embodying the way civilised people went about resolving conflicts and making joint decisions. Knowledge of and commitment to parliament and to parliamentary procedure as the way to settle political conflicts was not a weak or abstract commitment to a distant institution; it was a commitment enacted in every meeting convened or attended. As well, the etiquette of meetings, in which one participated in reciprocal talking and listening and subordinated self-interest and passing impulse to the common goal of arriving at a collective decision, accorded with widely held liberal notions of the qualities of good citizenship in which individuals were able to subordinate sectional and self interest to the common good of the nation.[23]

There has recently been renewed interest in the links between the quality of democratic public life and citizens' engagement or not with community organisational life. The focus of this work has been on the way participation in voluntary organisations builds what has become known as 'social capital', networks of reciprocity and reservoirs of social trust which enhance communities' abilities to solve their problems, and on the likely consequences of the recent dramatic decline in such participation.[24] My argument suggests that this work needs to be supplemented with attention to the values embodied in the practical political knowledge people bring to such participation. It is not just the fact of participation that matters, but the forms it takes, and the lessons people draw from these forms about legitimate and illegitimate ways of resolving conflicts, effective and ineffective ways of combining together for shared purposes. In learning how to run a good meeting, people were learning about connections between personal character and public order, between the ethics of self-control and the effective pursuit of collective outcomes, between the principles needed to run a good meeting and those necessary for a good society.

Confirmation of the importance of such practical political knowledge to Australian political life can be seen in the troubles which have beset Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party over its organisational modes and practices. Although the organisation described itself as a party, it lacked the formal participatory structures and transparent finances associated with voluntary associations. Instead it was structured like a business with Hanson and two of her close associates as directors rather than as elected office bearers.[25] One Nation's failure to meet its members' organisational expectations has been a continual source of acrimony and resignations: for example, Debbie Bevan who worked in the Queensland office of the party described it as a rabble;[26] and in early 1999 three of its sitting Queensland members resigned over its

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[23] I develop this argument at greater length in 'Retrieving the Partisan History of Australian Citizenship', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 3, November 2001.

[24] Robert Putnam, 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1, January 1995, pp. 65–78.

[25] Glenn Milne, 'The Party must be Over', *Australian*, 6 July 1998.

[26] *Australian*, 2 September 1998.

autocratic structure.[27] Neither a rabble nor an autocracy is a legitimate modern deliberative body. When One Nation was first formed, most commentators regarded it as a potential threat to Australian democracy because of the views its members espoused on questions of race and national identity; they failed to see the democratic values embodied in Australians' practical political knowledge about legitimate and illegitimate modes of combination and the trouble this spelled for a politically inexperienced leader like Pauline Hanson and her maverick political advisers.[28]

Modern Meetings

Since the war, meeting practice has been changing. Of course there are still many meetings run along the formal procedural lines set out in manuals like *Roberts' Rules of Order* and Marjorie Puregger's *Australian Guide to Chairing Meetings*, but these are no longer the undisputed centre of modern meeting practice. Many meetings are now markedly less formal, and much of what is found in the modern meeting manual owes very little to parliamentary procedure. In particular, the role of the chair is now far more than the keeping of order through the firm and impartial adherence to procedure. In more recent manuals, the chairman is advised on how to develop the necessary communicative and psychological skills to ensure an effective outcome. The aim, as one widely-used manual puts it, is to 'find the will of the group while keeping group unity, as much as possible without identifying the minority, and while giving the greatest possible atmosphere for free and informal participation.'[29] In achieving such an end, parliamentary procedure is of little use:

> Parliamentary procedure and motions should be avoided in reaching decisions in most conferences. ... Parliamentary procedure imposes a degree of formality on the conduct of the discussion which does not allow for the informality, spontaneity and permissiveness we strive for in the conference ... members should feel free to speak up and make contributions at any time without recognition by the chair or first indicating their desire to speak.[30]

Formal turn-taking through the chair is replaced by the more informal techniques people use to take turns in everyday conversation, and discussion replaces debate. Even recent editions of *Roberts' Rules of Order*, the bible of meeting procedure, express reservations about the applicability of formal procedures for all groups. Although required in legally constituted meetings, 'in small groups the ponderous procedures involved stymie human interactions, and the flow of creativity. The rules stimulate a legalistic and mechanical way of thinking.'[31]

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[27] *Weekend Australian*, December 18–19 1999; 'One Nation's Last Gasp', *Age* (Melbourne), 6 February 1999.

[28] See Judith Brett, 'Representing the Unrepresented: One Nation and the Formation of the Labor Party' in Nadine Davidoff (ed.) *Two Nations: the Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia*, Bookman Press, Melbourne, 1998.

[29] H.P. Zelko, *The Business Conference: Leadership and Participation*, New York, 1963, p. 163. This book was first published in 1957 and is representative of the new genre of meeting manuals. See van Vree, p. 272.

[30] Cited in van Vree, p. 286.

[31] 1978 edition; cited in van Vree, p. 291.

There are two reasons for the shift to less formal meetings. One pertains mainly to political meetings, the other to meetings in general. The social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s were self-consciously hostile to formal structures and procedures, regarding these not as enabling participation—as they had done in their origins—but as stifling it. The commitment to grass roots participation, to everyone's voice being heard, and a distrust of the authoritarian potential of leadership was widespread amongst the social movements, which tended to see existing meeting procedures in terms of the repressive values and practices they were seeking to change. For example, it was argued within the women's movement that formal procedures were a tool of the patriarchy and that women needed to develop their own distinctive organisational forms which reflected women's more openended ways of thinking and acting.[32] Also at work in the social movement's distrust of formal proceedings was a shift in the way many people experienced organisational membership, with a heightened individualism making many less willing than they once had been to be bound by group decisions and majority votes.

The second change is the spread of the workplace meeting. At work, more and more people are required to attend more and more meetings. While this is most obvious at the top of organisations, chief executives and departmental heads generally spending, depending on the size of the organisation, about 50 percent of their time in meetings, the work or office meeting is a ubiquitous feature of white collar work and rapidly spreading to blue collar, as horizontally co-ordinated work teams replace hierarchical command structures in work place organisation.[33] It is now likely to be at work rather than in their community life that people learn their meeting behaviour. Early meeting manuals were addressed to the person in their community and non-work life. In his preface to the *Guide for the Chairman and the Secretary*, J.P. Monro explicitly links people's need for his handy practical guide to their increasing leisure and opportunity to participate in interest-based clubs and societies. Now there are many meeting manuals solely about the work based meeting: Malcolm Reid's *The Australian Meetings Handbook*, published in 1991, begins 'This is a no-nonsense meeting book for the busy executive who finds that he or she is increasingly involved in convening, chairing or simply attending gatherings of all types.'[34] Meeting manuals are now more likely to be addressed to managers exercising authority in the workplace than to citizens holding elected office. As the book accompanying the John Cleese training video *Meetings, Bloody Meetings* says, 'meetings are management'.[35]

Guides to workplace meetings draw on management theory and on social psychology, particularly group theory, and few make any mention at all of parliamentary precedents. The deliberative body is generally small, the team or the work group, and the aim is a consensual outcome to which people will feel committed and on which they will act. Meetings need to be both efficient, to not waste time, and to be

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[32] Verity Burgman, *Power and Protest: Movements for Change in Australian Society*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp. 92–3.

[33] van Vree, pp. 277–8.

[34] Malcolm Reid, *The Australian Meetings Handbook: More Effective Meetings in Half the Time*, The Business Library, Melbourne, 1991.

[35] Antony Jay, *How to Run a Meeting*, Video Arts, London, 1976.

effective. Also important is the continuing cohesion of the group. One guide's list of the meeting's functions is: establishing group identity; collective thinking; helping individuals to understand their role in the group; creating a commitment to the decisions made; and acting as a status arena.[36] Only the last has any connection with what happens in parliament. The focus on small group dynamics has transformed the role of the chair from the impartial umpire of the rules to something more like a facilitator. One manual describes the chair as 'the social leader, keeping the group together'; another, which compares meetings with dinner parties and orchestra performances, describes the chair as a 'meeting master':

> Meeting masters saw their meetings as if they were orchestral performances. The hall had been prepared, the pieces selected, and some rehearsal accomplished. Everyone was an expert, trying to do his or her best. The job of the chairperson was to facilitate, to help, to conduct the committee orchestra.[37]

Meetings and Parliament

So, what has all this to do with parliament? There has been much speculation over the past decade or so about popular dissatisfaction with Australia's political institutions and about declining levels of trust in politicians. For example, a 1991 survey of Australians' confidence in their basic institutions found that 62 percent expressed little or no confidence in their political institutions.[38] Since then evidence of disaffection with the major parties, with increases in electoral volatility and the rise of independents and of One Nation, has fuelled journalistic speculation at least. Hugh Mackay has singled out the unruly nature of Australian politicians' parliamentary behaviour, together with the disappearance of clear and meaningful differences between the parties, as possible explanations. With the parties apparently so close, he argues, parliament's adversarial forms seem pointless:

> It is a source of widespread astonishment in the Australian community that, at the very time when parties seem quite capable of stealing each other's policies or invading each other's territory, it is not possible for politicians from all sides of the political fence to work together in a more co-operative and harmonious spirit. ... The common cry of parents in particular is that they would not allow their children to behave in the way that politicians typically behave in parliament.[39]

Mackay sees the main problem as the convergence of the parties. The search for reasons has also focussed on the behaviour and the moral quality of the parliamentarians themselves, on claims that they are too self-interested, too prone to temptation to feather their nests at public expense, not as watchful as they might be about conflicts of interest, and so on. I have always been sceptical of explanations

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[36] ibid., pp. 7–8.

[37] John E. Tropman, *Making Meetings Work: Achieving High Quality Decisions*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1996, pp. xii, 3.

[38] Hugh Mackay, *Reinventing Australia: the Mind and Mood of Australia in the 90s*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1993. p. 178.

[39] ibid., p. 179.

which focus on the moral qualities of individuals without attention to the institutions and practices within which these moral qualities are shaped and perceived. This lecture has put forward another argument about possible reasons for shifts in public perceptions of the parliament, which would flow onto perceptions of those who inhabit it.

Neither in top level negotiations between companies, nor in settling community disputes do most people abide by formal rules based on parliamentary procedure. Changes in both the form and location of meetings, from formal and adversarial to informal and consensual, and from community to work, have weakened the threads which once tied the general community to its parliament. With the prime locus of meetings shifting from civil society to the work place, meeting attendance is no longer primarily the actions of citizens of the polity but of workers in the economy. Meetings thus no longer help to give form to a person's sense of their non-work self, to tie them into the civic affairs of their neighbourhood and through that to those of the nation. And as their conduct has changed, from formal and procedural to consensual and discussion based, so they no longer provide the same link between the deliberative bodies of the community and the national parliament.

Two implications can be drawn from this for broad changes in the position of parliament in the political culture, and both point to a decline in its centrality. The first is that parliament is no longer so present in the community. Not only are people less knowledgable about its forms and procedures, but they no longer enact them so frequently in regular meetings which keep them alive to their purpose and periodically connect community-based deliberations with those of the national parliament. Operating according to different principles, community civic life seems increasingly cut loose from parliament and active civic citizenship no longer so readily builds trust in the nation's central political institutions.

The second implication is even more damaging for general popular confidence in parliamentary institutions. It is not just that people's active civic life no longer connects them with so readily to parliament, but that in many cases it makes them reject the adversarial form at the heart of the Westminster system. From the perspective of those experienced with the modern, informal meeting and its consensual means of reaching a decision, parliamentary procedure is no longer seen as enabling but as precluding cooperative action, and no longer seen as conducive to good decision making. Long used to the replacement of weapons with words in the settlement of political conflicts, people in contemporary society are looking instead to develop more finely-tuned and flexible communicative mechanisms for the solution of group problems.

The decline in the role of the speech in parliament is evidence of the loss of relevance of the forms embedded in parliament's origins. Once the speech to the House was at the heart of the parliament. Great parliamentarians were great orators, displaying their skill before their assembled peers, winning, through their ability to persuade, the highest offices in the land. But as Carmen Lawrence has recently observed, one of the more disquieting experiences of the modern parliamentarian is that speeches are delivered without an audience, into a void where once sat parliamentarians whose adherence needed to be won and maintained. 'Speech after carefully prepared speech

disappears without a trace, having no impact on the fate of the legislation.' She calls for consideration of ways of opening up decision-making and for more civil and cooperative parliamentary conduct; for a parliament that is less reflexly adversarial, so that we can become more focussed on solving the problems we face as a nation.[40]

The general shift in the community's experience of decision-making away from adversarial forms also helps explain the apparently high level of popular acceptance of the changed role of the Senate which has developed since the formation of the Democrats in the late 1970s, despite complaints from some parliamentarians that it is preventing governments from governing. Mechanisms which slow down decision-making, enforce discussion and attempt to build consensus, such as the use of bipartisan committees in the development of legislation, are far more in tune with contemporary practices than those which allow majorities free rein. Commentators on parliamentary reform regularly discuss the need to enhance parliament's deliberative practices by creating more spaces in which it can operate free from executive dominance,[41] and there are currently attempts being made to reform the Victorian upper house to make it more like the Senate.

To conclude: what has been described as 'the parliamentarisation' of associational life, which lasted from the late Eighteenth Century to the middle of the Twentieth, is now on the wane, and parliaments, the product of an earlier civilisational wave, are left exposed to the criticism of citizens who now do their day to day and community politics in quite different ways. Where once parliament led the way, establishing procedures and protocols which became the model for other assemblies, parliament is now being left behind, its rigid adversarial procedures deployed by our rigidly disciplined parties no longer according with the community's experience of the processes necessary for good decision making.

Question — I'd suggest that the Speaker of a parliament probably has a more difficult job maintaining order and civility than your average secretary of a local stamp club. The manuals that you talked about seem to be saying that the aim is adversarialism, tempered by civility and mutual respect. And possibly what we have in parliament, is adversarialism *not* tempered by civility and mutual respect. Is that a relevant nuance in the argument, rather than just saying adversarialism itself is the problem? And I think there is a democratic deficit. The work meeting model is the model for the non-parliamentary association of life. I understand that we can't go back to anachronisms, but if you look at those sorts of massive organisations in civil society like unions, etc. which developed their own procedures using all these manuals back in the 1910s or 1920s, they were trying to push that into the arena that it gets discussed at. Whereas nowadays we have the *Bowling Alone* phenomenon, where people aren't joining these

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[40] 'Renewing Democracy', speech to the Sydney Institute, 17 August 2000.

[41] See for example, John Uhr, *Deliberative Democracy in Australia: the Changing Place of Parliament*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998, chapter 9; John Uhr and John Wanna, 'The future roles of parliament' in Michael Keating, John Wanna and Patrick Weller (eds), *Institutions on the Edge? Capacity for Governance*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000.

organisations and so don't have the experience of them. Do you have any ideas on how to reinvigorate or address this democratic deficit without being anachronistic?

Judith Brett — Your first point about parliament is right. People look at parliament and see an absence of the manners that they think are appropriate in formal procedural meeting places. Your second point is more difficult. I know Eva Cox is doing some work on this, but whether or not Australia's associational life has fallen away to the same extent as that in the United States is hard to know. I don't think there's any hard evidence on that.

I think within the trade union organisations and the Labor Party, these more formal procedures are still learned and maintained and deployed very effectively. But, for example, if you go to your local kindergarten meeting, nobody wants that run in a formal way. Whereas when my parents ran kindergarten meetings, they did run them in a formal way, so that's a big generational shift. Obviously in parliament—and in other big public meetings such as union meetings—there is a requirement, because of the size, for much more formal meetings. But in the past, even the smallest of meetings was run in these very formal ways, whereas now smaller meetings are run quite differently. People don't want to take votes, for example—they want a much more consensual outcome. They see that as more democratic, which is interesting. They see the putting of a majoritarian type vote, procedurally, as somehow stifling democracy, rather than enabling it.

To explain your reference to *Bowling Alone*, it's a book by Robert Putnam.[42] The title refers to tenpin bowling alleys, and is saying that more and more Americans are not joining organisations or sporting clubs in the way they once were. They go to the tenpin bowling alley on their own, rather than in a bunch. He links this not just to a democratic deficit, but to a loss of social capital. People don't know how to organise themselves to get a bunch of friends to go bowling.

I don't have any particularly innovative ideas on how to reinvigorate community life. I'm not so sure that our community life is in the same state as America's. I'm awaiting Eva Cox's research on that.

Question — I'm glad you mentioned Rostrum. I'm an ex-president of Rostrum in the ACT. We have the problem of steering people through meeting procedures. We've been very much aware over the years of this shift from very formal meetings to informal meetings. We find that the informal type of meetings, where you don't adhere strictly to the rules of debate and so on, are fine for meetings of say seven to twelve people. But once the meeting starts getting bigger than that, then we find that the chairman has to take some sort of control. So you have a dilemma of people wanting to be more informal, and yet sometimes the situation won't allow it. I belong to some associations where 60 to 70 people turn up to meetings. If you don't have some sort of control it becomes mayhem. The other thing is, smaller meetings still depend on the goodwill of the people attending. At one stage, I was responsible for

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[42] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

administering grants to organisations in the ACT, and I wanted to go to some meetings, incidentally of kindergarten groups, where you had small groups of up to twelve, and I was told by one president of such an association: 'I wouldn't come if I were you, it's very bloody. The fur and the feathers fly everywhere.' Because there was no control and they tried to do things informally and speak in group discussions, the antagonism left the meeting in absolute mayhem. We have problems with this change in direction getting away from very formal meetings. It does really rely on the goodwill of the people in the meeting.

Judith Brett — I'd agree with that. In developing the argument, you need to have a closer look at the social-movement type meetings of the 1970s, where you had similar problems. Organisations like the women's movement, or environmental groups, were wanting to mark a break with this formal institutional-bound and rule-bound past, and attempting to do politics without procedures. I think this was exactly the same sort of thing. It took a huge amount of time, it wasn't particularly effective and it led to a lot of aggression and anger and disappointment. That's my hunch on it, though I haven't seen anybody write about it. I'm just remembering these ineffectual meetings. It's the same problem—and after a while they realise that there was a utopianism in much of the ideals of participatory democracy, of everybody having a voice. Because everybody's voice is saying something different and you have chaos. So they then moved back to some more formal procedural practices.

Question — I was interested in the comments you made about the Senate, and developments there since the late 1970s, where you have more debate and more consensus-seeking, simply by the composition. You raised the possibility of making more use in parliament of inter-party or multi-party committees to develop legislation. It seems common sense that you would possibly get better policy if you use that approach rather than a purely adversarial one, which is what the public sees played out spectacularly in the House of Representatives at question time and in other debates. I know in the House also, behind the scenes, a lot of valuable committee work takes place, but that doesn't get publicised. Do you have any ideas on how you could have the Senate kind of approach replicated in the House of Representatives? Associated with this, something very much on our minds at the moment is election campaigning, and if you were to get more deliberative proceedings in the houses of parliament, what would the implications then be for parties campaigning at election time? How might they differentiate themselves? It's a real dilemma because our democratic parliamentary system does depend on parties for a certain degree of stability and manageability.

Judith Brett — I don't have any solutions. I'm only trying to set out an explanation for this widespread dissatisfaction with our parliamentary adversarial forums, which I don't think was so prevalent previously. I think people previously saw this as quite a good way of resolving things. Ian Marsh has done some work on what is happening with the parties. He says that, if you look at the policy-making process, instead of all of the interest groups in society being picked up by the parties and then carried into the policy-making process through the parties, there is now an opening up, where there is a lot more consultation between government and community organisations and peak groups.

I think it's a big problem, the way we're locked in to the two parties, and the way there's a sort of reflex adversarialism, such that a new party gets in and they undo the things that the past party had done, some of which were quite good and some of which weren't so good. Now they probably don't undo as much as we think, because we tend to see the things that are undone more than we see the things that are continuous. I think the relationship between the Fraser government and the Whitlam government was very telling in this. I remember at the time being a supporter of the Whitlam government, thinking that all Fraser was doing was dismantling. I can now see with historical hindsight that, yes, he dismantled a few things, like Medibank, but there was also a great deal of continuity which was not so obvious at the time. There were changes in rhetoric and changes in emphasis, but in terms of indigenous policy, multiculturalism, and so on, much of that agenda stayed and really flourished under Fraser. So I think often things appear to be more adversarial at the time, than they appear later, from a greater historical perspective.

Question — It seems we've been getting away from networking in communities and the neighbourhood, and this seems to have been replaced by networking in the work places. Perhaps that's another way in which the parliament has got away from what is happening in the communities. I had a good look at the composition of the parliament in 1996, and it was clear that there was a very low representation of some of the functional groups out there, and yet that's where the networking is happening. There were a lot of lawyers, and there were quite a lot of people from companies, but there weren't very many retailers. There weren't very many people from technological industries. So the parliament has moved away from being representative as well, it seems. We should be thinking, maybe, about how we deal with that functional aspect. You've made it pretty clear that the rigidities that have crept in have stopped the parliament adapting the way the community has.

Judith Brett — There are no manual workers left in parliament, either. If you look at the occupational representations of parliament historically, the parliament now has an occupational spread that's almost the same as the parliament in 1901, before the Labor Party and the Country Party brought different sorts of people into the parliament. So probably the most representative parliaments, occupationally, were the ones of the 1950s. Whereas we've now gone right back, partly because of the decline of the Country Party as well, which was also bringing in people with quite different backgrounds. Now about 50 percent of the parliament is professional, which is about the same as the 1901 parliament.

Question — I was interested in your comments about the decline of oratory, particularly when you were quoting Carmen Laurence. My experience has been in bringing students to the two houses, and I think they were actually more shocked by the Senate being empty while Bob Brown made a speech, to virtually an empty chamber. They were much more shocked by that than by the rough and tumble of question time in the House of Representatives, which is at least entertaining. I wonder whether or not we shouldn't be very radical about the whole oratory issue, and perhaps even consider setting up a smaller room than this. Perhaps a room a quarter the size of this, where the public can come and listen to Bob Brown, or whoever is making their speech to parliament, so it can be kept on the record in a media way, instead of the pretence that these big chambers are an audience. When we went to the

Senate, there were about 20 people in the public gallery listening to this speech. There were very few senators. It looked to me as if the process was about the people in the public gallery, not about the rest of the Senate. And that isn't being recognised in the way we actually design the buildings or talk about parliament any more.

Harry Evans — The arrival of very large chambers coincided with the arrival of television cameras, and the two things don't go well together. You'll probably find that a large number of people around the building heard Bob Brown's speech, they saw it on the screen and had the sound going.

Judith Brett — That's interesting, but I'd like the parliamentary speeches to continue, because they're a great source for political historians. It's a very good way of getting at general common sense. Backbenchers, particularly, are often representative of certain common sense understanding and thinking about issues.

Harry Evans — There are some places that will not allow television cameras on that basis—that it empties the chamber. And it did here.

Question — I want to comment on networking. A previous questioner mentioned two forms of networking. But no one has mentioned networking on the Internet. Why not do what the lecturer has suggested and have a small room and relay it on the net?

Harry Evans — There is great debate about this also, in particular about how it depersonalises the whole thing.

Judith Brett — I think the use of the net is so new, that we do not yet really understand what it means for organisational behaviour, which is really what I'm interested in here. Clearly there is a bit of work being done on what it means for people's social lives—people meeting people on the net and forming relationships, and that sort of thing. And to a small extent social movements are making great use of it as it suits the horizontal networking political organisation which has been involved with things like the S11 protest and that sort of thing. Whether you could use it for deliberative proceedings, well, we'll have to see.

Harry Evans — There is already a large literature of people saying that the Internet will destroy deliberation, that it's a destructive thing for deliberation.

Question — The first mass media conducted election was, I think, Eisenhower in 1953 in America, which was run by a marketing company. From then on, most elections were run by marketing companies. Do you have any comments on the use of mass media in the political process, and the decline of people's confidence in politicians and political parties because of it?

Judith Brett — It's a big question. It's clear that mass media leads to the decline of the political meeting of the sort held pre-war where Bob Menzies would go to the Malvern Town Hall or whatever, but also the decline of the local politician's role in disseminating party policy through the local meetings. The other line of argument would be: 'Does the mass media give you much more detailed knowledge of individuals?' I think that the use of the political interview in elections means that

people are probably more knowledgeable about their politicians than they ever were, because they can see them close up, making decisions, and reacting under pressure. In the past if you were an ordinary not-very-interested person, you were lucky if you ever sighted your prime minister or minister. It has meant, of course, that there's now a focus on the leadership as against backbenchers. People in the past may have known their local member more. So it seems to me that it's quite a complex issue.

Regarding the decline of the mass media in meetings and associational membership—I think that Putnam is exploring the idea that it was the advent of television that marked the beginning of the decline of people going to meetings. They stay home where it's warm, rather than going out to some draughty hall.