

CHAPTER 23. CALLING ALL POLITICIANS: TAKE YOUR CITIZENS SERIOUSLY, OR BE MARGINALISED

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Why public engagement in policy making is so important for governments

On the surface one might argue that not very much has changed. I started my career in the 1960s in the middle of a movement against authority and the establishment.¹ Before that, after World War II, people also believed that politics would never be the same. And yet, the discussion about the existence of a small ruling elite is still going on. We still have more or less the same parties in a reasonably functioning democracy. And electoral turnout, at least on the national level, is high, at about 80%. The general level of trust in government has declined somewhat overall, but now seems to be recovering a bit. So, what exactly is the problem?

If you ask people in Groningen about the service from the government, they will be quite positive, but much less so about the way they experience responsiveness from local politics. About their actual say in local policy making, they are quite negative. Government does not have a problem as a service organisation, but it has a huge problem in terms of being a democratic organisation.

I believe the problem now is the discrepancy between the content of the political discourse in the media and the mind frames of the people in the street. If their everyday problems are not mirrored in parliamentary debate or in the policy measures of government, they will turn their backs. Of course, problems are different on the local level than the national level. But it is essential that people have a say in public affairs. In the Netherlands, forms of direct democracy are swiftly being left behind (systems of elected mayors and referenda are being abandoned by the present government). Most of the time, politics finds it very difficult to handle direct influence by the people. At the same time, the technological possibilities and the group that wants to participate are larger than ever.

In Groningen, we organised a public Internet vote about the selection of the architect and the design of the FORUM building – a centre for information and history. This raised a lot of interest. Many people came to see the exposition of the scale models; they did so because they were given the opportunity to give their say. In the end, more than 20 000 people voted on an issue most experts had qualified as a technical matter for professionals only. The success of this example shows that more people are willing and able to participate than is often believed and that government should take advantage of the modern facilities to mobilise the public's interest and commitment.

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It is not easy for politicians to escape the ongoing macro political debate and media sensationalism, eagerly looking for a scandal or a row. Government officials can hardly communicate authentically anymore. The answer, however, is often paradoxical. Politicians react defensively and show great fear of the crowd. Political parties realise that their position is no longer automatically legitimised as it used to be, but their response is again exactly the reverse of what it might be. They use “spin doctors” and hire public relations bureaus to manage their permanent campaigns. The result is that people observe their leaders as more interested in their votes than in their problems. The urgent need for change is evident.

Changing pattern of demand, the side of the citizens

For our report about Government Communication, we had an inquiry done by the bureau Motivation. This showed the obvious fact that the “average citizen” does not exist. There are numerous subgroups. Besides constructive and law abiding citizens, there are two interesting categories I want to point to. These are the cynics and the critics. The cynics have long ago said goodbye to politics and government matters and mainly complain or throw mud. The critics evaluate government behaviour on its merits and its behaviour.

What is essential is how the government reacts to these people. If the “average citizen” does not exist, then there cannot be a single communication strategy.

“Angry Cynics” need to get the best possible service and yet you will still get their hate mail. At this point government officials should take care – as long as these unpleasant messages are not anonymous, they should be answered properly. I always do and most of the time I get reactions of surprise: “You are still a scoundrel, but at least you have the decency to reply. And, by the way, could you also tell me this...”. In my view the top priority for governments is to equip itself with the necessary capacity to answer all emails and letters, to show citizens that they will be taken seriously as long as they sign their messages with their name and address.

“Critical Activists” must be offered more opportunities to participate and to voice their opinions. We must not be afraid to do so. Here is another example:

Our former alderman René Paas (now president of the national Christian Labour Union) initiated a large programme called “The Back Yard” in order to select locations for homes for drug users, youth resorts, etc. Most civil servants thought it a waste of time to consult inhabitants of the neighbourhoods under consideration about this. Because he presented the whole package at once, however, it was clear to everyone that these buildings had to be located somewhere and that they would be spread all over the city. The reactions he got from citizens were conditional: “OK, if you adjust your plan so and so, we might add this and that.” In the end all the facilities were located successfully and relatively little protest was heard in the Council house when the plans were decided on. Again, people are not only negative and selfish, in contrast to what officials think.

Why are governments so hesitant when it comes to public consultation?

I believe that most of the hesitation is due to insufficient professionalism. Politicians often think they know all the answers from their political programme or, worse, they consider their knowledge to be superior to that of other people. For example, two or three civil servants may be appointed to write a policy statement on health care, but they simply ask a few NGOs they know. I am certain that 500 general practitioners would be glad to sacrifice some of their scarce time on a Sunday morning to give comment via the Internet. But these officials would never consider consulting the doctors in the field for a reaction to their draft report – it might just produce trouble and dissent. The core problem is that our politicians and senior officials consider themselves competent and representative. In other words, they think hierarchically. And many feel disdain for citizens.

When I was Secretary of State for Education, I asked the deputy secretary general to arrange a weekly visit to a school. I wanted to hear directly from people and to ask what they thought about the feasibility of our policy proposals. He replied: “What do you really think you might learn there we cannot tell you? Of course we investigate all that.”

What we need is a real paradigm shift in politics. It is so much focussed on products, while it should be focussed on processes.

Political life is short and so it is understandable that many politicians consider it the chance of their lifetime to create a certain product for society. One result of their eagerness is that they forget to take care of the appropriate process, to let contingent opportunities do the work and to be sufficiently detached from power and control to present themselves as authentic trustworthy persons. It is amazing that this shift in attitude, which reached the boardrooms of large companies long ago, does not seem to have reached most of our political leaders yet. With fragmented authority nowadays and overestimation of professional expertise and interest in products over process, political democracy really threatens its own sustainability and seems unaware of it. It sees openness and participation as a threat. We, with our feeble legitimacy, should be glad when people show some interest, but instead we show disdain for individual (“average”) citizens and limit participation because we see it as “interference.”

Closer look on the opportunities for governments to engage citizens

So many opportunities for democracy to mobilise valuable new forms of active citizenship are just thrown away now. Why don't we establish a day in the week as polling day? At the same time every week, a relevant policy matter may be put before the population (or specific groups). This would, without a doubt, produce additional information for the policy makers.

Outside the realm of government policies, I see hopeful initiatives from civil society where otherwise governments would intervene. In a networked society, people and companies are getting used to forming all kind of alliances, and many of them express social responsibility. I have great confidence in these developments.

A professor explained to me an upcoming semi-collective system in the struggle against climate change, involving home-owners in a certain area. These people are able to buy shares in a private company that distributes emission rights for energy-use. Excessive use of energy is possible at a price. Revenues are invested in sustainability projects. Houses that are fit to install solar panels do so for the benefit of the whole block, including houses with flat roofs.

What lessons can we learn from failures? What are the limits of citizens' engagement?

After the positive examples above, I will now discuss a failed example of citizens' participation.

The university recently wanted to create office buildings on the grounds of the former botanical gardens. The people from the neighbourhood were opposed. In the course of the interactions, it became clear that the municipality was operating within a frame of reference that favoured building. As a result, the officials were rightly considered to be partisan in the discussion between the university and the citizens. The municipality paid a high price, also in terms of citizens' trust, for these tactics.

The lesson I draw is that governments would better just avoid engaging citizens in consultation than doing so with the intention of getting a predetermined outcome. There must be room for discussion and for new light to be shed on existing plans.

There are limits in both the topics that are feasible for consultation and in the methods that are used. The say of citizens should be limited to the scope of their interests. A neighbourhood cannot block facilities with a regional function. That must be made clear. Also, we must be aware of demagogues and other misuses of power in interactive policy making. Democratic rules for deliberation also hold in civil society. Finally, I would expand the idea of citizens' participation to all kinds of private initiatives that pursue (quasi) collective goods without government interference. Opportunities for this kind of self-organisation are growing fast and generally I welcome them, especially when these initiatives support solidarity and equal rights for all. However, I would also discourage citizens' actions that jeopardize solidarity and equal rights for all on essential protections and services. If rich people take care of their own communities, education and healthcare, and leave the provision of public goods for the poor to the government, this is not my kind of society. I would not accept the hollowing out of the core business of the state. At the same time I realise that these developments cannot be stopped if governments are unwilling to introduce more openness or to leave more room for clever bottom-up solutions that are adapted to the situation. So it is important that governments open up, and at the same time design frameworks for citizens' participation.

What remains of the role of the elected representatives?

Citizen engagement generally takes place in the realm of the administration, but that is not to say that we can dispense of elected politicians. No one wishes to go back to pre-medieval marketplaces, where whole communities were gathered for collective decision making. Many decisions will remain on the agenda for councils and parliaments. But their focus should shift from product-orientation to process-orientation. Here I see a role for elected politicians. They should feel ownership of the process architecture. Not only in controlling the administration, but as every new subject comes up, their focus should be: "go and consult stakeholder groups, we will watch carefully to see that you investigate ideas in certain areas and keep other preconditions fixed. Then come back to us with your report." If this lesson is not learned quickly, the dynamics of the network society will develop outside the sphere of politics and democracy.

Role of organisations like OECD

Institutions that are reflecting on governance have two important tasks. First, they derive their strength from the possibility to show the way, analyse best practices, and stimulate governments' enthusiasm about alternatives. Yes we can! Secondly, knowledge institutions can also direct their efforts to the citizens and intermediary organisations to empower them with know-how and inspiration.

Challenges for the future

The main challenge clearly lies with politics and with support for a paradigm shift that would make processes more important than products. The paradox is that, in the end, only detachment from power and control can provide hope for positively influencing the developments in society. If politicians don't take their citizens seriously, their role will in the end be marginalized.