

Helping Australians
to participate in
democratic processes

DEMOCRACY
DEVELOPERS LTD



2022

COMPANY
ANNUAL
REPORT
SUMMARY

Democracy Developers Ltd was established in January 2022 in Victoria by a group of Australians who care about the future of Australian democracy.

Our goal is to make political participation accessible to everyone. We are driven by our values of engagement, openness, privacy, and inclusiveness.

In 2022, we built a prototype version of *Right To Ask*, a dedicated mobile phone app that provides an easy way for Australians to direct questions to parliamentary representatives. *Right To Ask* also allows MPs to gauge what's important to their constituents and effectively respond to their concerns in parliament.

OUR VISION

A free and open democracy for the benefit of all Australians.

OUR MISSION

To support all Australians to engage and participate in democratic processes.

ABOUT US

Democracy Developers promotes the everyday exercise of democratic rights. We aim to improve democratic participation by providing clear channels of communication between the electorate and members of parliament so they can more effectively represent the people.

OUR APPROACH

Research and development

We build privacy-respecting open-source software as a free resource and encourage the public to develop, adapt and reuse secure software. We also conduct research and provide technical analysis for government and the public on electronic forms of democratic participation including risks, potential benefits, security and effectiveness.

Education

We believe all Australians have a right to be heard and contribute to our democracy. We provide resources to help inform the public about the functions of Australian parliamentary democracy and how they can actively participate in democratic processes.

Advocacy

We speak up about what we care about - privacy and a strong democracy. We encourage every Australian to be actively involved in our democracy to ensure the strength of our political system. We are enabling easy, secure and effective communication between people and their political representatives.

OUR VALUES

Non-partisan

We support all forms of improved democratic participation that are inclusive of all Australians regardless of political alignment. We are politically unaffiliated and non-partisan, and do not accept donations that would compromise our independence.

Open & transparent

We are concerned about the vast amounts of data collected on all of us. We use cryptographic protocols in software to protect privacy and aim to empower everyone to make choices about their own data. All of our software is open-source and freely available.

Human rights

We believe in democracy as a form of government is a universal benchmark for human rights protection. We are concerned that weakening the questioning of government, the lack of democratic participation and the lobbying power of interest groups will have negative impact on people's rights to be heard.

Freedom of speech

We support freedom of expression, ideals of citizenry, and civility of discourse as fundamental to societal growth. Encouraging respectful discourse is a process that requires continuous active commitment to promote a healthy democracy.

Diversity and inclusion

We foster a culture of open-mindedness, compassion, and inclusiveness among individuals and groups in all that we do. We are building an online community that welcomes members with diverse backgrounds including, but not limited to: race, ethnicity, culture, age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, national origin, and religion.

VOLUNTEERS

Our volunteers have been the lifeblood of Democracy Developers. Without their expertise and continuing determination and passion, we would not have been able to establish our company and deliver our democratic participation initiatives.

our team

OUR TEAM

The Board expresses their deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed to establishing the company and creating *Right To Ask*. The team has contributed to our objectives by: providing technical expertise in building the app prototype and our website; providing marketing advice and graphic design services; engaging MPs and their staff for feedback on user design; providing trusted advice on cryptographic and secure software design methods; and, assisting in the development of resources and policies that are important to the management of our charity.



A/Prof Vanessa Teague

BOARD CHAIRPERSON & FOUNDER

Vanessa is an Adjunct Associate Professor at ANU specialising in cryptographic protocols that support a free and democratic society. She works on openly-available research and software for supporting democratic decision making and empowering ordinary people to make choices about their own data. Vanessa has researched security problems in e-voting and e-counting systems and developed new tools and techniques for auditing complex elections.



Rosey Conway

BOARD MEMBER & MARKETING

Rosey has 30 years experience as an educator, specialising in executive sales, marketing, branding, strategy, management and communications. Her BA in the humanities & social sciences has inspired a career that thrives on building creative solutions to achieve great outcomes. Rosey is passionate about improving democratic involvement and communication, and she hopes to inspire more Australians to become politically engage and have their voices heard.



Lillian McCann

BOARD MEMBER & TECHNOLOGIST

Lilli grew up in Gippsland in regional Victoria. After completing a BA in politics & international studies and a Diploma in Computing, she fulfilled her desire to develop the skills to build technology to change the world for the better and began a career in software engineering. Passionate about the potential for e-democracy to improve democratic processes and representation, and concerned about poor cybersecurity and digital privacy, Lilli is committed to advancing democracy through her role in Democracy Developers.

Technical expertise & management teams

Charmaine Chew, Andrew Conway, Chris Culnane, Chuanyuan Liu, Dana McKay, Pedro Rosas, Matt Lefurge, Miguel Wood, Hanna Navissi, Tim McCann, Eleanor McMurtry, the Masters' student teams at the University of Melbourne, and one of our software company providers who donated their UI design and software development expertise.

RIGHT TO ASK

ENCOURAGING DEMOCRACY

- ✓ Publish questions directed to an MP to answer in-app.
- ✓ Search for existing questions and up-vote or down-vote them so MPs and the public can see the top issues that are important in an electorate and across Australia.
- ✓ Request questions to be raised in state or federal parliament by a particular MP or committee, directed to another MP, Minister or public authority to answer.
- ✓ Subject matter experts and people with lived experience can contribute valuable knowledge so change makers have the most relevant information to help effect positive change.
- ✓ There's no back and forth commenting synonymous with traditional social media, just simple, clean, uncluttered political communication.

The primary goal of *Right To Ask* is to facilitate meaningful information to flow between people and their members of parliament.

CHAIRPERSON REPORT

2022 was Democracy Developers' first year, but the ideas for the *Right To Ask* app have been gradually developing over years of interaction with parliaments, people, and political issues. Democratically elected parliaments are wonderful things, but they don't always function as well as they should.

MPs can be deluged with more communication than they can process, while parliamentary committees and inquiries might hear from only a small fraction of the people with knowledge or experience of their topic. The primary goal of the *Right To Ask* app is to improve these lines of communication, increasing genuine involvement while reducing the communication overload.

A good question is a very powerful thing. Take the COVIDSafe app, for example. It was obvious to those of us who examined it that it really wasn't working, but there was no good channel to convey this information into the Australian Parliament's powerful review processes. Sitting on the sidelines, we watched MPs with good intentions being deflected from the main issues, because they lacked the expert knowledge to be able to ask the most important technical questions in parliament or committees when it really counted. Eventually those communication channels were established, and some savvy MPs started asking well-informed questions about usage and effectiveness, but not before the app had cost Australian tax payers millions of dollars while finding only two new Covid-positive contacts. We needed a new tool to establish that communication channel faster.

I also admired the #notmydebt campaign, which used a dedicated website to gather lived experience of wrongful debt notices sent to Centrelink recipients. By bringing these stories together, organisers produced a single powerful narrative in which people asked why they had been

served with debt notices for debts they did not owe. The current Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme is a direct consequence of that campaign. It is clear that we need a new tool that helps people with shared experiences to raise and amplify their concerns as a group.

So through 2020 and 2021, with a small team of students and volunteers, we were hard at work prototyping a dedicated political app designed to improve democratic communication by allowing people to clearly and cleanly communicate with MPs all the time (not just during elections).

With a robust framework built and a demo app, we started to discuss with local MPs how *Right To Ask* could really benefit them and what additional features could be added to improve democratic communication from both ends.

On 31 January 2022, Democracy Developers Ltd was established as a public company with the support of founding members Lillian McCann and Rosey Conway. The company was also registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission as a charitable organisation. Through Democracy Developers, we will strengthen our commitment to building *Right To Ask* using privacy-respecting, open-source, and transparent technology to create a connected and inclusive space for all Australians to have their voices heard.

*A/Prof Vanessa Teague
Chairperson & Founder*

OPEN SOURCE

All the software used in *Right To Ask* is open source so you can take a look at the code and understand how it works. We will be using privacy-preserving vote aggregation software from the Microsoft *ElectionGuard* library which uses homomorphic encryption to allow up and down-votes to be added together so that totals can be calculated without ever decrypting individual votes. This will preserve privacy by ensuring that even our server doesn't know whether a person's response is an up-vote or a down-vote.



Visit our software repository at:
<https://github.com/RightToAskOrg>

reports

ACHIEVEMENTS

WEBSITE

In March, the team created our *Right To Ask* website, which focused on the clear articulation of our mission, values and app features which was instrumental in our MP Engagement Strategy.

GRANT

In April, we received a research grant of \$66,735 from Microsoft, allowing us to continue refining our app and experimenting with the use of sophisticated techniques for private up-vote and down-vote aggregation.

APP DEVELOPMENT

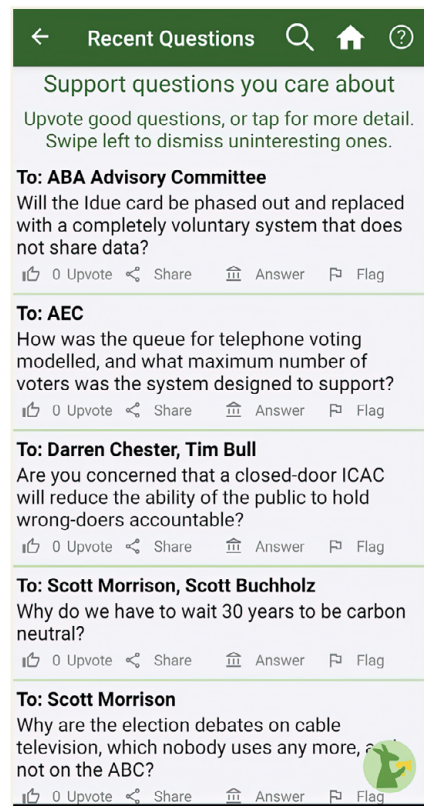
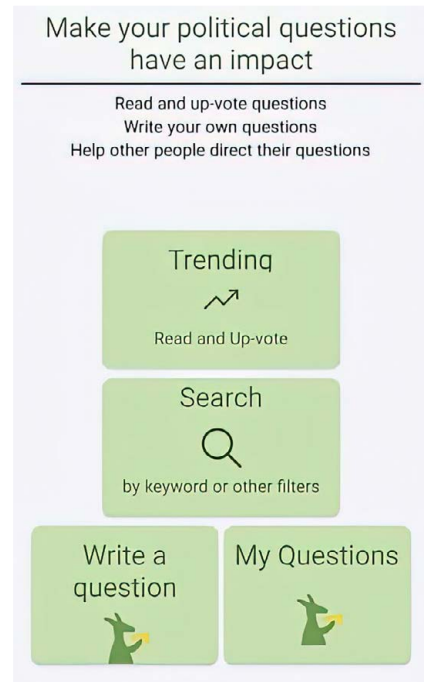
Development of the prototype *Right To Ask* app commenced prior to the establishment of the company and we were able to make further enhancements from January to June. We were able to engage a developer to work with our team to: enhance the existing question-upload feature with tag capabilities for MPs and public authorities to answer (or, in the case of MPs, raise) the question; create a simple landing page with appealing icons for the menu; improve the presentation of the main reading page, with separate cards for each question, consistent styling, and a clear statement of who should answer the question; add placeholder icons for up-voting, answering, sharing and flagging the question; implement a registration process for both standard and MPs accounts; implement a lookup process that allowed people to enter their address and discover which electorates they lived in (including a map of their Commonwealth electorate); and compute which MPs represent the user, given their electorates, for every state and territory.

The development of *Right To Ask* will be an ongoing priority as we build functionality that serves the needs of both MPs and their constituents, with a plan for incremental roll out through 2023.

MP ENGAGEMENT

Our MP engagement journey began prior to 2022 and continued into the current reporting period. We were able to reach out to a number of MPs from all sides of politics at both the state and federal level to get a deeper understanding of their common needs and goals. They, and their staffers, inspired us to create new and more valuable features - such as prioritising questions by up-votes from their own electorate.

We were also able to consider strategies around how to facilitate genuine engagement while mitigating trolling and aggressive comments such as those found in social media. We thought about how to enhance our privacy-focused design in ways that help MPs prioritise questions that are really important to their constituency, without being distracted by irrelevant questions from outside the electorate or outside the MP's core interests. We learnt about the challenging tension between the need to check who's a real constituent and the need for constituents to feel safe expressing the things that are really important to them.



Screenshots from the current prototype *Right To Ask* app.



Photo of Democracy Developer's Board members and volunteers at Victorian Parliament House.



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We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to their Elders, past and present.

WE ARE POLITICAL PARTY NEUTRAL

We support improved democratic communication between ordinary people and all parliamentary representatives.

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