



# **Mapping the new terrain: public dialogue on science and technology**

**Edited by Simon Burall and Tim Hughes  
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# 1 Editorial: Mapping the new terrain

Simon Burall and Tim Hughes

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Simon is Head of Dialogue at Sciencewise and Director of Involve. He has long and extensive experience in the fields of democratic reform, governance, public participation, stakeholder engagement, and accountability and transparency. He has worked at a national level in Africa, Asia and Europe as well as on related issues of global governance and democracy.

Tim is a researcher at Sciencewise and Involve. He has expertise in the areas of participation, governance and public administration, and a passion for democracy, open government and active citizenship. His research has covered topics including active citizenship, public dialogue, public sector innovation, civil service governance and accountability, and citizen-centred public services.

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Sciencewise has been at the forefront of the changing relationship between science, Government and society since 2005. In 2009, it published an edited anthology by leading thinkers in the field of public engagement, science and society. In contributing to 'The Road Ahead'<sup>1</sup>, the authors drew on the experience of the previous decades of the changing relationship between society and Government.

The authors offered their thoughts about the why, where, what, who and how of public dialogue with policy involving science and technology. In doing so, they recognised how far the UK has travelled on the road towards genuine dialogue, but that the hard work still lay ahead.

The essays have stood the test of time and remain as relevant to Government today as they did when they were written. However, much has changed since the anthology was published.

For this companion collection to 'The Road Ahead', a number of leading thinkers were asked to explore how a range of changes are affecting the relationship between Government, science and society. The changes they explore include changes to the way Government works, to technology and science, and to wider society. They were asked to describe the changes and identify what they think this means for Government departments wanting to open up genuine dialogue with the public about the implications of scientific research, innovation and development.

Jill Rutter begins the collection with her dissection of the Government's Civil Service Reform Plan and its focus on open policy-making. A core element of the Reform Plan proposes a more collaborative way of working. However, she notes that many of the pressures placed on the Government by austerity will make it harder for the Government to open up policy-making to alternative voices, including the public. There are glimmers of hope, but those inside and outside Government who believe that involving the public strengthens policy-making will have to work hard to build on the gains so far.

In the second essay, Liz Richardson explores the implications for public dialogue of the rhetoric and reality of localism. She highlights the tensions between opening up national policy to public voice and the fact that very often the impact of the policy itself will be at a local level. Taking this tension as her starting point, she explores how public dialogue on national policy issues involving science and technology might need to adapt to greater localism. She makes the case that tightly stage-managed deliberation is unlikely to work at a local level, given the ongoing nature of 'everyday' dialogues. In doing so, she highlights some examples of different ways to engage citizens deliberatively. She concludes with the thought that such processes could provide a foundation for national-level dialogue too.

At the beginning of March 2013, the network of [What Works centres](#) was launched to encourage policy and service delivery to be informed by evidence. In the third essay, Jonathan Breckon explores this development and argues that public dialogue can be an important part of the evidence base for policy-making. In noting the challenges of ensuring that policy-making and practice is opened up more widely to the public voice, he highlights the critical need for the dialogue community to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of their practice and its impact on policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Stilgoe, J (2009) 'The Road Ahead'. Harwell: Sciencewise.  
<http://sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Publications/SWcollectionHIGH-RES.pdf>

Although Tim Davies starts the fourth essay in 1766, his focus is firmly on the present. He asks what difference changes to transparency laws, combined with even more recent policies to make Government data freely available, will make to public dialogue. Simply releasing data is not enough. There is a need, he argues, for better connections between those responsible for datasets, the policy makers using the data and citizens. He concludes with the thought that authority no longer derives from having sole access to critical information. Instead, it is developed through public debate and effective delivery of policies; public dialogue and deliberation in a full variety of forms, has a critical role to play in developing this new form of authority.

The fifth essay, by Greg Fisher, explores what he calls the “quiet revolution underway in the social sciences”, the influence of complexity sciences on policy-making. After first describing the new science, he explores its implications for policy development, public dialogue and even democracy itself. He highlights three principles of complexity science:

- complex systems are dynamic and in constant flux
- idiosyncrasies in seemingly identical situations matter much more than is understood
- psychological constraints inherent in the brain’s architecture mean that our ability to make decisions in the face of the first two points is limited

Given this, public dialogue is an important tool for policy makers interested in opening up and understanding the implications of inherent complexity for their policy area.

In the end though, it is citizens, and the extent to which they are willing to engage with Government and policy makers, who will ensure the success or otherwise of public dialogue. In the final essay of this series, Tim Hughes and Diane Warburton explore what the latest evidence says about the willingness of citizens, or otherwise, to walk through doors that are opened by policy makers. For anyone who believes that a greater public voice will lead to more effective and efficient policy, the figures are worrying, showing a marked decline in some forms of public participation. Tim and Diane make an important distinction between apathy, which suggests a passive citizenry, and disengagement, which suggests that citizens are consciously deciding to use their energy for activities other than engaging with Government. To draw conclusions about the prospects for public dialogue, they then explore what we understand about why citizens engage.

The collection starts, though, with Roland Jackson putting these six essays in context for Sciencewise as he describes the road that the programme has travelled so far.

## 2 The story so far

Roland Jackson

Roland is executive chair of Sciencewise and was, until recently, Chief Executive of the British Science Association. Originally a research biochemist, he moved into science education as a science teacher, curriculum developer and Education Adviser for the international chemical company ICI. He joined the Science Museum in 1993 as Head of Education and was acting Head of Museum from 2001 to 2002. He was appointed by the previous Government as chair of the 'Science for All' Expert Group, which produced a collaborative action plan for developing public engagement in the UK. He also chairs Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council's (BBSRC) Bioscience for Society Panel.

It is now 8 years since Sciencewise was established, and 5 since it became the Expert Resource Centre (ERC), a locus for information and the sharing of expertise in the effective use of public dialogue in policy-making. During this time, Sciencewise has directly supported more than 20 public dialogues on emerging areas of science and technology – from stem-cell research to open data, synthetic biology to geoengineering, and low carbon communities to cyber trust – and has developed a firm foundation of knowledge and evidence on how to do deliberative public dialogue well.

Among other things, these public dialogues have influenced how research funds are allocated, increased the robustness and credibility of policy, informed the work of parliamentary enquiries, created conditions for the progression of research and fed into the development of new policy programmes<sup>2</sup>.

However, as will be explored in this anthology, the context in which policy-making exists does not stand still. New opportunities and challenges are emerging that Sciencewise, and practitioners and supporters of the use of public dialogue, must respond to.

However, before exploring how the use of public dialogue may develop and need to develop in the future, we must consider the origins of public engagement with science and just how far we have come.

The modern dawn of public engagement in the UK is generally traced to the Royal Society report of 1985 'The Public Understanding of Science'. While this report concentrated entirely on communication by scientists to the public and to policy makers, it did signal the need and, indeed, stated the duty of scientists to communicate intelligibly what they were doing:

'Science and technology play a major role in most aspects of our daily lives both at home and at work. Our industry and thus our national prosperity depend on them. Almost all public policy issues have scientific or technological implications. Everybody, therefore, needs some understanding of science, its accomplishments and its limitations'<sup>3</sup>.

It became particularly evident in the 1990s, through public controversies around science-related issues (e.g. mad cow disease and the application of genetically modified (GM) technologies) that the interface between science and technology, policy and wider society was not in a healthy state.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, reporting in 2000, saw this as a crisis of trust rather than of public understanding and that this should be addressed through dialogue:

'Direct dialogue with the public should move from being an optional add-on to science-based policy-making and to the activities of research organisations and learned institutions, and should become a normal part of the process'<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, T. (2012) *What is public dialogue? And other frequently asked public dialogue questions*. Harwell: Sciencewise [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Publications/What-is-public-dialogue-FAQ-Report-V2.pdf](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Publications/What-is-public-dialogue-FAQ-Report-V2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Royal Society (1985) *The Public Understanding of Science*. London: Royal Society. [http://royalsociety.org/uploadedFiles/Royal\\_Society\\_Content/policy/publications/1985/10700.pdf](http://royalsociety.org/uploadedFiles/Royal_Society_Content/policy/publications/1985/10700.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Select Committee on Science and Technology (2000) *Science and Society*. Select Committee on Science and Technology – Third Report. London: House of Lords [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199900/ldselect/ldsctech/38/3801.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199900/ldselect/ldsctech/38/3801.htm)

This refrain was taken up in the Government's Science and Innovation Investment Framework in 2004, which stated that:

'To better understand concerns and expectations, efforts will be focused on enabling public fora where the ethical, health, safety and environmental impact of new science and technologies can be debated. The Government wants constructive, inclusive and open public debate and dialogue on these issues, so that the public can be satisfied that science and technology is being developed responsibly and responsively, and that their concerns are being addressed'<sup>5</sup>.

Sciencewise was formed in 2005 in response to this zeitgeist, including the report by the Council for Science and Technology (CST) 'Policy Through Dialogue' in 2005, which called for public dialogue to be a core part of policy-making on science and technology issues:

'The time is ripe for Government to engage earlier and more deeply with the public in the development of policies and priorities, so that they are informed by public aspirations and concerns from the outset'<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, the CST recommended that the Government should develop a corporate memory about how to do public dialogue well and should work with others to develop a wider capacity to engage the public through dialogue.

In 2008, the Sciencewise-ERC<sup>7</sup> was created, as a focus for sharing such knowledge and expertise. It is wholly funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and effectively acts as an internal Government programme, supporting Government departments, agencies and other public bodies to make effective use of deliberative public dialogue.

Deliberative public dialogue brings two major benefits to policy development. On the one hand, citizen participation of this sort enables questions to be raised, and opportunities and priorities to be explored that might not occur to expert-led policy development; it is an enhancement to our democracy, alongside all the other formal and informal channels of democratic debate and governance. On the other hand, deliberative dialogue enables public values, views and attitudes to be explored and understood in depth; essentially an aspect of social research and the evidence-base it provides to policy. Both are important for making better policy and, in both modes, Sciencewise aims to contribute to the realisation of open policy-making.

The work of Sciencewise represents a significant step forward in the journey of public engagement in policy involving science and technology, but we are not content to rest on our laurels. In the past year, we have set about taking the Sciencewise programme a step further by, among other things, introducing:

- a citizens group, made up of past dialogue participants, which is embedded in the governance of the programme'
- a community of practice giving policy makers direct access to dialogue experts, peer learning and support, and other resources

Through this anthology and Sciencewise's wider programme of thought leadership, we intend to push the boundaries of our understanding of public dialogue, its role in the policy-making process and its possibilities.

### 3 Civil service reform and the public

Jill Rutter

<sup>5</sup> HM Treasury, Department for Education and Skills, and Department for Trade and Industry (2004) Science & innovation framework 2004 – 2014. London: HM Stationary Office. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/science\\_innovation\\_120704.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/science_innovation_120704.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Council for Science and Technology (2005) *Policy through dialogue: informing policies based on science and technology*. [www2.cst.gov.uk/cst/reports/files/policy-through-dialogue/report.pdf](http://www2.cst.gov.uk/cst/reports/files/policy-through-dialogue/report.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/)



Jill is Programme Director at the Institute for Government, where she has written extensively on civil service reform and policy-making. Before joining the Institute for Government, Jill was Director of Strategy and Sustainable Development at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Prior to that she worked for BP for 6 years, following a career in the Treasury, where she was Press Secretary, Private Secretary to the Chief Secretary and Chancellor, as well as working on areas such as tax, local government finance and debt, and export finance. She spent 2½ years seconded to the No.10 Policy Unit (1992/94) where she oversaw health, local government and environment issues.

### 3.1 Introduction

The civil service reform plan, published in July 2012, sets out a number of new directions for the civil service – more unified, more skilled, more accountable and more efficient. Policy-making is to be opened up and more collaborative. Operational experience will be valued more. Government itself will become more transparent. At the same time, the continuation of austerity means the civil service will reduce in size further. To date, departments have seen reductions ranging up to 33%<sup>8</sup>.

The Department for Education has now raised the bar with its zero-based review, which has set a target of reducing by 50% compared with the departmental headcount at the time of the election<sup>9</sup>.

In this section, I look at the potential impact of civil service reform on public engagement and public dialogue through the lenses of the various trends likely to affect the civil service over the coming years:

- reduction in size
- greater efficiency
- enhanced accountability
- openness and collaboration in policy-making
- new techniques in policy-making
- decentralisation and transparency

### 3.2 A smaller civil service

One aspect of civil service reform that is certain is that the size of the civil service will continue to shrink for the foreseeable future – and departmental budgets will remain under pressure. Size reduction has been accompanied by instability throughout the civil service; personnel turnover has accelerated with people staying in posts for less time and senior people are now covering far wider spans<sup>10</sup>. The wider spans are clearly here to stay – whether the churn slows down is a more debatable question. A number of departments are now managing policy on a more project-based approach.

The external impact has the potential to cut two ways. First, it makes it harder to establish external relationships – fewer people, stretched thinner, in post for less time. Second, it makes the civil service more dependent on other sources of knowledge and expertise – whether in the Government's own delivery bodies or in academia or beyond<sup>11</sup>. That does not necessarily mean more or less public engagement – though it may mean that the civil service has less time and capacity to undertake public engagement directly itself and instead has to commission it through others.

<sup>8</sup> Institute for Government (2012) Whitehall Monitor #17: Analysis of civil service staff numbers. [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/Whitehall%20Monitor%20%2317%20-%20Civil%20Service%20Headcount%20Q3%202012%20v1%200\\_final.pdf](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/Whitehall%20Monitor%20%2317%20-%20Civil%20Service%20Headcount%20Q3%202012%20v1%200_final.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education Review (published 13 November 2012) accessed at <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/t/dfe%20review%20report-external.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Institute for Government tracks trends in our regular Whitehall Monitor [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/more-effective-whitehall/whitehall-monitor](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/more-effective-whitehall/whitehall-monitor)

<sup>11</sup> This concern predated the reduction in staffing numbers – see Hallsworth et al, (2011) *Policy Making in the Real World*. London: Institute for Government, chapter 8 [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/policy-making-real-world](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/policy-making-real-world)



### 3.3 A more efficient civil service

If the civil service has less internal capacity, then it may need to go outside. One of the features of the new regime introduced by the coalition Government has been a suite of centralised controls on spending – including spending on consultancy and marketing – which is interpreted widely. The crackdown on spending requires departments and arm’s-length bodies to get authorisation for spending above quite low-delegated limits. The Government has claimed that this has led to very significant savings on consultancy and external support. When they were first introduced, it was assumed that these controls were a temporary fix, designed to signal a change of regime. However, since their inception, they have been concreted into Whitehall’s operating model<sup>12</sup>. One early victim of this crackdown was the Central Office of Information (COI), which was abolished and shut its doors in March 2012. While the COI’s primary function was to act as a purchaser and adviser to Government on marketing, it also housed a central public engagement team.

David Cameron has also emphasised the need to debureaucratise the civil service by removing internal obligations (e.g. to produce equality impact assessment and by issuing new guidance on consultations). The language in the new consultation principles announced in July 2012<sup>13</sup> sounds good in some respects – “thought needs to be given to achieving real engagement rather than following bureaucratic process. Consultation is part of wider engagement”. It states that the purpose of consultation can vary – from garnering “views and preferences, to understand possible unintended consequences of a policy or to get views on implementation”. It points to the potential of new means of digital engagement, allowing quicker and more targeted information gathering and consultation. But its main impact may be the removal of the ‘12 week’ requirement for formal consultation. Instead it states that periods between 2 and 12 weeks may be appropriate – noting that “for a new and contentious policy, such as a new policy on nuclear engagement, the full 12 weeks may still be appropriate” (no obvious irony implied). As yet, it is unclear how these new guidelines are affecting policy-making. However, in the current climate, they are likely to be interpreted as giving dispensation to do less rather than incentivising more effective engagement.

### 3.4 A more accountable civil service

The Civil Service Reform Plan<sup>14</sup> emphasises the need for enhanced accountability for the civil service. To date, the most direct manifestation of that is the publication of Permanent Secretaries objectives against which permanent secretaries will be assessed. The most notable thing for public dialogue in the Permanent Secretary objectives is that the public in general, and the consumers and users of services, are, in most cases, missing in action. Most Permanent Secretaries objectives<sup>15</sup> refer to the views of stakeholders, and ministers and their peers. However, none explicitly refers to engaging the public as citizens and only those running big operations have any objectives about the users of their services. Accountability is couched very clearly in terms of delivering for ministers and assessments are inwardly focused. So, this is not a mechanism in itself that will promote public engagement.

The tentative verdict under these three headings (a **smaller, more efficient, more accountable** civil service) is that there is at least as much potential that civil service reform, combined with downward pressure on numbers and spending, will reduce the appetite and capacity for public engagement, as increase it. So, are there any signs of potential countervailing forces? The following sections explore some of the possibilities.

### 3.5 Open and collaborative policy-making

One thing that all permanent secretaries will be held responsible for is their department’s progress in implementing the Civil Service Reform Plan. This has very positive language about the need for Whitehall to change its style of policy-making – to make it more open and collaborative. Indeed, openness is to become the ‘new default’.

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<sup>12</sup> See [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/whitehall-spending-controls-extended-permanently](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/whitehall-spending-controls-extended-permanently)

<sup>13</sup> See [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/consultation-principles-guidance](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/consultation-principles-guidance)

<sup>14</sup> June 2012 available at <http://resources.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Published by the Cabinet Office in December 2012: available at [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/permanent-secretaries-objectives-published-first-time](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/permanent-secretaries-objectives-published-first-time)

However, looking behind the detail of what openness means, it is clear that the Government conception of 'openness' emphasises different ways of engaging external expertise (academic and practical), thinking and interested parties alongside some tentative attempts at involving the public through 'crowdsourcing'. The Institute for Government explored some of the ways in which Government has, to date, 'opened up' policy-making<sup>16</sup>.

The example that ministers were keen to highlight was the work of the Practitioners' Advisory Group (PAG) which was invited by Planning Minister Greg Clark to produce a first draft of the new National Planning Policy Framework. The PAG consisted of four 'practitioners' – a planner, a councillor, an environmentalist and a housebuilder – who were all asked to come together to rationalise existing planning policy into something more usable than the thousands of pages of existing policy. However, the process of establishing the group, setting its remit and, indeed, the status of its output were all opaque and, if anything, added to the confusion about the process the Government was pursuing. The debate about the Government's own draft rapidly degenerated into a slanging match between ministers and campaigning groups, led by the National Trust, the disagreements were ultimately defused by quite substantial amendments to the Government's original draft. At no point was there an attempt to engage the public. Interestingly, although ministers took up the recommendation from the PAG to invite practitioners to draw up new guidance to underpin the framework, they adopted a more transparent and conventional approach the second time.

A second example, which was highlighted in the civil service reform plan, is in Defra. Defra has opened up its policy-making by establishing the 'Animal Health and Welfare Board for England' (AHBWE), which is the route for policy advice on animal health and welfare issues to ministers. Civil servants sit alongside (and are outnumbered by) external appointees, recruited after an open competition. The appointees are not there as interest group representatives, but in their own right although they were recruited as people who would carry external credibility. In this case, the AHBWE can shape the agenda of the department – and not just respond to a specific remit. They can – and do – do a significant amount of external engagement, although that is not inherent in the model<sup>17</sup>.

The third element in the Civil Service Reform Plan is the establishment of the contestable policy fund. This is a small budget available to allow ministers to commission advice externally. At the time of writing (Q1 2013) only one project had been commissioned from this fund – on civil service accountabilities from the Institute for Public Policy research after a competitive tendering exercise<sup>18</sup>.

All these examples show the policy space being expanded to bring in practitioners and think tanks – with different knowledge and experience – but do not represent a significant step forward in public engagement. As such, they have supplemented the normal repertoire of bringing in either ad-hoc external advisers, more or less successfully, or establishing inquiries or commissions to investigate specific issues. The extent of this was exposed in a recent paper by Levitt and Solesbury<sup>19</sup>. They noted that over 250 people had been asked to act as informal policy advisers to ministers since 1997. These were drawn predominantly from what would have previously been regarded as the "great and the good". As such, they were extremely unrepresentative of the public (i.e. 85% were male, 83% over 60 and only 2% drawn from ethnic minorities).

Two other developments have allowed the public more input into the decision-making process.

The first is the use of 'challenges' – used in advance of the 2010 spending review<sup>20</sup>, and also to invite suggestions for removing regulation – so-called 'red tape'<sup>21</sup>. Both allowed people to lodge their ideas through a website and the Red Tape Challenge website allowed others to view suggestions and join the debate, which was moderated. However, the actual impact on policy is harder to see. Of the few ideas that made it into the final announcements, the provenance is at least as likely to be from conventional lobby groups contacting the review teams directly as it is from a member of the public

<sup>16</sup> Rutter, J (2012) *Opening Up Policy Making*. London: Institute for Government [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/opening-policy-making](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/opening-policy-making)

<sup>17</sup> An account of the first year of the AHBWE by its chairman can be found on the Institute for Government's blog: [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/5377/opening-up-policy-making-in-practice-has-defras-animal-health-and-welfare-board-for-england-made-a-difference/](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/5377/opening-up-policy-making-in-practice-has-defras-animal-health-and-welfare-board-for-england-made-a-difference/)

<sup>18</sup> See [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/government-first-use-contestable-policy-fund](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/government-first-use-contestable-policy-fund)

<sup>19</sup> Levitt, R & Solesbury, W (2012) *Policy tsars are here to stay but more transparency is needed*. London: King's College London [www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/politicaleconomy/research/tsarsreport/Tsars-Final-Report-Nov-2012.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/politicaleconomy/research/tsarsreport/Tsars-Final-Report-Nov-2012.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Results reported at [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend\\_spendingchallenge.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_spendingchallenge.htm)

<sup>21</sup> Still in progress – see [www.redtapechallenge.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/home/index/](http://www.redtapechallenge.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/home/index/)

using the opportunity to shape public policy. Moreover, the format can encourage entrenching of set opinions rather than any shaping of a middle ground or a new way forward – and this format is the antithesis of what is needed to have an informative and informed debate on complex issues.

The second Government initiative is the introduction of e-petitions that can trigger parliamentary debate. These are the successor to the petitions that were posted on the No.10 website. One of these notoriously led the Government to decide to abandon the idea of road pricing. However, the rise of online campaigns by groups such as 38 Degrees, as well as specialist lobby groups, have been more effective than e-petitions. As Nicholas Timmins commented in his study of the health reforms<sup>22</sup>, social media has enabled campaigns to mobilise much more rapidly and much more effectively than before. However, these campaigns tend to be much more effective at stopping things happening (forest sell-offs, pausing the NHS reforms) than at creating new solutions.

### 3.6 New techniques of policy-making

The Civil Service Reform Plan emphasises the need for the civil service to adopt new techniques of policy-making. After the election, the Behavioural Insights team (also known as the Government's Nudge Unit) was established to experiment with and embed new thinking on psychology into policy-making to enhance the more conventional insights of neoclassical economics. Since then, this has been a theme of training rolled out to policy makers across the civil service.

Behavioural insights put the public at the centre of policy-making and can be an important element in designing more effective interventions – itself important at a time of austerity. The approach recognises that the way people react to interventions and stimuli matter, but it treats the public as a population to be experimented on and observed rather than as citizens helping to decide priorities and engage in decision-making. That said, David Halpern, who heads the Behavioural Insight team, argued powerfully for more direct involvement of individuals in decision-making in his 2010 book, 'The Hidden Wealth of Nations'<sup>23</sup>.

### 3.7 Decentralisation and transparency

The Conservative election manifesto contained some promising language about the desirability of citizen engagement and involvement, and was offered as “an invitation to join the Government of Britain”. Much of the early emphasis was involving people in service choices, through the extension of public sector markets, and in introducing new forms of democratic accountability. For example:

- on mayors, where the people were consulted and largely rejected the offer of mayors in major cities
- the new police and crime commissioners outside London, where people were given no choice on whether to have them, but most opted to stay away from the polls

The language of localism, decentralisation and Big Society have been tempered by the need for spending restraint, the imperative of restoring growth and a degree of public cynicism.

There are some notable areas where the Government was forced to backtrack into wider involvement in its plans, for example:

- after plans for the forest sell-off were dropped, the Independent Panel on Forestry<sup>24</sup> was established to chart a more widely accepted way forward
- the NHS Bill was notoriously stopped in its tracks to allow for the Future Forum to meet to consider the way forward before the Bill proceeded to the House of Lords

As Nicholas Timmins noted in his study of the health bill, former Health Secretary Andrew Lansley reflected it might have been better to incorporate that piece of process before the Bill was drafted. However, it is not clear whether these examples have persuaded the Government that more inclusive

<sup>22</sup> Timmins, N (2012) *Never Again? The story of the Health and Social Care Act 2012*. London: Institute for Government [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/never-again](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/never-again)

<sup>23</sup> Halpern, D (2010) *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*. Cambridge: Polity Press, chapter 5

<sup>24</sup> The Government has now broadly accepted the independent panel's recommendations: see Defra press release, 31 January 2013 at [www.defra.gov.uk/news/2013/01/31/protect-forests/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2013/01/31/protect-forests/)

processes in advance can smooth the passage of potentially contentious policies. It would be a logical lesson to learn.

### 3.8 Conclusions

So, to end with some potential glimmers of hope:

- The Government has made great strides on transparency by opening up Government data in a quite radical way. That should, over time, enable better citizen scrutiny, direct and through intermediaries
- The commitment to more open policy-making offers a potential opening to greater citizen involvement in forming and framing choices. It will be important to make the argument to ensure that open policy-making does not simply widen the group of elites able to participate, without offering meaningful public participation
- As the constraints on spending continue to bite, governments should have incentives to get policy 'righter' first time round to avoid wasteful reverses. Advocates of public dialogue need to continue to make the case that involving the public upfront saves time and money in the longer term

## 4 Deliberation and localism

Liz Richardson

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### 4.1 Introduction

Localism is an attempt to shift power from Whitehall to local government, and below that to communities. Public dialogues in the past have typically been conducted at a national level. However, this model of policy-making and public dialogue seems at odds with localism. Several nationally run deliberation programmes are moving towards more local dialogue, including Sciencewise's work in the Low Carbon Communities Challenge<sup>25</sup>. In this article, I ask:

- What implications does the transfer of power away from Whitehall have for public dialogue in policy involving science and technology, including who initiates them?
- How does public dialogue need to adapt to localism?
- Does localism increase or detract from the potential to engage citizens in policy-making around national questions involving complex science and technology issues?

### 4.2 Localism

Localism is a Government policy, which brings with it mixed reactions from local government of different political complexions. Despite this, there is a long history of attempts to decentralise in local government. Some of these date from the earliest creation of area committees in the 1970s, with a rapid acceleration of localist-style work across local authorities from the 1980s onwards. Today, there are concerted efforts to give more influence to wards and localities, and involve the public in policy debate in

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<sup>25</sup> See also: Landscape and ecosystem futures; Water Quality and Sustainability; Bioenergy dialogue: [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/dialogue-projects/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/dialogue-projects/)

Labour, Conservative and coalition-controlled local authorities in places as diverse as Bradford, Cheshire, Barnsley, Kingston, Wiltshire, Oldham, Newcastle, and some of the London Boroughs.

The Government has committed to transferring power away from Whitehall towards people. The Localism Act<sup>26</sup> was passed by Parliament in 2011 and set out measures in four areas:

- new freedoms and flexibilities for local government
- new rights and powers for communities and individuals
- reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective
- reform to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally

The legislative measures in the Act need to be seen as part of a much broader set of principles of Government, which include greater transparency of decision-making and strengthened democratic accountability. The paradox and tension inherent in localism is that legislation by central Government may be counterproductive in delivering the policy<sup>27</sup>. It may take persuasion rather than compulsion to inculcate some of these original decentralisation principles of empowerment of citizens, accountability, and transparency of policy and decision-making.

Decentralisation and community governance are at the centre of policies on localism. Localism means handing over power from the centre to local government. Then, at local government level, decentralisation means devolving more influence and/or control to wards, neighbourhoods and localities (i.e. below the level of the local authority) for public spending and decisions about what happens in local areas. Community governance is a generic term for different structures and processes to enable citizens and communities to influence the decisions and public services that affect their everyday lives. Decentralisation and community governance offer new forms of democratic spaces to bring in new forms of expertise into the policy process. This improves the quality and effectiveness of policy and makes it better informed by communities' preferences and needs, with communities then contributing to improved outcomes and achievable solutions. Fundamentally, localism implies a key role for strengthened and expanded public engagement in local policy-making. It suggests many hundreds of neighbourhoods taking part in discussions about policies that affect their local areas. Local government is a central player in initiating and facilitating discussions.

### **4.3 Localism and deliberation**

Localism, then, has a clear resonance with ideas of deliberation. Deliberative public engagement (such as public dialogue) is a structured process where one goal is to open up new conversations about tricky, controversial or complex issues. Supporters of the technique argue that by articulating the reasoning, values and principles underlying arguments, then different sides in the debate will gain deeper understandings of the variety of viewpoints. This may then open up new framings of issues, which stimulate new solutions or ways to see the problems. By drawing on each other's knowledge and experience, there is the potential to generate different solutions to problems. This parallels the principles of decentralisation, as deliberation can contribute to greater transparency, empowerment of citizens and accountability of decisions.

There can be tensions between policy decisions taken at a national level, and their implementation at a local government level. The same tensions potentially exist for policy-making processes, which may or may not be deliberative and dialogic at national and local levels. One way that localism helps to manage some of these tensions is by attempting to give more room for manoeuvre to local government, albeit within a national policy framework. Current Government policies have eschewed overt prescription, and centrally set targets and regulation for local government have been reduced. Despite fierce debates about the degree of financial autonomy of local government, all this leaves some scope for a local area to give a distinctively local flavour and interpretation to national policies.

Ideally, there would be deliberation at a central Government and/or national level, with additional deliberation processes at a local level. Party politics make it hard for the policy implications of local

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1896534.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> John, P & Richardson, L. (2012) *Nudging citizens towards localism?* London: British Academy. <https://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Nudging-citizens-towards-localism.cfm>



deliberations to be easily aggregated upwards or, equally, for national-level deliberations by central Government to be applied in a consistent way locally. However, in talking to each other, central and local government could bring to bear results of public dialogue in ways that are all too rare at present.

#### 4.4 Localism, public dialogue, and science and technology

There are many issue areas where developments in science and technology have profound implications at the local level, whether they be the physically obvious (e.g. wind farms, or field trials of GM crops) or less obvious medical advances that shift budget priorities and, hence, the viability or otherwise of local hospitals.

Science and technology advances often have 'social technologies' that go alongside them and their implementation. These social technologies (e.g. systems of use, understanding and acceptance by the public, behavioural and organisational changes needed) drive the need for public deliberation on science and technology issues. Local areas and neighbourhoods are often the sites where social technologies are applied and need to operate. Conflicts of interest between technology and the public are in sharpest relief at a very local level.

Not all technological changes need to be subject to citizen deliberation in local areas. Peter John and others, in their book 'Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think'<sup>28</sup>, contrast deliberation, what they call 'think' strategies, with 'nudge' strategies drawn from behavioural economics. In policy areas where there is a large degree of consensus on the need for change, relatively uncontested solutions, and a body of evidence and knowledge, a nudge strategy may be highly appropriate. However, many new technologies are areas with multiple and clashing viewpoints, where not enough is known about the impacts on society, and where the costs imposed on citizens is perceived to be high.

#### 4.5 Deliberation and local politics

At the local level, policy is the responsibility (in theory at least) of local elected members. One barrier to a wider proliferation of deliberation at a local level is that it does not sit comfortably with traditional ideas of how decision-making works. Political leadership by local councillors is applied at a ward level. Therefore, to have deliberative practices percolated through to neighbourhoods it will be critical to win local decision-makers over to the idea. However, notions of deliberative democracy and conventional democratic accountability are often seen as at odds. This presents an unhelpful binary as complex and messy neighbourhood circumstances mean that democratic accountability alone is not adequate to guarantee the outcomes that are imagined from governance. Pluralist democracies cope relatively effectively with contention in public life over scarce resources, divergent values, excluded identities, unequal power and different interests. However, these mechanisms are inadequate in many policy arenas if citizens and organised stakeholders fail to discover a larger public good. For example, in debates over GM, the least effective form of pluralism would be a competition between local 'elites' or powerful agriculture and business interests on one hand, posed against local citizen lobby groups defending local jobs on the other. Pluralism fails if neither side recognises the starting point as the bigger need to balance issues of public health, food security, land-use and hunger.

Members of the public broadly understand that 'to deliberate' as an everyday term, means to think and talk about hard choices. However, deliberation as a defined process is not a widely understood or commonly used term. The deliberation 'industry' perhaps does not help matters. For hard-pressed decision-makers in local government, faced with serious choices and possible electoral and reputational risk, the idea can sound a little wishy-washy. However, it is a challenge to conventional ways of 'doing local politics' that cannot be ducked. One opportunity is where severe social and environmental crises, and the pressures of 'dissensus' over much-needed scientific and technological innovation, may drive local government towards greater dialogue.

Although there are many barriers, some in the local government sector have gone so far as to endorse new ways of doing politics, albeit using different language. The principles underlying

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<sup>28</sup> John, P; Cotterill, S; Richardson, L; Moseley, A; Smith, G; Stoker, G; & Wales, C (2011) *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think: Experimenting with Ways to Change Civic Behaviour*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.  
[www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/NudgeNudgeThinkThink\\_9781849662284/book-ba-9781849662284.xml](http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/NudgeNudgeThinkThink_9781849662284/book-ba-9781849662284.xml)

deliberation are also in line with UK frameworks for local councillors playing a community leadership role. For example, one 'Political Skills Framework'<sup>29</sup> sets out negative behaviours by councillors such as preferring 'political "blood sports" to collaboration'. Positive behaviours include encouraging trust and respect by being approachable and empathising with others. Across the UK, moves towards joint problem solving by local government represent a deep shift in approach from a paternalism to collaboration. Examples of this can be seen in research from Bradford<sup>30</sup>, where old models of consultation (e.g. 'you said, we did') were seen as "oppositional between the council and the community, that's counterproductive to doing joint problem solving", and were being replaced by 'you said, we did together'. Again, practitioners in the research did not explicitly use the term deliberation, but their new models were along similar lines.

Deliberation is strongly suggested, although not always used, by governance and democratic problem solving. Another rapidly emerging area where deliberation could be central is in local interest in coproduction. As with the term deliberation, the term coproduction is not well liked or understood by practitioners. Instead, it could be seen as a series of activities about working with citizens to co-commission, co-design, and co-deliver decisions. Similar principles underlie community governance, coproduction and deliberation: namely the principles of redefining power relationships, professionals changing their approach and giving citizens more control over social redesign. There are similar rationales that greater plurality reduces risk and citizen assets are mobilised.

## 4.6 Deliberation and citizens

Seeing deliberation in the context of localism simply magnifies some of the usual debates around deliberation whether done locally or nationally. One debate is about equity. Applications of the social technologies to deliver scientific and technological innovation are likely to have differential impacts on areas of higher and lower resources and assets. Localism is an opportunity for local tailoring and diversity. With this come worries that localism might lead to exacerbated inequalities, and unhealthy competition between places and groups. Fears of not on my back yard (NIMBY) thinking, community tensions and strategic interests being undermined, keep demands for greater dialogue at bay. Local dialogue is frequently lively as the issues directly affect households, but how far decentralisation and deliberation lead to greater inclusion partly depends on how such debates are brokered. There are positive examples of ways that inclusion had been promoted in devolution from Bradford and elsewhere, based on facilitation, deliberation and greater transparency<sup>31</sup>.

Another debate is about the capacity of citizens to engage in dialogue. Many local practitioners and politicians shudder at the idea of public debate on controversial technical topics. They remember all too well previous experiences of low-grade debates on science and technology leading to misunderstandings, negative press coverage and public backlashes. This debate is particularly acute when talking about more disadvantaged places.

One key form of expression, and the one that creates a sense of risk for policy makers, is opposition to decisions. Wind farms, for example, are a newsworthy point of local tension in many areas. In research on how far residents feel they can influence decisions that affect their local areas, one example came from Teesside<sup>32</sup>. Residents cited the example of an unsuccessful 10,000 signature petition and campaign against a proposed wind farm. What is interesting about examples like these is the absence of a deliberative approach and the thwarted, but keenly expressed desire of, citizens to debate the issues. Protestors are often styled as resistant to change and progress, and unable or unwilling to appreciate the detailed technical arguments. The reality is nearly always somewhat more nuanced. For example, in the Teesside case, the anti-wind farm campaign was said by campaigners to be conditional on the specific siting. No one knows what might have happened otherwise if an alternative approach had been taken in this case. However, there is significant under-exploitation of opportunities for potential deliberators. For advocates of deliberation, local horror stories only serve to emphasise the need for the right sort of facilitation. It is true that deliberation demands a courageous

<sup>29</sup> Silvester, J. (2007) *The political skills framework: A councillor's toolkit*. London: I&DEA [www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6515699](http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6515699)

<sup>30</sup> Richardson, L (2012) *Working in neighbourhoods, active citizenship and localism*. York: JRF [www.irf.org.uk/publications/working-in-neighbourhoods](http://www.irf.org.uk/publications/working-in-neighbourhoods)

<sup>31</sup> Richardson, L (2012) *Working in neighbourhoods, active citizenship and localism*. York: JRF [www.irf.org.uk/publications/working-in-neighbourhoods](http://www.irf.org.uk/publications/working-in-neighbourhoods)

<sup>32</sup> Newton, R; Pierce, A; Richardson, L; & Williams, M. (2010) *Citizens and Local Decision Making: What drives feelings of influence?* London: Urban Forum. [www.urbanforum.org.uk/research-reports/citizens-and-local-decision-making](http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/research-reports/citizens-and-local-decision-making)



and often unfamiliar approach. These forays into the unknown need not be based on faith though. The examples of evidence described below suggest that citizens in low-income areas have an appetite and ability to understand and articulate complex scientific issues that counter some of the arguments about low expectations of citizens' capacity for dialogue.

One example of this evidence is work by Trafford Hall, home of the National Communities Resource Centre, to support communities to take environmental action. The 'Community Futures' programme works with communities from low-income neighbourhoods and social housing areas<sup>33</sup>. The programme involved community groups that did not have much experience in the environmental field, but which had an interest in trying to 'save the planet and save money'. At a series of sharing and learning events between 2009/11<sup>34</sup>, community volunteers showed an understanding of connections between local issues and global problems such as climate change, overpopulation and loss of biodiversity. People said they had found the question incredibly hard to answer, but their answers showed some complex insights such as sustainable communities need representative and effective governance, we need to construct our own support systems and take action to be more independent' food production should be simplified and localised (to reduce use of chemicals and excessive transportation leading to global pollution). People understood some of the ways climate change would affect local communities (e.g. changes to food production and prices affect everyone; increased local flood risk and poor people are affected most (by rising fuel and food costs)).

Other research reinforces a more optimistic view of people's capacity for complex cognitive processing. For example, on environmental issues, one study<sup>35</sup> held focus groups in six low-income neighbourhoods with individual citizens. It found that participants could readily identify biodiversity loss and global warming, but also globalisation, global inequality, international migration and resource depletion. The study concluded that awareness of environmental problems and actions in low-income areas belies many firmly held assumptions about the lack of capacity of residents there to engage in scientific debate.

## 4.7 How could and does deliberation happen locally?

Deliberation, for its advocates, is a tightly delineated, intensively facilitated process with a set of ground rules. Relatively high-cost, one-off, expert-led processes dominate the literature. One perception in local government that works against deliberation is that it amounts to a lengthy and resource-intensive process, like a citizen jury, which is unlikely to have much impact on the majority of the population. While some innovative work has looked at taking deliberation 'to scale' using online techniques<sup>36</sup>, there is also more that could be done to embed deliberative principles into everyday dialogues that take place regardless.

As the three examples below illustrate, there are more flexible and fluid forms of deliberation that offer similar benefits of more constructive dialogue, leading to improved policy outcomes. Some fluid deliberation takes place in very informal community settings. Some debates are in real-time, while others are asynchronous. What matters is a set of principles and 'way of doing things' that could transform public dialogue, not a particular set of tools. These principles can be used in different settings.

The first example is an 'action learning network' in Bradford<sup>37</sup>. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in partnership with the local council, convened this action learning network, which was made up of citizens, council officers, professionals from other public services, local councillors and people from the voluntary sector. They all agreed to donate their time to meet every 6 to 8 weeks over 18 months, because of their common interest in making neighbourhoods better places to work and live. The network heard from a series of outside speakers, academic experts, other local projects and study visits to other local authority areas. Providing this forum for people across sectors to meet together, share, reflect and learn gave participants a better overview of what was happening across the

<sup>33</sup> See [www.traffordhall.com/training/community-futures-training.aspx](http://www.traffordhall.com/training/community-futures-training.aspx)

<sup>34</sup> See [www.traffordhall.com/community-learning.aspx](http://www.traffordhall.com/community-learning.aspx)

<sup>35</sup> Power, A & Elster, J (2005) *Environmental issues and human behaviour in low-income areas in the UK*. London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28324/1/CASereport31.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> John, P; Cotterill, S; Richardson, L; Moseley, A; Smith, G; Stoker, G; & Wales, C (2011) *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think: Experimenting with Ways to Change Civic Behaviour*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/NudgeNudgeThinkThink\\_9781849662284/book-ba-9781849662284.xml](http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/NudgeNudgeThinkThink_9781849662284/book-ba-9781849662284.xml)

<sup>37</sup> Richardson, L (2012) *Working in neighbourhoods, active citizenship and localism*. York: JRF

[www.jrf.org.uk/publications/working-in-neighbourhoods](http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/working-in-neighbourhoods)

Bradford district as a whole and in other neighbourhoods. Their discussions with people in other neighbourhoods helped them see their common and shared interests more sharply. But, more importantly, it offered a 'safe space' for difficult conversations that would not have taken place otherwise. There are many existing informal local networks that could create platforms for a debate about how best to meet different needs.

A second example is the Structured Dialogue Method (SDM) that is used by the Chamberlain Forum<sup>38</sup>, an organisation based in Birmingham. SDM has successfully been used with residents in a disadvantaged Birmingham neighbourhood for policy development and evaluation. Discussion is generated using a provocative theme, in a storytelling circle, with active reflection, structured questioning and a skilled facilitator<sup>39</sup>.

A third example is that of 'philosophical inquiry', a generic term for a broad set of approaches being taken up across the UK, including some well-publicised examples in local social venues. One project where this has yielded positive results is Contour Housing in its 'Big Chin Rub' community philosophy project<sup>40</sup>. This used informal get-togethers, such as a 'butty and brew' session in a local community house to generate discussion about deep issues of what purpose and function communities should serve.

These examples already start to take deliberation out of a tightly defined structure, but with a minimum bar on the principles – some processes are deliberative, some are not. However, what would be even more exciting is to see deliberative principles implemented in more everyday dialogues such as conversations, regular public meetings, the hundreds of neighbourhood exchanges that take place face-to-face, in the media and through official channels.

## 4.8 Conclusions

Localism offers significant opportunities for an expansion of deliberative public engagement, such as public dialogue. Decentralised decisions in local governance are as much about 'democratic problem solving' and mobilising citizen assets as they are about formal decision-making. Where citizen assets are more effectively mobilised, the prizes could be substantial (e.g. greater legitimacy of decisions, stronger consensus on common or public good in controversial decisions, overcoming divisions in communities and enabling change to be delivered).

Local government could potentially play roles as a civic 'enabler' or 'ensuring council'<sup>41</sup> to set the topics for debate, initiate and help facilitate dialogue, orchestrate collaboration, broker relationships, and take a lead in feeding dialogue results into policy-making locally and nationally. Potentially, this puts local government staff in the lead role as initiators and facilitators of deliberation, if they can be convinced of the benefits of the approach. To enable local deliberation, it may first be necessary to deliberate with the policy-makers to win them over to new ways of doing local politics.

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<sup>38</sup> See [www.chamberlainforum.org/](http://www.chamberlainforum.org/)

<sup>39</sup> See [www.chamberlainforum.org/?p=161](http://www.chamberlainforum.org/?p=161)

<sup>40</sup> See [www.nwtwc.org.uk/uploads/community\\_empowerment\\_case\\_studies\\_2.pdf](http://www.nwtwc.org.uk/uploads/community_empowerment_case_studies_2.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> See [www.apse.org.uk/press-releases/09/09/Ensuring-councils.htm](http://www.apse.org.uk/press-releases/09/09/Ensuring-councils.htm)

## 5 'What Works' and public dialogue

Jonathan Breckon

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### 5.1 Introduction

There is a trend for more evidence within Whitehall and beyond. Building on a number of pre-existing organisations, a new evidence infrastructure is being formed to help to ensure that social policy and practice is informed by evidence.

Public dialogue can be an important part of the evidence base for social policy and practice by influencing local and national commissioners, decision-makers and practitioners in areas such as crime, teaching and social care. Public dialogue has a vital role in making better policy by involving citizens in decision-making, bringing together a 'diverse mix of citizens with a range of views and values, and relevant policy makers and experts, to discuss, reflect and come to conclusions on complex and/or controversial issues'<sup>42</sup>. Public dialogue could be part of the new 'what works' evidence base, but there are many challenges in agreeing where public dialogue sits in standardised scales of appropriate evidence for different social policy and practice questions. However, we must explore where public dialogue and wider engagement activities can sit in this system.

A broad system of public engagement including dialogue, and other techniques and innovations, offers a vital part of the evidence base for 'what works'. The public dialogue community, along with every other arena of public policy, needs to look hard at the rigour and relevance of its evaluation and evidence-base to see if it is doing any good or not.

### 5.2 Evidence-based policy-making and 'What Works'

On 4 March 2013, a network of What Works centres was launched to ensure social policy and practice is informed by evidence<sup>43</sup>. Trained in the Civil Service Reform Plan<sup>44</sup> and the Open Public Services White Paper<sup>45</sup>, there will be four new independent institutions responsible for 'gathering, assessing and sharing the most robust evidence to inform policy and service delivery'<sup>46</sup>. Championed and funded by the BIG Lottery, Economic and Social Research Council, Cabinet Office, Nesta and Government departments, they will cover topics such as tackling crime, promoting active and independent ageing, effective early intervention and fostering local economic growth.

In addition to these centres, a new post was set up to champion evidence in social policy. A civil servant will be appointed as National Adviser to oversee the What Works network. The National Adviser will have a dual role of supporting the network and advising ministers, and will sit within the Cabinet Office, reporting to the Minister for Government Policy and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The Government will also be reviewing the merits of creating a Chief Social Scientist.

One reason for this initiative is the need to find successful interventions in a time of austerity. In a time of reduced resources, do we know what interventions are working? Are some actually doing harm or wasting money? The 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan committed to a new evidence infrastructure that

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<sup>42</sup> Hughes, T. (2012) *What is public dialogue? And other frequently asked public dialogue questions*. Harwell: Sciencewise [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Publications/What-is-public-dialogue-FAQ-Report-V2.pdf](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Publications/What-is-public-dialogue-FAQ-Report-V2.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> See [www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/event/announcing-the-what-works-centres/](http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/event/announcing-the-what-works-centres/)

<sup>44</sup> See [www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf](http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> See <http://files.openpublicservices.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/OpenPublicServices-WhitePaper.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-evidence-centres-for-social-policy>

could ensure that ‘commissioners in central or local government do not waste time and money on programmes that are unlikely to offer value for money’<sup>47</sup>. Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, said at the launch of the What Works centres:

‘It is vital that we continue using evidence-based policy-making to shape decisions on public spending, particularly in this financial climate. The What Works network will ... ensure Government takes decisions at the Spending Round and future events on the basis of high-quality research aimed at delivering the best possible outcomes for the public.’

The What Works network grows from a range of other pre-existing initiatives. For instance, they build on the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF). Both of these will formally be part of the What Works network. The approach taken by NICE has clearly been a major motivator for setting up the centres. As Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood, put it in his first ever media interview:

‘The question mark is whether, just as NICE has been very effective in giving a view on drugs or pharmaceutical interventions worth supporting, there is a role for a similar sort of entity or entities in the social policy intervention sphere?’<sup>48</sup>

The trend for more evidence is also not unique to Whitehall. Philanthropy strives towards a more professional, evidence-informed approach. Central protagonists in the charity and voluntary sector such as BIG Lottery<sup>49</sup> are making game-changing strategic funding decisions<sup>50</sup> based on evidence. In terms of supporting good causes, that can show they are making a difference, and helping charities create and share robust data and evaluations for others to learn from. The prospect is that this will mould the policy landscape, and nudge the charity and voluntary sector to focus on delivering real impact in tough financial times.

### 5.3 What is good (enough) evidence to inform public policy?

Where should public dialogue sit in this new infrastructure for social policy evidence centres? Will the centres adopt an inclusive approach and incorporate all forms of evidence, including public dialogue? The What Works centres will need to show the strength of evidence on some commonly agreed scale. They are expected to:

‘Undertake systematic assessment of relevant evidence and produce a sound, accurate, clear and actionable synthesis of the global evidence base which assesses and ranks interventions on the basis of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness; shows where the interventions are applicable; shows the relative cost of interventions and shows the strength of evidence on an agreed scale.’<sup>51</sup>

However, the issue of ‘what counts as good evidence?’ is contentious. According to Roland Jackson, former head of the British Science Association, there is a tension between how to compare and balance different forms of evidence. For Jackson, this tension is between “more ‘rigorous’ scientific, economic and environmental evidence, to much more qualitative (and sometimes seemingly anecdotal) evidence from public engagement processes”<sup>52</sup>. Others would dispute such a tension. At a Sciencewise debate in the House of Lords, the chief social researcher at Defra, Gemma Harper, took issue with a dichotomy between ‘science’ and ‘anecdotal’ approaches, and sang the praises of a mixed-methods approach<sup>53</sup>.

In the US, there are some officially sanctioned formal standards of evidence that are used by policy makers, such as the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods and the Top Tier Evidence Initiative<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> See [www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf](http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> The Guardian (January 2012) ‘Cabinet secretary calls for social policy ‘kitemark’ to highlight quality initiatives’ [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/jan/10/cabinet-secretary-social-policy-kitemark?INTCMP=SRCH](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/jan/10/cabinet-secretary-social-policy-kitemark?INTCMP=SRCH)

<sup>49</sup> BIG Lottery is a funder of the Alliance for Useful Evidence

<sup>50</sup> For example, the £25 million Realising Ambition programme for reducing reoffending in young people. Also, the £125 million early years investment Fulfilling Lives: A Better Start

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-evidence-centres-for-social-policy>

<sup>52</sup> Jackson, R (2013) *Open policy-making and public dialogue*. [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/blog/?p=826](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/blog/?p=826)

<sup>53</sup> Listen here: <https://soundcloud.com/timihughes/experts-publics-and-open-policy-seminar>

<sup>54</sup> Nutley, S; Powell, A; & Davies, H. (2013) *What counts as good evidence? Provocation paper for the alliance for useful evidence*. London: Alliance for Useful Evidence. [www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/What-Counts-as-Good-Evidence-WEB.pdf](http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/What-Counts-as-Good-Evidence-WEB.pdf)

Similar standards have been developed in the UK. The Major of London's Project Oracle youth hub<sup>55</sup>, BIG Lottery-funded coalition of charities Realising Ambition<sup>56</sup>, and Nesta standards for impact reporting<sup>57</sup> are all applying standards of evidence to their investments. Interestingly, from the point of view of valuing public engagement, the UK-based umbrella body for international development, BOND, has led on some non-governmental organisation (NGO) Evidence Principles<sup>58</sup> that have prioritised 'inclusion and voice' as its first principle. Inclusion sits alongside the principle of rigour and quality, with a four-point scale of robustness, ranging from 'weak evidence' to 'gold standard'.

Incorporating standards of evidence is fraught with difficulties. As Professor Sandra Nutley at St Andrews University has pointed out, it is unhelpful to position some research methods as being inherently 'better' than others (i.e. hierarchies of evidence). Rather, that which counts as high-quality evidence should depend on what is being asked and for what purpose<sup>59</sup>. Some sort of matrix, rather than a hierarchy, may be the more appropriate in some contexts<sup>60</sup>. Perhaps we may be able to disentangle different policy and practice questions to match them with appropriate standards of evidence, according to Professor Nutley.

However, decisions do need to be made on what is good enough and appropriate evidence to inform policy and practice. Standards of evidence can also serve a more developmental purpose aimed at improving practices and the available evidence. A developmental approach can encourage progress through some assessed stages on an 'evidence journey'<sup>61</sup>. There will never be a static, natural end-point to this journey. Public dialogue could be part of the What Works evidence base in informing some decisions in some relevant contexts. It is illuminating to look at the example of NICE. The Institute's public and patient engagement programme, as well as science and research, feeds into NICE guidance, quality standards and implementation<sup>62</sup>. Perhaps something similar could be done with the other What Works centres, using the rich dynamic and participatory 'evidence' from public dialogue to avoid 'a return to the logics of expertise'<sup>63</sup>.

## 5.4 The old new thing

Public engagement practitioners should continue their tradition of being methodological innovators in deliberation and inclusion. They have pioneered or borrowed (like all good innovators<sup>64</sup>) techniques such as citizen juries, Democs or World Cafes. Are there new approaches relating to the public that could be included as 'evidence' in the new infrastructure? Nesta has been looking at something the British public are experts at – complaining. In a report, 'Grumbles, Gripes and Grievances', Nesta sets out how adapting to public complaints can create enormous benefits to public services, thus empowering residents and changing the way that staff think about the services they provide<sup>65</sup>. Complaints are not often associated with innovation and creativity. When we think of complaints, we tend towards negative association (e.g. frustration, failure, poor service, something to be dealt with promptly and filed away). Receiving lots of complaints is seen as something to be wary of, not celebrated. But complaints show that people think it's worth complaining and that they will be listened to, and that they believe they have power to influence the system. They are a good sign of democracy in action. Advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the role of social media means making and responding to complaints is becoming more and more commonplace. They have the potential to create a virtuous circle of better public services and the policies that underpin them. Not only

<sup>55</sup> [www.project-oracle.com/](http://www.project-oracle.com/)

<sup>56</sup> [www.catch-22.org.uk/Realising-Ambition](http://www.catch-22.org.uk/Realising-Ambition)

<sup>57</sup> [www.nesta.org.uk/blogs/alliance\\_for\\_useful\\_evidence/standards\\_of\\_evidence\\_for\\_impact\\_investing\\_a\\_new\\_approach\\_to\\_balance\\_the\\_need\\_for\\_evidence\\_with\\_innovation](http://www.nesta.org.uk/blogs/alliance_for_useful_evidence/standards_of_evidence_for_impact_investing_a_new_approach_to_balance_the_need_for_evidence_with_innovation)

<sup>58</sup> BOND (nd) *NGO Evidence Principles*. <http://www.bond.org.uk/effectiveness/principles>

<sup>59</sup> Nutley, S; Powell, A; & Davies, H. (2013) *What counts as good evidence? Provocation paper for the alliance for useful evidence*. London: Alliance for Useful Evidence. [www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/What-Counts-as-Good-Evidence-WEB.pdf](http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/What-Counts-as-Good-Evidence-WEB.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> Nutley, S; Powell, A; & Davies, H. (2012) *What counts as good evidence?* St Andrews: University of St Andrews [www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/A4UEprovocationpaper2.pdf](http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/A4UEprovocationpaper2.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> Nutley, S; Powell, A; & Davies, H. (2012) *What counts as good evidence?* St Andrews: University of St Andrews [www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/A4UEprovocationpaper2.pdf](http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/A4UEprovocationpaper2.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> What is good evidence? Standards kitemarks and forms of evidence. November 9, 2012. [www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/event/what-is-good-evidence-standards-kitemarks-and-forms-of-evidence-2/](http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/event/what-is-good-evidence-standards-kitemarks-and-forms-of-evidence-2/)

<sup>63</sup> [www.involve.org.uk/playing-policy-top-trumps-is-there-a-best-way-to-inform-policy/](http://www.involve.org.uk/playing-policy-top-trumps-is-there-a-best-way-to-inform-policy/)

<sup>64</sup> A lecture given by Geoff Mulgan, CEO of Nesta, set out why we should praise the creativity and innovation of borrowing:

[www.nesta.org.uk/assets/documents/1134](http://www.nesta.org.uk/assets/documents/1134)

<sup>65</sup> *Grumbles, Gripes and Grievances*, Nesta, forthcoming March 2013



can they provide an early warning sign that something has gone wrong, but they can also help identify and prioritise need, challenge established wisdom, and help to create a dialogue, co-creating and co-producing solutions.

If a principle of public dialogue is ‘gathering public experience in science and technology’<sup>66</sup>, then complaints or other types of ‘social intelligence’ could play their part. Patient Opinion, the UK charity that is a platform for feedback from health and social services, is another example. Since it was set up in 2005, it has had over 45,000 patient ‘stories’. Patient Opinion calls these the positive and negative feedback from the public. They are published on its website and have been viewed 51 million times by the public. It is not clear how many are responded to by professionals, but they aim to answer as many as possible and have many case studies of the NHS learning from the public<sup>67</sup>. These and other mechanisms that engage citizen feedback and dialogue could all be part of an evidence portfolio.

## 5.5 ‘What Works’ in public dialogue

The public dialogue sector may need to step back and look at its own evidence about what works in influencing policy. Do we really know if, say, citizen juries are more effective than citizen summits or do town hall meetings trump citizen advisory groups? Anecdotal evidence suggests that dialogue can save money in implementing policy and beat traditional forms of communication. However, according to a Sciencewise report<sup>68</sup>, there is little ‘recent detailed research data to support that view’. We should be wary of over-claiming the benefits of public dialogue until this evidence base is in place. Civil servants and practitioners have user-friendly toolkits, repositories, guides and portals<sup>69</sup>. However, underpinning such tools, we still need a rigorous evidence base to choose between different approaches, perhaps using experimental or quasi-experimental research methods where the context is appropriate, more robust systematic reviews, and move along what the Dartington Social Research Unit calls the ‘evidence journey’<sup>70</sup>. Is there any reason why science dialogue should not be more scientific about itself? Of course, there are tremendous challenges in developing a strong quantitative and qualitative evidence base, and we need evidence that is appropriate to the context<sup>71</sup>. The sector is mature enough to tackle this and now may be the time to move to the next level.

## 5.6 Conclusions

Compared with other forms of engagement, public dialogues typically engage a relatively small number of citizens directly. However, public dialogue generates a high level of discussion and outputs, and can have a valuable role in informing public policy and the What Works network. NICE – a major influence on the new centres – already has a highly respected public engagement programme that is blended with evidence from research and science. This might be a model for others. The new What Works centres are focused on social policy, but they should influence us all in seeking stronger and more relevant evidence, and taking stock of our evidence of ‘what works’, however challenging that is in practice. A robust evaluation and research on public dialogue would benefit us all – including others new to the sector who want to learn from the experiences of Sciencewise and other leaders in public dialogue involving science and technology issues. There is no end point to this or easy answers, but as Cabinet Office minister Oliver Letwin said at the launch of the What Works centres ‘this is only the start of a journey, not the destination’.

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<sup>66</sup> Sciencewise (nd) *The Government’s Approach to Public Dialogue on Science and Technology*. Harwell: Sciencewise- [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Project-files/Sciencewise-ERC-Guiding-Principles.pdf](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Project-files/Sciencewise-ERC-Guiding-Principles.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/upcoming/making-policy-better-series-armchair-evaluators-how-can-citizen-feedback-drive-better-policy](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/upcoming/making-policy-better-series-armchair-evaluators-how-can-citizen-feedback-drive-better-policy)

<sup>68</sup> Warburton, D. *Evidence Counts: Understanding the value of public dialogue*. Harwell: Sciencewise [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Strategic-Research-documents/Evidence-CountsSummary-report.pdf](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Strategic-Research-documents/Evidence-CountsSummary-report.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> Any fresh recruit to public dialogue should look at the Involve website: <http://participationcompass.org/>.

<sup>70</sup> What is good evidence? Standards kitemarks and forms of evidence. November 9, 2012. [www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/event/what-is-good-evidence-standards-kitemarks-and-forms-of-evidence-2/](http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/event/what-is-good-evidence-standards-kitemarks-and-forms-of-evidence-2/)

<sup>71</sup> Nutley, S; Powell, A; & Davies, H. (2012) *What counts as good evidence?* St Andrews: University of St Andrews [www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/A4UEprovocationpaper2.pdf](http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/A4UEprovocationpaper2.pdf)

## 6 Transparency and open data

Tim Davies

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### 6.1 Introduction

Since the Enlightenment, in the 17th and 18th centuries, it has been argued that transparency is a fundamental aspect of democratic politics. Although first enshrined in law in Sweden in 1766, it is only in the later part of the 20th century that freedom of information (FOI) acts spread across modern democracies, reaching the United Kingdom in 2000. These reactive transparency laws, giving citizens the right to request information from Government, have been joined in the last few years by open-data policies, encouraging proactive disclosure of Government information in the form of structured datasets. With open data, citizens asking, for example, for information on how budgets are spent, should no longer have to trawl through hundreds of printed pages. Instead, they should be able to load up a spreadsheet from Government, and filter and search for the information they need. In a complex state, where the scale of information held inside Government grows exponentially with the rise of vast databases and digital-by-default services, access to data may be the only way for citizens to effectively exercise oversight of Government. Non-digital copies of the information are just too cumbersome to work with.

### 6.2 The emergence of open data

In the UK, a national open-data initiative was announced in 2009 by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The announcement came in the context of the expenses scandal and a crisis of confidence in politicians. It was primarily framed in terms of transparency, but also emphasised the importance of opening data to support innovation, public participation and economic growth. The form the initiative took was centred on a data portal at [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk) that provides access to datasets from departments across Government and mirrored the model taken in the United States, where the [data.gov](http://data.gov) site was launched in May 2009. The US open-data policy developed out of a memo on open government issued by Barak Obama on his first day in office and emphasised the triad of transparency, participation and collaboration. In the United Kingdom, open data has remained high on the agenda across a change of Government, with the coalition pushing for further release of Government datasets, strengthening emphasis on the potential contribution that the innovative re-use of Government datasets may make to the economy.

In early 2013, over 9,000 datasets were listed on [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk), covering issues from food hygiene to school locations, and from prescribing practices of GPs to geological models and oil production statistics. And it's not just Government that is making a move towards open data. By choice, or in response to external mandates, many other sectors are also moving towards open publication of datasets online. Science funders and 'open-science' advocates are asking for datasets generated during research to be archived and, in some cases, to be made publicly available. Targeted transparency policies are being used by Government to force certain sectors to disclose data (e.g. on food nutrition, car safety and environmental impacts<sup>72</sup>). In addition, the Open Data Institute, founded in late 2012, is advocating for private firms to publish datasets online, sharing everything from product specifications to supply chain information. These open data are just a small sub-set of the total amount of data available digitally. Vast datasets of social interactions, captured by services like Facebook and Twitter, are partially accessible for re-use, albeit not as open data. Also, private firms

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<sup>72</sup> Fung, A; Graham, M; & Weil, D. (2007) *Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 300.



hold vast datasets on their customers, which are used to drive their business decisions. It is no surprise that the Economist referred to this as ‘the data deluge’<sup>73</sup>.

However, when it comes to public dialogue, where does all this data get us? What difference does it make to have open data? How far does Government transparency alter the relationship between citizen and state? The following sections explore these questions by highlighting a number of ways in which transparency, open data and dialogue might meet. Before this though, it will help to have a clear view of what makes open data different.

### 6.3 Defining open data

A dataset is a collection of ‘facts’: individual atomic descriptions of the world. Taken alone, a single cell or item within a dataset is effectively meaningless. It is only when we add context, and start to represent and analyse data, that it becomes meaningful information that can form the basis of dialogue and decision-making. When you have a printed table of figures or a map showing the location of particular services, then someone has already chosen how data should be contextualised, and has fixed an interpretation. However, if you have the underlying dataset and the tools to work with it, then you might be able to create your own interpretation, focusing on the aspects of the data you feel are important or mixing the datasets together to create new information and understanding. This is the value of open data. To be open data, a dataset must be accessible, machine-readable (i.e. in a form where you can manipulate it with digital tools), and licensed to permit re-use, rather than restricted by copyright or intellectual property rights.

In practice, open datasets vary in how far they are open to different interpretations. Some datasets listed on [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk) are little more than summary statistics pre-computed by departments, while others are ‘raw’ datasets reporting original measurements. Creating a dataset involves being selective about what to record and how to encode it<sup>74</sup>. Using a dataset often requires considerable tacit knowledge about a policy area and the way the data have been collected. The balancing act between protecting the privacy of individuals and releasing datasets built up from individual records also means that choices over anonymisation and aggregation affect the data that makes it into the open, and what can and can’t be transparent<sup>75</sup>. It is also worth re-iterating that not all data now available to drive policy are open. Just as ‘commercial sensitivity’ is one of the reasons for non-disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, many datasets that may inform policy or that are drawn on in consultation responses, remain private, owned by third-parties and not covered by the Government’s transparency and open-data policies. This is important to note when considering the balance of power in public dialogue.

### 6.4 Data informing dialogue

For over 40 years, proposals for a new airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, near the city of Nantes in France, have generated significant controversy. Arguments over its economic benefits, environmental impact and forced eviction of those on the proposed site have divided politicians and community members. In November 2012, with thousands of activists occupying the site in opposition to construction, a group of journalists and active citizens, frustrated by constant contradictory statements about the project, started compiling data related to the airport plans. In January 2013, they opened up this collection of data to the public<sup>76</sup>. Their vision is that this collection of datasets (some fully meeting the open-data definition, others approximating it) will support public conversations over the proposed airport and will allow the creation of dynamic visualisations, animations, web services and graphics that can better inform public debate.

The idea of open data supporting more informed public dialogue is a compelling one. However, as the airport example above suggests, using open data to inform dialogue is not simply a case of placing datasets online. It also requires data to be curated and for intermediaries to help make sense of complex datasets. Even with open data, the information that most citizens receive will still be filtered

<sup>73</sup> “The Data Deluge,” The Economist, Feb-2010. [www.economist.com/printedition/2010-02-27](http://www.economist.com/printedition/2010-02-27)

<sup>74</sup> Bowker, G.C. & Star, S.L. (2000) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. London: The MIT Press, p. 389.

<sup>75</sup> O’Hara, K. (2011) *Transparent Government, Not Transparent Citizens*. Southampton: University of Southampton. <http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/272769/1/transparency-and-privacy-review-annex-b.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> <http://dataaerportnotredamedeslandes.wordpress.com/>

through editorial judgements. Having datasets available will not inevitably drive more evidence-based or rational arguments in general. Yet, in a number of settings, open data does create a space for new actors to enter the debate. In particular, there have been civic-minded, open-data analysts and technologists engaging with open data and learning, in depth, about issues through the process of building platforms that work with the data. For example, creators of the [openspending.org](http://openspending.org) platform, visualising public spending from countries across the world, had to learn about the complexities of public finance to interpret and present Government datasets. Also, the 'Clear Climate Code' project<sup>77</sup> involved developers rewriting climate prediction software models to better comprehend how vital climate predictions were generated. Whether, as we go beyond the stage of early experimentation with open data, such community-led projects will be sustainable remains to be seen and it is likely that they will not be equally distributed across all policy areas. Nevertheless, they illustrate a new resource for dialogue in the outputs created and in the emergence of new, self-taught, citizen experts in certain policy areas. Such groups may be able to put new issues on the agenda for dialogue, and to play a role as participants and facilitators in existing areas of discussion.

The exact role that open data will play in a formal dialogue depends on the dynamics of the issue at hand and the sorts of data available. In some cases, independent intermediaries may already have created diverse interpretations and presentations of data, which can act as a useful input to a deliberative process. In other cases, few uses will have been made of available data (just because data are out there, doesn't mean anyone will necessarily have made the investment of time to work with them) and a dialogue project may need to commission or otherwise catalyse the creation of resources that can inform discussions. In cases where expert input is vital, open data offers the opportunity for experts to more transparently 'show their working', laying bare the data underlying their conclusions (albeit, requiring a culture change and new ways of working for many experts). Again, in other cases, it may not be appropriate to draw upon data at all and the purpose of dialogue may need to be to provide space for stories, rather than statistics, understanding the experiences and opinions of citizens, rather than their response to selected data.

## 6.5 Data-driven decision-making

While transparency and open data could be used to 'lay out the facts' in front of citizens and support more informed policy discussion, an alternative possibility exists, with open data being but a footnote to larger shifts towards data-driven decision-making. Here, dialogue is displaced by positivist perspectives that view answers as already there in the data, ready to be extracted by data scientists. In the 2013 Annual Letter for his grant-making foundation, Bill Gates wrote about the importance of measurement to the design of social policies. In this, he drew an analogy between the role of data in developing a better steam engine in the early 1800s, and addressing modern challenges in medicine and education<sup>78</sup>. If only we have the right measurements and better data, the argument runs, our problems can be solved. Yet, social problems rarely have simple solutions. The purpose of dialogue is to weigh up not only different evidence, but also to consider different notions of the good and debate the ends that we should pursue.

In the field of open data, just as in debates over evidence-based policy-making, there is a tension between the view that data can provide definitive answers, and the view that they are an input into a process of deliberation. In some cases, rather than bringing new dialogue participants to the table, open data might be used to bring in new 'solution providers', drawing on Government data and using statistical models to suggest optimum policies. The rise of smart-cities projects, in which large corporations seek to gain access to data flows from across urban area and to optimise everything from energy policy to transport flows, is just one example of this happening. Here, statistics captured in datasets and the algorithms that process them are what drives policy and practice, rather than citizens' stories and lived experience. Transparency may let those with the capacity to analyse dataset increase their control over policy, rather than distributing and decentralising control, as many advocates of open data have suggested it would.

The ways in which transparency and open data policy moves forward from here will have a big impact on the outcomes we see: whether providing resources for dialogue, or displacing it. The following

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<sup>77</sup> <http://clearclimatecode.org/>

<sup>78</sup> <http://annualletter.gatesfoundation.org/> Accessed 31 Jan 2013.

section explores the need to move beyond a transparent and open-data policy that is simply based on disclosure of information to one that is based on supporting dialogue with and around datasets.

## 6.6 Open data and ongoing dialogue

Meijer and others<sup>79</sup> divide open government into two components: vision, and voice. Under vision, they place reactive (FOI) and proactive (open data/publication schedules) transparency. Under voice, they place formal and informal arenas for citizens to engage in decision-making. Based on a review of 103 papers, they suggest that ‘vision’ components of open government are rarely connected with initiatives on voice, and argue that “open government is much too important to leave it to the ‘techies’: scientists and practitioners with backgrounds in law, economics, political science and public administration should also get involved to build sound connections between vision and voice”. What might these connections look like?

De Cindio suggests taking datasets and visualisations, and embedding them in online deliberative spaces to create discussions around data<sup>80</sup>. There has been a growing recognition in e-participation over recent years of the need to take discussions to where people are rather than necessarily expecting everyone to come to some central space. De Cindio points to the need to take open data out into a variety of digital environments and to focus attention on the technical and social features of environments that are needed to support discussion around data. The Five Stars of Open Data Engagement<sup>81</sup> takes a different tack, highlighting the features that a Government open-data initiative needs to support dialogue. It suggests that open data initiatives need to:

★ **Be demand driven** – focusing attention on the data that citizens ask for and prioritising data release based on demand

★★ **Put data in context** – with good metadata (i.e. descriptions of where the data came from, guidance on how to analyse them and examples of existing analysis)

★★★ **Support conversations around data** – online and offline. These conversations should be able to involve people from inside Government who know the dataset and it should be possible for citizens to communicate with the data owner

★★★★ **Build capacity, skills and networks** – don’t stop at just publishing data, seek to build communities around the datasets and make sure all key stakeholders have the capabilities they need to work with them

★★★★★ **Collaborate on data as a common resource** – recognising that Government should be open to data coming in from citizens and giving data out; and that tools and services for working with data can be created collaboratively between citizens, state and private enterprise

This model envisages open data as a locus for ongoing dialogue between citizens and state, but also points to the significant work and culture change required to make this happen. Right now, data portals tend to act as a firewall between citizens interested in data and the civil servants responsible for those datasets. This makes each invisible to the other, rather than being spaces to connect together producers and users of information.

As well as dialogue around individual datasets, there is also a need for dialogue around open-data policies and the underlying data collection practices of Government as a whole. Sciencewise has already hosted an ‘open-data dialogue’ exploring citizen attitudes to wider sharing of datasets, many of which are built up from data collected from citizens during the course of their interactions with Government in the first place<sup>82</sup>. Where the line lies between openness and individual privacy or between transparency and protected space for policy deliberation are important questions, as are questions about what data Government should collect in the first place. For example, the coalition

<sup>79</sup> Meijer, A.J.; Curtin, D.; & Hillebrandt, M. (2012) “Open government: connecting vision and voice,” *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, vol. 78, no. 1, pp. 10–29.

<sup>80</sup> De Cindio, F. (2012) “Guidelines for Designing Deliberative Digital Habitats: Learning from e-Participation for Open Data Initiatives,” *The Journal of Community Informatics*, vol. 8, no. 2.

<sup>81</sup> [www.opendataimpacts.net/engagement/](http://www.opendataimpacts.net/engagement/)

<sup>82</sup> Bhattachary, D.; & Dalziel, D. (2012) *Open data dialogue: Final Report*. Swindon: RCUK [www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/TNSBMRBRUKOpendatareport.pdf](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/TNSBMRBRUKOpendatareport.pdf)

Government decommissioned many surveys that previously provided data on policy impact and there have been discussions of whether, in future, the census may be replaced by data bought in from private firms (e.g. credit reference agencies). The consequence of this is that such data may be trickier to provide openly due to their commercial nature<sup>83</sup>. Jo Bates has argued<sup>84</sup> that transparency and open data are not neutral and can be used as political tools in service of particular agendas. Maintaining trust in transparency and open data requires good governance regimes to be established around it and these should include public representation. Whether the sector transparency boards that have been established in many UK Government departments will provide this role remains to be seen.

## 6.7 Open everything?

There are aspects of transparency that remain distinct from open data. In calling governments to account, access to documents through reactive transparency and FOI rights is likely to remain important. Not all the information that is needed for dialogue exists as datasets – much may be in the form of narrative accounts, evidence and opinions. However, the rise of open data does represent a significant shift in how information flows between state and citizens.

In a world of open data, open source and open access, authority is no longer secured through being in a privileged position with respect to some key information. Rather, it has to be produced through public discourse and performance<sup>85</sup>, and involves appeals to data and to lived experience. This involves a cultural shift.

## 6.8 Conclusions

Transparency and open data are resources for classic dialogue and the basis for new forms of ongoing dialogue. They bring new actors into the public sphere and allow information to be presented in ways that make issues more accessible. Yet, without careful attention to process, open data can also disempower those whose stories are not captured in the statistics and those who do not have the capacity to conduct arguments through numbers and datasets. Also, as part of a wider data deluge, it can tip the balance of power in favour of those with the computing power and skill to process vast quantities of data.

Although it might be 250 years since Sweden first put government transparency on the statute book, the way in which contemporary transparency and open data will unfold in practice very much remains to be shaped and seen.

# 7 Complexity, public policy and public dialogue

Greg Fisher

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<sup>83</sup> See discussion at [www.opendataimpacts.net/2012/12/notes-on-a-national-information-infrastructure/](http://www.opendataimpacts.net/2012/12/notes-on-a-national-information-infrastructure/)

<sup>84</sup> Bates, J. (2012) "This is what modern deregulation looks like": co-optation and contestation in the shaping of the UK's Open Government Data Initiative," *The Journal of Community Informatics*, vol. 8, no. 2,

<sup>85</sup> Hajer, M.A. (2009) *Authoritative Governance: Policy Making in the Age of Mediatization*. Oxford: OUP, p. 224.

## 7.1 Introduction

There is a quiet revolution underway in the social sciences. This follows the gradual incorporation of the complexity sciences into a number of sub-fields, including psychology and economics. In this chapter, after first describing what this new field is about, I want to explore some of its potential implications for politics, public policy development and even democracy itself. More specifically, I want to look at the role of consultation exercises in the democratic process and also at Sciencewise's emphasis on public dialogue. In the final section, before concluding, I will touch on the information revolution and how that ought to help us improve our practice of democracy.

The complexity sciences study systems made up of large numbers of unique constituent parts (agents) that interact and adapt to each other over time. Adaptation is a fundamental part of these systems, which are called complex systems. This new field only really blossomed in and after the 1970s when computational power accelerated and became cheaper following the creation of the microprocessor. Computers are necessary in the complexity sciences because they allow models to be built from the ground up, even modelling each agent if necessary and how they interact with each other, in fine detail. Pen-and-paper mathematics is insufficient for this task, so our study of complex systems had to be catalysed by computing power. What emerged is a new way of thinking, in addition to a toolbox of new concepts<sup>86</sup>.

## 7.2 Beyond enlightenment thinking

In 2000, Professor Stephen Hawking said this about the complexity sciences:

"I think the next century will be the century of complexity."

This quote reflects the understanding among a lot of natural scientists that the complexity sciences have given birth to a fundamental revolution in how we think about complex systems. Looking at the social sciences, perhaps one of the most powerful perspectives on the complexity sciences comes from the US military:

"I am convinced that the nation and people who master the new sciences of complexity will become the economic, cultural and political superpowers of the next century."<sup>87</sup>

Complexity science departments have sprouted up in many universities across the world over the past 20 years or so. In the UK, these include the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the Open University, Cranfield. More recently, the universities of Warwick, Bristol and Southampton have started teaching postgraduate courses.

But what exactly is revolutionary about this new field? Perhaps the best way of capturing this is to emphasise that it takes us well beyond the thinking that emerged from the Enlightenment. There are broadly two parts to this. The first is that, since then, social sciences have tended to follow the natural sciences in seeking the underlying laws of human and social behaviour as if this behaviour was equivalent to the laws of the natural universe, consistent in space and time.

The second part is that the complexity sciences allow us to go well beyond reductionism, which is the idea that the whole is the sum of the parts. This has dominated our strategy of making sense of social systems since the Enlightenment (and reaching even further back to some of the Greek philosophers). Within distinct academic fields, sub-disciplines and sub-sub-disciplines have been created. The idea being that, if we wanted to make sense of whole social systems, all we need do is combine these specialisms.

Perhaps the discipline that has best exemplified these points is the economics profession. Here, the aim appears to be to discover the underlying laws of economics, which hold in space and time, and where reductionism has been achieved by notions like the rational agent model and an emphasis on the allocation of scarce material and human resources.

<sup>86</sup> More information about this new field can be found via Synthesis' website: [www.synthesisips.net/about-us/our-approach/](http://www.synthesisips.net/about-us/our-approach/)

<sup>87</sup> Quote from Heinz Pagels, cited as the epigraph to the volume "Coping with the bounds: Speculation on nonlinearity in Military Affairs" (1998) National Defence University.



What the complexity sciences help us understand is that this reductionist strategy can only get us so far. If the parts of complex systems are interrelated, like psychology affecting our economic decisions (which is self-evidently true) and vice versa, then reductionism, while useful, cannot move us to a complete understanding of whole systems. We will miss the relationships between the so-called parts.

### 7.3 Three core principles

The complexity sciences now represent a massive subject domain in their own right, so it is impossible to do full justice to it here. However, I will highlight three issues that are particularly relevant for the social sciences and for this essay.

- Complex systems are in a constant state of flux. What this means is that the nature of social systems – their underlying patterns of relationships and technologies – are not static, they are dynamic. Put another way, the principles and patterns of social systems are not consistent over time, which stands in contrast to our post-Enlightenment approach. Furthermore, most change is impossible to anticipate ahead of time, which makes planning tricky. This point also raises the profile and importance of resilience if the future is inherently uncertain. Of course, this is not to say that social systems behave randomly – it is better to think of them as a mixture of patterns (or structure) and change. Within this broad point, we can also say that in democratic countries, voter preferences are not fixed either. To a degree, they will evolve over time too.
- Idiosyncrasies matter more than we normally believe. This is because the properties of whole systems are different to the sum of the parts. What this means is that, for example, two otherwise identical towns (say, with respect to their distributions of age, sex, race, education, etc) can have different characteristics in terms of crime and unemployment rates, etc. Such things are emergent properties of each town and these cannot be understood by analysing the parts. A reductionist strategy cannot help us make sense of these emergent properties, which give rise to idiosyncratic features over and above constituent characteristics.
- Neurological constraints mean that human cognition is extremely limited in the face of these first two points. While we humans enjoy flattering ourselves for our great achievements, the world is vastly more complex for individuals than we can hold in mind at any moment. Murray Gell-Man has emphasised the useful notion of coarse-grained cognition, which highlights the lumpy, coarse-grained nature of our awareness in comparison with the fine-grained complexity of the real world.

These three principles, along with other concepts and lessons from the complexity sciences, sit awkwardly with a lot of social sciences – and a lot of Government policy has been built out of those social sciences. The result is many institutions and policies sit awkwardly with the real world. In the next section, I will look closer at what these three principles mean for how we practise democracy.

### 7.4 Democracy and public policy

Democracy is practised in the UK by holding periodic elections at the European, national (UK), regional and local levels. After the 2010 general election it was decided that national general elections would be held on a 5-yearly basis having previously been at the discretion of the incumbent Government. Some have described this system as leading to ‘elected autocracies’ given the limited power of the electorate between elections. In the interim, much of the power of the electorate is due to the present value of future election power and it is relatively limited.

The point I want to emphasise here is that this 5-yearly electoral cycle stands in sharp contrast to the highly complex nature of our society. Consider the three core principles I mentioned above. First, the UK is continuously evolving in terms of how people relate to each other and in terms of new technologies, which mean that policies can become dated or obsolete. Second, national policies of the Government have to cope with the detailed idiosyncrasies of very different regions and local areas (e.g. the suburbs of Surrey are fundamentally different to the housing estates of Mile End in East London). This gives rise to a ‘one size fits all’ problem. Third, if we are living in such a fine-grained, evolving world, can we say that the 5-year electoral cycle will ensure public policy will mirror the preferences of the electorate consistently over time (preferences that will be evolving too)?

In light of these points, we might say that the electoral cycle takes crude, periodic snapshots of electoral preferences. Extending this metaphor, we might also say that our democracy needs to look more like a high-definition movie than a low-resolution still picture. In all, I would argue that a healthy democracy is one in which public policy mirrors citizen preferences on a near-continuous basis. What we see today appears some distance from that.

Of course, we should not take this point too far. It would be absurd to monitor people's preferences on a minute-by-minute basis. But, at the same time, 5-yearly snapshots seem infrequent in light of our core principles.

In the next section I will discuss how consultation exercises are an obvious way of improving our democracy, but there are other ways in which this could be done too. For instance, if idiosyncrasies are more important than we have previous thought, which the new science of complexity implies, then there is an argument in favour of devolution of authority and responsibility in the British political system. This does not mean an extreme form of localism whereby all authority is devolved. Instead, it looks more like the concept of subsidiarity, which is the idea that matters should be handled by the least centralised authority capable of addressing that matter effectively. Put another way, subsidiarity moves us away from the 'one size fits all' problem. In addition, if society and voter preferences are constantly evolving, we must ask whether a 5-year electoral cycle is too long. Equally, if the aim is to bring voter preferences closer to public policy, we might also ask if referenda should be used more frequently.

## **7.5 Public consultation and dialogue**

Here I want to focus on the importance of consultation and dialogue in healthy democratic systems. This relates closely to what Sciencewise is about (i.e. engaging with the public in a deliberative way on topics with a heavy scientific component, which Sciencewise calls public dialogue). To be clear, here I will define public consultation as being about voter preference testing without proactively informing them about any topic or topics; whereas holding a dialogue with the public involves informing them, and testing their attitudes and preferences. Sciencewise aims to go further still by opening up debates and questions, and helping to frame issues, which leads to the incorporation of the public's views in governance and regulatory systems.

The need for public consultation arises from at least two broad issues. The first is that elections give coarse-grained information about voter preferences. Voters tend to vote for a portfolio of policies and this means we are unlikely to be absolutely clear about their views on specific topics (e.g. do we know what proportion of the population is in favour of renewing Trident, the UK's nuclear deterrent?). We are unlikely to know this if policies in favour or against are bundled together with other policies. A second point in support of public consultation is, as mentioned above, that voter preferences evolve over time, as does society at large. Just because someone was in favour of renewing Trident in 2010 does not mean they will be in favour of it today or in 2015.

Of course, we shouldn't take this point too far either. There are mechanisms in Government and politics which help to ensure voter preferences and policy decisions are not too misaligned. National politicians prefer to be and remain popular to get re-elected, and Government departments, regional assemblies and local councils do instigate consultations from time to time. In addition, competition among the political parties contributes to this process. However, we are some distance from what is achievable, especially in light of new ICT, which is discussed more below.

The issue of aligning the public's preferences with Government policies gets more interesting the more we look at policy challenges that are more complex and which involve higher levels of intricacy. For example, new scientific domains, such as stem-cell research and nanotechnology, have thrown up new policy challenges. Public funds have been used to develop these fields and both have matured to the point where we can use them in a meaningful way. For example, there are ethical questions about how the public feels about using stem cells harvested from embryos. Equivalently, some believe that risks from nanotechnology might be too high.

How does the public feel about these things? Is our democratic system, centred on a 5-yearly electoral cycle, equipped to handle these new and evolving policy challenges? I would argue not. Our approach to democracy appears to result from a broadly static view of social systems where people's



preferences are broadly fixed, where people are generally well informed and where society does not evolve.

In addition to testing preferences more accurately, there is a further point that the public's likely reaction to different policy options should be tested too. Static, linear approaches to social systems tend to imply that the public's reaction to policies should be determinable, in principle. However, the complexity sciences would emphasise that the impact of policies is likely to be much less certain than is typically believed. The successful implementation of a policy is dependent on the actions and interactions of a myriad of actors. Therefore, forums that help to test these reactions might help to mitigate future policy problems.

It is for these reasons that I am an advocate of Sciencewise's work in holding dialogues with sample groups of the general public. Its public dialogue projects are designed to inform a sample group about relevant science, including newly emerging sciences, and to test their opinions. Such forums also allow the public to describe how they might react to different policies, providing some clues for the eventual impact of these policies. This is all then fed into public policy. Such a process helps a representative sample of the public drill deep into the fine detail of complex issues and to express their informed opinion. Of course, this is also a static snapshot, but I understand that Sciencewise is interested in exploring ways of developing ongoing dialogue and social intelligence.

These types of initiative help to mitigate the problems associated with the third core principle mentioned above, namely the tension between coarse-grained cognition and the fine-grained, evolving nature of reality. This is also a more efficient way of testing the public's preferences because the numbers are small (but big enough to avoid sample bias). These projects are healthy for our democracy.

## 7.6 But do people mean what they say?

Interestingly, and on the surface, testing people's preference seems like it should be a fairly easy task. Unfortunately, however, a lot of research indicates that it is much trickier than we might think.

A short paper written by Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan entitled 'Do People Mean What They Say? Implications for Subjective Survey Data', summarises these challenges very well<sup>88</sup>. First, certain cognitive factors affect the way people answer questions, including, for example, the order in which the same collection of questions is asked. Second, if asked in person, many people will bias their answers to impress the interviewer. Third, as the authors state "perhaps the most devastating problem with subjective questions ... is the possibility that attitudes may not 'exist' in a coherent form", the result of which might be instability in individuals' stated preferences.

What are the implications of this research for consultation and dialogue? One view is that such things are futile because of these subjective survey problems. However, by extension, should we then not require people to vote? Would it be better to have an autocracy? Another view, which I share, is that consultations and dialogues are useful, but they must be designed to mitigate these various biases and problems, and policy makers should be made aware of such problems. Ultimately, if we are dealing with public policy, then questions exist that must be answered. Often, it is necessary and preferable to have some understanding of the preferences of the general public. So, I think these subjective survey problems lead us to tread carefully with consultations and dialogues, not to avoid their use entirely.

## 7.7 The information revolution

All of the core principles mentioned above were relevant 100 years ago; other people have reached similar conclusions, but via a different route. My emphasis in this essay has been to highlight new ways of thinking about social systems, namely those arising from the complexity sciences, and to consider what these might mean for democracy and public policy.

In this final section before concluding, I want to consider the information revolution of the modern world and how it relates to this essay. The point I want to make is simple – this information revolution,

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<sup>88</sup> Bertrand, M and Mullainathan, S. (2001) 'Do People Mean What They Say? Implications for Subjective Survey Data'. *Economics and Social Behaviour*. [http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/marianne.bertrand/research/papers/mean\\_say\\_aer.pdf](http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/marianne.bertrand/research/papers/mean_say_aer.pdf)

born out of the computer revolution, should catalyse a shift in how we practise democracy. Indeed, we can think of this information revolution and the complexity sciences as being a part of the same paradigm change because both were catalysed by the invention of the microprocessor and modern-day networked computers.

Modern ICT is well placed to mitigate the problems of our democracy mentioned in this essay. This new technology can be used to inform the electorate about the fine-grained detail of public-policy challenges and to consult on the public's preferences concerning policy options. In more abstract terms, this new technology can help public policy to become more transparent and more democratic. Clearly, there are a lot of robust and healthy debates going on in the blogosphere, and the Government is not doing nothing (e.g. see [www.police.uk](http://www.police.uk)). However, I would argue that our political system has yet to engage fully with this new technology and the enhancement of our democracy that is now possible.

## **7.8 Conclusions**

The complexity sciences offer a new and exciting way of making sense of social systems and they can help inform decision-making, including in the realm of public policy. A number of sociologists and political philosophers have reached conclusions similar to those expressed here (e.g. subsidiarity was mentioned above). The value I hope this essay adds is to present a view from cutting-edge science.

This new field of science indicates that in fluid, complex and idiosyncratic social systems, it is essential to test more frequently than we do the preferences of the electorate and how they might react to different policies. Moreover, we need processes that allow for members of the public to drill deeper in to topics, allowing them to articulate informed and representative views about public policy. Sciencewise's public dialogue programmes are a good example of this.

Finally, the stunning revolution underway in ICT is a powerful source of technology that could help make our public-policy formation more transparent and representative of public views. We have the technology to make our democracy even healthier, so we should use it.

## 8 Overcoming disengagement: The promise and challenge of public dialogue

Tim Hughes and Diane Warburton

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### 8.1 Introduction

For at least the last decade, politicians, policy makers and commentators have been concerned with the democratic deficit that has grown in our public and political organisations as the result of the decline of traditional forms of democratic participation. This deficit matters from a normative point of view (if we believe in the principles of democracy, then we should not be content if/when our public institutions fall short of them), but also from a functional perspective (if citizens question the legitimacy of Government, then it will not be able to govern effectively).

The last decade has seen the situation worsen yet further for traditional forms of democracy. However, it has also seen a large amount of research into the causes of this democratic decline, as well as the development of democratic innovations such as public dialogues and research into their effects.

In this essay, the nature of public and political disengagement in the UK, and the potential of these democratic innovations to tackle disengagement will be explored. Do they offer a solution to the 'democratic malaise' or will they too suffer from disengagement?

### 8.2 The democratic deficit

The decline of traditional forms of democratic participation (e.g. voting and political party membership) in recent decades has been the focus of a great deal of political, policy, media and academic attention. Such interest and concern has certainly not been unwarranted as declining political participation began to, among other things, call into question the legitimacy of public institutions. The situation certainly has not improved much lately and, in some respects, looks to be getting yet worse.

The new millennium saw a significant drop in voter turnout, which had bounced around the 75% mark in general elections from 1970 to 1997, but dropped to below 60% in 2001 – its lowest level since the 1920s<sup>89</sup>.

Preceding the decline in voting, from the 1980s onwards, political parties in the UK experienced a mass exodus of their membership, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While just over 1.6 million people had been members of one of the three main political parties in the early 1980s, by 2008 this had dropped to only just over 400,000<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> NCVO (2011) Participation: trends, facts and figures. London: NCVO

<sup>90</sup> NCVO (2011) Participation: trends, facts and figures. London: NCVO

Though significant in themselves, the decline of these aspects of political engagement suggested the presence of something much deeper and even more troublesome. The Power Inquiry, an independent commission into Britain's democracy, which reported in 2006, identified 'a democratic malaise that has spread far beyond some disappointing turnouts, and which is a cause of grave concern'. The commission reported that:

'Most worryingly, there is now a well-ingrained popular view across the country that our political institutions and their politicians are failing, untrustworthy, and disconnected from the great mass of the British people. This last point cannot be stressed too strongly. We have been struck by just how wide and deep is the contempt felt for formal politics in Britain.'<sup>91</sup>

The 2010 General Election saw a partial recovery in voter turnout to 65%, but this did little to reverse the downward trend in voting from the previous two decades, and the decline in political party membership is only just beginning to level off (some might say bottom out).

Other indicators of democratic participation suggest that disengagement is as live an issue now as it ever has been, particularly in the last year. Since 2004, the Hansard Society has conducted a yearly 'audit of political engagement', tracking a number of indicators of citizen engagement with democratic institutions in the UK. The latest audit, conducted in late 2011 and published in 2012, found that almost all of these indicators were at their lowest levels since the audit was established, including<sup>92</sup>: interest in politics<sup>93</sup>, propensity to vote<sup>94</sup> and satisfaction with the system of governing<sup>95</sup>.

The report summed up people's feelings towards politics as:

'Disgruntled, disillusioned and disengaged.'<sup>96</sup>

### 8.3 Apathy or disengagement?

The distinction between apathy and disengagement is an important one. The suggestion that citizens are apathetic lays the blame solely at their feet and implies that they're disinterested, unmotivated, and/or unenthusiastic. However, evidence suggests that, while many citizens are certainly disengaged from political and public institutions, they are not apathetic.

Democracy, at its most fundamental level, is not a set of institutions or governance structures (though, in practice, these are important), but the active participation of citizens in public life. Public participation, which describes any form of participation with a democratic nature, comes in a range of different forms, with different qualities and relationships between citizen and state inherent in each. Some forms of democratic participation are driven or controlled by government, while others emerge from the activity of civil society. Both are equally necessary in a modern democracy to ensure that Government is accountable, responsive and makes good decisions. The evidence suggests that the former has suffered considerably more from disengagement than the latter and that this is where the problem lies.

Indeed, grassroots political activity has thrived at the same time as formal politics has declined in the UK and beyond. The Global Civil Society Programme at the LSE, which tracks what it calls 'Subterranean Politics', reports that:

'The whole of the past decade has been a decade of large-scale social mobilization worldwide ... The anti-Iraq war protests in 2003 brought some 11 million people to the streets; the social forums, the main focal point of the alter-globalization movement, have spread worldwide and especially in Europe since 2001, regularly mobilizing hundreds of thousands of participants around issues of social and economic justice, labour rights, environmental sustainability, and participatory democracy; environmental campaigns like the Climate Change Action camps in the UK, Belgium,

<sup>91</sup> The Power Inquiry (2006) *Power to the People: The report of Power: An independent inquiry into Britain's democracy*. York: The Power Inquiry

<sup>92</sup> Hansard Society (2012) *Audit of Political Engagement 9: The 2012 Report: Part One*. London: Hansard Society

<sup>93</sup> Declined from 58% very or fairly interested in politics in 2011, to 42%

<sup>94</sup> Declined from 58% absolutely certain to vote in an immediate General Election in 2011, to 48%

<sup>95</sup> Declined from 31% believing the present system of governing works well in 2011, to 24%

<sup>96</sup> Hansard Society (2012) *Audit of Political Engagement 9: The 2012 Report: Part One*. London: Hansard Society

France, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere took place during this period, not to mention a blossoming of all sorts of online activism and forms of political consumerism<sup>97</sup>.

In the UK, the migration of politics away from political parties towards single-issue groups has been apparent since at least the early 1990s<sup>98</sup>. Political activity through campaign and pressure groups, such as consumer boycotts and petitions, continues to be strong (e.g. UK Uncut, Occupy), while new forms of political activism have emerged. A notable example is the recent rise of online campaigning organisations and networks, such as 38 Degrees, which boasts a membership of over one million people.

Beyond politics, it is also the case that other forms of participation have not experienced the same decline as formal political participation. Levels of giving and volunteering have remained relatively stable over recent decades, while membership of some charitable organisations (e.g. The National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) has increased significantly<sup>99</sup>.

As the Power Inquiry, in its report on Britain's democracy, concluded:

'Participation in formal democracy, rather than participation itself, seems to provoke a unique distaste amongst British citizens.'<sup>100</sup>

## 8.4 Public participation over the past decade

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a range of new forms of public participation, linked to formal governance and decision-making mechanisms, and the proliferation of Government consultation. These forms of participatory or deliberative democracy have been variously prescribed as an antidote to public disengagement and rejected as unworkable for the same reasons.

Public participation flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, and re-emerged in the 2000s through a mixture of national Government commitment (partly to address the democratic deficit that was by then apparent) and because it was seen to improve public policy development, design and implementation.

However, in spite of the rhetoric then and since, from all sides of the political spectrum, most public engagement has continued to take place through unimaginative and unappealing means. Inaccessible consultation documents, stale public meetings and tightly controlled focus groups are the norm.

Many public institutions learnt to talk the talk of citizen engagement/empowerment/involvement/participation. However, while attempts were made to implement greater engagement through new legislation and guidance, the closed culture of the majority of public institutions has persisted. Consequently, Government consultation developed a reputation for being tokenistic, with a widespread feeling that decisions had already been made and citizens quickly became cynical of attempts to engage them. These negative perceptions and experiences only served to reinforce the existing ambivalence and lack of trust of political processes in general<sup>101</sup>.

As a result, on the one hand, many citizens became distrusting of the motivations behind public institutions seeking to engage them. On the other, many politicians and policy makers were doubtful that citizens had the motivation to engage. They argued that engagement is a waste of time and money because citizens are unable or unwilling to participate effectively due to lack of knowledge and understanding or because they don't care and/or are too busy to participate.

Advocates of public engagement have countered that if only we designed better ways for people to engage, then many citizens would be ready and willing to participate. While this is certainly true to an extent (as evidenced by numerous examples of public engagement in the UK and internationally), at times this conviction has bubbled over into an almost utopian vision of near full participation.

<sup>97</sup> Kaldor, M; & Selchow, S. (2012) *The 'Bubbling Up' of Subterranean Politics in Europe*. London: LSE [www.gcsknowledgebase.org/europe/wp-content/themes/SubPol2/SubterraneanPolitics.pdf](http://www.gcsknowledgebase.org/europe/wp-content/themes/SubPol2/SubterraneanPolitics.pdf)

<sup>98</sup> Beck, U. (1992) *The Risk Society*. Sage Publications.

<sup>99</sup> NCVO (2011) *Participation: trends, facts and figures*. London: NCVO

<sup>100</sup> The Power Inquiry (2006) *Power to the People: The report of Power: An independent inquiry into Britain's democracy*. York: The Power Inquiry

<sup>101</sup> Brodie, E; Hughes, T; Jochum, V; Miller, S; Ockenden, N; & Warburton, D. (2011) *Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?* London: NCVO, IVR and Involve



Much of the debate has become polarised between these two groups:

- those who feel institutions are the problem – if only we had better institutions, then we would have better citizens
- those who feel citizens are the problem – if only we had better citizens, then we would have better institutions<sup>102</sup>

As ever, the truth lies somewhere in the middle, though evidence suggests it is closer to the former, than the latter.

## 8.5 How and why do citizens engage?

It is necessary to see participation through the eyes of citizens to understand:

- why many have turned away from formal democracy, but continue to participate in other social and public activities
- why a sizeable minority say that they would be willing to engage in much more demanding forms of public participation

The Power Inquiry identified the following causes of citizen disengagement from traditional political participation:

- 'Many people feel that their views or interests are not taken into account when key policies are developed and key decisions are made even if they do get involved in formal democratic politics
- The main political parties are widely held in contempt. They are seen as offering no real choice to citizens, lacking in principle and acting as though a cross on a ballot paper can be taken as blanket assent to the full sweep of a manifesto's policies
- Our system of electing our parliamentary representatives is widely regarded as a positive obstacle to meaningful political involvement. For millions of citizens it seems, voting is simply regarded as a waste of time because the candidate or party you favour is either not standing or has no chance of victory while the candidate or party that does stand a chance of winning is positively disliked'<sup>103</sup>

Critical among the factors that affect citizens' participation are their perceptions of the impact that their participation has or might have. Unsurprisingly, people's motivations to participate are 'influenced by the extent to which they believe their actions will make a difference, where they will have the most impact and their perceptions of the relative worth of different activities'<sup>104</sup>.

However, the evidence suggests that voting has become almost entirely done through a sense of civic duty<sup>105</sup>. In some ways, this is fortunate because it means a sizeable proportion of the population continues to vote, even though they believe it makes little discernible difference. On the other hand, if this sense of civic duty is absent, voting has little to fall back on to make it an attractive proposition. It's not fun, by its nature it's solitary and the difference it makes, if any, is often intangible.

The Hansard Society's audits of political engagement reveal that 83% of the UK population feels that they have no influence at all or not very much influence over decision-making at a national level. According to a report on public trust in politicians:

'This perceived lack of influence is rooted primarily in the belief that politicians do not listen to what the public has to say and that the political system does not allow them to have influence and

<sup>102</sup> According to Ipsos MORI research, 43% of people say they would like to be very or fairly involved in decision-making in the country as a whole. The proportion who actually get involved in existing opportunities tends to be considerably lower, but it is unclear the extent to which this is due to the nature of those opportunities. Statistics from: Ipsos MORI (2010) *Do the public really want to join the government of Britain?* Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute briefing pack.

[www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/News/Do%20the%20public%20want%20to%20join%20government%20of%20Britain.PDF](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/News/Do%20the%20public%20want%20to%20join%20government%20of%20Britain.PDF)

<sup>103</sup> The Power Inquiry (2006) *Power to the People: The report of Power: An independent inquiry into Britain's democracy*. York: The Power Inquiry

<sup>104</sup> Brodie, E; Hughes, T; Jochum, V; Miller, S; Ockenden, N; & Warburton, D. (2011) *Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?* London: NCVO, IVR and Involve

<sup>105</sup> 76% of people believe it is their 'duty' to vote; NCVO (2011) *Participation: trends, facts and figures*. London: NCVO

therefore overlooks their views. In stark contrast, in 1963, 60% of the public reported feeling that they would be taken seriously if they raised an issue with the Government<sup>106</sup>.

Surveys of public opinion reveal a great deal of distrust, in general, of politicians and Government. Only 21% of the UK population say that they tend to trust the UK Government<sup>107</sup>, while only 15% think that MPs are 'in touch with what the public thinks is important'<sup>108</sup>.

Beyond this, citizens encounter a great number of barriers to engaging with Government – many of which are created or worsened by the actions or inaction of public institutions<sup>109</sup>. Dave Meslin, in an excellent TED Talk, 'The antidote to apathy', identifies a number of examples, including things as diverse as how engagement opportunities are publicised, the privatisation of public space, the common portrayal of leadership and the electoral system<sup>110</sup>.

With this in mind, what are the prospects for public participation? It is clear that people's poor perceptions and experiences of political and public institutions are having a negative effect on their engagement in formal public participation<sup>111</sup>. However, could new forms of public participation, which offer different opportunities for engagement, challenge these negative perceptions and experiences, and disengagement?

## 8.6 Prospects for public participation

The effective functioning of a modern democracy requires the participation of invited and uninvited publics. As outlined above, citizens are certainly not shy of turning up uninvited, but politicians and Government do not seem to be getting any better at extending attractive invitations to citizens.

However, there are some positive signs for public participation. Not least is that, in spite of everything described above, a sizeable proportion of people continue to believe in the importance of the public being actively engaged in decision-making. A smaller, but still sizeable, number say they are ready and willing to be involved themselves<sup>112</sup>.

Research by Ipsos MORI<sup>113</sup> suggests that people might prefer the idea of a more participative system of Government to a solely representative model. Given the choice between the following two options, respondents preferred the former to the latter by roughly two thirds to one third:

- 'Regular nationwide consultation between elections over key issues to explain the issues which the Government faces, setting out the choices, listening to the results and then ensuring policy reflects these views
- Regular elections every four to five years to set the broad direction of policy, ensuring election campaigns give people the opportunity to clearly express their view, listening to all of the choices available, but once they have voted, let the politicians get on with things until the next election when their performance can be judged'

If, with such negative perceptions of public institutions and experiences of public engagement, at least a third of the population continues to want to participate, it would seem that there are some firm foundations on which to build a better system of public engagement. That said, while research, such as Pathways through Participation<sup>114</sup>, has pointed towards the damaging effects of bad experiences of public participation, we do not know for sure if the contrary is true (i.e. that a good experience will

<sup>106</sup> Fox, R (2010) What's trust got to do with it? Public Trust in and Expectations of Politicians and Parliament. London: Hansard Society, Political Studies Association and Centre for Citizenship, Globalization and Governance.

<sup>107</sup> Figure from 2012, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/cf/showchart\\_line.cfm?keyID=2191&nationID=15.&startdate=2003.11&enddate=2012.05](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=2191&nationID=15.&startdate=2003.11&enddate=2012.05)

<sup>108</sup> Figure from 2010, in Grasso, M (2011) *Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2010*. London: Committee on Standards in Public Life

<sup>109</sup> Brodie, E; Hughes, T; Jochum, V; Miller, S; Ockenden, N; & Warburton, D. (2011) *Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?* London: NCVO, IVR and Involve

<sup>110</sup> Meslin, D. (2010) *The antidote to apathy*. [www.ted.com/talks/dave\\_meslin\\_the\\_antidote\\_to\\_apathy.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/dave_meslin_the_antidote_to_apathy.html)

<sup>111</sup> Brodie, E; Hughes, T; Jochum, V; Miller, S; Ockenden, N; & Warburton, D. (2011) *Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?* London: NCVO, IVR and Involve

<sup>112</sup> 33% said they would like to be very or fairly involved in national decision-making in 2012, though it should be noted that this represented a 9% point drop from the previous year. Hansard Society (2012) *Audit of Political Engagement 9: The 2012 Report: Part One*. London: Hansard Society

<sup>113</sup> Duffy, B; Vince, J; & Page, L. (2008) *Searching for the impact of empowerment*. London: Ipsos MORI

<sup>114</sup> Brodie, E; Hughes, T; Jochum, V; Miller, S; Ockenden, N; & Warburton, D. (2011) *Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?* London: NCVO, IVR and Involve



necessarily lead to more involvement). However, there are a number of reasons to think that it might. We know, for example, that public participants who have had a good experience say they would be **more** willing to participate in future as a result<sup>115</sup>.

There is also some evidence to suggest that it is those who do not participate in formal party politics that are most interested in forms of deliberative democracy, as it represents a different way of doing things. Recent research in the US into 'Who wants to deliberate – and why?' found:

'1) that willingness to deliberate in the US is much more widespread than expected; and 2) that it is precisely people who are less likely to participate in traditional partisan politics who are most interested in deliberative participation. They are attracted to such participation as a partial alternative to "politics as usual."<sup>116</sup>

This is important, not only because it would suggest that citizens see forms of deliberative democracy (such as the public dialogues sponsored by Sciencewise) as a positive opportunity for public participation, but perhaps more importantly, because it allays the fear that public participation simply provides yet another platform for those who are already able to get their voices heard through traditional political participation<sup>117</sup>.

It is not necessarily the case that the demand for deliberation in the US holds true for the UK. However, the available evidence from evaluations of public dialogues, as well as anecdotal evidence, suggests that public dialogue provides participants with a different type of experience to that of traditional political engagement, which they value and want to repeat (see below).

New forms of formal public participation, such as public dialogue, perhaps then offer an opportunity to combat disengagement by presenting new opportunities for citizens to participate – deepening democracy and increasing the legitimacy of public institutions, at the same time as improving policy-making.

## 8.7 Engagement with policy involving science and technology

Science and technology used to be seen as outside politics, but it has long been recognised that these issues cannot remain outside democratic processes. New developments in science and technology affect people's lives in very real ways, bringing opportunities alongside new risks and social and ethical questions. Stakeholder dialogue has become common (if not always optimal) in addressing issues of risk, but the involvement of the public in dialogue has been much more recent.

In policy involving science and technology, there is evidence that a significant proportion of the public can see the benefit of the public being involved in decision-making and want to be involved themselves<sup>118</sup>:

- 73% of the public agreed that Government should act in accordance with public concerns about science and technology, while two-thirds (65%) also agreed that they would like scientists to spend more time than they do discussing with the general public the social and ethical implications of their research
- over a third (35%) agreed that, for them, it is important to be involved in decisions about science and technology

This shows a significant level of personal enthusiasm for public participation in science and technology from a significant proportion of the population.

Evaluations of public dialogue projects<sup>119</sup> involving science and technology issues corroborate the findings of the US research mentioned previously. They suggest that participants in public dialogues enjoy and value the deliberative process, and that they have very high levels of enthusiasm for more

<sup>115</sup> Warburton, D. (2011) *Evaluation of Sciencewise-ERC*. Harwell: Sciencewise [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/)

<sup>116</sup> Neblo, M; Esterling, K; Kennedy, R; Lazer, D; & Sokhey, A. (2009) 'Who Wants to Deliberate – and Why?'. *Faculty Research Working Paper Series*; John F. Kennedy School of Government.

<sup>117</sup> In practice, public dialogues typically ensure that this does not happen anyway through their sampling methodologies.

<sup>118</sup> Ipsos MORI (2011) *Public Attitudes to Science 2011*. Prepared for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. London: Ipsos MORI [www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/sri-pas-2011-summary-report.pdf](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/sri-pas-2011-summary-report.pdf)

<sup>119</sup> Warburton, D. (2013) *Sciencewise evaluation 2012*. Harwell: Sciencewise [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/)

involvement. Typically, over 90% of participants in dialogue projects say they are more likely to get involved in future as a result of their experience. Similar, if not greater, percentages of participants say that involving the public in these sorts of policy decisions is important.

Just as important is that policy makers increasingly value this input. Evidence shows that they are impressed by the maturity and high standard of public discussions and debate on policy issues involving science and technology, and the public's ability to understand and engage enthusiastically with even highly complex technical scientific issues. They found that participants came without expected preconceptions or strong views 'for' or 'against' a specific technology, and that they exhibited a nuanced, balanced and sophisticated response to scientific and technological developments<sup>120</sup>.

Concerns that the public are unwilling or unable to participate fully in discussions on policy involving science and technology can now be put to rest as a result of this experience and evidence. As one policy maker said:

"I remember the first thing that struck me was that it taught us to trust them to understand very complex issues and, in that structured environment, to make sensible and often constructive comments."<sup>121</sup>

Even such relatively faint praise illustrates the potential for a growing relationship of trust. The increasing body of evidence that these public dialogue initiatives also have real influence on policy-making can be used to build on those small foundations of trust to reassure public participants that their input has made a difference. We can only hope that this evidence will further increase public willingness to engage with these and other similarly carefully designed and delivered opportunities to participate in science and technology issues, and more widely. It may also encourage others seeking to develop public participation initiatives to consider and build on the lessons from this very specific experience to develop the field further in the coming years.

## 8.8 Conclusions

The principal driver for public dialogue will always be to inform policy-making and improve decisions, and so it should be if citizens are to be able to trust that their engagement will make a difference.

New forms of public participation (such as public dialogue) do appear to offer the potential to begin to combat public disengagement and grow a relationship of trust. As Sciencewise and other dialogue practitioners commission, design, facilitate, and respond to public dialogues, we should be mindful of this opportunity, and do so with the interests, needs and desires of citizens in mind, as well as recognising the value of dialogue in strengthening the democratic accountability (and effective performance) of our public institutions.

<sup>120</sup> Warburton, D. (2013) Sciencewise evaluation 2012. Harwell: Sciencewise [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/)

<sup>121</sup> Warburton, D. (2013) Sciencewise evaluation 2012. Harwell: Sciencewise [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/sciencewise-erc-evaluation/)