

# KETTERING REVIEW

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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.

# Editors' Letter

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For millennia many have doubted the capacities of ordinary people to productively participate in public life—even during times that call themselves democratic. The story often goes that citizens are too disinterested, too polarized, and too lacking in knowledge to talk productively with their fellows, much less to collectively make sound decisions. As such, the “business” of democracy is better left to those who supposedly know better. In the wake of the recent elections, this refrain has increased in intensity. While problems persist on many fronts, blame increasingly falls on citizens.

But is this blame really warranted? We wonder what our longtime editor, Robert J. Kingston, who passed away as we were completing our previous issue, would have to say about this. So we decided to dedicate this issue to him, and we asked his wife, Carol Vollet Kingston, to create an original work of art for our cover. She obliged us and, along with Joan Harrison, created a work that depicts Bob in his informal musings, whatever the setting, thinking through the larger questions that continue to interest us. This issue, then, is a special tribute to his inestimable contribution to the work of the Kettering Foundation, the National Issues Forums, and democratic life more broadly. One of the keenest observers of public thought that we have known, Bob was both sober and optimistic, noting that while “democracy demands a deliberative citizenry” it is still up to “an elective government” to effect or, sometimes, frustrate “what that citizenry wills.” Through his many years of closely observing deliberative public forums all nationwide, Bob came to discern that, while citizens do not ultimately decide matters, they have a crucial role in setting the stage.

Nonetheless significant obstacles, ready to short-circuit a truly deliberative public, often stand in the way. For example, as Martín Carcasson notes, people tend to be “cognitive misers,” avoiding tough choices and processing information with an eye towards upholding preexisting beliefs. Moreover, Carcasson notes that many features of our political and media environment tend to exacerbate these features of the mind. And as Linell Ajello reports, some people enter deliberations expecting “to face disagreement and anger.” Further, Katherine Cramer even notes that a surprising number of people have stopped talking with someone close to them in the wake of recent, divisive elections. To such problems Carcasson argues that “we need processes that spark creativity and innovation, and ultimately lead

to cocreation and collaborative action.” And Ajello finds that in properly crafted deliberative settings, people with very different partisan views can actually come to shared understandings of problems. The very same people who had grown accustomed to anger and disagreement were surprised, she notes, at how productive political conversation, in spite of our many differences, could be.

Tracking political discussion groups “in the wild,” Katherine Cramer finds that, despite the common refrain that most people dislike politics and avoid discussing it in polite company, Cramer conveys here findings that there is far more informal political conversation occurring than we might expect even if those involved might not consider it “political” talk. Cramer finds numerous small groups of people who gather together at local gas stations and coffee shops to talk about what’s happening in the community, the country, or the world. More than just idle chit-chat, Cramer makes the case that these informal conversations are important as they help people to make sense of the political world around them.

Taken together, what we hear from both Cramer and Ajello suggests a public willing to have tough, but necessary, conversations with others. The groups are not perfect, all-knowing bodies, but as Cramer notes about the discussion groups she has observed, “These are not academic deliberations, but they are the act of people doing their best to make sense of the crazy world around them.”

Our authors show us that in communities of all sizes, from agrarian to suburban and urban, people are finding ways to talk across differences. In fact, politics and cities themselves arose out of the need to do this, or as Lewis Gordon puts it, “The initial logic of citizenship, if we return to the polis, from which the political emerged, was one of discursive conflict, communication, and, thus, interaction.” Though we tend to think of cities as places where politics may need to occur, Gordon writes that “it was the production of citizenship, a complex and constant negotiation of power emerging from human beings living together, that produced the demand for spaces, transformed into places, for their continued cultivation. This meant, in principle, that citizens produced cities wherever such practices emerged.”

We took a piece by another longtime friend, the late Benjamin R. Barber, to close out this issue. Excerpting from his last book, *Cool Cities*, we find Barber arguing for the power of what can be achieved through the exercise of democratic citizenship at the city level. Where the countries of the world have fixed borders that distinguish

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one from the other, many of the world's most pressing problems know no bounds. Thus, to tackle these borderless problems, Barber states that we must, "restore democracy to its deliberative roots," which he argues is most achievable at the level of the city.

Taking all the pieces as a whole, what we are left with is a picture, not of what the public thinks, but of how and why a public thinks. The "how" picture is far messier in that it does not convey a unified voice or a singular judgment. What it does convey though is public thinking that is actively struggling with difficult decisions, full of nuance, and reflective of the things that people deeply care about. As for the "whys," Bob writes, when a goal of deliberation is to respond effectively to a social problem, then

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.

**Noëlle McAfee and Nicholas A. Felts**

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