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Institutionalizing Participation through Citizens' Assemblies

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The question of why citizens ought to participate in politics is one that is as old as the study of politics itself. As far back as Aristotle, participation was seen as a vital part of the *res publica*, as a way for citizens to take part in activities that were important for the collective good. The ancient Greeks understood the importance of forms of participation such as the council of five hundred – a randomly selected deliberative body chosen for a fixed period of time and charged with oversight of the assembly. For them, robust participation was not seen exclusively through voting but also through direct involvement in democratic life. The seed of this idea has spread throughout the ages and germinated in Italian city-states, medieval Italian communes, kibbutz, and communes.

The advent of representative institutions, the nation-state, and capitalism led to a conception of democracy that favoured a clash of interests. Individuals were assumed to be self-interested and democracy was viewed as the result of competing demands made on the political system. Mansbridge (1980) calls this 'adversary democracy'. It is at odds with an older version that privileged reciprocity and consensus, which she calls 'unitary democracy'. Studies of interests within parliament, factionalism, debates within political parties, and consociationalism – to name a few – all assume adversary democracy. The unitary model, on the other hand, more often examines town hall meetings, deliberative forums, and small-scale democratic institutions.

Each of these democratic models is based on different assumptions about the nature, calibre, and quantity of participation needed in a democracy, as well as the locus of participation. The political parties and elections which are examined in the earlier parts of this book are key institutions of adversary democracy. The decline of public interest and participation in these institutions may indicate that people are becoming

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more receptive to the unitary model, which calls for quite different, and far more hands-on, forms of participation. Rousseau, whose 'general will' was a unitary concept, wrote of democracies where debate in face-to-face settings could reveal a common interest (Mansbridge, 1980).

We know from myriad studies how citizens behave in adversary democracies. But we know far less about citizen behaviour, attitudes, and participation in unitary democracy. The older Athenian model of participatory democracy has been revived in the last few decades. According to Snider (2007), its modern variant can be traced 'the Yale school of democratic reform'. It began with Dahl's (1970) *After the Revolution*, which argued for an institutional arrangement of random citizens to serve as 'advisory councils'. Later, in *Democracy and its Critics*, Dahl (1989) elaborated on this arrangement by calling it a 'minipopulus', whose 'task would be to deliberate, for a year perhaps, on an issue and then to announce its choices' (p. 340). The disciples of this school include Barber, O'Leary, Leib, and Gastil. Fishkin is arguably the best known of the Yale school. His 1991 work on deliberative polling is one attempt to learn how citizens, initially uninformed about a policy issue, can learn through collective deliberation. While Fishkin's work is important in examining the impact of citizen education over a short period of time, little work has been done on how citizens learn and participate in deliberative exercises that take place over a longer period.

This chapter examines a type of deliberative body that meets over a long period of time and is charged with making policy recommendations that have considerable weight – the citizens' assembly (CA). A CA takes a group of random citizens of diverse ages, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic status and after an intensive education programme followed by a public consultation and deliberation phase has them make a policy recommendation. Using this definition, there have only been three CAs, two in Canada (in British Columbia [BC] and Ontario) and one in Europe (the Netherlands). All three examined the issue of electoral reform – BC in 2003–04, the Netherlands in 2006, and Ontario in 2006–07. In the two Canadian cases, the results were put to referenda that ultimately failed. In the Dutch case, the government did not act on the CA's recommendation. For our purpose here, the subject matter of a CA is less significant than its defining characteristic – the quality of its public judgement and deliberation – the focus of this chapter.

Public judgement and deliberation are terms in common currency but mean something particular in this case. According to Yankelovich (1991), public judgement is a form of public opinion that exhibits 'more thoughtfulness, weighing of alternatives, more engagement with the

issue, more taking into account a wide variety of factors than ordinary public opinion as measured in opinion polls and more emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of questions than on the factual, informational side' (p. 5). Deliberation involves the reasoned and enlightened formation of policy preferences, based on a discussion of shared interests. Advocates such as Barber (1984) believe that transformative talk that goes beyond self-interested perspectives lies at the heart of deliberative democracy. Citizens involved in such exercises must eschew choice as simply the aggregation of individual preferences, seeing choice instead as a result of common interests based on the decision rule of consensus. With its emphasis on equality, common good, mutual respect, and organic relationships, the roots of deliberation can be found in friendship rather than competition. This echoes Aristotle's maxim that 'friendship [*philia*] appears to hold city-states together' (cited in Mansbridge 1980, p. 9). The deliberative approach assumes that participation ought to be non-adversarial, like friendship.

While much has been written on the concept of deliberative democracy, 'there has been far less attention paid to actual efforts to develop forums where citizens can and will talk to one another about public issues' (Button and Mattso, 1999, p. 610). We simply do not have good data on the calibre and nature of decisions made in bodies where citizens meet to make policy recommendations. CAs are one such venue and, aside from work by Warren and Pearce (2008), there is very little research done on them. This chapter attempts to add to that body of literature.

Why use a citizens' assembly?

Many might question whether a CA constituted of ordinary citizens would be any better than the representative assemblies that we elect. The answers are both theoretical and practical. Because CAs represent an instance of policy making by deliberation, experience with them offers insights into curing the ills of most legislative bodies. The qualities that characterize CAs are the very ones lacking in legislatures. CAs are marked by *equality* and they are not divided by gender, party affiliation, age, or experience. They have *legitimacy* because the participants, at least collectively, enter policy making with open minds and full transparency, making decisions only after consultation with fellow citizens. Individual interests are subsumed in the search for the *common good*. Perhaps most crucially, decision rules are not majority based, which is an arithmetic rule about individual votes; rather, they are *consensus based*, which sees value in using conversation to reach a common goal. There are also

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practical arguments in favour of creating CAs. When politicians have a conflict of interest, CAs are an obvious solution. By putting the decision in the hands of citizens, the appearance of bias is removed. On decisions where there is no right answer or when policy makers are divided, CAs might result in policy that is seen as legitimate and defensible. Assemblies also have an important participation spillover. Not only do the participants learn about the trade-offs required in policy making but the public they consult also learns. While it is true that governments engage in consultation exercises routinely, the consultations carried out by CAs are more likely to be seen as authentic and without a pre-set political agenda since they are divorced from partisan interests or political ideology.

Creating a CA does not necessarily guarantee these attributes. These are a result of several prerequisites. Assemblies must have time to learn, consult, and deliberate. They must have independence from government and must be transparent. To fulfil these conditions, assemblies must be well resourced in order to ensure diversity in the material considered. Unlike citizens' juries, participants do not choose between two or more competing options. Assemblies do not choose which expert is most persuasive but rather learn through a neutral presentation of arguments from a variety of perspectives and, most crucially, from themselves. A further criterion is that assemblies should deliberate on issues that are value driven and meaningful rather than on those that are exclusively scientific/empirical.

Reliance on a CA makes several assumptions about citizen participation. First, the *raison d'être* for a CA is that good policy can be made by a group of citizens who are given the appropriate learning tools and deliberative space in which to listen, hear alternative views, and not be invested in any outcome. Second, to be successful, a CA must be diverse in its make-up. This is so that the body is not 'captured' by any ideological or socioeconomic position. Surowieki (2004) suggests that good deliberation is dependent in part on wide sources of knowledge and background. This is important in ensuring that one faction does not dominate but also enriches the calibre of discussion.

It appears that both Canadian CAs and the Dutch version met these criteria, although through different methods. In the case of the BC CA, participant selection was made by the Assembly Secretariat, the administrative body that planned, organized, and ran the meetings. In the case of Ontario, it was made by Elections Ontario, the government agency that oversees elections in the province. In both cases, gender balance was achieved. In the Ontario case, a regulation mandated that there be

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218 *Activating the Citizen**Table 10.1:* Age distribution of Ontario and BC assembly members and population

	Ontario CA	Ontario population	BC CA	BC population
18–24	11%	12.29%	7%	11%
25–39	22%	28.86%	24%	26%
40–54	31%	29.67%	35%	32%
55–70	24%	17.46%	28%	17%
71+	12%	11.72%	6%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(103 members)		(160 members)	

Table 10.2: Age distribution of Dutch civic forum

	Civic forum	The Netherlands
18–30	17.6%	16
31–40	18.2%	22
41–50	25.8%	22
51–60	21.8%	17
61–70	13%	13
71+	3.6	7
Total	100% (143 members)	

at least one aboriginal member, whereas in BC, an amendment to the terms of reference added two aboriginal members.

Over 120,000 initial letters were sent from Election Ontario's Register of Electors asking prospective assembly members if they were interested in participating. Of those who received the letter, 7033 responded affirmatively. From this pool, 1253 were invited to one of the 29 selection meetings held across the province where 103 members and two alternates from each electoral district were chosen by random draw. As Table 10.1 shows, in terms of demographics, the assembly members came close to mirroring the population of Ontario. In other ways, too, assembly members were diverse. Collectively, they spoke over 28 languages and 66 of them were born in Ontario, 11 were from other provinces, and 27 were originally from outside Canada.

In BC, Elections BC provided the Assembly Secretariat with 200 names – equally divided by gender – per electoral district. Of this pool of 15,800 names, 1441 were invited to attend a selection meeting in their

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electoral district. This process yielded a very close approximation to the demographics of BC as Table 10.1 shows.

The process was slightly different in the Netherlands but the effect of approximating the population was the same, as Table 10.2 shows. In the Netherlands, 50,000 letters were sent out based on a national database called the Municipal Persons Records Database. From the 4000 responses, 2107 were invited to attend one of the nine selection meetings.

How do citizens' assembly members learn?

Diversity is obviously not just about place of origin. Assembly members represented a broad range of learning styles and educational backgrounds as well, which raised pedagogical challenges. Some members were students enrolled in university- or college-level courses. Many more were recent graduates. A few members had little or no formal education, and many others had not attended school for several years or many decades. Some members were comfortable in a traditional school setting and had no difficulty reading advanced materials. Others preferred learning by listening, talking, or doing. A small group of members learned quickly and easily while a minority initially found learning about electoral systems difficult or the lack of an obvious answer frustrating. Despite this diversity, a majority of the members appear to have learned a great deal by being exposed to a variety of learning techniques and tools. Surveys administered at the beginning and end of the learning phase showed that over that period, the level of the participants' comfort with the materials increased. In the Ontario case, on a scale of 0 (not informed) to 10 (very informed), members' self-reported confidence about electoral systems increased from 4.31 before the learning phase to 7.68 after the learning phase.¹ In BC and the Netherlands, the data are similar.

Citizens' own perceived capacity to understand the material is not sufficient to claim that an exercise in deliberation was successful. We need to be sure that citizens, with their broad range of educational abilities, were competent in making an informed decision. As far back as Plato, there has been a current of literature questioning the capacity of citizens to fulfil their democratic duty. Early twentieth-century democratic elitists such as Schumpeter (1942) did not believe citizens had the requisite knowledge or interest to play a meaningful democratic role. Lippmann (1925) wrote that the 'private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake' (p. 13). Others, such as Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) and more recently Neuman

(1986), Converse (1990), and Zaller (1992), have been equally sceptical about citizens' capacity. So we have good reasons to think that a democratic experiment such as a CA is beyond the capacity of most citizens and doomed to fail. However, evidence suggests that this was not the case in any of the three assemblies.

Thompson (2008) has argued that competence in choosing an electoral system can be measured by five criteria. First, participants should be interested in the project. Second, they need to be able to formulate standards or goals that a system should fulfil. Third, they need to understand basic characteristics, that is, they need sound knowledge. Fourth, citizen-experts should be able to understand the consequences of their goals; in other words, they need to be able to link goals with systems. Finally, they should consider the views of other citizens when making their decision.

Evidence indicates that members of all three CAs fulfilled Thompson's criteria. Regarding the first one, according to several indicators, members exhibited high levels of interest. In Ontario, attendance at weekly meetings averaged 98 per cent over the 12 weekend meetings in the learning and deliberation phases. In BC, 'over the eleven-month course of the Assembly, only one of 161 members withdrew and attendance was close to perfect' (British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004, p. xiii). In the Dutch CA, only 6 of 143 withdrew over the process. Members were also asked to complete weekly surveys that assessed everything from their knowledge to comfort and interest in the process. In the BC and Ontario cases, one of the questions asked members to assess their degree of enthusiasm for the following week's session. In both cases, the responses indicated a very high degree of engagement. In Ontario, for example, in response to 'I am looking forward to the next weekend session', where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 5 indicated 'strongly agree', the range over the 12 weeks was between 4.6 and 4.84 (Institute on Governance, 2007) and in BC, it was between 4.86 in the learning phase and 4.87 in deliberation. The data for the Dutch CA showed a similar commitment to the project.

Thompson's second criterion is that good deliberation is dependent on the formulation of standards or goals that the electoral system should fulfil. This is important because decision makers require some benchmark by which to weigh competing options. Since members were given principles by which to assess electoral systems, this was established before their meetings began. Moreover, members initially had a low knowledge of electoral systems, so the teaching of the material was done as a principles-led exercise. Farrell (2001) writes that electoral systems can

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be understood either as mechanics or as outcomes. Both approaches are important for members in making decisions about how electoral systems work and what they produce.

The mechanics-led approach was more dominant in the deliberation phase as members had to design a system from scratch. Understanding the outcomes by assessing principles was one of the pillars in the learning phase. When electoral systems were discussed in plenary sessions, design elements were introduced, but much of the teaching and discussion involved members thinking about how well and in what ways various electoral systems might meet the criteria they were given as well as those added by the group. For example, in discussing principles of representation, members were taught about how different systems privilege different kinds of representation, such as how single-member plurality privileges territorial representation and proportional systems privilege identity-based representation. They were thus able to conclude that electoral systems involve trade-offs of competing principles and that no one system is 'the best'. Their principles-led discussion meant that they were able to think about how each system is related to both mechanics and outcomes.

Establishing standards is not only important in ensuring sound policy but is also essential in providing a focal point around which competing options can be assessed and discussed. These standards help ensure that personal or ideological preoccupations are avoided in favour of a commonly shared set of principles. For CAs with a large decision-making body (158 in BC, 103 in Ontario, and 143 in the Netherlands), a clear set of standards is vital so that options are assessed using the same set of measurements. They also have an equalizing effect on members, giving everyone the same set of conversational tools.

Thompson's third criterion asks whether members understand the basics of electoral systems. Participation must be predicated on having sound knowledge. We know that citizens' knowledge of politics, let alone the specialized field of electoral studies, is low. Surveys of the members showed that their knowledge about the fundamentals of electoral systems increased during the learning phase. In both Canadian cases, members were asked four questions about 'political facts'; specifically, they were requested to identify countries around the world that use particular electoral systems. The education and deliberation process resulted in a four-fold increase in knowledge in the BC and Ontario assemblies and a corresponding increase in self-assessments of knowledge.

In the learning phase of the CA, members were quickly introduced to the four elements of electoral systems: ballot structure, district

magnitude, formula, and size of legislature. Each family of electoral system was explained not only in terms of these elements but also in terms of how well it fulfilled the criteria the CA had established. Discussion from the recorded plenary sessions indicates that members had a high level of engagement with the material and a strong facility with using the technical language of electoral systems.

This ability to understand and discuss the intricacies of electoral systems may be in part a result of the different ways the characteristics of systems were presented to members. Traditional classroom methods (reading, note taking, and listening) were supplemented by materials for visual learners and for verbal learners and by materials that had a range of complexity. In Ontario, simulations also figured prominently early on in the planning of the assembly's learning phase. For example, at their first meeting, members were encouraged to vote in an election simulation to determine the choice of snacks served at breaks. Using three kinds of ballots (single-member plurality, alternative vote, and list proportional representation), members were given a tangible lesson in how preferences and choices are shaped by ballot structure.

The norm of practice for CAs has been to ensure that learning materials are presented in different venues, such as plenary sessions for the introduction of broad concepts, small 'tutorial style' groups where in-depth discussion can occur, and semi-structured learning time at the hotel in the evenings after the formal sessions. As Table 10.3 indicates, the Ontario CA listed the learning phase as the single most important element contributing to the success of the process. Not only was this ranked the highest, but the standard deviation among responses was the lowest.

The data are similar for the BC assembly. Plenary lectures by visitors and staff were deemed the most important for the success of the assembly, followed by discussion group sessions and personal study (British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004). In the two Canadian cases, a robust educational component, which Karpowitz and Mansbridge (2005) identify as an essential element of deliberation, allowed participants to 'continually and consciously update their understandings of common and conflicting interests as the process [evolved]' (p. 238). Members of the CAs started the process with a knowledge of electoral systems that was like 'scattered croutons floating in undifferentiated cognitive soup' (Abelson, cited in Luskin, 1987, p. 860) but were transformed by their education and deliberation into citizen-experts.

Thompson's (2008) fourth criterion of competence is the ability 'to connect the goals with the systems' (p. 26). This ability to give a rational

Table 10.3: Ontario CA members' views of what contributed to the success of the assembly

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
The learning phase	96	4	7	6.64	0.651
The academic director	97	4	7	6.62	0.756
The chair	97	3	7	6.61	0.785
The deliberation phase	97	1	7	6.58	0.801
The citizens' assembly members	96	5	7	6.56	0.662
The interaction among members	94	3	7	6.47	0.799
The secretariat staff	94	2	7	6.44	0.979
The facilitators	96	4	7	6.39	0.910
The consultation phase	97	2	7	5.95	1.054
Conversations with family, friends, and/or other people in your riding	95	1	7	5.48	1.428

Asked at the end of the deliberation phase, the question was as follows: 'How would you rate the following aspects in terms of their importance in contributing to the success of the assembly? (Please circle your answer for each question where 1 means not important and 7 means extremely important).'

account to the public is essential in order to create legitimacy for any deliberative body's decision (Chambers, 2003). While on the face of it, this seems like a reasonable criterion of success, making it an element of competence for a CA may be asking more of CA members than we ask of experts working in the field. In a survey of political scientists whose research is focused on electoral systems, Bowler and Farrell (2006) found that experts agreed that mixed-member proportional (MMP) representation was the most highly regarded electoral system but could not explain why. As Bowler and Farrell say, '[While] the preference for MMP among of our sample of experts is unmistakable, the reasons for that preference, and for preferring MMP over list systems or STV [single transferable vote], are not nearly so clear cut' (2006, p. 455).

The process of connecting goals with systems must take sufficient account of the inherently contingent nature of electoral systems. Are they 'embedded institutions' whose effects are dependent on the context in which they are employed, as Bowler and Grofman (2000) argue? Do we even have, as Bowler, Farrell, and Pettitt (2005) suggest, 'commonly

accepted measures of key concepts' (p. 16)? What is the purpose of an electoral system? Should an electoral system provide the best representation (such as a diversity of parties) or should system designers focus on governability issues (such as stability or effective parliaments)? Should one even assume that these two sets of concerns are in opposition? Perhaps we ought to acknowledge that we cannot answer which principles best connect goals to electoral systems and admit that 'it depends', as Katz (1997) argues.

When we compare *how* assembly members reasoned, we find that there is a strong connection between the goals that each assembly thought were important and the system each designed. In other words, the system they preferred was closely correlated with what they thought a system should accomplish. Choosing among nine goals related to the outcomes and inputs of electoral systems, both Canadian assemblies chose proportionality, greater voter choice, and strong local representation. In the BC case, this led members to recommend the single transferable vote system. In Ontario, it led them to recommend MMP. In the Netherlands, members valued their system of proportional representation and the quality of representation offered by that system and wanted a system that was simple and understandable. These criteria led them to recommend only minor modifications to their electoral system. Yankelovich (1991) says that citizens who engage in these kinds of deliberative exercises have to choose principles that are 'simple enough to be intelligible to the public. Yet, at the same time, they could not be so simplistic as to be irrelevant and meaningless' (p. 152).

The process that led each CA to recommend an electoral system was the core of the deliberative exercise. Deliberation began with members evaluating what they had heard in their public consultation meetings, what they believed were the most important elements of an electoral system, and how they might accommodate each other's interests. Position taking was avoided as it would lead to either a defensive or offensive dialogue. Instead, articulation of interests was seen as the way in which to accommodate diversity. It is important to recall that at this point, both Canadian assemblies had spent considerable time together in a learning phase (of over six weekends) and a public consultation phase, as well as informally on an electronic bulletin board and website. This had created a significant storehouse of good will among members such that civility was the dominant principle of interaction. Gadamer argues that in such philosophical dialogue, 'one does not seek to score a point but to strengthen the other's argument' (cited in Yankelovich, 1991, p. 212). This was exactly the mode of interaction that characterized the CAs.

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Members had to decide which underlying principles of electoral systems were most important. The principles had to 1) determine which alternative system they would work up, 2) determine how the design elements fit together within each system, and 3) be used to compare their preferred alternative system to the present system. Of course, each principle involves a trade-off with other principles. For example, in an MMP system, the principles of proportionality and local representation might be seen in opposition to one another. The greater the degree of local representation, the less proportionality. In the Ontario CA's discussion of the structure of the list tier, members had two options: region list tiers or a province-wide list tier. Region list tiers would ensure that each geographic area of the province has some representation on the list tier (one of the objectives) but may compromise proportionality (another objective).² In the BC CA, this trade-off required balancing a smaller geographic electoral district, which could compromise proportionality, or increasing proportionality but sacrificing local representation. In the Dutch case, the emphasis on proportionality and simplicity led members to make minor modifications to their very proportional system. The members there recommended allowing voters to choose either to vote for the party of their choice or to cast a preference vote for the candidate of their choice. They also recommended a very technical and minor change to the electoral formula to transform it from a highest averages model to a largest remainder.

The system recommendations of all three assemblies were driven by and evidently a product of choices about design objectives. What is noteworthy about the decisions arrived at by the assemblies is that their models achieved their priority objectives without additional features that may have made the models more complex than necessary. As one member said, quoting Einstein, 'Make everything as simple as possible but not simpler.'

How do assembly members consult the public?

While the four previous criteria about competence relate to the capacity of a CA (interest, ability to formulate goals, knowledge of electoral systems, and connection between goals and models), Thompson's fifth criterion has to do with consultation with other citizens. On this element, we also find that CAs have been successful as deliberative and competent decision-making bodies.

On both a theoretical and practical level, this is one of the most important elements of a CA. At a theoretical level, Gutmann and Thompson

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(2004) tell us that 'to justify imposing their will on you, your fellow citizens must give reasons that are comprehensible to you. If you seek to impose your will on them, you owe them nothing less' (p. 4). At a practical level, Catt and Murphy (2003) see public consultation deriving 'from an understanding of the policy-making process as a forum for weighing competing preferences and priorities rather than as a procedure for uncovering hidden and incontestable truths. Thus consultation aims to improve the policy process by increasing the information or the range of perspectives available to decision makers' (p. 408). Broadly stated, public consultation can serve several purposes. It can strengthen relationships between government and citizens (Barber, 1984), thereby increasing the legitimacy of government; it can have a teaching function, where the public has an opportunity to examine policy options (Arnstein, 1969); and it can help produce better policy (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). When consultation is assessed, both the process of consultation and the outcome should be considered. Moreover, a consultation process needs to offer advantages to those consulting as well as to those being consulted (cf. Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

While the consultations of the three assemblies performed all of these functions, what is unique about them is that they were deliberative bodies comprised of citizens as well as consultative bodies consulting citizens. In this respect, a CA is different from other consultative bodies, where typically experts consult citizens. Though the participatory budgeting exercises and management councils of Brazil are good examples of citizens consulting citizens, they have more constraints on membership and policy recommendations than CAs (see Coelho, Pozzoni, and Montoya, 2005).

What was the purpose of the consultation phase? The nominal purpose was to seek additional information from members of the public and stakeholders about the specific policy issue, that is, electoral reform. More broadly however, the purpose of this phase was to create legitimacy for the assembly in the minds of the public. Substantively, the public consultation phase was about hearing from those who wanted change. In all three cases, oral presentations and written submissions were largely about improvements needed to the electoral system. In Ontario, 90 per cent of them argued for some kind of change. In BC, 76 per cent of the written submissions argued for change while only 2 per cent made a case for the status quo (British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004). While the impact of this overwhelming endorsement of change on the CA is hard to measure, in Ontario at least CA members claimed they had learned a lot from the public and were

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impressed by the presentations (Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2007). In a survey given to Ontario CA members after consultation, 87.4 per cent said they had found written submissions from the public very informative or somewhat informative, while 95.7 per cent found the public meetings they attended informative or very informative. Table 10.3 provides some contradictory evidence, however, since CA members also identified the public consultations as the second least important to the success of the process (though the range from the most important to the least important is small). So members found the consultation sessions informative but not important to their decision. It is difficult to know whether this is because the consultations reinforced the ideas members held at the time or because members were unsure of their role in the consultations.

Usually in public consultations, those consulting have some expertise and those who are consulted are non-experts. The CAs created an opposite dynamic; assembly members were in the unusual situation of being citizens who believed they had little expertise, consulting the public who they believed had, at least in some cases, significant expertise. As one member in Ontario said, 'I am a member of the Citizens' Assembly, but I'm also a member of the public. I am an ordinary person' (cited in Hannigan, 2007, p. 91). Another said about those who appeared at the public meetings, 'A lot of these people have been thinking about these views for years, and as ordinary citizens it's nice [for us] to get different views' (cited in Hannigan, 2007, p. 98). In other cases, there was an opposite dynamic, namely a disjunction between the calibre of talk heard at the consultation meetings and the quality of CA members' own internal deliberations. The set of skills that CA members had developed was often not reflected in the public meetings when citizens spoke to advocate a position without having understood the complexity of competing options. It is not surprising, therefore, that like other public hearings, those of the assembly 'routinely failed to resemble even a crude form of deliberation' (Gastil and Black, 2008, p. 24).

As vehicles of participation, CAs are caught in an interesting paradox. On the one hand, they are imbued with great authority, independence, and power. On the other hand, they are comprised of citizens who have developed expertise but in many cases are still deferential to the 'expert' citizens they hear. Unlike politicians who understand the symbolic and real importance of public consultation, members were often not clear on the competing roles that these public meetings had. Gastil and Black (2008) describe these competing functions as expert, official, and public perspectives, which need to be balanced during deliberations. Members

had developed a certain expertise, but as citizens they represented public perspectives. These two roles may have been tough to reconcile.

This is not to say that this form of participation was not useful to the CAs. Furthermore, the process likely benefited the public whose views were sought. Of the public who attended the meetings, 45 per cent completed a survey administered by the Ontario CA Secretariat, numbers similar to BC. In Ontario, over 80 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned more about the assembly after attending a meeting. This suggests that one of the benefits of the consultation process was to raise public awareness of the project. Some scholars claim that public consultation hearings 'are mere democratic rituals that provide a false sense of legitimacy' (Adams, 2004, p. 44), since presentations are more *pro forma* than substantive and the public is not given a chance to raise questions or participate meaningfully. This interpretation seems to contradict the views of members of the public who participated in all three assemblies. The Ontario case is illustrative: Over 90 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'the presenters were given enough time to present and answer questions' while 79.7 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'there was a chance for members of the public to raise questions'.

Perhaps the strongest warrant for the consultation phase was to make the process as well as the content accessible. Guttman and Thompson (2004) argue that deliberative democracy demands accessibility in both process and content; in particular, information must be presented in ways understandable to the audience. The structure of discourse in the consultation hearings made what could be technical issues into issues driven by values. Complex language was explained in as simple a manner as possible in an attempt to avoid one of the major limitations of deliberation (see Yankelovich, 1991).

The importance of time, resources, and support

One of the most significant limitations on the work of the CAs was the very compressed time frame in which members had to learn, consult, and decide. There was no break between any of the three phases and, in fact, consultation began during the last week of the learning phase. In the BC case, there was a summer break between consultation and deliberation, allowing members time to absorb the material they had been exposed to. The Ontario CA's independent evaluator's report indicated that more time was needed, especially in the deliberation phase but also in the learning phase (Institute on Governance, 2007). The issue of time

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constraint was commented upon by members themselves throughout the 12 weekends of these phases. In the Netherlands, the time frame was even more compressed, with three weekends devoted to learning and four devoted to deliberation.

In order to teach such a diverse group, it is imperative to provide educational materials that meet very different needs. Active learning was one of key foundations of the learning phase, with members engaged in simulations and learning by doing. Detailed planning of small group sessions began in advance of each weekend. Facilitator notes were sent to small group facilitators for feedback and discussed with them on Friday before each meeting. After the weekend, there was a debriefing session with facilitators to ensure that the techniques used in the small groups worked. In addition to debates and simulations, some of the other techniques used are described in the learning literature as 'buzz groups', 'think-pair-share', and problem-based learning that teaches students 'to develop the ability to think critically, analyse problems, find and use appropriate learning resources' (Centre for Learning and Teaching, 2007). Many members did want traditional textbook resources and these were provided as beginner, intermediate, and advanced readings, ensuring that all members were given material of the appropriate level.

The third and perhaps most critical element to a successful CA is to do two apparently contradictory things: to support the CA in its decision and deliberation but also to ensure its independence. According to Surowieki (2004), the independence of a deliberative body is a crucial element for it to reach a sound decision. The process needed to be strongly supported by staff whose job was to ensure that members received the resources and tools necessary to help them with decision making without steering them in any particular direction. Members needed to seek their own sources of knowledge and be willing to share them with their colleagues. This was done through a 'members-only' web forum, which served as a place for members to post articles and web links and to engage in debates about issues they were working through. Members' extra-curricular learning occurred at evening sessions at the hotel where ad hoc groups formed to discuss issues before the assembly met that weekend. Weekly surveys indicated that CA members felt well supported and that plenary presentations were neutral. The crucial measurement of neutrality was upheld with 93.3 per cent of members saying that 'the presentation of the options of the Academic Director and research staff' was very or somewhat unbiased. In the Netherlands, answering a yes/no question, 80 per cent agreed that the staff did not have a preference. All of this suggests that citizens have the capacity to

learn and that institutions can be established that aid in that endeavour without 'leading' citizens to a particular outcome.

Conclusion

Political participation can be defined by adversarial activities that place a premium on individual interest aggregation. Much of political science is devoted to examining these activities. Another older form of participation stresses the importance of talk that is framed around consensus. According to this view, citizens talking to citizens about politics is the essence of democracy. This chapter has explored three case studies of this form of democratic participation.

The creation of a civic space where equality, fairness, and an open mind are the goals is the hallmark of this kind of participatory democracy. CAs are an excellent – and far too rare – example of this type of robust participation. They are unique because they represent a transformation of citizens into citizen-experts through an in-depth educational programme and remind us about the capacity of citizens to make sound policy. Their democratic procedures and transparency provide a rare instance of participatory democracy that is not grounded in adversarial relationships but shared values. While none of the three assemblies so far has resulted in electoral reform, this does not impugn the process of the assemblies or the model of participation. Farr (1993) reminds us that 'more light might come of our theoretical and empirical research if we look not to public opinion or to elites but to actual discussions held between citizens' (p. 378). Perhaps this is the real value of Citizens' Assemblies.

Notes

1. This was in response to the question, 'How informed about electoral systems do you feel?'
2. The Ontario CA chose a province-wide list tier knowing that proportionality would be compromised by regional lists because they necessarily have a smaller district magnitude than a province-wide list.

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