Citizen Participation in the '90s: Realities, Challenges and Opportunities

Occasional Paper No. 30

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by Walter S. Kubiski
1992

The Institute of Urban Studies

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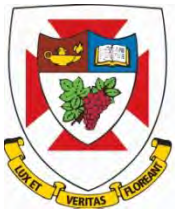

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The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

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FOREWORD

This paper was initially presented at the First Western Canadian Urban Studies Conference held at The University of Winnipeg on May 15, 1992. The conference was co-sponsored by the Institute of Urban Studies and Dr. Dan Chekki of the Department of Sociology, The University of Winnipeg, in commemoration of the University's Twenty-Fifth Anniversary.

A full slate of five invited speakers, from Western Canada, Toronto and the United States, presented papers on a variety of topics relevant to Western Canadian cities. Walter Kubiski, Managing Director of W.S. Kubiski and Associates Ltd. (Toronto) discussed "Citizen Participation in the '90s: Realities, Challenges and Opportunities." Bryan T. Downs (Department of Planning, Public Policy and Management, University of Oregon) made a presentation entitled "Heartland-Hinterland Interrelationships within Provinces and Regions and the Future of Western Canadian Cities." Robert K. Whelan (Associate Dean, College of Urban and Public Affairs, University of New Orleans) discussed "Urban Regimes and Their Responses to Social and Economic Changes: A Comparative Case Study of Calgary and Edmonton's Policies towards Urban Economic Development." William T. Perks (Chair, Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary) spoke on "Urban Restructuring: Modelling for Community and Urban Form in the 21st Century." Alan F.J. Artibise, Director of the School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia made a presentation entitled "From Desolation to Hope: Perspectives on the Vancouver Metropolis, 1990-2010."

From these diverse presentations, a number of common themes emerged: the need for community empowerment (self-help) and citizen participation; the need for innovative responses from cities in the face of economic decline (economic restructuring); the need for new conceptions of urban form (another kind of "restructuring"); the necessity of making hard choices and trade-offs to ensure an acceptable quality of urban life; the quest for urban sustainability; and an orientation towards the future. The presenters agreed that, if Western Canadian cities are to flourish, urban planners, politicians, policymakers and citizens must work together to develop new models of urban life and new ways of doing things in the areas of urban design, policy and economic development. Cities should be viewed not as isolated from the rural "hinterland," but as vital and integral parts of provinces and regions.

The Conference, the first ever to focus specifically on Western Canadian urban issues, attracted some ninety participants, who enhanced the proceedings with animated and substantive discussion and debate in the question periods after each presentation. In addition to Dr. Kubiski's contribution in this Occasional Paper, revised versions of some of the other conference papers may be published at a later date as IUS Publications, or in the *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*. Interested readers should watch future issues of the *Institute of Urban Studies Newsletter* for more publication information.

Mary Ann Beavis
Acting Director
Institute of Urban Studies

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE '90s: REALITIES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

When invited to prepare a paper for this conference, I knew immediately that my topic would be citizen participation and its necessity for the healthy functioning of democracy in urban communities and neighbourhoods. More specifically, I believe we have entered a period in our history when any new political, social, or economic agenda must, of necessity, be addressed first at the municipal level.[1] I was drawn to this topic for three reasons:

- First, my experience in the founding days of the Institute of Urban Studies was with community organizing aimed at giving people in Winnipeg neighbourhoods a greater say in the decisions that affected them, toward better overall city planning and governance. In my mind, the Institute has always been associated with the pursuit of this end.

- Second, although I have moved from Winnipeg to Toronto and from community organizing to management consulting, I have had many occasions to observe the progress and setbacks of citizen participation both in Winnipeg and in other cities over the years. This paper is an opportunity to make sense of what I have witnessed.

- Third, I am gravely concerned about the growing fragmentation and alienation that I see in our communities and in our nation. I have asked how this can happen, when there are dedicated practitioners, organizers, activists and ordinary citizens working so hard to make things better. I have asked myself whether our limited success comes from a lack of funds or from our current techniques. On reflection, I have come to the conclusion that our conventional wisdom about citizen participation is no longer serving us well. In fact, it may be contributing to divisiveness, fragmentation and alienation in our communities.

I would like to take this opportunity, then, as a moment for reflection. My intent is not to present a theoretical framework or an empirical study. Rather, I intend to reconsider some of our conventional wisdom about citizen participation in light of present social, economic and political realities.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND CURRENT REALITIES

Citizen Participation: What It Is, Why It Is Needed

As I am using the term, citizen participation refers to the actions that citizens take to influence the structure of government, the selection of government authorities, or the policies or administration of government.[2]

These actions may take place at election time, but also between elections. They may include:

- action taken in support of existing policies, authorities or structures, or toward changing any or all of these;
- a range of individual involvement from action toward a given goal, to passive participation in political events organized by others or simply paying attention to politics;
- a range of types of political action, from conventional political activities, such as involvement in elections or working with established groups, to less conventional activities such as protests.

Writers on Citizen Participation

Making our society work—the flourishing of civilization—is everyone's business. It's what we do. Our individual freedom depends upon our participating membership in democracy.

—Bill Moyers, American Journalist

An informed and active citizenry, hounding their governments to do what has to be done, is the indispensable ingredient of any hope for the global future.

—Boyce Richardson, Canadian Writer

At the heart of citizen participation is the concept of "citizen." A citizen is a person who lives in and is entitled to, all the rights of a democracy. A citizen also is responsible for protecting and preserving that very democracy. As long as there have been democratic societies, there has been concern with the appropriate role for citizens, and the need for citizen participation. The terms change (e.g., from citizen participation, to stakeholder involvement, to public consultation), but the fundamental issue is perennial. The concept of citizen participation is inherent in the functioning of democracy.[3]

The necessity for citizen participation is very clear. As a society, we have tough choices to make, and complex issues to address. At stake are the health and viability of our communities as living and working places, our future as a nation, and even the survival of our planet. As citizens of a democratic society, we need to participate in making the choices and resolving the issues which are before us. As a society, we are faced with real emergencies, both social and economic, which are interdependent. We need all the human resources and judgment available to us in our communities to address these emergencies.

Yet, the current realities of citizen participation both during and between elections are disturbing. As currently practised and understood, citizen participation seems to be breaking down. Our conventional wisdom says that citizens have become apathetic, that they are "turned off" by the complexity of issues, or they are not "turned on" by issues that do not relate to them directly.

For some individuals, this may well be true. There is sufficient evidence, however, that most citizens *are* concerned. They *do* wish to influence the quality of life in their communities, the state of our nation, and the treatment of our global environment.

It may be that they don't feel they really can.

The Realities of Participation at Election Time

A key indicator of citizen participation in the political process is voting behaviour. Voting by informed citizens is the minimum level of participation required in a democratic society. We are not achieving this minimum in Canada today. I note, for example, that only 34 percent of eligible voters voted in the last Winnipeg municipal election.[4]

To understand why, it is important to remember that not so very long ago, only people with certain sets of values or resources could participate in our democratic system. Some of the earliest struggles toward citizen participation had to do with obtaining enfranchisement for all citizens. These struggles are not very far in our past, and passing a law does not change behaviours or attitudes overnight. For example:[5]

- Women in most of Canada obtained the right to vote in federal elections in 1918. Women in the province of Quebec did not obtain the right to vote in provincial elections until 1940.
- In the U.S., one of the first steps of the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement was to register Blacks to vote. Compare this to Nova Scotia, where Blacks were prohibited from attending school with White students until 1954.
- Until 1960, Aboriginal people living on reserves were denied the right to vote.
- In Canada, Chinese and East Asian people won the right to vote in 1947.

As the above examples illustrate, the most basic experience of democracy is relatively new for large groups of people in Canada (approximately 60% of the total population based on current estimates). Also new is our society's experience in having them participate. In this sense, our democracy is still very young.

Today of course, our democratic values say that all citizens have the right to vote. Exercise of this right is a necessary aspect of citizen participation. The realities are disturbing. Poor voter turnout is not the only concern. For example, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the types of people who live in the poorer parts of our cities are even less likely to vote than others:[6]

- Very old people and very young adults are less likely to vote, and more likely to live in the inner city.
- People who are better educated are more likely to participate. In Winnipeg (unlike most other Canadian cities), residents of the inner city are less likely to have university educations than those of other areas of the city.
- People with higher incomes are slightly more likely to vote than those of equal education with lower incomes. In Winnipeg, income levels are lower in the inner city.

- Visible minorities are less likely to vote than others with the same socio-economic status. There is a higher proportion of Aboriginal people, and those not of British or French origin, living in the inner city.

In addition, some people still are disenfranchised within our cities (e.g., the homeless, who tend to be excluded from voters' lists because they have no permanent address).

> ***Public participation in voting is low, and seems to be reaching lower levels at each election. People's frustration about politics is high. A sense of political efficacy among citizens is missing. And people seem to believe that the system often is incapable ... of resolving major issues.***
>
> ***—Kettering Study of Citizens and Politics***

The decline from former levels in electoral participation indicates more than voter apathy. In fact, there is a deep malaise among voters. In the U.S., for example, a recent and compelling study for the Kettering Foundation confirmed what other reports have shown: that declining participation in voting is indicative of an underlying frustration experienced by voters about the effectiveness of their vote, an alarming sense of impotence.[7] In my view, the findings apply equally well to Canada, with our divisive constitutional debates and uncertain political future. Many voters are feeling alienated and manipulated. They are rendered passive by polls which predict their decisions before they have a chance to make them. They are dissatisfied with the available choices on issues and among candidates. Also, many are not satisfied with our current representative structures (e.g., school boards, municipal and metropolitan governments, the Senate), or with the patchwork thinking proposed for their reform.

Growth of the Reform Party is only one indicator of this deep-rooted dissatisfaction. New parties have also emerged in Quebec and in the Atlantic provinces, in each case indicating varying degrees of dissatisfaction with traditional representation. The capture of the constitutional consultation process by citizens in Halifax recently, even though they were hand-picked, is another! The frequency of public polls is yet another: regardless of the issue, pollsters know that the public are unhappy with their governments, and this is news.

Our conventional wisdom would say that potential voters are apathetic and likely uninformed. The evidence suggests that, on the contrary, many of them are very much concerned about the issues that affect them, but feel frustrated in their efforts to shape the resolution of these issues or even set the agenda for discussion.

The Realities of Participation between Elections

Even if informed citizens *were* participating in the voting process, there is debate as to whether this is adequate. At one extreme of this debate are people who feel that enfranchisement is not only

necessary, but that it also is a *sufficient* provision for citizen participation. As recently as seven years ago when I prepared a discussion paper on "Models of Citizen Participation Applicable to the City of Winnipeg" for the City of Winnipeg Act Review Committee, there were well informed and influential people who subscribed to this view.[8]

These people feel that not all citizens are equipped to have input into complex policy areas, beyond that which takes place on election day at the voting booth. For them, representative democracy is adequate, and further participation is not needed. In fact, some people see participation that occurs through other than the traditional political channels as an expensive impediment to good government. In their view, government policy and administrative decision-making require special expertise that ordinary citizens do not possess.

In the same group are those whose view of human nature suggests that most people will not participate, regardless of the system. They argue that, since every citizen has a vote in electing the leaders who will represent their interests, citizens have fair and sufficient access to the political system. The democratic election of representatives ensures that decisions made between elections will be fair and equitable. The number of people holding this viewpoint has shrunk over the past few years, as more and more governments have recognized the need for some consultation or involvement of the public as part of decision-making processes.

On the other side of the debate are people who are inclined to see society in terms of classes or interests, and to see that the upper and middle classes have greater access to political and administrative decision-makers between elections than do the poorer classes. In their view, the provisions of the traditional political system do not compensate for the inequities built into the social and economic class structure. For example, even public consultation about the issues facing those with lower or fixed incomes, in itself a desirable thing, can take the form of dialogue between individuals from upper— and middle-class backgrounds. When this happens, the result is a subtle form of disenfranchisement for the poor.

As the bureaucracy associated with every level of government grows, these analysts feel even more strongly that citizens should have some ongoing impact on decisions made by politicians and bureaucrats. For them, citizen participation which stops at the voting booth is inadequate. They wish to ensure that all citizens have fair and equitable access to elected and bureaucratic decision-makers between elections, as well as having the right to vote on election day.

In keeping with this view, there have been a variety of efforts to expand citizen participation beyond the bounds of electoral politics. Two main types of efforts have been:

- involvement of citizens in planning, administrative and policy formulation processes by government agencies, including urban authorities;
- the formation of special interest groups.

In both areas, there has been much activity over the past thirty years, with substantial accomplishments, but also with characteristics that are cause for concern.

Realities of Citizen Involvement in Governance and Administration

Remarkable transitions have taken place in the relationship between government agencies and citizens over the past thirty years. The governance of our communities, the agenda-setting process, the review and validation of plans and policies, and the administration of programs have all been affected permanently, to some degree, by the expectations and behaviour of citizens participating in civic issues.

Citizen participation in an advisory role to governments and agencies has expanded dramatically in the past few decades. Citizens *advise* on an enormous range of issues and activities, and they expect to be asked for advice on matters affecting them. Of course, governments and their agencies are still in the early stages of learning how these consultations should be carried out. Too often, consultations are still structured so that the scope within which advice is rendered is very limited, the agenda is already established, the options predetermined, or the advice sought too early or too late in a planning timetable. On the positive side, the necessity for consultation process is increasingly accepted.

In some situations, citizens *do* the direct work such as provide the goods or services that would otherwise be provided by civil servants. An undervalued dimension of citizen participation is in the form of self-help groups. There has been a dramatic increase in their number, diversity and strength over the past two decades. Such groups enable citizens to achieve important goals which government agencies, institutions or professionals either cannot or will not achieve. Alcoholics Anonymous is the first and classic model of these self-help groups. It has been copied in its organization and style by more and more types of other groups.

Other than through jury duty or membership on a governing board, there are few examples of new forms of citizen participation in which citizens *decide*, that is, have the authority to make decisions. It is in this form that true participation of citizens would be more fully realized. This problem of true participation is not a new one, but it is one that we are newly appreciating and understanding. All levels of government today are experimenting with methods of involving

stakeholders and partners in actual decision-making (e.g., federal Labour Force Development Board and provincial counterparts).

Citizen participation in urban planning and development is a special case, worthy of more detailed examination.

Until the late 1960s, the prevailing conventional wisdom in urban planning was that politicians were the only point of influence between citizens and government agencies. There was no provision for citizen influence over the actual administration of government functions, which was to be left to hired officials. The focus was on suburban growth and expansion, and high-rise redevelopment in downtown areas. In these downtown areas, the main strategy was to demolish deteriorated housing and replace it with new low-income housing. Citizens were moved aside during development, and perhaps moved back into new housing once development was completed, but they were not given a voice in the planning process. Their voice was presumed to be resident in the group of elected citizens of that day.

The late 1960s brought an era of citizen protest and community organizing across the country. Many factors fuelled this movement, and competing philosophies quickly emerged as to how planning should be done, how priorities should be determined, and how citizens should be involved. There were many points of disagreement, but a pivotal issue was whether cities could continue to plan as though economic development were without any significant social and moral dimension.

In Winnipeg, these were heady days, giving birth to new institutions such as the Institute of Urban Studies. The Institute's strategies at this time were innovative, collaborative and designed to help give citizens a voice in planning for their neighbourhoods. Various other agencies were similarly involved. Funds were plentiful, expectations were high. Although unemployment in the inner city was serious, we all had a sense that the economic pie was growing, and that we had only to obtain a fair piece of it in order to prosper.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a tendency on the part of government to bury problems with money and programs. The net effect of this largesse was that: (a) communities and individuals received short-term economic benefit that ended with the funding; (b) officials could always point to their planning intention to address social issues as well as development ones; and (c) unfortunately, people and communities became dependent on government funding for the long term.[9]

In 1978, the Neighbourhood Improvement Program was ended, and across the country citizen participation in urban development issues dropped quickly and significantly. The recession of the early 1980s brought a new style of planning. Canadian planners actively encouraged development again,

and they worked more with government and developers than with citizens (perhaps feeling justified by the departure from the scene of so many citizen groups and some ratepayers' associations). New major initiatives were spearheaded by development corporations in the mid-'80s, such as the Winnipeg Core Area Initiative (CAI). They were undertaken from the perspective of assisting the overall City, and involving the key stakeholders. Resources were not available for major citizen involvement, although planners had by now developed routine methods for limited involvement.

Examination of the impact of CAI development initiatives on Winnipeg's inner city are now being produced—for example by the Social Planning Council, the Institute of Urban Studies, and the Community Inquiry into Inner City Revitalization.[10] The information I draw from most of these reviews is not encouraging: development-driven transformations of parts of downtown Winnipeg have resulted in some glamorous environments, but economic goals have not been achieved in terms of renewed business activity or improvement of the daily existence of the neighbourhood's original residents. Indeed, small business may take a long time to recover, unemployment may have worsened, and affordable housing is now more of a problem than earlier in the mid-'80s. It seems that relatively few individuals from the core area actually benefitted in tangible ways (except those who did well in their training and changed their lives by moving elsewhere). In Winnipeg's inner city, for example, there were numerous programs to train and re-train people for whom there were no jobs. There is also some concern that the effects of social and physical deterioration may be spreading outwards from the inner core of the city.

The chart on page eight is a personal reflection on the evolution of citizen participation and planning in Winnipeg.

Community organizing and citizen participation in urban planning and development is an easy history to document in terms of landmark debates and major development projects, whether in Winnipeg alone or across the country. It is not an easy history to explain, partly because citizen participation embraces issues broader and more narrowly focused than urban development.

While old and new thinking patterns about citizen participation in administration and governance continue to coexist, there are some positive realities from the past thirty years. There are also some less attractive realities which need to be noted.

First, some of the less attractive realities.

Now that the money has run out, agencies are looking to partnerships with citizens to help them make difficult choices. Indeed, governments are now actively seeking citizen participation (usually referred to as "partnership" or "consultation") to get help with intractable problems that

QUICK SUMMARY OF THE EVOLUTION OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PLANNING IN WINNIPEG

1930s: Jammed, Depression, colourful people living in inner core of Winnipeg with no money. North End farmer's market, market around City Hall. Rich ethnic diversity (Jewish, Anglo, Polish Ukrainian, German, Black, few Aboriginal people). Main Street a gathering place for ethnic minorities.

1940s: Re-awakening of manufacturing in inner-city areas during wartime: people working in factories, much activity, industry, commerce. Horse and wagon delivery of bread, milk, ice. Tenement houses filled with people, some of whom were now making some money. North End a stimulating cultural centre.

1950s: End of War, new economy. Massive concern about the dilapidated state of housing in the inner core. Streets even around City Hall were known for narcotics, petty theft, gambling. Massive ethnic migration (Slavs, Italians). Out-migration to the suburbs as many people began to move further north (River Heights, West Kildonan). Native population started coming in from the reserves, finding their place in the inner-city area. Citizen participation primarily the Winnipeg Social Planning Council. Massive flood brought the city together for a time. Inner city continued to deteriorate.

1960s: Many structures started to come down in the inner-city core. Massive urban renewal, bulldozer approach. Disappearance of the Black community from the Point Douglas area. Main Street beginning to be heavily patronized by Aboriginal people, becoming the meeting place for Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario. Also large presence of motorcycle gangs in the core area.

Intensification and institutionalization of the community development approach (Neighbourhood Service Centres). More cry for participation, but it was controlled participation, usually through agencies. Institute of Urban Studies founded. Participation rhetoric widely used—"Let the people decide." Beginning of the Burroughs-Keewatin housing project and co-operative housing projects. Beginning of people being involved in the housing process. Groups were formed, including groups in the Lord Selkirk area.

1970s: Many new developments (e.g., Logan Heights). Introduction of federal programs like LIP and LEAP where people were encouraged to work with the urban disadvantaged. Structures were razed on Main Street, empty lots left standing. Generations moved out and left parents behind. Inner core more older people. More and more Aboriginal people moving in. Very little construction on the north side of Portage, area allowed to deteriorate. Most jobs now in the suburbs in industrial parks. Employment in the inner core primarily hospital and service workers. Retail sector still alive on Portage Avenue, although there were signs it was beginning to die. Some demonstration projects seemed to be fairly successful (Point Douglas, People's Committees, Logan Heights). Characterized by emergence of self-help groups of young people (poverty groups) and beginning of Unicity government including Resident Advisory Groups.

1980s: Continued influx of Aboriginal people into the inner core, and rise of Aboriginal organizations as a power in Winnipeg. Continued profound demographic shifts. Spread of physical deterioration outside of initial boundaries of the inner core. In first part of decade, some parts of the inner-city core look like a war zone, with some people trying to keep it together.

Investment of millions of dollars through Core Area Initiative—mega-mall in downtown Winnipeg, Winnipeg Forks Project. "Revitalization" of the inner-city core. Extensive community involvement in municipal/provincial successor to Neighbourhood Improvement Program.

government programs have not been able to solve, and for which resources are becoming extremely limited.

A risk of such involvement is that citizens (and groups) will be co-opted. This could mean that they are manipulated by the agencies, or that they are expected to accomplish with fewer resources what the agencies could not accomplish with larger resources.[11] This is part of the story of many seed-money programs.

We see an increased call for involvement of the public in decision-making and program delivery. This involvement generally is undertaken by representative groups. This matter of representation is going to take a new dimension as an issue. For example, as the Toronto and national media try to get a handle on the violence that took place in Toronto in May, some prominent members of the Black community there are speaking out as individuals to challenge the authenticity of "leaders" generally so named by the media. One person even went so far as to say that the whole idea of "spokesperson" and "community leader" were necessary fictions that the media required because of their conflictual style of reporting news. The discussion bears consideration, since it seems to signal more than the concerns of individuals wishing to distance themselves from uncomfortable realities and contentious "public" personalities. The dangers of this emerging issue, if I have captured it correctly, are that it is ready-made for politicians and bureaucrats to use to divide a community against itself, that it contributes to alienation within a community, and that it can contribute to negative stereotypes about a community.

Another unpleasant reality of administrative participation is the risk of creating parallel bureaucracies, in which groups outside of government set up administrative systems as elaborate and costly as those that they replace—except that government has to maintain the original bureaucracy in order to monitor the actions of the new outside agency! Such is a sure recipe for spiralling costs and public dissatisfaction. An even more disappointing outcome is when participative structures are legally established, but not supported by the political will to allow them to function (e.g., Resident Advisory Groups in Winnipeg, which were the first legislated community-based vehicle for citizen participation in Canada, but which have not had the support needed to function to their potential).

The final unpleasant reality is the risk that government agencies will allow programs and resources to be "captured" by the stronger and better organized interest groups—and this happens. In Canada, this has been a constant tension in programs serving Aboriginal peoples in which the worthy intention has been to be "status blind." The reality is that Status Indians on reserves by and large have a more focused and better resourced organization. Therefore, non-Status and urban groups

find it difficult to garner their share of the resources and power. A similar dynamic takes place between organized and unorganized labour, in which some organized labour groups assume the voice of non-organized workers. Government agencies like a structured world. They find it easier to deal with the organized than the unorganized, even if the organized are not truly representative of the full constituency.

So, what are the positive realities for citizen participation in planning and administration? First, the cause of citizen participation has survived a turbulent time, and even expanded. Second, public consultation has become the norm in planning, and in administering agencies and programs. Third, it has expanded and enriched the concept of representation. Fourth, it has enlarged and integrated the political agenda. And finally, it has fostered the growth of large and small interest groups. This last has been a mixed blessing, and bears further examination.

Realities of Citizen Participation through Groups

Our society has seen literally thousands of citizens' groups emerge in the last thirty years, many of them formed to challenge the existing decision-making systems of government. For example, a recent article in the *Toronto Star* reported that in 1991-92, a year of serious cutbacks, the federal government provided a total of $130 million to more than 3000 public interest groups.[12]

> *In the hurly-burly world of the 90's, if you really want to grab the national agenda to save the planet, control guns, take back the night for women, build wheelchair ramps or just get a little respect, the way to go is public interest groups.*
>
> —*Val Sears,* Toronto Star

Public interest/citizen groups are local, city-wide, provincial, federal or even international in scope. They frequently cut across class and party lines. Examples include women's groups, Aboriginal groups, multicultural groups and environmental groups. Some groups are extremist. We are not talking about them in this paper.

Groups serve many fine purposes. They provide education, and affect decision-making. Many have as a goal the empowerment of their membership. Because organized and sustained effort is required to make significant change, groups often are better equipped than individuals to be effective change agents. At their best, groups are vehicles for individuals to participate. There is a darker side to the emergence and growth of interest groups, however, and this reality must be acknowledged.

> *Like political scientists, citizens know that the political system is now designed to respond to interest groups rather than individual citizens.*
>
> *—Kettering Foundation Study on Citizens and Politics*

Ironically, the empowerment of groups can disempower other individuals who do not belong, or who belong to less effective groups. For example, the recent Kettering study found that individual citizens are as alienated from the powerful groups as they are from the political parties and government agencies. While the situation in the U.S. is more dramatic because of the greater power of lobby groups, a similar pattern is developing in Canada.[13]

When power is held primarily by groups, individuals come to be represented by an involuntary proxy. When a leader of a powerful ethnic group speaks out for the "ethnic community," for example, s/he tends to be heard as speaking for all people in the community. This type of proxy representation then becomes enshrined by government as total representation in public consultations, on boards and other processes. At the extreme, a myth of total representation comes into play, whereby government believes (for example) that it has achieved representation of all persons with disabilities by having one person with one disability on one committee.

The importance of an issue to a group and the need for solidarity in its resolution can also result in disempowerment of individuals within the group. Again, the issue is our conventional wisdom about representation, about the pressures that impose a sort of party-whip discipline on the individuals within a group because the rules of citizen participation rarely allow open dialogue on issues and solutions. People need an opportunity to speak and be heard as individuals, not only as members of groups. And of course, people who choose not to see themselves as part of a group also need their opportunity to speak.

I know that piece by piece involvement of individuals does not lead to political clout, and that groups are a powerful organizing tool.[14] On the other hand, I know that I am not alone in being concerned that we are at risk of becoming a nation of hyphenated citizens, whether by official language, region, country of origin, gender or group.

A related problem for and with groups, is that both media and government tend to lean heavily upon them. It is difficult for institutions to contend with an unorganized polity. Both government and the media need simplicity, either for the sake of a short, concise message in the case of the media, or for the sake of administrative convenience for government. Thus, both government and the media tend to overstate the reality of interest groups, giving them a power of representation that they may have neither claimed or earned for themselves.

Groups are forced to compete for the attention of legislators. Competition in itself can be healthy. It can help to clarify issues and priorities, and informs the public. However, Canada is increasingly heterogeneous in its makeup. Depending on competition among interest groups to make the democratic process work can be dysfunctional to the point of undermining democracy. This is especially true when strong interest groups are on opposing sides of an issue (e.g., in the case of abortion). Over-emphasis of the two extreme positions can force a win-lose stand-off, prohibiting successful deliberation toward new solutions.[15]

> *Any strongly defended particular interest can hurt the broader "public" interest, and today's "deprived group," if well organized, becomes tomorrow's "vested interest" ... in a democracy, real virtue lies not in achieving the triumph of any one interest but rather in strengthening the weak to create a balanced pluralism in which all have a fair chance.*
>
> *—Jack Nagel*

When groups are concerned with increasing their own power, they are less able to assist in solving complex problems for the good of all. This is even more apparent when issues affect many groups, as in urban planning, and groups will not or cannot join efforts for more broadly satisfying solutions. Many group leaders are aware that there is virtue in balance. But, as U.S. political scientist Jack Nagel recently wrote, organizers and activists have a strong need to see their group or cause as having unique virtue. It is not easy for them to maintain a balanced perspective while making a wholehearted effort on behalf of the group.[16]

The ground rules of urban representation are going to be challenged yet again, and in ways that we cannot really anticipate at this time. In several Western cities, Winnipeg included, the challenge of Aboriginal self-government, the diverse forms being considered by different Native groups, the coming together of Native and Métis peoples around common needs, and the growing Aboriginal and Métis populations in Western Canadian cities—all these factors will have impacts on our conventional wisdom about citizen participation, since citizen participation will be crucial as they move toward real self-government. Indeed, all Canadians may be able to learn important lessons from their experiences and approaches.

The reality of groups is that they are an essential, but problematic vehicle for citizen participation. Anyone who sees the current flowering of interest groups as an indicator that all is well is our democracy is unaware or unconcerned that this winners/losers game is a short-term success strategy (which is one definition of the power game) with longer term consequences of public apathy and lack of confidence. We need to protect the right of all citizens to participate on an equal footing,

while allowing people of like minds to get together to solve problems in a more meaningful way. To do so, we need to help groups work toward a common interest, as well as toward their own interests.

PRESCRIPTION FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE '90s

Recently, the federal government has been sponsoring a series of television ads on citizenship, asking Canadians to "take it to heart." I think they have put before us an apt analogy, but not in the heart-warming way they intended. My thinking is more visceral.

Effective citizen participation is the lifeblood of a democratic society. It provides a nourishing flow of ideas, insight and direction from the citizenry to the leadership. When this flow is impeded, the political will to make and carry out sound policy judgments will flag. When it is poisoned by an imbalance of self and special interests against the general interest, society will fight against itself and become incapable of sound judgments. When participation by individual citizens becomes too weak or stops, democracy cannot survive.

When I reflect on the evolution of citizen participation in Canada over the last thirty years, I am troubled. Even though citizen participation is becoming more widespread in some ways, I see a growing sense of powerlessness and alienation among my fellow citizens. I personally feel powerless as an individual to influence the direction of policy that is shaping my life, and I know that I am not alone in this feeling. Our participatory systems have become anaemic to the point of danger to the health of our democracy. The participatory routes which could be available to us are like diseased arteries, clogged by unclear thinking and blocked by administrative and political resistance to the exercise of democratic decision-making.

I see the varied interest groups fighting each other for rights and recognition, too often without common cause or concern for the general well-being of the larger community. I witness how media and "experts" provide poor nourishment in the form of one-sided, overly narrow or even inflammatory opinions. I see all this, and I am concerned. Already we have had social violence, which no one anticipated here in well managed Canada, that signals dangerously high social "blood pressure." I fear a breakdown that will require major surgery if the damage can be repaired at all.

To pursue the analogy one final step, I believe we can and we must take steps toward a positive goal of bringing ourselves back to good health, not simply to avoid future "inconvenience." I would propose five steps in the regimen or agenda for citizen participation.

First, Encouraging a Sense of Collective Responsibility

> *It is extremely important for us to instill in Canadians the basic idea that social and personal problems are inevitable, but that by working together, we can solve them.*
>
> *—Reginald Bibby, Canadian Sociologist*

As Canadians, we need to remind ourselves—something that we don't often do—that we have a collective responsibility to preserve and improve our democracy. Of course, the current constitutional debate provides a stimulus for serious thinking about the balance of citizen rights and obligations, but I am thinking also of the daily opportunities provided in the development and implementation of policies and programs affecting our communities.[17]

We need to take better advantage of these opportunities. We need to find ways to tap Canadians' sense of civic duty, not just to shore up programs and services which are ineffective, but in order to improve our political health. Public institutions and politicians can help by showing clearly and consistently that they are listening to citizen views, and responding to them. Also, there are many experiments taking place across the country involving new models for public consultation. These need to be documented, and key lessons need to be extracted from them.

Second, Renewing Our Understanding of Citizen Participation

Daniel Yankelovich, the American pollster, wrote recently about the three stages that public opinion must go through before citizens can actually hold informed public judgment on an issue. In his view, these stages are essential, must follow in sequence, can take considerable time, and require different types of supportive action from politicians, activists, experts and the media. In the context of citizen participation, the addition of a fourth step provides us with a powerful model for renewing our understanding of citizen participation and making it more effective.

The first step in Yankelovich's model is a process of "consciousness raising," a concept familiar to us all from the women's movement. In this step, the public learns about an issue, becoming aware of its existence and meaning. This is a term with which we are all familiar. It is the first step in forming citizen participation, just as it is the first step in forming public opinion.

The second step is a period of transition. Yankelovich borrows the phrase "working through" from psychology to describe this period in order to emphasize that a critical shift in thinking and feeling must occur. What is needed to animate citizens is not simply more facts, but support in sorting out conflicting values, attitudes and public choices. This step takes time. It cannot be pushed to fit an artificial agenda.

The third step is "resolution," in which the public resolves where it stands cognitively, emotionally and morally. At this stage it can make informed and democratic judgments as to what should be done about an issue.[18]

To these three steps, I would add a fourth: "action," in which citizens consider and choose and carry out actions needed to influence decisions and leaders.

I believe that this can be a powerful model in thinking through effective citizen participation, because it can be used to do two things. It can help us in the forming of groups dedicated to particular issues which are capable of participating in sound public decision-making in the general interest. It also can help define the roles and relationships of leaders, experts, bureaucrats, media, activists, groups and citizens that must be developed.

To date, our approaches to citizen participation have tended to underemphasise, even ignore, the essential second and third steps that I have mentioned. Many individuals and groups become stuck in the preliminary stage of consciousness raising. They think, perhaps naively, that citizens only need information in order to see the need for action. They ignore or are unaware of the fact that the resolution of the important issues in a community invariably involve conflicts of belief and value systems—not just between groups but within individuals. It is no wonder that so many groups lose heart, or, in their frustration, burst into inappropriate action without working the issues through.

We need to develop tools and ground rules to help us through all four stages. For example, the Kettering Foundation has coined the term "choicework" to describe what is involved in the second and third steps, and has been developing and testing techniques to help groups arrive at good choices.[19] I recommend their work to you. Such tools will be especially important in areas where people tend to be poor, disempowered by the present system, and frustrated. The Piedmont Peace Project associated with the Citizen Participation Project at the University of Chicago is an example of how such tools and ground rules can be developed especially for use with poorer communities.

Third, a Better Information Diet

We lack sufficient opportunities to discuss and explore public issues in public, particularly opportunities for citizens and public officials to explore alternative solutions to policy issues without falling into divisive debate. One of the inadvertent negative influences of the media is that they unnecessarily extend the period of consciousness raising and public resolution of issues by their style of reporting.

As we become ever more concerned with decisions which involve reallocating limited resources (*v.* spending new resources) and cutting back on existing programs and services, it becomes even more important for people to have the opportunity to engage in dialogue on the issues. The media play a key role in promoting or denying this opportunity. They have enormous power to spread a message and reinforce it in the minds of the general public. Equally, they have an enormous capacity for continuing to maintain confusion and uncertainty in the public mind. This can be seen in the media's normal use of "on the one hand/on the other hand" style of reporting, in which opposing facts or interpretations of facts are reported simultaneously with no possible resolution provided for the readers—except perhaps for the occasional "think piece" which follows days after the headlines have changed.

The media delight in their advocacy role, directing public consideration and scrutiny by blending a gossipy-confrontational style in the presentation of issues. They still have difficulty accepting the criticism that they promote or deny opportunities for informed public participation by their method of setting the agenda for public debate, or by influencing the importance attached to an issue (for example, by burying it in the back section of a paper or the equivalent on television).

The public is not stupid. It is definitely not apathetic. It does need information, though it is increasingly suspicious of the sources. It needs time: to absorb the information and believe it; to understand why the issue must be addressed at the community level; to sort out the choices being proposed (and this is where we are often shortchanged by expert opinion that is preoccupied with tidy and "rational" textbook solutions to messy and value-laden problems); and finally, to allow people to sort out their feelings and any value conflicts they may have.

Public opinion polls are useful in assessing the issue awareness level of citizens during the process of consciousness raising. Unfortunately, leaders and media alike treat polls as the fast food of decision-making. They grab information from polls quickly and often, using it to justify positions and/or to manipulate public opinion. Over-dependence on the limited information and perspective available from polls leads to poor decisions.

We need ways of encouraging public dialogue on issues, making creative use of technology and the media. For example, some cities in the U.S. are experimenting with "round table" discussions, in which leaders and citizens share their perceptions of community problems.[20] James Fishkin has proposed a deliberative form of opinion poll, which could help citizens and leaders to dialogue on issues.[21] Some Mayors of Canadian cities host open-line telephone shows on Cable TV. TV Ontario is presenting a special series combining documentary reporting with open-line dialogue on issues in

response to the recent spate of violence in Toronto. We should be making greater use of available interactive technology to let dialogue take place with politicians, experts and citizens, within cities and between cities and provinces.

Fourth, A Sensible Program of Exercise

Canada needs to begin a sensible program of exercise in citizen participation.

First, we need to stretch our minds with consciousness raising on the very nature of citizen participation. We need to understand that citizenship is a balance of rights and responsibilities, special and general interests. Our politicians and leaders need to understand that citizen participation is an essential element of good governance. It is not a matter of convenience, or current faddishness. The issues are too complex and the decisions taken can affect individuals, families, and communities for too long—sometimes for generations. Through intelligent consciousness raising, therefore, we can support citizens as they struggle with difficult and complex issues. Through more thoughtful consciousness raising, we can *motivate* our citizens to become involved.

Second, we need to engage in collaborative *capacity-building* to help individuals and groups work through issues so that they can contribute to the good management of their community. One way, but not the only way, is to begin to use our information resources more intelligently. Our experts are invaluable. We need individuals with the opportunity, temperament, training and time to investigate issues and the factors that shape them. We must all remind ourselves, however, that experts have no monopoly on moral insight or common sense when it comes time to decide what to do. Setting them up as captured pawns in a conflictual model of dialogue—as so often happens in the media and in other forums—is to waste this valuable community resource. In most cases, it also guarantees an escalation in time, effort, and human and financial cost before an issue gets to be resolved. And these days, issues do not go away.

Fifth, Reality Therapy

Finally, our politicians and bureaucrats must accept that a major change has already taken place in the expectations of many citizens as to how their affairs will be managed and administered. They must accept this change as a permanent one, and respond to it as a matter of course. Increasingly, citizens expect open process. They expect that opportunities will be provided for individuals and groups to contribute to policy development and implementation. They expect planning timetables that permit them the time needed for full deliberation. They are justifiably angry when this is not done.

They are not very receptive to paternalistic treatment, and will not tolerate systemic barriers to participation.

On the other hand, citizens and citizens' groups need to accept that they must work to contribute to solving problems for the general interest, as well as to enhance their own interests.

The most important reality is that Canada will be a democratic nation only as long and in so far as its citizens make it so. The challenges before us are daunting (e.g., competing in a global economy, undertaking local economic development, creating meaningful jobs, providing necessary services such as health care and education with decreasing resources, redesigning our political structures). We must adopt new ways of thinking about and fostering citizen participation. We must seize the opportunity to meet the challenges and create a reality at the end of the 1990s which is far better than the one we experience today.

NOTES

1. For an interesting discussion of the importance of municipal politics, see Murray Bookchin, *Urbanization Without Cities* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1992), pp. 282-83.

2. For a detailed definition of political participation, see Margaret Conway, *Political Participation in the United States* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985), pp. 2-4.

3. For discussions of the rights and obligations of citizenship, see Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment, Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), pp. 243-44. See also Bill Moyers, "Yearning for Democracy," *In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*, 30 (January 1991): 14-17; and Boyce Richardson, *Time To Change* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1990), pp. 235-36.

4. Based on information from the Winnipeg City Clerk's office.

5. Based on information from Reginald Bibby, *Mosaic Madness* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, 1990), pp. 19-29.

6. For information on U.S. voting patterns and socio-economic determinants, see Sidney Verba, *Participation in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). See also Conway, *Political Participation*.

   Information on the inner-city population of Canada is from Statistics Canada, *The Inner City in Transition* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services Canada, 1989), Statistics Canada Catalog Number 98-123.

7. The Harwood Group, *Citizens and Politics: A View From Main Street America* (Kettering Foundation, 1991).

8. Walter Kubiski, "Discussion Paper on Models of Citizen Participation Applicable to the City of Winnipeg" (City of Winnipeg Act Review Committee, 1985).

9. See, for example, Walter Kubiski, *Evaluation of the Winnipeg Inner City Local Initiative Project* (Manpower and Employment Canada, 1972). Findings from this report led to creation of the federal Local Entrepreneurial Assistance Program.

10. See, for example:

    Michael B. Dector, and Jeffrey A. Kowall, *The Winnipeg Core Area Initiative: A Case Study* (Conference Board of Canada, Local Development Paper No. 24, 1990).

    Kent Gereke and Barton Reid, "False Prophets and Golden Idols in Canadian City Planning," *City Magazine*, 12, 1 (Fall 1990): 16-22.

    Matthew Kiernan, "Urban Planning in Canada: A Synopsis and Some Future Directions." *Plan Canada*, 30, 1 (January 1990): 11-22.

11. As discussed, for example, in Henri Lamoureux *et al.*, *Community Action* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1989), p. 2.

12. Val Sears, "Interest Groups the New Power in Ottawa," *Toronto Star,* Tuesday, April 28, 1992, Section A17.

13. Harwood Group, *Citizens and Politics,* p. v.

14. For example, see the discussion of community action in Quebec in Lamoureux, *Community Action.*

15. In a recent interview, Robert Theobald makes the interesting point that if all our energies were not being consumed by the abortion debate, we might be able to find better ways of preventing unwanted pregnancies in the first place. See Alan Atkisson, "Portrait of a Political Instigator: An Interview with Robert Theobald," *In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*, 30 (1991) 26-31.

16. Jack H. Nagel, *Participation* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1987), p. 142.

17. For an interesting analysis of how Canada can transcend some of the forces that are pulling us apart through a greater appreciation of our collective situation, see Bibby, *Mosaic Madness*.

18. Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment.*

19. As described in ibid., pp. 63-65.

20. As described in Atkisson, "Portrait of a Political Instigator," pp. 26-31.

21. James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

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