

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Cover art: Carol Vollet Kingston and Joan Harrison collaboratively created the cover image, *I Have Work To Do* (2017). This digital photomontage homage to Robert Kingston was created using scans of a painting by Carol Vollet Kingston, *Summer Doldrums* (oil, 1993), vintage engravings, and text from Robert Kingston's writings.

Shared Experience and Collective Understanding . . . the Outcomes of Public Deliberation

By Robert J. Kingston

Public deliberation is not well fashioned to make policy or frame legislation but it sets the stage, turns up the lights, and sometimes itself becomes the overture of the show.

The blessing, and perhaps the curse, of history is the easy wisdom of hindsight that it offers. We know that times change; and when we examine that change it may be comforting to see it as rooted in the genes of national history. If we have a sense, too, of how public judgment on a given issue or problem in our collective life might (or should) relate to the institutional judgment of our leaders, we will find it illuminating to track the ways that public dialogue has reflected, or was confused by, or failed to anticipate what in fact subsequently happened. But when Yankelovich describes, in his book about public judgment, the exercises of intellectual discipline by which a public may come to an actionable judgment, it is only for convenience that he cites them as stages through which the public awareness will pass in sequence (from becoming aware of an issue to making a responsible judgment), as though in a relay race where only the handing off of the baton gives license to proceed along the next lap, toward a finish line already known and accepted. The real truth of public deliberation—and it is implicit in the psychology that informs Yankelovich's work—is that people move back and forth between the stages that he identifies: one stage may virtually “embrace” another, so that to have passed through one may accomplish the work of two. Further, as these pages may suggest, a given dilemma as understood by any one person may itself change over time: its features may

“morph” into another’s dilemma, and any “judgment” we may think we have come to may turn out to be merely a temporary reprieve, or a turn in the road. Perhaps more significant, the “finish line” is not known but emerges from the deliberative work of the participants.

Public deliberation reveals not a verdict but the making of a public.

To understand this particular phenomenon of *public* deliberation, approaching a judgment, is to contrast it with that of a jury that has to decide firmly between innocence and guilt, and even sometimes to measure the sum of penalties that its judgment should determine as appropriate. Public deliberation, for those who see and hear and analyze it—and for all of us who depend upon it—in effect reveals not a verdict but the making of a “public,” the formulation of a public will that can be described and put to use, even though it may not be measured in the sense that a public survey or poll may measure public opinion.

The survey analyst asks a series of questions (all of them based upon extensive research) of participants to be surveyed, then analyzes the responses as they relate to the predetermined purpose of the questions asked, reporting the outcome as agreement or disagreement, metrically. In analyzing public *deliberation*, however, having already identified a handful of different kinds of citizen that we think will be, overall, not *un*representative of the nation or the com-

munity whose judgment we are seeking, we search out, in the course of a group deliberation, the various aspects of the substantive problem that participants have seemed to be interested in addressing, discovering both the range of their interest in those aspects or subtopics and the motives or values or risks that appear to have driven particular dissensions or agreements as the subtopics have become, by turns, the focus of discussion. An ultimate distinction between the two ways of capturing public attitudes—polling and deliberative conversation—is that while the first approach (the survey) pursues established points of difference, or conflict, in knowledge and opinion and intent, then reports on them metrically, the second (the deliberative forum) is a means of revealing—for commentators, politicians, or other citizens to pursue and capture narratively—*substantive points of interest and concern* that people think they might usefully address collectively as citizens. In public deliberation such concerns are modified, expanded, even merged into each other, recurring, or fading, as groups of people talk judiciously together for sustained periods of time.

Both the likenesses and the differences between findings from the two approaches are of course ultimately of interest to us in the pursuit of democracy, or self-government. But in pursuing an inquiry, we always have to remind ourselves that the questions asked in a survey are dictated by something other than “the public”; the survey, although it is informed by focus group research, ultimately is designed to illuminate and understand the likely public outcome of expert, official, or special-interest attitudes toward a substantive and already defined problem at issue. The public deliberative approach,

by contrast, is intent upon finding out *what* it is that interests people, broadly, and *why* it is that they are interested in—or quickly cease to pursue—particular aspects of the problem or its consequences. What we have to report, ultimately, from public deliberation, to policymakers or various leadership elites, is not “what *they* (the policymakers) ought to do” (although that may be implied), but what aspects of the problem at issue *people* are interested in; and why—this is most important—*why* they are interested in those aspects of the problem, and in what has been suggested might satisfactorily be done about them. What we have to report from the public’s deliberations is not what action or policy the people appear to favor, as pollsters might, but how (or to what degree) the people have come, collectively, to understand the demands that a recognized dilemma may make upon themselves, collectively.

This is an enormous step forward, for this kind of public *judgment* is an essential aspect of a democracy’s political practice that is simply not included in the formalities of our Constitution, nor much noted in the present



institutional realities of our American democracy. Yet, as a collective dialogue among citizens—like the *demos* of the ancient Greeks—it is fundamentally what democracy presumes to characterize the community that is called “democratic.” Democracy demands a delibera-

Each successive respondent seems inevitably to add to or modify the nature of the original question.

tive citizenry; an elective government is merely thereafter instrumental in effecting (or sometimes, alas, frustrating) what that citizenry wills.

Different as it is from conversation or argument among family or strangers at a table or along a bar, public, political, face-to-face, group deliberation is inevitably and of its nature significantly different also from both deliberation through the newspaper, or by mail, or online. Fundamentally, it seems that mail, print, or online kinds of communication tend to take shape as question or statement invoking or implying an answer, the varying responses being direct, oppositional, or sometimes ingeniously diverting reactions to a stated question or “position.” In deliberative groups, however, each successive respondent seems inevitably to add to or modify the nature of the original question or observation itself, frequently with reference to personal concern, so that others, eager to respond, slowly change the nature of the understood question—which has (perhaps in

some sense, not even consciously recognized) already been changed between speaker and listener so that a deliberative “narrative” is itself being formed without reference to an agenda or issue book, or position, or any recognized rule of process in the consciousness of the deliberative

The core of a group deliberation is the unfolding of a shared story.

participants. (That on-paper, on-wire, or online respondents are not physically recognized as participating nonverbally—by gesture, notion, murmur, or intriguing changes in physical reaction—may further exacerbate the difference.)

Such deliberatively offered considerations are important in varying degrees on different occasions, of course; yet we do well to remember that the core of a group deliberation, as we have traditionally valued it, is the *unfolding of a shared story* among a modest-sized group of individuals, with some shared values but differing experiences, as they consider a common (or shared) “public problem.” This is not to say that our experience of the problem is shared: the health-care problem strikes me differently if I am a stockholder in an insurance company than it does an uninsured teen-aged mother. But in public political deliberation, as citizens, we recognize similarly the problematic nature of our mutually affective individual interests. Public communication among strangers who do not assemble as a community, however, even if it

can be realized online with a visible component, tends to reflect a focus on immediate responses, or answers. And even if a range of individual narratives of discomfort in search of answers comes readily in some instances, the one-at-a-time accumulation of individual responses—rather than a continuing sequence of experience and interaction—remains a significant difference between the deliberative *group* and the casual or one-at-a-time read news-sheet, online communications, or in audited argument. This is perhaps why there are so few examples of written literary deliberation; even great collections of correspondence, like that between Paul Claudel and George Bernard Shaw, turn out to be, in effect, debates among researchers—carefully thought and highly opinionated ones, at that!—rather than deliberative searches for shared understanding. In a deliberative conversation a shared story unfolds, taking the place of argument, while in the debates of legislators or partisans, predetermined *interests* are argued and attacked.

Public deliberation does not need a teacher or an umpire, and certainly not the kind of moderator we are familiar with in news programs, where, typically, hosts and reporters tend to adopt consciously (and sometimes condescendingly) the pattern of professional commentators. Popular domestic news media, deliberation online, and formal political campaign activities all tend to be valued among individuals who consciously represent a given *interest*. They are favored instruments of government and elective politics. Public politics, however, takes place within groups whose members must come to share an understanding strong enough to generate action by means of an extended exchange

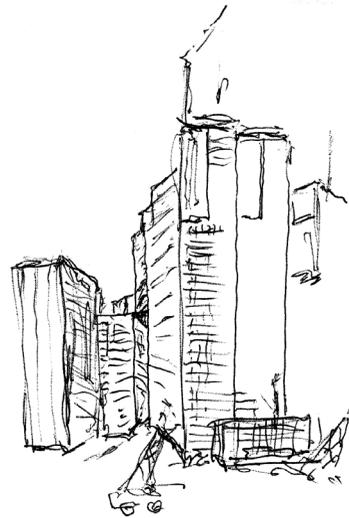
of experience. The value of public democratic deliberation, then, is that it opens the way toward shared *understanding* and thence collaborative action. Experience tells us that this is a difficult process, however, that requires extensive exchange among citizens. And *public politics*, in this sense, is never a conflict of interests, always a shared endeavor. The recognizable deliberative process of democracy is one whereby we citizens, in groups or as group, together exchange (and to varying degrees change) our understandings of problems that confront us all, as a people. We appear to value the options that such conversations offer us, and so recognize the trade-offs that the various options will inevitably require.

To assume that the outcome of public deliberation is, ultimately, the making of a decisive quasi-legislative decision may actually undervalue the public's distinctive role in the political life of a contemporary democracy. To government, always, belongs the task of framing and enforcing law; and in a fully functioning democracy, it will do so in response to a manifest public understanding—if you will, to an expression of public will. The image of the classical *agora*, as a place of relatively well-centered concern, comes to mind; but, in a vast and diverse country like the United States, where the business of one interest often seems necessarily to depend upon the exclusion of another, the notion that this kind of harmonious will can be satisfactorily achieved by the skills of representatives, elected *by* those interests, is open to question. The formulation of a coherent public will—indeed the taking shape of a *public*, itself

—depends on *the process of its citizens, collectively, coming to judgment.*

Except that the outcome of public deliberation is not ever quite a “judgment” of the kind we associate with courts of law, or professional examiners, or ideologically driven legislators!

In the very early years of the National Issues Forums, we learned quickly that individual participants in a deliberative forum very often did not change their minds (or their opinions) on the question at issue, but that they did change their judgments of the opinions of



others. The voices that they heard in the public forum were voices recognized as responsive to a shared dilemma, even though they might tend toward different courses of action, reflecting the somewhat different circumstances or prior concerns of individual participants. The more we have heard these public voices, confronting more (and sometimes more complex) issues, the more clear it has become that, in deliberative

public politics, the movement is always toward a closer, collective understanding, both of shared dilemmas and of the kinds of trade-offs that must be considered in deciding how those dilemmas might best be handled. And more clear becomes the effort that needs be made to that end if we are genuinely to share our life as a people!

When our goal, then, is an actionable, collective response to a societal problem, our interest is not merely in what individuals in groups want to do, but in why they want to do it. What citizens' deliberations have always revealed—if we hear them fully enough and consider them carefully enough—is the *relationship* between the “whys” rather than merely a *tension* between the “whats.” The “what” and the “why” are each related in their proponents' eyes, those of the deliberators, but acknowledgement of the tension that attends any action is valued variously by different individuals—and recognizing that is the means, the indispensable means, toward the making of citizens' relationship as a community. The achievement of that relationship—of a community that consciously shares its destiny—embodies the concept of government



to which democracy aspires.

In this sense, whenever we listen to, or participate among, a deliberative public—no matter that the issue be complex, the deliberation together all too brief—we become a part

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of that public, coming to (or at least moving toward) judgment about what should be done, in the context of our shared problem and a shared sense of others' experience of it. It may often be that in deliberative politics—as in psychiatric medicine—relative to the time available and the complexity of the rooted problem, the ultimate “cure” remains elusive. Nevertheless, what is achieved, what is learned or “worked through,” session by session, may be critical in determining what follows. And the patient (we, the people, in this case) may progress therefrom! Politically, the psychological metaphor of “working through” is particularly illuminating to those whose interest is in the question David Mathews is wont to ask, “What will make democracy work as it should?”

Such deliberative dialogue is itself what makes democracy work: deliberative citizens are doing the work of democracy. In a culture like ours—that tends to think of “government

of the people” as essentially associated with a representatively elected *institutional* government which, once chosen, governs pretty much as do other kinds of hierarchic governments—it is not conventional to accept that a people talking to itself is ultimately setting the terms within which effective policy is designed and legislation shaped. Yet although these deliberative citizens ... may still not know quite what to do or who should do it with respect to any given issue, it is nonetheless their dialogue that leads us to an awareness of what *should* be done, and why. In the last resort, public deliberation is not well fashioned to make policy or frame legislation, but it reveals to all of us the concerns that policy and law must embrace. It sets the stage, turns up the lights, and sometimes itself becomes the overture of the show that we look forward to. As Daniel Yankelovich says, it sets “the boundaries of public permission.” As a deliberative public, we may not actually decide upon which actions might be taken by ourselves, individually or collectively, and which by our governing institutions. And contrary to sentimental expectations, the deliberative public forum seldom leads directly to individual citi-



zens’ actions. It is, however, the *people’s politics*—as distinct from the politics of elections and legislation—in the functioning democracy.

Robert J. Kingston was a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation and editor of the Kettering Review for more than 30 years. Before joining the Kettering Foundation, Kingston was deputy director of the National Endowment for the Humanities under three US presidents. He was also the executive director of Public Agenda in New York. This essay is drawn from his 2012 book, Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics.

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