

Chapter XII

Engaging the Community Through E–Democracy in South Australia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in South Australia. It starts by assessing South Australia's leading role in the adoption of democratic reforms in the nineteenth century. It then suggests that there is not the same enthusiasm for the more contemporary reforms found in the implementation of e-democracy. The chapter draws from an appraisal of internet based initiatives by government, not for profit and private agencies and sets these against best practice models for community engagement. Based on this research it concludes that there is little originality and initiative in the formal State Government sites and that there is little designed to foster e-democracy. What innovation there is can be found in more local and specific community based applications of ICT.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between citizens and the agencies of government has been transformed by recent developments in information and communication technology (ICT). Just as in business, education and entertainment – indeed, in almost every aspect of our lives – the way we interact with the

institutions of government has been reordered by exposure to rapidly changing technology. This change has affected the way that we, as citizens, express our views and respond to government initiatives as much as it has changed the way that information and the delivery of government services are provided. The growth and the extent of 'e-democracy' and the consequences of this

transformation in the relationship between governments and those who are governed are difficult to over-estimate. In many respects the impact of e-democratic initiatives may be as significant a reform as the initial spread of democratic institutions in the nineteenth century.

If this is the case, then it is likely that South Australia will not be at the forefront of current reform in the way that it was in the past. There can be no doubt that South Australia has a long record of reform and that it was a leader in the early implementation of democratic initiatives. There is, however, less evidence that this pace of reform has been sustained in more recent years. So, while there have been a number of (commendable) developments that, on their own have been significant, there has been little overall embrace of broad and co-ordinated reform based on new developments in ICT and there has been no clear recent commitment to e-democracy.

Even a brief summary of South Australia's colonial history shows that it led the way in introducing many of the democratic acts and initiatives that became common elsewhere. In contrast to all other former British colonies, South Australia's foundation was a product of legislation rather than direct settlement. The *South Australia Act 1834* (UK) laid the foundations for the democratic style of governance that the new colony would eventually adopt and established many of the key institutions that shaped its democratic culture. The fact that the structures of government were laid out by statute rather than emerging from conflict meant that South Australia avoided many of the tensions that accompanied democratic reforms elsewhere. Accordingly, by 1857 South Australia had a bi-cameral Parliament that included a House of Assembly (lower house) with suffrage extended to all adult male British subjects (included Aboriginal men). Similarly, South Australia was either the first or among the first to use secret voting, have an elected Town Council, to separate Church and State, to introduce

industrial reforms and to legalise Trade Unions. In 1894, the South Australian Parliament was the first parliament in the world to give women the right to stand as candidates for election, and one of the first few to give women the right to vote. As Chris Sumner has argued, South Australia's early political initiatives placed it 'at the forefront of democratic reform' (Sumner, 2003, p.22), with a Constitution among the most democratic in the contemporary world.

Despite these initiatives, through the twentieth century the passion for democratic reform in South Australia became less evident. For much of this time, political initiatives were focussed principally upon securing economic growth through periods of war and depression. Most of the first 60 years of the twentieth century were dominated by conservative political groups that saw little need for further reform. Then, while the governments of the final four decades reflected the more progressive social mood of the times and introduced a range of overdue social reforms, there was no more than piecemeal attention given to democratic and constitutional reforms. There were changes to the electoral laws that saw the end of a property qualification to vote for the Legislative Council (the upper house of the State Parliament), the introduction of proportional representation in the Legislative Council, and the ensuring of one-vote-one-value for House of Assembly elections, but beyond these, there is little that any government could point to as constituting significant reform to the institutions of government or to the character of the democratic culture. Rather, the changes that did emerge came from the broader revolutions that were occurring across society. These reflected both the changing nature of the relationship between citizen and state and the transformed role of the media and, in time, new communication technologies.

Among the most significant of the early communication revolutions were the growing use and influence of broadcast technology. The penetration

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