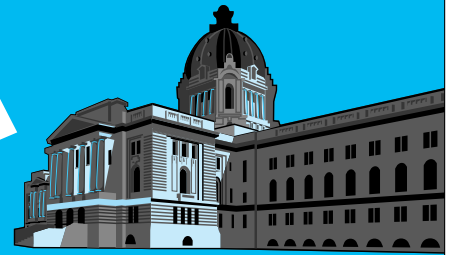


MEANINGFUL



CONSULTATION:



A Contradiction in Terms?

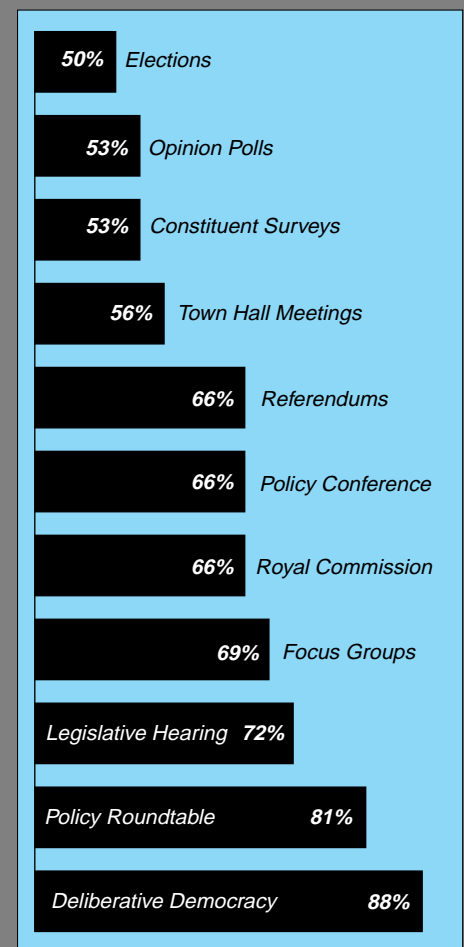
ENHANCING PUBLIC CONSULTATION IN THE 21st CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, consultation with business, stakeholders and the public has become a virtual prerequisite for any government proceeding with a major policy initiative. On the constitutional issue, one can turn to the *Spicer Commission*, the *Renewal of Canada Conferences*, the *Manitoba Constitutional Task Force* and the referendum on the *Charlottetown Accord*. On the deficit and debt issue, one can turn to *Alberta's Budget Roundtable*, the *Economic Summit* in Québec and the federal government's *Pre-Budget Conferences*. On economic strategy, one is reminded of Ottawa's *Strategy for Prosperity Conferences* and the *Partnership for Renewal* initiative in Saskatchewan. Topping it all off, every government either conducts or at least watches very closely the myriad of opinion polls which emerge almost daily in newspapers across the country.

While the media typically reward major consultation initiatives and even the smallest blips in the polls with huge headlines and front page coverage, the reality is that the effectiveness of many "traditional" consultation efforts is questionable (**Figure 1**). Sometimes, consultation is merely an euphemism for "public relations." But recently, a new method of citizen consultation has emerged. This approach, called **deliberative democracy**, marries three types of traditional public consultation mechanisms – the public opinion poll, the policy conference and the policy roundtable. By using these three methods in tandem, deliberative democracy avoids the pitfalls inherent in each while at the same time combining their unique strengths into a more insightful method of assessing the public's opinions on the issues that matter.

FIGURE 1: Consultation Methods and Their Relative Effectiveness



SOURCE: Developed by Canada West Foundation.

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25 years

EFFECTIVE CONSULTATION

The best way to assess the merits of deliberative democracy is first to define the criteria which provide for effective citizen consultation, and then compare the performance of deliberative democracy against other more traditional methods of public participation in decision-making. At least eight specific criteria affect the quality of citizen consultation, and while the list could no doubt be expanded, each of the following eight are essential:

1. Representation

The effectiveness and legitimacy of a citizen consultation process is enhanced by the presence of diversity and inclusiveness, but detracted from if certain groups, interests or voices are excluded. In order to properly consult citizens, the process must involve participants who reflect the relevant community with its full diversity of characteristics, interests, concerns and priorities. In other words, a method which is open to all is a superior method than one which excludes – deliberately or accidentally – significant elements of the community.

To be sure, representation is a tricky word. For example, a particular consultation process may indeed be “open” to all citizens, but the results will be highly unrepresentative if only academics participate. There is a world of difference between those methods which are “open” and those which adequately ensure active participation from the full range of concerns and diversity present within a specific community.

2. Agenda Setting

Citizen consultation will be more effective if it focuses on a single or a small number of issues, and less effective if it ranges over a multitude of issues. The reasoning is simple – fewer issues mean that each can be pursued more in-depth. Too many issues makes it much more difficult for each to be pursued to a conclusion. For example, holding a meeting with a limited and coherent agenda will often achieve much more than one with a very long and rambling agenda, or no agenda at all.

3. Access to Information

A citizen consultation process will be more effective and useful if those participating can gather and use accurate information both prior to and during the exercise. Consultations which have participants responding to issues whose background, circumstances and consequences are not fully understood or appreciated will be less effective. A good method of citizen consultation will tap thoughtful, reasoned and informed opinions and ideas. Many of us react to situations with less than complete information – we get angry about a headline before even reading the news story. An effective consultation process helps participants move well beyond this point.

4. Discussing Issues

Citizen consultation is clearly more effective when participants can discuss the issues by stating their point of view, then listening to other points of view that may conflict, and then reassessing their opinions given the conversation which just occurred. Conversely, consultation is less effective and useful if participants are isolated from one another and their involvement is reduced to nothing more than a flat sequence of “for” or “against” positions.

At the end of the day, in a democracy, the majority prevails. But democracy is more than majority rule – it also means that on the way to the end of the day, the citizens will discuss, deliberate and have an opportunity to arrive at a position other than the one they held when the conversation first began. Compromise is held high in the pantheon of democratic values for this very reason – it implies a willingness to listen and a capacity to meet others halfway rather than simply declaring winners and losers.

5. Creating Options

A consultation process which allows participants to introduce new options and considerations into the discussion is superior to one which is limited to a number of predetermined alternatives. For example, it is one thing for a teacher to allow students to decide whether they want to write an

EFFECTIVE CITIZEN CONSULTATION: A Matrix of Conclusions

		Effectiveness Criteria								
		Representative Sample	Agenda Setting	Access to Information	Discussing Issues	Creating Options	Individual Participation	Cost & Logistics	Closure	% Score
Consultation Methods	Elections	Excellent	Poor	Fair	Good	Fair	Poor	Poor	Fair	50% “D”
	Referendums	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor	Excellent	66% “C+”
	Legislative Hearings	Poor	Excellent	Excellent	Fair	Fair	Excellent	Good	Good	72% “B-”
	Royal Commissions	Fair	Excellent	Excellent	Fair	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Fair	66% “C+”
	Constituent Surveys	Poor	Excellent	Fair	Poor	Fair	Fair	Excellent	Poor	53% “D”
	Town Hall Meetings	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Fair	Fair	Good	Poor	56% “C-”
	Opinion Polls	Excellent	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Fair	Fair	Fair	Poor	53% “D”
	Focus Groups	Fair	Excellent	Fair	Fair	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Poor	69% “C+”
	Policy Conference	Fair	Excellent	Excellent	Fair	Fair	Fair	Good	Fair	66% “C+”
	Policy Roundtable	Poor	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Good	Good	81% “B+”
	Deliberative Democracy	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Fair	Good	88% “A-”

SOURCE: Developed by Canada West Foundation.

NOTE: Letter grades were assigned to each percentage mark as follows: 49% or less (F), 50% - 54% (D), 55%-59% (C-), 60%-64% (C), 65%-69% (C+), 70%-74% (B-), 75%-79% (B), 80%-84% (B+), 85%-89% (A-), 90%-95% (A) and 96% and over (A+).

exam before or after a long weekend, but it is another thing altogether to ask how they would like to be evaluated – whether a term paper, essay exam, oral questions, etc. The power to choose between a predetermined range of alternatives is no small thing, but it is much less than the opportunity to redefine the range of choices itself.

6. Individual Participation

There can be no more devastating criticism levelled against a consultation process than the complaint “Nothing I did made the slightest difference.” While making a difference could

simply imply the opportunity to be heard, it could also mean coming up with the clinching argument or the creative compromise that accomplishes a qualitative change in the way things are resolved. A process where one has no opportunity to contribute in such a way is less effective.

Clearly, this is a very difficult criterion. As society grows larger and ever more complex, fewer and fewer of us can do more than simply react to the flow of events foisted upon us. But, having an impact on the final outcome of a consultation process still remains a very important criterion.

7. Cost and Logistics

A consultation method that can be employed with reasonable cost and without consuming inordinate time and energy will be more effective and useful than one which is expensive or requires a lengthy time frame and elaborate preparation. High cost limits the number of times that a process can be used, and on the logistical side, complex procedures reduce timeliness. What would be an otherwise commendable procedure would be seriously flawed if it could only be used this year to discuss last year's issues, or if it could only deliver the results of this year's deliberations some time next year. This point should not be pushed too far, since citizen participation is so central to an effective democracy that it deserves some expenditure of both time and money, but it is unrealistic to ignore the cost factor altogether.

8. Achieving Closure

Finally, a consultation process is more effective and useful if it ends with a clear outcome and with action that flows directly from the participation itself. Consultation is less effective if the expression of opinions and the articulation of positions has no concrete outcome. For example, when you spend an hour going through a pollster's battery of questions, you have no idea whether your opinions will have any effect. Consultation that has no closure and goes nowhere can be frustrating in the least and counter-productive at worst. The process can become a magnet for media scorn and citizen anger as charges of "smokescreen", "public relations gimmickry" and "jiggery-pokery" are laid against the "official" report which everyone suspects will land up top of a dusty shelf.

CITIZEN CONSULTATION Finding the Superior Method

After cataloguing the criteria for effective public participation and citizen consultation, various methods can be set against these criteria and then ranked according to how well each performs. On page three is a matrix which sets eleven different consultation mechanisms (the

rows) against the eight specific criteria that enhance effective participation (the columns). Inside each cell is a score, which ranges from poor to fair to good to excellent. Each score was assigned based upon how well each method of consultation *typically* fulfills the various effectiveness criteria.

To rank the consultation mechanisms, each "poor" designation received one point, each "fair" received two points, each "good" received three points and each "excellent" received four points. A perfect method would therefore receive a total of 32 points for a final score of 100% or an A+. Not surprisingly, no mechanism scored a perfect 100%. But the matrix does show both the specific and cumulative strengths and weaknesses of each method, and which ones are *arguably* more effective than others.

HOW THE METHODS STACK UP

As shown in the matrix above, *deliberative democracy* – with a score of 88% – emerges as the most effective and legitimate method of citizen consultation according to the eight criteria used in our classification scheme. The policy roundtable method came in second at 81% followed by the legislative or parliamentary hearing process which scored a 72%. The least effective but most familiar method of consultation – voting – received the lowest score at 50%. Opinion polls, constituent surveys and town hall meetings did not fare much better, ranging from a low of 53% to a high of 56%. Referendums, royal commissions, focus groups and policy conferences are only average methods, each receiving a C+ grade.

What follows is a description of each consultative method and the considerations affecting its rating. We will then expand on the mechanics of the deliberative democracy process, examine how it played out in Canada's first experiment in deliberative democracy – *Assembly '96* – and conclude by exploring a future opportunity for using this consultative process.

1. Elections (50% or D)

Advantages: Elections are the most obvious consultative mechanism in democratic practice. Their main strength is inclusiveness. The only citizens whose input is not registered are those who choose not to vote. There is evidence that this group is growing, but the point remains that elections are still highly representative. In addition, the hype of an electoral contest will usually provide citizens with an opportunity to discuss the issues at least on a casual basis, and election forums allow voters to steer the debate by questioning the candidates.

Disadvantages: As a rule, elections tend to fare poorly with regards to agenda setting since parties can differ on so many points that it is hard to see the election outcome resolving any one of them, or worse yet, because the parties do not differ at all. A notable exception to this rule was the 1988 federal election which essentially became a debate over the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

For the most part, elections offer limited opportunity to hear informed opinion. While arguments for and against certain policies are abundant, they are slanted to serve partisan interests rather than inform the electorate. A good example of this is a group of disgruntled voters in British Columbia who have recently gone to court claiming that the winning party in the recent provincial election deliberately misrepresented circumstances so drastically that it constitutes fraud.

The wide scope of participation in an election reduces the impact of one voter's participation. The opportunity to create options is also limited to supporting the party whose opinions are most like your own. Elections certainly provide closure by declaring a winner, but they do not necessarily provide closure on the issues. The election process is also expensive, time consuming and highly disruptive of normal government activities while it lasts. In short, elections rate poorly as a means of soliciting citizen input on policy choices, even though they are essential for the popular selection of governments.

2. Referendums (66% or C+)

Advantages: Referendums are becoming a recurrent feature of Canadian politics. Like elections, they rate high in terms of inclusiveness since all voters can register a preference, but they have an added advantage in that they focus on a specific issue thereby generating more of an opportunity to inform citizens and provide a forum to discuss the issue.

Because referendums involve voting on an issue, and usually in a YES or NO fashion, they do offer strong potential for closure – the outcome should logically settle the question. But again, there are exceptions. Technically, a referendum cannot provide absolute closure since the Canadian practice is to use non-binding referendums which governments can follow or ignore at their discretion.

Such was the case in a 1991 Saskatchewan referendum. Despite 79% of voters saying their provincial government should hold a referendum before the legislature approves any future change in the Canadian Constitution, the government has yet to introduce legislation to this effect. In addition, there is the promise of the *Parti Québécois* to continue holding referendums until it gets a YES vote on sovereignty. For the most part, however, the democratic rhetoric surrounding a referendum makes it difficult for most governments to simply ignore the results without incurring at least some political costs and consequences.

Disadvantages: The biggest liability of the referendum process is that the voter can only react to the wording of the question with a YES or NO. Sometimes the choice can be broadened, like the three options presented in the referendum for Newfoundland's entry into Confederation, but these votes are not the norm. The wording of the question can also present problems, as the 1995 Québec referendum testifies. In any event, voters cannot change the conceptualization of the issue or introduce new options that broaden the range of choices. Like elections, the impact of one individual's participation on the outcome is limited.

Like elections, referendums are very costly. Piggy-backing the referendum on top of an election will reduce the costs, but then the referendum debate risks being lost in the noise of the election. This practice would also place severe limits on when and how frequently the referendum could be used.

3. Legislative Hearings (72% or B-)

Advantages: Governments frequently hold public hearings on legislation as it works its way through the legislative process, especially when the issue is controversial. Legislative or parliamentary hearings remain a useful vehicle of public consultation in the formation and fine tuning of public policy. They are enhanced by a strong focus on a particular piece of draft legislation and they do provide a forum to air the informed opinion of experts and others most directly affected by the issue. It is possible for a single presenter to have an impact on the outcome, although it will typically affect only the details of the legislation rather than its general tenor.

Such hearings usually result in a definite outcome within a finite time period, often ending with a report to the Legislature or Parliament. The costs of such hearings tend to be reasonable, and the cost of presenting a brief is minimal.

Disadvantages: A significant drawback of legislative hearings is that they are not fully representative of the broader society. Only a fraction of those directly impacted can take part. The committee may also screen presenters for partisan relevance, further narrowing the range of opinions to be heard. Indeed, many of these hearings are highly partisan affairs, often making participants feel like pawns in a chess game between the political parties sitting on the committee. Legislative hearings also work within a very narrow and predetermined range, limiting the opportunity to introduce new options and broader considerations. Such hearings can play an important – if not indispensable – role in the modern legislative process, but they cannot carry the full burden of citizen consultation.

4. Royal Commissions (66% or C+)

Advantages: Royal commissions gather information and seek input into very broad policy areas. Recent examples include the *Macdonald Commission* in the early 1980s and the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* in the 1990s. On a number of criteria, the royal commission performs well. Like legislative hearings, specific issue relevance is quite high, although the range of issues is broader.

The opportunity to hear informed opinion is excellent. Royal commissions ask for reports from experts and the accumulated volumes of research usually remain relevant and useful for years. The volumes published by the *Macdonald Commission* have provided a valuable resource for academics and policy-makers, and the same is true of the series of papers produced by the more recent *Lortie Commission on Electoral Reform*.

Generally, the door is left wide open to the consideration of a wide range of alternatives for dealing with the policy area. But again, there are exceptions, such as the *Commission on Electoral Reform*, whose terms of reference did not allow for the consideration of the most important aspect of any electoral system – the way the votes are translated into parliamentary seats.

Disadvantages: The most visible drawback is the high cost and long timeframe of a royal commission. They cost tens of millions of dollars and last for several years. Very few commissions report on time or come in under budget. Another complaint is that while the process ends with a report that provides an encyclopedic overview of the policy area, its recommendations often fail to be implemented. This seriously hampers closure, leading the cynics to suggest that the real purpose of a royal commission is to provide a way for government to sidestep a controversial issue.

While the membership of a commission usually reflects the most critically involved groups and the hearings do canvas the full range of opinions on the subject, royal commissions cannot be said to be fully representative of the

broader public. After years of activity, a single presentation can become lost, diminishing the impact of one's participation. Likewise, the opportunity to discuss issues can only be rated as "fair" since one would need tremendous tenacity to stick with a process that can take years to finish.

5. Constituent Surveys (53% or D)

Advantages: Recently, many elected officials have begun using constituent surveys to give electors within their riding a chance to express their opinions through a mail or telephone questionnaire. Some politicians have stated that they will follow any clear preferences that emerge from this process, while others have said they will simply take it as information to be included in their voting decision. Timeliness, low cost and a focus on specific issues are strong features of this method. And, of course, this combination carries a further advantage in that the technique may be repeated regularly and on very short notice.

Disadvantages: While there are usually some informative statements about the issues included with the questionnaire, these are unlikely to be extensive. This lowers the educational value of the process. Since most of these surveys are filled out by one person alone, there is no opportunity for discussion. In addition, there is little chance for the respondent to do more than choose among the limited options. While open-ended questions can be used to invite lengthier comment, these are difficult to work with given the large number of surveys that might be returned. In short, there is little chance to create new alternatives.

The biggest drawback to this method is its unrepresentative nature. The people responding to the survey are small in proportion to the total number of voters in the constituency, and even more problematic is the fact that all respondents have selected themselves to participate. As a result, the opinions surveyed will not mirror those of the broader community. As far as the respondents are concerned, their participation will have little impact given the thousands of surveys that will also be collected. Finally, there is no prospect for closure that can be expected from such a process.

6. The Town Hall Meeting (56% or C-)

Advantages: In a town hall meeting, decision-makers converse with members of the public. Specific issue relevance is high, although those attending the session could potentially derail the agenda. Both the time and cost factors are a positive selling feature of this process. The opportunity to hear informed opinion can be quite good as well, particularly from the view of the audience who can listen to politicians presenting their opinions without the rancor of Question Period, an election, or a referendum campaign.

Disadvantages: The openness of a townhall meeting is frequently more apparent than real. Participants must be screened, which reduces representativeness. Deciding who can ask questions, how those questions will be controlled for relevance and be prevented from turning into speeches implies a degree of control which negatively affects the opportunity to discuss the issues and create new options. Obviously, this will also negatively affect one's impact on the process. To be sure, much depends on how the meeting is organized.

Clearly, the psychological overtones of townhall meetings are very positive – a decision maker responding to members of the public and answering their questions. But there remains a spontaneous flow to the sessions that works against their capacity to provide closure on any issue. Townhall meetings, by definition, cannot follow issues through to a logical conclusion, let alone a consensual one supported by the group as a whole. More important, it has no ongoing existence that would imply a capacity to follow through on whatever conclusions were reached.

7. The Opinion Poll (53% or D)

Advantages: Polls are omnipresent in modern politics. News stories constantly emerge with the latest poll, its reading of the national mood, the popularity of political leaders and the growing or shrinking support for a particular policy. The main strength of the poll is its highly representative nature. The samples from which pollsters draw their conclusions are quite small –

about one to two thousand – but the techniques are scientifically developed and very accurate, generating an excellent match with the general population. Issue specificity is also very high. Polls can zero in on a particular issue and can be used quickly to generate immediate feedback. Polls are also continuous, meaning that the same question can be asked over time. This allows the direction and current state of opinion to be tracked.

Disadvantages: Polling has real limits as a vehicle of democratic participation. They only measure an immediate response to an immediate question, and there is no opportunity to hear informed opinion or discuss the issues. There is usually little chance to do more than respond to a range of options that are explicitly laid out. The cost of polling and the tabulation of the results is also high. Since respondents are alone in a sea of many other respondents, one's impact is also diminished. In general, polls are simply raw material to be used by decision-makers as they see fit. They offer no closure and no certainty of outcome linked to input.

8. Focus Groups (69% or C+)

Advantages: Like polls, focus groups are aimed at uncovering the opinions of people. The process involves assembling a small group of about 10 to 15 people who exhibit a particular set of characteristics or mix of interests for the specific purpose of asking about their opinions. Like polls, issue specificity is very high, and because of the smaller group, the impact of one's participation is excellent. The opportunity to create options and different alternatives is much higher than a poll. A particular strength of the focus group approach is its relatively low cost, involving little more than renting a facility for a couple of hours and paying a small honorarium to each group member for their time.

Disadvantages: Like opinion polls, focus groups should only be seen as raw material to be used by their organizers as they see fit, albeit for less money. Focus groups offer no closure. While focus groups may offer a better chance than polls to allow for the airing of informed opinions and the discussion of issues, these two considerations are hardly central to the process. A serious

weakness in the focus group approach is its lack of representativeness. Ten people cannot represent the interests of the broader community. As a result, most focus groups are designed specifically to secure the opinions of a select portion of the community.

9. The Policy Conference (66% or C+)

Advantages: Conferences are convened for a multitude of purposes and can take a number of different forms and structures, but generally speaking, most are designed with an educational purpose or some type of professional development in mind. Various interests are brought together to consider the opinions of experts who make presentations at the conference. Issue specificity tends to be high, and most conferences can be conducted within a reasonable budget.

Disadvantages: While most conferences allow some opportunity to question and dialogue with the speakers, the discussion of issues and creation of alternative solutions is limited by the sheer number of people who attend such events. Participants tend to become de facto spectators, which hampers their ability to have any real impact. Because there is little opportunity to reach a consensus, there is also minimal closure, and what is left at the end of the process is simply a set of expert opinions. Since conferences can be quite large, they do offer a better opportunity to create a representative body, but it does not approach a mirror image of the populace, and tends to be limited only to those with a specific interest in the topics at hand.

10. The Policy Roundtable (81% or B+)

Advantages: The policy roundtable is a 1990s innovation, which involves inviting relevant groups and interests to sit down at the policy "table" and discuss issues of government policy and priorities. Issue specificity is quite good as the initial focus is usually provided in advance through a position paper or report which lays out the options. Within these general parameters, new ideas and outlooks can be introduced and considered. The capacity for an exchange of views and the sharing of information is also good.

Because roundtables also tend to be fairly small in size, the impact of one's participation is extensive. The cost of such a proceeding is usually modest, although it can take some time to prepare. Roundtables also have the added advantage of providing at least a reasonable sense of closure.

Disadvantages: The only serious shortcoming of the roundtable is its unrepresentative nature. This is the trade-off between having a large group which is representative of the broader community and one that is small enough to allow debate and discussion.

11. Deliberative Democracy (88% or A-)

A Description: The newest idea of consultation in the 1990s is the deliberative democracy concept. This process is an expanded version of a public opinion poll coupled with a policy conference and a roundtable. By combining elements of all three processes, one can take advantage of the strengths of each while avoiding their pitfalls when used separately.

Advantages: Like a *poll*, participants to the event are chosen at random. This ensures that the group mirrors the larger community and is highly inclusive of the full range of interests and concerns within the community. Before the conference and roundtable process begins, the group is queried about their opinions on a set of specific issues. Issue specificity can be very high depending on how the agenda is constructed.

Like a *conference*, the group then spends a substantial period of time in a setting which allows them to interact formally and informally. Participants are presented with objective and balanced information by "experts" who also serve as resource persons when they are called on to answer specific questions. As a result, there is excellent opportunity to hear informed opinions on the issues.

Like a *roundtable*, the process then moves into smaller workshops or working groups. The purpose here is to facilitate the discussion of issues, the exchange of ideas, the clarification of

points of view and to create options for various problems. Participants are not just asked whether they support a certain position, but are called upon to defend their point of view to someone who might oppose it and to have an opportunity to understand why someone might hold a particular opinion. The focus is very much on the exchange of views. In the process, the active participation of each individual is critical.

Following the conference and roundtable components, all participants are *polled* a second time to see where and how their opinions might have changed as a result of becoming informed on the issues and discussing them in-depth over an extended period of time.

The deliberative democracy method also offers a good opportunity for closure, but like other methods, much depends on how the process is structured. Logically, there is a trade-off between specific issue relevance and the opportunity to create new options and alternatives. For example, if the discussion is freewheeling, it is less likely for a focused and precise result to emerge. If there is no structure or agenda laying out a sequence of issues and a timetable for moving from one to the next, then the discussion may become so freewheeling that it goes nowhere. But if the agenda is too structured and too firmly enforced, then it prevents both the crystallization of opinion and the dynamic emergence of new perspectives. The trick is to find the proper balance between the two that will allow for some concrete conclusions at the end of the process.

Disadvantages: The main weakness of deliberative democracy is in the expense and time frame. While it does not come close to the costs or logistics of an election, referendum or royal commission, bringing together 100 people or more to one destination from around a country or province is no small endeavor. Conference and living facilities are needed, and for more than just one or two days. Such an event takes at least a month or two to set up and five days to a week to carry out. Even more time is needed to assemble a comprehensive report of the final outcome.

ASSEMBLY '96: *Deliberative Democracy in Action*

In August of 1996, ninety-seven young adults from all walks of life across Canada met at the Terry Fox Centre in Ottawa for *Assembly '96*, Canada's first experiment in deliberative democracy. The event was held over a one week period and was designed to tap the ideas of young adults on several issues facing the country.

1. How it Worked

Assembly '96 was more than just a conference. It was deliberative democracy – a new consultation method that is part opinion poll, part policy conference and part policy roundtable:

STEP #1 – The Polling Component: Each of the young adults attending the assembly was invited at random, just like a public opinion poll. All participants (except those from the NWT and Yukon) had responded to a Canada-wide opinion poll in the Spring of 1996. Assembly organizers secured a list of those who had participated in the poll and then randomly invited 100 to the assembly. Since every Canadian has a statistically equal chance of being selected to participate in a poll, each of the five and a half million Canadians aged 18-29 also had an equal chance to participate and therefore be invited to the assembly.

Prior to the assembly, participants also filled out an extensive survey very much like a poll. This survey inquired about their opinions on the issues that would be discussed (Canadian values, the economy, national unity and citizen participation and democratic representation). Following the assembly, participants were surveyed again to determine how their opinions might have changed.

The opinion poll component of deliberative democracy ensures that participants will closely mirror their respective community and that the process remains focused on a specific set of issues...

STEP #2 – The Conference Component: Upon arrival, participants were given a workbook which discussed the issues in-depth. As the assembly moved from topic to topic, participants could prepare from the workbook. In addition, the assembly heard the testimony of 18 “experts” on the various topics. Ample opportunity was given the participants to question these experts.

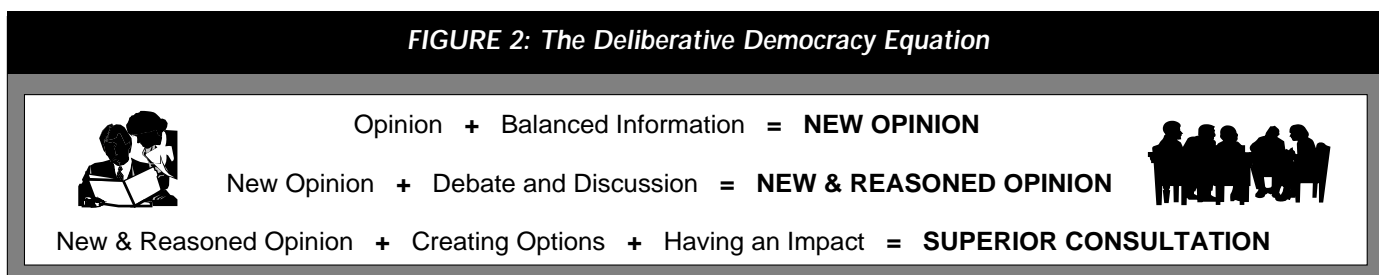
The conference component ensures that participants have wide access to balanced information on the issues...

STEP #3 – Roundtable Component: Participants spent about half of their time at the assembly discussing the issues in small workgroup sessions of about 12 to 15 participants each. These “roundtables” included people of all types of backgrounds and interests, and were guided by facilitators to ensure that the discussion was open to the full range of concerns and ideas that participants felt relevant and wished to discuss. Half way through the assembly, the workgroups were shuffled to broaden the number of differing opinions that participants would encounter.

The roundtable component heightens the impact of each individual's participation by providing a small group forum to discuss the issues and create options...

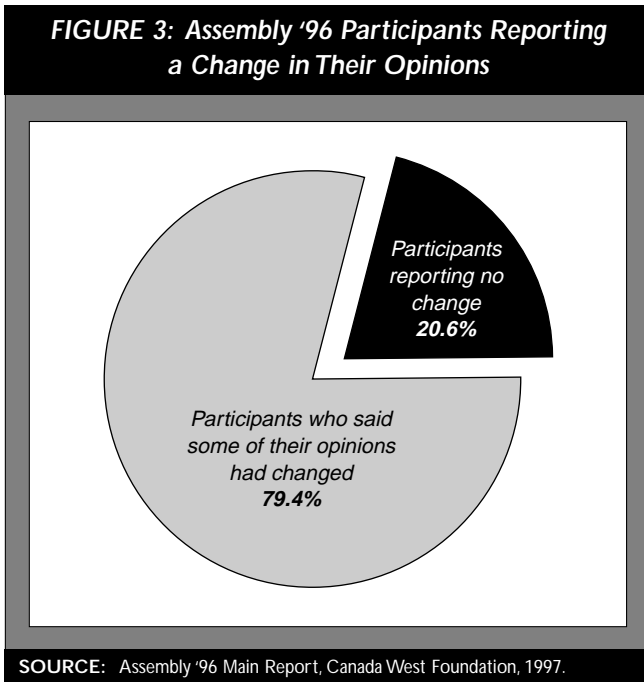
The fresh perspective emerging from *Assembly '96* was instructive, but even more instructive is the superiority of deliberative democracy as a consultation process (*Figure 2*).

FIGURE 2: The Deliberative Democracy Equation



2. Moving From Theory To Practice

The thinking behind deliberative democracy is clearly shown in **Figure 2**. But the bigger question is how well that theory translates into practice. Part of the answer appears in **Figure 3**, which shows that most participants, in fact almost 80% of them, reported a change in some of their opinions as a result of their *Assembly '96* experience.



This is highly significant, since it reinforces the fact that opinion is *dynamic* rather than *static*. All opinions can shift over time as people encounter new information, discuss and debate the issues, and most important, assess and perhaps integrate the views, circumstances and life experiences of others into their own thought processes.

A complete analysis of the *Assembly '96* project is outside the scope of this report, but is available in the *Assembly '96 Main Report* and the *Summary Report*, both available from Canada West Foundation. That aside, the most significant conclusion remains – deliberative democracy resulted in a significant change of opinion for many of these young adults on some very key issues.

For example, both surveys asked participants if Canada should undertake any changes to federalism to prevent another referendum on sovereignty in Québec. Only 31% of participants agreed with that option on the first survey, but support for it more than doubled to 63% on the second. When asked if the provinces should receive more powers, about 90% of participants were in favour on the second survey compared to 67% on the first.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

A multitude of opportunities clearly exist for the use of deliberative democracy as a means to consult Canadians on the issues that matter. In fact, one such opportunity has come knocking on the heels of a recent meeting held between the Premiers of Canada's English-speaking provinces and territories. The meeting, held in mid-September in Calgary, resulted in the Premiers declaring their support for a *Framework for Discussion on Canadian Unity*, which outlined five general guidelines for initiating a process of public consultation.

The framework agreed to by the Premiers stated that any process used should be open, innovative and allow governments to act as a catalyst for consultation. The Premiers also agreed that such consultation could occur in stages and that each province or territory should be free to choose what they felt was the most "appropriate" consultation vehicle.

As a response to these five guidelines, deliberative democracy rates very high indeed (**Figure 4**). The great strength of deliberative democracy is that it can accommodate opinions and deeply entrenched positions – neither of which are in short supply on the national unity question.

If there was anything surprising about the way that the deliberative democracy process worked out at *Assembly '96*, it was that never did the process create an insurmountable degree of polarization or confrontation on any one issue. In fact, the process served to bridge opinions and lead to consensus on many of the issues discussed.

FIGURE 4: The Fit of Deliberative Democracy With the Premiers' Framework for Discussion

<i>Consultation Guidelines From The Premiers' Framework</i>	<i>The Fit With Deliberative Democracy</i>
The process should be open to general citizens.	Deliberative Democracy is not only open, it actively encourages – if not demands – participation from all quarters and segments of society.
Efforts should be made to find creative ways of engaging Canadians in each provincial consultation process.	Deliberative democracy is the most innovative and creative way to consult in the 1990s. It has the ability to capture the imagination of a territory, province, and even a nation.
Governments must act as a catalyst for the process of consultation.	Governments can be a true catalyst for debate and consultation by choosing deliberative democracy since the process is not limited to special interests, but is “bottom-up.”
Provinces and territories may wish to have processes of consultation in stages, but the advantage of a coordinated time frame is recognized.	Deliberative democracy is a highly flexible process that can be used in one province or territory or expanded to cover whole regions of the country.
Each province and territory is free to decide on the range and scope of consultation as well as the most appropriate mechanism for consultation.	On the eight basic criteria for effective consultation, deliberative democracy scores the highest. It is the appropriate mechanism.

USING DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

On all fronts, deliberative democracy meets or exceeds the standards set by the Premiers in their *Framework for Discussion*. A process of deliberative democracy would be ideal for consulting Canadians about their interests and aspirations given the current state of national unity and their thoughts on another referendum and any negotiation with Québec in the event of the least desirable outcome – a **YES** vote.

The process could be initiated by one or several Premiers. Participants could be chosen through provincial voters' lists. The roundtable sessions could run in cities throughout a province or group of provinces, beginning with informational sessions, moving to discussion sessions and finishing with sessions that focus on the creation of options and ideas. The process would culminate with a “capstone” conference and a comprehensive report.

This report could then serve as a “white paper” to be fine-tuned through a legislative hearing process in the case of one province or a *Reconfederation Council* comprised of elected leaders and prominent citizens from across a group of provinces. With such a process, the Premiers would be assured of meeting the high goals they have set for themselves.

CONCLUSION

The idea of deliberative democracy, a method of consultation unlike any of the more traditional methods, has much to recommend it. Under the best of circumstances, deliberative democracy allows us to place the square peg of large population and mass society into the round hole of direct democratic participation. What results is face to face communication, invaluable exchanges of information and ideas, a broader understanding of varying human circumstances and priorities, and a much deeper level of compromise and understanding.

This research report was authored by Canada West Foundation Research Analyst Casey Vander Ploeg with Dr. Peter McCormick, University of Lethbridge Political Scientist, and CWF President David Elton. Because of the independence given the authors in writing this report, the opinions and recommendations expressed within are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Canada West Foundation, its Council, members or contributors. Permission is hereby granted by the copyright owners for any and all reproduction of this report in its entirety for non-profit and educational purposes.