

The Participative Route to Sustainability

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The complex, contentious, apparently overwhelmingly difficult problems we face on the environmental, social and economic fronts cannot be resolved by doing nothing or even by doing as we have done in the past. Simply coining and propagating the term ‘sustainability’ has been a start. It has reframed the issues¹ in a world view that enables us to ‘see’ the future in a different way: ‘Meeting the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity’². The question is how can we change the trajectory we are currently on? Government regulation may help, but will not be sufficient. We will need the hearts and minds of civic society. To achieve this will also require a change in world view and hence direction.

In Australia, like most of the western world, we have understood the key to democracy to be representation—elected government. Increasingly, however, we are finding that without participation—the active engagement of the people in the policy-making process—the implementation of any contentious issue is increasingly difficult. For decades we have known that we can achieve effective participation through community consultation. However, to our bewilderment, we have found our efforts to consult with communities have often resulted in greater distrust and cynicism from both citizens and government.

On coming to office, the Western Australian Labor Government made a commitment to improving civic governance and to increasing sustainability. These issues are inextricably interrelated:

- The transition to a sustainable future is a long-term agenda that requires rethinking the way we live, use resources, govern and do business³.
- This will require rethinking how government can partner with community and industry; new connections, new inter-dependencies, new ways of deliberating and new ways of decision making.

This chapter examines how this has been achieved at three different levels—the macro policy level in developing the State Sustainability Agenda; the middle level in developing a long-term sustainable plan for metropolitan Perth; and the micro level, applying sustainability and engagement to a locally contentious issue of coastal development.

THE STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

The State Sustainability Strategy was a commitment in a green election in Western Australia, which the new ALP Government was keen to deliver. The Sustainability Policy Unit was established in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet in July 2001, with Professor Peter Newman as its Director. Newman has a long background in furthering the cause of sustainability both in Australia and worldwide. It was clear to him that constructing the strategy had to be a participatory process or else it would be meaningless. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development describe sustainability as akin to ‘playing jazz’⁴ with many different players contributing to a basic theme that we can all see but at various times any player can lead, new sub themes can emerge, and much innovation is likely as we play creatively together. The story of how Western Australia started playing ‘jazz’ on sustainability involves a series of five parallel and overlapping processes.

A research process

Work on the Strategy was begun by developing a series of eighteen

public seminars by visiting and local academics. In a unique partnership between universities and government contributing to the ‘jazz’ of sustainability, around fifty students and academics (mostly from ISTP at Murdoch University) documented thirty Background Papers of sustainability innovation from across the globe and forty-two local Case Studies⁵.

Published on the Sustainability Policy Unit website⁶, the Case Studies and Papers created considerable global interest, as well as a strong base upon which to develop policy. They showed sustainability activities were already happening in WA and summarised what was achievable in government through examples of sustainability in other parts of the world. This development of trust—that the suggested changes are feasible and manageable—is a critical part of any participatory process.

A public process

A formal government-based public process was conducted that used all the normal processes of government. A Consultation Paper was released in December 2001 and public and agency submissions were received until February 2002. These were then developed into the 240-page draft State Sustainability Strategy which was accepted by Cabinet and released for four months discussion in September 2002. About 150 public workshops, seminars and presentations to industry and community groups were held during the submission period. The Final Strategy was formulated along with an Action Plan and a set of Partnership Agreements, and released in September 2003⁷.

This agency-based process is still the main way that government needs to address major issues, and it cannot be avoided. Every submission was analysed and a response drawn up to each point made, including where it was made part of the Strategy, with all the submissions and the responses tabulated on the website. A particular partnership process with local government was necessary, as they had already been considering the issue of sustainability for a number of years. In the end, it was the agencies themselves who had to make the major changes, which led to the Strategy taking hold within government.

The hard work of talking to small groups of key people in government agencies was still necessary; there is no way that participation can

subvert that. What made it easier was that key industry and community people, who had become sustainability converts, were able to provide constant encouragement that this was a new idea worth pursuing to such groups. This occurred because of some creative exercises set up with community and business.

A community process

Apart from the general public's involvement through 150 different workshop opportunities, there was a specifically community-oriented process that came about through the initiative of a number of peak civil society groups. The WA Collaboration, a unique partnership between peak civil society groups including the Conservation Council, the WA Council on Social Services, the WA Council of Churches, the Ethnic Communities Council, the Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Council, the Youth Affairs Council and Unions WA⁸, was funded to create a Community Sustainability Agenda and they ran a number of workshops across the state⁹.

Another way of creating community interest was through a display in various shopping centres based on the stories of twelve local sustainability champions, with members of the public invited to submit comments and ideas on postcards.

A business process

The involvement of business in the Strategy was another key part of playing 'jazz'. The state's economy is dominated by the resources sector and for them sustainability was a lively and relevant global concept. For many resource companies, the process of developing a State Sustainability Strategy was an essential framework for how they foresaw their future. It was a necessary part of creating their 'licence to operate', especially in providing guidance on how to link the social dimension of sustainability into their approvals and operating processes. Thus, a number of close working groups were established with business in order to clarify and develop sustainability policy. This was broadened out through a range of seminars and workshops held with professional organisations. Lively debates were often held as the material frequently

challenged traditional notions of business responsibility. But in the end it was the innovative businesses and particular business leaders who were able to hold sway and suggest that the sustainability agenda was also a business agenda.

A global process

Every process of change is helped if it is seen as a part of a global process. This is particularly so with sustainability which began as a part of global politics¹⁰. Thus, from the beginning, all of the actions taken as part of developing the local sustainability agenda were linked to global processes. In particular, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 was chosen as the place to launch our draft Strategy. This coincided with the establishment of the Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (nrg4sd) which was the global linkage of state governments involved in sustainability. Because of our leadership, Western Australia became an inaugural Co-chair of nrg4sd and thereafter has linked its policy development to other states in that network (especially Wales). The launch of the final State Sustainability Strategy was given considerable momentum by the holding of the third meeting of the nrg4sd in Fremantle in September 2003, when several Premiers and Ministers from around the world came to discuss sustainability. The event provided a significant backdrop for the Premier to show the state and, in particular, the media, that Western Australia now had the world's first State Sustainability Strategy.

The Strategy process received considerable interest¹¹. This is apparent from the many thousands of hits a day received on the Sustainability website (over one-third from overseas), the consistently good attendance at all the public meetings, and the demand for presentations on the Strategy, which was unprecedented within government. Perhaps of greater significance, however, has been the level of engagement by people in the Strategy discussions. As stated by Stigson¹², President, World Business Council for Sustainable Development:

I am impressed by the work that you and the government of Western Australia have been doing to create a sustainable development

strategy for your state. I have not come across any similar extensive process as that you are going through anywhere else in the world. It will be very interesting to follow how the next phases of your work will evolve.

PIONEERING DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Applying the concepts of partnering and engagement to achieve sustainability is often more difficult at a local level, where NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard) frequently mitigates against long-term, big-picture change. Experience in Western Australia has shown that residents in favour of an effective public transport system have fought against a bus stop outside their homes; those in favour of giving disadvantaged people a fair go, have raged against public housing in their district; and those who have fought for protection of their ocean reef have railed against recreational fishing restrictions on the reef. The notion of sustainability is highly accepted—unless it impinges on people's personal or pecuniary interests.

However, it is both the big and small decisions that will need to change if there is to be a transition to a more sustainable future. Government can provide leverage, facilitation and support, but it will need the 'ownership' of the people for any major transitions to take place.

This is unlikely to be achieved if we consult with communities in the same way we have been consulting in the past. To do so is likely to further reduce social capital rather than increasing it¹³. We need an innovative approach to shared decision making that engages people in an inclusive way in understanding one another, in deepening knowledge about the issues and in seeking common ground that has at its core, the common good. This is the essence of deliberative democracy, a nascent social movement that seeks to increase social capital through participative decision making¹⁴.

Like coining the term 'sustainability', the concept of deliberative democracy allows us to reframe how we conceive partnering with the people. The Deliberative Democracy Consortium¹⁵ defines deliberative democracy in the following way:

Deliberation is an approach to decision-making in which citizens consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, converse with one another to think critically about options before them and enlarge their perspectives, opinions and understandings.

Deliberative democracy strengthens citizen voices in governance by including people of all races, classes, ages and geographies in deliberations that directly affect public decisions. As a result, citizens influence—and can see the result of their influence on—the policy and resource decisions that impact their daily lives and their future.

These are the principles that have guided the deliberative democracy initiatives taken by the Western Australian portfolio of Planning and Infrastructure. The Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, Alannah MacTiernan, outlined her reasons for taking this approach as follows:

My concern is that we are increasingly functioning in a climate where making good decisions becomes very difficult...The media wants clear black and whites—big headlines, little words—it wants dramatic divergence—it wants outrage—not considered partial disagreement...This mitigates against good governance. In my view, we need to ‘retool democracy’—to establish systems where we genuinely encourage community involvement in decision-making—where we present government not as the arbitrator of two or more opposing camps—each of whom are provided with incentives by the process in hardening their position—but as the facilitator of bringing divergent voices together to hammer out a way forward¹⁶.

Janette Hartz-Karp, a community engagement consultant, had the task of implementing innovative ways of engaging citizens in joint decision making with Government. This has resulted in the pioneering of a broad range of community engagement techniques over the past four years including: citizens’ juries, consensus conferences, consensus

forums, multi-criteria analysis conferences, deliberative surveys, enquiry by design dialogues, and twenty-first century town meetings.

From this experience, we have learnt that effective community engagement depends on an environment of trust that facilitates ‘reframing’¹⁷, where creative alternatives to complex problems can be found. To create such an environment requires a series of building blocks that act synergistically. These include:

- participants who are representative of the population, seated in ways to maximise diversity;
- a focus on thoroughly understanding the issues and their implications;
- serious consideration of differing viewpoints and values;
- a search for consensus or common ground; and
- the capacity to influence policy and decision making.¹⁸

These building blocks reflect the key elements of deliberative democracy¹⁹. To demonstrate how the elements of deliberative democracy can work to help the transition to sustainability, two initiatives will be described: ‘Dialogue with the City’ to develop a plan for the future of the Perth metropolis and the ‘Scarborough Deliberative Survey’ used to resolve a contentious coastal planning issue.

Dialogue with the City

‘Dialogue with the City’ was created to engage the citizens of the Perth greater metropolitan area in developing a plan ‘to make Perth the world’s most liveable city by 2030’. Perth is experiencing some of the highest population and economic growth rates of any city in Australia, and this growth is placing a significant demand on land, resources and environment. Predictions indicate that growth in Western Australia will continue and the population of the Perth metropolitan area and the Peel region will almost double to 2.2 million by 2031.

In the main, most people still want single houses on large blocks at affordable prices. The only way to do this is by spreading further and further away from the centre, creating the ubiquitous urban sprawl at

huge cost to the taxpayer with a subsidy of \$44,300 per block for the necessary infrastructure and services for fringe development. Moreover, the people who buy blocks at the urban fringes tend to be those least able to cope with the distance from vital amenities such as schools, child care, employment, and public transport. Such development is not sustainable.

This was considered to be an ideal situation to apply deliberative democracy; seeking to understand what a large, representative group of Perth residents would want if they were well informed and had the opportunity to deliberate; building the future plan for the city on their common views and involving them in the implementation process.

'Dialogue with the City' was a deliberative process rather than an event. Given the media's preoccupation with 'black and whites' and 'dramatic divergence', the community had little opportunity to understand the issues involved in creating a more sustainable city. Similarly, government had little opportunity to understand the values and attitudes of the community. Both are critical if there is to be a transition to a more sustainable future. The process to address these was extensive. It involved:

- A large random sample survey of 8,000 residents to gauge community values and views on the future development of the city.
- Dissemination of nine comprehensive issues papers developed over several years by the WA Planning Commission.
- An interactive Web site enabling browsers to access information, input ideas and exchange views.
- A partnership with the State-wide newspaper to help people understand the issues and encourage debate by publishing one-page weekly articles based on WA Planning Commission research papers.
- A partnership with a commercial television station to produce and broadcast during prime time, a one-hour TV 'hypothetical' on potential futures for Perth.
- A schools competition to elicit the views of young people. This involved a painting competition for primary schools and a short

essay competition for high schools on the sort of city they would like to live in by 2030.

- Listening and learning sessions with groups who are often not heard—youth, Indigenous people and those from non-English speaking backgrounds—to assist with their understanding of the issues and to ensure their views were heard.

The process culminated in the largest community engagement forum of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere. The ‘Dialogue with the City’ forum on 13 September 2003 used the methodology of a ‘21st century town meeting’²⁰, a large scale meeting with small group dialogue enabled by sophisticated technology; as well as a hands-on regional planning game²¹ to find common ground and a direction forward.

Considerable effort went into ensuring forum participants were representative of the population. Approximately one-third were from an invitation to a random sample of the population asking them to participate; one-third responded to invitations to a broad range of stakeholders including local government, industry, environmental and social interest groups; and one-third self nominated, answering advertisements or listening to the media.

There were approximately 250 volunteers from the private and public sectors supporting the forum and they facilitated at small tables and acted as scribes, inputting the table’s views to the computer.

Participants spent the morning discussing their hopes for the future; what they would like to keep and to change, the value of different potential scenarios and, finally, which scenario they would prefer to evolve. Both commonly held and strongly held minority views were input to computers on each table and a ‘theme team’ analysed the responses, sought common themes, and projected them back into the room on big screens in real time. The aim was to provide the opportunity for an authentic, informed exchange of views and to build common ground to move forward.

A vital challenge for the forum was to move beyond the creation of fine sounding sustainable principles to addressing the complexities and trade-offs that would be required to transition to a more sustainable

city. To achieve this the afternoon was spent playing the Perth Dialogue regional planning game, based on Geographic Information System (GIS) data. This game enabled participants to take the role of planners in creating their preferred future shape of the city. Having chosen one of the four potential scenarios to manage the predicted growth of metropolitan Perth, participants then needed to find practical solutions to the resulting planning dilemmas.

Chips or icons representing the housing densities, industry and commercial areas required by 2030 had to be placed on the map. Trade-offs could be made between different housing densities and different urban forms. Decisions on where not to grow were marked on the map. Transport linkages were made. Many inserted an urban boundary. Most tables chose an urban form called the Network City, where frequent public transport connected higher density, mixed use villages with transport routes running parallel. The table had to agree on its plan before the chips were stuck onto the map and then submitted in a digitised format to the computer, which enabled a more comprehensive analysis of the maps.

At the conclusion of the forum, each participant received a Preliminary Report of the widely held views developed during the day's proceedings, with the Final Report distributed two weeks later together with a copy of the map developed by their table as well as the entire room's integrated map. The aim was to encourage participants to feel ownership of the forum's outcomes.

Following the 'Dialogue with the City' forum, over 100 representatives from the community, industry, state and local government worked together for over six months to develop a planning strategy. An Implementation Team oversaw the process. Community, Industry and Local Government Liaison Teams ensured that progress was relayed to their constituents, and their feedback was relayed back into the process. Six Working Parties, chaired by an Implementation Team member with at least two representatives from each of the Liaison Teams as well as additional forum representatives, developed the critical issues into strategies and action plans. The resulting document 'Network City: Community Planning Strategy for Perth and Peel' was accepted in

principle by the WA Planning Commission, the Minister and Cabinet. It is currently undergoing a three-month public comment period.

While all major planning efforts in Western Australia have involved community consultation, this will be the first time in the nation's history that a plan has been developed and put in place through a truly deliberative democratic process. The community strategy details not only the sustainable strategies and actions to be adopted, but also how they need to be achieved—through authentic community engagement.

Scarborough Deliberative Survey

The issue of development in the Scarborough Beach precinct has been controversial in Perth for many years, both before and after the construction of a high-rise building on the beach—the Observation City complex.

The local government authority, the City of Stirling, currently has in process a number of proposed amendments to the town-planning scheme, including high-rise development. Ultimately, the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure will be required to make a decision on whether the proposed amendments are accepted.

The community was divided on the issue and consultation with protagonists and antagonists of high-rise development arrived at very different conclusions. The information widely available to the community about the need for and impacts of development in the precinct was neither totally accurate nor complete. Hence, while measuring community attitudes and opinions would have given a reliable indication of what the community was currently thinking, it would not have shown what the community *might* think if it had access to more complete information. Both are valid inputs into the decision-making process. Holding an open dialogue with those in the community who self-select to participate would not have helped government to understand the community views. Moreover, from past experience, forums such as this tend to be dominated by lobby groups with pre-determined positions, more interested in advocacy than dialogue.

Hence a two-stage 'Deliberative Survey' methodology was applied,

a technique widely used overseas though not previously in Western Australia. The first stage was a traditional community attitudes survey of a random population sample from areas reflecting a Scarborough Beach users survey to measure current (top-of-mind) attitudes. Over 400 people returned their first survey. The second stage was inviting a representative group of those who completed the survey to attend a deliberative information forum before completing the same questionnaire a second time. Over 100 people attended the forum and completed the second survey. The deliberative survey enabled the identification of any changes to the initial (top-of-mind) results following deliberation and more complete information, the ('considered') second survey results.

Given the Government's commitment to the State Sustainability Strategy and to the outcomes of the 'Network City: Community Planning Strategy for Perth and Peel' (which had suggested that the Scarborough Beach precinct could be a higher density, mixed-use village, supported by frequent public transport), these were discussed at the deliberative session. To ensure that the process was fair and accountable, a small Steering Group of the stakeholders was appointed to oversee the process. Additionally, the key protagonist and antagonist groups gave their input to the survey and the choice of speakers and panellists at the deliberative forum. The functions of these groups changed from participants to expert witnesses and observers.

The deliberative forum focused on inquiry rather than advocacy, that is, on deepening understanding through asking questions rather than pushing views. Speakers, representing key stakeholders and the varying viewpoints, each had ten minutes to present their information to workshop participants. With participants seated at tables of ten, the facilitator at each table input key questions via networked computers to an independent 'theme team' who synthesised these to develop theme questions. These were immediately projected back to the whole forum and speakers were asked to address them. A comprehensive range of technical experts also formed a panel to provide additional information and clarification of issues. When the most frequently asked questions had been addressed, it was open to the plenary to ask for further information.

At the conclusion of the day, participants were asked to independently complete the survey for the second time. The results showed that some attitudes remained constant, such as the beach and foreshore area being more important than the shops and other facilities. Other attitudes, especially towards sustainability, shifted significantly following the deliberation. For example, there was a greater focus on public transport and the need for substantial development to improve the beach precinct, including the concept of a higher-density, mixed-use village. However there was no shift in support of eighteen-storey high-rise development as proposed by the local council amendments.

The community understood the need for development and revitalisation of the Scarborough Beach precinct and the perceived need for this increased with more complete information. The underlying values of the community, however, held strong, that is, the desire to see the minimum amount of development required to achieve the necessary effects in the precinct. Based on the results of the Deliberative Survey, the Minister proposed that no higher than eight-storey development take place along the beachfront.

CONCLUSION

The creation of the State Sustainability Strategy and the use of deliberative democracy in the development of planning policy are contestable as to their effectiveness and value. The underlying ethos of both processes was to work towards 'making Perth the world's most livable and sustainable city', thus leaving it open to criticism from those who felt threatened by the possible outcomes. Evaluations have shown positive results for most stakeholders and participants. When the State Government released the 'Network City' strategy for a three-month public comment period, many Dialogue with the City participants took the initiative to correct misinformation about the process and the outcomes in letters to the *West Australian* and on several talkback radio stations, so the anti-campaign lost traction and the issue was dropped. It was a great example of the impact of increasing social capital.

Planning is now in place that is likely to move the state and the

city in the direction of greater sustainability. By engaging the people in a representative and deliberative way and empowering them to make a difference, the Government was able to increase its legitimacy to implement changes that special interest groups would have blocked. It has used the 'jazz' of sustainability to create a broader set of partnerships.

Achieving greater sustainability will require re-thinking of our democratic practices to enable the people to understand the implications of decisions, to deliberate, find alternative solutions, search for common ground, and be empowered to co-create a sustainable future.