

# BURGUNDY WALLS: THE FOUNTAIN COURT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SPACES AND EXHIBITIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Cherelyn Brearley, New South Wales Legislative Council  
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## Introduction



Image: Fountain Court, Unlocking the House exhibition, Bicentenary Launch night. Photographer Andy Baker, 2022

This paper will explore the importance of a physical space in bringing new diverse audiences into parliament through art exhibitions. Using a recent exhibition *Unlocking the House* as an example, the NSW Legislative Council has also used the Fountain Court space to highlight parliamentary history, tradition and procedures in an engaging way, reaching new audiences and educating the public on parliament's role.

## Context of the Fountain Court

NSW Parliament utilises the Fountain Court as a platform for an exciting and engaging exhibition program by a diverse range of artists and organisations. Changing monthly, the exhibitions allow for a wide range of community members to exhibit, visit and interact.

Exhibitors must be sponsored by a Member of Parliament and demonstrate some connection to the state of NSW. The exhibition space is managed by the Black Rod team which sits within the Legislative Council Procedure Office.

This year, the space also hosted a very unique exhibition *Unlocking the House*. The exhibition provided an opportunity to interpret and 'unlock' parliamentary practice and tradition. The exhibition ensured traditions and stories were captured and shared with the community.

## **The Physical Space**

The Fountain Court is a unique and special place. It is a lobby which physically lies in the centre of the NSW Parliament building, joining the old and new parliamentary precincts together. Comprising of five burgundy walls, a floor of creamy pink Wombeyan marble, surrounding a feature fountain designed by Robert Woodward (1923-2010), it is a main thoroughfare for visitors to the NSW Parliament. Woodward, described as a 'water genius' also designed the High Court waterfall in Canberra and the stainless steel fountain in Melbourne's Parliament Gardens (just physically next door to Parliament House in Melbourne)<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to recognise that when discussing a physical place, that history is acknowledged. The Parliament of New South Wales meets on the traditional land of the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation. The territory of the Gadigal people stretches along the southern side of Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) from South Head to around Petersham. The southern boundary is marked approximately by the Alexander canal and Cooks River. The Eora nation consists of about 29 clans across the Sydney metropolitan area<sup>2</sup>.

As part of the Reconciliation process with the indigenous peoples of Australia, in 1998 the Presiding Officers dedicated the western wall of the Fountain Court as a permanent area for the exhibition of artworks by Aboriginal people. The artworks are changed on a regular basis, featuring artists, community groups and the NSW Parliament permanent collection. Details on these fantastic exhibitions can be accessed through the NSW Parliament website.

## **Context of Community Engagement at Parliaments**

Engagement through art is another 'prong' to the multi pronged approach to community engagement for parliaments. <sup>3</sup> These existing engagement avenues include through committees' submissions, the tabling of petitions, public tours, open days, school outreach, and in more recent years, social media and blogs. There is a long history of NSW Parliament providing excellent engagement to the community. As will be argued in this paper, exhibitions can become a regular avenue for community engagement.

Art exhibitions engage in a number of ways. They encourage new visitors to parliament and they allow visitors who already were visiting on other terms to experience an unexpected engagement. It allows a community to showcase their point of view, sharing who they are and what is important to them. The process of exhibiting brings MPs and the community together.

## **Why engagement through art?**

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<sup>1</sup> Woodward, Andrew. *Architecture Australia*, July 2011. Published online: 1 July 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Frappell, Stephen and Blunt, David (editors), *NSW Legislative Practice 2021*, Second Edition, page 874

<sup>3</sup> Want, Susan and Rodgers, Brett. *Effective Public Engagement*, Paper presented at the Australasian Study of Parliament Group Conference 29 September 2017

A 2020 survey by the Australian Council for the Arts demonstrates the influence of art on community cohesion and engagement.

"The latest survey has shown a gratifying consolidation of the community's view of the role of arts and culture in supporting social cohesion. 71% said arts and culture help us understand perspectives different from our own, 60% say they impact on our understanding of other people and cultures, 53% say they help us connect with others. Creative expression helps us reach for a more expansive view of who we are as a community and what we could become<sup>4</sup>."

The survey results show the community's willingness to engage through art. There is a recognition that art helps an audience to understand different perspectives and cultures.

Art exhibitions provide a reflective platform. Artists often depict themselves or matters that are important to them, sharing their emotions with an audience. As an audience member, we learn more about the artist, community or curator through their choices of concept and material. We don't necessarily need to know each other's background, but we can empathise and share emotions that are depicted in the artwork, often in an instant.

The Fountain Court saw the return of a physical program of eight exhibitions over 2021/2022 after the closure of the parliament for part of the 2020/21 period due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these, five exhibitions featured community or emerging artists, with three featuring community organisations: the Blue Mountains Creative Arts Network, St George Art Society and Australia Chinese Art Society.

Digital promotion is utilised across all exhibitions as a platform for artists to share their work and the parliament's content. Communication through other languages can also spread the word for exhibitions. This can also be utilised to reach culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and encourage visitation and interaction. As a part of the recording of a recent promotional video with the organiser of the Australia Chinese Art Society exhibition, the organiser spoke in Mandarin. This allowed direct communication with those in the community who spoke the same language. The catalogue also featured English and Chinese.

Being a main thoroughfare between the chambers and members' officers, the Fountain Court provides opportunity for incidental engagement. Visitors are often able to stumble upon exhibitions, in the process of being in the NSW Parliament building. Visitors come across art and exhibitions that they may not otherwise come across. This incidental engagement is only able to happen in a public space.

### **Reducing barriers to connect with Parliament**

The application process to exhibit within Fountain Court enables engagement and encourages the community to connect with Members of Parliament.

As discussed in the introduction, a Member of Parliament, such as a local member, or a member with an interest in the organisation, must support the exhibition and act as the Parliamentary

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<sup>4</sup> Creating our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey, Australian Council for the Arts, August 2020. page 90

Host. This requirement encourages applicants to seek out their local members, enabling engagement between the member and community.

The Black Rod team can also facilitate these connections, introducing members to interested artists and community groups.

Members often attend exhibition launches. An acknowledgement to the host member in signage and promotion is encouraged.

### **Engagement through exhibitions about Parliament – *Unlocking the House***

"It is important for people to feel close to Parliament, and to change the perception that is impenetrable, “stiff”, and arcane.<sup>5</sup>"

— Parliament Engagement Strategy 2018-2021, New Zealand Parliament, February 2020

In October this year, an exhibition called *Unlocking the House* was on display in the Fountain Court. As the title of the exhibition suggests, the purpose of the exhibition was to share parliament's own stories and provide the community a glimpse into our history and traditions, so they may learn more about the role of parliament.

The exhibition was part of a program of activities commemorating the upcoming Bicentenary of the Legislative Council in 2024. Two more exhibitions have been scheduled, the next in November to December 2023, followed by another in 2024.

The exhibitions are a part of a larger range of special events and resources for the Bicentenary. Recently the history conference, *The State of the Colony: People, Place and Politics in 1823* explored key figures and events in the history of the Legislative Council, early colony and Aboriginal community with sessions delivered by academics and authors. Over 100 members of the community attended. A series of upcoming seminars in 2023 will explore the *New South Wales Act 1823*<sup>6</sup> and good governance and Aboriginal Representation in the NSW Parliament.

The Immortals' Video Series allows the community to step inside the chamber to discover 'The Immortals', focusing on eight commemorative busts that are placed on the chamber walls. The series uncovers who these figures were in life and how they came to be honoured in this way.

As a part of the Bicentenary Launch, the President of the Legislative Council, the Hon Matthew Mason-Cox MLC, also provided further context for these events and also announced a further program including a possible Royal Visit, the establishment of ambassadors and young Aboriginal leaders program.

The Bicentenary website provides excellent learning resources about the history of the Legislative Council whilst also documenting the key events as listed.

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<sup>5</sup> Parliament Engagement Strategy 2018-2021, New Zealand Parliament, February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> The New South Wales Act 1823 establishes the New South Wales Legislative Council.

*Unlocking the House* exhibition consisted of key objects in the NSW Parliament Legislative Council collection, NSW Parliament Archives and Historical Collection.

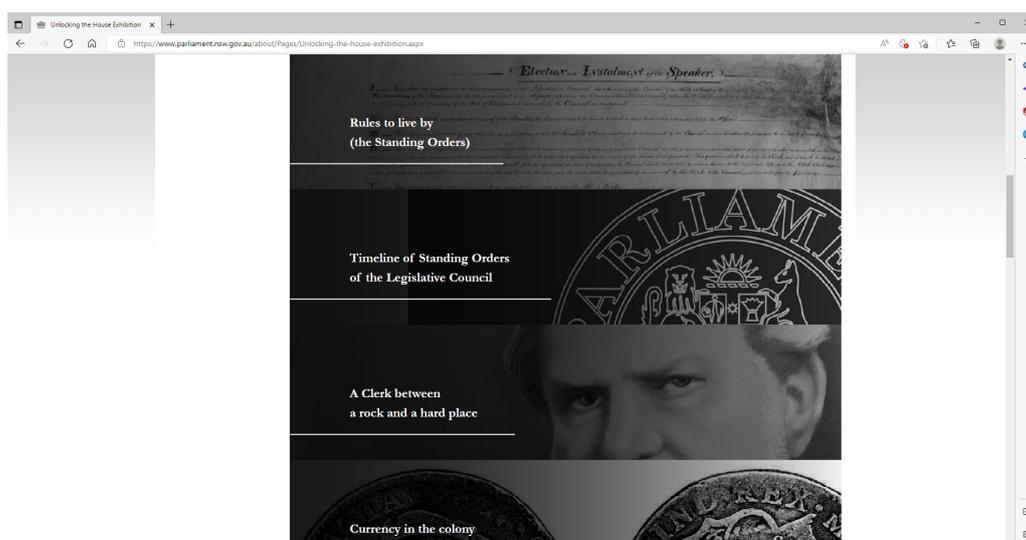
The exhibition comprised of ten stories about parliamentary procedure, history and tradition, which were collected from the senior clerks at the Legislative Council at NSW Parliament, including Clerk of the Legislative Council, David Blunt, Assistant Clerk – Procedure, Beverly Duffy and Usher of the Black Rod, Jenelle Moore. Through their knowledge, we were able to capture these stories through print and also video. Two videos were produced that featured the Clerk and the Usher of the Black Rod, describing key moments and providing further context to the objects in the exhibitions. These videos, together with all copy from the information panels is included on the Exhibition website.

An online overview of the exhibition was available for those unable to attend in person. Whilst this wasn't the focus of the exhibition, 455 people viewed content related to the exhibition.

The exhibition provided an opportunity to exhibit objects that provide examples of long held parliamentary procedures that are still observed by clerks at the table today, allowing the community a unique insight into our working traditions.

The Protest Book, is an example of an object still utilised today. This book, which has been kept by the Clerk since 1857, allows members' protests to bills to be recorded. Each protest received is inscribed in the Clerk's protest by hand.<sup>7</sup>

This book includes the title of the bill; the member's reasons for objecting to the bill; and the name of each protesting member. The process fell into disuse, before being revived in 2005 when a protest was lodged against the passage of the Terrorism (Police Powers) Amendment (Preventative Detention) Bill. The practice has continued periodically since that time<sup>8</sup>. It provides us with a reminder of the special role clerks have in supporting parliamentary proceedings and working directly with historical objects.



<sup>7</sup> Moore, Jenelle and Want, Susan (edited by Blunt, David), *Annotated Standing Orders of the Legislative Council*, page 528.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* page 532.

Image: Unlocking the House Exhibition section on the NSW Parliament website



Image: The Protest Book on display in the exhibition. Photographer: Rachael Ho

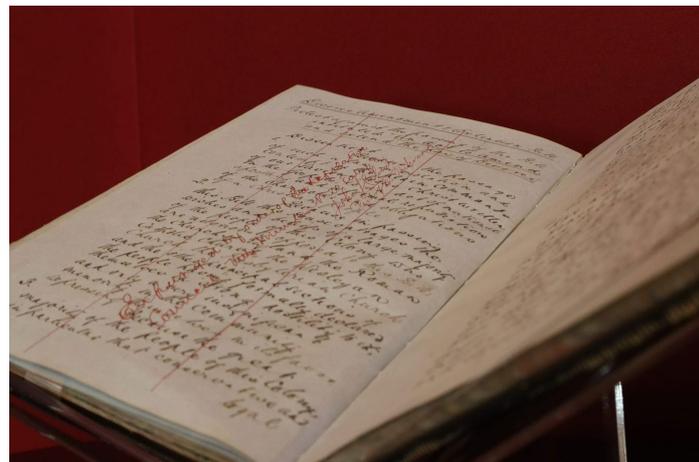


Image: Close up of the Protest Book open to 'expunged' pages. Photographer: Rachael Ho

The book was opened to a particular page in the exhibition, the record of the 'expunged' protest of Mr Heydon on the Divorce Amendment and Extension Bill from 1890. The story of the bill was included in the exhibition, next to the Protest Book.

On 9 July 1890, two protests were lodged against the passing of the bill. A controversial bill, it sought to legislate new grounds for divorce, including desertion, habitual drunkenness, imprisonment for at least seven years, and assault on the petitioner. Some opponents believed that the new law stood at odds with the law of the Church, while others argued that husbands who had mistreated their wives would, if allowed to divorce, go on to mistreat their new wives, thereby multiplying the harm caused by their behaviour<sup>9</sup>.

The protest documented in the Protest Book (and on show in the exhibition) was from a member, Mr Heydon, who was not only a fierce opponent of the bill but also questioned Sir

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 532.

Alfred Stephen's (a fierce supporter of the bill) actions. While acting as Lieutenant-Governor, Stephen had sent a message of thanks to those who had supported him in the passing of the bill just prior to the final vote. Mr Heydon claimed that Mr Stephen had used his position of Lieutenant-Governor to influence members to vote for the bill. The protest was also included in the minutes of proceedings. Later, on 10 July 1890, the House debated this recorded protest by Mr Heydon.

A number of members provided their contributions, with the House resolving in the affirmative that the entry be 'expunged' from the minutes of the house<sup>10</sup>.

The removal of this protest in the Protest Book was effected by inserting the words 'expunged' and two red lines through the entry.

This example provides us with exposure to how the bill was debated, how the bill was dealt with after being passed and the clerk's role in documenting the protest in the Protest Book. For a few pages of a singular book, it provides much perspective into parliamentary process.

### **Bringing the old to the new, using image to connect**

The physicality of the chamber space was in focus in the 'Set in (sand)stone: Saved by the Privy Council' section of the exhibition. This section captured a pivotal year for the Legislative Council, when in 1932, the UK Privy Council, then the highest court of appeal for Australia, ruled against Premier Jack Lang's attempt to abolish it.

It also featured a 3.8 metre wide enlargement of a plate glass negative of the chamber in session, captured by the Government Printer, dated 1930.



Image: 'Set in (sand)stone: Saved by the Privy Council' panel in the exhibition. Photographer: Rachael Ho

<sup>10</sup> Hansard, Legislative Council, 10 July 1890, page 2005.

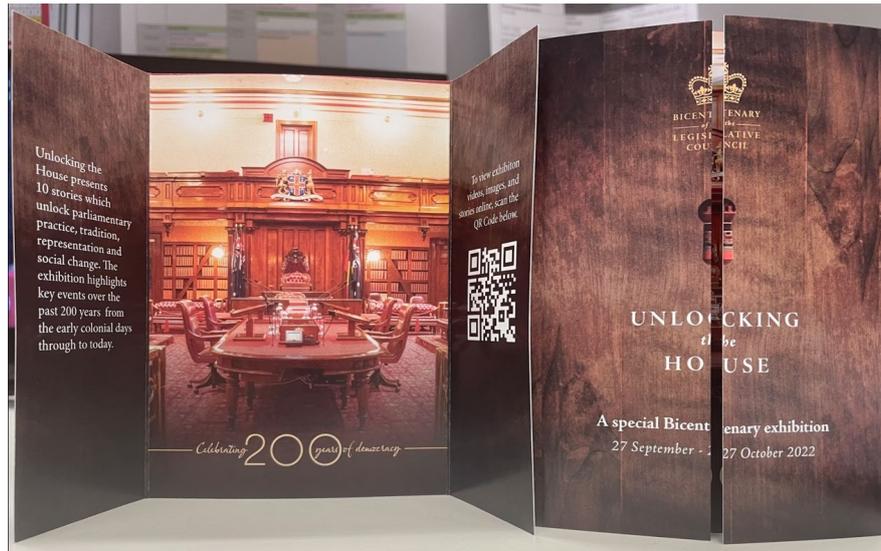


Image: Unlocking the House Exhibition Pamphlet. Photographer: Cherelyn Brearley

By including this image in the exhibition, viewers naturally compared the current chamber to this image, and as you can see, little has changed in terms of the physical chamber except for the large beams holding up the room. In terms of the diversity of members and clerks, lots has changed!

The exhibition pamphlet featured a photograph of the contemporary chamber, also providing an opportunity for visitors to compare chambers then and now.

The black and white enlarged photograph featured alongside the story of the Legislative Council being saved. During this time, the building and chamber were showing literal signs of deterioration. By the 1920s the building was showing signs of imminent collapse due to the deterioration of the southern outer corrugated iron wall. Large wooden props were installed in the chamber to support the ceiling, while others buttressed the south wall against Sydney Hospital<sup>11</sup>. A large number of men stare at the photographer (who from this perspective, has now become a viewer in 2022!), stern faced and some with crossed arms. The Legislative Council and its chamber are still standing, in a physical and literal sense, even after the Premier Lang challenge and physical deterioration.

In terms of media engagement, the Clerk, David Blunt spoke to ABC Drive on Monday 3 October 2022 about the exhibition and the ten items that the exhibition explored. This interview reached a national audience, which allowed further people to learn more about parliamentary stories and practice.

Other media coverage included three pieces on Koori Radio's 'Blackchat' program, notable as this is an Aboriginal-targeted program and mentions in online news articles including ABC news and The Latch.

<sup>11</sup> Frappell, Stephen and Blunt, David (editors), NSW Legislative Practice 2021, Second Edition, page 880.

The exhibition was promoted across the Legislative Council social media channels. In total, posts on Facebook and LinkedIn reached 28,843 people and had close to 2500 engagements (comments, likes, shares).



Image: 'Set in (sand)stone: Saved by the Privy Council' panel in the Unlocking the House exhibition. Photographer: Rachael Ho



Image: Visitors viewing the 'Unlocking the House' exhibition. Photographer: Rachael Ho

### **Acknowledging the team - bringing expertise together**

The exhibition utilised three main collections, the Legislative Council collection, NSW Parliament Library Collection and the NSW Parliament Archives. These collections all had expert teams in NSW Parliament to assist in identifying key objects and images.

A key to the Wentworth Room, made from colonial forged iron, the location of the first sitting of the Legislative Council in the old Rum Hospital in 1829, was identified through the Heritage and Collections team. Jenelle Moore, Usher of the Black Rod, identified a Parliamentary Handbook written in 1867, by Richard O'Connor, a previous Clerk of the Legislative Council. This was also included in the display from the NSW Parliament Library Collection.

Images of former members and previous clerks were sourced by the Manager Records and Archives in the NSW Parliament Library team. A previous clerk was also approached to supply images to be included for display, enabling never before exhibited works to be shown.

The Department of Parliamentary Services also provided the support of a carpenter, Peter Smith, and assistance at installation stage including physical lifting/removalist capability.

The Legislative Council Digital Communications team, led by Lauren Monaghan, and including Rachael Ho, provided communications support including media releases, the development of the Bicentenary aspect of the NSW Parliament website (including the exhibition pages), the design of the exhibition pamphlet, the promotional video for the exhibition and took photographs to document the exhibition.

This project also provided an opportunity to research the archives of State Library of NSW, NSW State Archives and National Library of Australia, through their excellent online catalogues.

All these external agencies responded well to requests for use, and allowed the images to be included in the exhibition.

## **Conclusion**

The Fountain Court exhibition space provides the-NSW Parliament with a valuable opportunity to engage with, and educate the community about its role.

*Unlocking the House* presented 10 stories from the Legislative Council that unlock parliamentary practice and tradition, featuring objects from the Parliament's own vaults and beyond.

While the Fountain Court is located in the heart of the parliamentary precinct, an exhibition about parliamentary procedure in that space was unusual.

By opening our doors (literally!) to share the stories and traditions that have shaped the Legislative Council, *Unlocking the House* illustrates how parliaments can engage the community in parliamentary practice, and we hope it will encourage other parliaments to consider similar exhibitions.