

Kettering Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Summer/Fall 2005



June Board Summary

At the Kettering Foundation's spring board meeting this past June, trustees and staff explored different options for Kettering's international research, listening to the remarks of three longtime research partners about the challenges of exporting democracy. They were Daniel Yankelovich, founder of Public Agenda and former Kettering board member; Ramon Daubon, Vice President for Programs at the Inter-American Foundation; and Randa Slim, the executive director of the Institute for Sustained Dialogue.

Debate over the current U.S. policy of imposing democratic reform by force in places like Iraq has divided not only politicians and policymakers in Washington, Yankelovich noted in his opening remarks, but also citizens in much of the rest of the country. Elections alone, he cautioned, are not a cure-all for political instability or social injustice. Hitler, he pointed out, was democratically elected in Germany, while more recent elections in the Arab World in places like Algeria and southern Lebanon have brought hard-line fundamentalists to power—hardly the result U.S. or European interests had hoped for.

Current efforts to promote the spread of democracy, however, have created a number of interesting opportunities for both exploring insights from the foundation's past work and focusing the direction of future research: 1) that elections alone do not make a democracy; 2) that true democracy requires the work of both officials and citizens; 3) that public deliberation can help get citizens from *me* to *we*; 4) and finally, that we must find ways to translate citizen deliberation into action.

While Yankelovich's comments focused on the importance of citizen work to creating an effective democracy, Daubon's remarks addressed the link between democratic life and economic growth.

For the past 35 years, the Inter-American Foundation has been working on the issue in Latin America. "What we've come to learn, is that without an undergirth of a democratic way of concertation, of learning to talk and make decisions together, economics doesn't work," Daubon said. Democracy he suggested, is really a capacity to talk, identify what's important, consider alternatives, and make decisions. It is done in many places, he added, but seldom in Latin America where there is both a rigid



class structure and a strong tradition of authoritarian rule.

"The culture cannot be taught. It has to be learned, and it is learned by experiencing it," Daubon explained. Working in small, often poor communities, Daubon's foundation has been in the business of engaging citizens in defining economic goals and projects. The idea has been enthusiastically embraced not only by grass-

roots organizations, but also by an unexpected ally—business interests who see it as a powerful economic tool. To date, some 53 corporate sponsors have been involved. They see the work as not only improving the region's economy, but also its political stability. Kettering's research in civil economics, Daubon pointed out, laid the groundwork for this new approach.

Business interests, interestingly enough, also played a role in Randa Slim's discussion of political reform efforts in the Middle East. Since 9/11, she noted, a host of foundations and government agencies, ranging from USAID to the United Nations, have tried to promote the spread of democracy in the Middle East, but have met with little, if any, success. Most have little, if any, understanding of Islam, she said. As a result they are seen as trying to import something entirely alien to the region. Secondly, their efforts are largely mechanistic: they focus on voting and multiparty elections and the like.

Locals are interested in a far more fundamental conversation. Broad-based coalitions of Islamicists, nationalists, civic activists, and business interests have emerged in places like Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, Slim explained, and they are engaged in a dialogue about both citizenship and public life. Business interests are critical, she added, because they can provide a moderating influence to help resolve conflicts between the old and new. They also have a great deal of credibility—something most governments in the region and outside interests lack.

Kettering Foundation president David Mathews concluded the meeting by noting that the Kettering Foundation's understanding of democracy as a culture rather than a process could be valuable in a wider study of these kinds of problems. At the same time, research with international partners could provide valuable insights into a number of other areas of Kettering's research about the role of both citizens and institutions in a democracy.

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The forums provided participants with an opportunity to appreciate the broader implications of HIV/AIDS. Among other things, participants thought that the pandemic challenged them to consider extraordinary ways and means of dealing with it. At the core of this initiative is an emphasis on why and how political institutions, civil society organizations, and businesses should take the lead in combating the disease. It is clear that civil society and development professionals believe that the commitment to fight HIV/AIDS must emanate from leaders who are dedicated to human rights and who endorse sound policies and implement them justly and effectively. Everyone must take the initiative. Those who are HIV negative must continue to lead healthy lives and minimize their risk of HIV infection, and those who are positive must be counselled about risk reduction and ways of living positively with their HIV condition.

At the End of the Forum

Many people left the forums with the belief that something could be done. Many thought they had found a place where people were willing to talk and listen to them about this most personal and complicated issue. Most important, they saw the need to continue talking about HIV/AIDS in clubs and churches and with their friends.

Future Plans

IDASA plans to hold a number of forums in South Africa in disadvantaged and underprivileged communities, in high schools, and with Citizen Leader groups with whom we work. We have recently been invited again by the Washington-based International Women's Democracy Center (Barbara Ferris) to continue with the work in Botswana, teaching issue framing, naming, and moderation, as well as holding some forums.

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Getty Images

Australia— Refugees and Immigrants

By *Angela Romano*

Immigration is controversial not only in the United States, but in countless other countries as well. Although Australia was a haven for political refugees from East Timor and Kosovo in the late 1990s, since 2001 the nation has been divided politically over how to respond to asylum seekers. Observers believe that much of the angry, disruptive debate has been fueled by the media—in particular talk radio, or talkback radio as it is called in Australia. This is ironic because only a few years before, the same medium was key to pressuring the government to accept Albanian refugees from Kosovo. Public support at that time was broad. As one caller to a popular talkback program put it in the 1990s, “I’d put a couple up, mate. I have a couple of spare beds and plenty of tucker.”

However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and deteriorating economies in the Middle East have changed the situation drastically. Since 1999, asylum seekers, rather than apply at Australian embassies abroad, have increasingly attempted to arrive by boat and apply directly for refugee status. Although government policies have stemmed the flow of asylum seekers, the

political and financial costs have been high. By some estimates, the effort to intercept and detain would-be refugees is costing the country as much as \$300 million (Australian) per year—\$300,000 for each refugee prevented from entering the country.

Given the issue’s divisiveness, journalism faculty and students at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) began a research project to explore whether a more deliberative form of public discussion on the airwaves might have yielded a different outcome. The project places journalists at the centre of community deliberation on the economic and social challenges created by incoming asylum seekers and refugees. The effort did not begin with the belief that a “best answer” already existed; rather, the goal was to explore how the media might gauge public concerns on the issue and cover the news so as to help citizens resolve those concerns.

Although most media coverage relied on official sources in government, business, and elsewhere, the QUT group has experimented with approaches that permit ordinary citizens to establish the news agenda. Queenslanders, for example, were asked what concerned them about asylum seekers and refugees and why they held those concerns. The short-term goal is to use this knowledge to produce stories on

topics about which citizens feel confused or insufficiently informed. The long-term goal is to develop a guide for further public deliberation that contains key aspects of traditional NIF or Kettering issue books and that reveals how communities (1) nominate or name particular problems, (2) frame them to reveal their true nature or the underlying problems behind them, (3) identify possible solutions, and (4) weigh the benefits and tradeoffs associated with those solutions. Those ideas, accordingly, will then provide both a guide and the material for future radio news on the topic.

Beyond simply offering an example of how journalists can better connect with the public, our research has revealed how journalists' own framing of the issue—through the use of both sources and language—made it difficult for the public to come to terms with the issue. Few citizens have any direct contact with asylum seekers. The press, as well, has little contact, since journalists' access to detention centers is severely limited. Because of those restrictions, the media group Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders) downgraded Australia's position on its International Press Freedom Index from twelfth to fiftieth.

Although conservative columnists have criticized the press as "too soft" on asylum seekers, a considerable body of academic research and press commentary presents a very different picture. Rather than being soft, press accounts have often demonized asylum seekers—describing their arrival in terms of invasion, attack, contagious disease, floods, or tidal waves. Numerous media accounts circulated messages that asylum seekers might include "sleeper" terrorists who threaten national security. When public tension was high, news stories seldom included the voices of asylum seekers or refugees themselves. Mass media outlets, particularly tabloids and talkback radio, reflected the general Australian discomfort with the increased numbers of Middle Eastern and Islamic people among asylum seekers and refugees.

Strict government control of detainees and detention centers created problems for journalists, but other problems sprang from the journalists' own limited understanding of the issues involved. One example is the so-called Tampa crisis of

2001 when the Howard government refused to allow a group of asylum seekers, who had been rescued by a Norwegian tanker after their boat began sinking, onto Australian soil so that their applications for refugee status could be considered. Press coverage used terms like *refugees*, *boat people*, and *illegal immigrants* as if they were interchangeable.

The press was also so disconnected from the public that it failed to indicate why people were so anxious about asylum seekers when there had been no increase in the number of applicants in several years. The only change had been that more asylum seekers were lodging their applications onshore after travelling to Australia by boat. Our current research project attempts to identify how a deeper understanding of these community concerns could help journalists better address the public's information needs. The QUT program attempts to use a variety of strategies—stakeholder consultations, community forums, town hall meetings, and focus groups.

Early research identified some significant trends. Public support for refugees accepted through offshore programs was increasing at the same time support was falling for asylum seekers attempting to reach Australian shores by boat. There was, however, little evidence of this nuance in media coverage. Although government policies have greatly reduced the arrival of boat refugees (since 2001 only one boat has arrived), nothing has been done to address the underlying social roots of the public's particular concern about asylum seekers arriving by boat.

Citizens might work through these issues better if the news they received included the following: more information about the political problems that prompted the increase in the asylum seekers arriving by boat, their experiences, how claims are processed, how Australians might determine whether boat refugees are a threat or a useful addition to society, and what alternative responses Australians might make to their arrival.

To test these ideas we initiated a pilot program, "New Horizons, New Homes," three 30-minute programs that aired on community radio in March. These productions taught students a great deal, as they had to learn to frame issues, manage and condense a variety and volume of information, and maintain their objectivity and impartiality while doing so.

Balance was a problem. News coverage of the boat people has been largely negative, but few formal groups exist with overtly anti-immigration stances and even fewer were willing to go on the air in support of current or increased government restrictions. This is contrary to the situation in the United States where anti-immigrant groups abound. At the same time, government officials were reluctant to speak with student journalists in detail—making it hard to obtain alternative viewpoints from formal institutions on the issue. This situation, however, had an unex-

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pected benefit, in that it forced students to engage more directly with the local community. Students spoke to more than 130 citizens, and, from those discussions, selected and aired a range of comments that typified community concerns.

In the longer term, this project will explore strategies to build journalism's role as a mediator of community politics. New models of journalistic practice may ultimately produce better solutions for Australian communities and strengthen Australia's social fabric.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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