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Civic engagement and the promise of a new citizenry

Jonathan Rose
Queen's University

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About the author

Jonathan Rose is Associate Professor of Political Studies at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada. In 2006 – 2007 he was Academic Director of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. He has published on Canadian politics, political advertising, federalism and government advertising.

Jonathan is completing a book with several colleagues on citizens' assemblies as instruments of democratic deliberation. He has held visiting professorships at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan.

Donna was intrigued by the letter she, and over one hundred thousand other citizens of Ontario, Canada, received from the provincial elections office in the spring of 2006. The government seal on the envelope meant it was important—perhaps a reminder to make sure that she was on the electoral roll? When she read the letter, however, she was puzzled. Her name had been picked at random to participate in a novel form of citizen engagement that had only been tried once before in the world. A 'citizens' assembly' made up of 'ordinary' Ontarians would meet over eight months to study and make recommendations on electoral reform—a subject to which she had given little thought. Donna accepted the invitation to attend a meeting where there was a chance her name would be chosen to represent her electoral district.

Several weeks later, Donna and around three dozen citizens from neighbouring electoral districts who had received the same letter assembled in a Toronto hotel. After hearing a presentation about the project, they were given the option of letting their name stand or withdrawing. Few withdrew. At that meeting, Donna's name was one of three drawn from a ballot box. This scene was played out in twenty-nine other selection meetings across the province where 103 members of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform were chosen.

The impact this project had on the lives of those who were chosen was profound. Donna describes the experience as 'one of the highlights of my life.' She read widely and studied hard to prepare for the first weekend of the learning phase, some three months away. Pat, a grandmother who was chosen at another meeting, borrowed the Law Commission of Canada's report on electoral systems and anything else she could get her hands on, and took them away with her on the family camping trip. Such was the impact of the Assembly and it hadn't yet begun.

The enthusiasm for the project was certainly not about the somewhat dusty subject of electoral systems—an esoteric matter usually confined to political scientists. Neither was it about fame nor pecuniary benefit, for the participants would work in relative obscurity and receive a nominal payment of $150 per weekend. Rather, it was about the opportunity for civic engagement, dialogue and participation at a time when few real avenues existed for citizens to contribute meaningfully to public policy. In fact, they were not contributing to, so much as *making* public policy. Their mandate was to determine whether their electoral system met the needs of a twenty-first century citizenry. If it did not, they were to design a model that did so, which the public would vote on in a binding referendum.

Interestingly, the participants referred to themselves as 'members'. Members belong to communities, share values and work cooperatively. Though they came from very diverse backgrounds, these members managed to achieve something to which most elected assemblies aspire. They listened to each other and shared their knowledge, perspectives and insights, putting aside partisan interest for the common good. Over the next eight months, Donna and Pat, both long-time citizens, were joined by new citizens like Buddhadeb from Bangladesh, Marisa from Italy, Catherine from Hong Kong, Cornelio from the Philippines, and Elton from Dubai. The diverse backgrounds and opinions of the members contributed to the success of the assembly.

Real public engagement vs. pseudo-engagement

Public consultation exercises are now a routine part of what governments do. Prime Minister Rudd in May 2008 called for an 'inclusive policy process that engages with average Australians.' In 2004, the UK government commissioned the Power Inquiry to seek ways of engaging citizens more actively in politics. India has experimented with increased citizen participation at the village level in West Bengal (Panchayat Reforms) in the 1970s, and more recently in the state of Kerala. Citizens' juries, created in the US, have been used in Italy to

deal with traffic regulation in Bologna and Turin, and in Western Australia to examine an exit to the Reid Highway. In New Zealand, the former Labour government proposed the creation of a citizen jury to cut through partisanship in state funding of political parties. Perhaps most famously, Porto Allegre in Brazil initiated a 'participatory budgeting' exercise allowing citizens to set spending priorities for the discretionary part of a municipal budget. To varying degrees, all these initiatives offered citizens the opportunity to help shape policy, and enabled governments to increase citizen participation.

Citizens' assemblies, however, differ from these engagement exercises in several ways. The main difference is their commitment to real engagement—that is, sharing decision-making with the public, not selling decisions to them. Too often, public engagement is used as window dressing. Janette Hartz-Karp (2007) describes many public consultation projects (where governments 'decide', 'educate', 'announce' and 'defend') with the acronym 'DEAD'. In these cases, governments use public engagement to legitimise decisions they have already made. Little wonder that citizens emerge from these exercises more frustrated and disenchanted than when they started. Citizens' assemblies, however, create social and civic capital, and members gain greater efficacy and awareness of the power of citizens to make change. Assemblies are laboratories for policy experimentation unlike citizens' juries. They ask citizens to create policy *de novo*, and not simply to choose from options put to them.

To enable citizens' assemblies to accomplish this, governments need to be confident in the capability of citizens. The two Canadian governments that initiated citizens' assemblies (British Columbia and Ontario) needed to have faith in ordinary citizens to make good policy. Royal commissions, expert panels and blue ribbon committees are generally seen to have legitimacy. Governments choose to use these bodies for their expertise and independence. Citizens' assemblies also offer these qualities, and, at the same time, provide an opportunity for citizen participation.

As the maxim in the political science literature goes: when it comes to citizens' knowledge about politics, the median is low and the variation is high. If this is true, how then can important decisions be entrusted to a body of ordinary citizens? The answer lies in the amount of learning embedded in these kinds of projects. No other deliberative exercise offers as much learning time as citizens' assemblies. Six weekends—the equivalent of a university-level subject—was spent preparing citizens, many of whom had not been in a classroom environment for years. They responded to learning with enthusiasm. Members created simulations and models, formed discussion groups, debated on their web-based bulletin board, asked for additional reading, and sought out and shared resources on-line. In doing so it also offered a natural experiment in citizens' capability and knowledge.

James Surowiecki's book, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2005), should be mandatory reading for governments and civil servants embarking on civic engagement exercises. In it, he argues that groups of diverse individuals that exercise judgment independently can make better decisions than individual experts. In an allusion to Condorcet's jury theorem, the principle that underlies his theory is that 'if you ask a large enough group of diverse, independent people to make a prediction or estimate a probability, and then average those estimates, the error that each of them makes in coming up with the answer will cancel themselves out' (Surowiecki, 2005, p.10). We think of 'average' as satisfactory, but not exceptional. Surowiecki's theory that the wisdom of a large number is higher than the wisdom of a few, challenges that interpretation. He draws examples from business and science, but the theory is most significant in its application to politics.

Of course crowds *per se* are not necessarily wiser than experts. Surowiecki contends that there are four pre-requisites for the wisdom of crowds—diversity of opinion, independence of thought, decentralised decision-making, and a means of aggregating opinion within the

group. When we think about the qualities of good public deliberation and citizens' assemblies in paricular, we find his four criteria in abundance. Let's examine each of them.

Diversity of opinion is a significant result of randomly selecting members. Formally known as 'sortition', using a lottery to choose participants has a long history. According to Oliver Dowlen (2008), it was first used by the ancient Greeks to select public office holders and was practised in Venice until the eighteenth century, and in the UK as recently as 1834. Random selection means that members not only have a diverse background, but also a diverse range of experiences and assumptions about the project.

Surowiecki's second pre-requisite, independence of thought, is crucial yet difficult to create. Economists studying a problem share many of the same assumptions around issues such as the market; politicians who approach a problem may also see the problem in a certain kind of way. This occurs because of the shared assumptions about what matters and what doesn't. The same kind of thinking characterises public deliberation exercises. They are conducted by experts who guide citizens through different options or present material deemed by the expert as significant. A meaningful deliberative exercise needs to have sources of knowledge that are independent, and this can only be achieved when learning takes place over a long period of time and by the members themselves. What encourages this independence is Surowiecki's third pre-requisite: decentralised decision-making.

Those closest to the problem are more likely to have a good solution to it. It's the same logic underlying a beehive, an anthill or even Wikipedia and Linux computer code. In the case of the latter two, by providing an open source, there is not only collaboration, but also transparency and accountability. Everyone has equal access to contributing knowledge, and errors are corrected by the sheer number of people working on an issue.

The final pre-requisite for wisdom of a crowd is the means of aggregating opinion within the group. This is most often done by means of secret ballot, a show of hands or discussion to create consensus. Interestingly, the citizens' assembly members eschewed these traditional means of aggregating opinion, favouring instead to simply talk. This is the essence of what Benjamin Barber calls strong democracy—a return to consensus-based principles, and an assurance that decisions taken are reached fairly and represent the broadest collection of beliefs. Such an approach obliged members to put themselves in others' positions, and discussions focused on attributes of commonality, and avoided adversarial position taking.

What Surowiecki identified as the characteristics of good public deliberation are the very qualities that are found in citizens' assemblies. These characteristics are not naturally occurring. They need to be nurtured and supported through an intensive and citizen-centred education program that exposes members to diverse views and allows for the creation of a space where even peripheral ideas can be examined and deliberated. In the case of the Ontario and British Columbia citizens' assemblies, this education took place over six weekends of intensive learning from experts in the field and, most importantly, from each other. After they have learned, assemblies also need to take into consideration the views of fellow citizens. This is as much a desire for other citizens to understand the process of learning that took place as much as it is for that decentralised learning to continue. 'Citizens talking to citizens' was the way it was characterised by the assembly members. Theorists like Benjamin Barber argue that this kind of citizen-led political conversation is the essence of re-energising a fatigued body politic. Others, like Dennis Thompson argue that citizens consulting with other citizens is an important way to create legitimacy for the task, and is vital if citizens are to be policy makers.

While an issue such as electoral reform can be technical and complex, it is also a fundamental component of democracy. Citizen-led deliberation works best with issues that are meaningful and important to the community. When we think about it, so many political

problems, stripped of their bureaucratic jargon and veneer, are decisions about principles, judgments about trade-offs and choices among competing values. These are the kinds of matters that are ideally suited to citizens' assemblies. In many ways, a decision about building a highway overpass, is not so different from choosing an electoral system. Each requires careful consideration of costs (material and otherwise) and benefits, and how they should be distributed. Who or what should be privileged? What are the inherent values that matter? What are the consequences of any one choice?

Why should governments change?

There is a common refrain among policy advocates, politicians and academics that the key to halting the ever-quickening decline of democratic participation is re-engaging citizens in democratic life. Governments typically respond by adding some engagement strategy to existing processes. It's the 'add citizens and stir' approach. The problem is that these exercises are often seen as adjuncts to the 'real' policy-making that goes on in our parliaments. What has been argued here is that citizen-engagement exercises need to be bestowed with real power; governments need to believe in the capability of citizens' assemblies to craft well-reasoned policy and allocate resources for learning and for consulting with fellow citizens.

A further change that needs to occur is even more profound. Governments must redress the monopoly legislative institutions have on decision-making. It is time to re-cast the functions of democratic institutions to fit contemporary realities. As Britain's Power Commission found, it isn't the media, political parties, elections or citizens' apathy that account for citizen disenchantment with politics. It is that our contemporary political institutions—read parliament—are not up to the challenge of meeting the needs of a modern, heterogeneous public. Peter MacLeod describes this as 'running 21st century software on 18th century hardware.' Focusing on what worked in the past and what we see as 'natural', ignores the fundamental changes that have occurred. Governments must realise that a vibrant representative democracy and vigorous, meaningful citizen engagement can coexist. In fact, one depends on the other. If we want to transform public opinion to public judgment, we need models such as the citizens' assembly that endow the public with legitimacy and authority, and recognise the true capability of citizens.

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