GRADING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD WE BE
ASKING?

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CPSA 2010 Annual Meetings

There continues to be considerable interest in the application of deliberative
approaches and the use of citizens' assemblies as vehicles for enhancing democracy and
better utilizing the collective wisdom of citizens. Notions about democracy are moving
toward an emphasis on the sharing of ideas and the search for consensus. In the words of
Simone Chambers we are witnessing a move from "voting-centric democratic theory" to
a "Talk-centric" orientation (2003; p. 308). Dialogue, group education, and collective
reflection upon concepts and possibilities become the central concerns. Deliberative
democracy experiments are now a global trend while within Canada there have been
large-scale citizen assembly efforts in British Columbia and Ontario. Application of
deliberative strategies raises many topics worth exploring. One such matter is the
question of evaluation. What are the appropriate questions to ask about deliberation and
the labours of a citizen assembly? How do we best assess their contribution to civic life
and public engagement? What criteria should inform these explorations?
    Citizen assemblies are a response to the current democratic malaise. If we can
understand their potential and discern what is reasonable to expect of their operation then
the potential for success would naturally be enhanced.   The ensuing paper will outline
three issues meriting study and methodological attention related to citizen assembly
activities. First, is the fundamental <u>evaluation challenge</u> of grappling with the diverse
ways of assessing success or failure and the multiplicity of potential assessment criteria.
Second is the need for further discussion about our expectations of the deliberators, or
assembly members, particularly after the completion of what might be regarded as the
formal deliberation stage. This is the <u>human capital challenge</u>; what is it we expect of
these people and do we envision a role for them in spreading the message regarding their
recommendation(s)? Third are the questions about the relationship of deliberative
democracy to the broader political community and its culture, behaviour, and elections.
This broader <u>democratic challenge</u> is perhaps best summed up by Mark Button and David
Michael Ryfe, "deliberative democracy is best viewed, in theory and in practice, as one
part of an overall civic endeavor that aims to reproduce the necessary spaces, skills, and
virtues to foster sovereign self-governing members of a pluralistic society (2005; p.31)."
Understanding and continuing work on this challenge is imperative.
    My purpose today is to urge further reflection upon our expectations and
applications of deliberative exercises, most notably citizen assemblies. This presentation
will focus upon these concerns in hopes of encouraging further study. Deliberative
democracy is a promising approach which seeks to engage a citizenry currently perched
on the verge of withdrawal and cynicism. Sharpening our evaluative tools, recognizing
the potential of former assembly members, and better relating deliberative exercises to

ongoing commitments to democratic revival are all necessary steps forward in the practical application of this strategy of communication and group deliberation.

Origin of My Concern with Recognizing the Work and Contribution of Deliberative Participants

In addition to the obvious benefits of refining strategies for evaluation, there is a personal reason for my wish to engage this topic. It arises from my observations at various points of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly at work. As a result, many of the examples over the course of this paper are drawn from observations and literature related to the Ontario experiment. This is not meant to overlook or diminish the British Columbia or other Canadian examples of deliberative democracy. Rather it reflects that the Ontario experience in many ways was the primary inspiration for a number of the observations in this paper. When the Ontario Citizens' Assembly exercise began I travelled to Toronto to watch prospective Assembly members from ridings across the Greater Toronto Area spend a beautiful sunny summer afternoon in a hotel ballroom waiting while the Assembly was described and then volunteering to have their name placed in the draw as a possible assembly member from their electoral riding. The mood was thoughtful and optimistic. People listened attentively and asked good questions of the Assembly staff. Those whose names were called subsequently met, listened to presentations, studied, and debated over the course of a number of weekends during the coming months. These people were interested and committed. Yet, when their work was done and their collective recommendation was submitted to the Government of Ontario their work was received as if it was an undesired 'hot potato'. Word of the Assembly submission of a final recommendation took several days to make it to the Government of Ontario website and the governing Liberals adopted an officially non-committal response Furthermore, despite early suggestions of an active public education campaign, the McGuinty Government handed the information task over to Elections Ontario. They, in turn, were already busy with the administration of the upcoming election, and so treated the Assembly recommendation as a bland matter of public information. Meanwhile, the same Provincial Government heightened electoral barriers. A super-majority became necessary to approve electoral reform. Together this produced a feeling among those engaged by the issue, no matter their preferred result, that the McGuinty Government was bobbing and weaving away from commitment and from appropriate follow-up to the creation and commissioning of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly. Nelson Wiseman felt so troubled by the McGuinty tactics that he declared, "If you want electoral reform, run on it. Don't hide behind a sham mechanism, trying to look good by telling the public it is up to them to decide and then, afterward, imposing rules like a 60 per cent super majority. That's a bait and switch …"

Stephenson and Tanguay (2009) may well be right about the reasons for the rejection of the Assembly proposal in the subsequent Ontario election, when they argue that the provincial electoral reform initiative was "largely elite driven and without general public support." (p.21) While significant, this finding does not contradict the motivation for this paper. Ordinary citizens gave up considerable time in hopes of making a contribution to enriching the democratic life of their provincial community. Their work and sacrifice got lost in the midst of the McGuinty Government's retreat from apparent commitment to reform. Information about the Assembly's work became reduced to dry,

non-committal information about alternatives. The impassioned support for debate reform shown by Assembly members was reduced to the routinized message of Elections Ontario staff attempting to grapple with added responsibilities at the outset of an election when their attention was already absorbed with their standard responsibilities. It is therefore timely and worthwhile to inquire into what we expect of such citizen efforts to promote fairness and respect for citizens and, in particular, those we might ask to undertake membership in future citizen assemblies and deliberative exercises.

The Evaluation Challenge

The creation of citizen assemblies and deliberative vehicles is often accompanied by fine words about the sacredness of democratic reform. The provision of supporting empirical evidence is some times uncertain however. According to Chambers, "Although "empiricists" agree that normative theory has generally been somewhat cavalier with its empirical claims, there is no consensus about whether such research generally supports the normative claims or undermines them.' (p.318)

In announcing his Government's intent to move on democratic renewal, Premier Dalton McGuinty unveiled a promise to seriously engage provincial citizens. In his speech of November 18, 2004, to a Conference called to discuss democratic promotion he proclaimed, "I believe that Ontarians should have the opportunity to re-examine the election system we have inherited and determine whether they are satisfied with it, or wish to exchange it for another." (Text of Premier's Address to Dialogue on Democracy Conference, Ontario Government Website, November 18, 2004) He went on to say that "The very exercise of re-examining our electoral system will be to re-invigorate and heighten our appreciation of it." Brave words full of hope and optimism. Yet, two and a half years later those same Ontarians went to the polls and voter turn-out hit an historic low of barely 52-53% (CBC, "Ontario Voter Turn-out A Record Low", October 11, 2007). Support for the Assembly-recommended alternative obtained slightly over 30% of the votes cast.

So was the Ontario experiment a useful try at reforming the provincial civic culture? Voter turn-out numbers would appear to provide a resounding no. Yet, Hugh Segal argues that to obtain a vote of over 30% of those who actually voted under the circumstances of limited funding and faltering governmental support is a noteworthy achievement (2007; pp. 27-30). The failure in his mind lies more in the Premier's response. When asked after the election about further democratic initiatives McGuinty indicated that the vote had decided matters. Other policies were now to be seen to. In Segal's judgment McGuinty's response signified that "Clearly any kind of ongoing infrastructure maintenance for Ontario's democracy is of far less importance than the other parts of the social and economic infrastructure." (p.29)

Debate over the effectiveness and workings of the Assembly process can be found but it is scattered and without a uniform focus. Jonathan Rose, Academic Director of the Ontario Assembly, has argued that measures of its success should encompass the demonstrated learning potential of Assembly members and its diverse composition. Note, for example, his views in the Autumn 2007 edition of the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. His perspective would encourage attention to the dynamics of learning and the

perceptions of Assembly members regarding their development of comfort with the material and the quality of their instruction as well as the means of information delivery.

A similar line was taken by the Institute of Governance in their official evaluation of the Ontario Assembly (Document dated May 28, 2007). This consultant Report commissioned by the provincial government chose to evaluate through a focus upon the satisfaction of the Citizen Assembly members. Were they satisfied with their learning experiences? Were their educators and facilitators prepared and helpful? In its own words, "The key data collection instruments were the brief and detailed surveys of the members." (Summary of Findings – Methodology) There is little rationale offered for this approach. The Ontario evaluators supplemented their survey findings with examination of Assembly-collected press clippings files, and summary totals of people appearing at the various Assembly public sessions, but much of the Report is directed at the responses and perceptions of the citizen members. This methodology identifies effectiveness with the citizen assembly member's satisfaction and sense of their experiences. While this tactic reflects the important contribution made by the willing Assembly members and their understandings of the quality of their deliberations and of the support staff and educators, it does merit further assessment.

Another evaluation tack is taken in chapter 8 of the recent volume edited by Mark Warren and Hilary Pearse on the B.C. Citizens' Assembly. Cutler et al. examine the connection between the Assembly findings and the BC provincial agenda. How persuaded were voters by the Assembly handiwork and did the findings of the Assembly deliberations present a coherent and compelling viewpoint? Here again are significant questions being raised about the work of an Assembly. Connections are drawn between the deliberative labours and the agenda and priorities of the political community outside.

There are thus a number of conceivable indicators of Assembly and deliberative success. They include, but are not necessarily limited to, (a) the resulting levels of voter turnout and engagement by the broader political community, (b) Assembly member learning, diversity, and commitment, (c) Assembly member satisfaction and perception of their experiences, and/or (d) the existence of societal links and possible agenda-setting potential arising from the deliberative exercise. All of these open up fascinating analytical possibilities; one of which being the debate over the most appropriate or feasible kinds of evaluation criteria.

The Human Capital Challenge and the Place of Citizen Assembly Members

It is striking that the official evaluation of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly dwelt so extensively upon the satisfaction of the members and so little upon their subsequent potential to impact the electoral reform debate. The provincial government behaved as if the Assembly was a discrete process which once having produced a formal recommendation automatically became history. This is troubling for here were a group of apparently content and civic minded citizens now knowledgeable about the complexities of electoral systems. Despite their potential, they were cut loose. They were not formally employed during the broader provincial debate and there was little recourse to, or praise for, their long hours of debate and deliberation.

Over the course of pages 4 to 30 in *Democracy at Work: The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform --- A Record of Ontario's First Citizens' Assembly*

Process there are pictures and short biographies of the Assembly members ending with the Chair George Thomson. These are the people who willingly spent weeks over the course of months away from family and work discussing electoral reform. They were also willing to have their picture and personal characteristics publicly reported. I recommend anyone interested in deliberative democracy to read through these and gain a sense of the diversity of the members and their reflection of the broader provincial community. It also bears noting that despite the sacrifices involved in membership on the Assembly "no members dropped out during the entire eight month project" (Rose, p.10).

Most organizations are thrilled to have active and informed participants yet the decision by the provincial government to have Elections Ontario run a strictly neutral informational campaign on electoral reform effectively sidelined the former Assembly members. Elections Ontario's mandate for neutrality and non-partisanship ruled out official use of former Assembly members who were on record as having collectively endorsed an alternative voting system. The Ontario case is not completely atypical for in the BC case assessed by Cutler et al it is observed that "the CA shut down five months before the referendum and … had few resources with which to sell its message (p.169)."

The human capital challenge encompasses the need to define the place of Assembly members and the need to do more with their expertise and enthusiasm. Why devote time, expert instruction, and valuable resources, on the engagement of a group of willing citizens only to subsequently discharge and marginalize them? Could they have been used in a public education program? Did the provincial government's ebbing enthusiasm for reform lead them to overlook the work of these dedicated citizens? How might the political system make better use of their experiences and commitment? All these are important concerns needing further study.

Deliberative Democracy and the Broader Democratic Challenge

Is there any plan to take the deliberative exercises to another level? Is there evidence that governments are attentive to continuity of public engagement and the inclusiveness and quality of political debate? What kind of ministerial and budgetary support is provided for assessing and learning from past deliberative exercises? How are governments exploring the declining citizen interest in voting? Is there a healthy democratic culture of participation and discussion? These and other questions come under the expansive breadth of the democratic challenge associated with public life.

The case of Ontario provides meager grounds for optimism. Despite the bold words from the McGuinty government early in their existence about democratic reform and renewal, it is a theme noticeably absent from their second term agenda and the subject has been downgraded in its ministerial status. Reference to the provincial government website discloses that democracy as a search term overwhelmingly yields references from earlier in the McGuinty period. Segal's assertion that governmental attention was turning away from fostering democratic infrastructure is being born out. Amid this kind of development it is critical that we consider further issues related to the state of deliberative democracy in Canada.

There is clearly much to be done to foster a knowledgeable and active democratic culture in Canada. Revitalizing legislative politics is one element in this objective. In reflecting upon their experiences arising from the Prorogation Controversy Peter Russell

and Lorne Sossin sounded the warning that "it was … apparent that the Canadian public's knowledge of the constitutional foundations of parliamentary democracy was very low (p.xiv)." Coupling this with evidence of widespread cynicism and low voter turn-outs, produces further reasons for disquiet.

Educating and engaging people with legislative institutions is one building block in the fostering of a vital democratic political culture. This paper offers a number of related concerns and potential avenues for continued research about deliberative democracy and the promotion of a vibrant and engaged public life for citizens. There is much analytical and promotional work to be done. Deliberative democracy offers a promising course of action but it needs to be understood broadly and practiced over a longer period of time than one citizens' assembly exercise.

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