



Science & Technology AUSTRALIA

Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy

30 September 19

To the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the issue of Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy.

Science & Technology Australia (STA) is the peak representative body for more than 77,000 scientists and technologists in Australia through our member organisations including associations and societies, research institutes, and research strategy bodies such as councils of deans.

As an organisation that democratically represents so many of Australia's scientists and technologists, we have a keen interest in a healthy, functioning Australian democracy informed by and built on transparency, evidence, and collaboration.

However, in recent years concerns about transparency, collaboration and evidence have arisen with the Australian electorate, resulting in reports of the lowest level of trust in the government ever measured.

It is with these three principles in mind that STA has considered the terms of reference and discussion paper from this inquiry and here present concrete recommendations on potential improvements to Australia's functioning democratic processes:

1. A commitment to evidence-based policy through the support of the public service and research sector;
2. All new legislation proposed by ministers should be accompanied by an evidence statement alongside the explanatory memorandum;
3. Implement a plain language policy for all departments and legislation with explainers to be housed in a central online repository;
4. Strengthen rules surrounding inquiries to prevent their politicisation and provide adequate time for consideration and feedback from interested/affected parties; and
5. Develop and enforce a requirement to respond to inquiries and specific recommendations within 6 months of receiving a report

Kind regards,



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President, STA



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Introduction

In the Age of Information Technology, ideas and information are more rapidly and readily spread across the globe than ever before. This global interconnectivity as well as a globalisation of the economy also means that the lines between nations are blurring. These changes having a profound effect on western democracies, and Australia is no exception.

With these changes in mind it is important to evaluate Australia's democracy and adapt process and regulations to ensure its strength and viability in a changing society.

Concerns around Australia's democratic process have recently been thrust into the spotlight as large-scale challenges such as climate change are discussed at a national level at speed, and with varying reference to established evidence. Science & Technology Australia and our members are concerned about the potential threats these changes pose, and are keen to:

- Improve long-term evidence-based policy making;
- Ensure strong, genuine and two-way political engagement with the Australia electorate; and
- Develop a relationship of greater trust between decision-makers and experts.

Changes in the science and research sector provide learnings that can be implemented to the benefit of Australian democracy, as well as the overall political process. These recommendations will help to improve policy development, build trust in Australia's democracy and political process, and strengthen transparency where appropriate. As such STA recommends:

1. A commitment to evidence-based policy through the support of the public service and research sector;
2. All new legislation proposed by ministers should be accompanied by an evidence statement alongside the explanatory memorandum;
3. Implement a plain language policy for all departments and legislation with explainers to be housed in a central online repository;
4. Strengthen rules surrounding inquiries to prevent their politicisation and provide adequate time for consideration and feedback from interested/affected parties; and
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Long-term evidence-based policy

A changing climate, a more volatile global landscape, and disruptive changes in the future workforce are all large-scale challenges that Australia faces now and in the near future. None of these complex challenges has a short-term silver bullet solution. Rather, they require well thought out, long-term, evidence-based policy and strategies from multiple sectors.

However, with an almost entirely diminished news cycle and constant feedback to decision makers through social media there has developed a desire to have a constant supply of new policy and projects: so-called ‘announcables’. Australian voters have responded to this short termism with cynicism: 73% have indicated that they see the government as focused on short-term gains and not long-term challenges and solutions¹.

There is a solution to short-termism already available to the government and decision makers: evidence-based policy. Some of Australia’s greatest policy achievements have been a result of careful consideration involving genuine consultation and deep examination of established evidence. The introduction of the Higher Education Commonwealth Support program is one such example of good evidence-based policy and as a result has lasted for over 30 years with few changes².

Australia already has institutions in place that can not only provide evidence for the development of policy (our research sector) but the capacity to evaluate and convert evidence into robust policy via the public service. For strong, lasting, and robust policy to be developed both these sectors must be supported by the government to provide frank and fearless advice.

1. Recommendation: A commitment to evidence-based policy through the support of the public service and research sector.

While it is vital that Australia commits to developing policy based on the best available evidence, it is also crucial to maintain transparency in the way this evidence is selected, applied and represented. Government Ministers are already required to produce an explanatory memorandum to accompany any new legislation they propose. We suggest this should also be required to incorporate a statement of evidence. These documents can and should be an opportunity to present a strong case for legislative change, based on the best available knowledge, and give context to the legislation as well as improving public understanding of the work that has gone into its development. Ideally such a statement would include the evidence demonstrating why the legislation is required, the modelling used when examining potential effects of the legislation, and an articulation of any such potential consequences. The statement would also provide a mechanism to explain why any evidence has been discounted or put aside in formulating new policy. This model, which already exists within the science and research sector, could be easily adapted. It is one of the keys to scientists’ enduring place among the most trusted professions³.

2. Recommendation: All new legislation proposed by ministers should be accompanied by an evidence statement alongside the explanatory memorandum.

¹ [“On a mission to save democracy”](#) Centre for Policy Development, 2018

² [“Reflection on four Australian case studies of evidence-based policy”](#) Bruce Chapman, 2009

³ [“Little sign in Australia of conservatives losing confidence in universities”](#) Andrew Norton, 2019

Engaging the Australian electorate

The Australian electorate is becoming increasingly disengaged with the political process. While the 2019 election had an increased voter turnout, this turnout still fell short of the record enrolment of 97%⁴. A recent Essential Poll has shown that only 15% of the public closely monitors what is happening in Australia⁵. While these statistics are concerning, Australians have also demonstrated themselves to become deeply engaged with the political process on issues of personal importance. While the 2019 election may have had one of the lowest turnouts it also had one of the highest proportion of people enrolled to vote in part due to the same-sex marriage plebiscite⁶. It can be surmised that it is not necessarily apathy but accessibility to the political process that is limiting engagement.

Making legislation and policy more accessible to the public is the first step in improving engagement with the Australian electorate. The United States of America already has a similar policy, The Plain Writing Act of 2010, that requires government agencies to write “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use”⁷. While this is an important start to allow better public engagement, STA suggests that Australia can go a step further and require plain writing explainers of legislation and policy changes to be available to the public.

Currently, navigating departmental websites, the parliamentary library, and the legislative database is not intuitive. For the public to have ready access to policy and legislative explainers we recommend the development of a single intuitive and accessible online repository.

- 3. Recommendation: Implement a plain language policy for all departments and legislation with explainers to be housed in a central online repository.**

Rebuilding trust between government and experts

Growing distrust between experts and decision-makers presents a further threat to functioning at the highest possible level of democracy. Recently, a number of federal political leaders have demonstrated this distrust by calling for the creation of a government watchdog to evaluate scientific findings presented to government⁸. The ensuing potential to politicise subject matter experts and consultation processes threatens Australia’s democratic and free political

⁴ [“2019 turnout at federal election exceeds 2016 event”](#) Tom Rodgers, 2019

⁵ [“The big tune-out: few Australian’s follow politics closely, Guardian Essential Poll shows”](#) The Guardian, 2019

⁶ [“High number of young voters create record enrolment rate of 96.8% for election”](#) The Guardian, 2019

⁷ [“Plain writing act 2010”](#) United States of America Government, 2010

⁸ [“2019 Federal Council Motions”](#) National Party of Australia, 2019

process by disincentivising experts from engaging and providing advice and evidence.

Perhaps one of the most effective mechanisms that government has to consult with experts in certain fields is the inquiry and committee process. Through this process experts can provide information and testimony to legislators to ensure that legislation takes the best possible evidence into account.

When inquiries are launched for political reasons rather than gaining evidence and feedback on issues and legislation, trust in the inquiry process is eroded. To protect this core function of Australia's democracy the rules around inquires and committee investigations should be reviewed to prevent politicisation of the system.

Along with protecting the inquiry process from politicisation there is also a need to enforce rules around government feedback mechanisms. Providing testimony or written submissions is a time-consuming process and community groups and stakeholders will be more incentivised to engage if:

- Reasonable timeframes for submissions are set
- Submissions are given due and genuine consideration
- The results of inquiries are published in a timely fashion
- Final reports and recommendations from inquiries are acted on

Currently, the unfortunate situation is that legislative inquiries open for submissions over periods as little as eight days. Two- to three-week windows for submission are not uncommon. This is particularly burdensome for the non-government, charitable and not-for-profit sectors, which often represent community stakeholders and work with minimal staff and resources, relying heavily on volunteer input. At the same time as disadvantaging community-based stakeholders, this practice unfairly advantages bigger and better resourced lobby groups.

At the other end of the inquiry process, while there are regular reminders from the President of the Senate (for example) as to what inquiries are still outstanding, faith in the inquiry process is significantly diminished when reports experience lengthy delays in publishing and responses from the Government to these reports can routinely take longer than the 3 or 6 month time limit afforded by reports in Senate⁹ or House of Representatives¹⁰ respectively.

There are also examples of inquiry recommendations being shelved for up to years at a time, only to have the inquiry subsequently re-open. While STA respects that it is up to the elected government to respond to recommendations and make legislation as they see fit, it is also important, for the sake of transparency, that the government provide clarity regarding its intentions, be clear about what recommendations it will or will not implement, and provide a timetable in which to do so.

⁹ "[Senate Briefing No. 4](#)" Parliament of Australia, 2019

¹⁰ "[Infosheet 4 – Committees](#)" Parliament of Australia, 2019

- 4. Recommendation: Strengthen rules surrounding inquiries to prevent their politicisation and provide adequate time for consideration and feedback from interested/affected parties**
- 5. Recommendations: Develop and enforce a requirement to respond to inquiries and specific recommendations within 6 months of receiving a report**