_____

Citizen Engagement: A New Challenge for Governments

Speech: Retreat on the Government-Citizen Relationship

Judith Maxwell

Introduction

Elections are the time when governments are accountable to citizens; and the time when citizens get to choose public policy direction.

But the vote acts as a summary judgment on thousands of interactions over a four year period. Modern citizens do not accept this vote as their only voice. But they are not well-placed to define the other forms of voice they need.

How great is the need? Graves had a positive response to questions about the need for citizens to "reflect and offer solutions to our current problems." Peters found that citizens, once they had experience of public dialogue, "thirsted" for more.

Some Definitions

Transparency
> Government decisions are made openly so that those who wish to know are informed. Decision processes are known and followed.

Accountability
> Results/outcomes of public policy are reported regularly and are linked back to earlier decisions.

Participation
> Citizens are given information about programs, results, options, recommendations, and asked for feedback. Also known as consultation. Best used in situations where there is consensus on frameworks and little value conflict, but mid-course corrections are possible/necessary.

Engagement

Citizens are asked to reflect on choices/tradeoffs which involve conflicts in values or difficult resource allocation decisions. Best used in situations where shared frameworks do not exist, and where major policy shifts are needed. Many techniques proposed, some are being used, but none are yet proven.

General Context

1. Globalization homogenizes

- Market forces polarize society
- Commercialism rules
- Technical solutions dominate
- Identity is lost.

2. Knowledge economy fosters pluralism

- Information is widely shared, and cannot be controlled
- Hierarchy breaks down
- Large institutions are suspect
- Change accelerates
- Old loyalties are challenged
- New 'communities of interest' form – e.g environmentalists

- Citizens seek new forms of identity

- Differences are accentuated: cultural, ethnic, class, regional, linguistic, etc
- Identity is achieved in contrast to others
- People lose sight of the common weal
- Civil society is at risk – unless there are strong bonds of association

Many jurisdictions are experimenting with new techniques to strengthen democracy and restore public trust. (U.K. *lean* democracy, Oregon Progress Board)

Here in Canada...

Distrust of government is deeper than ever. But Canadians have not given up on the state. They want governments

- to be a collective force for their benefit, e.g. education, health
- to focus on what they can do well,
- to collaborate with other jurisdictions, and
- to share the burdens of decisions with citizens.

Canadians share the core social values of

- self-reliance (taking responsibility),
- compassion leading to collective responsibility, and
- investment in the future.

But these values are often in conflict, e.g. how much effort at self-reliance is required before compassion kicks in?

And people need help in applying the values to a rapidly changing context. There is still deep ambivalence about whether sole support mothers on welfare should work; and how society can support children in families. [Peters, CPRN, 1995;The Society We Want, 1997]

Stein et al point out

- that identity conflicts are deeply embedded in Canada even though Quebec and the rest of Canada have grown more alike in attitudes, values, social preferences, and economic aspirations, and that
- the two civil societies are disengaging, as association across the linguistic divide diminishes.

Implications for Citizen Engagement

Canadians need help in

1. Working through deep tensions between core social values around family, work, and health,
2. Working through the identity conflict in ways that enable tolerance and respect to surface,
3. Generating new ideas and institutions for civil association and governance,
4. Seeing that governments can and do listen and learn. (Building public trust.)

What Does Engagement Mean?

Yankelovich argues that there are three stages in moving from public opinion to public judgment

Consciousness raising
> This requires a) awareness, and b) a sense of urgency. Opinion in this stage involves venting, and blowing off steam.

Working through
> Involves a search for solutions, choice work, learning, struggling. Usually takes time.

Resolution
> Citizens come to a judgment which is accepted in emotional and moral terms.

How do Traditional Models Contrast with Engagement?

<u>Traditional models</u>	<u>Engagement models</u>
Encourage venting, advocacy	Encourage reflection, learning, choices
Treat interest groups one by one, creates a platform for them	Force interest groups to a) listen to citizens b) interact with other interests
Encourage a "me-first" dynamic	Permit focus on common ground
Focus on technical choices	Focus on moral choices – no right or wrong answer
Seek validation of government's choices "govt knows best"	Assume citizens will add value and that new options will emerge
Tend to control process, focus on process, not outcome	Encourage new ideas through an open-ended process
Impose rigid deadlines	Take time, cannot meet deadlines

Traditional models can be adapted to reflect learnings from engagement:

- Deal with interest groups in cross-section, not one at a time; [House Finance Committee has experimented but did not allow enough time and did not mix economic and social groups]
- Ensure there is feedback to participants so that they can see how their input a) fits with what others said; and b) influenced the final outcome.

What Methods of Engagement are Available?

Formal political processes

- Genuine Parliamentary debates, where citizens can watch politicians openly struggle with the issues. These are often associated with free votes (Dobell).
- Parliamentary/Legislative committees or panels meeting citizens and interest groups in cross-section, not just sequential statements by advocates.
- Regular accountability sessions around performance indicators where the Minister and senior officials meet a cross-section of stakeholders (Alberta, Oregon)
- Town-halls and public conferences (as in 1992) where cross-sections of citizens and elites gather to debate the issues, while politicians listen.

Neutral space processes

- Structured workshops of elites designed to generate consensus or resolve conflicts (CPRN Social Union project; Stein et al);
- Deliberative polling (Ekos proposal, Fishkin) where citizens are given opportunities to reflect more deeply between polls;
- Citizen juries, selected randomly, invited to work through a policy issue with support from experts in order to a) give advice to government, and b) help the community at large to work toward judgment [CBC tried to do this in 72 hours under glare of TV camera. Probably need more time and more neutral space]
- Public dialogue (CPRN: The Society We Want project), where citizens meet in small groups, using a structured issue guide to provoke 'choice work' on issues where we know there is ambivalence which confuses/paralyses debate.

Preconditions for Engagement Leading to Judgment

1. Provide a safe, neutral space
2. Develop techniques to focus on tough choices and their consequences
3. Let the process work – you cannot control the outcome
4. Offer information, and then let people reflect
5. Lower barriers to participation, encourage diversity
6. Focus on common ground
7. Give people time, avoid rigid deadlines.
   [Peters]

How Does Citizen Engagement Fit into Policy Development?

Governments need to engage citizens on difficult public policy choices:

- Around values and principles before detailed proposals are developed (What do you hold dear, how would you choose between conflicting objectives?)
- After the proposals are developed, with a brief statement of the choices/tradeoffs that have been made, explaining how the previous consultation has shaped the result.

The outcome will be better policy development because

- Consensus has been developed around the fundamental moral and ethical issues, and
- The full array of options has been assessed.

This helps people to accept the trade offs. It also builds public trust.

"If I include you, you will be my partner, if I exclude you, you will be my judge"
[Rosell]

(June 26, 1997)