

newDEMOCRACY

ENGAGEMENT & POLITICS
BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE, BUILDING COMMUNITIES
ADDRESS TO IAP2 CONFERENCE

Greetings.

There are a number of key elements of discourse which characterise the politics of engagement in Australia's democratic systems in 2014.

SLIDE

The politics of engagement is characterised by our growing distrust of politicians, fuelled by old media love of adversarial action and the perceptions of our 'key influencers' about what defines 'the community'. In many ways, new media adds to this distrust: increasingly people seek information only within their own defined "community" – their reference points and their influencers alike coming from narrow, partisan sources.

In discussing this today, I think there are four key questions we should ask ourselves.

- 1. Why is there growing distrust of politicians and what does this mean for our democracy?**
- 2. What is the role of the media in all this?**

3. How should “the community” be defined? Is there such a thing as “the community” in the 21st century?
4. What can random selection contribute to our democracy?

SLIDE

The magnitude of the problem of **growing distrust of politicians** is clearly demonstrated by findings from successive investigations by a range of independent think tanks.

In its December 2013 Report, the Scanlon Foundation showed declining levels of public trust in federal parliamentarians "to do the right thing for the Australian people" (falling from 48% to 27% between 2009 and 2013). This same report also reveals that the quality of government/politicians ranks second after the economy/unemployment/poverty as the most serious problem confronting Australia as a nation in the most recent survey in 2013 - ahead of other concerns including asylum seekers, social issues, environmental problems, immigration, health, education, crime/law and order, housing, racism, national security, industrial relations, and Indigenous issues.”

This slide is about trust – not just in the politicians themselves but with the systems within which they operate.

As the Australian Financial Review itself noted,

‘The political powers that be have lost our trust’

“You can see it in the response to the daily revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption hearings in NSW. There are allegations of wrongdoing against individuals from both sides of politics – from former Labor minister Eddie Obeid’s corrupt dealings for financial gain to Liberal MPs funnelling illegal donations from developers into party slush funds. The real impact of ICAC is that as each dirty secret is revealed, the public’s suspicions that our political system is not working in the best interests of most of us is confirmed.”

Indeed the last few weeks the federal budget and of course the Gillard government’s carbon pricing scheme are seen by many in the community that politicians are a deceitful lot.

You will see on the bottom of our newDemocracy slide template that we say, “We don’t need better politicians, we need a better system”. I think the reality is that people have lost trust in the way decisions are being made and that the politicians are bearing the brunt of this because of the adversarial system in which they operate, with fuel added to the fire by the mainstream media.

SLIDE

What is the role of the Media in all this?

I want to say that the mainstream media are the enemies of deliberative democracy.

I was recently on a panel where two of the other panel members were old fashioned journalists – one a columnist from the Financial Review and the other a retired SMH writer. Both said that people couldn't be trusted to find tradeoffs – that they would always look for the best outcome for themselves.

I explained that this had not been our findings through newDemocracy's work with Citizens Juries that people gravitate towards the middle, to the solution that is going to be the best for the most people – the logical solution. But logical solutions don't create headlines, adversarial positions do.

I often wonder that as the power and reach of digital media increases so too will the stridency of the former mainstream media.

It is in the media's interest to define "the community" according to the loud adversarial groups who say they represent the community.

SLIDE

How should the community be defined? Is there such a thing as "the community" in the 21st century?

It's time all acknowledged the fact that 'community' and community groups are two very different things. It's time to hear from both, not just enraged and articulate.

We can start by remembering that a community is a collection of individuals, that no one person or self-selecting group speaks for an entire "community", no matter how loud their voice or how wide they claim the membership behind them.

This is not to say that community groups do not have a place in engagement activities. They can be a valuable consultation partner and an important source of local knowledge and input. But we must look for approaches that don't lead to just the usual suspects showing up with the usual gripes.

We are increasingly moving to a society that is more fragmented and diverse, where information and knowledge is held and sourced **individually by individuals**, a society where the aforementioned usual suspects are less relevant than ever before.

Just as an example, say you are consulting on a project with a significant sustainability impact. Typically you would prepare to consult with say bush care organisations. They might at best have a reach of a couple of hundred. This would certainly answer statutory requirements... but instead why not also seek out the permaculture community: one organisation in NSW has a reach of almost 50,000 people alone.

Or, to take a Sydney example, if consulting about urban renewal, the Grounds of Alexandria, a large restaurant, urban farm, bakery, coffee roasters and market built in the ruins of a 1920s factory, can help you reach almost 40,000 people, obviously much more than say the Alexandria Residents' Action Group.

SLIDE

Case study: the planning process

A perfect case study of this interplay is the planning process. I think it is fair to say that everyone in this room can acknowledge that the community does not trust the planning process. There is a strong current of rhetoric that the community is a voiceless victim at the caprice of developers and local and state governments.

Indeed, former premiers Geoff Gallop and Nick Greiner, who may disagree on most things, agree on this: people do not trust the politics of the planning process. Even more than this people no longer trust the politicians, and therefore the political process itself is under threat.

As leading engagement practitioners we all know that this is not true, that most projects and developments have at their core a genuine commitment to public engagement. I am sure that many of you regularly put on your joggers and doorknock, man drop-in centres and displays, individually answer each incoming query and demand, chair and facilitate forums and consultative committees...

Yet this will never be enough for the engaged and enraged. We all know that on many projects the silent majority *does* exist – the young families delighted to discover affordable housing options or more convenient shopping, employment and commuting choices, the senior citizens happy the new town centre will have an upgraded library and community facilities. It is a perverse reality that makes our jobs difficult, but contented community members are usually complacent, quiet community members.

As engagement practitioners we have all been guilty at some point in our past of “tick a box” consultations, where we just notify nearby residents and spend the majority of our time meeting with the loudest local community groups. This might mostly satisfy statutory requirements but it is not truly *engaging* with the community.

It is our responsibility to make every voice heard; it is our responsibility to ensure that community engagement is not just tokenistic and reactive to entrenched single-issue activists.

The truth of this was brought home to me personally during the consultation for Johnsons Creek Parklands Master Plan in the City of Sydney. A lot of people confused us for representatives of Mirvac’s nearby Harold Park development and we duly copped abuse... however one woman stopped and explained to us why Harold Park was such an important and welcome development for her: she currently owns a traditional three story terrace house in Glebe. She’s in her early 70s. The stairs and the maintenance are getting too much for her. So, she has bought two apartments in Harold Park, one for her, one for her sister. When it’s ready, she’ll sell up her terrace house. Harold Park’s modern amenities such as elevators means that she can comfortably spend her remaining years in the neighbourhood she grew up in and lived in all her life. Of course, she has never made a formal submission to any planning process in her life.

SLIDE

What can random selection contribute to our Democracy?

So how do we address this disconnect? How can we encourage these voices to rise?

It falls to us as engagement experts to find a way to reach into our fragmented, diverse communities and gather these individuals and their unique contributions. But.

And we all know this “but”.

It is one thing to ask individuals to participate, but it is another thing entirely to even get them through the door.

This is where newDemocracy comes in.

We may not have a “killer app”, but we do have a “magic technique”. A technique that in one instance had 31 randomly-selected individuals join a deliberative democracy process and retained 29 of them till the end, three months later. A technique that operated in a rational, considered manner. A technique that ended in a pragmatic, considered and consensus decision. A technique that is being adopted exponentially by local and state governments and agencies.

We call this technique a “Citizens’ Jury”.

Our deliberative democracy process relies on three key elements: random selection, a space for deliberation and authority for outcomes.

Random selection can be a cumbersome process, but the advantages are guaranteed transparency and diversity: a randomly selected group cannot be stacked by action groups or developers' mates.

Space for deliberation is the most important of the equation. We all know how so much of public opinion is reactive and unfounded and so this process gives people time to consider information before giving input. Deliberative discussion groups typically work over a couple of months to complete task, usually through regular meetings and online forums.

The quality of the output of deliberative processes is only as good as the information provided to participants. As with everything we do, it is critical to give participants buy-in to information gathering processes, to empower them to find the information they think they need. Effective approaches can include calls for submissions and calling for expert witnesses.

Authority for outcomes is the final key factor. Deliberative processes can take up a lot of time. As such, participants have to know the results will be authoritative and taken seriously. They also have to know what the end result is, what the outcome of their output is.

RHODES EXAMPLE

During the citizens' jury deliberations for Canada Bay Council's operating budget there was a discussion of the range and level of services – which necessarily involved opening the books on all council's revenue.

One of the biggest issues in Canada Bay in recent years is the massive redevelopment of the old Union Carbide site on the Rhodes Peninsula. One citizen asked where the \$4m in developer money from redeveloping Rhodes could be found (he'd heard the amount around the neighbourhood). Safe to say there was a mild "gotcha" in the question, an inference that there was a secret, lucrative pot of money to tap into.

Council's Director of Finance informed the jury member that the conditions of developer contributions were that they were used for capital works for the community's benefit and couldn't be diverted to pay for operating costs. He also advised that council actually earned \$74.2m in development contributions for the Rhodes redevelopment.

The community jury members were amazed, and explored how the money was spent: \$11.2m on Concord Library, a little over \$2m on renewal of a pool at Haberfield, parks, a walking trail etc.

Though we recognized we were off topic, they asked the facilitator to let it run for 30-45 minutes to see how it would unfold as the NSW Planning Legislation Review was running concurrently with these deliberations.

As people understood the amount of money to be unlocked, and its potential uses, their questions changed. Most asked how much the council would earn by going to 45 (from 32) storeys in the centre of the precinct.

It was notable that what Council's own everyday people wanted didn't necessarily align to council priorities – the major items were State Government responsibilities (one was a light rail connection through Five Dock, the other was a primary school). Council planners saw this as evidence the tradeoffs were too complex for everyday citizens (they asked for infrastructure beyond what s94 contributions could be used for!).

The Mayor saw a redevelopment that had generated 3 years of fierce protest was suddenly and unanimously liked by a mix of everyday citizens who had spent less than hour looking at the actual economics and benefit tradeoffs for the community. He said "*where were these people when I was getting flogged?*"... and the answer is that council didn't invite them in for a constructive effort at sharing the decision. What the Mayor saw was citizens able to reach consensus on a hard tradeoff.

So here we have something that "the community" had protested for 3 years, but when a random sample of actual community members were shown the tradeoffs they not only liked council's decision, but indicated they would have supported even greater density.

So what's the immediate solution? How can we apply this Rhodes example?

I could be glib and say just that we need to stop having the conversation only with the infuriated.

Ultimately it's not about closing off communications lines, it's about opening them up, broadening them. People aren't going to trust the political and planning process until the politicians and the planners behind those processes start to trust people!

As I said before, a "community" is made of individuals. It is made of young and old, rich and poor, religious and atheist, conservative and progressive, not to mention readers of the Murdoch press and viewers of the ABC and readers of BuzzFeed.

Mailing out notifications or placing an advertisement in a local newspaper will reach only those with lots of time on their hands. It only reinforces the power of the engaged and enraged.

It is up to you to make sure that community consultation consults with community members. So how can we address this imbalance?

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newDemocracy is about redressing the imbalance

We innovate in so many areas, and democracy needs to be part of that to flourish.

That being said, Queensland has some interesting challenges which could also be seen as opportunities.

Queensland has an unusual political system for Australia. You have no upper house to represent minority interests, you have powerful and large local governments... and you have a pretty colourful planning and development history. When your politicians win a mandate, they can get things done. These unique political arrangements mean projects often move a bit faster than they do in New South Wales or Victoria.

Queensland is also the most decentralised state in the commonwealth, with more than half the population living outside Brisbane. This means that major infrastructure projects must have considerable state-wide benefits *and* reach.

I think it is fair to say that Queenslanders are generally more amenable to major infrastructure projects such as roads, rail, dams, ports and mines. Given the broader spread of the population across the state, the positive benefits of such projects to the freight industry, to primary producers and of course to the general public are easier for individuals to see – billion dollar railways, mines and ports are not remote concepts to Queenslanders, they are local realities, with local impacts, positive and negative.

All this leads me to ask, could we harness a change in thinking about the definition of community here in Queensland? A definition that is both

wide and deep? Could the singularity of your purpose and commitment to outcomes help to drive a better and more diverse engagement process, a process which can help reinvigorate our democracy for the 21st century?

Random selection, deliberation and agreed authority for those deliberations can be your partner in this. Citizens' juries are already involved in service delivery and sustainability deliberations for local governments, in inquiries into energy generation and alcohol impacts for state governments... there is no limit to what or where citizens' juries can deliberate.

The newDemocracy Foundation would love to get involved in a scenario where the vox pop result and a deliberated result are likely to be quite different: where all courses of action are politically fraught and elected representatives are willing to listen to a new option.

There are some hard messages about balancing activist group views with the views of everyday people who are randomly selected. You as practitioners don't need to do this on your own: a research foundation *who isn't a consultant* has more freedom to act and you can take advantage of this.

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