

A new school of political thought is taking shape at the University of British Columbia's Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions

Concluding Remarks:

"When Citizens Decide: The challenges of large-scale public engagement"

Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions

Liu Centre for Global Issues

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It's a real treat to be here. This has been a great two days and I think everyone here feels, as I certainly do, a real debt of gratitude to the organizers, to Amy, Fred, Mark, Hilary and Ken not only for their scholarship but also for just going to the time and expense of putting everyone in the same room and welcoming us so graciously.

It's funny, because in a typically Canadian fashion we tend to think that everything that's really important, that's really exciting is probably happening elsewhere: In Denmark, or the UK or Brazil.

And so part of what is so special about a meeting like this is that we're all working, in various ways to understand, and refine and build upon a Made-in-Canada precedent that started here in our own backyard. If we can start to see the contours of a Vancouver School taking shape, I think it's because it's becoming possible to talk seriously about a Canadian approach to democratic innovation — and know that this is a story worth telling.

Now Amy asked if I would talk about my sense of this story and about what I think the future of public engagement might look like.

And at first I was really excited about this opportunity and then she explained that I'd be on a panel with Gordon Gibson and that I'd be the last person to speak to all of you and I started to feel very intimidated. But then I remembered that Jonathan Rose was going to be in audience and that in addition to Jonathan having become a very good friend, he also supervised my MA thesis and so I realized that if I explained this connection that no matter what I said, no matter how outrageous, you wouldn't blame me, you'd blame him. Which I encourage you to do.

I want to say that I feel very good about this conference because it really underscores what an interesting time it is to be thinking about democracy, and critically for our discipline, to be thinking as political scientists about the importance of democratic innovation to the future of responsible government.

I think one thing we can all be grateful for has been the chance to really roll up our sleeves, and get under the hood. Gordon, I'm sure, feels grateful for having been asked

to write his original report. As we heard yesterday, George and Jack and Jacobine clearly feel grateful for the opportunity to have served as chairs. Jonathan and Ken are grateful to have had the chance, as they describe it, to learn as much as teach. The members feel grateful for having been offered the chance to serve. And I feel grateful because when I proposed a parallel Students' Assembly in Ontario, George and the Minister said yes.

This is all so uncommon, this chance to create something new and engage not only our political expertise, but our political imagination as well. And so, in this way, I think it's fair to say that citizens' assemblies aren't only good for politics, they're probably good for political scientists too.

But more than this -- and without being too valedictory -- I think the work that is being done and has been captured in this first book is just so terrifically important. We are in a necessarily tentative and time-consuming way, slowly making sense of a method for securing the legitimacy of a new form of democratic participation.

This is no small thing. And there are many people here far better qualified to say this, but my hunch is that this really is as good as it gets.

We are in the midst of a very special opportunity and we have seen, through this rip in time, something that suggests that a more expansive and appreciative politics is possible.

Stuck between two paradigms -- a paradigm of classical representation and an emergent paradigm of reciprocity and recognition -- we are building a bridge towards somewhere that more traditional efforts at reform simply can't go.

Yesterday hearing George and Jack speak about their work -- about leading without directing -- I was struck by the extent to which they both embodied such a thoroughly modern and uncommon sense of leadership and could bring such enormous emotional intelligence to bear on their work.

It was an instance that reminded me of so many other instances during the assembly in Ontario when we watched as members and staff intuitively found their way to new and un-described roles and in the process came alive to the value of their contribution and voice.

And this is where my own interest really steps in because to me citizens' assemblies are not only valuable as effective, complementary mechanisms for reaching high levels of consensus about difficult policy choices, but because they appear to pay an enormous democratic dividend and provide us with a new platform for exercising a more active form of collaborative citizenship. By taking the time and care to move, in Yankleovich's stirring phrase, from public opinion to a richer kind of public judgment they demonstrate the possibility of a rare esteem, a sense of communal liberty, that inspires and soothes the body politic.

To me a democratic politics must be an aspirational politics. And so, when I think about the future of public engagement, I think about a politics that takes as its first purpose the democratic fitness and readiness of all people to play the fullest possible role as agents and in government. I think to the invocation of a high-energy politics, a politics that requires a determined program of democratic experimentation and sustained institutional

reform — a politics that makes public learning synonymous with public leadership and sees innovation and iteration as inextricably linked and healthy.

And truthfully, I think the times require nothing less. This is what we need from political scientists and theorists now. We need to be here and engaged in the development and evaluation of a new set of ideas and mechanisms for generating public legitimacy and accord.

And so... breaking every rule, let me tell you what I want.

I want a future where all citizens can expect at least once in their lives to be invited to the table – to win the civic lottery, step into the Wosk Centre and feel lucky-- or to know someone among their friends or in their family who has.

To me, that's how we bring this to scale. And so we need to figure out what all this means for municipalities and nations, for public agencies and international boundaries. As we construct these mini-publics, it may also be possible to construct macropublics that transcend and cut across our formal political divides.

I want to obliterate the harmful distinction between public service provision and democratic participation, and so to see every experience of government as a critical moment in the evolving relationship between a citizen and their state.

And so I want public sector management to be reinvented again – where ease, efficacy and personability and the production of democratic value animate our designs.

I want policy to be made legible and government to be made navigable as the predicate of a democratic society. But to do this we need to learn as a matter of both habit and heart how to represent and illustrate and write clearly about the complexity of complex issues. And this, this is more than editorial advice – it's a practice of art that has been so sorely stripped from the public realm we are meant to share.

Over the past two days, we have heard about how to do things better next time. We are all still learning about the parameters and possibilities of citizens assemblies and large scale public engagement: how to work with the media, how to afford stature to the members, how to frame a mandate, how to improve the relationship with legislators, how to think about adult learning and the cultivation of expertise, how leadership matters, how impartiality and due process are always paramount.

But the challenge now, especially for the Canadians in the room who have had this first hand experience, is how we're to sustain the momentum and the energy as the Assemblies in Ontario and BC begin to fade from view.

I would hate to think that any of this ends here or that we all just move on to different things. Having found ourselves lucky, I think we need to make more luck. We need to continue to demonstrate the utility, and applicability of this model and be full-throated about its value and return. We need to be conscientious and creative about how we work to extend this platform into new policy areas and public spaces. We need to encourage visionary leaders in governments and public agencies to be leaders by letting go – to understand that there's a second axis of accountability that travels out, not only up or down and that's it's within this three-dimensional politics that the future of responsible government will be found.

When asked, members of Ontario's Citizens' Assembly often talked about participating because they wanted to "make history." I think this phrase was often misunderstood by the Assembly's critics to mean that a vote for electoral change was inevitable and predetermined. That the whole thing was, in a sense, gamed against the status quo.

But the most palpable sense of history was never about burying SMP. The history being made was the process itself. It was the constitution of an assembly without barrier to creed or colour or age, to money or politics, to learning or professional station. It was at a time when the chasm between people and politics looms large, an imaginative and historically-significant gesture of reconciliation.

And I think in this way, we should get comfortable with the idea of making history — to paraphrase Stewart Brand, we're now already doing it, so we might as well be good at it.

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