Chapter 4 - Shaping Opportunities, Creating Public Value: Government and Community Collaboration in the Australian Capital Territory

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I begin today with a cautionary tale. The substance of it will no doubt be familiar to this audience, even if the detail is not. It is a reminder of the work that still needs to be done before there is any consensus — even a broad one — about what community consultation and collaboration involves, and what it means.

A little over a week ago, the deadline passed for submissions to a discussion paper the ACT government issued earlier in the year on the subject of formally recognising same-sex relationships. As often happens with these things, there was a flood of last-minute submissions — probably two-thirds of the 300 or so submissions came in during the week before the cut-off. While it looks like this late rush may have significantly evened out the scales, the majority of the early-bird submissions were clearly opposed to formal recognition of same-sex union. The government had expected that imbalance, had made no secret of the fact, and I made no secret of it either when I faced the local television news cameras on the day submissions closed.

I thought the questions put to me by one television journalist that day were instructive. First, I was asked whether, if the majority of the submissions were opposed to same-sex union, I would abandon the pursuit of formal recognition. In other words, would I be guided by the will of the people. The second question was equally enlightening. I was asked whether, since the number of people who would be affected by any outcome - in other words, the gay and lesbian community - was quite small, the whole exercise was a waste of time, energy and resources.

I think you can probably anticipate my answers. On the first issue I pointed out that this had not been a referendum, nor even an opinion poll. On the second, I wondered aloud whether it would be considered a waste of time and resources to address the basic rights of any other small minority — say, Indigenous people.

The journalist's first question betrayed a common misapprehension about public opinion and community consultation, and was a reminder of the corruption, in this age of talk-back radio and instantaneous, SMS reality-television voting, of statistical concepts that once had a clear scientific meaning.

The second question betrayed a misapprehension about the meaning of democracy. Together, the two questions went to the substance of tonight's topic — to what extent do consultative governments risk allowing their priorities to be dictated by the barometer of shifting public opinion over an election cycle? And, as a corollary, to what extent *must* the creation of opportunity and the delivery of true equity for minorities be driven by government, even in the *absence* of a groundswell of public desire? In short, how can governments collaborate with the community to create things of value without abrogating their responsibility to make decisions about the best allocation of resources?

Here in Canberra, in the early years of the 21st century, we are privileged to live in an age and in a place of great opportunity. Vast communications, financial and distribution networks link our immediate world to those of our near and distant neighbours as never before. Our cultural, intellectual, economic and social horizons have never been broader, nor so easily within our reach. But the opportunities created have not been distributed evenly. Some groups and some individuals have been excluded or denied participation. In some ways, our capacity to control and predict our own environment has diminished, as events half a city or half a world away have come to affect our lives more directly and more swiftly.

The days have passed when the town hall, the church or the local factory was the forum for the common civic experience of most people. And yet, there is still some sense in which many of us yearn for those simpler structures, those shared narratives of who we are. Witness the continuing popularity of clubs — the aggregate membership of clubs in the ACT is about 420,000, larger than the total population. Witness too the warmth with which people respond to opportunities to come together in celebration or commemoration. When the ACT government inaugurated the Canberra Gold awards this year, to recognise those who had given more than 50 years of their lives to this city, it was staggered to receive a thousand nominations.

ACT governments have within their reach a great resource, in the form of the combined talents and skills of the community they serve. They ought to make better use of that resource. It would be a poor, naïve or overly confident government that believed it had the answers to everything, that it was the repository of every good idea, that it had its finger simultaneously on the pulse of every part of society.

Inclusion, consultation, collaboration are vital if for no other reason that governments cannot hope to consistently deliver public value merely by

consulting their own feelings or their own consciences. Of course, this conversation with the community, in its most blunt and basic manifestation, occurs periodically in parliamentary democracies in the form of elections – a pretty clear message of how well a government is seen to have used its mandate to promote the common good.

Here in the ACT we do pretty well when it comes to this particular form of consultation. Our Hare-Clarke voting system is arguably the most democratic in use anywhere in the country. At last year's territory election, voter turnout was the highest on record and the informal vote – one important measure of disenfranchisement – was just 2.7 per cent, compared with a national average of around 5 per cent.

But an election is a form of conversation – a form of consultation – that has certain limitations. The most obvious is that elections are infrequent. Another is that they deliver a judgment, but no reasons. Another, even in a nation with compulsory voting, is that they exclude too many members of the community – everyone under 18 for a start, along with others who have been, for whatever reason, voluntarily or involuntarily, alienated from the democratic process.

The ACT government came to office knowing for certain that such pockets of alienated, excluded individuals existed. We could see their shadows flit across the life of this affluent, educated society. Our ambition was to see the shapes that cast those shadows, to put names to them, to give them a voice.

Such an ambition does not always meet with the approval of those who already dominate the spotlight and who already have the loudest voices. When I travelled to Juncie earlier this year to ask some of the ACT prisoners incarcerated there what they would most like to see in the prison we are building here in the territory, there was a predictable chorus of outrage from those who believe that prisoners should be neither seen nor heard – that, in effect, they have no rights, and no insights to offer.

As it turned out, the big concerns of the inmates to whom I spoke were not the quality of the meals or the comfort of the mattresses or the television reception. The single biggest concern – the single biggest *fear* – of these big, tough, prison-hardened men, was what awaited them on the outside, on the day their sentence ended and they walked free. And let me assure you, most of them *will* walk free, sooner or later. The question is whether we, as a community, intend to give them a fighting chance to set their feet on a path that will not lead straight back inside.

I believe that when we talk about governments creating opportunity, we can not just mean opportunities for intellectual stimulation for our smart students, opportunities to break into export markets for our brightest entrepreneurs, opportunities for our finest and most talented sportsmen. We must also mean

opportunity for those students who struggle in class. We must mean the opportunity for a charity clothing shop to create a pleasant working environment for its volunteers, with no expectation that it will ever be listed in the Forbes 500. We must mean the opportunity for every child to participate in sport knowing that no gold medal will result, and with no greater outcomes intended than fun, participation, and good health.

You can not create those opportunities without engaging. You can not do it without listening. You cannot know what the charity shop needs to make the life of its volunteers more comfortable until you ask. You can not know what struggling students require unless you consult their teachers. You cannot know what sport will be popular with youngsters unless you put the question.

One of the most humbling and instructive moments in the life of any ACT Chief Minister is the fortnightly *Chief Minister Talkback* segment on the local ABC radio station, 666 2CN. It does not really matter what issue of great political moment has been in the news over the course of the week or how many censure motions have been passed or what fiery debate has accompanied the passage of what contentious Bill. You can be confident that most callers will still want to talk about the need for a stop sign at their local intersection, or a tree branch obscuring a street sign, or the parched state of their local oval.

Part of this focus can be traced to our hybrid form of government here in the ACT, which amalgamates municipal and state functions. Here in the ACT the Minister for Health will, as likely as not, also be the Minister for school ovals. The Attorney General will, in all likelihood, also be the Minister responsible for overhanging branches.

There are downsides and upsides to this administrative model. One downside is the tendency for critics to dismiss the Assembly as a 'jumped-up town council' and to howl down any attempt by MLAs to voice an opinion on anything that strays beyond the purely parochial. It is disappointing that, a decade and a half after self-government, there are still those – some of them MLAs – who belittle the Assembly and argue that the focus of its members must always, and entirely, be on the potholes and the stop signs, and never on the more philosophical questions of what kind of society we wish to be. I believe that in the best of all worlds even local councils, even ordinary citizens, ought to be involved in that sort of discussion.

One of the big *advantages* of our hybrid status is that Canberrans enjoy an ease of access to ministers and a familiarity with the machinations of government that is quite unusual. Any Canberran knows they can speak to me directly just by dialling the ABC every second Friday morning, or by heading out to one of the government's frequent community Cabinet meetings.

This unique administrative structure gives the ACT the opportunity to create avenues for collaboration and participation that are not easily available to other jurisdictions. Here in the ACT the government that educates your child is the same as the government that empties your bins. It has seen you at your best and your worst, and has been seen by you in the same way.

But while opportunities for closer interaction and collaboration exist, the question remains what shape these mechanisms should take, and to what end should all that mass of collected opinion and those lists of suggestions be put.

Alexis de Tocqueville spoke of ‘intermediary’ associations between the state and the individual, in which feelings and opinions were recruited, the heart was enlarged, and the human mind was developed by the reciprocal influence of citizens upon one another. Such associations need not always be formal, nor long-lasting, though sometimes they must be. They can range from *ad hoc* public meetings to opinion polls to formally appointed task forces with a narrow focus, or advisory bodies with a broader but still thematic purview.

The more formal these consultations become, the more they are open to manipulation. It is relatively difficult to control or direct a one-off public meeting on a matter that has aroused community passion. But it is easy enough for a government to stack a board or a consultative committee and then to claim that its findings – with which the government just happens to agree – are legitimate since they have been independently arrived at.

There are also significant risks in uncontrolled, or unmediated, consultation. A government that is scrupulous in its consultation, yet which routinely ignores the results of that process, brings consultation into disrepute as swiftly as one that stacks its committees.

This is not academic. It goes right to the core of consultation. What can be expected from a consultation? What do those who are consulted expect themselves? Must the opinions garnered be acted upon, if the process is to have any standing? Is it worth the effort, the anxiety and the inevitable misunderstandings and misinformation?

And make no mistake, it can involve anxiety. Consider the example of the government’s recent consultation over a proposal to close Ginninderra District High School and build a \$43 million pre-school-to-Year-10 government school campus in West Belconnen. Before the government could consult, it needed something to consult about. The minister could not just go to the community with a blank sheet and then, six months down the track, bring to Cabinet a notebook full of uncostered ideas.

So the government developed a comprehensive proposal and *then* went to the community. Instantly, we were accused of presenting the community with a *fait accompli*, and of having no real intention to consult at all.

Some weeks into the consultation period we announced that some of the alternative proposals suggested by residents would be tested by a consultant. Suddenly, we were accused by critics of backing down. 'Government backflip on school', crowed the media, which just days before had been berating the government for its so-called pretence at consultation. I doubt the absurdity or the inconsistency of the criticism has been much relished by those with the greatest interest in reaching a workable solution – the parents and students of West Belconnen.

So, is it worth it? Is consultation worth it? In the end, the answer must be yes – even in West Belconnen. Yes, the value derived from consultation outweighs the ambiguity and the cost.

The ACT government is philosophically committed to drawing the community deeper into the conversation about what kind of society we want to be, and how we go about creating that society.

That is why we have gone to the effort of producing a *Community Engagement Manual* that guides agencies through the process. At an international conference on engaging communities held in Brisbane recently, delegates voted the manual the most valuable document they took home from the whole conference.

It is why we have worked to improve the gender balance on government appointed boards. If the opinion of the boards did not matter, their make-up would not matter much either. Their opinions *do* matter, but the Government believes those opinions ought to be more representative of the community. In our first term of government we managed to achieve an overall gender balance on all government-appointed boards.

As I said, consultation can take many forms. When the ACT government was consulting the community on the issue of a bill of rights, we commissioned a deliberative poll – the first regional one to be held in this country – to draw out the issues and to measure whether fully informing a community about the pros and cons of a controversial issue might cause public opinion to shift.

As I am sure you know, the idea of a deliberative poll is to draw together a representative sample of the community and expose it to the full range of arguments for and against a proposition, allowing it to ask whatever questions it likes, to probe as deeply as it wishes, to really wrestle with the issues.

As you probably also know, Australia's first deliberative poll, held in the last days before the republic referendum, generated a measurable shift in opinion among participants.

A measurable shift was recorded by the ACT's deliberative poll on a bill of rights, too. At the outset of the process, opinion was weighted 60-40 against a bill. By the end of the period the balance was 60-40 in *favour*.

Sadly, deliberative polling is a pretty costly and disruptive way of gauging informed community sentiment. It will only ever be one of an array of mechanisms in the armoury of a consultative government. Others are needed. The challenge is to know which mechanisms are suited to which circumstances. Another challenge is to ensure that the terms, definitions and underlying assumptions each party brings to a consultation are roughly equivalent.

The Italian political theorist Danilo Zolo believes that finding such a common language is almost impossible. He argues that the meaning of an event experienced in one social environment – a religious experience, for example – cannot even be properly translated into terms that can be understood in a different environment – a sports club, for instance, or an office, or a nuclear research laboratory. I suspect this might be overstating the case. I think people are more socially and intellectually flexible than he allows. But his point is taken and it is a reminder that effective consultation is more complex than simply insisting that the conversation be conducted in plain English.

One thing that would ideally be settled at the outset of any consultation is just what a government hopes to achieve from the process. What does it seek? If it is public good, how do we define, measure, or even detect, the creation of ‘public good’? How do we measure whether the creation of that public good has flowed from consultation, or from some other source?

A fairly traditional view of governance is that it is the job of governments to exercise authority in pursuit of the common good or public interest. This authority is manifested in the laws, regulations, policies, programmes and services with which a government surrounds itself, and through which it pursues its aims. This authority can also be manifested, though perhaps more obliquely, in attempts by governments to articulate a vision that will influence the tenor and mood of the times. *The Canberra Plan*, the current ACT government’s social, spatial and economic blueprint for Canberra, is a vision of this sort.

At the most prosaic level, ‘public value’ can be described as those public goods and services that are ‘valued by the public’.

Governments generate public value by producing or organising the production of public goods. These go beyond tangible things such as services and security. They include such nebulous goods as public trust, tolerance and civic participation.

But must a public value be consciously valued by the public in order to be deemed valuable? How do we *know* what the community values; and how do we balance conflicting or unrealistic community desires? Might not the very act of routinely consulting the community escalate community expectations or encourage unreasonable demands? Consultation is a risky business.

But risk, well-managed, is a stimulus to innovation and invention. And the more practised in consultation a community becomes, the better able it is to see that creating public value, creating opportunity, is not necessarily cost-neutral – that it can involve sacrifice and trade-offs. The more accustomed the public becomes to consultation, the more it comes to understand that public value exacts an opportunity cost.

And there is another potential advantage to be gained from consultation. The community is likely to put a greater value on a public good that it has had a direct hand in fashioning, a public good towards which it feels a sense of ownership. Making the community a joint architect in the creation of public value means that the community has a vested interest in its success or survival. Such a community is likely to not just involve itself in the planning phase, but to *remain* engaged, to involve itself in the delivery and administration of the public good it has helped create. Neighbourhood Watch, a collaboration between police and the community, is one obvious example of this vested interest at work.

Over the past three decades or so there have been fundamental shifts in the way we think about and undertake public administration.

The guiding principle of early thinking about public administration was ‘efficiency’. And this remains an important principle, even today. But much has changed since Sir Phillip Whistler Street defined public administration in 1935 as ‘the management of men and materials in the accomplishment of the purposes of the State’. We still strive for the most effective management of personnel and resources, but few of us would argue that the goal of administration should any longer be baldly described as the ‘purposes of state’.

Since World War II, our political and administrative systems have been deeply transformed by social change and communication technologies. The vocabulary of public administration has been complicated by the arrival of managerialism, economic rationalism and, contractualism. The practicalities of administration have been altered by a new belief that the user must pay and by a trend towards decentralisation that has seen the rise of school-based management, the demise of the Australian Government Printing Service and the privatisation of the Commonwealth Employment Service.

As the structures of administration have altered, sometimes beyond recognition, so have the community’s expectations of what it should and is capable of delivering. Somewhat paradoxically, these elevated expectations have coincided with a growing sense among some commentators over the past decade or so that our democratic institutions – parliaments, political parties, bureaucracies, legal systems, media, and other civil organisations – have become fatigued and incapable of interesting and involving citizens and the broader community in public life.

Personally, I believe the doom-merchants are probably looking nostalgically back to a golden age of global civic engagement that did not really exist. This is dangerous because it mystifies the past as a civic or social 'utopia' in which all members of the community participated fully in public life. Such mythologising conveniently overlooks the long periods of even relative recent history during which large numbers of individuals were not only formally disenfranchised but effectively excluded from full social engagement in a host of ways — not least women.

The very idea that the community is now 'disengaged' from public institutions implies that 'engagement' is not just the preferred, but the *normal* state of affairs, from which we have carelessly allowed our institutions to drift.

What is unquestionable is that people now engage, with each other and with government, in quite different ways. Communication technologies have had a massive impact. Information that in the past could only be gained by attending a public meeting or a political rally can now be gleaned from television or the Internet. As newspaper circulations decline, the chat room and the blog continue their march towards the domination of public conversation.

E-government is transforming the capacity of governments to reach into people's lives, inform them, elicit their opinions and encourage their participation. At a purely functional level, e-government means that a growing number of services and a growing mass of government information is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Reports, fact sheets and discussion papers can be downloaded by anyone with Internet access. And the interaction can be two-way. When the ACT government wanted to test public reactions to proposed new off-leash dog areas recently, it solicited online comments. Arguably, there are more avenues and easier avenues for public participation in civic life than ever before.

It is true, sadly, that there is a greater than ever cynicism about politics and politicians — particularly about election promises — but it cannot be assumed that this is synonymous with political disengagement. Nor can it be assumed that it signals some crisis of trust.

Building some workable degree of community trust in government is one of the enduring challenges of government and it is a challenge that is not made any easier by the competitive, adversarial nature of politics, in which parties actively seek to undermine community trust in each other.

At its most dangerous and counterproductive, this sport can, of course, undermine public trust in institutions beyond the elected government. To give just one example, gratuitous criticism of the police, aimed at wounding a government, can instead wound public confidence in community safety and security. Thankfully, in my experience, the public tends to be just as cynical about those seeking to do the undermining as it is about those being putatively

undermined. Moreover, I believe that electorates are willing to respond to governments that reach out to the community, governments that take an inclusive approach, governments that prove that they *want* to know what the community thinks – not just the 5 per cent or so of the community that decide elections.

I believe that for all the talk about a disengaged electorate, there is ample evidence that many people *want to be engaged*, want to have a say, and are looking to play an active role in shaping the life of their neighbourhood, school, town centre, and city. They are prepared to listen, but they also want to be listened to, to have their local expertise and intimate local knowledge valued and incorporated into policy-making and program delivery. Our community is quick to embrace opportunities to contribute, when they are offered. We encounter no difficulties in drawing together diverse gatherings for special groups like the Dragway Advisory Committee, which gives space and voice not only to motor-sport proponents, but to local residents anxious about the possible impact on their local amenity.

The challenge for government is not really to motivate the community, but to better harness their already considerable motivation. In his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki observes that politics is ultimately about the impact of government on the everyday lives of citizens. And he wonders why anyone would imagine that the way to do politics well would be to distance yourself as far as possible from the everyday lives of citizens. Mind you, I have never quite understood either why anyone who had not enjoyed a long and close association with community life would desire a political career, which seems to be a logical extension of community activism and involvement, rather than a vocation in its own right.

As I said earlier, I believe that the administrative structure of the ACT, combining municipal and state functions, lends itself in quite exciting ways to closer community collaboration and involvement — and not just within discrete portfolio areas. One of the ACT government's ambitions has been to take a more holistic approach to government. That is why we have woven together our economic, social and spatial ambitions under the single banner of *The Canberra Plan*. It is why we established the Community Inclusion Board, which can range across the policy spectrum in its quest for strategies to combat disengagement and social exclusion, rather than focusing solely on education, or economic disadvantage, or disability. It is why, a year ago, we introduced the country's first bill of rights, *The Human Rights Act*, to ensure that every government agency brings to its dealings with the people a consciousness of the human-rights implications of its actions.

The ACT is home to a vast number of vocal and vigorous not-for-profit community organisations and consumer advocacy groups. Because a large number of us have worked at one time or another in government, most of these groups

have individuals in their ranks who are well and truly conversant with government processes and who know quite well how to get the ear of government or, failing that, how to get under the skin of government. Of course, we must always be cautious in assuming that these groups truly represent the sections of society for which they claim to speak, and on whose behalf they claim to advocate. We must always take care to go beyond the usual suspects in seeking opinions or forming partnerships. In reality, in a city of lobby groups, the silenced, excluded sections of society may still be inadequately represented.

No government can be aware of the minutia of the challenges that confront sections of the community, down to the level of the individual or the family. We cannot know, unless we are told, that making a modest investment in the soundproofing of the entrance to The Street Theatre Studio, for example, will stop noise spilling in from the café. We cannot know, unless we happen upon the truth, or someone tells us, that basic structural repairs to the Stephen King Memorial Centre will transform the venue for the Vietnam Veterans who meet there.

What governments *can* do, and what the ACT government seeks to do, is to create channels that ensure that such minutia feed into our decision-making processes. We do this through initiatives such as the Renew Community Infrastructure and Facilities Program – which provides small but meaningful grants that help revive ageing community infrastructure, and the Community Grants Program. These programs are a recognition that the creation of public value comes in many forms and guises. Community initiatives sometimes need only the smallest injection of public funds – micro-funds, if you like – to flourish. But that potential will remain latent unless the community knows that support is available or if it feels intimidated by government structures.

Success requires more than political will. It requires a commitment to community engagement to imbue every agency that acts in the name of government. The community engagement manual is a crucial resource in this respect, guiding officials and steering them through some of the reefs and rocks that confront the unwary or the inexperienced. These include the unintended creation of bottlenecks, the risk of creating barriers to participation without the consultative mechanisms themselves, the danger of mistaking unrepresentative for representative views and of polarising or alienating sectors of the community. I cannot pretend that the ACT government is always exemplary in its attempts to involve the community in creating its own civic destiny. But I do know that we strive to engage as fully as we can.

I could cite many examples of collaborative work we have undertaken, but will highlight just one partnership set up under the Community Inclusion Fund, because it encapsulates many of the themes I have discussed in this lecture.

On advice from the Community Inclusion Board, the government is providing \$116,000 over three years to the Majura Women's Group in Downer, in partnership with ACT Mental Health, to take its 'Mums at Home in the Community' program further afield, into Tuggeranong. For a number of years, this self-run community group has encouraged women with young children to come together for a couple of hours each week, to talk about their experiences and learn new skills. Each year the women set themselves challenging projects. Last year they completed a fantastic mosaic for the Queen Elizabeth II Family Centre. This year, with the help of an artist in residence, they're designing and making two felt wall hangings for the mothers' rooms in the Mental Health Unit at Calvary Public Hospital. By combining on-site childcare, which gives the women some time to themselves, and project-based activities, the women have developed a model for dealing with some of the characteristic problems and risks that can confront mothers at home — including social isolation, low self-esteem and post-natal depression.

While it is too early to say whether the model has successfully been transplanted to the southside, the project shows the real public value, the real public good, that can flow from genuine partnerships between government and the community, born out of the community's own instinctive awareness of where the gaps exist, and what might fill those gaps.

It was Woodrow Wilson who described the networks, organisations and associations that make up the social fabric as 'self-originated, self-constituted, self-confident, self-sustaining, veritable communities'. Sometimes. But sometimes, in our complex world, the community alone is not equal to the challenge. Sometimes, self-sufficiency needs to be supplemented. In truth, neither the community nor government holds all the answers. But in combination, there is little that cannot be achieved.

As Chief Minister I am often thankful for our hybrid administrative structure here in the territory. I truly believe that it is a gift to government, an unparalleled opportunity to reach deep into the community, to engage with the community, to make the kinds of small inroads and forge the small partnerships that have large and lasting legacies.