



Politics Online (Proof)

Politics Online

Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Wednesday 29 October 2008 (Proof).

POLITICS ONLINE

Page: 73

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE (Parliamentary Secretary) [6.26 p.m.]: Tonight I bring to the attention of the House the online participation, or lack thereof, of elected representatives in New South Wales. Recently the Whitlam Institute and University of Western Sydney completed a report entitled, "Young People Imagining a New Democracy." The report points to the need for a close examination of the way individual members of Parliament, political parties, non-government and other voluntary organisations, and individual agencies seek to contact, engage and work with younger citizens if we are to fully draw on their ideas and enthusiasm to contribute to our future democratic structures. I believe that the issues highlighted in the report can be applied equally to all our citizens, regardless of age.

In many democracies there is a growing concern about the level of participation of people in traditional democratic forums. This is coupled with a growing level of distrust and cynicism about elected representatives and governments. The Whitlam Institute report found that there is a generational shift away from traditional institutional forms of political participation such as voting, membership of political parties and unions. This does not mean that young people or, indeed, other citizens are not interested or engaged with political and social issues. The evidence is that they are participating in new and less formal social and advocacy networks; much of this participation occurs online. Young people also are more engaged in cause-oriented activities such as demonstrations, consumer boycotts and petitions. Again, many of these activities are online through blogging at sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and the microblogging site Twitter.

Political participation of all citizens is being transformed by new media; 80 per cent of Australians have access to broadband and of those, 75 per cent are regular Internet users. For them this is the most important source of information. Without change the traditional ways of gathering and communicating information, such as newsletters, television advertising, direct mail and traditional mainstream news media, will become less relevant as large portions of the population no longer get their primary information through these mediums. This will have a significant impact on the participation within our democracy. The question I ask tonight is: what are we, the elected representatives in New South Wales, doing to make ourselves part of the transformation of political participation? Beyond the old structures that have served us well, are we drawing on all the ideas, energy and enthusiasm to provide input into legislation, policy and practice as we seek to make decisions on behalf of the people of New South Wales?

Recently I was fortunate to have an intern from the University of Sydney, Vicki Wynn, undertake an audit of the online presence of the members of the New South Wales Parliament and compare it with what is happening internationally and interstate. I thank her for her excellent work. Unfortunately, the findings of the audit were less than inspiring and showed that many members of Parliament in New South Wales are yet to even put their toe in the water of online engagement. Only 39 of the 136 members of the New South Wales Parliament have personal websites. Only 12 of the 39 websites had recently updated information; 18 others had media releases as their only current information; three were a few months old and were out of date, and five were a few years out of date. Only seven members of the Parliament are using Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, polls and online petitions.

At its simplest level, a website enables people to find their elected representatives and find out a bit about them and the issues that they are working on. But it is also a way of enabling democratic participation through an easy to use, cheap and instantaneous medium. It is a new way of communicating that does not speak at people but rather allows them to communicate, debate and discuss ideas in a two-way exchange. It is something that all elected representatives should engage in more.

What is clear from Vicki's work is that New South Wales members of Parliament are lagging behind the rest of the world when using online tools in their work. As a comparison, 655 out of 746 members of the House of Lords have their own website. It is also worth noting that the House of Lords recently launched a combined blog from numerous Lords from various parties. The www.lordsoftheblog.net is worth a look. In the United States, all 100 senators have their own website.

There are enormous changes occurring as part of the digital age. It is an exciting and transformational time. There are many opportunities for politicians to embrace changes. In doing so, members of Parliament are

opening up decision making, increasing public participation, and, I hope, leading the way towards a healthier and more vital democracy in the future. I encourage members of Parliament to consider opening themselves up to this input.