

Making Community Engagement Responsible

Johns G T*

Institute of Public Affairs, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Abstract

The noble task of community engagement has been pressed into service on behalf of many causes — economic development, poverty alleviation, nature conservation, town planning, budget planning, and many more. It carries the weight of great expectations, the sense that, if only the community was involved in the decision all would be well. In truth, community engagement is one technique in the decision-making arsenal. Indeed, as people have demanded, and as governments in liberal democracies have sought to provide their constituents the opportunity to have a say, the limitations of community engagement have become all too apparent. Moreover, where government stimulates engagement, the pitfalls are even greater.

The appeal of community engagement lies in participatory democracy. A democracy of active citizens is held to be superior to a democracy of politically apathetic citizens. On close reflection, it may not be so. A consensus of active citizens sets a premium on a saleable outcome. It does not ensure a least cost or public interest outcome. The expanding scope and purpose of government intervention is also such that governments are under pressure to listen ever more intently to the voice of 'civil society.' The consequence is that governments in the liberal democracies are more competent, better informed and more engaged in the community, but they are apparently less trusted.

Participatory democracy and its techniques, such as community engagement, make governing and policy-making more open, but arguably less effective for the unorganised public. It privileges particular forms of political participation, and relies on a policy class, which is no more 'representative' than the representative model. In particular, engagement with non-government organisations may confuse the distinction between representation and public recognition as criteria for selection, it may privilege some values in preference to others, and value expertise in the citizens, but devalue it among policy makers. Australian data is used to explore these weaknesses, in particular, unequal participation and trust in governance institutions. Policy-makers need to be aware of the pitfalls in the participatory model. Engagement needs its antidotes — transparency in the government-NGO relationship, accountability for the use of public funds, and a clear understanding of the purpose of the engagement.

Problems with community engagement

The prospectus for the *International Conference on Engaging Communities* states that the primary rationale for engaging communities is that people expect 'to have a say' in government and in organisations that 'affect their interests'. These phrases are pregnant with assumptions about the role of government (and business and community organisations), and the extent to which government should 'encourage' participation. Engagement assumes an enthusiasm on the part of many to be involved in politics. It assumes that the 'proper' course is for people to be self-governing in a direct sense, and eschews the alternative course, which is for people to elect representatives to govern on their behalf, leaving the citizen free to pursue other matters.

Community engagement involves collective decisions, and collective decisions require answers to basic questions such as, who is to decide? In other words, community engagement is a political issue that involves the difficult task of *representation*. Moreover, whole classes of decisions about public issues are made collectively, but at a scale vastly removed from the intended recipient. The reasons for this are to ensure the *objective* and *equitable* application of agreed rules and programs. Community engagement also implies that the community is inherently better placed to decide what is good. It confounds participation with *knowledge*. While participation may increase knowledge of events, it usually results in having to choose between options. The issues in community engagement are whether the options are any different to those that officials have to choose, and whether the sense of *ownership*, which engagement is meant to enhance, makes the options more likely to be successful.

Where activism is chosen, the enthusiasm for engagement does not solve fundamental problems of governance, such as defining the general interest or as Sunstein (2002, introduction) conceives, the *raison d'être* of the 'cost/benefit' state, the allocation of benefits and costs of any decision or program. By contrast, the bureaucratic state brings certainty, expertise, low decision-making costs and powerful enforcement to issues of governance. Even if the community is engaged in establishing norms and standards, these matters are never made by a continuous application of community engagement. As interesting is the propensity for individuals and communities to not be involved; to be relieved of the costs of decision-making so that they may proceed with their lives. Neither is it clear just how much of a say is sufficient, and how remote one's interest may be before they are reasonably excluded from the debate. There are classes of issue, moreover, where community engagement does not help. For example, location of hazard decisions raise the cost of decision but provide no hope of a resolution as each group will opt for a not-in-my-back-yard solution. Engagement will not help to resolve allocation problems, where funds are to be made available to some groups and not others. Neither does engagement assist in decisions about transfer payments to individuals: these need to be made collectively, and

administered by those who are specifically not recipients of the benefit. Engagement can be well managed, and suggestions are made in this regard, but in many respects, it is not feasible to be self-governing, other than through elected representatives. Enthusiasm for self-government is soon stifled in the straightjacket of responsibility and consequence. It may be true that there are concerns about 'low levels of knowledge' and 'poor relations with communities', but it does not follow that these cause 'reduce[d] trust in public and private institutions'. Nor does it follow that the alleged lack of trust 'impedes effective decision-making and the achievement of social and economic development and environmental sustainability outcomes'.

Engaging communities does not of itself ensure better decision-making. As a process, it can suffer problems of inequality, legitimacy, corruption and co-option. In the film, 'The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer' (1970), English comedian Peter Cook starred as the political anti-hero, a Prime Minister intent on holding power by any means. His vehicle was participatory democracy! He had Her Majesty's Post deliver to voters, daily, ballots for them to decide on all manner of problems. There were scenes of working-class semi-detached bungalows and middle-class rural cottages being inundated by posties. In the face of the assault, the masses gave up and pleaded to have the Prime Minister do the job he was paid to do — make decisions. Cook gleefully acceded to their demands and the daily ballots ceased. While examples of direct democracy, such as citizen initiated referenda can enhance good government, or at least constrain bad government, it nevertheless was a delightful illustration that there are real limits to the extent to which people can take, or want, the responsibility of making collective decisions. This is not to argue that governance is best left to government and the civil service, or indeed to a corporatist model of collective interests — big business and trade unions — to rule in conjunction with government. However, there is a need to ensure that the enthusiasm for engagement is not merely an opportunity to privilege some interests at the expense of others, or indeed for government-funded activism.

The role of government in stimulating engagement is particularly problematic. For example, it is sometimes claimed that government action can help build social capital. In this regard the conclusion reached by the Australian Productivity Commission in a recent paper was pessimistic, 'Whereas devising policies to create new social capital generally is problematic, governments should at least consider the scope for modifying policies that damage social capital' (Productivity Commission 2003, p. 68). Essentially, the Commission concluded that government can destroy social capital by substituting government provision for individual and group initiative, but government does not build it. There are echoes of this cautionary tale in Fukuyama's (2004, p. 55) discussion of state-building in less developed countries, where he observes that foreign agencies under the aegis of 'capacity-building', often substitute for the capacity of government

when they by-pass government and make the primary task the delivery of services. The same dilemma occurs in Aboriginal communities in Australia, where there is a conflict between the desire to deliver services directly for best immediate effect, and the need to resist, so as to not undermine the capacity of the local groups to provide for themselves, albeit in the first instance, inadequately.

Participation and inequality

A fundamental class of problem with community engagement is that which stems from democratic participation. The way that policy communities are formed for example, can make a big difference to policy formulation. In the absence of a sure direction, sitting everyone around the table becomes political management, not policy formulation. The consensus method becomes even less likely to produce good policy when the participants represent values rather than constituents. This occurs in the newer lobbies, the NGOs. For example, the welfare lobby claims to give a voice to the poor and disadvantaged, the environment lobby to the environment, the human rights lobby to refugees and others, the indigenous lobby to Aborigines and so on.

In reality, the welfare lobby survives in the policy marketplace by exaggerating the extent of poverty, often misrepresenting its causes and boosting an egalitarian ideology, each of which may be of no help to the poor. The environment lobby survives in the policy marketplace by exaggerating the extent of environmental degradation but, for example, rejecting scientific solutions such as Genetically Modified crops to solve dependence on chemical sprays and water in agriculture. The human rights lobby, in the case of refugees, seeks to impose a legal method and a human rights ideology that weakens the rights of citizens in preference to the rights of non-citizens. The indigenous lobby seeks the collectivisation of Aboriginal life that is antithetical to the welfare of Aborigines. Each of these groups is not representative, rather they are a policy community. They approach government with a suite of pre-determined solutions to the things they decide are problems. Collectively, NGOs do not necessarily represent public opinion, or good policy.

Why then does so much debate revolve around these voices? The answer lies in the appeal of participatory democracy. A democracy of active citizens is held to be superior to a democracy of politically apathetic citizens. On close reflection, it may not be so. A consensus of activists is a process-oriented policy, it sets a premium on a saleable outcome. It does not ensure a least cost or public interest outcome. It also lends itself to interventionist outcomes because it promises to further involve the participants. Participants begin to own the policy and want to implement it, monitor it and meet again, in endless iterations. The consensus method is very different to the

inquiry method for example, which allows for voice, but then allows for reflection and analysis, and an opportunity to study the situation without the filter of the groups of policy apparatchiks.

While advocacy democracy values knowledge and expertise in the citizenry, it devalues those same characteristics among policy makers (Dalton et al. 2004, p. 136). Participation by policy groups with a set of values, each gaining formal access to the policy apparatus is increasingly becoming the norm. It is driving up the price of governing and the likelihood of sub-optimal solutions. It is also increasing the tendency for government intervention where none is warranted. Advocacy democracy deepens and extends access to political decisions, but it lacks representative democracy's 'one person, one vote'. In Australia, there is equality in access to the vote, but when it comes to participation through other more direct forms of participation, joining NGOs for example, the unorganised are left out.

In fact, participatory democracy gives two votes to the 'progressives'. The environment lobby could consist of those who believe in sustained development based on technological innovation as the best means to preserve the environment. It does not. Instead, it consists of the sustainable development lobby that assumes limits to physical resources, and prefers abstinence to innovation. The welfare lobby believes in neither liberal nor meritocratic concepts of fairness: only an egalitarian version. It believes that equality is a more important objective than the living standards of the poor, a view not shared by most Australians. Indeed, 'only 1 in 20 Australians thinks fairness is *solely* to do with achieving more equal outcomes' (Saunders 2004, p. 9). The human rights lobby prefers to use 'international norms' to achieve ends that they are unable to achieve by a combination of a national majority tempered by the equitable application of the national law, including in countries with the most liberal common law traditions. The indigenous policy community is dominated by those who believe in a collectivist idealisation of a long gone Aboriginal culture, which undermines matters such as private property, contract, obligations to seek work and to attend school. The agenda has condemned generations of Aboriginal children to live in a drug-induced stupor because they cannot gain the skills to live in the modern world.

By the very nature of their volunteering for the job, activists form an elite. This is as true of the local activist as the national politician. For example, 84 per cent of candidates for the 2001 Federal election had completed some form of post-secondary study¹ (ACS 2001), while only 44 per cent had done so in the population at large² (ASSA 2003). The politician, however, is largely constrained by means of a public election to seek a wide view of values and needs in the

¹ 'How many years of study have you completed since you left secondary school?'

² 'What is the highest level of education you have completed?'

community. The same is not true of non-elected activists, and yet social status inequality is present among a whole range of political activity, and a range of organisations.

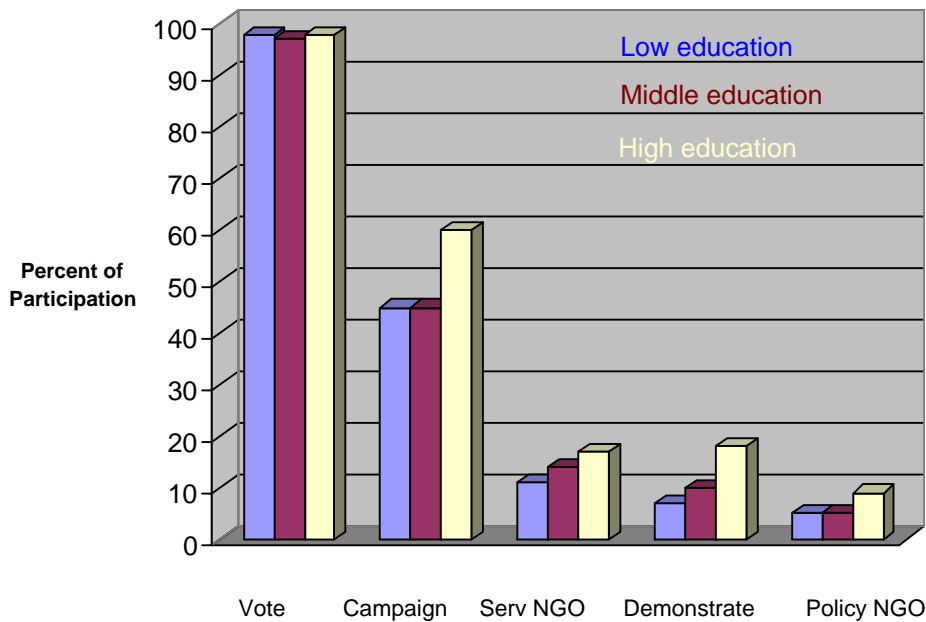
By way of illustration, the Figure, Education and Participation in Politics Australia 2003, is based on a sample of over 4000 adults derived from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes for 2003. It displays the percentage of those from different educational backgrounds — low, middle and high — who participate in different forms of political activity. The activities are arranged approximately in descending order of participation. Only in the most basic form of political participation — voting in an election — is there an equivalent rate of participation between people of differing educational backgrounds. To the question, 'did you vote in the Federal election 2001', the answer was 'yes' for between 97 per cent and 99 per cent of respondents in each category, which means that there is no statistically significant inequality between education categories.³

The category, *campaign activity*, consists of those people who were working with people of the same concern, or boycotted or bought a product as a form of political statement, or contacted a politician or government official. The data showed that such activity was overall less common than voting and highly unequal, ranging between 45 per cent of the least-educated population and 60 per cent of the most-educated population. The data also contained questions relating to membership of non-government organizations. These were divided into two classes, *service NGOs* and *policy NGOs*. Service NGOs consist of those people who joined a self-help/consumer health, special needs, neighbourhood or community-based group.

Participation was low for all and unequal, ranging between 11 per cent of the least educated and 17 per cent of the most educated. The *demonstration* category — protest, march or demonstration—showed very low levels of participation and high inequality in participation, ranging between seven per cent of the least educated to 18 per cent of the most educated. Policy NGOs consists of those people who were members of a political party, or a lobby group to change specific government policies, or a group working to improve the environment, or an environmental or aid organisation, or a group that promotes rights. These groups showed the lowest level of participation of all activities and a high degree of inequality in participation, ranging between five per cent of the least educated and nine per cent of the most educated.

³ In the Australian system of compulsory voting five per cent of the eligible voters fail to enrol, and a further five per cent fail to turnout on the day, which suggests that either the sample is slightly more 'active' than the norm, or some respondents are giving the answer expected of them.

Education and Participation in Politics Australia 2003



Dataset: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. Figure: Author.

Legend: Low education completed year 10 at high school or less, Middle education completed year 12 or trade qualification or apprenticeship, High education certificate, diploma, degree or postgraduate.

Figure 1. Education and participation in politics, Australia 2003

Overall, the Australian data show that, as the requirements of greater commitment on the part of the citizen increase, the overall level of participation declines, and the inequality in participation rises in favour of the more highly educated. These results place in doubt claims made by NGOs that they represent civil society and clearly show that advocacy or participatory democracy suffers from the problem of very unequal use. It also seems to suggest that increased public access to political activity places greater demands on citizens. Clearly, there are limits to the extent to which citizens can participate in ruling themselves. When these limits are reached, as they are in any activity more extensive than voting or seeking out the help of a politician or a local group, questions arise about the representative nature of those prepared to make the sacrifices required for higher order participation. A recent study of the internal democracy of a selection of advocacy NGOs, for example, found that 'in most [NGOs] policy is initiated by a small group that includes CEOs and some board members, including the chairperson' (Dalton and Lyons 2005, p. 38).

NGOs are policy communities, people who share a viewpoint. Whether their viewpoint should be granted privileges above others is an essential question for government and corporate managers who wish to engage with these communities.

Inequality and trust in institutions

The same body of data can be used to shed some light on these issues. The inequality in participation may result in different values and views being expressed, and being mistaken for the views of the majority, or of civil society, or the electorate, indeed whatever collective entity is called upon from time to time by any group involved in politics to buttress their views. This is particularly apposite on the question of confidence or trust in Australian institutions.

One of the stimulants to the interest in engaging communities is the apparent 'reduce[d] trust in public and private institutions'. There is evidence of a decline in the public trust and political support of democratic governments in three areas: 'disillusionment with politicians, with political parties, and with political institutions'. (Pharr et al. 2000, p. 13). However, the apparent erosion in popular confidence in government and the institutions of representative democracy may not be cause for concern. In the first instance, as Will (2004) has observed, constitutionalism and judicial review 'amount to institutionalised distrust.' A more educated and prosperous citizenry is bound to be a more discerning citizenry, and more likely to say so. It may also reflect the desire for more direct forms of participation in public life. In other words, NGO participation will make life harder for governments because of the constant articulation of dissatisfaction. That is a consequence of enhanced participation; the issue of whether it weakens those elements of democracy that allow for consensus is a different matter. Indeed in the face of a particularly boisterous and highly organised civil society, can the state possibly resist?

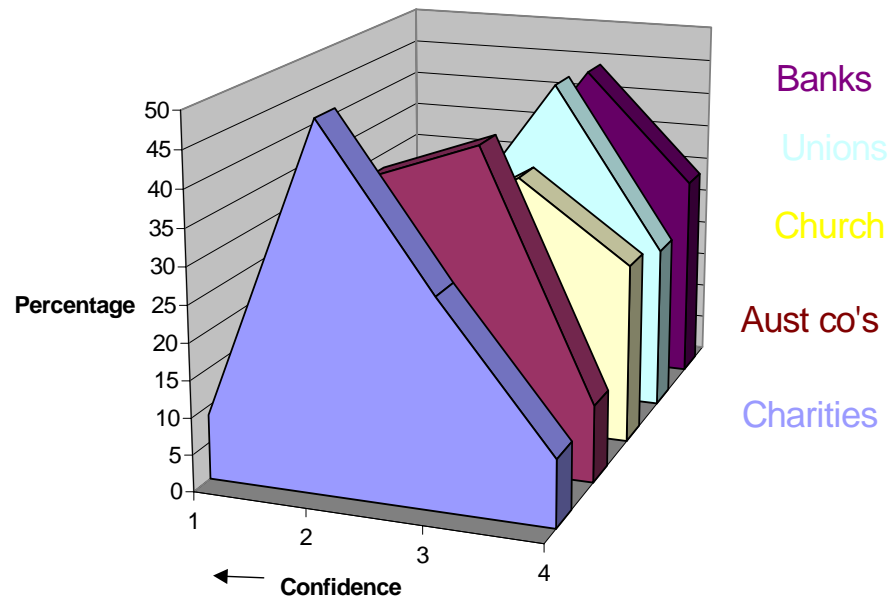
If the decline thesis is of concern, what are its causes? There are two major explanations for the decline-of-confidence thesis. The first concentrates on information and expectation. It is clear that voters have, over time, become better informed about their governments' performance. Voters expect more of government and their expectations are more divergent, consequently it becomes more difficult for government to 'identify any feasible set of policies that would satisfy its constituents' (Pharr et al. 2000, p. 20). The second relies on changes in the economy and in social attitudes. The information society has caused a 'creative destruction ... disrupt[ing] existing social patterns. This in turn creates anxiety and dissatisfaction in large parts of the public'. Changes in social and cultural attitudes have caused a 'change in the balance between the individual and the community', which has led to a long-term trend toward the individual, a trend which 'undercuts the authority of institutions' (Nye and Zelikow 1997, p. 271). At the same time, government is now seen as an arbiter of social relations, gender, race, family, and so on.

Expectations of government, once confined to safety and the administration of justice have risen to include 'prosperity and various norms of social stability' (Nye and Zelikow 1997, p. 272).

Into the climate of distrust born of high expectations and an increased level of awareness of the potential for government intervention, steps the problem of inequality of participation. It is worth speculating that loss of trust in institutions is a function, up to a point, of increased knowledge. Which is to argue that trust in institutions is to some extent a trust built on ignorance, on loyalty. The other is, that loss of trust is diminished when the institution does not deliver. That in turn is a function, however, of expectation of performance. When the state or for that matter, charities only deliver the basics, expectations are low. In these circumstances it is not difficult to score well among clients on trust. Where expectations are high, a loss of trust may occur because expectations are higher than an institution's ability to deliver. In the case of government this is a real problem, because the electorate will dismiss a government, in the case of civil society institutions it may be a problem if it leads to a loss of support, for example, empty church pews, or it may mean little at all if your clients do not vote or if there is no measure of performance. For example, many advocacy NGOs are paid to complain, so as long as they complain, usually about the government, they maintain support. Their job is to undermine trust in those institutions for which they compete as voices of the people.

In Figure 2, the data indicate that Australians are most confident about charities and major Australian companies. They are less confident about churches and trade unions, and least confident about banks and other financial institutions. These levels of confidence may be a reflection on the performance of these institutions, or on the level of information available about the performance of these institutions. For example, charities are meant to be altruistic, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, they should score well. The fact that there are no measures of 'corporate' performance for charities may well enhance the trust shown in them. The good score for Australian companies is somewhat surprising. A great deal is known about the performance of corporations, but perhaps a large dose of nationalism is implied in the question. A question about all companies, including 'foreign multinationals' would most likely score poorly [speculative. Where is your evidence? Yes, this is speculative!]. The decline in the authority of the church is a very long run phenomenon in the humanist West, but it has been intensified in recent decades by the appalling revelations of sexual misconduct among a small section of the clergy. This is a reflection of knowledge being rewarded with a decline in authority. The low record for banks and financial institutions may stem from the change to the way that these deliver services. They are less physically accessible, especially in small communities.

Australian Confidence in Civil Society 2003



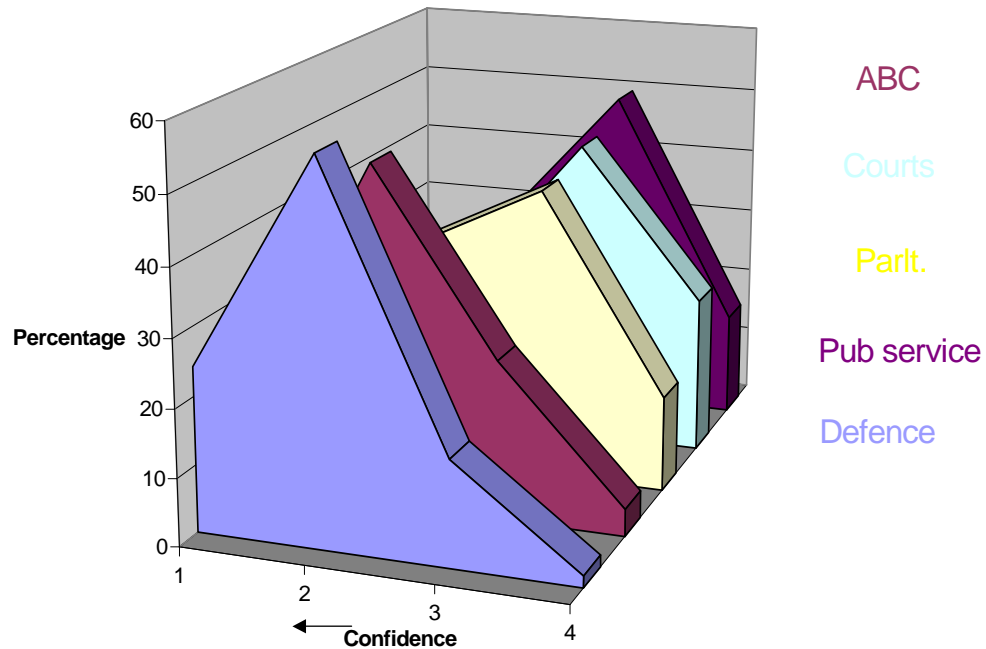
Dataset: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. Figure: Author.

Legend: Charities, Major Australian companies, Churches or religious institutions, Unions, Banks and financial institutions. Number 1 – A great deal of confidence, 2 – Quite a lot of confidence, 3 – Not very much confidence, 4 – No confidence at all.

Figure 2. Australian confidence in civil society, 2003

In Figure 3 the data indicate that Australians have most confidence in the defence forces and the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission. They have far less confidence in the Federal parliament, the legal system, and the public service. It is worth speculating that this result is, like that for civil society organisations, also to some extent a result of performance and information. For example, although there is from time to time information made available about the defence forces and some disquiet about their behaviour, bullying and bastardisation for example, little is available about their operations and to the extent that any is available they appear to perform well. Then again, no Australian is a direct client of their services! The ABC is a little surprising because its share of the audience for radio and television is quite small. Debates about its performance are confined to a small group of observers, so its customers are unlikely to constitute a large body of disappointed subscribers, especially as the service is free to air.

Australian Confidence in the State 2003



Dataset: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. Figure: Author.

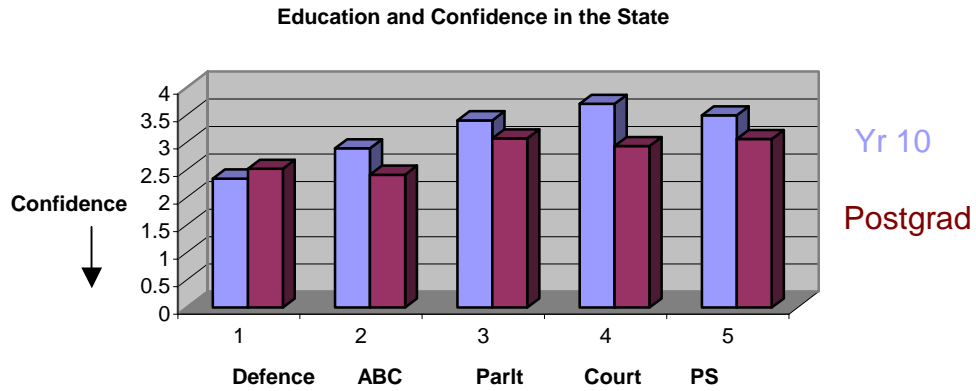
Legend: Defence forces, 2 ABC, 3 Federal parliament, 4 Courts and the legal system, 5 Public service.

Number 1 – A great deal of confidence, 2 – Quite a lot of confidence, 3 – Not very much confidence, 4 – No confidence at all.

Figure 3. Australian confidence in the State, 2003

The comparative lack of confidence in the Federal parliament and the other substantive institutions of the state, the courts and legal system and the public service, is well canvassed under the Nye et al. scenarios. The interesting aspect of these is that, unlike the first two institutions, the latter have a clear and considerable clientele, so there are expectations that may not be fulfilled. This may suggest that some knowledge and high expectations generate a loss of trust.

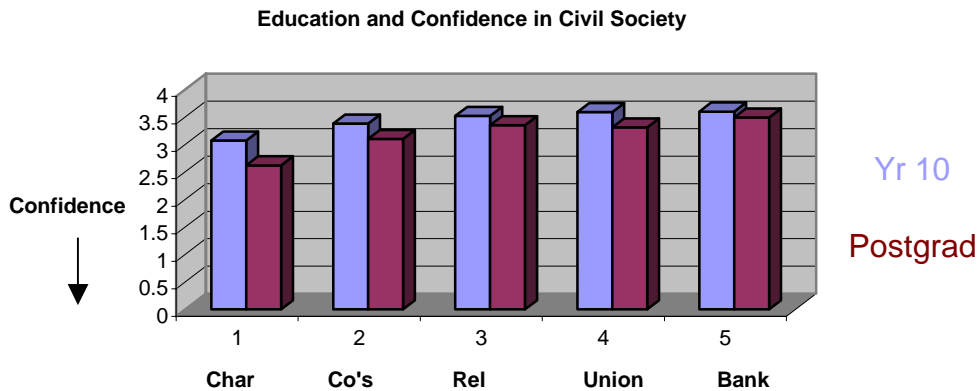
In this general climate of trust, the attitude of particular groups to state and civil institutions can be traced. Figure 4 displays median scores on the confidence questions, used in the previous figures, for low and high educational achievers. The results show that only in the most trusted institution, Defence, do those with a low level of educational attainment have a higher level of confidence than those with the highest level of education. Confidence in the ABC, parliament, the courts and the public service is much lower for the less well educated. The disparity is greatest for the courts and the legal service, which may well be more frequented by the less educated.



Dataset: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. Figure: Author.
 Legend: Did not complete high school to year ten, postgraduate degree or diploma. Number 1 – A great deal of confidence, 2 – Quite a lot of confidence, 3 – Not very much confidence, 4 – No confidence at all.

Figure 4. Education and confidence in the State

Figure 5 displays median scores, which indicate that those of lower educational attainment are less confident in institutions than those of higher attainment. The disparity is highest for charities, which presumably work for the poor, who are more likely to be of lower educational attainment.



Dataset: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. Figure: Author.
 Legend: Did not complete high school to year ten, postgraduate degree or diploma.
 Charities, major Australian companies, churches or religious institutions, unions, banks and financial institutions. Number 1 – A great deal of confidence, 2 – Quite a lot of confidence, 3 – Not very much confidence, 4 – No confidence at all.

Figure 5. Education and confidence in civil society

People of differing educational achievement in Australia have differing levels of trust in Australian institutions. It is paradoxical that those who appear to be most active (the most educated) are the most trusting, but also the most critical. The least trusting are the least engaged, yet the least critical. Lifting engagement may increase trust, but it may also create more criticism.

Trust and community engagement in institutions

Into the institutional authority gap has stepped NGOs not only as political actors, but also as governance institutions in their own right. As Furedi perceives, 'Widespread disenchantment with conventional institutions has created an opening for new, alternative forms of authority' (2002, p. 184). Indeed, he further suggests that mistrust is not confined to government and officialdom but extends towards other members of the public. Fear of risk and the over-specification of danger are raising levels of mistrust across the board, 'Safety has become the fundamental value of our times.' (Furedi 2002, p. 1). 'Encouraging people to fear, mistrust, complain and litigate is seen as a socially responsible act. Consequently, consumer advocates do not merely reflect the existing state of mistrust: they play an active role in educating people to believe the worst in most circumstances' (Furedi 2002, p. 185).

The danger in these trends is that it is simply not popular to believe in government. Certainly, the press covers politics in a highly intrusive and negative way, which reinforces the popular belief. In this context NGOs, in increasing numbers and in a more professional and organised manner, approach government. However, whether they are the solution to the desire for a more participative democracy, or the reflection of the problems that cause governments to fail in the eyes of the public, is highly contested. At the heart of the desire to democratise democracy as a means of restoring faith in the institutions of government is the desire by citizens to take a greater role in determining their future. That is an entirely laudable desire but it has some major conceptual problems. Civil society, for example, is as likely to oppose a democratic government as an authoritarian one. It is as likely to split 'into warring factions ... or degenerat[e] into a congeries of rent-seeking "special interests"' (Foley and Edwards 1996, p. 39). Those in the civil society 'utopia' camp who see civil society as a counterweight to the state must concede that it can be a counterweight to a good state as well as a bad one. Civil society and its activists may simply monopolise public resources, they may spend all their time battling one another for control, and they may polarize society. The missing variable in the civil society argument, and indeed the claim of NGOs to political legitimacy, is politics itself. Who is to play the important role of political compromise and restraint, accommodation and reconciliation in an orderly and peaceful way? Ultimately this is the role of the political parties or the parliamentary representatives and, of course, the most powerful of interests who hold sway in the electorate.

Most important are the institutions that govern the means by which settlements are reached, the important and hard-won rules of play, the determination of what are acceptable and what are not acceptable outcomes. 'A democratic civil society seems to require a democratic state, and a strong civil society seems to require a strong and responsive state. The strength and responsiveness of a democracy may depend upon the character of its civil society ... reinforcing both the democratic functioning and strength of the state. But such effects depend on the prior achievement of both democracy and a strong state' (Foley and Edwards 1996, p. 48). The strength and role of NGOs may give the appearance of an active democracy, indeed, it may be an active democracy, but it is primarily a sign of an active citizenship. The quality of the democracy will be measured by the ability to incorporate and resolve issues, not just voice them.

A more accurate picture of democracy is obtained by conceiving it to be not participative in the broad sense, but as a competition among elites. These matters are well canvassed in theoretical terms by Etsioni-Halevy (1993, p. 97), where she concentrates on the relative autonomy of élites in a democracy and distinguishes, for example, élite pluralism, 'which has to do with the numbers of elites' and elite autonomy, which has to do with 'the distribution of resources among them.' An important element of the relationship between elites and the public is that:

“...when the public is well informed and closely monitors elite actions, the chances that some of its members will join the elites are increased. In this manner the probability for the renewal of the elites grows, and the elites that are constantly rejuvenated from the public are inclined to represent its interests, or those of a sizable part within it” (Etsioni-Halevy 1993, p. 107).

Although Etsioni-Halevy had in mind NGOs as a counter to the 'elites', the fact that the most prominent NGOs have become part of the policy community elite does not invalidate the general proposition that elites should compete. Further, they should be relatively autonomous from the state, but not have such power that together they can use the public's resources to satisfy each main platform without regard to the costs to the public. In this regard, the only defence is to keep government–elite relations and corporation–elite relations (in pursuit of public policy) as transparent as possible.

The rise of social movements and NGOs in the West may be an opportunity to maintain a challenge to other elites and to the state, and fluidity in political competition. This scenario depends somewhat on the extent to which the movements and NGOs themselves are relatively open and/or autonomous. The largest and most influential of the NGOs may well have entered a consolidation phase where their mission is less important than their access to resources and bureaucrats. The absorption of protest and co-optation of the new groups, bringing them into the

camp is well underway, the question is, have the right ones been absorbed? Have those that have been absorbed been captured by one ideology?

If some of the background to the desire for participation is an apparent loss of trust in institutions, part of the blame rests not in the institutions but in the freedom with which knowledge is shared and the ease of its spread, sometimes to the detriment of the truth. This was not a problem, other than for the immediate individuals concerned in less information rich societies, it is now in information rich and electorally responsive societies, in other words, it is a problem of liberal democracy.

Making community engagement responsible

Community engagement sits in a camp that favours a large degree of state intervention, where government is a willing participant in the game of state sponsored activism and regulation. Motivations for government intervention have traditionally been the supply of public goods and the prevention or amelioration of the consequences of market failure. They have also sought to achieve equality of opportunity and at times equality in outcomes, but as the latter has proved impossible, attention has shifted to risk or harm minimisation. It is most comfortable with doomsday scenarios typified by the likes of Beck (1990). It suffers regulatory problems, and from unequal access which results in skewed values. These are not easily remedied without invoking problems of diminished freedoms. One remedy is to insist on a cost/benefit approach to the analysis of public policy (Sunstein 2002), which to some extent re-weights the tendency noted by Dalton et al. (2004, p. 136) to devalue expertise among policy-makers. Another, which is briefly explored here, is to ensure that there are transparent relations between those governments that encourage community participation, and the groups encouraged. Three examples of transparency are explored, although in two of the examples problems of engagement are so severe that they are not redeemable by transparency alone.

John Ruggie, assistant secretary general for strategic planning UN from 1997 to 2001, has been reported as observing that 'power [had] shifted decisively within the United Nations, out of the hands of what he called the "traditionalists," who see the organization as being primarily beholden to its member states, to the "modernists," who believe the institution's mandate requires accountability to its own agencies, nongovernmental organizations and the public.' (*New York Times*, 17 January 2005). The modernists were clearly in the ascendancy among a recent committee, which reported on UN-NGO engagement.

The release of the UN Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations on 11 June 2004 (UN Eminent Persons 2004) stimulated an intense debate

about the proper relationship between participatory and representative democracy in the management by intergovernmental institutions of the NGO relationship. The claims of the panel in these regards are bold.

“The rise of civil society is indeed one of the landmark events of our times. Global governance is no longer the sole domain of Governments. The growing participation and influence of non-State actors is enhancing democracy and reshaping multilateralism. Civil society organizations are also the prime movers of some of the most innovative initiatives to deal with emerging global threats” (Cardoso 2004).

The UN needs to reflect on its mandate. Although it is keen to quote from its masthead “We the Peoples”, it is, of course, a creature of nation-states. If it attempts to become a world forum for all comers, without the architecture to test world opinion or the responsibility of raising taxes and armies, then it must not pretend to have the authority of world opinion. If it attempts to be the moral conscience of the world, it must be prepared to acknowledge that it has neither the spiritual substance of the church nor the certainty of a single politico-economic system (to claim the liberal democratic West as the model would destroy its credibility with much of its constituency). The UN may seek greater relevance, but it risks becoming nothing more than a platform for untested opinion.

The eminent persons propose *inter alia* that ‘Member States need opportunities for collective decision-making, but they should signal their preparedness to engage other actors in deliberative processes.’ This statement ignores the fact that the most prominent voices in civil society at UN forums are well and truly heard within the western liberal democracies. The UN proposes to privilege these voices by letting them into the UN deliberative processes. There must be a clear distinction between deliberative processes and information gathering. It is a normal process to have lobbying at many stages of any decision-making process, but to invite NGOs into substantive deliberative forums is a clear breach of constitutionality and exacerbates equality problems. To the extent that the UN wants to increase its engagement with civil society, a greater clarity of accreditation procedures is essential. More important is a greater clarity of roles. Input at hearings is acceptable, access to deliberative forums never is. Transparency can help to overcome the equality problem in participatory democracy, but it cannot overcome the constitutionality problem. The only remedy for that is to keep the NGO lobby at distance from deliberative forums, perhaps as far away as the real civil society, ordinary citizens (Johns 2004a).

Within a liberal democracy, elections are but one part of the architecture of representative democracy. Other aspects are the courts, which assist private dispute resolution and the review

of government decisions; the taxation regime, which funds programs; and, the intense focus of the daily media. These are the well-tested elements of the “daily plebiscite” (quoting Ernest Renan, Jusdanis 2001, p. 24) of politics in the liberal democratic state. They operate with intensity and a grounded nature that only occurs at the scale of the nation-state and below. This does not mean that the system does not suffer in the eyes of the voters from unfulfilled expectations of ever-greater access and preferred outcomes, but participatory democracy reaches its peak within the representative framework of the liberal democratic state.

In such a democracy, with its emphasis on open dialogue, the emphasis should be on ensuring transparent relations between organised voices and the government. A recent study for the Australian government on government-NGO relations noted a lack of awareness of the need to disclose relations and to make evidence available in a comparable and assessable format. The study recommended that a system of public disclosure and reporting — that is, a protocol — about Australian government department/NGO relationships be implemented. It recommended that the Australian government initiate the public reporting of its relationships with NGOs (Johns and Roskam 2004).

In addition, it is clear that the vast majority of NGOs are granted charity status and accorded taxation privileges. Moreover, many of these operate in a far more politically active mode than was once the case, that is, they are advocates as much as they are providers. A government, which sought to restrict the amount of advocacy that a charity may undertake as a condition of charity status, would run the risk of offending basic principles of freedom of association. One way of satisfying the public need for a well informed donor market, for whom charities act as agents, and at the same time not offending freedom of political activity (beyond partisan activity) would be to ensure that, as a condition of registration for charity status, a government impose a national standard of transparency and reporting for charities. Regulation does not imply a loss of freedom to speak, nor does it preclude a debate about the proper use of charity funds — for example, for advocacy. The idea of a powerful disclosure regime is to place much of the work of the scrutiny of charities into the hands of the donor in order to re-weight the scrutiny to the widest constituency (Johns 2004b, p. 304).

An example of the folly of local engagement is the Australian experiment with Aboriginal self-determination. The abolition this year of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission was an acknowledgement that answers for Aboriginal people do not rest in a collective political identity (as distinct from political action), but in understanding the operation of the economy. Although the overwhelming pretext was the incompetence of many of the senior Commissioners and the poor accountability of many of the Aboriginal organisations funded by ATSIC, the underlying difficulty

was a system of total dependence on state preferment in which Aboriginal leaders became the gatekeepers for publicly provided goods and services. Aborigines were beholden to leaders whose success depended in keeping people in need. The real key to Aboriginal advancement rested in escaping the system, not as many who were beneficiaries had argued, for more and better public support. Community engagement carries with it this burden also, that if only more largesse is available the problems will be solved. It has a tendency to generate need rather than resolve it.

Conclusion

Community engagement has its darker side. It can be nothing more than a device to privilege some voices at the expense of others, it can enhance the tendency of government to buy favour with sections of the community with public money and not necessarily in the interests of the public. The problems of advanced liberalism and participatory democracy need to be recognised and corralled by regimes of transparency that keep a proper relationship between responsible officials and activists to protect the interests of all.

The apparent problem of trust in institutions in liberal democracies is as much a symptom of success as failure. Reading lack of trust only as a symptom of failure invites more engagement from the same elite who already have a say. It does not inform the electorate any better nor is it likely to lead to any better results for the whole public. Governments which attempt to reweigh opinion in favour of those who do not participate are raising the price of governance for the same result as gained through ordinary representative means.

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