

The following is a summary of research findings by Dr. Lyn Carson of Sydney University. The research was undertaken with funding by the Don Chipp Foundation and the findings below were presented at an open forum hosted by the Don Chipp Foundation in Melbourne on September 29th, 2006

Deliberative Design in Australia Presentation to the Don Chipp Foundation 29 September 2006, Melbourne

The research project on “Deliberative Design in Australia” refers to a type of consultation process known as Deliberative Inclusive Processes (DIPs) but more latterly known as DDPs¹ – Deliberative Democratic Processes. Dr Lyn Carson’s ongoing research and consultancy has focused on this form of engagement.

Deliberative, inclusive processes are decision-making processes that are used in policy making and which allow participation of otherwise “voiceless” citizens in processes which are usually dominated by interest groups and politically vocal individuals.

The aim was to compile an inventory of deliberative inclusive processes, to expose their depth and breadth in Australia, and to learn if any patterns emerge linking methodologies with outcomes. As Dr Carson herself acknowledges, it is “notoriously difficult” to prove that policy decisions made using deliberative, inclusive techniques are actually “better” ones or that they are better due to the use of such techniques though anecdotal evidence and a growing body of literature suggest that this is so. Nevertheless, this exciting enquiry has given voice to many noteworthy practitioners around the country whose work is often little-known outside the immediate context in which they operate, or their professional peers. Hopefully their reflections on the successes, barriers and opportunities they have observed in conducting DDPs will be able to be conveyed to a wider audience in the future as a result of the project “Deliberative Designs in Australia”.

I will confine this short presentation largely to a discussion of how we have gone about our research. An analysis of the substantive research outcomes will be the subject of a major body of work being conducted by Dr Carson herself.

Screening the scores of events to find out the extent to which Australian DDPs conform to the principles of deliberation, representativeness and influence was a time-consuming process, far more than originally thought.

One aspect of my role has been to follow up leads from academics and practitioners around Australia about consultation events they considered remarkable or praiseworthy because their engagement with stakeholders went beyond what is often called community consultation, that is, a formulaic “going through the motions” which cynics would see as placating the community. To make this assessment, we had to explore the fine details of technique. Such details were not always instantly available as the documentation of these DDPs has been inconsistent. A small minority of DDPs has been the subject of academic publications. A slightly higher number

have been reported on in some way on the web. That leaves the majority of DDPs being documented purely in organisational records, in some cases archived beyond ease of access.

Furthermore, as occurs in many disciplines, many practitioners are not focused primarily on technique. In such cases, the role of the researcher is made more challenging.

Many leads – probably most – proved to be unfruitful. While creditable, on further enquiry most consultation events typically lacked the essential features of DDPs. Many “interesting processes” did not make it to the inventory because they were lacking in either some element of random selection of participants or deliberation.

I would like to offer some examples to illustrate this point, firstly on the need for random selection as an indicator of inclusiveness. This meant that consultation events where the participants self-selected in response to an advertisement alone were not included in the inventory. Random selection, usually conducted via an electoral roll, or other list, reaches out to the silent majority in our community who for many reasons would not normally volunteer to take part. In many instances, a combination of recruitment techniques was adopted with varying degrees of randomness. We did not have a distinct policy as to how many of the participants should take part as a consequence of random selection. We just needed to see randomness built into the process because of its direct link with capturing the voiceless. Some excellent events, including demonstration citizen juries which employed deliberative techniques, were excluded because they lacked the essential quality of randomness. Yet one very important regional health DDP selected its participants by first writing to all householders (inclusive), inviting them to respond (self-selecting) and with a final layer of selection being that the organisers took a stratified sample from within the self-selected group. This is deemed as sufficiently random for our purposes.

Conversely, there is a great deal happening – particularly at local government level – in respect of community consultative committees where we can observe randomness being used to select the participants, but no deliberation takes place. The qualities of deliberation, of having participants face-to-face with each other, building their knowledge of issues together, and collaborating rather than competing, cannot be substituted by non-deliberative techniques such as telephone interviews, questionnaires or formal committee arrangements. “Judicious argument” and “critical listening” with the support of an independent, skilled moderator are qualities of a properly facilitated deliberative process².

As to the third principle, influence, this has been described as “a most vexing aspect”³ of DDPs. This principle refers to the degree of impact that a deliberative and representative group has on decision making. Dr Carson’s prior research had already revealed influence as the hardest aspect of DDPs to achieve. Our research has corroborated this.

Adding to our challenge is the fact that the nomenclature of classifying DDPs is still in its formative stages. Even the organisers of the events frequently use the nomenclature very loosely. Consensus conferences, citizen juries, 21st century town meetings, deliberative forums, citizen senates – all these terms and more are used to

describe the events. When they are used loosely it is difficult to describe or analyse them accurately by use of the terms.

Yet, as I have pointed out already, many practitioners appear less concerned with the classification of their work than they are with its integrity and meaningfulness.

Inventory statistics reveal that DDPs are happening around Australia at an increasing rate, but according to a dramatically uneven distribution. Western Australia is clearly the state which is host to the large majority of DDPs to date. I will not attempt to elicit a theory for this (though Dr Carson has written about the fruitful combination of a skilled process designer and an enabling leader⁴), but wish to point out that Western Australia has a Minister for Planning & Infrastructure Ms Alannah McTiernan who has personally driven DDPs as a necessary element of strategic planning.

In talking to so many practitioners from around Australia, I was struck by their pride in their contribution to good governance in their field of endeavour. Some of these experienced individuals have come to regard DDPs as a necessary aspect of effectiveness.

Facilitators, public engagement experts, senior managers in health, planning, natural resources and local government, shared an overriding faith in the importance of what they are contributing to our democratic processes.

This was affirmed when I conducted a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with some of them. Four categories of questions were posed: Questions which help us understand the interviewee, questions relating to the planning, implementation and outcomes of the DDPs.

Despite this optimism, there is one aspect in which they are pessimistic overall, and that is the unwillingness of the mass media to inform the wider public about their work. As WA health administrator Dr Scott Blackwell said, the media needs to *“tell the stories about how ‘normal people’ successfully looked at the facts and came up with sensible decisions. It would be good if the media would tell these stories, but they only like to peddle tit-for-tat. Someone has to convince them that covering these stories might give them the edge...highlighted snippets would make good TV. Certainly no less entertaining than Big Brother”*.

Indeed it was our original desire to voice record the in-depth interviews, but alas the research funding was not of the order that would enable the expense. Manual transcription of the interviews challenged the need to convey the “voice” of the interviewees faithfully and accurately.

These interviews, along with the inventory, are a valuable body of research which is sure to make a significant contribution to the theory and practice of participatory democracy in Australia. We thank the Don Chipp Foundation for including “Deliberative Designs in Australia” in its funding program.

Anna Christie

¹ Carson, Lyn (in print, 2006) “Community Engagement: The Australian Experience”, *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche (Italian Public Policy Review)*, Bologna, vol. 2

² Carson, Lyn and Hart, Phillip “What Randomness And Deliberation Can Do For Community Engagement” *International Conference on Engaging Communities*, Brisbane, Australia, 14-17 August 2005 citing Gastil, J (2000) **By Popular Demand** University of California Press, Berkeley

³ Carson, Lyn and Hart, Phillip fn 2

⁴ Carson, Lyn (2006) “Avoiding ghettos of like-minded people: Random selection and organizational collaboration”, In S. Schuman (ed.) *Creating a Culture of Collaboration*, Jossey Bass/Wiley, pp. 418-432