

# Rethinking the Public Policy Process

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A Public Engagement Framework

Don Lenihan



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A Public Engagement Framework

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## Acknowledgements

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# 1. Introduction

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Policy making as we have known it is essentially a search for the best ideas—even the “right” idea—to solve a problem or achieve a public goal. Good policy work requires clear thinking, expert knowledge, and keen political judgement on trade-offs and compromises. For the most part, this happens inside government and behind closed doors. Once the final decisions have been made, they are announced by the minister and then implemented by officials.

The times, however, are changing. Today many issues can’t be solved by governments working alone. In policy areas like climate change, population health, or training and skills development, stakeholders and the general public often have a critical role to play. For example: if greenhouse gasses are to be brought under control, citizens must drive smaller cars; if heart disease is to be reduced, they must exercise more; if there is to be a skilled labour force, universities, community colleges, labour unions, and business will have to work with governments to develop the right programs.

Government cannot force citizens or stakeholders to do their part in solving such problems—or, if it can, it rightly views the use of that kind of power as a last resort. Ideally, the public will recognize that they have a critical role to play, and that it is in their best interest to accept this responsibility. But there is a quid pro quo. If governments really want the public to take some ownership of the problems, in return they must give them a say in formulating the plan.

In short, government and the public must engage in a real dialogue that lets them work through the issues and arrive at the solutions together. Public engagement is a new way of thinking about how governments, stakeholders, communities and ordinary citizens can work together to find solutions to complex problems.<sup>1</sup>

This paper takes seriously the claim that we need a new generation of public processes. Accordingly, the key task is to explain what public engagement processes are, why we need them, how they work, and some of the special issues, challenges and opportunities they pose for governments and the public. The paper is divided into three main parts.

Part 1 begins by introducing the idea of public involvement processes, then divides them into three basic categories: consultative, deliberative and engagement processes. It goes on to describe and explain how each one works and why governments need all three.

Part 2 introduces the concept of deep structure. This refers to how participants view the process as

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<sup>1</sup> Nothing in this paper suggests that ALL policy-making, or even all policy-making around issues like population health or climate change, requires public engagement. It does not. The emphasis here is on “complex” problems within those policy fields, that is, ones where the solution requires action from the public. The assumption here is that, in such cases, the public is unlikely to take ownership of its part without having a say in defining the issues and solutions. Public engagement is about giving them this say. Where this is appropriate, and how far the process should go, should be decided case by case.



a whole, their role in it, and how it will reward or sanction their behaviour. The discussion then drills down into the special role dialogue plays in public engagement processes, contrasting this with the deep structure of traditional consultation processes.

Part 3 draws on the discussion in Parts 1 and 2 to further describe the deep structure of engagement processes by providing a checklist of some of their defining characteristics.

Before we begin, a word on terminology is in order. Over the last few decades, a huge literature has evolved around ways to involve the public more fully in the policy process. As a result, there is now a

**Government and the public must engage in a real dialogue that lets them work through the issues and arrive at the solutions together.**

veritable jungle of terminology in use. Sometimes different terms are used to describe very similar things; sometimes the same term is used to describe very different things.

This paper coins some new terms. On first blush, the processes and concepts they stand for may not seem very different from ones developed elsewhere in the literature, such as the consultation and partnership levels in Sherry R. Arnstein's famous Ladder of Citizen Participation. Nevertheless, where new terms

have been coined, the decision was not taken lightly. While the thinking here certainly builds on previous work, the terms are meant to mark important differences in the approach.

Before beginning, three terms in particular should be mentioned. The first is consultation. In this paper, that term refers to a specific kind of involvement process, which is then distinguished from deliberative processes and public engagement processes, two other technical terms.

In practice, many governments continue to use the word "consultation" to refer to all three types of processes. This may be confusing for some readers—and possibly frustrating. The paper has some harsh things to say about the uses and abuses of consultation. At times, therefore, it may sound like it fails to appreciate the many innovative processes under way across the country, and which also go by that name. As the examples and arguments hopefully make clear, however, this is not the intent. It should be borne in mind that, as used here, the term "consultation" refers to only one of three kinds of involvement processes. Unfortunately, some frank talk about its uses and abuses is long overdue.





# A Public Involvement Framework

## Part one

### 2. Three Types of Public Involvement Processes

We can use the term public involvement processes for any process that directly involves the public in government planning and decision making. The framework proposed below sorts these processes into three basic types:

- consultative processes
- deliberative processes
- engagement processes

#### 2.1 Consultative Processes

Consultative processes are the most familiar ones. Although they can be large or small, take place in a hotel meeting room or online, involve a series of public hearings or a simple telephone survey, the basic goal is always the same: to give the public an opportunity to influence government planning and decision making by presenting their views on an issue to officials.<sup>2</sup> Once these submissions have been made, the officials review the material, deliberate on what conclusions they should draw from it, and then make recommendations to the minister on what actions to take. Accordingly, we can divide the process into three basic stages:

- getting the public's views
- drawing on the public's views (and other relevant material) to deliberate over the issues
- developing recommendations to the minister for action

We can represent the respective roles played by government and the public as follows:

#### Traditional public involvement consultation



<sup>2</sup> In fact, consultative processes can be further subdivided according to whether government is seeking to gather and/or share ideas and information; or provide the public with an opportunity to provide input and advice.



Over the past two decades, consultation processes have been under significant pressure. Events like town halls and public hearings often fail to resolve difficult issues. Indeed, when the participants' views are polarized or fragmented—as they often are—consultation can make matters worse. Government officials can find it very difficult to arrive at recommendations that will be acceptable to even a bare majority of participants. When their report is made public, those who disagree with its findings often feel the process has failed them. They may feel that the officials were unresponsive or not listening or suspect that they had already decided on the outcome before the process was even launched. As a result, over the last two decades pressure has been growing to find ways to make these processes more transparent, accountable and responsive to the public's views.

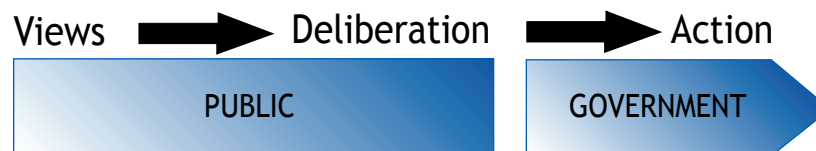
**Achieving goals like a healthy population or a highly skilled labour force requires collaboration between government, stakeholders, communities and citizens.**

## 2.2 Deliberative Processes

One strategy has been to experiment with deliberative processes. These processes ask the public to do more than just give their views. They must go another step to engage one another in a dialogue where they work through the issues together, weighing evidence for competing claims, seeking compromises and trade-offs to deal with competing values and priorities, and arriving at strategies for how to proceed. Government then makes the final decision on what it will do.

The basic idea here is that involving the public in the deliberative stage of the policy process will lead to a more transparent, accountable and responsive outcome. Ultimately, the public should be more willing to accept the results because they've played a key role in the deliberations. In such a process, we can represent the respective roles of the public and governments as follows:

### From consultation to deliberation



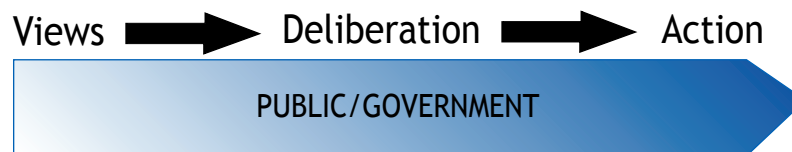
Over the last 20 years, there have been many good examples of successful deliberative processes where participants have shown that they are ready, willing and able to work together to overcome differences and arrive at recommendations they agree upon. By and large, this has been a constructive experience. However, deliberative processes are not always the right answer to the failure of consultation, and can raise problems of their own. In many cases, we should be turning to public engagement, rather than deliberation.



## 2.3 Public Engagement Processes

Large-scale societal changes are making governments, businesses and civil society far more complex and interdependent than they were only a generation or two ago. In this new world, achieving goals like a healthy population or a highly skilled labour force requires more than public deliberation. It requires collaboration between government(s), stakeholders, communities and citizens. Public engagement processes—which are the main focus of this paper—are designed to help all these parties work together more effectively to find and implement solutions to complex problems or achieve complex goals. They do this by treating the public and government as partners in the exercise. We can represent the three stages of these processes, and the respective roles played by the public and government, as follows:

### From deliberation to public engagement



Before moving on, two further points should be made. First, on hearing about public engagement, people often assume these are large, complex processes, focused on big public policy issues, such as regulating greenhouse gases or developing a plan to address poverty within a province. Sometimes this is the case. But more often these processes are small, highly focused community initiatives, such as a neighbourhood literacy program or a community economic development initiative. Public engagement is NOT about size. It is about how government can use deliberative discussion to unite a group of people around a common goal and mobilize them to work together to achieve it.

Second, many people also wonder if public engagement requires government to turn over some of its authority to others, whether stakeholders, communities or citizens. Suffice it to say here that nothing in this approach requires government to give up any of its powers or responsibilities. Public engagement is about how government exercises its authority, not whether it should have it. We will return to this point in the Conclusion.

In sum, there are at least three basic models for involving the public in the decision making process. Drawing clear distinctions between them raises some important questions: Should governments be using all three types? If so, which one should they use where? What are the risks and benefits of each one?

Before we can answer these questions, we need to see more clearly why interest in deliberative and public engagement processes has been growing so quickly in recent years. The answer lies in a very



important shift in how governments think about policy. We can call it the **holistic turn**.

### 3. The Holistic Turn

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A striking example of the holistic turn is found in work around the determinants of health. When policy experts talked about health 25 years ago, they focused mainly on the role the health system played in curing illness. Thus the discussions of the day centred on issues like the availability and quality of doctors, hospitals and pharmaceuticals. But then things began to change. Policy makers began to recognize that the goal of curing illness was largely reactive. Instead of waiting till people were ill to treat them, they would get better results by putting more emphasis on the proactive idea of promoting wellness. Prevention, as the old saying goes, is worth a pound of cure.

This new perspective raised all sorts of new questions about what it means to be healthy and its causes: What is the difference between wellness and health? Is wellness more than a physical condition? How is it related to other factors, such as stress in the workplace, cultural background or income levels? Who is responsible for promoting wellness? How should governments marshal their resources to promote it?

Over the last two decades, questions like these have linked the wellness and health discussion to discussions of issues in many other policy fields. Analysts have mapped out how a wide range of social, cultural, environmental and economic factors interact to influence public health.<sup>3</sup>

Work on these interconnections has fundamentally changed how analysts think about policy issues around health and wellness. For example, there is now a huge body of information and data on the connections between health and income. It shows, for instance, that people with low incomes have higher rates of diabetes.

Two decades later, we can see that the overall result of the holistic turn is that policy fields that used to be regarded as essentially distinct from public health are now seen as closely connected to it in all kinds of complex and unexpected ways. Policy analysts call them “horizontal connections.”

The holistic turn is not confined to health policy. Most policy fields now look at their issues holistically, including education, transportation, national security, training and skills development, economic development and the environment. Moreover, the impact of this shift in thinking is now reaching beyond just policy. It is pushing governments to draw some far-reaching conclusions about the policy process itself, at least three of which now seem clear:

- Good planning and policy development in major policy fields should take important horizontal connections into account

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<sup>3</sup> These factors include income and social status, social support networks, education, employment and working conditions, social environments, physical environments, biology and genetic endowment, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, health services, gender, and culture.



- The public has a crucial role in helping to identify which horizontal connections are important
- The public has a crucial role to play in defining and implementing many of the strategies and solutions to deal with horizontal issues

Recognition and acceptance of these three points is growing. As it does, the interest in deliberative and public engagement processes is also growing. Indeed, they seem poised to change how modern governments work by changing how governments involve the public in the policy process. Let's take a closer look at these new approaches and how they can help solve some of the problems that now afflict many traditional consultation processes.

## 4. The Uses and Limits of Consultation Processes

Traditional consultation remains an important tool in government's toolkit. But we've already seen that it is not the right one for every job. How do we know when consultation will work well and when we need to move beyond it?

Consider a case like setting regulatory standards for marketing meat products. Among other

**Traditional consultation remains an important tool in government's toolkit, but is not the right one for every job; sometimes, we need to move beyond it.**

things, this will include regulations around meat packaging and distribution, such as how it is to be prepared and stored. For the most part, these regulations will be based on the best available science. Government will draw on this body of knowledge to set standards and implement them through regulations. As long as industry officials believe this is the case, they are unlikely to resist government's decisions. They want their products to be safe and they want the public to feel that they are safe.

Still, even with the best science, there will be unanswered questions, such as how inspections will be carried out. Government and industry want the system to be as simple and cost-effective as possible, without compromising public health and safety. Consultation is often a good way of addressing such questions. It allows government to get the input it needs from industry to be sure government understands their concerns and the burdens different options may place on them. Once this has been decided, implementing the regulations is largely up to government.

We can use this example to formulate two basic questions that determine whether a consultation process is likely to work well or not:

- Is government able to frame its questions in a way that stakeholders will accept?
- Is government able to implement the solutions that are likely to result?

We will call these the Two Test Questions because the answers to them determine which of the three types of processes is likely the best one for the task at hand. For example, when the answer to both



questions is yes, officials can be reasonably confident the public will see consultation as an effective way of arriving at a solution to the problem. Thus, in the meat marketing case, first, industry agrees that the issue is about public health and safety and that the thinking around it should be guided by the best available science. Second, once government has consulted industry on non-scientific questions, such as how to inspect meat processing, it is in a position to implement the solution by making regulations that everyone must follow.

However, food processing is now more the exception than the rule. As we have seen, the holistic turn has made it difficult for government alone to frame many issues in a way that the public accepts. In response, governments should not just assume consultation will work. They should start by asking the first of the Two Test Questions. If their answer to it is no, reframing the issue becomes the first priority; and that requires a deliberative process. But what about the second question? How do we know when the answer to it will be a yes or a no?

## 5. The Uses and Limits of Deliberative Processes

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Suppose government officials are thinking about consulting stakeholders on how to manage a resource like local marine waters, so they pose the Two Test Questions. Suppose further that they arrive at the following answers:

- Government is **UNABLE** to frame its questions in a way that stakeholders will accept; and
- Nevertheless, government likely can implement the solutions—it can regulate—if enough stakeholders eventually agree on the options.

We see from the answer to the first question that conventional consultation won't do. In order to get communities and stakeholders together around the options, the issue will have to be reframed, so they will need a deliberative or "2-stage" process.

The Southwest New Brunswick Marine Resources Planning Initiative (RPI) provides an interesting example of a 2-stage, deliberative process. It shows that the public can work together to reframe the issues. But it also highlights some of the unexpected results that can come from these processes—and how that, in turn, can affect the answer to the second of the Two Test Questions.

### 5.1 An Example

The RPI initiative is a citizen-led planning process supported and funded by Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the New Brunswick Department of Fisheries and the New Brunswick Department of Agriculture and Aquaculture. It began in 2004 to address marine space conflicts in the Bay of Fundy and move towards a more integrated and collaborative approach to management of marine activities.

In brief, communities and stakeholders in the Bay of Fundy region had become frustrated with past efforts by governments to manage the marine resource. Consultation processes to get their input



led to decisions that many residents felt did not reflect their views or the values of the communities around the Bay.

Government, however, saw the situation differently. According to one senior official, members of the public often had deep disagreements with each other about what the real issues were and how they should be addressed. This made it very difficult for government to arrive at a coherent management plan that everyone supported. Officials therefore decided to launch a citizen-led, deliberative process that would allow the public to work through the issues and solutions together, in hope of reaching greater agreement.

In April of 2006, a Southwest New Brunswick Marine Plan Development Committee of interested citizens was asked to guide a plan-development process. At the time of writing this paper, the Committee had produced a draft report. It testifies to the group's dedication and to the public's ability to work through complex issues to find mutually acceptable solutions.

In particular, the report addresses issues in five key areas. The first of these focuses on governance. In effect, it replies directly to the concern of stakeholders and citizens that past processes often ignored their concerns. This section, titled "Resource Management and Decision Making," sets the following goals for the group's recommendations on improving governance:

- Minimize user conflict issues in the planning area
- Create more transparency and predictability in decision making processes
- Incorporate a conflict resolution framework for use by all governing bodies and users
- Develop a communication system by which the public can be aware of and involved in the marine planning implementation

The section goes on to recommend a number of actions that, in the Committee's view, are necessary to meet these goals, and to ensure that the public's voice will have an adequate say in future decision making. The centrepiece of their strategy lies in two recommendations: one for a Marine Planning Advisory Council; and a second one for a Marine Planning Office.

The next four sections of the report provide a list of recommendations to government in four key policy areas:

- Marine Ecosystem Conservation
- Marine Access
- Health Coastal Communities and Sustainable Livelihoods
- Research and Monitoring

For our purposes, two important lessons can be drawn from this ambitious and admirable experiment.





## 5.2 Lessons from the Example

First, if government's main reason for launching this process was to allow the public to reframe the discussion in ways that would lead to a more coherent view of the issues and solutions, then the process has made some impressive gains and should be considered a success. (We will have more to say about how dialogue achieves this kind of reframing in Part 2.)

There is a second lesson, however, that is more worrying. Reportedly, there are now concerns in government that the recommendations may go too far. In particular, some feel the proposed Advisory Council and Marine Planning Office may give the public too big a role in decision making, thus tying government's hands in future. What should we make of this?

**Uncertainty about what the public will decide makes real dialogue meaningful to the public—and useful to governments—by giving people a chance to reframe the issues in ways that reflect their first-hand knowledge of how the issues affect them.**

It might be argued that, if these new governance mechanisms truly make decision making more community-based, transparent and accountable, government should accept them. After all, it supposedly launched the process to deepen these values. After the group has worked so hard to overcome its' own differences, make compromises and trade-offs, and arrive at solutions, shouldn't government respect their view of how to make decisions in the future?

In order to answer this question, we need to get a better fix on government's concerns. We can do so by distinguishing between two kinds of goals that underlie the process: process goals and substance goals. Process goals are those which seek to make the decision making process more open, transparent, accountable,

inclusive, fair, and community responsive. These are the broad goals behind the group's call for the Advisory Council and Marine Planning Office. They are also the main goals that government had in mind when it launched the process.

But presumably government and the public also thought that a deliberative process would result in better decisions and therefore better policy. This is where the substance goals come in. They are the ones that aim at defining and solving specific policy issues around management of the Bay. They can be found in the four policy sections of the draft report, which follow the section on governance. If officials are now nervous that the governance proposals will give the public too much say over policy, it is because they fear that too many of the policy decisions that will result will be unacceptable to it. In short, they fear the governance proposals will lead to bad policy.

Consider a community on the Bay that relies on tourism. It may find that tourists don't like commercial shipping in the area, which affects their willingness to spend time in the community. In response, community members may try to use the new governance mechanisms to ban or restrict commercial shipping, which may conflict with government's trade agreements or other prior





commitments. Government could not implement such a recommendation, so it would find itself in a stand-off with the community.

But that is not all. There are also concerns that the public may use the new governance arrangements to propose solutions that would exceed government's fiscal capacity or its legal or moral authority.

These concerns are real. In fact, the process makes such results worryingly possible, precisely because it asks the public to base their deliberations on their experience. When citizens draw on their experience, they rarely see issues the way government does. They focus on how those issues affect them, not government. As a result, the solutions they propose often will not fit comfortably into government's policy silos or respect its other priorities and commitments.

For government, this raises a serious problem. If it invites the public to carry out this task, and the public has acted in good faith, their expectations that government will act on their recommendations will be very high. But if government finds itself with solutions it can't implement, it will have to ignore the recommendations and, as already noted, will find itself in a stand-off.

Still, if government rightly worries about finding itself in this position, it also needs to recognize that this uncertainty about what the public will decide is exactly what makes real dialogue meaningful to the public—and useful to governments. It gives citizens and stakeholders a chance to participate in reframing the issues in ways that reflect their first-hand knowledge of how the issues affect them, their communities and their businesses.

This is not only good for the public; it is also good for governments. It can and should make a major contribution to their effort to think more holistically about the issues. It is an effective and authoritative way of identifying and mapping out the real-world connections underlying the issues governments are trying to solve.

So, 2-stage deliberative processes present governments with a dilemma. On one hand, they may help citizens overcome their differences and unite around a common view of the issues and their solutions. If governments can then act on this, the public will feel that the process was genuinely more transparent, accountable, and responsive. At the same time, it leads to better decision making.

On the other hand, there is a risk that the public will arrive at solutions that government feels it cannot implement, in which case it will have to ignore them. The public will then feel the process is even less transparent, accountable and responsive than the consultations it replaced. No government wants to end up here.

### 5.3 Resolving the Dilemma

There are ways out of this dilemma. Let's return to the answers we gave at the beginning of this section to the Two Test Questions. First, we said, government was not able to frame the issues in



a way that was acceptable to the public, so it launched a deliberative process. We saw that this approach overcame the problem. Second, we said that, if solutions were found, government assumed it would be able to implement them, presumably through regulation. However, we now see that this answer may have been wrong. The outcome to the second questions turns out to be harder to predict than expected because the solutions the public will propose may not respect prior commitments or may strain government's fiscal capacity.

In fact, this dilemma is not that hard to solve. It can be done by building better checks and balances into the process. With the right tools, the risks of a bad result can usually be managed. For example, the way to avoid solutions that are too costly or that threaten to conflict with government's prior commitments can be avoided by putting clear parameters around each dialogue through a terms-of-reference document. This gives the public clear guidance on such things as the funding that

Often, processes are designed based on the belief that government will be able to implement the solutions the public delivers to it. This often turns out to be false.

is available for solutions and prior commitments that must be respected.

Second, government should be more than an observer in this process. It can and should be a full participant in the dialogue to help ensure that its constraints and concerns are being weighed and vetted each step of the way, along with other ideas and proposals.

Both of these strategies still require that governments are willing to show real flexibility in how they respond to the public's views.

But handled well, they can provide adequate protection for

government while still allowing for a genuinely open dialogue. We will have more to say about this later in the paper. In the meantime, we need to note yet a third—and very different—way that public deliberation can lead to solutions government cannot implement.

## 5.4 The Limits of a 2-stage Process

We saw that deliberative processes work differently from traditional consultation processes. Rather than looking at issues through the lens of government's policy silos, the public sees them through the lens of their own experience. The result may be solutions that government cannot deliver on its own—even if it wants to—because they require the participation of stakeholders, communities and citizens.

For example, a public dialogue on controlling greenhouse gases is likely to arrive at solutions that require changes in people's behaviour, such as driving smaller cars or conserving energy. However, government's authority and ability to get people to change such behaviour is limited. It can't force them to change—or, at least, it will and should view this option as a very last resort.

Far from being a bad thing, however, solutions that require the active participation of the public



should be seen as a good thing. They reflect a more realistic view of what must be done to solve an issue like climate change, namely, to enlist the public in implementing the solutions. The solution reflects a more holistic view of the issue. So, if solutions like these worry governments, it is not because they are bad policy, but because governments are left with the responsibility for implementing them, even though they have no effective way of doing so.

This is a flaw in the process, not the solutions. A solution to greenhouse gasses that does not require a contribution from the public is likely no real solution at all. But a 2-stage process like the Bay of Fundy example never asks the public to consider whether they have a part to play here. On the contrary, the public's role comes to an end once they have made their recommendations to government. At that point, they turn the problem back over to it, along with their report. The process is thus based on the belief that government will be able to implement the solutions the public delivers to it. This often turns out to be false.

The lesson here is not that such solutions are bad, but that the public's part in the process is not finished. The process needs to go another step. It needs to move the participants into a third stage: action. In this stage, the participants begin asking themselves what role they should play in implementing the solutions, along with government. Thus, in our example of reducing greenhouse gases, this third stage of the dialogue would get the public to focus on the steps they are prepared to take to make their proposed solutions work, such as driving smaller cars or conserving energy. Adding this third stage to the process moves us from deliberative processes to what we call "public engagement processes." Before turning to this topic, however, it is worth having a quick look at one more example of a 2-stage process—one that fits more comfortably into this model.

## 5.5 A Second Example: The British Columbia and Ontario Citizens' Assemblies on Electoral Reform

The Government of British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly is an impressive example of a 2-stage, public engagement process. It brought together 160 randomly selected citizens from across the province to discuss and make recommendations on electoral reform. The group began meeting in January, 2004. Their mandate was, first, to see if they agreed on the need for some form of proportional representation; and, second, if they did, whether they could come to agreement on a particular model.

The government promised that, if both conditions were met, the Assembly's proposal would be put to the general public in a referendum in the next provincial election in 2005. If the public then approved it, the government would introduce legislation so the new system could go into effect for the election of 2009. Ontario used a similar process to carry out its own experiment in electoral reform in 2006-7.

The BC Assembly reached agreement on the need for a new system and a model. When the model was proposed to the voters, however, it was narrowly defeated. Because the vote was so close, the



government has since decided to pose the question to voters a second time in the election of 2009. As this paper is written, the campaign is underway. The Ontario assembly also reached agreement, but its proposal too failed to pass in the provincial referendum.

If we look at the BC and Ontario assemblies through the prism of our Two Test Questions, first, we can see that the government launched a deliberative process because it was not able to solve the questions around electoral fairness through conventional consultation. The issues were simply too complex and divisive. A deliberative approach was needed to overcome differences.

Once agreement on a model was reached, however, the assemblies' work was done. The question was then put to the general public to allow them also to participate in this stage of deliberation and decision. Had the voters in either BC or Ontario supported the proposal, the third stage—action—would have fallen to government. It would have taken appropriate action by passing legislation to change the electoral process. So, the answer to the second of our Two Test Questions, then, is that government could deliver the result on its own and did not need to involve the public.

## 5.6 Lessons from the Example

At least two lessons can be drawn from this example. First, notwithstanding the voters' rejection of the two Assemblies' proposals, it is fair to say that, from the viewpoint of using deliberation to overcome differences, the assembly processes were remarkably successful. They serve as a powerful demonstration that citizens are willing to engage whole-heartedly in a deliberative exercise—often at considerable personal cost. In BC and Ontario, they gave up their weekends for several months, left their homes and families, sat through long and often complicated learning sessions, and then debated the options with one another until they arrived at a conclusion.

Moreover, they did what their political representatives may not have been able to do. They reached almost unanimous agreement on an option for electoral reform. This not only shows that citizens are willing and able to participate more fully on complex issues, but that they can be relied upon to work together and to find solutions to problems that may elude their governments.

Second, it is worth asking why the dialogue in the Bay of Fundy case seems to have expanded the issues in ways that were more appropriate to a Stage-3 process, but that this same kind of expansion didn't happen here. The answer may lie in the distinction we have already drawn between process and substance goals.

Let's note that the issue of electoral reform is itself largely a process question. It is about how to make the process of government decision making more fair, transparent, responsive and democratic. But, unlike the Bay of Fundy example, this isn't immediately linked to a lot of substance or policy issues that citizens are also being asked to discuss. It is purely and simply a question about how government should work.

This may account for why there was no need for a third stage. When there are no real substance or



policy issues to consider, the solutions will not spill over into the day-to-day activities of stakeholders, communities and citizens for the simple reason that the questions is focused on how government itself is organized and works. While the public has a deep interest in this, it doesn't have a direct role in implementing the solution. Either government will change how it operates, or it won't.

So perhaps the lesson to be drawn here is that the more narrowly the engagement process is focused on issues around government processes, the less likely it is that the solutions will require public action, in which case, a 2-stage process is all that is needed. Nevertheless, these are slippery issues. Before drawing any firm conclusions about what makes a 2- or 3-stage process the right choice, we need more experiments, reflection and discussion about the differences between them. This brings us to our discussion of public engagement processes.

## 6. Moving to Public Engagement Processes

If we return to the Two Test Questions, we can now see that public engagement processes are useful when:

- Government is UNABLE to frame its questions in a way that stakeholders agree with; and
- Government is UNABLE to implement the solutions of the public dialogue process, on its own.

So, in such a case, the answer to both of the Two Test Questions is no. Responding effectively means, first, the issue will have to be reframed in a way that the public feels addresses their concerns; AND, second, that this discussion of the issues and solutions will be followed by a discussion of who will do what in implementing them. In practice, this usually involves the development of an action plan in which everyone has a role, not just government. To see how this might work, let's consider the following example from Saint John, New Brunswick.

### 6.1 The Sustainable Communities Discussion in Saint John

Over the next decade the greater Saint John region in New Brunswick expects to see investment of between 12 and 20 billion dollars, much of it in the energy sector. For a community of that size, this is a huge amount of money. Local governments and community leaders recognize that growth on this scale can be a mixed blessing. Along with high-paying jobs and new industries, it can also bring major social and economic problems, such as a spike in crime rates or sky-rocketing housing prices.

In response, leaders agreed early on that the region needs a long-term plan for the future. They also agreed that the planning process had to involve people and organizations from across the community. Finally, they agreed that the overarching goal should be to transform their region into a single sustainable community, that is, one that takes a balanced and ecologically friendly approach to growth and development.

Over the last few years, the five communities in the region have launched a series of initiatives



to help them prepare for the future. These include a broad-based visioning exercise involving thousands of citizens from the City of Saint John, and a series of town hall meetings, roundtables, surveys, studies, and other processes aimed at bringing together local governments, citizens and stakeholders from across the region to discuss their future.

In hindsight, the commitment to finding the “balance” needed to build a sustainable community turned out to be a catalyst for some uncomfortable but highly productive discussions over who is responsible for what in community development.

For example, they all agreed on an economic vision that would transform Saint John into a thriving energy hub. However, discussions around how to achieve the goal raised questions about the need

**Real change will happen only if the public takes some ownership of, and responsibility for, the solutions, and if governments are willing to be open and flexible about how they arrive at these solutions.**

for a highly skilled workforce. ‘Whose responsibility is it to build this and what is needed to do the job?’ they wondered.

At first, there were the usual differences between governments, businesses, environmentalists and social policy advocates. As they explored the issue, however, they heard things that changed some peoples’ minds.

They learned that highly skilled people are in demand and very mobile. When they accept a job, the community they will live in is often as important as the rate of pay. They expect quality social services like education and health care; they want clean air and water, and parks for their children; they want access to cultural events, such as music and theatre; they want to feel “at home” in

their community. In short, they want liveable communities.

Hearing this seems to have made a difference to the business community, in particular. Traditionally, business tends to look on social and environmental programs as someone else’s responsibility, usually government. Staffing a business, they will say, is about paying for someone’s labour, not building them a community.

In Saint John, they now seem to be taking a different view. They agree that this way of looking at the issue misses the bigger picture. They have come around to the idea that these social goods are really an investment in their own future, a way to ensure the healthy, happy and highly skilled workforce they will need to run their industries and ensure their own long-term success. Businesses in the area thus have joined a community-wide discussion on what new role they might play in creating social infrastructure, such as affordable housing, arts and culture programs, or new educational facilities.

On the other side of the policy debate, advocates for environmental protection and social programs are also taking a fresh view of things. Too often these groups see major economic development in a sector like energy as a threat to their goals, one to be resisted or opposed. In Saint John, however, many of these advocates have stopped talking this way. Instead of demanding higher taxes to pay





for new social programs, or strategizing to prevent new refineries from being built, they are working closely with governments and the business community to try and do some creative thinking around how a new oil refinery or nuclear reactor can make a real contribution to a sustainable community.

All these stakeholders have come to see that building a sustainable community involves promoting a wide variety of interests, not just their own. And they know that means making trade-offs and compromises. Without overstating the degree of social harmony in Saint John (there is still a long way to go), the dialogue on community development is strikingly civil and the mood is decidedly collaborative. At bottom, the change in tone seems to come down to this: While many communities tend to see their economic, social, cultural and environmental interests as competitive and separate, these people and their governments have reframed the discussion in a way that allows them to look on these interests as complementary and interdependent.

## 6.2 Lessons from the Example

For present purposes, we draw four general lessons from this case:

- Although looking at issues holistically makes them more complex, the case shows it needn't make them unmanageable. As citizens, stakeholders and governments come to understand each other's interests and roles more fully, they begin to see that they are all part of a bigger whole in which the different interests and roles complement one another. This makes them more trusting of each other, more respectful, and more open to reasonable trade-offs and compromises—which, in turn, allows them to work together more effectively to solve problems and achieve goals.
- The case highlights the critical role that deliberative dialogue plays in producing this kind of social learning. Community members, stakeholders and governments need to listen to one another and learn about each others' views, discuss their similarities and differences, weigh evidence and arguments for the various claims, and work together to find common goals and joint priorities, make choices and compromises together, and propose common measures. Without this kind of dialogue, real progress would be impossible.
- The case shows how this kind of deliberation can be carried over into how roles and responsibilities are shared and assigned for implementing solutions. Stakeholders, citizens and governments are discussing how they can work together to realize the goals they are setting and implement the plans they are making. For example, as business discusses with the community what its role might be in helping to provide solutions to social policy issues, the environmental and social policy groups are looking for ways to work with government and business to blend the idea of an energy hub with that of a sustainable community.
- Public engagement processes can be big or small and need not involve a whole geographic community like the Saint John region. We should keep the scope of this example in perspective.



If it is a good illustration of a public engagement process, such processes need not be this comprehensive or ambitious. Public engagement is about using deliberative discussion to unite a group of people around a common goal and mobilize them to work together to achieve it. Such a project can be small and focused, such as a Neighbourhood Watch program; or far-reaching and comprehensive, such as the Saint John example. So there is nothing in principle that says this approach could not be applied to a small community-of-interest, a neighbourhood, or across a province, country or even internationally. Collaboration is about how people and/or organizations work together to solve problems or achieve goals. It is not about size and scale.

In sum, public engagement processes extend and deepen the holistic turn that began some twenty years ago. Because citizens, stakeholders and communities focus on how issues affect them, they naturally frame them differently from governments. Allowing the public to engage in such a discussion can lead to highly productive and innovative ways of looking at issues and proposing solutions, for both the public and governments. But this exercise will lead to real change only if the public is also ready, willing and able to take some ownership of, and responsibility for, the solutions, and if governments are willing to be open and flexible about how they arrive at these solutions.

The remainder of this paper explores some issues and strategies around designing and implementing the various stages of a public engagement process. In the next part, Part 2, we focus on the role of dialogue in these processes and contrast it with the deep structure of traditional consultation.





# Dialogue as an Engagement Strategy

## Part two

### 7. From Analysis to Dialogue

At the beginning of this paper, we said that good policy making requires clear thinking, expert knowledge, and keen political judgement on trade-offs and compromises. We went on to argue that today it is also about building new relationships based on shared ownership and responsibility. Public engagement uses deliberation to build these kinds of relationships. This requires a high standard of trust and mutual respect, truthfulness, logic and evidence, compromise and good will, innovation and creativity. But will this approach really work? There are at least three common objections to it:

- Some critics say that, insofar as we are talking about the general public, the approach overestimates their capacity to participate fully in such a process. In this view, the general public lack the skills and training needed to work through complex policy issues in an orderly and objective way. At the very least, engaging them in such a dialogue would require the development of new skills.
- A second concern is that, whether we are talking about the general public or stakeholders, this view is likely to lead to an explosion of talk-fests that go nowhere, while distracting governments from making the hard decisions that must be made to provide good governance and leadership.
- Finally, there are objections that this call for dialogue is overly optimistic—if not naive—about the public's willingness to work together to solve complex issues. The general public and stakeholders are both too self-interested to arrive at real collaborative solutions. As a result, engaging them in a dialogue on tough issues is more likely to lead to conflict and stand-offs than solutions. Consider, for example, the intractable debates between stakeholders over nuclear power or environmental regulation; or the general unwillingness of the public to take on responsibility, as demonstrated by the so-called NIMBY syndrome.

Let's consider these three objections in the same order.

1. The first one is misplaced. Using dialogue to solve problems is NOT a new or highly specialized skill. On the contrary, each of us does it every day. Although few people could cite the rules of logic or evidence they use to advance views or work through a problem, neither could they explain what happens with the laws of physics when they ride a bicycle. Nevertheless, most of us do it with ease. In fact, the vast majority of people are competent users of language. If they weren't, they couldn't engage in conversation, let alone manage their day-to-day lives. Dialogue is one of the most basic social skills we possess. Every competent speaker is an expert in it. Each of us knows intuitively how it works, why it works, and when it works. Participants therefore don't



One way to understand the differences between types of processes is by examining their deep structure: how participants view the process as a whole, their role in it, and how it will reward or sanction their behaviour.

need a lot of training in the complex rules, practices and skills of dialogue to participate fully in a process. They only need to get in touch with their own intuitive ability to use language.

However, this is not to deny that participants in a dialogue process need leadership and direction. They do. A well-designed process is one source of direction. Another comes from the officials who lead and facilitate it. Both the designers and the facilitator DO need special skills and training. Their challenge is, first, to build a process that sends the right signals to participants about the tasks at hand and their respective roles in performing them; and, second, to get participants to recognize and begin responding to the signals. Both tasks require a sophisticated grasp of the rules and structure of dialogue, careful planning around how a

proposed dialogue will unfold, and experience at managing group dynamics.

2. Nothing in this approach commits governments to launching large numbers of big, rambling, public dialogues. If governments need engagement processes to solve certain problems, they do not need them for every problem. Nor must these processes always involve large numbers of people or go on interminably. While the right participants must be at the table and must have the time needed to work through the issues, a well designed and well executed process will be focused and disciplined, have clear milestones, and lead to action within a reasonable period of time. Indeed, the participants themselves will usually insist on this.

We should add, however, that this approach often aims at building “ongoing dialogues.” But these are not rambling or endless discussions. On the contrary, they are part of a cycle of learning and improvement that leads to increasingly focused and productive dialogue.

3. On one hand, we must agree with the critics that people often do disagree on important questions. If they didn’t, we wouldn’t need democracy, which is based on our recognition that such differences exist. These differences usually stem from competing values or interests, ideological commitments, or incomplete evidence. But democracy also assumes that reasonable people can learn to live with such differences, peacefully and respectfully. Public debate is a key tool for achieving this. To the extent that the critics are in effect rejecting this view, they are rejecting the basis of democratic government. We disagree.

On the other hand, many of the most acrimonious public debates today are not so much the result of a real clash of ideas as an attempt to manipulate the process. An increasing amount of tension and disagreement stems from intransigence, grandstanding, and wilful misrepresentation of facts, positions and views (spin). Irritants like these are often part of a “game” participants play to manipulate the public policy process and gain influence over the



decision makers. The fact that the rules of traditional consultation not only allow but reward such tactics has become a serious threat to the policy process that must be recognized and checked.

A well-designed and facilitated dialogue is a powerful countervailing force. It helps prevent the use of tactics. Dialogue processes are governed by rules that sanction rather than reward such behaviour, thus helping to focus and discipline public debate. To see how this works first we need to look more closely at how the consultation game is played, then go on to examine the structure of dialogue processes and ask how they can change the way participants behave and interact.

## 8. The Deep Structure of Consultation

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One way to get at the differences between the three types of processes we have been discussing—consultative, deliberative and public engagement—is to examine what we can call their deep structure. This refers to how participants view the process as a whole, their role in it, and how it will reward or sanction their behaviour. Let's begin by looking at the deep structure of consultative processes.

Traditional consultation allows the public to present their views to government on what they think it should do to solve a problem. Consider a consultation process on regulating greenhouse gases. Government (or a committee of its representatives) poses a question to the public, such as: What are acceptable emission limits? It then sits at the front of the room (metaphorically or literally) and listens as the public replies, posing occasional questions or listening to interesting exchanges between participants. Finally, it retires to the privacy of the antechambers to sift through what it has heard and make its decisions and recommendations.

First, in such a process the basic goal of most organizations will be to advance their own interests. They will use their time before the committee to try to influence the decisions it will make when it retires to the antechamber. Thus business groups may argue that emission limits should be lower rather than higher, while environmental groups may argue the reverse.

Second, because the process casts participants in the role of advocates for a cause, much as a lawyer's job is to advocate for the client, it also makes groups representing different interests appear as competitors for the ear of government. This, in turn, can create distrust, tensions and rivalries between them.

Third, it will be in the participants' interest to create a sense of urgency around their views of the issue, seek out studies or statistics that support their positions, and bring competing claims into disrepute.

In recent years this last point has become the fly in the ointment. Government officials know all too well how easily consultation processes can be derailed by theatrical tactics, especially on big public issues like the environment. Exaggeration and grandstanding attract media attention, which puts



pressure on governments to respond. The rule of thumb here is ‘the squeaky wheel gets the grease.’

By the same token, these participants know there is usually little cost to them for sticking to an exaggerated or doubtful claim. Consultation processes have almost no way of holding participants to account for what they say. On the contrary, when the media want a counter-argument, they turn to someone else. The two positions are then usually presented to the public as equally viable possibilities. The citizen is expected to choose between them. This actually rewards the participant’s intransigence by treating their exaggerated claim on par with a serious one.

Nevertheless, if traditional consultation processes often fail to arrive at a satisfactory solution to a problem, it is not just because some participants interfere with it through the use of tactics. As we saw in Part 1, a second and perhaps even more significant cause of this is the shift to holistic thinking.

Suppose government is seeking advice on how to deal with expected labour shortages in some region of the country. Representatives of the business community who come before the committee may argue that more immigration is the right response. This is a time-tested policy response to labour shortages that is likely to fit comfortably into the range of policy options government is considering.

**A process that involves real dialogue, ownership and responsibility, rather than competition, theatrics and intransigence, means paying closer attention to the deep structure of the dialogue process.**

But now imagine someone from an anti-poverty organization who wants to challenge the validity of the very question the committee has posed, namely, that there is a looming labour shortage. Such a person might want to argue that there is no labour shortage at all, because marginalized groups like aboriginal people or the disabled could easily fill the gap. The real issue, he might say, is the systemic barriers to their full participation in the work force. In his view, asking how to deal with a labour shortage simply avoids the real issue the committee should be considering.

In effect, such a participant is trying to reframe the issue. However, the process puts him at a huge disadvantage. First, it has already been defined as a search for answers to the question

‘How do we deal with the impending labour shortage?’ Redefining the terms of reference will be an uphill battle, at best. Second, the process provides little or no opportunity for such a participant to directly engage or challenge those who agree with how the issue has been framed, such as the business community. As a result, the process leaves little alternative for the anti-poverty activist but to reach for and use whatever tactics are available to get the committee to pay attention to, and recognize the merits of, his viewpoint—and who can blame him?

So, between the inability to hold participants to account for what they say and do, on one hand, and the holistic turn, on the other, the pressures to move beyond traditional consultation processes have



been mounting. The main lesson from this is as follows: traditional consultation is not designed to encourage participants to look at one another's interests holistically or to build trust and mutual respect between them. On the contrary, it encourages them to see the process as a competition that creates winners and losers. In such circumstances, the logical goal, of course, is to win.

Now, before closing this section, let's pause a moment to be sure that these comments are kept in perspective. Nothing said here suggests that traditional consultation is bad or doomed or that it should be abandoned. As we saw in Part 1, traditional consultations still work well where (1) the issue to be discussed can be framed with confidence; and (2) the solutions fall within the control of government. So, if there is a growing problem with consultation processes, it is not because of the model, as such. It is because governments use it to address all kinds of issues it is not well suited for. Trying to shoehorn complex problems into consultation processes can lead to disastrous results.

Governments need to recognize that achieving goals like a healthy population or a highly skilled labour force requires collaboration and alignment between themselves and a wide variety of stakeholders. This, in turn, requires a process that involves real dialogue, ownership and responsibility, rather than competition, theatrics and intransigence. In designing such a process, we must pay closer attention to the deep structure of the dialogue process to see how it can be used to achieve this end. In Part 3 we will provide a checklist of some of the defining characteristics of collaborative processes. But before we can turn to that, we must describe the basic structure of collaborative processes. That is the task of the next section.

## 9. The Stages of an Engagement Process

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In Part one of this paper, we said that a full public engagement process moves through three stages. In fact, there are really four basic stages. For simplicity, we dropped the last one till now. It is evaluation. The four stages can be represented on a continuum as follows:

Views → Deliberation → Action → Evaluation

Each stage is designed to perform a different task in the dialogue process. Accordingly, each stage has its own set of rules, which reflect the task to be carried out. Let's consider these stages in turn.

### 9.1 Views

In Stage 1 the task is to get all the participants to state their views of the problem—to tell us, in effect, how they would frame the issue. In contrast to consultation, engagement thus treats issues holistically from the start. It allows participants to propose new connections between issues and puts the challenge of reframing front and centre. Moreover, note that there is no wrong answer to



the question: ‘How do you see the issue?’ In asking people to state their views we are simply asking them to report on what they think. No one is passing judgement on it and everyone is entitled to their view. By giving them a chance to get it on the table, we ensure that everyone feels included and we have identified everyone’s point of departure for the dialogue that is to come.

## 9.2 Deliberation

Once all the views are on the table, the facilitator moves the discussion to the second stage. The first challenge here is to reframe the issue, that is, to work toward a new synthesis of the views set out in Stage 1. This can be difficult. **Now that all sorts of new connections and ways of framing the issue** have been proposed, there is a danger of being overwhelmed by too many new connections to other issues and policy fields. The immediate challenge therefore is to keep the dialogue from wandering off in too many directions.

To guard against this the facilitator should have a dialogue strategy. Developing such a strategy involves canvassing participants’ views beforehand to get a better sense of which issues or lines of discussion are most likely to lead participants to agreement on new and relevant connections; which ones are likely to lead to irresolvable disagreements; and which ones are likely to lead nowhere. One-on-one discussions with participants may also be needed to work through particular issues participants may be having.

In this stage there are also a wide range of rules and strategies for bridging different viewpoints as participants discuss the issues. They range from appeals to logic to assess the validity of arguments or evidence to assess factual claims, to compromises and trade-offs to find common ground on competing values and goals. **In the end, however, the ultimate authority on which new connections matter most—and, ultimately, to reframing the issue—is the participants’ actual experience.** It serves as the surest guide to new and important ways of looking at issues and the best standard for ranking them. Government is unlikely to know these things beforehand and, for its part, must guard against assuming it does.

## 9.3 Action

Once the group has gone as far as it can in reframing the issue, the dialogue moves to Stage 3: Action. The challenge here is to decide on a strategy to address the reframed issue(s). If Stage 1 is about opinions, and Stage 2 is about synthesis and reframing, Stage 3 is about finding the best means to the end, where “best” means not only efficient and effective, but also the one that most fairly addresses all the interests around the table. The rules governing this discussion are closely tied to expert knowledge of science and of our society and how it works. At bottom, this is a discussion of how different options are likely to play out in the real world, and which ones will best address the issue(s) as they have been reframed by the group.

There is also a critical, second level to this discussion. As the general strategy for addressing the





issue(s) is being developed, this discussion must be combined with a discussion of the willingness and capacity of the participants to implement it—to develop an action plan. In practice, this means each of the participants must be ready and willing to propose specific actions they (or their organizations) can take to move the strategy forward. A strategy that no one is willing to contribute to is of little use. This, then, is where the rubber hits the road. Participants must be willing to demonstrate real ownership of the issue by taking responsibility for some part of the solutions.

## 9.4 Evaluation

Finally, the group must arrive at a set of indicators to assess their progress. These indicators should not focus exclusively on the effectiveness of the proposed strategies and action plan. They must also help the group assess the effectiveness of the process, that is, their effort to build new relationships. As we said at the outset, the process is an essential part of the solution. So it too must be evaluated. Together, the indicators should provide a point of departure for a second round of dialogue. The first step will be to evaluate the success of the first round. This, in turn, should lead to refinements of the strategies, new commitments in the action plan, and ways to strengthen the process.

## 10. Rewarding and Sanctioning Behaviour

**A well-designed dialogue process rewards good behaviour and sanctions the bad through powerful incentives that make participants want the process to succeed.**

We saw how some people worry that dialogue processes are more likely to result in disagreement and conflict than solutions. We replied that the big tensions in public debate often have less to do with the clash of ideas than the failure of consultation processes, which often reward intransigence, theatrics and spin. But why should we think the dialogue process outlined in the last section will be any different? Won't participants play the same games here?

The answer is no. The reason is that, unlike consultation, a well-designed dialogue process rewards good behaviour and sanctions

the bad. It does so by marshalling two interlocking forces:

- powerful incentives that make participants want the process to succeed; and
- pressure from participants to make sure everyone plays by the rules.

Let's consider how these two forces work together to commit participants to accepting the dialogue structure and playing by the rules that were sketched in the last section. We'll start with the incentives. Three different kinds will be considered here:

- having a stake
- supporting the community



- providing community leadership

## 10.1 The Stakeholder Dialogue

Stakeholders are people or organizations who have a “stake” in the issue or goal. In other words, they have an interest—often a very significant one—in seeing the issue resolved. To the extent that the process holds real promise of this result, the stakeholder has a powerful incentive to participate in ways that will make it succeed.

By contrast, consultation processes too often fail to produce such a solution. Nor does the stakeholder have much control over the outcome of such a process. As we have seen, their participation is limited to trying to influence the committee’s deliberations. Public engagement comes at this very differently:

- First, the facilitator challenges stakeholders to see their particular interest in the issue as part of a larger, complex solution to the problem. Every stakeholder owns part of the problem and part of the solution.
- Second, the facilitator leads them to recognize that a sustainable solution requires that a critical mass of the stakeholders do the right thing. If they want a solution, they must align around an adequate plan or strategy—and each one must be willing to do his or her part.
- Finally, the process must be designed in a way that ensures everyone will have a meaningful voice in designing the strategy or plan. That way each stakeholder will feel confident his or her interests will be considered and addressed in the plan in a fair and reasonable way.

To the extent that the participants succeed in arriving together at a plan or strategy that: (1) they believe can make real progress on the issue as a whole; and (2) addresses their individual interests in the issue, they will have a powerful incentive to take action together to solve the problem. The deep structure of engagement processes is quite different.

## 10.2 Citizens and the Community Dialogue

Designing a dialogue process that motivates ordinary citizens to change their attitudes and behaviour is difficult. The main strategy followed here is to engage them in a community dialogue, that is, one that situates the issue within a community or community-of-interest, and then carries out the dialogue in ways that link the issue to the members’ sense of community identity. Identity can be a powerful source of motivation. For example, efforts to change people’s behaviour on greenhouse gas emissions are more likely to succeed if we engage people as members of a community and then link the issue to its well-being.

In the dialogue process community members work through the issue together, identify their individual and collective roles in solving it, and commit to taking ownership and responsibility for action. Climate change thus becomes a community issue and taking action to address it is seen as part





of a community effort. The sense of shared identity and of contributing to the common good can be a powerful force for mobilizing people. Community members strengthen one another's resolve and commitment through example, encouragement and support. In effect, their bonds of kinship, neighbourliness, friendship and citizenship become a source of mutual strength and motivation to change and to help one another through the process of change.

### 10.3 The Community Leadership Dialogue

The community dialogue can be reinforced by engaging what we can call 'opinion leaders.' These are individuals whose special commitment to the community has earned them its trust and confidence. Such people are found in most communities. They may be artists, clergymen, business leaders, educators or, in some cases, just wise persons. Opinion leaders can be a huge aid to public engagement processes. They are well positioned to help mobilize citizens and provide leadership on community issues. They can be engaged in the process by appealing to their sense of commitment to the community. The facilitator's challenge is to get them to see that the community needs their leadership on the issue under discussion. They need to recognize that government is not well positioned to play this role; so, if they do not rise to the challenge, their community will lack the leadership it needs to deal with the issue effectively. For these people, the opportunity to provide leadership to their communities in times of need is a powerful source of motivation. The design challenge is to create an environment where government can challenge opinion leaders to join in the dialogue, without leaving them feeling they are being co-opted into becoming government's spokesperson.

### 10.4 Sanctioning the Use of Tactics

So, as these reflections show, well designed engagement processes provide participants with a real incentive to work together to make the process succeed. But how does this ensure that everyone will play by the rules? What about those who still want to engage in tactics?

If the process is well designed, we can assume that a critical mass of participants will be motivated to give it a try. As they start to weigh evidence, assess arguments, explore new connections and make trade-offs and compromises, a sense of ownership of the process develops. They begin to see it as their process. They become increasingly unwilling to tolerate cynical efforts by others to undo their work. The more this sense of ownership grows, the more resentful they are of those who try to manipulate or interfere with the process. In response, they band together and begin to monitor one another's behaviour to ensure that manipulative tactics are quickly shut down, say, by calling someone to account for intransigence or exaggeration. As this new culture of mutual accountability and personal responsibility settles in, it becomes very difficult and uncomfortable for participants who try to resist the trend.

In sum, now we can see how strong incentives can be built into engagement processes to make



participants want them to succeed. And we can also see that dialogue involves rules-based interaction and debate between the participants. In practice, this means the participants have ways to call one another to account for what they say and do. Together these two forces can become a powerful force for keeping the dialogue focused and disciplined, and the process on track. This is a critical difference from consultation, where no such mechanism exists.

## 11. Making Choices vs. Expert Knowledge

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There is another way that tactics can be used to manipulate public debate that must be considered. In Section 9 we distinguished the Deliberation from the Action stage of a dialogue. Deliberation uses rules of logic, evidence, fair-play and so on to work toward a synthesis of views or a reframing of issues. Although this kind of dialogue is rules-based, arriving at a synthesis, or reframing issues, is nevertheless primarily about making choices. It involves agreeing on new priorities, making compromises and trade-offs between competing values, and deciding how to deal with incomplete information. All these tasks come down to making choices. The real challenge in this stage of a dialogue is not just to ensure that people's views are informed, but to ensure that they are treated fairly and respectfully.

By contrast, the Action stage is mainly about means-end relationships, such as developing a strategy to achieve goals we set together through deliberation. This kind of reasoning relies heavily on science and other forms of expert knowledge about the physical world and society. The challenge here is to produce solutions that are effective. This is largely a scientific or expert matter.

As things stand, these two stages are often deeply entangled in public debate, which is not surprising. The difference between the two stages is hardly black and white. There is a lot of grey. Deliberation often involves some means-end reasoning and Action involves making choices. So some entanglement is unavoidable. Nevertheless, as we have just seen, these stages are not the same. They perform different tasks and the balance between choosing vs. expert knowledge is almost reversed.

For example, a decision to make carbon emissions reductions a higher priority than creating jobs is ultimately a policy choice about what our society value and/or what kinds of risks it is willing to take, even if scientific information plays a key role in that choice. Once the choice has been made, however, the task of implementing it—setting appropriate limits for carbon emissions—should be closely guided by scientific knowledge and expert opinion. That is what will ensure that it is effective.

However, public debate often does not play out this way. Sometimes this is because no one has distinguished clearly enough between the two tasks. But too often it is the result of stakeholder manipulation of the process. Stakeholders who favour a particular choice in the deliberation stage often spend huge amounts of money on information campaigns that portray what is really a choice as though it were a matter of science and/or expert opinion. Their strategy is simple: overwhelm



the public with technical studies and expert opinion that support their choice; then portray it as a scientific or expert question. The fact that there is a large grey area between Deliberation and Action makes it relatively easy to blur the distinction. The message implied by the campaign is essentially that the issue is a very complex, technical matter and that finding the right solution requires high levels of expertise and learning—and that the average citizen lacks such expertise, so they should defer to the experts. The public are easily intimidated by such displays of knowledge and expertise and, as a result, often do just that.

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**Ordinary citizens are perfectly capable of balancing competing values, making trade-offs, setting priorities or deciding how to deal with incomplete information.**

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The suggestion that the public is ill-equipped to judge on such matter is not only misleading, it is false. While making choices may require some scientific or expert knowledge, this does not make such matters questions of science or expertise. Making choices is about balancing competing values, making trade-offs, setting priorities or deciding how to deal with incomplete information. Ordinary citizens are perfectly capable of this. Each one of us does it every day. Like using language, making choices is a basic social skill that we all possess. If we didn't, we couldn't function in our day-to-day lives.

Dialogue processes can help bring this kind of manipulation under control. They can present such choices to citizens as choices. When they do, we find that citizens are quite capable of rising to the occasion and making the choices they feel are right. Ensuring that this distinction between making choices and following expert opinion is respected could make a big difference to our ability to make progress on many issues. An important part of designing a process and dialogue strategy to engage the public thus requires close consideration of this issue.



## Part three

# Deep Structures of Engagement Processes

In Part 2 we saw that, despite differences of size, location, duration, and so on, consultative processes elicit similar patterns of behaviour, including advocacy, competition and, ultimately, the use of tactics to influence decision making. They elicit similar patterns of behaviour because they share the same basic deep structure: they are basically competitive. This defines how participants will view the process as a whole, their role in it, and how it will reward or sanction their behaviour.

Much the same could be said of engagement processes. They come in many shapes and sizes, but nevertheless elicit similar patterns of behaviour. This is because they too share the same deep structure: they are basically collaborative. As with consultation, this defines how participants will view the process as a whole, their role in it, and how it will reward or sanction their behaviour.

In the following sections we draw on what has been said so far to provide a kind of checklist of some defining characteristics of the structure of engagement processes. This helps us see more clearly how their deep structure contrasts with that of consultation and how that is likely to affect the way participants see the process and their role in it.

## 12. The Terms-of-Reference Dilemma

Although engagement processes treat issues holistically, they cannot be allowed to roam freely across policy fields and issues. This is likely only to lead to fragmentation of the dialogue and frustration among participants. While the search for new connections between issues must go on, the discussion must remain focused and disciplined. How do we ensure this?

Ideally, the process would begin with a terms of reference document that set clear parameters around the issue to be discussed, much like a consultation process. Not only would this reassure government that it knows what it's getting into, it would also show participants that there really is an issue space in which government is prepared to be flexible in the search for solutions. Once the space had been defined, the dialogue would remain within it. A key task of the facilitator would be to ensure that discussion didn't wander beyond the boundaries.

As we have seen, however, things are not so simple. Indeed, there is a dilemma at the heart of engagement processes. On the one hand, for the reasons just stated, we would like the issue and dialogue space to be clearly framed before the process is launched. On the other hand, a key reason for launching such processes is precisely that the boundaries around such issues are in question. A central task of the process thus is to reframe the issue.

There is no simple solution to this dilemma. It must be dealt with pragmatically. If we cannot expect the terms of reference document to clearly frame the issue, it can provide adequate guidance in



the form of guidelines, rules, objectives, a dialogue strategy, and so on. Together, these things can provide enough clarity and direction to allow government and participants to feel comfortable that they know what they are there to discuss and how the process will unfold.

## 13. Reframing the Issue

As just noted, a key task of an engagement process is to reframe an issue. In effect, this means working through new connections between issues that will lead to better solutions. But the number of connections easily can become overwhelming. The real challenge is to identify and prioritize the

**A key task of an engagement process is to reframe an issue, working through new connections between issues that will lead to better solutions, and then identifying and prioritizing the most important ones.**

most important ones. A dialogue strategy is a crucial aid to this, as are the other rules and strategies that govern the deliberative stage. Still, in the end, lived experience is the touchstone of a successful dialogue. It is the authoritative guide for deciding which connections matter most. If participants are not able to ground a proposed connection in their own experience, it is a poor candidate for consideration. At the same time, participants should be encouraged to have confidence in their intuitions and instincts, which are often inarticulate but helpful guides to real elements of our experience. A key task of the facilitator is to help participants recognize and articulate such experiences.

## 14. The Role of Participants

In a consultation process, participants have a chance to give government their view (or that of the organization or group they represent) on a particular issue or question. This helps ensure that their interests will be taken into account in decision making. It also provides government with additional information and input that may help it make better decisions.

Engagement processes work differently. The public is directly involved in the deliberations, so they don't need a process to inform government of their views. Rather, the process is designed to engage them in the task of solving complex problems. What then is the right role of participants in the dialogue?

From the viewpoint of stakeholders, the process gives them a real say in the choice and design of solutions to issues that concern them. This maximizes their chances of having their interest in the issue addressed. However, focusing too narrowly or insistently on their interests is likely only to disappoint them. Others around the table will reject solutions that do not address their interests as well. The best strategy, then, is for each participant to work collaboratively with others around the table to find solutions that fairly address one's own interests AND those of others. The participant's role thus is not one of an advocate. It is to act as an essential part of the collective intelligence



around the table that is needed to find solutions that address as many of the participant's interests as possible, as fairly as possible.

From the viewpoint of citizens, the process aims at mobilizing the members of their community to achieve a goal or solve an issue. In practice, this means, first, each participant must be willing to work through the issue with others in the community in such a way that they come to see the connection between the issue, their individual behaviour, and the interests of the community as a whole; and, second, to work with other community members around the table to find a strategy that links changes in everyone's behaviour to promoting the overall good of their community.

## 15. Shared Ownership

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Fulfilling one's role as a participant goes beyond identifying the right solutions. Participants must take ownership of them. They must come to recognize and accept that part of the solution belongs to them, not government. They must be willing to take ownership of it and responsibility for it. This shared ownership is reflected in innovative practices, such as shared ownership of the report and action plan. Shared ownership implies shared accountability.

## 16. Shared Accountability

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When a group of stakeholders, citizens or communities agrees to work together to solve a problem or achieve a goal, they become responsible to one another for the commitments they make through the process, such as the action plan. This is a major departure from traditional consultation processes. In such a process, the minister receives the report and its recommendations from the working group. The minister is then accountable to the group, in the sense that he or she is expected to respond to the recommendations and, hopefully, act on some of them.

In an engagement process the minister remains accountable for those parts of the action plan that his or her officials have made on the minister's behalf. So engagement processes do not weaken or undo traditional ministerial accountability. The difference is that accountability doesn't stop there. Everyone in the group has a similar responsibility. Each participant is accountable to the others for the commitments he or she has made.

Of course, this raises the question what sort of sanctions are available to back up this accountability. Admittedly, not much work has been done here, but there are options. For example, the members of our group can agree to reconvene in the near future to follow up on who is doing what and who has or has not fulfilled their commitments. At a minimum, this would expose those who have failed to deliver on their commitments to embarrassment and shame and the disapproval of their peers. Other and more severe options are possible, such as banishment from the group or public disavowal.

In conclusion, nothing here undermines ministerial accountability. Rather, these processes add a



new layer of accountability to it—that of the participants to one another. We can call this shared accountability.

## 17. The On-Going Dialogue

In Part 1, we talked about how societal goals and issues should be seen as “long-term” ones. In practice, the participants in such a process should not expect the issues to be resolved after one round of dialogue and action. While the action plan from such a process may make important progress, it should be viewed as only a first step. Sustainable solutions to long-term issues depend on the participants’ willingness to continue the discussion—to see it as an on-going dialogue that will lead to on-going action and adjustment. The process thus should be seen as a cyclical one, whose long-term goal is not only to solve a problem, but to build a new relationship between the

**Sustainable solutions to long-term issues depend on the participants’ willingness to continue the discussion.**

participants. As this new relationship develops, the participants come to understand one another better, they begin to share a common way of speaking about the issues, and they develop new ways of working together.

By the same token, they become more understanding of one another’s interests and concerns, more trusting, and more willing to make adjustments and compromises to reach solutions.

As a result, their on-going dialogue becomes more focused, disciplined and productive. So the idea of an on-going dialogue is not about talk for talk’s sake. It is about building the kind of long-term relationships needed to deal effectively with long-term issues. If it takes more time, resources and energy at the beginning, that investment is amply paid back over the longer-term.

## 18. Communications

In a traditional policy process, once government has consulted with the public, its deliberations and decision making happen behind closed doors. When final decisions have been reached, there will be a new discussion around how they will be made public. Typically, communications specialists are called in to help craft a “message” that is supposed to put the decisions in the best light. This is accompanied by a “communications strategy,” which is a plan to get the message out with the least possible interference.<sup>4</sup>

Public engagement processes work very differently. Because the deliberations and decision making

<sup>4</sup> In recent years, governments have become much more sophisticated about this. Rather than wait till the decisions have been made, communications experts participate in the deliberations to help ensure that the decisions will be ones that government can reasonably expect the public to accept. In effect, this is a significant step in the direction of public engagement. The differences with public engagement is that the participants are included in this process along with government.





involve the public, the “message” emerges from their dialogue as they sort through the issues and develop their report. The facilitator will be regularly returning participants to the question: What are we saying? They will need to answer that question for themselves and for the network of contacts whose interests they may be speaking for at the table.

Once they have reached their conclusions, each participant will be an owner of the report, action plan and message. This means they are entitled—indeed, expected—to speak publicly about it, and they will do so authoritatively. Moreover, because the message and solutions are owned by everyone, each participant will speak about the process and results from their own point of view. They should not be seen as spokespersons for government. Government is one participant in the process and it will speak for itself.

**Because the message and solutions are owned by everyone, participants will speak about the process and results from their own point of view.**

From a “communications” perspective, this should be seen as strength, not a weakness. It shows that the solutions reach out into many organizations and across sectors. It shows that the process is producing alignment and building new working relationships.

This does not prevent the group from identifying someone to act as a principal spokesperson, say, for media purposes. The real point here is that, in a collaborative process, government

does not have exclusive ownership of the message, any more than it has exclusive ownership of the solutions or the process. Like the report and action plan, the communications process is an integral part of the dialogue and everyone has some ownership of it and responsibility for it.

## 19. Evaluation

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Finally, a few words should be said about evaluation. Clearly, participants must work together to set indicators to evaluate their progress as they implement their action plan. Setting indicators, benchmarks and goals should reflect the best thinking in performance management. But it should also be clear that there is a whole new element that must be evaluated—that of the process itself. Participants must explore ways to assess the value-added of their efforts to collaborate and to learn from their experience. As the on-going dialogue takes shape over time, much needs to be learned about how to strengthen the relationships and build on best practices.





## 20. Conclusion

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Let us end on a point about the broader governance implications of public engagement. There is a widespread view that, if government enters into a partnership or some kind of shared decision-making arrangement with stakeholders or communities, it is in effect handing off some of its authority to another party, along with its ability to use that power to promote the public interest, and its responsibility to provide public accountability for its use.

While some models of democracy advocate such an approach, it is emphatically NOT the approach proposed here. Nothing in this paper supports the view that governments should “give away” or transfer their authority to someone else. Such a reading of it would be misguided.

The approach here is based on recognition that many public policy issues and goals are bigger than government(s). Government(s) therefore cannot solve/achieve them alone. If effectiveness is the ability to use one’s authorities and resources to achieve a goal, government needs to work with others to be effective in its pursuit of these goals—or give up on them up altogether.

Working together collaboratively to achieve a common goal need not involve any transfer of power from one organization, private, public or not-for-profit, to another. The approach taken here is that collaboration is about getting actors outside government to see themselves as a critical part of any viable strategy to achieve goals that they themselves hold dear.

So a collaborative partnership is not about giving away authority. It is about exercising it differently. It is about learning how to make decisions together with others, rather than trying to command and control them. Public engagement processes are about building the machinery, skills, and culture that will make that possible. This should neither offend nor worry anyone who believes government can and should provide real leadership on key public issues and goals.

