DRAFT Charter for Democratic Renewal in South Australia

1. Introduction

1.1 Preamble

As the world changes rapidly, our democratic systems need to evolve to stay relevant. South Australia has a proud legacy of leading democratic reform—and we have the opportunity to build on that legacy by reimagining how power is shared, how voices are heard, and how decisions are made. Democratic renewal isn't an abstract concept; it's about real reforms that bring power closer to the people.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of the Charter for Democratic Renewal is to promote a community-led process of democratic review and renewal, enhancing the way we do democracy in our state, and establishing South Australia as a global leader in democratic practice and innovation. It sets out a vision for what an enhanced democratic system could look like, and some ideas for how we could get there. We propose that the draft Charter be used as the basis for an in-depth process of community engagement over the next decade, ultimately leading to a refreshed constitution for South Australia by 2036.

Currently in draft form, the Charter will evolve as community consultation, discussion, and research proceeds. Implementing the reforms will require wide support and commitment, which is why it is essential that the final Charter reflects the ideas, aspirations, and expectations of all community members. The world is changing rapidly around us, presenting enormous challenges for democracy. The Charter is a unique opportunity to ensure that our system of government remains accountable, effective, fair, and in the hands of the people.

1.3   A fundamental task for democratic renewal: Reconciliation with First Peoples

Like other States and Territories, the South Australian community must face up to an issue that has scarred our democracy for more than two hundred years – the fact that it was built on a fundamental injustice in its attitudes towards and treatment of First Peoples. Unless this is widely recognised and accepted, talk of democratic renewal will simply confirm the arc of injustice that began with the European occupation and, in various ways, has continued to the present day.

South Australia has taken steps to address this issue over recent decades, and this must continue in order to create the conditions for a genuine reconciliation between First Peoples and the settler state – a reconciliation which is fundamental to any project of democratic renewal.

2. Principles for Democratic Renewal

We believe four key principles are central to a strong democracy: *Political equality; Government of, by, and for the people; Empowered communities;* and, *Open government*.

These principles focus on how we do democracy; they don't seek to dictate outcomes, but to ensure that the rules of the game are as fair as they can be. While reform priorities may change, these principles offer a steady guide to ensure that we remain true to our democratic values.

These principles reflect the kind of inclusive, fair, and vibrant democracy that we believe all South Australians can support. We'll be asking South Australians if they agree.

2.1   Political equality

Political equality refers to the extent to which community members have an equal voice in governmental decision-making. At the most basic level, political equality means equality before the law – this includes civil and political rights such as the right to free speech, freedom of association and assembly, and natural justice. It also means that there are no unreasonable barriers preventing people from participating and exercising their rights – including through voting and running for election.

In addition to the important work of upholding and expanding democratic rights, the process of democratic renewal offers us the opportunity to explore how we can empower all citizens to understand and to exercise their rights.

2.2   Government of, by, and for the people

Democracy means, literally, 'rule by the people'. In contrast with an oligarchy, where power is held by a select few, democracy is a system in which all community members can have a say and contribute to collective decision-making. In our present system of representative democracy, people rule when their government is composed *of the people*, where representatives are chosen *by the people*, and where policies are made *for* (the good of*) the people*. This basic system of accountability forms the backbone of modern liberal democracies, but requires vigilance to maintain. In particular, an effective system of representation requires competitive elections that offer genuine choice among candidates and policy positions, and a transparent flow of information that enables voters to make informed choices and communicate their preferences clearly.

In addition to enhancing our present system, the process of democratic renewal offers us an opportunity to 'democratise' democracy, by expanding the ways in which people can participate and make their voices heard – whether this is via traditional direct democratic methods, innovative deliberative forums, or by making use of emerging technologies.

2.3   Empowered communities

A strong democratic culture is built on the active participation of all community members. Widespread participation is vital for ensuring that public policies reflect the views of everyone, and that no one's perspective or experience is marginalised. But participation is also beneficial in and of itself: it provides a civic education, builds skills and confidence, and can help to foster a sense of community, civility, and a shared commitment to this democracy of ours.

To a large degree, our democratic culture is built from below – in our communities, clubs, cultural institutions, and through engagement with local government. Democratic renewal provides us

with an opportunity to enrich and empower communities and civic society as the spaces in which we all learn to become active citizens, responsible actors, and agents of change.

2.4   Open government

Governments are ultimately accountable to the people. However, in order for 'the people' to feel fully capable of judging the actions and decisions of governments, there must be maximum transparency and openness in public decision-making processes. Democratic renewal offers the opportunity to take meaningful strides towards the goal of open government – not merely by upholding our 'right to know', but by advocating for processes and technologies that enable proactive and real-time information sharing.

3. Ideas for democratic renewal in South Australia

The following ideas are proposed to kick-start a community conversation about ways to revitalise South Australian democracy. Each idea is designed to reflect one or more of the democratic principles outlined above. As consultation proceeds, some of these and other ideas we gather will be sharpened to become strategies, forming the basis of an advocacy campaign.

3.1   Our democratic framework

Ideas for reform could include:

- The introduction of a *Human Rights Charter*, setting out rights for all;
- The establishment of a process, led by First Nations Peoples, to explore how a fair and just reconciliation between First Peoples and the settler state can be negotiated, such as through a Treaty;
- Constitutionally enshrined guarantee to hold a Citizens' Convention every 10 years to review, update and amend our State's Constitution.

A BIG question: What changes might be made to our federal system in order to maximise the involvement of citizens in democratic life?

South Australia's democracy sits within the framework of the Australian federation. There are limits to what we can change here without considering changes to the allocation of powers and responsibilities within the federation.

Community discussion about such a question would position South Australia well for a national conversation about reforms to the federation.

3.2   Our representative democracy

Ideas for reform could include:

- Reduce barriers to the full participation of women in political life;
- Globally leading practices in voter enrolment and registration, including extension of voting rights to permanent residents;
- Extension of voting rights to 16-year-olds;
- Compulsory voting in Local Government elections;
- Legal guarantees to ensure an advocacy role for civil society organisations.

A BIG question: What changes should we make to the role and functions of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, and how our representatives are elected to them?

South Australia's bicameral Parliament was established by our first Constitution in 1856. In the 19th and 20th centuries, there have been some changes to the role, power and membership of both Chambers. Are further changes needed for the new contexts of the 21st century?

For example, thinking about the role of the Legislative Council, is there an opportunity to consider new and innovative approaches to its membership, such as a random ballot of citizens (sortition)? Would this encourage a deeper engagement with democracy?

3.3   Our transparent and accountable democracy

Ideas for reform could include:

- Legislation to introduce a new statutory agency of the *Office of Democratic Practice*, with powers to review, recommend and enhance democratic practice in the State;
- Democratic audits of South Australian democracy undertaken every four years, including a consideration of inter-generational impacts;
- Identifying ways to strengthen laws relating to truth in political advertising, regulation of lobbying, and political donations;
- Stronger protection to safeguard whistle-blowers from retaliation and to make organisations accountable.

A BIG question: Can public funding of elections transform politics?

South Australia's recent campaign finance reforms aim to tackle big money in politics—but imagine going further. Elsewhere political party conventions involve community forums, policy workshops, and accessible political events that bring hundreds of everyday people into real conversations about issues affecting their daily lives.

There's also a growing number of experiments with alternative ways citizens can participate in government decision-making, such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting. What if public funding didn't just take big money out but brought citizens in and demanded a genuine contest of ideas?

3.4   Our democratic culture

Ideas for reform could include:

- Leadership in developing and implementing new approaches to educating for democracy in schools and the community;
- Empowerment of communities and civic institutions, including local government and community organisations, through decentralisation of authority and resources;
- Strengthening the power of arts and cultural institutions as agents for democratic values;

- Identifying ways of fostering more public interest journalism and media which ensures that diverse voices are heard, citizens have access to multiple sources of information, and government is held to account;
- World-leading safeguards to protect against cyber threats, including misinformation and disinformation;
- Exploration of the use of AI and digital technologies to strengthen individuals' agency, inclusion and wellbeing while protecting their rights and preventing undemocratic use of citizens' personal data.

A BIG question: How can we create a society where people can share different ideas and disagree when they need to, but do it with open minds, respect, and civility?

One of the biggest challenges we face when trying to bring people together to address important issues that affect us all is that people trust each other less and less. There's a growing culture of disdain and resentment that's making public discussion increasingly toxic. At all levels of society, we need to find better ways to talk to each other.