

ONE ON ONE

Being politically social

Renowned British political blogger Iain Dale spoke with About the House after a forum on social media and politics held at Parliament House in Canberra.

There's no doubt the rise of social media is putting those who wield political power under increasing pressure by voters and the media to provide a free flow of information.

As politicians take advantage of platforms like Twitter and Facebook to broadcast their messages, their constituents in turn are expecting them, and their governments, to be open and transparent.

The recent rapid changes in how we communicate prompted the Australian government last year to make a public commitment to "open government", with the aim of increasing democratic participation through innovative use of technology to provide better access to government-held information.

The commitment came after a wide-ranging review into how the public service and governments can engage the public through the internet and social media.

But what exactly is "openness and transparency" and can it be assumed that upping the information flow is necessarily a good thing all of the time?

Well-known British political blogger, commentator and former Conservative candidate Iain Dale grappled with this very question during a recent forum at Parliament House in Canberra.

Dale is best known in the UK for his political blog, 'Iain Dale's Diary', which he began in 2002 at a time when blogs were relatively unknown to mainstream media consumers.

While on his Australian tour, Dale caused a stir for criticising Australian MPs' behaviour during Question Time for being too rowdy and combative.

While Dale agrees a citizen's right to know is at the heart of every liberal democracy, he also believes it is wrong to assume that more access to information is always going to be better.

Not only could there be issues surrounding privacy and national security, Dale said governments may be less likely to use bold thinking when dealing with difficult and complex ideas if they are afraid their discussions will become front page news.

"The public, and indeed the media, can be very short-sighted," he said.

"Politicians must have the freedom to indulge in blue-sky thinking without the constant fear that their discussions will appear on the front page of the *Daily Mail* through some ill-intentioned freedom of information request."

Although ultimately supportive of the push for more openness and transparency, Dale urges caution on its future direction.

"Otherwise we risk moving from a quality democracy to a populist, mass media dominated democracy," he said.



GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNER: *Iain Dale encourages deeper community engagement with politics*

Dale believes the best way to promote openness is for governments to find ways to increase participation in the political process through more effective consultation at a grassroots level.

How that can be effectively achieved by politicians and governments is a complex question, but many believe that social media is already changing the public's engagement because it enables such a direct channel of communication with decision makers.

Dale thinks political institutions such as parliaments need to get on board, but concedes this is easier said than done.

"Parliaments are innately conservative institutions, with a small 'c', and they don't like change ... and I think that they find things like Facebook, Twitter, blogs a real challenge," he said.

While Dale thinks parliaments do need to make their workings as accessible as possible, there is only so much they can do.

"Because parliamentary procedure, however you try and explain it, is going to be difficult for most people to understand and you can't translate it into normal language.

"People don't speak like that in the real world and they never will."

Dale sees the use of Twitter as a good way for institutions to personalise their communications and a place where politicians can show voters they are real people too, as long as they understand that social media is a conversation, not a broadcast. ●