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Reclaiming the Public Role

by Robert J. Kingston

“There are repeated and quite consistent indications that a deliberative public politics may transform individuals, inform public judgment, and address problems associated with a given social fabric.”

In 1992, just a decade after the National Issues Forums had published their first issue guide, the editor of a new guide prefaced it as follows:

For just over a decade . . . the forums have encouraged Americans to sort through difficult choices that face the nation, issues that range from the deficit, AIDS, and drugs to abortion, racial inequality, and health care. . . . This issue book asks readers to struggle with a different sort of problem . . . an exploration of the health of our political system itself.

A solution to *that* “problem”—the health of our political system itself—has regrettably not yet been reached. Once before, and again during the ensuing 15 years, the issue of our own government, and the effectiveness of the citizenry in it, had been or was to be raised in the dialogues known as National Issues Forums; and what had evidenced a characteristic uncertainty and cross-directions in the many deliberations about the kinds of schools we need for our children was to become apparent, too, when we turned to problems of our democratic government—or at least, to the complaints we make about it. Even though in the titles of the issue guides for these forums we can sense the responsibility for self-government that democracy implies, participants remain apparently unsure of actions that we, the people, might take to bring that about.

In 1992, the Cold War threat had passed; the threat of terrorism was not yet immediate and domestic. It was an election year, in which economic projections were to be “read” from candidates’ “lips”; and the voter turnout, especially by the young, was not expected to be high. Perhaps therefore, public deliberation in 1992

and 1993 would focus on the funding of election campaigns; and on the apparent lethargy, with respect to political matters, of the American people, especially younger voters.

The NIF title for its 1992 issue guide on the health of our political system was *People and Politics: Who Should Govern?* And quite clearly

Ours appeared to be a sadly undemocratic citizenry . . . discouraged from voting, anyway, by registration requirements that were inadequate, complex, or perhaps sometimes even deceptive.

the concern universally in the forums on this issue—and in the research that preceded it—was that the people *should* govern but that the government (or the elections that routinely reestablishes it) were in the grip of monied special interests. Further, the power of those interests was clearly thought to be complemented by a reluctance among the electorate to get out and vote. Ours appeared to be a sadly undemocratic citizenry that had not experienced any effectively kinetic teaching of civic responsibility in its schools and was discouraged from voting, anyway, by registration requirements that were inadequate, complex, or perhaps sometimes even deceptive, and by candidates who could not be relied upon to deliver what was promised—if, indeed, promises were made and could be understood.

So the conversations went.

In these public deliberations, the tentatively suggested responses of citizens to the predicament they themselves described did include

increased citizen engagement. Yet no pattern emerged to outline a kind of *citizen* leadership, without which the hope of democratically addressing national threats—like the deficit, urban decay, the depletion of natural resources, and so on—might be likely to fail. The failures of government, however, were apparently seen in these forums not as merely reflecting the diminution of an active public interest but as being in some obscurely Machiavellian way the very *cause* of it; and the ensuing and subsequent public deliberation on the topic no more than marginally changed the sense that “leaders” do not lead because no one demands it of them—a thought reflected perversely in the comment of a man in a forum who said *people* didn’t act because *leaders* didn’t demand it of them.

This notion that people did not ask of leaders that they lead surely should, anyway, have seemed a distinctly odd reflection from a proudly democratic society. The distinguished 20th-century French scholar, Émile Legouis, once suggested that the first historic document of modern democracy, the British *Magna Carta*, was forced on King John by his nobles, as the people, overall, were beginning to frame a public voice, beginning, perhaps to imagine even that there might be, one day, “no taxation without representation.” Legouis wrote:

In tones that are harsh and often coarse, which must have been echoed by common men up and down the country, the vices of the nobles, the state, and the clergy were denounced. Some sided with the people against their governors . . . even against the king.

Yet after seven more centuries of democracy’s growth, at the end of the 20th century, and now in America, Richard Harwood, responding to the implied question, “what is wrong with politics?,” argued in his relentless commentary, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street*

(published a year before the “People and Politics: Who Shall Govern?” forums were convened):

We do not face simply a problem of citizen apathy. Instead, we find ourselves confronting a pervasive sense of *political impotence* among the American people. This impotence grows out of a politics of disconnection—where citizens find little access to the process of politics; where they feel overwhelmed by a political system that seems to be running beyond their control; where citizens believe their relationship with public officials is perilously near to being severed; where citizens believe there is only a muffled “public voice.”

Harwood does acknowledge that “there are pockets of public life” acting to improve their communities; and indeed, from research reported in his own book, we find that Americans “hold a keen desire to act in the public arena.”

Americans are both frustrated and downright angry about the state of the current political system. They argue that politics has been taken away from them—that they have been *pushed out* of the political process. They want to participate, but they believe that there is no room for them in the political process they now know. This sense of impotence differs greatly from the so-called “citizen apathy” we have read about in weekly magazines and heard on nightly news programs. Apathy suggests the making of a voluntary, intentional choice; but most Americans feel, instead, that today’s political situation has been thrust upon them. It is not something that they have—nor would have—chosen for themselves.

So the challenge becomes, for Harwood, “how can we reconcile people’s sense of political impotence with their desire to act?” That is surely a challenge that a deliberative people ought to meet.

Five years later, however, John Doble Research Associates—who, in 1997-1998, covered extensively a further set of forums on this same topic of a recognized alienation of citizens from government—reported the deliberations as revealing that people did still feel alienated and disaffected. Doble evidences that people apparently wanted to limit campaign spending and curb the influence of money in campaigns; they wanted government to be closer to the people; but they found it “hard to imagine how citizenship could be rediscovered.” The “obstacles,” they thought, nowadays would include apathy, mistrust (of government by “the people”), and, in Doble’s words, “an inability to imagine what *a public* is or what it would do.”

Strikingly, one man who had moderated forums on this problem in Portland, Oregon, confessed:

I’ve had almost every person come up to me [after the forum] and say, “Okay, so now what do we do?” And I’m not sure what to tell them.

And Doble observes:

A number of participants maintained that civic involvement would be meaningful and



effective only if it were connected to government action, and that officials would have to show people what to do and how their efforts connect to solving the larger problem. A woman from Atlanta said: “If the government could set up an agency and charge it

They want to participate, but they believe that there is no room for them in the political process they now know. This sense of impotence differs greatly from the so-called ‘citizen apathy.’

with the purpose of mobilizing citizens, rallying them, showing them how they could contribute, then I think a lot of us would get involved.”

Whether the irony of this fanciful notion registered on any of the forum participants—in Atlanta or elsewhere—we cannot say, having only oral records, often quite casual, from most places, although we are told that many nodded approval to the Atlanta remark. Events



closer, however, may caution us of a tendency among non-deliberative voters to find themselves caught in a web of self-serving interests, not necessarily their own.

When the issue was first revisited again in this century, however, in 2006, the focus of the entire deliberation was on “reclaiming the public’s role”—an interest that clearly evoked, if it did not actually reflect, a US tradition of the public’s own democratic sovereignty. Instead of the timorous, “officials will have to show people what to do.” This “reclaiming” had itself become our democracy’s challenge—as the discussion guide title makes plain, its title being *Democracy’s Challenge: Reclaiming the Public’s Role*. (Emphasis added.) It seems as though the National Issues Forums, whose mission itself is to affirm and enrich the public’s responsibilities in democratic self-government, were taking on the public! And appropriately, the naming of the issue thus, and the competing “approaches” whose putative merits would frame the “choice work” that public deliberation embodies, were drawn in clear lines from citizen “complaints” about the diminution of their role that had repeatedly emerged during the preceding decade.

In a stimulating little study, *Sustaining Public Engagement*, published in 2009 by the Kettering Foundation and Everyday Democracy, Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung, the authors, distinguish between what they call “embedded public reflection” and “embedded public action.” They describe the first this way:

When a community uses deliberation with some regularity to address problems of weak social fabric, to transform individuals, or to inform public judgment, we say they have embedded public reflection.

And the second as follows:

When a community translates public reflection into action to provide public input, to mobilize communities and resources to solve

local problems, or to achieve collaborative governance, we say they have embedded public action . . . intimately connected to institutions and organizations that possess the resources and authority to address the social problems at issue.

Now it is still difficult, over the 30-some years we have been analyzing deliberations, in fact, to identify more than a sample of communities in which we might confidently observe public deliberation as an “embedded” means of acting to change longer embedded societal disorders. But some examples suggest that a pattern of public deliberation, even in a culture of such diversity as the USA, can and does consistently secure meaningful public reflection that may, given appropriate energy in leadership and institutional facility, be translated into effective political action of the kind that democracy aspires to. There are repeated and quite consistent indications that a deliberative public politics may transform individuals, inform public judgment,

People found it ‘hard to imagine how citizenship could be rediscovered.’ The ‘obstacles’ would include apathy.

and address problems associated with a given social fabric.

As we have seen, the slowly shaping changes, over half a century of citizens’ reflection on their appropriate role in the world, paint this development on a large canvas; so do the slow first steps towards a 21st-century sense of “the energy crisis” and “the immigration crisis.” The possibilities of a shared tolerance glimmer even through dilemmas like those presented by matters reflecting differences of ideology and faith, or

cultural differences—like abortion, immigration, and AIDs. And in a culture where paddling one’s own canoe is an ideal, there will no doubt nonetheless eventually be accepted alternative means of providing care to those most in need.

Looking towards the ideal deliberative community sometimes leads to glib talk that seems to imply that *the* ideal democracy in the United States today is as it was in Greece, BC. There, it seems to be inferred, the practice of public action was based on the outcome of public deliberations. Insofar as there was a governing order, it was merely responsive to the predetermined public will. The paradoxical history of that idea is not our business now; but it is important to note that this (ideal or “routine”) relationship between public will and its formal (or “official”) enactment is difficult to evidence historically, and unlikely within contemporary structures of democracy, whose electoral systems have been traditionally unenthusiastic about shared authority, whose major nongovernmental organizations have become increasingly thought of, by the public, as instruments of government, and whose popular constituency tends always to be wooed by divided but sophisticated ideological oligarchies.

Certainly Yankelovich at Public Agenda has always seen the deliberative “working through” process of the public as the ultimate guide to legislators—directions for policymakers, in effect; and Mathews at Kettering has always argued it as the essential means through which the community comes to know itself—a necessary preface to public action. But the long movement towards a public coping more readily in a situation with international obligations, and the misunderstanding of (or reluctance to cope with) shared obligations, and the persistent or repeated ease of complaint against government by a people who supposedly govern themselves, suggest that



what we, as a people, might best keep tackling our reluctance, as citizens, to accept the responsibility of deliberating together.

The continuing *practice* of public deliberation itself reveals the slow-paced movement that translates the idea of change into the conceptualizing of public *action*. The forums of 2006 on reclaiming the public's role were instructive in the way in which they revealed citizens addressing the same old *problem*, but with an unmistakable difference of *tone* from that of a decade before. It may be like seeing a child after the first year of college; or a grandchild after a first term at nursery school; or a daughter, after marriage: what one knew before is still there, and recognizable; but there is an added confidence, a genuine spark of awareness, and the hope of achievement. "Democracy," wrote Harwood, now, "is based on people talking to one another"—what might be called "public talk." Indeed, democratic living is the antithesis of the monastic: we *become* ourselves as citizens only in the practice of *community-making conversation*. We learn as we weigh one choice against another; and we sometimes accept what we might individually forego as the price of what we may collectively achieve.

The democratic state is inescapably "ours" and inevitably "us"; and the slow-paced move-

ment that all of these sessions of public talk have reported reveals its unique choreography. What *first* happens when people gather to deliberate over ways in which to cope with a complex problem is probably little more than a kind of griping, even hand-wringing, about the overwhelming fact of the problem's existence. That is perhaps inevitable and little more than a social affirmation of the agreement to talk. But we are not all likely to welcome reports of a familiar and pathetic gripe with banner headlines, as though it were a "finding" from public deliberation. We don't meet in deliberation merely to vent known frustrations or to advertise our confusion. Those are no doubt among our *reasons* for deliberating, but we meet to learn together something that we cannot know or have not been able to accept, *alone*.

When John Doble produced the first of his widely recognized annual print reports of outcomes from the National Issues Forums—it was on foreign policy, in the early 1990s—the reason for its enthusiastic reception was that the skillful analysis of the patterns of thought expressed in the forums enabled him to present "outcomes" with the accompaniment of supporting, but not determining, "ballot" data, collected from questionnaires, following the conclusions of the deliberative sessions, that reflect the clarity, if not quite the mathematical authority, that we associate with survey analyses that reflect polling data. Obviously, as all of us were always careful to point out when the outcomes of public deliberation were presented to professionals in government and media, these were merely descriptive and qualitative studies of the thinking among self-selected groups. We eagerly chose other ways—noting the nature of the groups, their diversity and geographic range, the clearly nonpartisan nature of support ma-

terials, and the inferred sense of judgments *in a formative stage*—to underscore what we sensed to be their potential *political* importance, hoping that might lead towards some professional political *acceptance*. And we took to employing

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the useful phrases *public thinking* and *a public voice* to distinguish what is unique in this work.

Yet from the start, such reports of public deliberation were almost inevitably hitched to the survey analysts' quasi-scientific credo, to the quantitative values of politics-as-usual. They were assumed to be persuasive only in so far as they recorded *widely shared* attitudes, if not technically majority opinions. What was sought in the professional establishments of politics and government—and certainly of commerce—was the *size* of opinion, the *mass* of discernible change, the *currency* of a specific concern. It is in the nature of reporting for political ends—as it would be, also, for marketing purposes—to record observations in this way; and in a democracy like ours, where both majority and minority opinions are only theoretically of importance to suit particular occasions, it is as appropriate as it is thoroughly regrettable.

In this respect, the nationally televised *A Public Voice* program at that time had a somewhat easier task than print reporting in that it

had real citizens to show, on film, as if in extended dialogue. It could offer visuals of a train of thinking, over time; and by editing, by juxtaposing individual responses of concern or uncertainty, it could more simply present an offered thought *in the process of change* as it came into contact with thought and experience from others. In effect, in the televised programs we had the advantage of real life “characters,” and actually sometimes used recognizably the same people in different sequences to make what are genuinely human and individual changes in perception “real” to a video audience. Yet even though the *Public Voice* program had the interest and expectation of “characters,” as in theater, rather than the baggage of science and numbers that is anticipated among professional social scientists, anyone who looks carefully today at the video archives of *A Public Voice* can see that they are essentially collections of opinions, expressed in real time, juxtaposed in such a way as to reveal the actual *patterns in the progression* of “public thoughts”—the weight or breadth of approval collectively given being indicated by the number of approving or contradictory or “qualifying” perceptions that surround it, before a peculiarly succinct summation (or dismissal) by one or two on-camera participants opens the way for transition to a “next step” in the deliberative process. In other words, the origi-



nal hours of film have been edited down to the familiar “television hour” in a way that reveals the *process* or “*pattern*” of public thinking, as it was found from an aggregate of many more deliberative hours, filmed in different sites over a few weeks of the year. (Shakespeare, we tell ourselves, and Euripides, set the pattern, albeit with more interesting subjects and more consummate grace, as well as their own gifts for language!)

Inevitably, then, we were sometimes obliged to show the value of a public *judgment* much as politicians and pollsters measure the import of public *opinion*, although we argue that “public opinion,” unlike the narrative of deliberation, is a fictive construct, implicitly defining possibility in terms of predetermined questions that relate to a preestablished agenda. We know, however—at least in our wiser if more theo-

Our own opinions may not, in the end, change for each of us as individuals; but our understanding of their implications will.

retical moments—that public deliberation is valuable precisely because it is *not* so restricted by prior assumption. People’s *opinions* are merely instrumental in public deliberation; they are refracted or enlarged as they accommodate newly reported experience, evolving into subtly different views, shared from others talking with them. Our own opinions may not, in the end, change for each of us as individuals; but our



understanding of their implications will; our understanding of their costs will; our understanding of their limits and of the possible continuing usefulness of the opinions of others—all this will change. And it is the nature of these changes, and the circumstances of these changes in the course of deliberation, that represent the real, the *political* usefulness of what we call “public thinking.” Opinion is a fuel of public thinking; but public thinking should not be mistaken for a measure or demonstration of public opinion. Rather it tells us *what* concerns drive people, and *why* they drive them. In a democracy, wise policy and satisfying practice may emerge from this, as it does not from opinions measured in contest, one with another. From deliberation, we learn, not how to write laws, but what kind of community we want to be. We do not deliberate to *govern* ourselves, but in order to *learn* . . . that we might be governable!

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