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Consulting Bloggers as Citizens

By Barry Saunders, Jason Wilson and Axel Bruns

The announcement of the [Greensblog](#) is an interesting example for the possibilities of blogging for minority political parties. Clearly drawing inspiration from Democrats Senator [Andrew Bartlett's blog](#), it shows the value of the blogging format for discussing political positions that fall outside the easy left-right, Labor-Liberal soundbite-based journalism often found in the industrial mainstream. As Greensblog contributor Tim Hollo [hopes](#), it will work for the Greens because their policies aren't necessarily "soundbite-friendly", and they welcome the possibility of consultative policy development.

This form of engagement is something the major parties should be watching. For some years now, observers have noted a trend of voters [moving away from traditional party affiliations](#) to multi-faceted political perspectives, shifting from party-political to social activism, and forming fluid allegiances that vary across policy areas.

Blogging and other forms of participatory social media (such as [wikis](#)) are well suited to consultative policy development. They allow comments and feedback, and thus open up discussion to a range of voices. This in turn allows political debate to move beyond left-right political point-scoring to a more complex, nuanced, interactive process. While some blogs do tend in practice to become echo chambers – restating and reconfirming the biases of their preachy writers and converted readers – overall, the participatory and interconnected network of the blogosphere nevertheless provides an invaluable space for hosting inclusive policy discussions.

The best political blogs in the Australian blogosphere – whether on the left ([Larvatus Prodeo](#)) or the libertarian right ([Catalaxy](#)) – show that the key to success in online policy discussion is striking a balance between openness, continuity and civility. This requires careful management. Too many restrictions deter involvement, too few risk a degeneration into unending flame wars. The blogosphere policy discussions that work tend to be moderated with a light touch, and thereby often reach interesting conclusions. But how far have the major parties gone in absorbing the lessons of the public affairs blogosphere?

The Labor Party's outreach via [Kevin07](#) certainly [looks](#) like blogging, but the majority of the articles are press releases, and readers seem reluctant to comment. When we checked, [entries on healthcare reform](#) had only generated four comments and no back-and-forth between the bloggers and commenters.

Blogging is about arguments and discussion – a robust conversation about healthcare reform might be informative, and would certainly gauge the depth of community feeling around the issue. Such an unfettered discussion might help defuse the electorate's most common complaint about major party politics: "they just aren't listening." As it stands, Kevin07 works as a campaign site, but doesn't really show much enthusiasm for dialogue with constituents. Whether due to its comments policy or the fact that "pressies" aren't very open-ended, Kevin07 seems, at the moment, to be a lost opportunity.

While Liberal party politicians' efforts in participatory media spaces have been similarly disappointing, the Coalition *government* has shown more interest. Special Minister of the State Gary Nairn has just released a [consultation paper](#) on having an Australian Government Consultation blog.

Reaction from the digerati has been somewhat predictable, with TechCrunch's Duncan Riley [saying](#)

now whilst it's great to see a sovereign nation officially consider a blogging strategy, I want what ever it is the soon-to-be former Government is smoking; the irony of launching a consultation paper on a consultation blog seems lost on them.

This first move might be slightly clumsy, but governments shouldn't be expected to dive into fully-fledged policy blogging without first dipping a toe to test the water. It's also fair enough for them to take the trouble to ask citizens whether or not they actually want consultation blogging. We think that it's commendable that the Australian government is looking into this as a form of outreach, and is thinking critically about how to implement it. One hopes that whichever government is eventually elected will take this proposal forward.

The proposal has clearly been developed by people who've actually used blogs – commenting and feedback are highlighted as central parts of the proposed design, and the authors have thought critically about how to manage them. The current proposal isn't explicit about whether comments would be pre- or post-moderated, but it does include a fairly comprehensive Acceptable Use Policy. There is just one curious aspect of this policy:

do not include internet addresses or links to websites, or any email addresses, in your contribution.

This is evidently an anti-spam measure, but it would prevent contributors from linking back to relevant source material and articles – this [gatematching](#), however, is a core aspect of almost any blog discussion. It would be nice to see this relaxed, and indeed for the consultation blog to allow (pre-moderated!) image and video embedding.

What is missing from the proposal is a clear explanation of how online consultation in the form of comments and feedback can feed into policy development. The risk for any form of government outreach, and indeed, for any form of political engagement online, is 'e-consultation fatigue'. As our colleagues Stephen Coleman and Ann Macintosh [explain](#) in noting this phenomenon, if citizens' involvement doesn't lead directly to a tangible outcome – whether in the form of new policy directions or even simply as feedback – there are few incentives to stay involved.

Whatever process is implemented, it must be transparent and fair, and unpopular perspectives need to be addressed rather than screened out. Drawing on Stephen Coleman again: sites run by independent bodies are more likely to elicit trust and engagement than those run directly by governments. That said, governments need to accord such forums trust and respect if they are to have a meaningful role. Initiatives could benefit from being run under the banner of one of our national broadcasters (along the lines of the [BBC Action Network](#)) or by an independent body set up specifically for the task.

Opening up policy development further (for example by using a wiki) would be a step beyond blogging, but also raises more management issues. It's an experiment which has now begun in earnest in New Zealand, where a [draft](#) of the new Policing Act is now open for citizen input, wiki-style. We're looking forward to the outcomes of this and similar projects – if citizens are invited to develop and propose their own policies through online collaboration, directly feeding into the political process, we could see some exciting (perhaps radical, perhaps innovative) policy proposals that might re-invigorate what we shouldn't forget is the core business of government: the development and implementation of policy on behalf of citizens.

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