

2015 Annual Australasian Study of Parliament Group Conference

Session: A Modern Parliament – The People’s House

Friday 2 October 2015

9.30am – 11.00am

Legislative Chamber, Parliament House

Presentation by Hon Louise Upston, MP

**“The Nordic Example: Lessons in Citizen
Engagement”**

*Exploring how an inclusive, modern Parliament can best engage
New Zealand civil society in the decision-making process.*

Abstract

An active, engaged citizenry is essential to a healthy democracy. New Zealand has a strong civil society, and it offers great potential for more robust, informed citizen participation in Parliamentary institutions and processes. Taking inspiration from the Nordic countries, this presentation explores how an inclusive, modern Parliament can best engage civil society in the decision-making process. The Nordic countries have a long tradition of transparency and citizen engagement and enjoy a high degree of public confidence and trust. Comparable to New Zealand in terms of population, land size and their relative isolation, as well as many shared values, the Nordic countries demonstrate, using a variety of mechanisms, how a wide cross section of society can be meaningfully included in the decision-making process.

Introduction

E aku rangatira, tēnā koutou katoa. Ka nui te honore ki te mihi ki a koutou.

(Distinguished guests. It is a great honour to greet you all at this important event today).

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be here today and to have the opportunity to speak with you.

I would like to thank our Chair, Katie Bradford. I would also like to acknowledge my fellow presenters who have travelled from Australia to join us: Hon Ruth Forrest, Independent Member for Murchison, Legislative Council, Tasmania; and Hon Barry House, President of the Legislative Council, Parliament of Western Australia.

It has been heartening to see so many young people, academics, political commentators and Parliamentarians passionately exploring ways in which we can make Parliament more inclusive and relevant to the next generation.

In the spirit of 'modernisation', this morning's session will focus on how an inclusive Parliament –the 'People's House' – may best engage the public.

The imperative of citizen engagement

The imperative of citizen engagement has been clearly recognised throughout this Conference and we have heard how essential an active, engaged citizenry is to a healthy democracy.

Civil society and its organizations play a crucial role in building social capital, trust and shared values that help to hold society together (Putnam 1993). A vibrant and independent civil society is a precondition for good governance.

By definition citizen engagement in public administration requires 'the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process of the State – through measures and/or institutional arrangements – so as to increase their influence on public policies and programmes ensuring a more positive impact on their social and economic lives' (Armstrong 2013, 5).

Efforts supporting citizen engagement must move beyond the provision of information to the creation of practical opportunities for participation. Such engagement makes policy more responsive to the interests of citizens, develops citizens' social and political capacities, and confers legitimacy to public policies (Teorell 2006).

New Zealand's progress

New Zealand has a proud history of a strong civil society, and our size, geographic location, history and political establishment offer great potential for more robust, informed citizen participation in Parliamentary institutions and processes.

Domestic progress of citizen engagement has been positive and the tradition of select committees can be traced as far back as New Zealand's colonial parliaments (Jackson 1987).

However, there is room for improvement. New Zealand's Parliamentary committees

could provide a greater forum for citizen engagement in relation to emergent and strategic issues (Marsh and Miller 2012). It has also been observed that civil society has limited opportunity for interaction without mediation in the legislative process (Marsh and Miller 2012).

I am particularly looking forward to this afternoon's discussion on 'Parliamentary Committees - Vehicles to Modernize Parliament'.

The capacity of ordinary citizens to learn about and make informed decisions concerning complex policy issues is often underestimated.

As Lundberg and Miller have noted, New Zealand has 'heightened levels of intimacy, community, access and accountability' in politics which provide huge potential for greater citizen engagement in the policy-making process (Hayward 2013, 74).

The question is: how do we best realize that potential?

The Nordic example

In March of this year I was honoured to represent New Zealand at the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women in New York.

During that visit, I met with Ministers and Ambassadors from a number of the Nordic countries. I was struck not only by the progress these countries have made in women's rights, but their efforts more broadly to engage their respective populations in the decision making process.

Those initiatives have inspired my presentation today and I hope that we may draw from the Nordic example, lessons to apply in our own systems of Parliament.

The Nordic countries have a strong history of transparency and citizen engagement and on the whole enjoy a high degree of public confidence and trust.

Differences may exist in the political foundations of local self-government. But the Nordic countries have developed a common approach to civic participation in the democratic process and there is a long-standing tradition of 'cooperative, network-based problem solving on the local level' (Hall et al. 2015, 520).

Highly developed welfare states, strong local governments and similar multi-party structures are defining features of the Nordic countries. Such systems encourage inclusive citizen participation in extra-parliamentary activities to a greater extent than many other European countries (Harrebye and Ejrnaes, 2013).

Civil society organisations boast high levels of citizen affiliation and in many cases function effectively as democratic watchdogs.

Comparable to New Zealand in terms of population, land size and their relative isolation, as well as many shared values, the Nordic countries demonstrate, using a variety of mechanisms, how a wide cross section of society can be meaningfully included in the decision-making process.

I propose that the example of the Nordic countries offers valuable lessons in citizen engagement. Given the time constraints of today's session, I will limit my focus to specific initiatives in Finland, Denmark and Iceland.

Finland: The Committee for the Future

Described as ‘a unique invention of Finnish democracy’ (Tiitinen 2004, 5), the Committee for the Future was established in 1993 in the midst of a severe socio-economic crisis, to advise on future-related aspects of policy and legislation.

As one of the Parliament of Finland’s 16 standing committees, it has 17 members who are all members of Parliament and represent different political parties. The Committee’s task is to conduct an initiative-generating dialogue with the Government on major future problems and means of solving them (Eduskunta Riksdagen 2015).

It is, in the words of one Committee member, a kind of “parliamentary think tank” (EAC 2011, 59). The Committee’s autonomy in setting its own agenda is critical to its success.

The Government regularly publishes a report on the future of Finland, which the Committee evaluates and responds to.

The Committee has reported on the impact of globalisation, the future of Finland and Europe, Finland’s economy, employment, science and technology, welfare and regional development. The continual, and often complex, interplay of these subjects is central to the Committee’s deliberations.

The Committee does not initiate specific legislation. However, its process of dialogue fosters ‘a shared understanding’ of the causal issues that require legislative address (Groombridge 2006, 277).

Citizen engagement

The Committee partners with domestic and international research organisations and universities to address challenges of citizen engagement in the legislative process.

It is integrating new technologies, including the use of a ‘virtual commentary portal’ to allow citizens to comment on issues before the Committee. Crowdsourcing techniques have been used for law-reform evaluation and in 2013 the Committee sought ideas from online participants on off-road traffic and the law regulating it (Aitamurto et al. 2014).

The Committee has also established an experimental web-based ‘Young Future-Builders’ discussion forum between Parliament and citizens (Karhula and Grönlund 2002, 240).

Regional, national and international conferences and seminars are regularly held. In 2006, the whole Committee held a public meeting on the ‘Future of Democracy’ at Finland’s famous Jazz Festival in the city of Pori. Broadcast live in prime time, the meeting demonstrated the Committee’s emphasis on ‘getting out to meet the people’ (Dator 2006).

Despite its comparatively small budget, the Committee has also established The Forum of the Experienced and Wise, a consultative body comprised of about 60 retired women and men who meet at regular intervals throughout the year (Power 2012, 33).

Forum members are mostly drawn from four categories (Groombridge 2006, 276):

1. those with administrative experience;
2. those with private sector experience;
3. university academics and scientists; and
4. former politicians (e.g. former president Mauno Koivisto), and key media people (e.g. former editor of a leading newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat).

The Forum provides opportunity for the Committee to engage in critical discussion with a group of well-qualified senior citizens, who perhaps most crucially, 'are not motivated primarily by party allegiance' (Groombridge 2006, 276).

Evaluation

At the time of its establishment, the Committee for the Future was one of a kind. It has since been emulated in various national and regional parliaments, including those of Chile and Scotland.

As Brian Groombridge observes (2006, 278), it has demonstrated the ability of a future-focused Parliamentary Committee to engage with citizens and to:

- foster dialogue between Members of Parliament and government;
- improve Parliament's ability to initiate business and hold government to account;
- encourage government to take a longer-term view in policy formation;
- provide a non-partisan intellectual framework in which to assess legislation; and
- disseminate relevant academic research to assist in policy development.

Most encouraging of all, the Committee for the Future has demonstrated the potential in the often tradition-bound parliamentary system for new democratic initiatives (Tiitinen 2004, 9).

Denmark: MindLab

MindLab is a Danish public and social innovation lab – a cross-governmental innovation unit, which works with citizens and businesses to develop new solutions for the public sector.

As part of three ministries (Business and Growth, Employment, and Education) and one major municipality in Denmark (Odense, the third largest city in Denmark), MindLab collaborates both horizontally across government agencies and vertically between the state and local level.

MindLab works with service users, citizens and other stakeholders at early planning stages of service delivery (Involve 2015). It provides a dedicated space for exploring new ways to address problems and co-designing processes to develop new ideas into practical outcomes (Christiansen and Sabroe 2015, 3).

One of its greatest strengths lies in its ability to help key decision-makers to see their efforts from a citizen's perspective (Mind Lab 2015).

Citizen-Oriented Implementation

MindLab employs a robust methodological foundation and human-centered design

process to achieve better outcomes for public services, policies, and governance models (Castensen and Bason 2012, 11).

- MindLab has worked with users to test mobile devices for doing tax returns, resulting in changes to government plans and avoidance of costly service mistakes (Involve 2015).
- It has helped Odense Municipality create a new 'Citizens' House' that will make the meetings between citizens and the public smoother (Mind Lab 2015).
- It has developed social networks for highly skilled migrant workers to motivate them to stay in Denmark (Involve 2015).
- MindLab has also refocused government employment reforms aimed at citizens at risk, resulting in a significant paradigm shift (Christiansen and Sabroe 2015).

New Nordic School

In one of its largest initiatives to date, MindLab has collaborated with the Ministry of Education on the New Nordic School project, which seeks to improve outcomes in the Danish education system.

Based on a broad set of politically decided principles, New Nordic School encourages a 'collaborative process of learning and improvement' in schools (Christiansen and Sabroe 2015, 5). It is a model of decentralized, bottom-up change, in which teachers, supported by principals and the municipalities, work together with children and their parents to close the achievement gap.

MindLab supported schools and municipalities to realise the potential of the New Nordic School principles. In doing so, it had to find room within the existing administrative system for a variety of different small-scale social innovations.

MindLab helped schools to effectively function as 'local living labs' so that learning and experience could be gained on a small scale before expanding solutions throughout the municipality (Christiansen and Sabroe 2015, 7).

As the head of New Nordic School described, 'We could finally bring together all the small initiatives that were going on in various places' (Mind Lab 2015).

Evaluation

Danish politicians and civil servants increasingly recognise the challenges of translating politically envisioned reforms and policies into positive practice. MindLab has demonstrated how effective facilitation can overcome the 'inertia' of established cultures and working practices (Christiansen and Sabroe 2015, 8).

As Jesper Christiansen (2015), Head of Research at MindLab explains, the power of such facilitation is its ability to 'allow political intentions to become more human and practice-oriented, and thereby increase the legitimacy of public interventions.'

Collaborative practice based on the realities experienced by citizens and businesses, has allowed MindLab to develop a myriad of methods to harness the collective effort (Involve 2015). The next step for Denmark is to ensure that these innovations are incorporated into wider public sector practice (Castensen and Bason 2012, 21).

Iceland: Better Reykjavik

Prior to the economic and political crisis of 2008, Iceland like its Nordic neighbours, enjoyed a stable electoral and party system and healthy welfare policies.

The government prioritised the development of a strong information communication technology (ICT) infrastructure 'to ensure all citizens full and equal access' to e-services (GOI 1996). However, while the 'Icelandic miracle' (Dupuy, 2003) saw widespread internet diffusion, there was little focus on e-participation and e-democracy.

The crisis that engulfed Iceland following the fall of the three largest banks in 2008, changed the landscape dramatically. In the post-crisis period there was little trust in the political establishment (Gylfason 2012). In contrast, there was high trust in citizen participation and ICT solutions, which led to pioneering developments in e-participation at both national and local levels (Åström et al. 2013, 40).

Better Reykjavik

In 2010 the non-profit organisation Citizens Foundation established a website that allowed political parties in the Reykjavik local elections to crowd source ideas for their campaigns. Within a month, 40 percent of Reykjavik's voters used the platform and almost 2,000 priorities were created (CF 2015).

Following the election, an open collaboration between Reykjavik City Council and the Citizens Foundation, led to the reconstruction of the website as a participatory tool known as 'Better Reykjavik' (BetriRekjavik 2015). It was implemented in the local municipal system of the capital.

The website seeks to give a voice to citizens and to encourage participation in governance (CF 2015). It allows citizens of Reykjavik to post, discuss and 'vote' upon political issues concerning local politics (BetriRekjavik 2015). The capital's political representatives process the top ideas every month and in doing so receive valuable information about citizen's opinions and priorities (CF 2015):

- 10-15 top priorities are processed and voted upon by Reykjavik City Council every month;
- Over 70,000 people have participated out of a population of 120,000 since the site opened;
- 257 ideas have been formally reviewed and 165 accepted since 2011.

Åström and his colleagues observed (2013, 39) some important characteristics about Better Reykjavik:

1. Because it was constructed (and is largely run) by a non-profit organization, local government had no input when the system was created. Technical problems of implementation are most frequently solved by changing the political processes, rather than amending the platform itself.
2. Local government does not require that a threshold number of signatures be reached in order for petitions to be considered. Instead, time is reserved each month within each committee, for the petitions with the most signatures.
3. Citizens have greater opportunity to contest, refine, or combine one another's ideas and arguments than other e-petition systems. Not only can arguments be submitted for or against a petition, citizens can also review

the arguments of others in terms of how helpful they were in understanding the issue. Petitions may be signed both in favour of and against.

Evaluation

Better Reykjavik boasts positive citizen engagement results and demonstrates an effective use of Iceland's strong ICT infrastructure (WEF 2013). An empirical study was undertaken (Kristensson 2013) comparing Better Reykjavik with the e-petitioning system in the city of Malmö in Sweden. It showed that Better Reykjavik has gathered more than three times as many petitions in the period 2008-2011 (1,647 against 449), more signatures per petition and, more deliberation on the site (Åström 2013, 39).

The comparative success of Better Reykjavik is thought to be the result of its system design, which offers greater opportunity for both aggregate and deliberative participation and a higher chance of consideration by local government (Kristensson, 2012).

Iceland's 2008 financial and political crisis proved an extraordinary catalyst for innovation in e-participation. Distrust in the political establishment defined the post-crisis period and opened the door to new, bolder tactics of citizen engagement. Better Reykjavik is but one example of this.

Conclusion

The examples highlighted in this presentation, demonstrate the very different ways in which the Nordic countries have mobilized citizen engagement: from the agenda setting potential of Finland's Parliamentary Committee for the Future and Iceland's local level platform Better Reykjavik, through to the facilitation offered by Denmark's MindLab and its translation of political vision into practical policy.

Using very different mechanisms, each of these countries has effectively included a wide cross section of society in the decision-making process.

While Iceland suffered a particularly dramatic fall in public confidence in the post-crisis period, the struggle of the political establishment to maintain its legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry was not unique. A global movement is seeking engagement with government beyond the traditional confines of periodic elections.

I hope that the example of the Nordic countries will encourage us all to consider how our respective parliaments can better engage the voices of those we seek to serve.

It is, after all, the 'People's House'.

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