

Involving Citizens in Making Public Policy¹

Silas B. Weeks

In a democracy, citizen participation is essential. But, according to Weeks, citizen participation is in difficulty because of: (1) an overwhelming avalanche of information with opinions, truths, half-truths, and lies; (2) an impersonalization of our institutions; and (3) the technological revolution where technology often decides policy. The author offers the small decision-making group as a means of reviving citizen participation. "The small committee of concerned individuals working together to resolve a community problem can be a powerful instrument for change," he says.

If there's any single genius in our remarkable American society, it's the concept of government by consent. We're living in what is now the longest continuing democracy.

Government by consent has a special meaning in America—not the negative one of government by concession, but the positive one of government by consensus. Consensus requires participation, otherwise the term is meaningless.

First, let's discuss citizen participation in public policy making. This is imperative because we must have participation or perish. Second, let's review the fundamental role of the committee or the small group as a vehicle of participation. Third, let's suggest ground rules that

facilitate effective participation.

Citizen Participation

Citizen participation in public policy making is in serious jeopardy, not because of machinations of the barons of Wall Street, the greed of organized labor, or the lust of power by bureaucrats, but for more sensible reasons. The basic reasons are threefold, and are irreversibly built in our system—things we'll have to learn to live with as best we can.

Communications Revolution

Daily, even hourly, we're overwhelmed with an enormous and continuing avalanche of informa-

SILAS B. WEEKS is Resource Economist, Cooperative Extension Service, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire.

tion, facts, opinions, truths, half-truths, and lies about what goes on in our community, state, nation, and the entire world—until like the tormented bull in the arena, we become confused, stunned, and finally numb. We just can't react one more time with joy, indignation, or outrage to the stimuli assaulting us. This situation of total frustration inevitably leads to alienation and withdrawal.

Insensitive Bureaucracy

A second discouragement to citizen participation grows out of the impersonalization of our institutions. We no longer deal with individuals, but with representatives of organizations. All of us have suffered the frustration, annoyance, and righteous indignation of trying to get a decision, hearing, or "reasonable" answer to our particular problems when we deal with a bureaucracy—be it public or private, be it the university, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, or the telephone company. Now this isn't because bureaucrats are evil or stupid or insensitive (although they may be all of these), but because we haven't yet learned, and may never learn, how to administer large organizations to be sensitive to the unique, individual, personal situations that deviate from some institutionalized norm or specific rule.

This problem of sensitivity to individual deviations from some "standardized" situation will be-

come more difficult as computerization spreads through all segments of society. A computerized system of recording or responding can't tolerate individual deviations. Human beings will be increasingly standardized to fit the machine, and those who don't cooperate with the system will be excluded from it.

Technological Revolution

The third force leading to the decline of citizen participation is the technological revolution. The impact of this is twofold. First, the amounts and complexity of technology are so staggering that even the experts no longer communicate with one another. Thus, we either throw up our hands at the hopelessness of acquiring specialized knowledge, or are humiliated by our lack of facts.

Secondly, technology decides policy rather than vice versa. For example, military strategy is made by weapon technology available as witnessed by the use of the massive, complex B-52 bomber to blow up a few huts in Vietnam. A half a billion dollars worth of equipment is used to do \$50 worth of damage, not because the damage is important, but because the equipment exists. On the civilian side, note the adjustment of employment policies to fit automation rather than the other way around.

What should we do about this triple revolution of communications, bureaucracy, and technology that discourages citizens from participating in public decision making?

Are there organizational adjustments we as educational leaders can make to help revive public participation? I suggest that renewed attention to the small group or working committee can be an important step, and particularly when the task assigned to such groups is of such a nature and scope that the participants can envision self-rewarding results.

When properly structured and used, the small group has the advantage of offering the participant two key experiences:

1. Opportunity for genuine, not superficial, interaction with others.
2. Opportunity to acquire specialized knowledge, and feel secure in the role of an expert.

The issues of community development provide topics with direct bearing on and involvement in the economic, social, and political welfare of the participant and his neighbors. This is quite different from asking them to become involved in some generalized national policy issue on how to control inflation or reform the committee system in Congress. On community development issues the local citizen is a specialist on facts. He's frustrated by not knowing what to do with these facts.

Here the contribution of Extension leadership as "process expert" becomes clear. The process expert becomes a technical resource assisting the citizen in organizing and interpreting his facts of the

community. This expert understands the process by which change takes place . . . he carries to the committee an understanding of the social action model.

Role of Committee

What is it about the kind of committee we're interested in—the social action committee—that makes it different from others? The difference is the major role of a social action committee—to engage in community problem solving. This problem solving frequently centers on conflict resolution.

At the community level, we have very few technical problems. We know technically how to get rid of pollution, how to control traffic, how to build low-income housing, how to zone land. The problem is in accomplishing these goals and isn't related to technology itself, but rather to social, political, and economic conflict of the adaptation, timing, location, costs, and control of the objective.

Differences, or conflicts, are a constant social condition. Conflict isn't something to wish away, but is central to the social process. Thus, our approach to conflict resolution through the committee must be a positive one. We must learn how to make conflict into a productive force rather than a destructive one, how to seek conflict resolution through creativity rather than compromise, and how to direct conflict energy into positive results rather than stalemate. The productive pro-

cess becomes the fundamental challenge, rather than a particular act such as the establishment of a day-care center. Once we understand how to manipulate or build on conflict, then we'll get our day-care center or whatever the immediate goal may be.

For this kind of productivity to occur, committee members must understand how to establish a creative and productive atmosphere.

But like any job, we need to know our purpose. A better set of ideas comes from the mixing of individual ideas than from those we started with as individuals. You must have faith that the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Through the collective interchange of ideas and information, we can be more creative than if we were left to tackle the same problem alone. But this must be done under two particular rules: (1) the integrity of the individual shouldn't be violated in the process and (2) there should be no coercion.

In dealing with differences, the central objective isn't compromise, but positive or productive growth rather than protective growth. To make positive or creative use of conflict requires great skill and commitment on the part of committee members. It requires, among other things, a commitment that:

1. The function of the committee isn't to register opinion, but to create unity.
2. The central creative chore of the committee is to channel or

direct conflict into positive results rather than stalemate.

3. Conflict may be resolved in one of four ways, only the last of which is productive. These are:
 - a. One side submits to the other.
 - b. One side struggles and overcomes the other.
 - c. There is compromise.
 - d. There is integration.

Integration, as used here, means an interpersonal relationship among committee members which is conducive to positive results rather than mere compromise. By integration we mean that out of conflict situations we get what might be labeled "progressive experience." Essentially through understanding and respect for opposing sets of ideas we seek to create a new or better (progressive) idea, a synthesis. Conflict looked on in this way can be viewed as an emerging dynamic force rather than a noncreative or static force.

Ground Rules

This ideal situation of the creative committee is easier to describe than attain. Are there any ground rules that help attain progressive or creative participation—where the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts?

Social scientists say there are ground rules . . . some of which are:

1. Our relationship with one another shouldn't be anticipa-

- tory, but rather freeing. We shouldn't anticipate either a position we're going to take or that another committee member's going to take, but remain free or open to new direction.
2. We must believe that opposed interests aren't necessarily incompatible interests.
 3. Each of us must acquire an objective—a scientific attitude toward both what we believe to be fact and what others believe to be fact. As a minimum we must try to sort out and eliminate from our position preconceived notions and mere opinion.
 4. We must have additional faith that the essence of progress isn't merely a matter of adjustment, but rather that the insights from two different views that can be combined or synthesized into a third, or new, or creative solution.
 5. The information supplied by the expert isn't to create consent, but rather a foundation on which to build new alternatives. Mary Follett says, "The expert must find his place within the social process rather than be a substitute for it."²
 6. The role of any individual participant, and especially the leader, isn't to bring about consent to his proposal. The real task of each is how to get his proposal into the mind or experience of the other members so they may build on it—*not* acquiesce to it.
 7. I believe additionally that you must take the position that the majority view isn't necessarily the correct one, that the rights of the minority are just as precious as those of the majority. A victorious majority and a dissatisfied minority isn't consensus. On major issues the group goal should be decision by unanimity. Perhaps another article of faith is that for any given problem there is one best answer, and through sincere concern for one another, this can eventually be revealed.

We've been talking about fundamental insights. These aren't easy to grasp. They aren't simple in concept. Perhaps it would help to restate them another way. John Cogley, in a newsletter of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, tries to define conditions for a dialogue . . . which is another description of what we're discussing. He says it is

. . . an opening of persons one to another, a sincere effort to get into another person's mind and grasp his system of thought, a way of at least temporarily sharing another man's intellectual world By discovery through dialogue of what we really have in common we can reach agreements that make disagreement not only genuinely possible, but even fruitful Dialogue is a warm adventure in humanism rather than a cold intellectual process With commitment to

this no one should ever leave the table feeling overwhelmed, browbeaten, patronized, or persuaded that what he had to say had not really been heard or totally rejected.³

Cogley defines the central purpose of dialogue as "commitment to truth" and lists four major offenses against this commitment:

The first is to deny the truth and this is the way of the liar. The second is to keep silent when truth should be spoken; this is the way of the coward. The third is to proclaim the truth harshly and unfeelingly when silence is clearly the better course; this is the way of the insensitive. The last violation is to distort the truth in order to score points in an argument; this is the way of the vulgar.⁴

Summary

The small committee of concerned individuals working to resolve a community problem can be a powerful instrument for change. Equally important, it can be the needed vehicle for evolutionary change in a society of technological dynamics suffering from institutional statics.

However, small groups, to effectively perform this role, must operate within the correct structure or frame. In general, the ground rules for such a structure are known; what's needed is practice of their application.

Fundamentally, the process involves committee members opening up to one another. Experience shows that within the framework of mutual trust and confidence, the initial ideas of an individual member can be built on by the group. This results in a product that's superior to what the individual could generate himself. The point is illustrated by the homily that if we meet and swap a dollar, we each leave with a dollar, but if we meet and swap an idea, we each leave with two ideas.

Footnotes

1. This article is a revision of a paper presented at the Governor's Conference on Community, Durham, New Hampshire, September, 1965.
2. Mary Follett, *Creative Experience* (New York, New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1924), p. 29.
3. John Cogley, "The Civilization of Dialogue," *The Center Diary* (April, 1965), p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*