City Health and Deliberative Democracy

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The way we build and live in our cities is an important influence on health outcomes and this is the case whether our focus is on infectious diseases or non-communicable disease (NCDs). Indeed, in relation to the current epidemic of NCDs like obesity and diabetes our built environment and transport systems are seen as crucial influences. Not surprisingly, then, the World Health Organisation has identified urbanisation and how its managed as one of the key health challenges for the 21st century (WHO and Metropolis, 2014).

When considering how to respond, our city planners and managers now have bucket loads of evidence and experience about what helps or hinders the city health agenda. Some of it relates to the type and location of health services throughout a city but some too to land use planning and regulation considered more generally such that we now have a clear picture of what smart and sustainable strategy looks like, namely "a policy framework that promotes an urban development pattern characterised by high population density, walkable and bikeable neighbourhoods, preserved green spaces, mixed-use developments (i.e., development projects that include both residential and commercial uses), available mass transit, and limited road construction" (Resnik, 2010).

In many ways the issue has moved from "what do we need to do" to "how do we make it happen". I'm referring here not just to the resources and capacities both human and technological, needed to introduce and administer change, but also to the question of political acceptability and the issues associated with it, like public opinion, vested interests and political leadership. Very little - if anything - comes without politics and controversy and conflict over the agenda associated with healthier cities is no exception. As WHO and Metropolis (2014) put it: 'The good news is that technical solutions for many of our challenges exist. Participatory approaches of using evidence to inform and sustain corrective action is also gaining momentum. But progress is slow. Politics is the biggest barrier. Politics is also the primary solution".

We need to imagine the city not just as a form of settlement but also as a set of relationships within which there are hierarchies of power and interest. All of those with an interest in city health solutions find themselves lined up against those with a vested interest in the status quo. It might be a local community resisting a new and mixed housing development or a new public transport corridor. We've all heard of the phenomenon of NIMBYism or "not in my back yard"! It might be developers not keen to spend more in the interests of the environment and liveability. So too might it be a city planner set in his or her "modernist" ways. As Marinova, McGrath and Newman (2004) have noted: "The dominant modernist development paradigm of the twentieth century was based upon centralised and hierarchical planning" which "ignored the social and quality of life issues which are complex and unquantifiable and are thus deemed difficult".

Unfortunately, too it's often the case that projects aimed at producing healthy cities aren't managed well, thus putting into jeopardy the very idea. Reformers too are capable of cutting corners!

This leads me to ask: Is the way we do politics today capable of producing the structural and policy initiatives required for healthy cities? How do we maximise the chances that evidence-based policies will win out where it matters in the provinces of government and public opinion?

In our type of system with its accountability mechanisms centred on regular elections and the public opinion, significant leadership backed up by effective campaigning and political nous, is needed to ensure evidence has a chance to speak and be influential. To some extent this has always been the case, but even more so in a world influenced by "post-truth" thinking and practice in which the disciplines associated with scientific endeavour are ditched and debate "framed largely by appeals to emotion disconnected from the details of policy" (Wikipedia). All too often we see vested interests lining up with fundamentalists to thwart evidence based initiatives related not just to urban form but also service delivery focussed on the needs of marginalised, vulnerable and stigmatised populations. The battles over harm reduction initiatives like medically supervised injecting centres are a case in point. Many victories have been achieved but challenges remain if we are to produce healthier outcomes for all.

This state of affairs leads us to ask whether or not we can create circumstances where public opinion can be activated on a different basis. Currently it takes shape in the context of party-political and ideological battles and is revealed through voting, polling and sometimes street-level protest. Official consultations occur but more often than not aren't inclusive or deliberative enough to make a difference in these political battles. Good leaders will bring evidence to the table of decision and it helps enormously if they can say that not only are "reason" and "evidence" on their side, but also "public opinion". It follows that we need better ways to link the findings of scientific endeavour with the authority of public opinion. Traditional and new forms of political advocacy, elections and campaigning will take us so far but even then, more is needed as we've seen so often when elected governments claim a mandate but can't deliver in the face of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition. This takes me to the range of institutions based on the principle of deliberative democracy such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences, planning cells, deliberative polls, and citizens' assemblies and the contribution they can make to the ends and means of democratic politics.

These initiatives vary in scope and operation but all share a commitment to the random (usually stratified) selection of participants and properly facilitated deliberation. They create what are in effect mini-publics "demographically representative of the larger population, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making" (Escobar and Elstub, 2017). Thus, the first two of three key elements for deliberative democracy - inclusion and deliberation. The third is influence or "the capacity to influence policy and decision-making". To be effective it's important that any recommendations of participants in a jury or assembly are agreed to, or at the very least taken very seriously. Indeed, it's the criticism of much so-called "consultation" today not only that it is insufficiently deliberative and inclusive but also that it's not conducted in good faith. This undermines trust and denies the consultation exercise the authority it needs to make a political difference (Hartz-Karp, 2005).

The connection here between mini-public advice and decision-making doesn't just exist through a commitment by governments to take that advice seriously but also indirectly through its influence on public opinion more broadly considered. As Fishkin and Mansbridge (2017) put it: "Popular deliberative institutions are grounded in the public's values and concerns, so the voice they magnify is not the voice of the elites". This gives the deliberative process authority with the general public disillusioned by contemporary politics. What emerges isn't a case study in "angry populism" but nor is it a case study in top-down policy-making by distrusted elites. Practised properly it produces results that "represent what the larger population would think if somehow those citizens could engage in similarly good conditions for considering the issue' (Fishkin and Mansbridge, 2017).

It might be a small but seemingly intractable local issue related to a particular health service or planning proposal, wicked problems that inevitably involve trade- offs around competing objectives, a challenge from new technologies whose consequences are uncertain, or major society-wide issues such as a city-plan or a local authority budget. We can point to many examples where such issues have been addressed through one of the forms of deliberative democracy - and with powerful and positive results. In the case of Australia, the New Democracy Foundation promotes and facilities the creation of mini-publics to assist in policy making. Local and State Governments have partnered with them, as have Parliamentary Committees. The topics covered include water pricing, local governance, the nuclear fuel cycle, local budgeting, infrastructure planning, obesity, cycling policy, transport nodes, safe and vibrant cities, energy and parliamentary reform. Their work, and that of others, has been noted by the general public, a recent poll indicating 57% support for citizen juries with only 12% against and with 31% still undecided (Pollinate, 2017).

In my own time as Premier of the State of Western Australia (2001 to 2006) a range of innovative mechanisms were used in the planning portfolio to determine or advise on a range of issues - six Consensus Forums, three Citizen's Juries, a Deliberative Survey, three Multi-Criteria Analysis Conferences and two Design Dialogues (Gregory, Hartz-Karp and Watson, 2008). However, most important of all was the convening of Dialogue with the City in 2003 involving 1,100 participants to draft up a planning framework for the capital Perth on the understanding that the government would implement what they recommended, which we did. One-third of the participants were randomly selected, one- third invited stakeholders and one-third self-nominated to attend following advertisements in newspapers, radio and the internet. Experts had their say as did those with interests but so too did those unrepresented minorities like the young, indigenous Australians and people with a non-English speaking background. It was a lengthy process involving not just information provision and deliberation phases but also an implementation phase involving 100 participants from the Dialogue itself. The final result - Network City: A Community Planning Strategy - was accepted in principle by the cabinet and along with expanded passenger rail and cycling infrastructure and initiatives like Liveable Neighbourhoods and Travel Smart became a part of the program to create a healthier city. At various points along the way there was opposition to the project and its link to the government's commitment to sustainability and its triple bottom line but they failed to gain any traction in the face of genuine community ownership of the strategy (see Hartz-Karp, 2005 and Marinova, McGrath and Newman, 2004).

There are plenty who criticise deliberative democracy as too middle-class in conception and insufficiently authoritative to give strength to leaders standing up for evidence. In respect of the claim that only the well-educated can access "the language and procedures of deliberation" the empirical evidence is otherwise. Indeed, deliberative democracy curtails rather than perpetuates elite domination "by creating space for ordinary political actors to create, contest, and reflect upon ideas, options, and discourses" (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks and Niemeyer, 2017). In fact, there is plenty of evidence available today to indicate that not only does a better policy conversation come with deliberative democracy but also that more "sensible, actionable, defensible" recommendations follow, even when there is significant controversy and complexity surrounding the issue (Schecter, 2017). This speaks well of the capacity of ordinary people to listen to others, discuss a matter respectfully, change their minds if that's where the evidence takes them, and then reach a decision. It's an impressive record that has added energy to our democracies.

On the question of authority, we come to the most important finding of all and that is "increased public trust in the decision, the decision-making process, and - over time - in government in general" (Schecter, 2017). It is the case that the "whole community" feels represented by the "mini-public" and as a result looks upon recommendations so determined with more acceptance. After all it's a case of "people like me" making the decision and capable of seeing through any spin by experts, manipulation by vested interests or obfuscation by politicians. Just as important is the finding that deliberative practices can help bridge the deep conflicts - religious, racial, ethnic or national - that undermine trust and social unity in many communities, the evidence for this "coming from formats ranging from mixed-identity discussion groups located in civil society to more structured citizen forums with participants from different sides" (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks and Niemeyer, 2017). Trust across the boundaries is a means as well as an end and often it is these sort of divisions, as well as those related to class and status, that undermine efforts to find solutions to city-wide problems.

Deliberative democracy doesn't just speak to us as citizens wanting improved access and accountability but also as decision-makers wanting better outcomes in a world increasingly out of control. We need a new alliance between science and democracy in which our scientists provide us with the best that properly conducted inquiries can produce and our deliberative assemblies the best that properly conducted deliberation can deliver when it comes to the application of science's findings to human society. As Fishkin and Mansbridge (2017) put it: "If the many versions of a more deliberative democracy live up to their aspirations, they could help revive democratic legitimacy, provide for more authentic public will formation, provide a middle ground between widely mistrusted elites and the angry voices of populism, and help fulfil some of our common normative expectations about democracy".

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