

Excerpt from an Article: Citizen Involvement: Crucible of Democracy or Errant Methodology?

Whatever its name, citizen involvement is regarded by some as an illegitimate child of democracy. Others proclaim it as the first born son capable of shaping differing perspectives into the common interest. These opposing views give rise to important questions. What is this thing called citizen involvement? Should we take this child in or throw it to the wolves? If the door is to be opened to citizen participation, then how do local politicians and administrators provide for reasoned dialogue that leads to community building? How does one work with the dynamic of so many people with so many points of view?

Citizen participation has been undergoing a transition to deeper forms of involvement between governments and citizens. These more profound means of interaction have been labeled as citizen engagement, citizen involvement and deliberative democracy. The definition of citizen involvement being used for this discussion is meaningful two-way dialogue between citizens and government during policy development. Such dialogue is continuous, iterative and interactive and may include different methods of communication at various times in the policy process.

The questions surrounding citizen involvement are important to everyone who lives along the river of democratic process. However those who are canoeing the white waters of local government are pressing for answers. The boulders of globalization, economic imperatives, changing demographics, downloaded services, amalgamation, legislation governing water supply and nutrient management and the new municipal act are peering out of the water like so many glaciers carved in stone.

While local governments have been negotiating these rapids they have discovered that the question of whether or not to open the door to citizen participation at the local level has already been answered. Citizens are not waiting politely at home while local officials consider policy options. There is no time to send interdepartmental memos in triplicate or to table the discussion on citizen engagement. Ratepayers are already in the council chambers. Their letters are in the newspapers. Their appeals are before the OMB. They are standing their ground in public meetings. They are making their views known by telephone, a chance meeting with a politician, E-mail and submissions to committees of Council. Their views are being included in municipal strategic planning processes. In effect local government is participatory democracy.

But is this thing we call participation a natural part of how we govern ourselves or is it an aberration of the democratic ideas on which our governing institutions have been built? A brief history of democratic thought can give insight into the origins of our form of governance and where we are heading. Core ideas that we attribute to our democratic institutions and practices today were described more than 150 years ago. In the mid 1800's, Jeremy Bentham described the idea of universal suffrage. The seeds of one man, one vote were planted.

In 1910 and 1913, J. S. Mill and Rousseau respectively, discussed the participation of the electorate as central to the establishment and participation of democratic polity. Twenty years later, in the 1930's, James Mill wrote about the education of the electorate in the interests of socially responsible voting. The role of the citizen was being shaped from the earliest days of democratic thought. During the years that followed the vote was extended to all men and all women. We moved from rule by an elite to the rule of law. The legitimacy of governments was no longer at the pleasure of the monarch but was derived from the mandate given by voters.

Along the way there have been revisionists who decried the inability of the citizenry to provide informed input and the potential disruption to the social order due to participation by the average citizen. Today, lower voter turnout is sometimes offered as proof that citizens cannot participate effectively. However voting is only a small slice in the participatory pie. The reality experienced by local politicians and civic employees indicates that people participate in whatever ways are available and if there is no existing process, they will create one to make their views known.

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The Canadian political process has acknowledged this propensity of citizens to participate whether there is an accepted means to do so or not. During the 1960's Canadian social policy began to examine the phenomenon of citizen participation and to debate its form. Concerns were raised about the effect of bureaucracy as a buffer between elected and electors. The rise of interest lobbies, community organizations and consumer groups were identified as a considerable influence on the policy process. The ensuing debate focused on the role of the citizen in influencing public policy.

Today, in Canada, there are new forces in favour of engagement. The top down model of big government that enjoyed a critical mass of knowledge and expertise is in decline. It is being replaced by relatively smaller government that must rely on collaboration with policy networks and citizen groups to solve complex policy issues that affect a more diverse population. The shift to new forms of public management has promoted steering in place of rowing. Governments may set priorities but are leaving delivery to private contractors and community organizations. The growing emphasis on accountability has fostered new forms of citizen input and auditing.

Rising levels of education have created a population with not only an interest but also the skills with which to dialogue with government. Immigration and the diversity of many communities compels new citizens to participate as a safeguard against political exclusion. Some citizen groups entering the public policy forum are questioning the rise of transnational corporations with vast resources of money, information technology and power with which to shape the public agenda. They assert that democracy in a pluralistic society requires institutions and processes that foster broad-based participation. While public policy has embraced economic growth to support the well being of citizens, many citizens are pointing to the potential retardation of social policy that is driven purely by economic interests.

Admittedly citizens are not perfect participants. They come out in greater numbers for controversial issues and often leave other issues alone. Some of them are well informed and others are ripe for learning. However, the rhythm of their involvement does not prove their disinterest any more than a cloudy day proves the sun has gone. The lack of expertise that some voters bring to an issue that involves technical expertise should not be regarded as a reflection of their lack of knowledge so much as proof of interest in their own well-being and often the well-being of others. Perhaps what is important is not whether citizens understand the complexities of governing but whether politicians understand what citizens want. The question at the local level is not whether to open the door to participation but how to understand and work within its dynamics with integrity and effectiveness.

Citizen engagement is not simply lending an ear when voters speak. It requires analysis of the steps in the policy process, the methods by which citizens may participate and the history of engagement or non-engagement that has been practiced. The importance of this history cannot be underestimated. Where citizen participation has resulted in divisive outcomes, it will be necessary to foster methods of engagement that can offer a new beginning to the working relationship between council and citizen. Where citizen participation has been non-existent it will be prudent to provide opportunities to establish a working relationship and thereby learn how to work together. Where citizen and council have a history of working together and some successful outcomes, the ground may be established for working through the tougher policy issues. The starting point will depend on the specific circumstances of your municipality.