

# Room with a view or two - a homely taste of the future

By Anne Summers  
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On December 11 last year when many Australians were engaged in the relentless round of pre-Christmas parties, others were flexing their political muscles in an innovative and perhaps ground-breaking exercise in grassroots activism.

At 7 o'clock that Tuesday evening 327 GetTogethers, as they were styled, got under way with people in 130 federal electorates across the country opening up their homes to 10 or more strangers who had come to talk about their vision for Australia following the election.

Altogether 3012 people participated, bringing food to their hosts' homes then sitting with people they mostly had not met before to talk through and reach agreement on the three issues that should be the priorities of the next Parliament. The event was organised by GetUp!, the online activist group that has been making quite a big splash in the political pond over the past year or so.

So far GetUp! has mostly engaged in online activities such as collecting signatures for petitions on issues such as ABC funding, where it got 75,000 signatures and took some credit for ABC funds being boosted in last year's budget. It also got 100,000 people to sign a petition opposing the proposed Migration Bill and felt vindicated when the former prime minister John Howard withdrew the legislation.

More recently 96,000 people signed a petition on climate change that was presented to Penny Wong, Minister for Climate Change and Water, at the airport as she was about to fly off to Bali.

But GetUp! is now moving - at least in part - from online to onground activities. It is, for example, still urging online activists to email Mike Smith, the head of the ANZ banking group, and "tell Mr Smith" not to finance the Gunns pulp mill in Tasmania. But it also had 7100 people working as volunteers on the ground in various electorates (including 450 each in Bennelong and Wentworth) in what they called the "We Too" election.

The Vision GetTogethers, as they were called, represent a new phase for the organisation, says Sam Mclean, national organiser for GetUp! They may also represent a new phase in Australian politics. In the past, to have any influence on policy and government priorities you had to be a party member, a lobby group like the farmers or the miners or the union movement, or a member of an issue-specific non-government organisation such as Greenpeace or Amnesty.

Now, a new force has entered the fray, which has the potential to allow unaligned individuals to have a voice. "We have tried to convert online activity into a grassroots army," says Mclean.

The exercise was conducted with admirable professionalism, with hosts being briefed on the agenda and how to conduct the 90-minute meetings. Each group had to nominate the three top issues it wanted the new Parliament to address, together with the reasons for these choices, plus one local issue specific to that electorate.

Before Parliament resumes on February 12 most federal MPs will be called on by a GetTogether group from their electorate, reporting on the December 11 discussions.

One hope, says Mclean, is that they might influence the maiden speeches of new members. The results are not yet compiled fully. Despite the standardised reporting form, the volume of detail provided by most groups was far greater than anticipated and the organisers are attempting to read every word of it. But the trends are clear and they reveal political passions that are somewhat at odds with the electoral candy generally dispensed by poll-dependent politicians.

Topping the list is climate and sustainability, which is hardly a surprise but the other priorities are not so predictable. There is not a "hip-pocket" issue among them. Civil liberties and social justice come in second, followed by "massive" concern at the situation of indigenous Australians and the treatment of refugees.

What has surprised Mclean, however, is the "huge" desire to improve the process of democracy itself, making enrolment and preferential voting easier to understand, especially for first-time voters, and finding ways to make the political system more transparent.

One host told me her meeting in Balmain - of people ranging from a full-time mum to teachers and a banker, none of whom was a member of a political party - expressed relief that there was a means of talking to government. "There was a general feeling of not wanting the Labor Government to go the same way as the Howard government and stop listening to people," said this host.

That a bunch of "basket-weavers" thinks this way might be scoffed at in Canberra, but the same views came from groups in Rooty Hill and Thirroul, Dubbo and Woy Woy, in Tenant Creek and Alice Springs, Kalamunda and Kununurra, Caboolture and Nambour. Some people drove for an hour to participate, which suggests a level of engagement significantly beyond what is required to simply "click" an online petition.

We are fortunate in Australia to have had a seamless and civil transition of power in our elections. The chaos and carnage in Pakistan and in Kenya is a sobering reminder that democracy alone is no guarantee of stability, let alone integrity (just ask Al Gore who was robbed of victory in the 2000 US presidential elections).

But many in Australia who are disenchanted with the major parties want to do more than vote every three years. A truly responsive democracy will embrace these efforts of citizens to caucus and contribute ideas. Let's see if it happens.

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