

# 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 ensuring power stays with citizens.

### 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 recognized 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 recently taken a significant step towards addressing this issue by establishing a Voice to State Parliament. It creates some of the necessary 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

The principles of *Political equality; Government of, by, and for the people; Empowered communities; and, Open government*, reflect the values we seek to uphold in the process of democratic renewal – the kind of democracy we aspire to. These are universal values, which have been refined to fit the specific institutional and cultural norms of our State.

The four proposed principles speak to political processes – the rules of the game – rather than political outcomes. They seek to ensure that our democratic processes are as fair as can be. For this reason, we believe and we hope that all South Australians – irrespective of party affiliation, identity, or cultural background – can get behind these four principles of democratic renewal.

There are, of course, many ways that these principles can be interpreted and realised through institutional, political, and social practices, and there will often be shifting priorities for reform from year to year. Yet, through constant reference to these four principles, we can be confident that whatever twists and turns the reform journey takes us, our ultimate direction will always be towards the advancement of the democratic values we have set for ourselves.

### 2.1 Political equality

Political equality refers to the extent to which citizens 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 of exploring how we can empower and build the capacity of 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 wielded only by a select few, democracy is a system in which all community members are able to 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 rests on several key foundations, including 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, ensuring 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 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. As consultation proceeds, some of the general ideas will be sharpened to become strategies which will form the basis of an advocacy campaign.

#### 3.1 Our democratic framework

We propose for South Australia:

- 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;
- The introduction of a *Human Rights Charter*, setting out rights for all;
- 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

We propose for South Australia:

- Address barriers to the full participation of women in political life, including representation in the South Australian Parliament by 2036;
- 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 is the place and role of the Legislative Council in the 21st century; and is there an opportunity to consider new and innovative approaches to membership, such as a random ballot of citizens (sortition)?**

*South Australia's bicameral Parliament was established by our first Constitution in 1856. In the 19th and 20th centuries, debates about the role, power and membership of the Upper House – the Legislative Council – were a constant feature of our democratic life. Are changes needed for the new contexts of the 21st century?*

### 3.3 Our transparent and accountable democracy

We propose for South Australia:

- 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 deliberative approaches such as citizens assemblies and/or participatory budgeting enhance the transparency and accountability of government in the 21st century by increasing the participation of citizens in democratic life?**

*The form and practice of our representative democracy was largely designed in the 19th century. In recent times there has been strong interest in alternative ways citizens can participate in government decision-making. Any process of democratic renewal must evaluate these and other models.*

### 3.4 Our democratic culture

We propose for South Australia:

- Leadership in developing and implementing 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 develop a democratic culture where people can exchange points of view and disagree where they must, but do so open-mindedly, respectfully, and with truth and forbearance?**

*One of the challenges we face as we seek to bring people together to deliberate on ideas to revitalise our democracy is the diminishing levels of interpersonal trust and an increasing culture of disdain and resentment that has been creeping into civic discourse.*