

A Case Study in Deliberative Democracy: Dialogue with the City **Janette Hartz-Karp¹**

Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, and its surrounding metropolitan area ranks highly among the world's most liveable cities.² However, it is experiencing urban sprawl, and given the predicted high rates of growth, continued growth outwards is unsustainable. To harness the creativity of the community, the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure decided to engage the people of Perth in determining their future. The process that was implemented, *Dialogue with the City*, became the largest deliberative forum in the southern hemisphere and a case study in deliberative democracy.

Deliberative democracy, or participatory democracy, has been described as a nascent social movement, a response to the perceived inadequacies of representative democracy (Bohman 1998, Dryzeck 1990, Smith & Wales, 2000, Levine 2003). According to Levine (2003), democracy requires deliberation for three reasons:

- To enable citizens to discuss public issues and form opinions;
- To give democratic leaders much better insight into public issues than elections are able to do;
- To enable people to justify their views so we can sort out the better from the worse.

Among the numbers of definitions of deliberation and deliberative democracy, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (2003) has one of the most practical versions:

Deliberation is an approach to decision-making in which citizens consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, converse with one another to think critically about options before them and enlarge their perspectives, opinions and understandings.

Deliberative democracy strengthens citizen voices in governance by including people of all races, classes, ages and geographies in deliberations that directly affect public decisions. As a result, citizens influence – and can *see* the result of their influence on – the policy and resource decisions that impact their daily lives and their future (Deliberative Democracy Consortium, 2003).

More succinctly, Uhr (1998, 4) describes deliberative democracy as “fair and open community deliberation about the merits of competing political arguments”.

These are the principles that have guided the deliberative democracy initiatives taken by the Western Australian government, in particular, the portfolio of Planning and Infrastructure over the past four years. The Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, Alannah MacTiernan, has outlined her reasons as follows:

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² In 2002, the Worldwide Quality of Life Survey, published by William M Mercer, ranked Perth as overall equal 18th, together with Luxembourg, Toronto and San Francisco.

My concern is that we are increasingly functioning in a climate where making good decisions becomes very difficult...

The media wants clear black and whites – big headlines, little words - it wants dramatic divergence – it wants outrage - not considered partial disagreement...

This mitigates against good governance.

In my view, we need to ‘retool democracy’ – to establish systems where we genuinely encourage community involvement in decision-making – where we present government not as the arbitrator of two or more opposing camps – each of whom are provided with incentives by the process in hardening their position – but as the facilitator of bringing divergent voices together to hammer out a way forward.

We need to reinforce that we are a democracy, the problems confronting Government are the problems of the community and we have to work together to solve them. We need to make democracy richer, providing opportunities for everyone to participate creatively and critically in community affairs, connecting individuals, building trust, respect and confidence in our democratic processes and in the future (MacTiernan, 2004).

As a community engagement consultant to the Minister and Department for Planning and Infrastructure, it is my task to implement innovative ways of engaging citizens in joint decision making with Government. There is no unit or established resource base to help achieve this. Each initiative requires negotiation with the Department to create a small support team.

Over the past four years, we have trialled, modified and adapted a variety of community engagement techniques including citizens’ juries, consensus conferences, consensus forums, multi criteria analysis conferences, televotes, deliberative surveys and 21st century town meetings.

From this experience, we have learnt that true deliberation is the key to effective community engagement. The end result of effective deliberation is not only good governance, but also the opportunity to remind participants what it means to be a citizen.

Through the four years of trialling different deliberative democracy techniques, we have begun to understand the necessary preconditions for effective deliberation and the building blocks to achieve it. The over-riding precondition is the development of a ‘container’ (Senge, 1994), an environment of trust, where open and honest dialogue can develop. This, in turn, provides conditions that enhance opportunities for participants to ‘reframe’ the issue (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) so alternative and emergent solutions or trade-offs are possible.

In our experience, creating conditions for trust and reframing is greatly facilitated by putting in place a number of building blocks that act synergistically. These include:

- participants who are representative of the population, seated in ways to maximise diversity;

- a focus on thoroughly understanding the issues and their implications;
- serious consideration of differing viewpoints and values;
- a search for consensus or common ground; and
- the capacity to influence policy and decision-making (Hartz-Karp, 2004).

These building blocks reflect the key elements of deliberative democracy (Bohman 1998; Forrester 1999; Carson & Hartz-Karp forthcoming). For example, Carson and Hartz-Karp (forthcoming) characterise deliberative democracy as a process that requires:

- Influence: capacity to influence policy and decision making
- Inclusion: representative of population, inclusive of diverse viewpoints and values, equal opportunity to participate
- Deliberation: open dialogue, access to information, space to understand and reframe issues, respect, movement toward consensus.

To meet these requirements, our experience in Western Australia has demonstrated that what is needed is a deliberative process of engagement, rather than an event. An exemplar of such a process has been *Dialogue with the City*. This engagement process has taken over a year, and is now spawning a series of local dialogues.

Dialogue with the City was created to engage the citizens of the greater metropolitan area in the impending difficulties facing Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. The city is experiencing some of the highest population and economic growth rates of any city in Australia and this growth is placing a significant demand on land, resources and environment.

While planners have created plans to manage growth, actually achieving them is becoming increasingly difficult. While the principle of sustainability has the support of the community, it clashes at the local level with NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard) and the demands of the free market.

This was considered to be an ideal situation to apply deliberative democracy - understanding what a large, representative group of Perth residents would want if they were well informed and had the opportunity to deliberate; building the future plan for the city on their common views; and involving them in the implementation process.

The stated aim for *Dialogue with the City* was to plan to make Perth the world's most liveable city by 2030. The process moved from engaging the broad public in the issues, focusing on those often not heard, onto a large deliberative forum with 1,100 participants to determine the common direction; and then continuing the deliberation over the next eight months with over one hundred of the participants from community, industry and government, to create the community planning strategy.

Using the three critical components of deliberative democracy as defined by Carson and Hartz-Karp (forthcoming) - inclusiveness, deliberation and influence – the question can be asked, to what extent did *Dialogue with the City* fulfil these criteria?

Inclusiveness

Theorists and practitioners have argued that to be inclusive, participation needs to be large scale and representative of the population (Weeks, 2000; Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002). This is to avoid the typical consultation scenario that involves only a small number of the community, overwhelmingly skewed by those who are either ‘highly articulate’ or those ‘with an axe to grind’ (Carson, 2001).

Dialogue with the City aimed to be both large scale and representative. Prior to the large deliberative forum, the aim was to involve as many of the community as possible in understanding and talking about the issues. A number of strategies were used to achieve this.

A community survey was sent to a random sample of 8,000 Perth residents to determine the issues of prime concern to the community and to ascertain their values and views on the future development of the city.

To help inform the public, comprehensive issues papers were published on the Web, and an interactive Web site enabled browsers to access information, input ideas and exchange views. To make this information more accessible to the broader community, the daily newspaper provided full-page feature articles, each feature story based on one of the issues papers. The aim was to interest people in the issues, help them understand the complexities and varying viewpoints and encourage debate as well as participation at the large, interactive forum. For example, written information generated from the chat room was analysed for themes and used to help steer the agenda of the *Dialogue* forum.

Using a different medium, a one-hour television broadcast, a ‘hypothetical’ was developed and broadcast during prime time, to engage citizens in thinking about potential futures for the city. Again, viewers were encouraged to register for the interactive forum. A variety of experts spoke on radio, including talk-back radio.

To include youth, a schools competition elicited the views of young people. This involved a painting competition for primary schools and a short essay competition for high schools on the sort of city the students would like to live in by 2030.

This broad public inclusion culminated a huge deliberative forum that drew together approximately 1,100 participants from state and local government, industry, business, academia, special interest groups, community groups and a large random sample of residents from metropolitan Perth. These people considered how to manage the future growth of the city in a sustainable way. The engagement techniques used were a combination of a ‘21st century town meeting’³ and a regional planning game.⁴

³ AmericaSpeaks, a not-for-profit pioneer in large-scale civic engagement designed this new kind of town meeting. Carolyn Lukensmeyer and her team kindly offered helpful advice prior to the forum as well as the invaluable assistance during the forum of one of their associates, Mr Joe Goldman.

⁴ Fregonese and Associates, in particular John Fregonese, a not-for-profit pioneer in designing new ways of engaging citizens in urban design, including a regional planning game used throughout the USA, kindly allowed us to use their ideas to develop our own planning game.

Considerable attention was given to assuring participation was representative of the population, inclusive of diverse viewpoints and values, with citizens having equal opportunity to participate.

Of those who participated, approximately one third came from an invitation to a random sample of the population asking them to participate; one third responded to invitations to a broad range of stakeholders including local government, other state government agencies, industry and industry bodies, environmental groups and a comprehensive range of social interest groups; and one third self nominated, answering advertisements in state-wide and local newspapers, reading, listening to or watching the media, or through their community and organisational networks.

It became obvious that some segments of the population were under-represented - young adults, indigenous people and those from a non-English-speaking backgrounds. Grassroots enrolment of these groups took place to engage youth, Indigenous people and those from non-English-speaking backgrounds in listening and learning sessions. The aim of these sessions was to ensure that the people who are often not listened to were heard, had the opportunity to learn more about the issues, and felt sufficiently comfortable to take part in the large forum dialogue.

Deliberation

Informed dialogue was a feature of the deliberation. Over several years, the WA Planning Commission had employed experts to research and write discussion papers to underpin a new planning strategy. Nine well-researched discussion papers provided the background information for the process. These issues papers were disseminated via the internet, through feature articles in newspapers, and through background briefing packs sent to all participants prior to the forum. The television hypothetical on the futures of Perth was on prime time, and watchers could input their comments on internet. At the forum, there were two overseas speakers who were renowned for successfully implementing plans to make their cities more sustainable. The speakers highlighted the choices that needed to be made for a sustainable city.

A variety of strategies were developed to encourage open dialogue, respect, access to information, and space to understand and reframe issues, and movement toward consensus. One of the most important of these was to encourage open and free discussion through small-group dialogue between diverse participants. Each group was supported by a trained facilitator, with the task of encouraging in-depth discussion and respect for others' views. A trained scribe at each group input data to a computer that the group deemed to be a fair representation of their discussion. The small group interaction provided a safe environment to input views, learn from others and reach a collective view.

There were over 250 volunteers supporting this deliberation - facilitating, scribing and taking other support roles. This team was acquired through a variety of networks, and encompassed volunteers from the private sector, public sector and non-government organisations. People said they volunteered because this was an exciting initiative, dealing with an issue that was important to them, that offered them the opportunity to

learn new skills The entire support team underwent a full day's training to ensure they understood and were capable of carrying out their tasks.

To encourage participants to listen to different views, they were purposely seated at a table with dissimilar others, that is, a mixture of random sample participants with stakeholders and those who self nominated. Not only were commonly-held views fed into the computer, so too were strongly held minority views, and in many instances, each person's views.

The computers on each table were networked, transmitting the data to a 'theme team' who analysed the data in real time and broadcast the common themes back to the entire room. In a very short space of time, participants could see the build-up of collective views from the individual tables to the whole forum.

In the morning, the deliberation was broad ranging, focusing on hopes for the future, what participants wanted to keep and change, and what they might and might not value if different scenarios of Perth were to occur.

The afternoon was more focused on actioning, finding trade-offs and negotiating. By playing a hands-on planning game, participants were provided with the opportunity to test their assumptions and reframe the issues to find alternatives.

Each table chose one of four development scenarios. Each scenario was represented by a package containing different density 'chips' (or game pieces of differing colours and sizes), based on Geographic Information Systems data (a digital mapping and analysis system). The chips represented the housing densities, industry and commercial areas required by 2030.

Participants needed to decide where each of the chips would be placed on the map. Concurrently, they needed to conserve the spaces important to them and to draw in the transport links. Trade-offs could be made between different housing densities and different urban forms from the other scenarios.

The interactive dialogue at the tables was crucial. The table needed to agree on its plan. When table participants were in agreement, the backing on the chips were removed and they were stuck onto the map. This information was then transferred to the computers using mapping grids to ensure accuracy. These digitised images enabled effective analysis of the common themes from the whole room.

The final element of deliberation was the search for common ground. The '21st century town meeting' methodology allowed constant movement between small group dialogue and consensus, and the collective views of the entire room. A trained facilitator guided each table to discover commonly-held views. The networked computers acted like 'electronic flipcharts'. Immediately after the scribes typed in the data, it was transmitted through to a 'theme team' where the views were synthesised and beamed back to the whole room. The key issues were ranked individually and then collectively. To check the validity of the themes, following the forum, an independent 'theme team' and a computer software analysis re-checked the data. This analysis corroborated and added to the key themes. A similar process was used to analyse the planning game results.

The most important key direction to emerge from the engagement was the sort of urban form participants wanted for the future of Perth – network, multi-centred, compact or dispersed. Since this issue was pivotal to the engagement, it was considered important for consensus to evolve, and to be repeatedly tested in different ways. The process moved from information to dialogue, then from prioritisation to practical planning.

It began with a visual, computerised fly-through of the different scenarios, followed by discussion from different points of view in the one-hour ‘hypothetical’ video. Written information was provided to each individual outlining technical expert views of the basic differences between the four scenarios socially, economically and environmentally. Participants then discussed each scenario at their table, finding common ground on the positive and negative aspects of each. Individually, participants were then asked to rank each of the four scenarios in order of preference. The scenario that scored highest, the network city, was in fact not far from achieving the highest possible score for the room (while the same can be said in reverse for the scenario which scored lowest, the dispersed city). However, this information was not given to participants until the close of the day’s deliberation.

The purpose of the planning game was to move participants from the theoretical realm of scenarios to the practical allocation of the housing, industry, commerce, etc. that would be required in such a scenario. Trade-offs and a search for alternatives would be necessary for the map to represent the agreed team view. This activity allowed participants to continually test their original thoughts. They could trade into other scenarios at any time.

Before commencing the game, each table discussed which scenario they wanted to use to begin. They could choose the scenario they had ranked first, or another-- providing the table agreed. Seventy two percent (72%) chose the network city model, 0% chose the dispersed city model; the remainder were fairly evenly split between the remaining two - the multi-centred and compact city. At the end of the game, each table was asked to judge out of the 100% total available, what percentage of their final product fitted each of the four scenarios. This analysis showed as the game progressed, there was an increased tendency towards developing the network city.

Participant observations of their maps were tested after the forum by a computer analysis of the digitised maps. Again, the network city clearly emerged as the preferred urban form. With the assistance of technical expertise, the Spatial Planning Team, consisting of 18 representatives from the forum, from the community, industry, local and state government, agreed that preliminary testing of the network city showed it to be sufficiently feasible to progress to the next stage. Again, this was tested with all participants of the forum, requesting their feedback. They were overwhelmingly supportive. The consensus that emerged early in the proceedings, persisted, not only withstanding the rigours of a complex deliberative process, but growing despite it.

Measuring the effectiveness of deliberation is complex. While strategies were implemented to maximise the effectiveness of deliberation - opportunities for open dialogue, respect, access to information, space to understand and reframe issues, and

movement toward consensus - they were not evaluated except through participant feedback forms, largely qualitative.

Qualitative analysis of participant feedback forms pointed to their high satisfaction with the deliberative process. Many talked of their initial cynicism about the political agenda and their anxiety about achieving productive dialogue or consensus with such a large, disparate group. Accordingly, they expressed surprise at the extent of common ground that had been forged, hope that politicians could be trusted to listen and respond to the people, and delight with the goodwill of fellow participants to engage in positive dialogue.

Quantitatively, forty two percent (42%) said they changed their views as a result of the dialogue, while many more admitted to broadening their views. Over ninety nine percent (99.5%) of participants thought the deliberations went okay or great. Most importantly, ninety seven percent (97%) indicated they would like to participate in such an event again (Participant Feedback Report, 2003).

If the critical measure of deliberation is an increase in intellectual, social and political capital, this feedback would indicate that the *Dialogue with the City's* deliberative process was effective.

Influence

At the commencement of the forum, both the State Premier and the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure stated that this forum would result in “action on the ground”. During the forum, the Minister re-iterated that this was not a “talkfest”, that the outcomes would be actioned.

To reinforce the importance of the outcomes and the accountability of the process, at the conclusion of the forum, each participant received a Preliminary Report of the widely-held views developed during the day's proceedings. The Final Report was distributed to all participants two weeks after the forum. Each participant received a copy of the map developed by their table, as well as the integrated map of the whole room.

An implementation process that involved all the stakeholders was established following the forum. An Implementation Team consisting of thirteen representatives from the Dialogue process from the community, industry, local and state government, oversaw the development of the plan. Three liaison teams – community, industry and local government – consisting of approximately 13 representatives each, had the task of establishing continuing communication links with their constituents. There were six Working Groups, each consisting of fourteen to eighteen representatives from the community, industry, local and state government, chaired by a representative from the Implementation Team, with at least two representatives from each of the liaison teams. Their task was to develop a critical planning issue, recommending strategies and actions. The final result was a composite document - ‘Network City: A Community Planning Strategy for Perth and Peel’.

At key stages in the development of the Planning Strategy, the plans were disseminated to all forum participants, and were discussed at workshops for the

broader community, run by the liaison teams. As a result of the feedback received, the Strategy underwent constant revisions.

‘Network City: Community Planning Strategy’ was accepted in principle by the WA Planning Committee and the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure. It was submitted to Cabinet and again, was accepted in principle. It is currently undergoing the usual public comment period that will close at the end of January 2005. In the interim, a local government grants program has been established to support local governments willing to implement community engagement that is based on inclusion, deliberation and influence, on issues supporting the Network City concept.

It would appear this is the first time that deliberative democracy has played such a crucial role in the development of such a major regional planning strategy. The Strategy outlines how this role should continue through to the implementation of the plan.

The Cost Benefit Analysis

Critics of deliberative democracy have argued that it does not work. Reasons include that citizen participation:

- Minimises the influence of experts who have a far better understanding of the issues (Irwin & Stansbury, 2004);
- Is too slow (Rourke, 1984), and too costly (Irwin & Stansbury, 2004);
- Is often used for instrumental ends - to achieve political outcomes - rather than its critical purpose – to increase social, intellectual and political capital (Burby 2003).

The case study of *Dialogue with the City* indicates that:

- In terms of city planning, regardless of the technical merits of experts, experience has shown that if proposals do not reflect the values of the community, implementation is fraught (MacTiernan 2004);
- Prior to *Dialogue with the City*, the Department had invested more than \$200,000 over several years on technical expertise to develop background information and best practice urban plans. However, these expert plans were not ‘owned’ either by the Government of the day or the community, and hence were not likely to be implemented fast.

The Dialogue process was extensive and would have been costly if industry partners had not shared the costs of the televised production, chat room, newspaper coverage, computer software and hardware and major forums. Indeed, it is estimated that the process would have cost at least AU\$570,000, excluding public service salaries, if it had been paid for totally by the Government. The actual cost to Government was AU\$250,000.

For some, this still might seem costly. However, in terms of cost benefit to the State, it is well worth-while if this plan for a highly liveable city is ‘owned’ by the community, industry, local and state government, and can be implemented.

- The criticism that deliberative democracy initiatives are used for instrumental gain rather than increasing social capital assumes that these goals are incompatible. On the one hand, achieving the legitimacy to implement proposals is undoubtedly an important pay-off (MacTiernan 2004). However, if the engagement process is perceived by citizens to be political manipulation, this legitimation will not occur. On the other hand, if the engagement is perceived by citizens to be fair, transparent and accountable, it reflects good governance -developing political capital (MacTiernan 2004), and is likely to result in a ‘virtuous cycle’ that increases social and intellectual capital (Hartz-Karp, 2004).

Dialogue with the City has extended our understanding of deliberative democracy. Based solidly on the principles of inclusion, deliberation and influence, it has achieved an outcome that truly reflects the deliberative process. Throughout, it has made every effort to be transparent and accountable to the community. Although there will always be aspects in need of improvement, and members of the community who remain cynical throughout, from all accounts, *Dialogue with the City* appears to have impacted positively on intellectual, political and social capital.

Postscript

One week prior to the release of ‘Network City: Community Planning Strategy’, a local council, unhappy with some of the potential implications of the plan, released some extraordinarily incorrect information to the press, for example that the community would lose their back yards, be coerced to travel on public transport, that public open space would be taken over by high-rise, and people would be forced to live in high density. For several days, the sole state-wide newspaper continued with this theme, until the community ‘fought back’. Participants who had been involved in the dialogue process and community groups went on radio, participated in talk back shows, sent letters to the daily newspaper and local newspapers and published press releases outlining the preposterous and inaccurate nature of the claims. The issue lost traction and the newspaper gave up its apparent vendetta. The community strategy has now returned to the realm of deliberation, with community and industry groups running their own forums and submitting their issues through the public consultation process.

Learning and Future Directions

With the benefit of hindsight, there are always improvements that could be made in future engagements.

While every effort was made to ensure inclusive participation, the ethnicity, age, geographic location and socio-economic background of the participants was not measured. Neither was the diversity of their views. AmericaSpeaks, the founder of the ‘21st Century Town Meetings’, utilises individual electronic keypads to collect such data, which is then projected immediately back to the room. Unfortunately, this equipment is expensive. In the future, if individual, electronic keypads are not

economically feasible, it could be worthwhile to ask forum participants to fill out a short, anonymous questionnaire prior to the deliberations to ascertain the extent of inclusiveness, and to announce the results during the deliberations.

Several participants expressed dissatisfaction that the information presented to participants was not comprehensive, eliciting all viewpoints – for example there were no speakers supporting the current urban sprawl. Instead, they were all aimed at sustainability. This was an accurate perception. The stated aim at the beginning of the deliberative process was to make Perth the world's most liveable (sustainable) city by 2030. Since this was the aim, the speakers and literature were focused on different ways to achieve sustainability. In retrospect, it would have been helpful if this had been explained more carefully during the proceedings.

Due to widely differing perceptions of the term 'consensus', the expression most frequently quoted in deliberative democracy theory, 'the search for common ground' was the term used throughout the *Dialogue with the City* engagement. Several participants complained that this focus produced generic themes that no-one could dispute, rather than hammering out the contentious issues. To some extent this was true. On the other hand, the forum outcomes provided a broad agenda that in some ways differed significantly from the expert's prior plans, and in other ways ratified them. This was highly useful information. In retrospect, it could have been explained more clearly and more often that the intention of this large-scale forum was not dispute resolution of disparate and often fixed positions. Instead, its aim was to elucidate those issues where agreement could be found, providing a basis upon which to move ahead.

Similarly, in retrospect, there are also elements that were done well and are worthwhile repeating. From the overwhelming feedback from participants, this was a wonderfully organised, democratic, hopeful, exciting and ground-breaking initiative, that could become regular government practice.

In conclusion, *Dialogue with the City* adhered to the principles of deliberative democracy – inclusion, deliberation and influence. It gave government the legitimacy to create a strategy based soundly on the principles of sustainability, despite some powerful interest group opposition. At the same time, it gave the community a sense of 'ownership' of the strategy – to the point where many took action to defend it against inaccurate commentaries being made about it. Most importantly, it provided participants with an experience that reminded them of the importance of being a citizen.

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