

Just Participating – a paper prepared for the Local Government Community Services Association Biennial Conference *Just and Vibrant Communities*, July 2003

By way of background, I did some research for two papers as part of my work within the NSW Parliament. One of these is *A Suburb Too Far? Urban Consolidation in Sydney*. It is available electronically through the NSW Parliament website – follow the prompts to ‘Library’ and ‘Publications’ or there may be some copies left in the Conference Bookshop. The website address is www.parliament.nsw.gov.au. The other paper is for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association on public participation processes used by parliaments around the world.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the NSW Parliament for my participation in this Conference.

What I found in the research may not astonish or astound any of you, but may be a useful way of opening up discussion about what constitutes a *just* participatory process. Also, if we are to be true to the themes of this conference, what is it that ensures we are not just ‘going through the motions’ with participatory processes, or, what makes them vibrant and alive?

Hogwarts-on-Thames! This is the title attributed by ‘unkind’ commentators to the House of Commons in London – or so said former Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons, Robin Cook. It refers not so much to the magical qualities of the House, as to the perception that it is musty, fusty and more than a little out of touch with its people. Robin Cook argued strenuously for the modernisation of the House, in its language, participatory practices and use of media, but more about that later.

Similarly, a former Speaker of the National Assembly of France, Phillippe Seguin, commented that if someone who lived in France between 1830 and 1848 came back today, the one place they would recognise is the National Assembly. As well as the décor being the same, he suggests that the methods of work, methods of expression, organisation of discussions and debates are still the same.

I am not at all proposing to eliminate tradition. The point that both these men and I make is that society today is quite different – it is not just an electorate made up of a limited group of (male) people who had wealth, were educated and had easy access to the parliamentary milieu.

We need to be designing our methods of participation responsively.

In my brief foray into public participation processes within Australian parliaments I found considerable use of fairly conventional participatory processes, and a few surprises. At one level, conventional participatory processes, done well, can be quite satisfactory. Parliaments, like Local Governments, face constraints of time and other resources to involve members of the public.

But the challenge is, to ensure the participation is *just*. Thus, conventional methodologies used by parliaments like Committee Inquiries, stakeholder consultations, surveys and public education programs each have the capacity to be more participatory.

Parliaments around the country have, for example, taken Committee inquiries 'on the road' and in some cases 'off the road' to remote communities and/or indigenous communities. Culturally appropriate settings have been adopted for consultations. In celebrated occasions, these include beneath a baob tree!

On occasion Parliamentary Committees have provided assistance to people from remote areas unable to meet the cost of participation. Video and audio conferencing have been used in remote locations. In some instances, including in indigenous communities, they have provided interpreter services to assist participation. Evidence and reports have been provided in braille, and on occasion, oral copies of evidence have been provided. But the applications of methodologies, even *within* Parliaments has been *ad hoc*.

Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff need to be encouraged to participate in cultural awareness training, stakeholder identification and in public participatory processes. They need to be encouraged to engage community participation practitioners to undertake properly resourced and planned participatory exercises, not merely rely upon a 'can-do' approach to participation, based upon aeons of their own experiences of chairing public meetings. No offence, but there are occasions when 'chairmanship' simply reinforces all the worst aspects of public participation gone to the dogs (that is, rewarding articulate people, cunning or pushy behaviour, sexism, racism and ageism!) Some people have only had limited exposure to types of participation processes – I use the illustration to suggest that we can all benefit from engaging in 'lifelong learning'.

The barriers arise when we recognise that *just* participatory processes need to extend the *opportunity* to participate to wider populations. Just how those populations are identified and how far parliaments or Local Governments will extend the process are not only time and cash-resource constrained, but rely upon daredness to engage with innovation.

It is in this regard, Moreland Council's (Victoria) E-Discussion Forum opens up new opportunities for participation to online discussion in an atmosphere of trust (registering participants are asked not to abuse the discussion process by 'stacking' the chat-room). Many Councils, like Sutherland Council (NSW) now provide electronic links to Council business papers. Wellington Council, New Zealand, calls for e-submissions on current issues, and uses these to help inform policy directions. With these few examples, I am not by any means suggesting that electronic media should replace good, solid face-to-face participatory processes. They are but part of the suite of tools to be employed.

Here are some references to effective participation processes:

- www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au

The website has examples and 'how-to' sheets on basic guidelines for community forums, group work techniques, negotiation skills, conflict management, etc which can be downloaded

- *Common Ground and Common Sense: an action handbook*, Rosemary Nicholson, Peter Stephenson, Valerie A Brown and Kathy Mitchell, (eds), Commonwealth of Australia, 2002. (The handbook contains current case studies. It is approximately A\$25 is available from the Co-op Bookshop at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury, phone 61+ 0245 701 370 for details).
- Local Government Community Services Association of Australia – visit website for examples of current good practice:
www.lgcsaa.org.au/benchmarking
- Moreland City Council, Victoria, Consultation Framework and E-discussion groups – visit website:
www.moreland.vic.gov.au/publications/consultationstrategy.htm
 - Wellington City Council New Zealand – visit website for description of on-line forums:
www.wcc.govt.nz/policy/current/consultation/
 - Blue Mountains City Council *Map for Action Towards a More Sustainable Blue Mountains and Blue Mountains – Our Future: How We Did It* (discussion of the community participation process)
 - Kate Burton's *Community Participation in Parliamentary Committees: Opportunities and Barriers*, Research Paper 10, 1999, which identifies a range of participatory methods used in parliamentary committees.

I think that there will be a lot more discussion to follow these few words on what needs to be done to work up **checklists** for 'just' participation, and what can be done to ensure vibrancy remains in community participation. I have long held, for example, that community participation should be fun. I don't mean 'Pollyanna-on-steroids', but crikey, if it is all a drag we as practitioners will not be coming back for more and neither will community members.

Perhaps we could consider these elements as the common ground between parties in just participation. The 'common ground' or contract should establish:

- dialogue between the parties in the process
- an understanding of the respective motivations for the consultation
- a tacit acceptance of the 'rules for discussion' including respect for diverse opinion
- tolerance of difference and fair allocation of time to express one's views
- effort to ensure the process is inclusive and fair to all parties who want to participate
- an established and agreed process for using the products of the discussion
- mechanisms for feedback

- capacity for evaluating the process
- human and capital resourcing allocated to supporting the consultation.

I am a great fan of the ABC's *Grass Roots* program, and I wince with recognition at some of the slightly too-close-to-home calls made by the clever writers. What we altogether miss out on as a viewing public in the series is any embrace of complexity in the development of community – and although it may not serve a comic end, I find it a pity that a view of Local Government as manipulative, shallow and self-serving is perpetuated, because the opposite is so readily apparent to us as practitioners.

When Robert Putnam first wrote of the development of social capital he identified in Italy thriving, participatory communities as those where community members joyfully and freely took part in choirs, sporting activities and civic matters while languishing communities were characterised by non-joiners. Similar observations were made in the 1999 “Missed Opportunities” project, describing the role of Australian women in agriculture. Women were identified as the social ‘glue’ in many small communities, and while all communities were struggling under rural recession, drought and other adversities, some of them sizzled with ideas and activities while others had just plain given up. As practitioners we seek to encourage the networking that drew together a cheesemaker with a sheep farmer struggling to make ends meet - she now provides sheep’s milk for the cheese that supplies a local and international market – or the entrepreneurship that enabled Italian women farmers in a declining tobacco market to turn their skills to an enterprise cooking up and marketing pasta sauces. We identify and support the problem-solving skills that rural women bring, for example to the Landcare movement – but we ought to be aware that many of the women chose to invest their effort here rather than traditional farming organisations like the Farmers’ Federations because these were generally perceived as exclusive, slow to innovation and energy-sapping.

Just and vibrant participation can allow for the message to be taken to the leadership of resistant organisations (including, sometimes, our own) in a way that enables shared learning to develop.

About participation at its most fundamental level – the vote. In the UK, Robin Cook observed that people *will* vote if they believe that their ballot is part of an empowering process. I am glad he used the word ‘empowering’, because it has been unceremoniously dumped upon in recent years, associated as it is with ‘social engineering’. But I believe empowerment in its truest sense ought to be a central tenet in any community practitioner’s handbook. Robin Cook was using as an example voter turnout of 69 per cent in New Deal (read socially and economically deprived) communities, where previously the turnout had been very low.

The value of this example for Local Government practitioners is that the bulk of the issues concerning UK voters were local area issues – of the very kind that spawned Australian Local Government’s interest in integrated local area planning in the early 1990s and beyond.

The ILAP principles, I believe, still provide a sound basis for focusing our intent of just and vibrant participation.

These principles are:

- Holistic planning (ie embracing Physical, Social, Environmental, Cultural and Economic planning processes)
- A local focus for community building, including coordinated planning, problem-solving and practice
- Promotion of genuine partnerships between the three spheres of government and the local community (including all stakeholders)
- A focus on outcomes achieved through long-term vision and resource allocation
- Ensuring skill development/shared learning is part of the process
- Ensuring monitoring and evaluation are part of the process.

The NSW urban planning context

Urban consolidation has become one of the major foci of urban planning in Sydney and environs. This is because of the need to house people more 'compactly'. In Sydney's case, the resulting search for sustainable solutions through integrating environmental, economic and social planning is not so much a concern driven by an interest in sustainability as one driven by the geographic limits of the Sydney Basin.

Recent research undertaken for the NSW Parliamentary Library explores the significance for Sydney's urban development of both its economic dominance and of migration trends meaning that a disproportionately large number of immigrants need to be housed in Sydney.

The paper also addresses housing affordability in Sydney, and some of the factors driving choice.

It examines the challenges for planners in terms of how to measure the impact of planning decisions, including urban sprawl. It notes some of the indicators currently being used. Recent visitors to our shores from the 'Smart Growth' school in the US have some tools to help in this regard (and also in public participation). Useful websites are:

- www.gmla.org (Growth Management Leadership Alliance)
- www.smartgrowthamerica.org
- www.smartgrowth.org (Smart Growth Network)
- www.placematters.com
- www.cnt.org

For me, this information and tools they are generating are useful because they result from community-driven concerns about *dis-integrated* urban planning – in the main the dominance of the motor vehicle over all other planning decisions and controls. The example of ordinary people in Portland Oregon is seminal. They rejected the case for a new motorway, got together 1,000 people prepared to fund a foundation, commissioned research to look at alternate ways of accommodating urban growth and getting people to work and play, and got the leadership of first the city and then the State on board to turn around attitudes, resourcing and use of public transit networks. They have achieved a 50% increase in public transit use since 1990, they

are not building any new roads, and they are now re-laying the cable-car tracks torn up there (and in many other urban centres including Sydney) in the 1960s. Consolidated housing development, shops and services are clustered around transit nodes, much as is the recommended model for Sydney. The residents of Portland have been accused of 'NIMBYism' but have demonstrated that they are embracing a more critical concern about the sustainability of their city. They wear proudly the badge of "old hippies with good facts" (as one of their detractors scathingly sought to insult them).

In NSW, from South Sydney Council and the Blue Mountains, we have stories of communities inscribing their vision, developing urban consolidation, urging sustainability and espousing integrated planning.

To introduce those stories, I will introduce the players, but first provide some local context.

The **South Sydney Council** area is steeped in a rich and colourful history as a traditionally working-class cluster of suburbs from Woollomoolloo and Kings Cross, to Surry Hills, Redfern and further south to Zetland and Beaconsfield. They have featured in the folklore of the 'underside' of Sydney life from early settlement, and even when the 'fringe' became the geographic centre, housed the poor and vulnerable.

South Sydney saw urban consolidation in the 1960s, with the development of the dominant public housing estate of the Waterloo towers. They were and will remain a dramatic presence in South Sydney because of the extent of infrastructure invested in them by the Department of Housing. More recently, the towers have housed increasing numbers of people with multiple and complex needs.

South Sydney Council area also saw plenty of action as the site of some of the first Green Bans imposed by the BLF. (As an aside, the Waterloo estate might have been much larger but for the actions of local residents such as Marg Barry and her mum who hung bedsheets out their windows protesting the demolition of their 'slum' homes, who rallied and organised and were sometimes under great threat and danger in their opposition to planning decisions that were 'off the scale').

South Sydney, and indeed community development practitioners across Australia owe much to the late Marg Barry for her commitment to shared learning. She helped establish the inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development, which still exists and remained 'in business' when much of the national network of RCSD's were closed down, post-Whitlam.

South Sydney Council is also home to an astonishingly varied multicultural community. It has a large indigenous population, not many of whom are housed on the infamous Block, but in the Block and in the matter of partnership with the indigenous community South Sydney Council has a distinct and ongoing challenge.

Into this environment has come one of the largest brownfields urban consolidation projects ever – Green Square.

Blue Mountains City Council, to the west of Sydney, is known as the city in a world heritage national park. It encompasses 26 townships within its 1433 square kilometres. The area holds enormous symbolism for Sydney in so many ways, for its iconic beauty, ruggedness and mystery. To Europeans it was a natural barrier which had to be conquered before the vast inland could be developed, and it played, from a relatively early time in European development, a role as the playground of the rich, healing place and place of inspiration. It was that and much more, of course, to its indigenous people (and still is). It has also become an international mecca as a World Heritage area and a popular haven for day-trippers seeking a wilderness experience on the fringe of a metropolis.

The Blue Mountains City Council's "Map for Action" unfolds a 25 year visioning strategy. To arrive at that point, residents were invited to review the last 25 years – a period during which many of us not resident in the Blue Mountains could remark upon how issues such as the spectre of bushfires and the ongoing debate about urban development have shaped its development. But as we are about to hear, for the people who actually live in this popular tourist destination, there is much more underpinning the map and its intentions, including the challenges of looking after the environment, looking after people, using the land for living, moving around and working and learning.

The challenge for the Blue Mountains City Council and the community is how to achieve planning intentions sustainably – and that sustainability includes recognition that goals committed to now have implications for generations to come and so refocuses actions towards just participation.

Some workshop questions/challenges:

Are these ILAP principles still relevant/can they be embellished to point us to just and vibrant participatory processes?

One of the key lessons from the ILAP process is that it requires committed leadership within the organisation. How can committed leadership for just and vibrant participatory processes and for integrated planning be engendered?

How can the message of good practice in integrated local area planning be spread?

Where should just participation lead? Is empowerment a legitimate goal? Is training in participatory techniques tantamount to social engineering? Will it matter if others take control of the process, as long as it is inclusive and otherwise just?

What should go in our *handbook* to guide just participation?

What examples can participants contribute of just and vibrant participation in your own patch?

Jackie Ohlin
June 03