



International Association  
for Public Participation

# Participation Quarterly

February 2004

Core Values 2003 Special Recognition

## Sharing cups of tea: Preparing a management plan for Myall Lakes National Park

by Carla Rogers

### Challenges we faced

The New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service engaged and worked with the community to develop a Plan of Management for Myall Lakes National Park, in the state of New South Wales, Australia. A POM is a legal document prepared under the 1974 NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act. A plan outlines how a national park will be managed in the years ahead. Once adopted by the State Minister for the Environment, operations must be undertaken in accordance with the plan. This new Plan was to replace one prepared in 1984.

The outstanding natural and cultural values of Myall Lakes National Park have been recognised internationally; the Park is listed as a Ramsar wetland of international importance. However, the story of the park's creation in 1972 and its on-going management is not only one of controversy and divergent community interests, but is also about shared commitments and passion for the area. The public participation program for the project was designed to provide an opportunity for expression and recognition of such views and emotions.

A key challenge of the project was to develop trust and rebuild "burnt bridges" between the agency and the community in an environment where strong feelings of mistrust and alienation from and resentment toward the agency had been expressed. Other challenges in both the design and implementation of the public participation program included:

■ **Legal process**—The process for plan preparation is defined in legislation. How do you enable genuine contributions from the community in decision-making whilst ensuring that the agency retains decision-making authority?

■ **Conflicting views**—Patterns of established use, often inconsistent with the objectives of park management, were entrenched, and strong competing interests and views also existed on how it should be managed.

■ **Resources**—Time and monetary and other resource allocations for the participation program, which had to embrace geographically large park and visitor catchment areas, were constrained.

■ **"Once bitten"**—Some people, both within and outside the agency, had a negative experience with the earlier plan, resulting in mistrust, and did not wish to move from this position.

■ **"Big red trucks"**—Unforeseen issues/circumstances arose during the program that at times complicated, dominated, and/or altered the debate.

■ **"Non-players"**—Some groups that had a pre-defined position elected not to participate in the public participation program, possibly fearing a "manufactured compliance," until formal public exhibition of the draft plan. At that time, they strongly lobbied elected representatives on a pre-defined position, often with the generation of large numbers of form letters.

■ **"Screaming silents"**—Some elected not to be involved in the public participation program or remained "silent" throughout, until the formal public exhibition stage.

■ **"Silent majority"**—These are groups traditionally unrepresented in consultation programs or unable to be represented (e.g., future generations).

■ **"Free riders"**—Some used the participation program primarily to pursue agendas unrelated to the program or agreed charter.

■ **"Changing faces"**—The importance of maintaining continuity in key agency staff was recognised; however, this was not always possible.

Each of the above challenges was considered in both program design and in on-going modification.

### Addressing the challenges

The role or objectives of the public participation program were defined jointly with the public via a community focus group and reflected in a charter that outlined responsibilities for the group and the agency. The objectives and key roles were to:

■ Foster community ownership and commitment to a revised plan through early and on-going public participation and

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# Meet IAP2's new president

**V**ivien Twyford is founder and managing director of Twyford Consulting. She was born in the UK and commenced her working career there before moving first to the US and then to Hong Kong. After settling in Australia in the early 1970s she pursued a career in communication before undertaking academic study part time and earning both a bachelor's degree and an MBA at the University of Wollongong.

Vivien has managed Twyford Consulting since 1988. She works in a range of consulting areas including communication, leadership, business performance improvement, facilitation, mediation, evaluation and review and, of course, public participation. She sees great overlaps in all of these areas and finds that the learning she does in one area usually has immediate application in another. Vivien has designed and implemented community participation programs around some very sensitive and controversial projects. She has assisted clients with the development of public participation policies,

practices and procedures. She has a unique style of facilitation, is an accredited mediator and has been a workplace trainer for many years.

Vivien has lectured on personal and organizational communication to both undergraduate and postgraduate students at university level and facilitated training programs in leadership and communication for clients in both the public and private sector around Australia and New Zealand. She is a licensed IAP2 trainer. She has presented papers at a number of conferences on consultation, evaluation and communication.

Vivien has been a member of IAP2's Board of since 2001. In 2002, she was appointed Vice President, International Affairs. She was also the inaugural president of IAP2's Australasian Chapter. She is a member of the Evaluation Society of Australasia and the Australian Institute of Training and Development. She has recently been made a Fellow of the University of Wollongong. She looks forward to her year as IAP2 president and hopes to assist in the ongoing internationalization of the organization.

## Cups of tea

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through mutual education on issues related to park management and use.

- Provide the public with an opportunity to shape the draft plan and outcomes from the outset of the project.
- Develop a stronger and improved relationship between the community and the agency.
- Keep the agency informed on community use of and concerns associated with the management of MLNP.
- Improve decision-making through better information and a more

collaborative approach.

- Adopt a "best practice" approach to public participation, including continuous improvement and adaptation of the program.

## Pathway to success

The public participation program involved these eight steps.

**Connecting:** Identifying existing and potential relationships; building awareness of the public participation program; and inviting participation through, for example, the media; hosting information sessions; writing to known interest groups, stakeholders, neighbours, and park visitors; attending a variety of community meetings and functions; and using the "snowball sampling" technique number. From this, a stakeholder database was developed.

**Scoping:** Identifying what people valued about the park and what they considered to be key management issues through a series of community workshops. Outcomes informed the design of the public participation program. Options for the program were discussed at the workshops and a preferred option, formation of a Community Focus Group selected.

**Focusing:** Forming a CFG of 20 through application. This comprised community nomination, then selection by NPWS based on pre-defined advertised criteria.

CFG members represented visitors to, and the broad range of interests in, MLNP. A charter was developed and endorsed by CFG participants, including agreed commitments, responsibilities, and programs. The CFG was provided with extensive information on park and management issues, and participated in orientation sessions. The wider community was informed of the program and issues under consideration through information sessions, NPWS newsletters, and through CFG members.

**Searching for solutions:** Producing six Issues and Options Papers based on key themes identified by the community. Each issue paper was posted to CFG members and subsequently debated through workshops with the CFG every other month. Merits of workshop techniques were evaluated at the end of the workshop and methods were adapted. Relevant state government agencies participated in workshops. An internal series of staff workshops were held concurrently.

**Informing:** Informing the wider community of progress through newsletters, media, agency attendance at more than 100 community meetings, field days, and information sessions within and outside of the park.

**Integrating:** Developing a Review Plan influenced by feedback and discussion at

## Participation Quarterly

### IAP2

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**Submissions:** We encourage all IAP2 members to share news and information about the field of public participation in *Participation Quarterly*. For submission guidelines and deadlines, visit us online.

# Meeting IAP2's Core Values

**The public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives.**

The participation program for the Myall Lakes National Park Plan of Management was designed to enable meaningful and effective public participation from the inception, through the development, and during the implementation of the plan. This included the provision for people to suggest and shape solutions that were ultimately embraced in the plan. Provisions have been made for on-going public involvement in park management and an on-going role for the CFG.

**Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.**

Given the level of distrust within the community about the agency and some cynicism about the value of participation programs, it was imperative to establish at the outset the role of the participation program and participants. Discussion and clarification of people's expectations preceded the development of objectives for the program. Parameters of the program and legal responsibilities of the agency were clearly defined. How participant's contributions could shape the plan was defined through a charter with a corresponding commitment from the agency to provide feedback on how contributions influenced decisions. Feedback was provided throughout the process on how each issue raised by an

individual, either within a submission or workshop, was responded to by the agency.

**The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the process needs of all participants.**

The participation program was designed on the principles of representativeness, inclusiveness, and accessibility. The public nominated representatives to the consultative group. Selection was based on the extent an applicant was able to represent key interests. Regular newsletters were sent to all people on the mailing list, providing updates on the process and opportunities for input. Workshop papers were made available and more than 100 submissions

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external and staff workshops and over 100 community submissions on Issue Papers. A report outlining NPWS response to community comment, via submissions and workshops, was prepared and made publicly available.

**Reviewing:** Producing a draft plan after considerable internal review by agency staff. Because ministerial approval was required for formal exhibition of the draft plan, this document was discussed with the CFG, but not distributed.

**Evaluating:** Exhibiting the draft plan for five months. Comments to the draft were evaluated by a State Advisory Council to the minister and recommendations for changes to the plan were made. The public participation program was reviewed and evaluated with the CFG. The plan was adopted and launched by the minister with the contributions of the CFG acknowledged.

## What makes our story special?

Our pathway and the techniques used demonstrate a method of applying best practice in public participation, as defined by the values of IAP2. The project suggests solutions for many challenges common to

public participation programs. The pathway and many of the techniques adopted were both fresh and innovative. The adoption of a process of continuous improvement to workshop technique and approach, in consultation with workshop participants, was especially valuable. Finally, a POM is a legal document. This type of consultative process was a first for the agency in preparing a legal document and for similar legal documents within other agencies. The approach provides the practice of public participation with a new dimension.

## Project effectiveness

The consultation program commenced in February 2000. The NSW Minister for the Environment launched the revised Myall Lakes Plan of Management on 1 November 2002. A number of aspects attest to the effectiveness of the project.

**Timeframe:** The project took just over two years from commencement to adoption by the minister. Most plans of management of this scale and complexity, without a similar level of community consultation, take a minimum of four years from commencement to adoption. Key factors in the adoption of the MLNP plan were the clear and transparent process, community support of the process itself, and a general

understanding of how outcomes were achieved.

**On-going community involvement:** At the ministerial launch and celebration of the plan in November 2002, the majority of CFG members were present and expressed satisfaction with the public participation process and a keen interest in on-going participation in plan implementation. A formal evaluation of the public participation program has been conducted with CFG participants and some observers, with extension to the wider community planned.

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## Correction

IAP2 apologizes for incorrectly labeling the article "Community engagement – Not again? Sharing challenges and solutions" in the Fall 2003 PQ as the successful 2003 award submission from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service Australia. The article outlined the findings of a research trip undertaken by Carla Rogers, a NSW NPWS employee, as part of a Winston Churchill Fellowship.

## Core values

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were received from the general public to the papers. These submissions formed an important input to the preparation of the draft plan. During plan development, the agency attended more than 100 community meetings and held information sessions and field days. More than 1,000 submissions were made during the draft plan's exhibition and a report outlining the agency's response to each issue within each submission was made available to the public.

The process was designed based on the principles of transparency and accessibility to people with a range of skills and literacies. This was achieved through utilising a mix of consultative methods, (e.g., field-based inspections and discussions, techniques relying primarily on verbal skills, and smaller group work to draw out quieter participants). "Shared commitments" were also established at the beginning of the consultative program that included:

- The agency would provide each participant with the information required to effectively participate in workshops.
- Workshops would be conducted so that each participant felt comfortable and had an opportunity to participate.
- Views and opinions would be respected and personal attacks were not acceptable.

While Aboriginal groups participated and were represented on the CFG, a separate participation program was conducted concurrently with the Local Aboriginal Land Council. This program included a mix of formal and informal consultative methods such as field-based inspections and discussion meetings.

**The public participation process seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected.**

An initial database was established from 15 years of file/record history of those expressing concern or interest in

park management issues. Letters advised of the program, sought interest, and invited contribution. Similar information was conveyed through the general media (news, radio, television, flyer distribution) and through agency staff at key locations in the park, community meetings, and other public locations (e.g., shows, exhibitions). From this, the initial database was expanded. Invitations were then extended to a workshop to assist in defining the participation program purpose and design.

**The public participation process involves participants in defining how they participate.**

At a community workshop, several options for the participatory program design were assessed. The outcome was a combination of the options presented. This provided opportunities for direct participation via a community consultative group, participation in other workshops, representation to the park planner, or indirectly through a CFG member. The charter for the consultative group was developed with and endorsed by the group. At the workshop conclusion, each was evaluated with the group using the

Focused Conversation and progressively modified. This ensured a process of continuous improvement.

**The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.**

Feedback was provided at each workshop about how input/comments were likely to be addressed and/or incorporated in the draft plan. All input was documented. A report discussed issues raised, how they were addressed in the draft plan, and why. It was made available with the draft plan.

**The public participation process provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.**

At the outset, participants identified the issues to be addressed through the program, which then formed the basis for program design. It also was utilised to define the information required to provide answers. Detailed studies were commissioned on vegetation and cultural heritage. Information was provided to the CFG through comprehensive issue papers distributed at least two weeks before each scheduled workshop date.

### Relationship-building strategies

**Early agreement:** Consultation program and charter for focus group developed with and agreed to by community.

**Commitment:** Public participation program prepared at the outset with community input and the program adhered to.

**Diverse representation:** Participants represented a cross-section of visitors and stakeholders.

**Flexibility:** Concurrent public participation program designed to encourage and enable participation of Aboriginal groups.

**"Sharing cups of tea:"** Planning made sure that the setting and time at events/workshops allowed for informal and one-on-one discussion before and after meetings.

**Visiting people on their turf:** This

ranged from interest group meetings to visiting people at campgrounds within the Park. Park and Regional staff connected with people outside of formal meetings or meetings directly related to the POM, such as participation in field days, community meetings and forums;

**Field trips:** Participants visited areas of particular interest, enabling people to share their knowledge and express their experience/feelings about the area;

**Celebration of successes:** Contributions from the community were acknowledged throughout the project;

**Adaptive program:** There was on-going review of consultation techniques with participants and adaptation of the program in response; and

Working with other state government agencies (eg Waterways Authority NSW in developing a cooperative approach to management.

# Why doesn't the government respond to the participating public?

by Mike Williams

*(Editor's note: This is the second in the series of articles on public participation in the United Kingdom as part of IAP2's look at public participation around the globe. IAP2 welcomes articles from practitioners and researchers about the state of the practice in their corners of the world.)*

To answer this question it is necessary to understand the reasons for why the government and state are willing to engage groups in dialogue, and to respond to the issues of certain groups and not others. This, in turn, requires an understanding of the primary motivations of the democratic nation state.

The emergence and proliferation of the nation state has been a defining feature of the last 150 years of world history (Hall et al., 1992). The state is the most powerful group within a given area, a group that is able to have itself recognised as the dominant and/or sovereign political authority. Once established, the state is perpetually engaged in an attempt to consolidate its position, and in some cases, to absorb or control other territories (Bobbio, 1995; Held, 1996). This motivates it to use violence, and technologies and resources secured by that violence, to impose social forms, which reproduce the power of the state and realise its projects (Foucault, 1986: 141-9; Giddens, 1991: 15; p.3; McNay, 1998: 220).

Although the state is capable of developing "political strategies" not necessarily reducible to any particular set of interests (Held, 1996: 26), it inevitably depends on some groups and individuals to implement its impositions. The state's desire to co-opt motivates it to engage certain groups in dialogue and make decisions in their favour.

In a representative democracy, the elected government guides the objectives and actions of the state. In so doing it takes into account the wishes of the

electorate. It is often argued that the popular vote ensures the state acts in the best interests of all the people. The impositions of the state are said to be the outcome of a settlement between the people.

## Political inequalities

However the representative state ensures two political inequalities. Firstly, the citizen, if not an elected representative, is excluded from the policy formulating and sanctioning mechanisms assumed by representatives. The second inequality is the product of the first. A person or group is able to influence the government or a local state agency only if they have access to some resource that the government or agency wants and cannot get at less cost or at all, or they pose a serious threat to the state or its projects.

Those who hold no resources or pose no threat are unlikely to influence the state. It is arguable that the popular vote lessens the extent of this inequality. The government's perception of the electorate inevitably influences its actions. However, it rarely looks to please the whole electorate, but tactically chooses to please some groups at the expense of others.

Minority and nonvoter interests are likely to be overlooked in the interest of significant voting groups. Where the political system allows representatives to be elected by only a majority of those who vote, rather than a majority of those eligible to vote, this diminishes the proportion of people whose interests politicians need to take into account. The lower the turnout, the more this is so. The Labour party had to court only 25 percent of the British electorate to win the last general election; only 59 percent of the electorate voted. The vote gives political capital to a number of individuals who might otherwise have none. But to the extent that equality is afforded to people through the vote, then it is in deciding the constituents of a system that ensures two

significant political inequalities.

With this analysis behind us, we can now begin to answer the question. Under New Labour the public is invited to participate in discussions about how politicians could, should, or will take decisions. This form of participation does not challenge but maintains elected representative's exclusive right to formulate and sanction public policy. The only groups who influence the state continue to be those who have access to some resource that the state wants, or who pose some kind of threat to the state.

Given that participatory forums are often established to engage the poor, disabled, and marginalised, they are unlikely to fall into the two categories just mentioned, and are therefore unlikely to influence the state. Secondly, participatory forums tend to, in practice, constitute a minute percentage of the electorate. The government is unlikely to respond to their wishes, because in so doing it may act against the wishes of the much larger non-participating public. This is all the more likely when one considers that the voting public, mass media, and political opposition commonly hold the government and not the "public it listened to" responsible for any bad decision (Meadowcroft, 2001).

Many criticise the notion of handing power to unrepresentative forums as being undemocratic. Furthermore, a responsive government, (i.e., one that is prepared to admit that it has no fixed agenda and/or which is prepared to deviate from its original agenda) is often interpreted as being weak, unorganized, and lacking in conviction. Hence in his study of more than 600 councilors, Copus (1999: 85) found the majority believing that they and not the public should make decisions on local needs and priorities.

In summary, although successive governments have encouraged public-

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government dialogue and emphasised responsiveness, the bases from which participants have been able to negotiate, and therefore the outcomes of the negotiations, have not changed. The relatively powerless continue to have little chance of influencing the government or local state agencies through participation in dialogue, despite the increased opportunities for such dialogue.

On the issue of citizen centred and responsive planning processes, the government and local state agencies have proven that on many occasions and in many places they have yet to practice what they preach. The absence of a thought through model of practice, which ensures that providers act in line with the wishes of the participating public, suggests that the government is tentatively exploring the meaning and consequences of citizen centred government. Its tentativeness is manifest in doublethink around the issue of responsiveness, and not only in the ways outlined earlier in this article.

The government has encouraged local agencies to be responsive to the public, but at the same time it has reserved the right to speak on behalf of the public for the local authority and/or itself. This begs the question, does government responsiveness mean government responding to the participating public, government responding to its own priorities or local agencies responding to central government? This provides a number of reasons why central government encouragement will not in itself bring about a more responsive government and state. A political motivation to “enforce” responsiveness is necessary.

## Policy options

The first policy option is the delegated decision-making model of participation. It is based on an acceptance of the notion that the elected government and local authorities have the unique right to set agendas and decide policy matters on behalf of the public. However, they should also seek to give the participating public

a role in decision-making. They should do this by delegating certain decisions within otherwise pre-defined agendas to citizen target groups, a particular community of citizens.

Each decision delegated would be accompanied by a number of decision options—all of which would be feasible and politically acceptable. A mechanism that affords equality to citizens in determining the outcome of the decision made by the CTG would be identified prior to participation. The authority would ensure that all those who wished to participate were enabled to do so, rather than leaving it to the already active. The decision-making procedure would be managed by an organisation that was independent of the delegating authority and that did not have a vested interest in the outcome.

Implementing the DDM model could be the next step for central government and local organisations in the path towards citizen centred planning processes. Authorities have already been urged to develop practices similar to the DDM model. Guidance on drawing up long-term care charters states, “For users to have faith in the charter it will be important to make clear how they can influence the content of the charter and how this relates to operational policy” (DETR, 1999a: para.10.3). “Enabling the electorate to determine or influence policy on a specific issue” where the authority is, “handing over a decision or influence to those affected” is identified as a legitimate option for local authorities (DETR, 1998b: para.4.11).

Use of the DDM model could be the key to local authorities meeting the challenge laid down by central government to “develop a capacity to lead without insisting on control” (DETR, 1998a: para.7.2). The DDM model could be used to involve a range of stakeholders and would allow organisations to overcome two commonly reported drawbacks of participation - the retardation of the policy process and the raising of unrealistic expectations (Lowndes et al., 2001). Furthermore, it would give local people the feeling that they had influenced

government decision-making, and it would allow local agencies to show central government that they had responded to local people.

The DDM model could be used as part of a strategy to allow citizens to take more decisions. This pertains to Hirst’s (1993: 117) vision of associationalism, which is to “decentralise and devolve as much of the affairs of society as possible to publicly funded but voluntary and self-governing associations.” The state would move away from providing services to regulating service providers. It would ensure that standards of provision were met, and that the internal governance of service providers was consistent with democratic norms (Hirst, 1993).

The second and more radical option would be to institute a form of participation as government rather than participation as dialogue with government, or local participatory government. Although set within the context of a representative democratic centralised state, it is based on the idea that increased participation in dialogue with local state agencies will not lead to influence when the bases from which participants are able to negotiate remain unequal. It is the bases that must be changed.

Therefore, this model proposes to eradicate, at the local level, the political inequality between political non-representatives and representatives. It does this by ensuring that:

- All citizens can articulate and define possible policies.
- All citizens have a formal vote in determining which policies should be sanctioned.

Furthermore, local policies would have to receive the support of a significant majority, perhaps somewhere around 70 percent of eligible voters rather than of actual voters. This feature would counteract the tendency under local representative government for politicians to take into account only significant voter groups, or other powerful interests.

Those keen to develop and see particular policies sanctioned would need to engage with a greater number of the

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electorate than under the current system. When they found that some members of the community had different agendas, they would be forced into making concessions either through altering the policy they were proposing or accommodating alternative policies.

In short, individuals and groups, driven by a selfish desire to further their own interests, would be motivated to engage and deliberate with and understand and act in the wider interests of the community. This is in contrast to the current liberal representative system of democracy in which individuals seeking to further their interests, battle each other to impose their views on the state or local authority (Parekh, 1993).

LPG would require an institution or institutions that would provide access to processes of policy formulation, deliberation, and sanctioning. These institutions would offer access to information; venues for discussion; and office, administrative, and legal resources. Mosse (1995: 144) argues that participatory institutions are “constituted, negotiated and challenged in the context of existing structures of power.” There are likely to be individuals who by way of their relative poverty in spheres of life such as education, income and status, find themselves effectively barred from participating.

It would be important that the institutions develop a continuing internal critique of their policies for ensuring basic standards of access, with the assumption being that improvements could always be made. The institutions would also need to organise the procedure through which local communities voted for a proposal.

## Questions

Under LPG, the central government would allow local people to act independently of the government’s interests. However, if the central state would not also be transformed by the participatory ideal, then how would it relate to LPG? To what extent for example

could LPGs deal with matters concerning monetary policy, taxation, redistributive and welfare measures, the workplace, industry, schools, and hospitals? One possibility would be for central government to fund LPGs. Each LPG would focus on what it could add to what central government provides. When an LPG could not reach a consensus, the money would go back to central government.

Under LPG, once local people had decided on a policy, the policy would need to be implemented. This might be done by a locally elected executive or by bureaucrats employed by the government. Alternatively, the policy itself might specify who should implement it.

## Critiques

It is often argued that people do not have the inclination or ability to participate in participatory government (Holden, 1993). However, under the model outlined, when there was a lack of interest, either no policy would be implemented and the status quo would prevail, or the state would make the decision. A lack of interest would not be a problem. Secondly, there are many contemporary examples of people engaging in participatory activity, which puts a lie to this notion (see Switzerland, Italy, and some US states in Budge, 1996).

The huge amount of work expended by people involved in local political, voluntary, and civil society also suggests otherwise. Furthermore, the current lack of interest in initiatives that go under the name of participatory democracy can be explained by the lack of power afforded by them. The participatory system proposed here would offer people formal rights to determine public policies. A second critique is that participatory government would lead to the rule of activists (Holden, 1993). This applies to any system of rule.

Some might retort that under representative democracy the activists are representative and under a participatory system they are not. This critique rests on the idea that participatory government means giving exclusive policy-making rights to a band of self-selecting citizens. However, the system offered here extends the right to make and sanction policy to all citizens.

## Conflict

Local participatory government would draw resources away from the state, reducing its effectiveness in promoting national economic growth. Abrahamson (1977: 208), a staunch advocate of participatory democracy, defines the dilemma. “It is hard to deny that centralization, concentration of resources, increasing expert functions... very often lead to gains in efficiency.” But the ethos behind participatory democracy is to ask “whose efficiency” or if we are to consider that efficiency, always presupposes an outcome, “whose outcome?”

Centralised decision-making is effective precisely because it subordinates the will of others and incorporates them into its projects. “Strong government” is what happens when a government has enough power to insert everyone and everything into its agenda, regardless of what others feel (Marr, 1995: 16).

Many people value living in a relatively wealthy and powerful country, both of which are the consequences of a centralisation of power and a number of government impositions. Ascending the ranks and exercising the impositions of hierarchical organisations are also valued. For this reason, the values of participatory democracy and political equality are often held in abeyance in day-to-day living.

Nevertheless, support for them continues to bubble under the dominant discourses of our age. The following comment was made by the Secretary of State for Scotland (Reid, 2000):

Anyone who thinks that the state in itself can solve all problems or that the state enshrines all compassion, all goodness falls into error. What we have to try and do is to use the state to enable individuals and groups in what we could call civil society to accomplish an element of their own liberation and their own advancement because the state does not know the best ways of doing everything. And people in localities and communities and groups very often understand their own problems better, they can think up their own solutions more appropriately and

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# Public influence on government decision-making: A review of the literature

by Mike Williams

Fifty-three empirical studies in the UK, published between 1987 and 2001 were reviewed, to establish the extent to which the public has influenced decision-making and the extent to which local lead agencies have established mechanisms ensuring public influence. Relevant studies were identified on the Baths Information and Data Services International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, in the most recent journals at the University of Sheffield, and in the bibliographies of relevant articles. A number of studies were cases based on one or several examples of public participation.

Others were reports on practice across national or regional areas.

Of all these papers, Lowndes et al.'s (2001), "census of participation" gave the best perspective on national trends in public participation. The census data was derived from a survey of 332 local authorities—85 percent of all local authorities, and 11 detailed case studies of local authority practice. They asked local authorities to describe the effect of participation initiatives on final decisions (2001: 214). Twenty percent of authorities indicated that they felt the public had had a strong influence on decisions. A number of other studies included in this review

reported that the public had influenced:

- The development of local strategic plans such as community care plans (Means & Lart, 1994: 29; Boaz & Hayden, 2000: 5); local primary care plans; health commissioning plans (McCabe & Ross, 2000: 181); and local health strategies (Barnes & Bennett-Emslie, 1997).
- The development of needs assessment forms (Barnes & McIvor, 1999: 15).
- The specifications of contracts used by local purchasers of welfare provision (Harrison, 1993; Raynes, 2000: 73).

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tailor made to themselves so the state should be, wherever possible, an enabler.

With enough support and will power the values of participatory democracy, inherent in this politician's statement, could be used to inform real change.

## Conclusion

Public participation under New Labour and Conservative governments has meant involving the public in discussions about how the government and state agencies should, could, and will make decisions. To the extent that this method leads to the participating public gaining greater control of decisions that affect their lives, then it is through decision-makers agreeing to act in accordance with what they say.

However, the literature suggests that often decision-makers do not act in accordance with what the participating public says. This article has argued that this is because the democratic nation state tends to be influenced only by groups:

- 1) that possess resources that the state wants and cannot get at less cost or at all
- 2) that threaten the state and its projects, and/or

3) that are made up of a large number of voters.

The participating public rarely constitutes one of these three groups; therefore, it rarely influences local state agencies or the government. If the participating public is to influence, then the government has to enforce a thought-through model of participation that guarantees local state agencies act in accordance with the public's expressed wishes.

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## Public Influence

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- Increases in service provision (Lupton, 1995a, pp39-40).
- Alterations to existing services (Boaz & Hayden, 2000: 23; DoH, 2001a: 7) or the details of plans for future services (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000: 499).
- Establishing new services (Barnes & Wistow, 1994: 535; Lupton, 1995a: 9; Barnes & McIvor, 1999, pp14-15) and programmes (Lupton, 1995b: 9).
- The layout and design of surveys and publicity leaflets (Barnes & Bennett-Emslie, 1997).

Four caveats should be introduced at this point. Most studies on participation, and thus reports of the public influencing decision-makers, were based on interviews with or surveys of representatives of local authorities or other agencies. Given that representatives may distort events, knowingly or otherwise, to present themselves or their organisation in a favourable light, findings premised on their views should be treated with caution (Foddy; 1993; Fielding & Thomas, 2001).

The tendency for discrepancy between what is reported and what actually happened is all the more likely because the representative is unlikely to have drawn on independent systematic research on participation within their organisation. Research on influence is scarce and usually only of academic concern.

Secondly, no study identified what it understood by the notion of "influence." This means that claims of public influence may be contestable. A few studies implied that a similarity between the public's views and decisions made by the organisation constituted influence. Where this was the case, only one study questioned (Weeks, 2000) and none established whether the similarity was a coincidence or due to the public voice being taken into account.

Thirdly, where studies had established that local people had influenced plans, few investigated whether those plans, and more importantly, the parts influenced by local people, had been implemented. Fourthly few studies investigated why

decision-makers were influenced on the occasions that they were. Was it because:

- They felt the public had come up with the best way of resolving the issue?
- They were acting in accordance with the principle of citizen control (i.e., even if they disliked the public's idea they would still seek to realise it anyway)?
- They were seeking to co-opt the participating public on a given policy (i.e., giving them a little influence in return for their acceptance of the overall policy)?

Although the evidence suggests the participating public has influenced decision-making it also suggests that on any given occasion it is more likely not to influence decision-making. Eighty percent of authorities responding to the census did not indicate that the participating public influenced decision-making (Lowndes et al., 2001).

In a survey of "best practices," local authorities found three-quarters failing to link consultation results with decision-making processes (Audit Commission, 1999b: 41). A national survey of how local authorities involved the public in setting local standards and targets found that although a number had communicated to and asked for the public's commendation of their ideas, few had asked for the public's ideas of what the targets should be (Audit Commission, 1999a: 48).

In 1993, the Office for Public Management found that although there were a number of user and career involvement initiatives operational in the forty local authorities they reviewed, major changes in service provision resulting from that involvement could only be identified in a few authorities. Better Government for Older People was a government-led pilot programme designed to listen to the views of older people (BGOP Steering Group, 2000: 10). Its principal goal was to develop strategies for an ageing population through 28 local authority pilots (BGOP Steering Group, 2000: 10).

An acknowledged limitation of the programme was the inability of pilots to translate "listening into action" (Hayden & Boaz, 2000: 27). Other studies have

reported that although the public has influenced relatively minor issues, they have not influenced significant ones (Bewley & Glendinning, 1994: 16; Means & Lart, 1994; Foley & Martin, 2000: 481; Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Martin & Boaz, 2000: 51; Abbott et al., 2000; Riseborough & Sribjilanin, 2000: 13). Participants are commonly reported to have felt unable to influence major decisions (Barnes & Wistow, 1994; Burns et al., 1994; Hayden & Boaz, 2000).

The literature suggests that few authorities have created mechanisms that ensure the participating public influences decision-making. Only one initiative referred to in the literature was explicitly intended to ensure public influence. That was a health authority consumer strategy that aimed to "open decision-making to influence by the public" (Lupton & Taylor, 1997, appendix).

Literature on participation also suggests central government impositions often leave local authorities with little room to delegate decisions to the participating public. Authorities must meet central government requirements for organisational change, service improvements, and efficiency measures within strict and short deadlines. In so doing they struggle to respond to local concerns (Martin & Gaster, 1993: 48; Means & Lart, 1994; Goss & Miller, 1995; Wilson, 1999; Braye, 2000: 22).

Some BGOP pilots described themselves as, "a 'battleground' in the struggle to be both citizen centred and to meet government expectations" (Hayden & Bennington, 2000: 32). Even where local authorities have discretion, often they do not use it to respond to the voices of the participating public or to delegate decision-making to local people. Evaluators of the Best Value and BGOP pilot programmes argued "citizen centred government requires a greater capacity to take account of citizens needs and priorities than many local authorities have so far demonstrated" (Martin & Boaz, 2000: 53). The BGOP evaluators claimed that inter-agency partnerships were, "not looking creatively enough at opportunities for joint decision-

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See PUBLIC INFLUENCE, page 11

# Collaboration through real community ownership

## The Jacks Gully Community Monitoring Committee

by Paul Cosgrave

It's not uncommon to achieve local public participation over several years through independent facilitation, but there's no guarantee of consistent collaboration when tough issues come up. Even with agreed protocols, carefully managed processes can splinter or leak.

The key, I think, is to take the risk of giving real ownership to stakeholders and to trust them with the resulting responsibility. Nowhere has this been clearer for me than in a process I've been privileged to facilitate for three years.

The New South Wales government's waste management agency, Waste Service NSW, decided in 1991 that its line of business conferred an ethical duty to involve local people and businesses near its 11 landfills and transfer stations, recognizing that decisions taken by those affected by them are likely to be better decisions.

What is particularly interesting about the Jacks Gully landfill process, however, is that it was a sleeper for several years. Some consultations started as dispute resolutions right away, but many had no immediate issues to resolve. In these cases, there was a tendency for residents to say, "Why should we come out at night and talk to you. There's nothing to fight about!" This was tackled through a planned series of work programs, so that if serious issues arose later, a pre-existing climate of trust built on effective personal relationships would generate collaboration.

For instance, the agency provided environmental monitoring data for regular evaluation and inducted householders into safety procedures for unannounced inspections. And every process had its own "community information repository," administered through local libraries, making proceedings and data publicly available.

So when in 1998, serious odours suddenly came onto the agenda, the

established process at Jacks Gully simply moved up a couple of gears to address them. And that's what we've been mainly talking about for the last five years. The initial odours were caused by solid garbage disguised in green waste and this was rectified relatively quickly. However, the issue was up and running in a locality where state housing releases were progressively moving into a traditional market gardening area with diverse odour sources. The agency said that although it didn't feel responsible for many of the odours, it would promote a more inclusive business participation to debate wider community concerns about odours, even though this meant enlarging the process's terms of reference.

The agency listened, worked with councils on local education campaigns, installed methane gas wells to divert odorous gas for electricity production and embarked on the longer term objective of alternative, enclosed waste processing. For their part, community representatives formed a sub-group of the consultation process and undertook to network through the community, which was clear in its view that it sought odour resolution, not facility closure.

When necessary, the group as a whole drew on information from elsewhere (e.g., another local council, a gas company, the landfill contractor). Later, the regulatory and land selling agencies became closely involved, too, and disclosures on the latter's marketing material to new home buyers were established. Smells came and went and spirits lifted and sank, but over time odours diminished noticeably and a deal between the waste and land sales agencies was negotiated, with strong community input, to finance ongoing alternative garbage processing.

Then, just last year, residents became alarmed over possible health impacts from odours when local school children complained of headaches and nausea. At this point, the government health

agency was invited to participate, playing a supportive and catalytic role from the outset, while remaining even-handed. It reviewed literature, reported to residents, and undertook a local health survey funded by agencies, the local council, and an adjacent private sector compost producer that had seen the benefit of open dialogue.

The survey invited full community input through press ads and proactive media contact. As this is written, the final report of the health study has just been released, finding no adverse health effects but significant lifestyle impacts. In the foreseeable future, residents will benefit from a cessation of solid waste land filling and its associated odours.

Why has this process worked? The initial decision by the waste agency to risk meaningful involvement for residents undoubtedly created an early climate of confidence. The group's demonstrated ability to successfully resolve problems without personal rancour was not in doubt when the odour problem arose. The willingness of all parties to consider creative options generated solutions which otherwise might not have been apparent. Agencies were prepared to give time and money to these ideas, and to meet informally with residents between meetings. And the community itself placed its trust in a small number of hard-working representatives who produced their own local newsletter and liaised with householders and elected politicians.

**(Note: Cosgrave is a facilitator, mediator, photographer, broadcaster and writer, based in the blue mountains of NSW, near Sydney, Australia. E-mail him at [paul@photoswordspeople.com](mailto:paul@photoswordspeople.com))**

# Upcoming training

## February 2004

### Sydney, Australia

Feb. 25-26, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

### Durban, South Africa

Feb. 19-20, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

### Pretoria, South Africa

Feb. 26-27, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

## March 2004

### Sydney, Australia

March 9 – 10, Techniques for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

March 30, Effective Communication for Public Participation (one-day course)

March 31, Facilitation for Public Participation Practitioners

### Minneapolis, Minnesota

March 25 – 26, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

### Madison, Wisconsin

March 30 – 31, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

## May 2004

### Melbourne, Australia

May 17 - 18, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

### Saratoga Springs, New York

May 24 – 28, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

May 26, Effective Communication for Public Participation

May 27 – 28, Techniques for Public Participation (two-day course)

### Johannesburg, South Africa

May 13-14, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

### Cape Town, South Africa

June 3-4, Planning for Effective Public Participation (two-day course)

## Public Influence

*continued from page 9*

making with older people on matters where the local authority is well within its power to delegate authority" (Hayden & Boaz, 2000: 33).

Meadowcroft (2001) researched Liberal Democrat-controlled authorities seeking to build local consensus from competing local interests through processes of deliberation. He found that authorities continued to retain a corporate view of the best policy outcomes, often based upon professional advice, which took precedence over local preferences. In summary, the available evidence gives examples of local people influencing decision-makers. It also suggests that more often than not, the participating public does not influence local agencies.

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