

The newDemocracy Process:
A Participant Perspective on the
Marrickville Infrastructure Jury
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1. SUMMARY

1.1 Context of my involvement

In July 2014 I received a slick, shiny envelope from Marrickville Council addressed only to “The Resident”. The quality of the envelope was an important factor in me opening it, so this is to be encouraged in future. I was excited by the invitation to participate in the Marrickville Infrastructure Jury (MIJ) process: not only because the process itself sounded interesting, but because I had actually seen Luca’s TEDx talk several years before so was aware of newDemocracy and the idea behind it.

I am an early career academic (PhD Dec. 2013) with a strong interest in social justice and issues of political economy, and have grown increasingly demoralized by the appalling state of “democracy” both in this country and around the world. These interests mean that I was more excited than most to be selected for the MIJ. This also provides the background for why I have written this report, i.e. because I believe passionately in what newDemocracy is trying to achieve and am hoping to contribute to the cause by providing critical feedback on the process from an insider perspective.

1.2 Overall impressions of the newDemocracy process

My overall impressions were very good. There are certainly aspects of the process that could be tweaked, some of which I note in this report. But in general the process was extremely professional in both design and implementation. Iain Walker and Nivek Thompson did an excellent job in a role that requires a difficult balance between guidance and getting out of the way.

1.3 Overview of the MIJ process

The outcome of the MIJ process was reasonably strong. The final report contained unambiguous clarity of intent about the community’s accepted level of service for various asset categories and saved Council over \$3m in shortfall projections. Recommendations about new assets were not as strong, and were probably less useful for Council (an issue addressed in §3 below). However this resulted in the Jury’s first recommendation being that Council should improve its data management systems to facilitate easier community participation in future. If Council actions this recommendation, the MIJ will have made a valuable and lasting contribution to Marrickville Council that goes well beyond the basic parameters of the question. Thus while it was not perfect, the MIJ process will still count as solid “runs on the board” for the newDemocracy portfolio. The newDemocracy Project Outline describes its key objective as providing “clarity of intent about the community’s priorities” through consensus of a representatively diverse group of citizens. Although there were issues around the funding question, it achieved this objective with respect the quality of infrastructure that the community is happy with.

1.4 Key recommendations about improving the newDemocracy process

- Consider developing a robust web-based platform to use for the forum, document library and collective editing instead of relying on existing digital systems of participating organizations
- Stronger encouragement of Jury members to engage with information between sessions
- Stronger message to the Jury about how each individual citizens’ jury is part of a bigger movement to revitalize democracy at a national level (i.e. make the stakes clear!)
- Better introduction of Jury members to each other at the start of Workshop 1
- Keep same newDemocracy representative with group for entire process if at all possible

2. Overview of the Process: Observations and Recommendations

I kept a diary for the duration of the process. This is in section 3. The following are general observations about the process. Nothing systematic, just things that occurred to me vis-à-vis both positive aspects and observations about what might have been done better.

2.1 Positive observations about the MIJ process

2.1.1 A valuable experience

- The Marrickville Infrastructure Jury process was valuable for pretty much everyone involved. This view was expressed by all jurors present in workshop 5 and was seconded by those in Council who had worked most closely with us. I'm sure the report will cause some headaches for Council vis-à-vis funding of new assets, but those directly involved in the process all found it a rewarding experience. I know this is not a result that newDemocracy can quantify, but it's important to note all the same.

2.1.2 Professional and neutral facilitation

- As noted above, the newDemocracy process struck me as well organized and professionally neutral.

2.1.3 Good preparation prior to process

- The pre-process preparation and information was all conducted well in my view.

2.1.4 Tables were good for early group dynamics

- I liked the approach to seat people at round tables at the beginning of the process. Somehow this felt right. It set a good vibe between bodies in the room. That kind of thing is important.

2.1.5 Great food

- The food was excellent! Really excellent! I know that newDemocracy recommends this to participating organizations, but Marrickville Council hit it out of the park – or rather [*name*], the catering lady, hit it out of the park. This really made a difference. Outstanding food is an excellent investment in terms of what it does for people's mood. I'd urge newDemocracy to keep emphasising the point in planning sessions for future projects.

2.1.6 Meal times were extremely valuable for the process

- I also liked that plenty of time was designated for meals – this allowed people to have a lot of informal conversations. This was valuable (a) because it helped people get to know each other and build rapport, but also (b) because a lot of jurors spoke about the issues in meal times, and a lot of productive ideas came up that were then brought back to the main discussion. This is interesting because it testifies to the fact that people often don't speak their mind fully in formal contexts.

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- Perhaps the facilitators could even encourage people to discuss aspects of the task during meal times if they are interested – this would prompt even more conversation and creative thinking in the available time. In the MIJ process it was just kind of “OK, let’s come back at 1:30”. While there is something to be said for letting people have a break from the topics, it might be worth mentioning that good ideas are often born in these informal times, so people should not hesitate to keep thinking during meal breaks if they are so inclined.

2.1.7 Positive observations about the jury as a group:

- It was a great collective pool of knowledge and skills – people brought lots of perspectives to the table that helped to make sense of various important issues.
- People with data-processing and report-writing skill collaborated well via Nivek/Iain to compose the report through its various stages to completion.
- People were generally nice and polite to each other.

2.2 The newDemocracy process: suggestions for improvement

2.2.1 Proper introductions at the start

- In my view there should have been whole-group introductions quickly at the start. This would make everybody aware of who is in the room, particularly in terms of what skills and experience they bring. In the MIJ process we only introduced ourselves to 5 others at a table. It would have been good instead to have done a collective introduction as an opening ritual – saying hi to everybody. It took a long time to get a proper sense of who was in the room.
- Perhaps a quick-fire three questions like: name & profession/experience/etc.; favourite thing about living in the LGA; and a random fact about yourself. Or something to that effect.

2.2.2 Make the stakes clear

- One of my key criticisms is of the jury itself, namely that many jurors did not seem to appreciate the broader significance of the MIJ process in terms of putting runs on the board for the citizens' jury model. A lot of people had a more insular view of the process, seeing it simply as a form of community consultation by Council, not the more radical experiment that it is. This meant that many jurors did not put in as much effort they could have. I reflect on this point below (2.2.7).
- As such, it might be good for newDemocracy to emphasize the wider context of the deliberative democracy movement more vigorously when preparing people for the process. Make them feel the stakes.
- The Foundation's motto is fantastic – “We don't need better politicians, we need a better system” – but by and large the information provided to jurors did not emphasize this theme. For example, in the MIJ Information Pack there is only a tiny note on deliberative democracy on p. 2.
- Including a separate preparation document to the effect of “What is a citizens' jury?” would be a good way to generate more enthusiasm and commitment.
- This kind of motivation will help particularly when the process becomes difficult. People will be more liable to stick with it work creatively around problems.

2.2.3 Keep the same newDemocracy representative for entire process if possible

- It would have been good to have either Nivek or Iain at every session. As it happened, Nivek came back into the process in workshop 5 and was less clear about what the jury had discussed than if she had been at all previous sessions (she noted something to this effect when the group was finalizing the report in workshop 6). This was by no means a disaster, but it was not ideal.
- I appreciate that scheduling may make this impossible in some cases, but it seems worth mentioning the issue.

2.2.3 Encouragement to generate more text earlier

- Could there perhaps be more encouragement for jurors to start developing text early? Obviously nothing of substance can be achieved around workshops 1 and 2, but after workshop 3 maybe it would be good to ask jurors to start producing bits of draft text on various parts of the report that the whole group can consider/edit.
- In the case of the MIJ, the report would have been much harder to complete on time had it not been for a single juror who produced a solid batch of text about principles of decision making, much of which was incorporated into the final report. Without this it would have been even more of a scramble.

2.2.4 A bit more formal open space for jurors to voice suggestions they may have

- There was no proper time to discuss the evolving perspectives of jurors, especially in light of new information that had been requested.
- Inspecting newly received information was left to unstructured (and even unprompted) self-perusal, and clarifications during the process only came through maverick moments of interjection.
- Maybe include space in the agenda (slots of up to 10-15 mins) for open forums where jury members can voice any ideas they have. This could be:
 - Ideas they've had while synthesizing new information between sessions
 - Reflections on any problems they see with how the group is deliberating on a particular issue or question
 - Suggestions for refined or new approaches to the leading question/s
- I am envisaging something semi-formal where anyone wishing to speak stands before the group with a proposal, idea, reflection, etc. This would work well from Workshop 2 onwards.
- The group can either endorse the suggestion, park it for later, or acknowledge it and move on if the idea is deemed to be a digression/distraction.
- It could be communicated at the outset that this space will be available in order to get people thinking more actively about anything they might wish to contribute.
- Something like this might have helped the MIJ get its head around the details quicker. I appreciate that there is the potential for people to derail the deliberations, but if the open forum were formalized then people could collectively decide whether something was relevant or not.

2.2.5 Stronger encouragement of jury members to engage with information between sessions

- The newDemocracy Project Outline states (p. 11) that “ongoing online discourse among the panelists is encouraged during the ‘away’ period.”
- But in my view not enough encouragement was offered. As noted below, there was hardly any activity on the forum, and certainly nothing that made a

substantive contribution to the report.

- Facilitation of sessions could include more direct focus on getting the jury to reflect on the information they have been provided with. Some jury members will inevitably have experience with such documents and will be able to translate them for the group.
- See the following recommendation.

2.2.6 Consider developing a robust web-based platform to use for the forum, document library and collective editing instead of relying on existing digital systems of participating organizations

- The jury faced a MAJOR challenge in digesting huge amounts of information. I work with complex information for a living and still found it difficult. I can imagine that most others found it overwhelming. This was reflected in the fact that hardly any time was spent talking about the information that the jury was given in response to requests, even though a lot of time was spent getting such documents together.
- The newDemocracy Project Outline states (p. 6) that: “We generally use any existing platform licensed by Council and continue to seek out new platforms given the difficulty of eliciting considered views in an online environment.”
- My view is that newDemocracy should develop a bespoke online platform that caters better to the needs of the process, particularly around the issue of collective commenting on information (e.g. requested documents) between sessions.
- Imagine if people could inspect documents online and leave notes/commentary/questions for each document that were visible to all? This would facilitate MUCH more engagement with the information juries are given. (particularly if people were more strongly encouraged to participate online).
- The Marrickville Council online platform was not set up to do this properly. The result was that the jury’s deliberations were not informed by proper command of the detail it had been provided with.
- The online forum for the MIJ was not employed by jurors to communicate with each other. The only role it played was as a central location for the document library.
- As such, there should be better support for dealing with the deluge of information:
 - A more user-friendly platform for viewing documents that come from jury requests. The Marrickville Council forum was clunky for dealing with a large amount of downloads.
 - In particular, there should be a dedicated forum for making notes and observations about each specific document.

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- I am envisaging something like a private version of GoogleDocs and other open collaboration platforms. I'm not sure what options exist in this direction.
 - This could be something newDemocracy offers as part of facilitation, branding the platform appropriately for the organization where necessary.
 - This would require a substantial investment in digital infrastructure, but it would be well worth it as newDemocracy continues to push the deliberative democracy model into the future. *Better digital infrastructure will lead to stronger collaboration, and thus to stronger results.*
 - Something of this order is needed if a group of 30-40 people is to collectively digest large amounts of information for a collaborative decision. Otherwise the information is overwhelming and people will not feel as empowered. *This is certainly what happened in the MIJ process.*
 - Let me stress that a large part of the problem was Marrickville Council's lack of preparedness to provide the MIJ with robust and well-digested figures and modeling scenarios (cf. recommendation 1 of the MIJ report). But if newDemocracy is able to provide a better online platform, the results will improve.

2.2.7 Critical observations about the jury as a group

- My strong impression was that people were not spending much time at all with the material outside of sessions. This made it very difficult to collectively synthesize the information. One must be immersed in the data for questions that are this complicated, and I do not think that sufficient effort was made at a collective level.
- Participation in the forum was almost non-existent. It is reasonable that not everybody will want to contribute in an online context, but hardly anything at all happened in the forum that was productive for the process. The only value of the online platform was in terms of the document library.
- By and large people are not used to collective discussions of this manner. To me this seemed evident in the way that jurors would often voice comments in a non-dialogical manner. By "non-dialogical" I mean comments with little to no qualification, as if deliberation were about an aggregate of flatly stated opinions instead of being a conversation trying to find consensus about difficult issues. I feel that there could have been stronger emphasis directing the tone of jurors' comments towards collaboration rather than assertion.
- Regrettably many jurors did not seem to appreciate the significance of the process they were part of, i.e. the democratic revitalization of society at large (cf. 2.2.5 above). From my perspective it was essential for the MIJ to come up with a strong, credible report not just for the sake of Marrickville Council, but to demonstrate the strength and potential of the deliberative democracy model in general. At this embryonic stage it is vital to get "runs on the board" in terms of demonstrated results. newDemocracy has already been achieving this well in its various other projects, and the research is compelling at a general level. The MIJ was certainly not a failure that

undermines the idea of a citizens' jury, but its results were possibly not strong enough to single out as an example of how good the process is. Maybe I'm being too harsh? We'll have to see what Council says. Maybe the report is significantly more valuable than I realize? Either way, the key point is that most people did not seem to understand the context of the MIJ process at a proper level. If they had, I think we would have seen much more effort from everybody to get their heads around things and clarify what needed to be clarified. Fewer people would have dropped out or switched off. As it happened, a lot of jurors displayed less enthusiasm and commitment than is necessary for the deliberative democracy process to work really well.

3. Participant Diary

At the start of the MIJ process I decided to keep a diary of the experience with the aim of sending the reflections to newDemocracy to contribute to its post-process analysis. The following entries were written at the end of each day. They were thus written before finalizing the observations and recommendations above, but have been included in case they are useful for the newDemocracy team to see how my understanding evolved during the process.

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Summaries of Workshops

❖ Workshop 1 (whole day):

Orientation to task. Lots of time to talk with others over breaks. Getting heads around information. Main thing today: understanding the basic issues around asset management (range of portfolio; life-cycle and maintenance; cost and prioritizing). Nice people.

❖ Workshop 2 (6-9pm):

Welcome from new Mayor. Seems like a good guy. Response to Jury's requests: legal expert; presentation about LGA satisfaction surveys; [*a Council staff member*] on Council's multipurpose infrastructure aims. Loads of documents posted to forum in the mean time. Some group discussion – also asked to come up with prelim list of priorities – no fucking clue here yet. Group still fairly bewildered and unclear about what we will come up with. Jury members still have no proper grasp of the material at this point.

❖ Workshop 3 (whole day):

This was the turn-around point. Starting with a speed conversation with 6 councilors, the Jury finally started to feel they had a sense of the issues. Group consensus started to emerge around basic shape of the issues. At lunch I asked [*facilitator*] if I could suggest an idea I had during the week about flipping the question around (i.e. let's first think about priorities and then work out what that means for trade offs): this went down very well and the post-lunch group work was focused even more strongly around assessing individual asset areas in terms of both minimum standard and priority of expenditure. Final task of day was groups of 15 starting to draft points to include in report. The two groups came up with different but very complementary sets of points. They will both be posted online (I'm just polishing ours up now – I was scribe by virtue of having the laptop). Our points were mainly around specific categories – I can't remember fully what the other one was about but I'll be keen to get the document. As a final note I also encouraged everyone to check the other citizen jury recommendations on the forum to get into the mood of the genre.

❖ Workshop 4 (6-9pm):

Where Workshop 3 felt like a breakthrough, Workshop 4 was the opposite. Things broke down and the session ended with the Jury confused and not at an appropriate stage to finish the report in the next session.

I'm not sure exactly why this happened, but I think when the Jury was asked to start ranking their preferences for existing infrastructure quality it became clear that we had not yet established sufficient principles to make an informed decision. People were voting on each category based on an impression, not in relation to a clear principles that were being applied across the board.

In hindsight this seems partly due to the suggestion I made in the previous session about flipping the question around. While this seemed like a good idea to everyone at the time, I can now see that it confused the two questions: we needed to decide on infrastructure *quality* for existing assets and *priorities* only for new investments. Although this seems clear in hindsight, it was not at all clear during the meeting. And I think a bigger problem is the question itself – the more I look at it the more I feel that it is less clear than it needs to be.

After meal break the session devolved into a more general discussion about what we were trying to achieve and what we needed to do to get the process back on track. No clear path emerged before the end of the night and people left a bit disheartened. This session was also complicated by the fact that it was a weeknight – everyone was tired and not able to focus properly.

❖ Workshop 5 (whole day):

This was supposed to be the final session, but it became clear we would need another workshop because we weren't able to get everything done today. Day started with me presenting a draft version of the report to the group for their consideration. It merged the two half-group reports from workshop 3 and added a bit in terms of structure, with items to fill out during discussion.

One of the other Jurors had also compiled a great document providing text for some principles and observations to guide our decisions and to be included in the report. She gave some great words regarding data management, which was particularly important because this was a large part of the reason that the Jury had not made as much progress as we hoped. The group spent a fair bit of time tweaking this text and agreeing on sections of it, so this was good. Another Juror who works with excel was able to provide the group with a very useful pie chart graph to make concrete sense of the data. This helped people make more informed decisions what level of quality to recommend based on realistic understanding of the financial implications. Council took the recommended levels away for modeling.

The other major thing achieved today was that the group collectively discussed aspects of the report with someone taking notes. This resulted in a rather large and messy document, but it was intended to be distilled by the next meeting and worked well for this purpose.

There was still some tension in the group about the fact that the report was not finished by session 5. Some jurors noted that they would be unable to attend a further session, some even suggesting that they were unwilling to do so because their views had already been expressed. They did however consent to a final meeting taking place with the qualification that all jurors be sent the final document and given the chance to voice any dissenting views. It was agreed that a minimum of 20 out of the original 30 must attend the final meeting to achieve a quorum. Luckily there were just enough people to make it happen.

❖ Workshop 6 (half day with only two-thirds of Jury present):

A lot of work was done by a few jurors leading up to the final session. Another juror with experience working in local government prepared a different draft report that captured everything well. He had voiced concerns about the length of the report and urged to be as concise as possible. His report reflected this and was a great distillation.

I added a draft executive summary to this and copyedited small portions of the text. These documents were all posted to the forum, including the merged set of notes from W5 so that jurors could check to see if anything important from the notes was missing from the final draft. Another juror did some additional editing and merging.

The final session was spent collectively editing this draft. The jury ratified its previous recommendations about level of quality (which saved Council \$3 million on projected shortfall) and moved on to agree about the “priorities” section of the report. Emendations were made and agreed upon using the 80% consensus rule.

The last part was trying to decide on some final general recommendations about how to fund the shortfall once Council pursues all other efficiencies. No consensus was reached here despite the fact that the Jury theoretically had enough information at its disposal. But the question had not properly been framed – Nivek offered helpful clarification of the stakes, i.e. pressing us about what recommendation we have for once Council pursues all “efficiencies” as we suggest. Everybody finally saw the point, but it was simply too late for a decision.

There were only 19 people left in the room and after some conversation it became clear we could not put anything of that magnitude in the report without proper discussion. This was a shame, but at least it was not the essential feature of the report (or was it?). It would have been good to provide a clear recommendation here, but the report will hopefully still be quite a helpful document for Council. Looking back at newDemocracy’s Project Outline, the key objective was to “provide clarity of intent as to the community’s priorities”, and the report clearly achieves this with respect to desired level of service.

But it’s a real shame we didn’t get to the funding part with more clarity earlier in the process. Others expressed this view as well. It would have made for a much stronger and more authoritative report. I worry now that it is a little spineless in terms of direction, where it could have been clear and forthright. It’s a bit of a cop-out on the “trade-off” question and does not give council clear direction about the community’s views here.

Would more guidance from the facilitators have helped here? Probably. But they could only steer us so far. It was up to us to get more clarity too. The group got bogged down in minute detail for far too long, but without realizing it, or at least without seeing a clear path forward to more productive discussions.

The guiding question could also have been worded much more clearly too I think, looking back. There was ambiguity about whether we were supposed to provide clear recommendations about funding or only stick closely to the question (which just asked “what are our priorities for [new] infrastructure?”, leaving the trade-off question implied rather than explicit.) I suppose this is what I was getting at with flipping the question in Workshop 3, i.e. trying to get the group focusing on spending priorities instead of just desired levels of service. But I think this got off track because we blurred the two categories of “existing” and “new” infrastructure. Either way, we lost sight of the priorities issue after Workshop 3 and never got back to it.

But the report was finalized by a few Jurors who could remain after lunch, with the agreement that nothing new be added. This document was finalized by me after Nivek sought final comments from all Jurors.

Let me stress that the document does retain a lot of value by virtue of its first recommendation for Council to improve its data management systems to facilitate great community participation in future. If the Jury is able to make Council move on this then it will have made an invaluable step towards greater collaborative decision making in future years. Under the circumstances, I am glad to have this as the first recommendation in the executive summary. I hope it gets taken seriously. The rationale was clear and unambiguous.