

Participatory Democracy: Cracks in the Façade

GARY JOHNS

WHY DOES the Trade Minister regularly consult with the head of the Australian Conservation Foundation? Is there some insight that ACF has on the intricacies of the trade agenda that others do not? Is it just to keep a lobby quiescent? Or is it the final acceptance by the Coalition government of the consensus method—tripartism, now multipartism—for which it so admonished Labor?

There are environmental treaties to which Australia is a signatory—and the Minister is best to be well informed on such matters—but should this involve a formal and regular consultation with an environment advocate? Are other views best consulted in such things? Does the formal and ongoing relationship create an opportunity for the values promoted by ACF, or any like organization, to affect the trade agenda, perhaps to the detriment of the welfare of others? These are matters that Ministers must grapple with, but forming permanent policy committees with NGOs begs the question as to the credentials which some bring to the table.

The mechanisms of participatory democracy, in particular the consensus method, confuse the distinction between representation and public recognition as criteria for selection, and between expertise and values in the process of policy formulation.

WHAT HAS CONSENSUS TO DO WITH POLICY?

Consensus may work when there is a strong policy in place. For example, if a government decides that it wants

to make the car manufacturing industry more competitive, it does so by imposing the discipline of the market through lowering tariffs. It then uses the consensus of unions and manufacturers to manage the costs and difficulties of the structural adjustment. The norm for many years was not making the adjustment, and the unions and manufacturers used the consensus method to lobby government to impose tariffs and send the bill to the consumer.

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The consensus rationale for engagement with the community is thus of no assistance unless it is driven for good policy reasons.

The way in which policy communities are formed 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 exaggerates the extent of poverty, misrepresents its causes and boosts an egalitarian ideology, none of which help the poor. The environmental lobby exaggerates some harms to the environment, such as greenhouse gases, at the expense of scientific solutions to harm, such as the dependence on chemical sprays and water that GM crops are designed to overcome. The human rights lobby, in the case of refugees, seeks to impose a legal method that weakens the rights of citizens in preference to the rights of non-citizens. The indigenous lobby seeks the collectivization 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.

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 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 know-how and expertise in the citizenry, it devalues those same characteristics among policy makers.¹

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.

TWO VOTES TO THE LEFT?

Advocacy democracy deepens and extends access to political decisions, but it lacks representative democracy's 'one person, one vote'. In Australia, there is an equality in access to the vote, but when it comes to participation through other more

direct forms, such as joining NGOs, the workers are left for dead.

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 fairness, but only an egalitarian version. It believes that equality is a more important objective than the living standards of the poor. To pursue its primary objective it is prepared to use public funds to support policies that deny jobs to the poor. 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. The indigenous policy community is dominated by those who believe in a collectivist idealization 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.

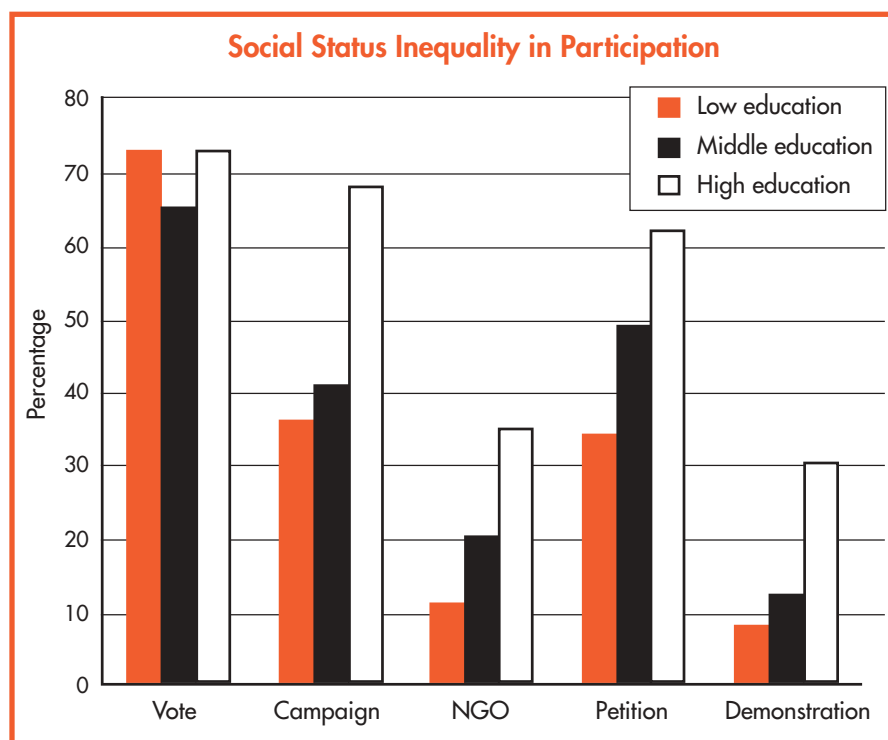
The figure (below), Social Status Inequality in Participation² indicates that while as great a proportion of people of low education as middle and high education voted in the EU 1989 election, an inequality gap emerged when it came to other forms of participation, such as campaign activity, joining a citizen group (NGO), signing a petition or participating in a demonstration. Australian data assembled in 2003³ are not available yet, but may well show the same pattern of inequality in participation, placing in doubt the claims of NGOs to represent civil society.

Participatory democracy and its techniques have produced a democratic process which makes governing and policy-making more open, but less effective for the disinterested public. It creates a policy class, which is no more representative than in the former, cruder, representative model. Policy makers, including Trade Ministers, need to be aware of pitfalls in the participatory model. To regard NGOs as 'policy communities with attitude', and not as voices of the electorate, is a good place to start.

NOTES

- 1 Dalton, R., Scarrow, S. and B. Cain, 2004. 'Advanced Democracies and the New Politics.' *Journal of Democracy*, 15(1): 136.
- 2 Figure produced from data in, Dalton *et al.*, 2004, 135.
- 3 The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003 has embargoed until 1 March 2005, the public release of variables that explore the political participation of Australians, including involvement in NGOs. See The Australian Social Science Data Archive at <http://assda.anu.edu.au/analysis.html>

Dr Gary Johns is a Senior Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs and the Head of the Institute's NGO Project.



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