CITIZENS in Democratic Politics
Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions

Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions is a report for people who want a stronger hand in shaping their collective future and recognize that this requires working through disagreements on what the future should be. Replacing an earlier publication, Framing Issues for Public Deliberation, this booklet incorporates the foundation’s latest insights on how people can describe problems and present different ways to address them so as to encourage sound judgments and avoid immobilizing polarization.

Kettering Foundation | 2011
FREE | 24 pages

Working Through Difficult Decisions

Working Through Difficult Decisions is a brochure for people interested in helping their communities work through their most challenging problems and for anyone interested in moderating forums based on National Issues Forums materials. The brochure speaks to how people can move beyond disagreements to arrive at shared and reflective judgments.

Kettering Foundation | 2011
FREE | 12 pages

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering’s primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering’s research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s website at www.kettering.org.

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Folk Politics  
Randall Nielsen
In the 2008 issue of Connections, Bob Cornett writes about the use of traditional music in the education of young people. Readers may not know that Bob, his wife Jean, and their family are renowned among musicians for their annual festival of Appalachian music in Lexington, Kentucky. Their Festival of the Bluegrass began in 1974 and is now the longest running music festival in the region where the distinctive form of music began.

Bluegrass festivals can appear odd to modern concertgoers. They typically run for days rather than hours, and people come as families to camp on festival grounds. Most do not come just to attend a concert. They bring their own banjos, guitars, and mandolins. And they bring their voices—they come to do their own
When Woody Guthrie was singing songs on a Los Angeles radio station in the late 1930s, he would mail out a songbook to people who asked for the words. On the bottom of one page appeared the following:

“This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright #154085, for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singin’ it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ours, cause we don’t give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that’s all we wanted to do.”

—Woody Guthrie

Folk Politics

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singing. Bob Cornett emphasizes the point. “People really sense that festival belongs to them . . . they really do sense they’re coming to their own show. They’re not just buying tickets to come and sit at an event.” Music at the festival never stops, as people break off into self-organizing ad hoc concerts. Yes, people also go to watch the professionals paid to play on the “main stage.” But it is common to find those professionals at the campground jam sessions as well.

Bob regards the sense of community as a critical part of a good festival and of bluegrass music itself. The music began in places where people came together on front porches to talk and to entertain each other. “The music was a part of it,” Bob says. “It was a self-forming community.” The music that they made on those porches and are still making at the Festival of the Bluegrass is folk music in Arlo Guthrie’s sense: people are doing their own singing and the music is theirs.

Of course bluegrass music is not unique in its origins. Just a few generations ago most people would rarely experience a stranger playing music for them. Yet music and singing have been fundamental parts of the everyday lives of people of all cultures. Throughout human history, songs have been sung around tribal campfires, in homes, in churches, and in workplaces. Before the advent of the printing press, people used songs to share and make sense of things happening in their lives.

The resulting songs and the insights they contained could not typically be attributed to particular authors. Copyright ownership of music and lyrics is a recent institution. The songs were ever-changing emergent phenomena, appearing at points in time as artifacts of an ongoing conversation—a melodic public voice that took different forms in different contexts while retaining the identifiable plots of human life. The resulting music has taken a mélange of intertwining forms: sea shanties and field hollers, rhythmic drumming and complex narrative poems, love songs and murder ballads, drinking songs and gospels, beer hall polkas and street corner raps.

Folk music is thus distinguished not by the subjects of the songs or the instruments used but by the nature of the interactions among people in the process through which the music is created. Folk songs are public works.

As Arlo Guthrie notes, people doing their own singing—the practice of folk songs—has only recently come to appear odd. The nature of music and its roles in the lives of people has changed in fundamental ways in the 20th century. By the mid-1900s songs and stories had become the purview of professionals who write, copyright, and perform them for the folk. Today if you ask people what the term folk music means, most will say that it is a professional form of music that takes “everyday people” as the subject and audience.

In this way music, like many other things that people create and exchange, has been transformed in just a few generations. The concept of music as
something produced for people by professionals was part of a larger 20th-century movement. Many of the challenges people once saw themselves and their fellow citizens responsible for—individual and social security, caring for the ill, the gathering and sharing of news, the education of youth, organizing people for community work—have become widely seen as distinct responsibilities of agencies staffed by experts in the administration of services.

The results have been transformative. Professionally managed programs built affordable housing, provided clean water supplies, constructed schools and hospitals, and built national highway systems. They virtually eliminated many life-threatening communicable diseases. The programs have been so successful that their administrative protocols for analyzing, planning, and evaluating are seen as the paragons of governance.

The meanings of citizenship and community have been transformed as well. People—the folk—have become the subjects of public administration rather than its fundamental actors. As Arlo Guthrie has seen the loss of the folk as players in popular music, we have seen the loss of the folk from the work of popular governance.

What can be done? As shown in this issue of Connections the promise is not in the molding of a new kind of citizen for a new kind of politics. People become singers by singing, and they become citizens by doing the things they have always done to shape their futures together. Indeed the most interesting stories seem always to begin with people seeing and building on what is already happening in the life of their community. While folk songs have come to appear relatively insignificant, people never stopped singing together.

We know what the songs sound like and we know how they feel. We also know how it feels to work together in concert with others in community, and that feeling is at the heart of every story in this issue of Connections. The stories are songs of folk politics.

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