



Public Participation in Canada

*Presentation by Judy Watling to the 2007 CIDA Governance Workshop on
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Good morning everyone. I am very pleased to be here today as a participant in this workshop. It gives me an opportunity to continue to learn along with our Chinese colleagues about improving decision making processes in our two countries. In my capacity as Assistant Director of Civic Engagement at Canadian Policy Research Networks, I was part of the CIDA funded project with the Parliamentary Centre and the National People's Congress over the past three years, including having the honour of visiting China this past May.

First a word about CPRN to explain why I have been asked to provide this overview of public participation in Canada. CPRN is a not-for-profit, independent think tank, with a mission to create knowledge and lead dialogue and debate on social and economic issues important to Canadians. We work with policy makers, academics, stakeholders, experts and citizens, to inform public policy decisions. (We take a broad view of public policy, including legislation, regulation, policy and program design and implementation.) In the course of our work, we have developed an expertise in the practice and theory of citizen engagement, reflecting our conviction that citizens must have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, their communities and their society – both today and in the future. We use a deliberative dialogue methodology, which I will speak of in more detail later.

Over the past five or so years, CPRN has engaged more than 3,000 randomly recruited Canadians to deliberate in structured processes on a wide array of complex public policy issues, including, among others:

- the future of health care (done for a Royal Commission established by the federal government);
- the long-term management of nuclear waste (done for the Nuclear Waste Management Organization, who was charged by legislation to find a socially acceptable approach, among other things) ; and,
- how to share public resources between our federal and provincial governments (for an expert advisory panel set up by the provincial premiers).

The results of dialogue participants' deliberations are carefully analyzed and captured in a report that provides decision makers with an understanding of the choices Canadians make and why and the values they want to see reflected in policy choices.

CPRN also commissions research in the field of public participation and supports capacity building in governments, civil society and among citizens themselves, for meaningful participation.

Today, I will offer a view on the state of public participation in Canada, the challenges we face and opportunities for the future.

Public Participation in Canada – What Does It Look Like Now?

Public participation in developing public policy has a long history in Canada. Similar to many western countries, it is rooted in democratic theory and the evolution of parliamentary traditions in Canada, and drew strength from the cooperative movement of the early 20th Century, grass roots involvement in the fields of environment, health and education and a strong network of civil society organizations. It is also connected to the fields of conflict resolution and organizational design, as all are based in the premise that better results are achieved when those most affected are included in the decision making process.

The many methods to engage the public in use across Canada and elsewhere can be classified into three different categories (Abelson and Gauvin, 2006: 13-14):

The first, **public communication**, is a passive, one-way flow of information from governments to the public through tools like websites, advertisements, reports, brochures, etc. While there is no actual public involvement, becoming informed is necessary in order to be able to more actively participate.

The second, **public consultation**, is usually a one-way flow of information, from the public to government. Methods include public hearings, opinion polls, referenda, focus groups or meetings with stakeholders. They allow the public to express top of mind opinion or express their own or their organizations interests in the policy issue at hand.

The third, **public participation or public engagement**, allow for interaction both among the public and between the public and government. They include such methods as citizens' panels, consensus conferences, James Fishkin's Deliberative Poll, (used in China in 2005 in the township of Zeguo in Wenling City) and deliberative dialogues like those done by CPRN. These methods involve active outreach to members of the public and share a number of characteristics: 1) they usually have multiple face-to-face sessions involving about 10- 40 participants, often randomly recruited; 2) they use a structured process with professional facilitation; 3) participants are provided with factual, objective and accessible information to support their deliberations; 4) participants have access to experts to answer questions (in a controlled way) and 5) a set of recommendations is produced based on the deliberations (Abelson and Gauvin, 2006: 15). In a society that is becoming increasingly individualized, these processes support individuals coming together in the interest of the collective.

You will recognize the similarity between this three-part typology and the definition of public participation that CIDA has asked us to use for this workshop. As they note, effective participation can take many forms. Often, all three are needed to address complex issues. In deciding what public participation method to use, form must follow function. Variables that need to be considered include the issue at question, the stage of the decision making process, the general context of the process, and the objectives of involving the public. Is it defining the problem? Understanding values? Testing a policy option? Convincing the public of a choice already made? The method or methods chosen must also be in line with resources, time and capacity available (Abelson and Gauvin, 2006: 22).

Canada has a mature practice of first two types of public involvement across Canada, at all levels of government. Websites, publications and advertisements are commonly used to share information on government programs and services. Telephone surveys are frequently commissioned to gauge top of mind public opinion on various issues. A number of public organizations have a policy or guidelines on public involvement their officials use to determine who to involve, when and how. (Health Canada's Office of Consumer and Public Involvement offers a good example of this.)

Access to information laws, legislated requirements to seek public input on proposed regulations, and to hold public hearings for environmental assessments are part of the legal framework supporting public involvement. Legislative committees, made up of elected officials of all political parties, regularly hold public hearings on draft laws as part of the legislative process. These types of public sessions usually involve stakeholders, experts or special interest groups.

However, many complex issues today have an ethical dimension, involving difficult choices or tradeoffs between public goods. As noted by Grant Sheng, professor of environmental studies at York University, public hearings are formal, legalistic types of meetings that place weight on hard, technical evidence. They do not lend themselves to an open discussion of values that would be of interest to the general public and essential part of determining the most socially acceptable policy choices (Sheng, 2004: 2, 7).

Canada has growing experience in using public engagement methods in the third tier in the typology, including some very innovative projects dealing with very diverse subject areas that offer models for others. In addition to the projects I mentioned earlier in which CPRN has been involved, a number of organizations are using public participation methods for a variety of purposes, from the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, Public Interest Alberta, the Toronto Housing Commission's participatory budgeting or Nova Scotia Power's deliberative poll on the energy use and sources. The Public Health Agency has held deliberative dialogues on Public Health Goals and to explore the use of antivirals in dealing with pandemic flu. Several years ago, the House of Commons Sub-committee on People with Disabilities and the Senate Committee on Mental Health both used a combination of on-line and face to face tools to provide meaningful opportunity to the public to provide input into their deliberations.

The innovative Citizens' Assemblies recently used in two Canadian provinces – Ontario and British Columbia – to explore the issue of electoral reform offer wonderful examples of meaningful engagement of unaffiliated citizens in exploring challenging and complex public policy issues. Both initiatives have garnered the interest of public involvement researchers and practitioners from around the world. The results of this research will add a great deal to our knowledge of public participation and should go some way in helping it to become a more routine part of decision making processes.

There is a growing recognition by decision makers that the legitimacy and sustainability of policies and programs depends on their fit with public values. The complexity of many public issues facing us today means that the public must be part of implementing solutions. They have to be on board.

Yet we know that Canadians are not content with the kinds of involvement opportunities currently provided. They are looking for more frequent and meaningful ways to help shape public policy – between elections. There are a number of factors driving this:

- The increasing disconnect between citizens and governments as demonstrated by low voter participation, declining trust and confidence of the public in their governments and public officials, along with increasing demands for accountability and transparency.
- Outdated democratic institutions and practices (e.g. political parties and legislatures that do not reflect the gender and ethnic make-up of the population).
- A more educated, less deferential public who are demanding a say in issues that affect them. Interestingly, there is growing evidence that shows people are more comfortable with government decisions if they know citizens like them were consulted, even if they weren't part of the process themselves.
- Technology is changing every aspect of life including raising expectations for immediate access to reliable information and facilitating grass roots organization and networking across groups – outside of geographical boundaries and traditional governance processes. It is interesting to consider how technology has changed the relationship between the media and the public, allowing the public to be producers and distributors of information as well as consumers (Ferguson, 2006). Technology is becoming a democratic institution but governments are slow to embrace it as such.

As Stephen Coleman and John Gøtz note in their report *Bowling Together*, “The alternative to engaging the public will not be an unengaged public, but a public with its own agenda and an understandable hostility to decision-making processes which appear to ignore them” (Coleman and Gøtz, 2001: 1).

We need to update our governance mechanisms to renew the relationship between Canadian citizens and their governments. Though certainly not the only answer, more systematic use of deliberative processes needs to be part of that renewal.

Research tells us that citizens are ready for this.

- They are willing to discuss public issues, absorb complex information, engage with each other and sustain serious, in-depth conversations;
- Participating in respectful, well organized deliberation processes is a rewarding experience, allowing people to be more informed, and to feel they have been able to make a contribution. For some, it can be transformative. Most CPRN dialogue participants agree they would participate in similar processes on other issues, and many indicate they intend to become more informed, active citizens.
- Deliberation produces excellent results as citizens balance perspectives and make tough choices. They are often prepared to go further than governments (Levine, Fung and Gastil, 2005).

There is a large, untapped potential for citizen engagement.

Challenges to Greater Public Participation

So if the benefits of more deliberative engagement are so clear, why hasn't it become more institutionalized in Canada and elsewhere?

There are structural, cultural and institutional barriers to overcome in order to have robust public participation. I know we share many of these challenges with China. I will highlight a few of these, and then suggest some ways in which they can be addressed.

- Perhaps the greatest barrier is the resistance of many policy elites, who are well entrenched in decision making processes, to relinquish some of their authority and share power with citizens. Many experts are sceptical of the ability of citizens to grapple with complex issues and provide any useful input.
- On the other hand, many citizens are sceptical of willingness of elites to take them seriously and listen to what they have to say.
- For some elected officials, public participation is inconsistent with representative democracy. They see it diminishing their role. There are also tensions between the role of the elected official and the role of the public servant when it comes to their respective relationships with voters.
- Deliberative processes can be expensive, and governments are often reluctant to redirect or invest new resources in them. Canada's large geography and two official languages can make national processes particularly resource intensive.
- In the Canadian federation, responsibility for addressing many major policy issues is shared between the federal and provincial governments, often leading to jurisdictional bickering over authority and resources.

So How Do We Move to the Next Level?

There is no one easy solution, nor can public engagement be addressed in isolation of the broader issue of democratic reform. I am looking forward to hearing the panels throughout this workshop – especially those later today that will share their experiences of promoting public participation in our two countries. We need to help those in power understand that deliberative processes, or what many call deliberative democracy, are not about replacing representative government, but enhancing it. To be sure, this does mean change, and a loosening of the elite’s grip on power. In my view, greater institutionalization of public participation can be a win-win. As the Party Secretary of Zeguo Town said after their Deliberative Poll on budget allocation was completed: “Although I gave up some final decision-making power, we gain more power back because the process has increased the legitimacy for the choice of priority projects and created public transparency in the public policy decision-making process” (Fishkin, 2005: 7).

CPRN’s dialogue participants consistently reaffirm the role of government as the guardian of the public interest. They are looking for a voice to inform decisions, along with experts and stakeholders – not instead of them. They are not interested in making decisions themselves – they expect their governments to do that based on the best information possible, and provide them with feedback on why decisions were taken. Not surprisingly, they often come away from a dialogue with a greater understanding of the difficulties of making decisions on complex issues, where there is no clear right or wrong answer, and express empathy for those ultimately responsible. Citizen engagement is a form of shared accountability, as dialogue participants often recognize the need for citizens to share in the responsibility for effective public policy (Abelson and Gauvin, 2004: 17).

Our Parliamentary institutions can take the lead in reaching out to citizens, through early engagement in policy development (rather than waiting until late stages of the legislative process). Political parties and elected representatives can create public spaces in their ridings to engage their constituents in policy discussions, to learn about different perspectives and find common ground. To do this, they will need support in terms of capacity, expertise and resources – much of which could be developed within the Public Service.

Our governments are leaders in using technology for service delivery, but rarely use innovative on-line tools to engage people in deliberative processes. In combination with smaller face to face public deliberations, on-line tools are an effective and efficient way to broaden the span of outreach, in particular to share results of deliberative processes.

Finding resources for any public initiative is always a challenge when there are so many competing demands. Greater use of technology is one way to help address issues of geography. Investing in internal expertise and capacity within governments to manage ongoing engagement will help to avoid reinventing the wheel for each initiative, thereby reducing costs. However, recognition of public participation as a priority, and allocating some of the resources currently devoted to opinion polling or government advertising to meaningful participation can provide a better bang for the buck. And this brings us back to the need for cultural change. As academics Lori Turnbull and Peter Aucoin note a “large portion of polling and advertising does not serve public purposes, but rather the partisan interests of the government of the day” (Turnbull and Aucoin, 2006: 39).

Finally, complex public policy issues require complex solutions and shared responsibility between governments, the market, and the public. Canadian governments must learn to work better together, using a citizen-centered approach to problem resolution. Including citizens themselves in multi-jurisdictional processes can help achieve this, by grounding efforts in shared values, understanding differences and finding the common ground on which to move forward.

In closing, democracy in Canada belongs to the governed, not the governors. People have a right to participate – they also have a responsibility to do so (MacKinnon, 2005). At its most fundamental level, this is not in dispute in Canada. While I have outlined a number of challenges in moving to a deeper level of public participation, we have a strong base to work from, and a growing recognition of the value of doing so, both for better public policy and for a stronger democracy.

Thank you for your patience. I hope I have provided you with some food for thought as you share your experiences and ideas over the next two and half days.

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