Meetings, Parliament 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 longer accord with its commonsense understandings and practical experience of the way good decisions are made.

The 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 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 amongst the European ruling elites of church, town and state, the Reformation and the Protestant Meeting Order which spread meeting discipline amongst 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 of course followed their own lines of development, but the deep shared history of 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

[1] Leicester University Press, London, 1999.

[2] The following summary account is based on Wilbert van Vree's in the 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.

`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

[3] Alfred Deakin, Age 9 February 1904, cited in J.A. La Nauze, Alfred Deakin: A Biography, vol 2, Melbourne University Press, 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, p. 395-6

democratic life `In democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge'.[5]

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 found well over 3000 social organisations and 1700 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.

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

[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, Sweet and Maxwell, London, 1936, Second Edition, p.1.

> 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]

Helena Marfall 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.

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[9]. Mirth Jamieson remembering her mother Helena Marfell who stood for the Victorian federal seat of Wannon at the 1949 election; cited in Heather Gunn, `For the Man on the Land': Rural Women and the Victorian National Party, 1917-1996, Ph D La Trobe University, 1996, p. 139.

[10] Marion Aveling (Quarterly), A History of the Australian Natives Association, 1871-1930, PhD Monash, 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.

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 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 knowing 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,

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

[14]. See Wilbert van Vree, Meetings, Manners and Civilisation, 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 Man's Parliamentary Guide, Macmillan Co of Canada, p. 6; Marjorie Puregger, Mr Chairman, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1962, p. 10.

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 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': `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

[16]. General Henry M.Robert, Robert's Rules of Order, first published 1876, Spire Books paperback edition, 1967, p. 167.

[17] Monro, p. 14.

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

[19] Marjorie Puregger, The Australian Guide to Chairing Meetings, revised edition, UQP, 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, revised by J. Gordon Dubroy, McClelland & Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1963, From Introduction to the First edition, p. x.

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 claim 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 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 the 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

[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

[23] I develop this argument at greater length in `Retrieving the Partisan History of Australian Citizenship', Australian Journal of Political Science, November 2001.

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

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 lacks 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 member's 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 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 impartial 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

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

[26] Australian, 2 September 1998

[27] Weekend Australian, Dec 18-19 1999, `One Nation's Last gasp', Age, 6 February 1999.

[28] See Judith Brett, `Representing the unrepresented: One Nation and the Formation of the Labor Party' in Two Nations: The Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia, Bookman Press, 1998.

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]

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 to 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 open ended 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. Whilst this is most obvious at the top of organisations, chief

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[29]. H.P. Zelko, The Business Conference: Leadership and Participation, New York, 1963, pp. 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.

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

executives and departmental heads generally spending, depending on the size of the organisation, about 50% 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 in 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 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]

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[33]. van Vree, pp. 277-8.

[34] The Australian Meetings Handbook: More Effective Meetings in Half the Time, The Business Library, Information Australia, 1991.

[35] Antony Jay, `How to run a meeting', Video Arts, 1976.

[36] Antony Jay, How to run a meeting, p. 7-8.

[37] John E. Troopman, Making Meetings Work: Achieving High Quality Decisions, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, US, 1996, p. xii. 3.

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% 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 signalled 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 of 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 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

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[38]. Hugh Mackay, Reinventing Australia: The mind and mood of Australia in the 90s, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1993. p. 178.

[39]. Reinventing Australia, p. 179

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 knowledgeable 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 co operative 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]

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

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 a population which now does its 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. Where once the community at large learnt form parliament about how to do its politics, the tables are now turned and parliament needs to learn from the community.

[41] See for example, John Uhr Deliberative Democracy in Australia: The Changing Place of Parliament, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998; chap 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.