In the mass democratic polities of today, the role of citizens remains confined largely to that of voting for members of elected legislatures. Beyond that, there is scant opportunity for 'the public' to participate in any meaningful sense in most of the tasks that make up the policy-making process. Indeed, influencing that process is typically viewed as the sole prerogative of technocratic experts, organized interests, and elected officials. This presumption is buttressed (and rationalized) by a too-ready acceptance of the platitude that citizens are generally uninformed, unskilled, and uninterested in the work of democratic self-government.

We begin with a definition of 'deliberative democracy'.

We then briefly consider its connection to the concept of democracy more generally and argue that the moral authority of the former follows from that of the latter.

From both the developing and the developed worlds, we draw several examples of institutionalized deliberative participation. In some, institutionalization has been sustained; in others, it has not been sustained.

Reflecting on these examples, we consider the 'lessons learned' from these and other cases. We identify costs, difficulties and limitations associated with institutionalizing participatory public deliberation as well as the benefits and advantages thereof.

Finally, we briefly outline a proposal for an Australian experiment that might serve as a learning model for subsequent efforts there and elsewhere to 'institutionalize' participatory citizen deliberation.

Institutionalizing deliberative participation would not replace representative government, but rather would supplement it, enabling democratic governments to reflect and respond better to the values, priorities and aspirations of the people they ostensibly serve.

We offer this practice-orientated paper as a discussion paper intended to introduce readers to the idea of institutionalizing participatory public deliberation and to generate
constructive debate concerning it. We do not presume to provide a rigorous analysis of the concept or of any of the many issues surrounding it.

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Introduction: citizens and democracy

In the mass democratic polities of today, the role of citizens remains confined largely to that of voting for members of elected legislatures. Beyond that, there is scant opportunity for ‘the public’ to participate in any meaningful sense in most of the tasks that make up the policy-making process. As Michael Delli Carpini observes of citizens in the United States, ‘many...lack the de facto ability to participate, especially in more costly but more influential ways’ (Delli Carpini, 1999: p. 37).

In large measure, this circumscribed role for citizens stems from the widely-held view that, in a representative democracy, directly influencing the policy-making process is the bailiwick of technocratic experts, organized interests, and elected officials. This presumption, in turn, is buttressed (and rationalized) by a too-ready acceptance of the contention that citizens are generally uninformed, unskilled and uninterested in the work of democratic self-government. Whatever the merits of this contention—and they are not insubstantial—is nevertheless difficult to disagree with the conclusion Delli Carpini reaches after completing his survey of the literature concerning the importance to a democracy of informed voters:

In his later years, Thomas Jefferson often lamented the lack of trust most of his contemporaries had in the general public. While be agreed that people often fell short of the civic ideal, he argued that the political system, by minimizing what was expected of citizens, guaranteed the nature of their public behavior: “We think one side of this experiment has been long enough tried, and proved not to promote the good of the many; and that the other has not been fairly and sufficiently tried” (Jefferson, 1939: p. 31). I share Jefferson’s concern about the lack of

A common theme in discussions of their relationship with the public is captured in the comment, ‘The general public is not interested in delving into issues...’ (Harwood, 1989: p. 15) They are convinced that citizens have too many other demands on their time—at home, in the workplace and elsewhere—to get involved. Few citizens, they believe, are interested in public issues and are willing to find the time required to deal with them competently, unless their interests are in direct and immediate jeopardy.

A third reason policy-makers give for doubting that the public can contribute much to the crafting of public policies is that typically they hear only from citizens who belong to groups that choose to be vocal on an issue. People with special interests, however, often turn public meetings into opportunities to make their views known, and to try to sway public opinion and the policy process in their favour. Public meetings then turn into contests between competing groups. Policymakers say they find it nearly impossible to obtain input from the public as a whole.

Even when they think their interests are at stake, officials maintain, citizens have a poor grasp of the complexities involved. They question whether members of the public can offer ‘informed’ input on issues, and they say it is difficult for them to translate those issues into more-accessible terms. Even if they can, they are disinclined to do so because simplifying complex matters often distorts them. If citizens cannot get a handle on such matters, then they cannot offer informed input. If issues have to be ‘dumbed down’ to the point where the information the public provides in response is not helpful, there is no point in doing so. Some policy-makers say the public must face up to and deal with the inherent trade-offs that action in one area entails for what government can do in other areas. But policy-makers do not know how to help citizens confront and weigh these trade-offs. Consequently, genuine deliberation is rare.

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1In its 1999 study, American Unplugged: Citizens and Their Government, the Council for Excellence in Government reported that public officials see too many people who are impatient, emotional, intolerant of ambiguity and complexity, ill-informed, concerned only with their narrow, immediate interests and unwilling to face up to and accept unavoidable costs and trade-offs. They seldom even know about, let alone sympathize with, the struggle of officials to deal with intra- and intergovernmental conflict and differing (sometimes overlapping) areas of responsibility and authority. Ordinary citizens tend to focus on solutions that would address their particular concerns in their particular situation, whereas government officials must always think in terms of policies that apply equally and fairly to all persons in all (relevantly similar) situations. Moreover, citizens do not appreciate that the amount of effort needed to turn around government once it has embarked upon a particular course is draining and often demoralizing.

Public officials express strong reservations about the ability and desire of citizens to participate in the policy process.
trust in the people themselves... I also share his beliefs that an informed citizenry is the only true repository of the public will; that, given the incentive, education, and opportunity, the general public is capable of exercising political power in an enlightened way... (emphasis added)

Our purpose in publishing this practice-orientated paper is to provide readers with a discussion paper that introduces the idea of institutionalizing participatory public deliberation and that will, we hope, generate constructive debate concerning it. We do not presume to provide a rigorous analysis of the concept or of any of the many issues surrounding it.

What is public deliberation and why do we need it?

In political contexts, the commonplace term ‘deliberation’ usually has meant something like ‘the process used by juries, councils, legislatures and other bodies that make decisions after reasoned discussion’ (Gastil and Levine, 2005). Over the past several years, though, ‘deliberation’ increasingly has been employed to characterize a particular form of public discourse in models of democracy that emphasize participation by ‘ordinary’ citizens in the political process. Definitions vary, but generally speaking ‘public deliberation’ is widely understood to be a pragmatic, inclusive form of discourse in which citizens collectively—even cooperatively—analyse a ‘problem’; establish criteria by which to evaluate public responses to it; identify multiple options that reflect different sets of values or value-priorities held by members of the public; weigh arguments for and against each option in light of the criteria established previously and, through an indefinite period of continuing discussion (that may or may not include voting), approach a measure of agreement that (ideally) most participants can accept as a collective ‘decision’.

Public deliberation is valuable for many reasons. The most fundamental of these, however, is the role it plays in sustaining the moral character of democracy. (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996) In ‘Democracy as a universal value’ (Sen, 1999), the Nobel prize-winning economist and social theorist, Amartya Sen, argues that democracy is a value having universal validity for human beings. Among other things, democracy enables us individually and collectively to form our values, principles, purposes and priorities through interaction with others. If Professor Sen is correct, then we should think of democracy, not just as an institution or a system of government, but as a way of life. Specifically, we should understand democracy as a way of living ‘in right relationship’ to others. This involves not only respecting others’ rights (a moral principle for living together) but also having certain ‘powers’ or capabilities as well as opportunities to act in our capacities as moral agents. Among these ‘powers’ is the ability to contribute actively to shaping the values, priorities, practices, policies and institutions that give substance to our community’s or society’s quality of life. ‘When all will be affected, all must decide’ is the essence of democracy—and it is a moral essence, not just a political one. Deliberative democracy, in short, is a practice of democratic politics that emphasizes participation, cooperation and discourse characterized by reason-giving.2

2For proponents of deliberation, the aspiration to democracy is the aspiration to a moral community based on recognition of the equal moral standing of one’s fellows; it is a commitment to showing all persons equal concern and respect. Demonstrating equal concern and respect requires people to accept that they owe one another an effort to provide ‘reciprocally acceptable reasons’ for their political prescriptions. (Gutmann and Thompson, in Macedo, 1997) In order to provide one another with such reasons, people must have access to the decision-making process and be able to gain a hearing in which both their fellow citizens and official decision-makers are open to being influenced by the reasons they offer. The moral force of democracy is rooted in the idea that human beings should be able—not just be free—to express themselves in public and to be heard. Being heard entails that citizens enjoy not only the right to voice their views but also implies the duty to listen and to respond to voices other than their own. For a democracy to be a democracy, and not some other form of governance, requires the willingness of citizens to participate, not only in the election of representatives but also in the give-and-take of making the decisions that affect their lives.
Institutionalizing deliberation: examples that have not been sustained

By ‘institutionalizing’ deliberation in democratic politics and policy-making, we mean incorporating deliberative activities into the legally-constituted political decision-making structures and processes of a community or society. To illustrate what institutionalization so defined means in practice, we begin by summarizing examples of deliberative democracy that have been deemed successful but that have not been sustained over time.

Planning and infrastructure

The first example comes from Western Australia, where Minister Alannah MacTiernan who was responsible for the state assembly’s substantial planning and infrastructure portfolio, implemented deliberative democratic processes over a 4-year period. According to a recent study, ‘there is no equivalent in any other state of Australia, and possibly in the world, where a single politician has embraced [deliberative democratic processes] with such enthusiasm during her term of office. …This situation confirms the catalytic nature of combining a skilled process champion with an enabling leader’3 (Carson and Hart, 2007).

For each deliberative event, Minister Mac-Tiernan required that an effort be made to ensure inclusive, representative participation through either a random sample of the population or through a combination of one-third random sample, one-third stakeholders and one-third respondents to advertisements. The Minister clarified in advance the extent to which the outcome of the process would influence official policy; for example, implementing the recommendations on a trial basis (the Reid Highway Citizens’ Jury); taking the recommendations to Cabinet (Dialogue with the City—a 21st Century Dialogue) and adopting recommendations for which broad support existed (the Road Train Consensus Forum). Participants then listened carefully to different viewpoints, weighed options and selected the course of action that best reflected common ground among them.

Outcomes of the deliberative exercises in Western Australia included ‘Network City’, a strategic plan for guiding the cities of Perth and Peel towards a sustainable future; changes to building heights and density in coastal nodes; altering the route of a major highway and sweeping new freight policies that have led to major infrastructure development.

Despite such successes, however, the WA Planning and Infrastructure portfolio has for the most part fallen back into what might be called ‘community engagement business-as-usual’. In part, this relapse has occurred because deliberative processes became difficult to sustain when the media, the partisan opposition and even the Minister’s own party began criticizing her for ‘too much democracy’. Moreover, the key governmental department, which had never felt comfortable with a change in direction they felt had been foisted upon them (and which was beset by staff shortages and inadequate time and money to pursue the deliberative agenda), reverted to traditional community consultation. Finally, the deliberative experiment did not last long enough for a supportive external constituency to form. In the end, the language of ‘community engagement’ had changed, but little else.

Electrical power generation

A second example of a deliberative practice that failed to take root where it was introduced is the Deliberative PollTM. In a Deliberative Poll™, a large randomly-selected group of participants are polled on their opinions prior to and following extensive deliberation among themselves.4 In Texas between 1996 and 1998, eight electrical power providers undertook Deliberative Polls™ to find out how their

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3 In the study, a wide range of approaches to fostering deliberation were considered, including Citizens’ Juries, Consensus Forums, 21st Century Dialogues, Multi-Criteria Analysis Conferences, World Cafés, Enquiry-by-Design Dialogues, and Deliberative Surveys.

4 The Deliberative Poll™ was developed by Stanford University scholar James Fishkin. See Gastil, 2008: pp. 201–204; Fishkin and Farrar, 2005: pp. 68–77.
customers preferred that they meet future demand for electrical power. The public’s clear preference for renewable energy surprised all the (organized) stakeholders. This expression of support has since translated into legislative targets for renewable energy.

Yet despite its success, the Deliberative Poll\textsuperscript{TM} has not been repeated. Why? Perhaps its success in giving voice to the public’s perspective explains its demise. Informed publics do not necessarily follow the policy preferences of elected officials. Indeed, well-designed and conducted deliberative processes are (to policymakers) disconcertingly unpredictable. It takes considerable trust and courage for a politician to share decision-making authority with citizens if they have strong views of their own about the direction policy ought to take.

Electoral change

Another promising example of joining public deliberation with governmental decision-making authority comes from the western Canada province of British Columbia (BC). During the 2001 provincial election campaign, the Liberal Party in BC promised to create a citizens’ assembly to consider changes to the provincial electoral system.\textsuperscript{5} It also agreed that the recommendation of the assembly would be put to the electorate in the form of a parliamentary referendum.

In 2003, the BC provincial government established the ‘Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform’, which was composed of 160 citizens selected at random—two from each of the province’s 79 electoral districts, plus two ‘at-large’.\textsuperscript{6} The Assembly’s task was to evaluate the existing provincial electoral system and, if warranted, propose a new one. A pool of 15,800 names was created from the roll of voters. Selection of participants in the Citizens’ Assembly took several months.

During the first half of 2004, participants went through a ‘learning phase’ in which they listened to presentations by experts and held public hearings. In the autumn, delegates to the Assembly deliberated. On October 23, the Assembly voted 146–7 to recommend changing the existing ‘first past the post’ system\textsuperscript{7} for electing members of Parliament to a ‘single transferrable vote’ (STV) system, which lets voters rank candidates within multi-member districts or constituencies (Gastil and Levine, 2005: p. 277).

The recommendation of the Citizen’s Assembly was put to the electorate in a referendum held concurrently with the 2005 provincial election. The referendum required approval by 60 per cent of all votes cast, plus simple majorities in 48 (60 per cent) of the 79 electoral districts. The referendum failed on the first requirement, with only 57.7 per cent of votes in favour, though it did obtain majority support in 77 of the 79 electoral districts.

From the standpoint of support for deliberation in public policy-making, the ultimate results of the BC Citizens’ Assembly are not only disappointing but also unsurprising. The recommendation to change the way representatives to the BC provincial parliament are elected—made by a random sample of citizens who deliberated together for many hours (and 95 per cent of whom supported the recommendation)—failed because slightly more than 4/10 voters in the referendum opposed it. The significance of a random sample is that it provides an indication of what the electorate as a whole would decide if, like the members of the sample, all voters had a comparable opportunity to deliberate concerning the issue. The ultimate failure of the BC electorate to approve the recommended switch to an STV system makes clear that citizens who are afforded the chance to deliberate together are almost certain to form a perspective that differs from those who do not have the opportunity. There is an important difference between the views of a public formed through the act of


\textsuperscript{6}The BC Citizens’ Assembly is an example of the Deliberative Poll\textsuperscript{TM}. See Note 5, above.

\textsuperscript{7}This mechanism for electing a public official awards the contest to the candidate who wins more votes than the other candidate(s) (a simple majority in a two-candidate contest, a plurality in a multi-candidate contest).
collective deliberation and those of a public conceived as an aggregate of individual voters. The point worth noting here is that the BC Citizens’ Assembly demonstrates that public deliberation can fit into an institutional arrangement in a way that affords citizens the opportunity to exercise substantial influence on issues as fundamental as the electoral process itself.

**Examples of sustained institutionalization**

In contrast to the foregoing examples, democratic deliberation has shown durability and resilience in a number of places around the world, to the considerable benefit of both government and the community.

**Institutionalization in the developed world**

**Danish consensus conferences**

The Danish parliament has incorporated into its policy-making a public participatory process—the Consensus Conference—that makes use of a random sample of the population. Similar to a Citizens’ Jury, the Consensus Conference has been well documented (Hendriks, 2005) and 10–25 citizens engage in facilitated deliberation for 8 days over a period of 3 months. An external advisory committee composed of academics, practitioners and topic experts contribute their expertise and add credibility to the process. Findings are presented to a Parliamentary Research Committee, and then are passed into the institutional mechanisms for crafting policy.

The impact of Consensus Conferences on Danish official policy-making is maximized by conducting them in a building used by Parliament and by scheduling them when the topics have already emerged as issues of public debate. Although recommendations derived from Conference lay panels have no statutory authority, they have had a direct impact on the legislative process. For example, recommendations on genetic engineering in industry and agriculture led to the exclusion of transgenic animals from the first governmental biotechnology research and development program. Similarly, following the Conference on the human genome project, the use of genetic testing for recruitment and insurance claims was outlawed by the Danish legislature.

**Municipal government**

Hampton, Virginia often has been cited as an exceptional example of how government officials and citizen volunteers can work advantage of the Citizens Jury process is that it yields citizen input from a group that is both informed and representative of the public.

The key characteristics of a Citizens’ Jury are as follows: (1) random selection: jurors are carefully selected to be representative of the public at large. The members of the jury pool are randomly selected through scientific polling techniques, (2) informed witnesses are persons who are knowledgeable about the issue. They provide information to the jury on key aspects of the issue. The jury engages the witnesses in a dialogue to ensure that all questions are answered, (3) impartial witnesses present a range of perspectives and opinions. Testimony is carefully balanced to ensure fair treatment to all sides of the issue and (4) deliberation: the jury may deliberate using a variety of formats.

In Denmark, conferences for the most part have addressed issues of technology: for example, genetically modified foods; the future of fishing; teleworking; information technology in transport; air pollution; human genome mapping and genetic engineering in industry and agriculture.

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together to build a deliberative community (Gastil, 2008: p. 242). Hampton has been called a city in which ‘deliberation is not an event, but rather integral to deep reforms that have changed government and governance, reweaving and strengthening the community’s civic infrastructure’ (Potapchuk et al., 2005: p. 255).

In the 1980s, Hampton city officials realized that ‘the familiar models of governance do not work because they depend on predictability, approach problems piecemeal and presume experts can design workable solutions to meet recognized goals’ (Innes and Booher, 2003; quoted in Potapchuk et al., 2005). Officials turned to collaborative deliberation strategies to address challenging problems the city was unable to solve on its own. They teamed up with neighborhood leaders to advance the goal of shared governance (Gastil, 2008: p. 265). One of their significant accomplishments— the ‘Neighborhood Commission’, a 21-member body composed of government and community members—not only makes recommendations to municipal government but also has its own budget and undertakes its own initiatives

Hampton city officials are unwavering advocates for the principles and practices of citizen-government collaboration (Morse, 2004: Ch. 5). Nevertheless, they offer words of caution to other communities that wish to emulate what Hampton has accomplished. First, they point out, everyone must accept that citizen-government collaboration is often a messy, slow, uncertain and resource-intensive way to conduct a community’s business. No city should adopt it unless all elements of government are fully committed to it from the outset—in particular elected officials. Second, both citizens and city staff must be prepared to learn from each other and to grow together. Citizens and city officials alike must see results and enjoy successes right from the beginning.

Third, officials in Hampton realized that, by empowering citizens, they have unleashed an enormously powerful force. As Joan Kennedy, Hampton’s Neighborhood Office director, once observed, ‘It’s like dancing with a bear—you don’t stop until the bear wants to’.

Institutionalization in the developing world

Participatory budgeting

Porto Alegre is a subtropical city of 4 million residents on the southern coast of Brazil. The capital of the Brazilian state, Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre has achieved worldwide recognition for its innovative and highly-successful practice of ‘popular budgeting’ (PB), in which a broad range of community groups play a key role in shaping the municipal budget (Heller, 2001).

Developing the city budget in Porto Alegre is a bottom-up process. The chief innovation is the creation of district and citywide budget councils composed of delegates elected in open assemblies at the levels of the neighbourhood and the district. Over the years, the councils have come to play an increasingly substantial role in negotiating both the general aims and the details of budgetary allocations (Abers, 1996: p. 39).

The sustained relationship between popularly-chosen council delegates and Porto Alegre administrators has helped bridge the divide between the competing values of technical knowledge and citizen participation. City officials have addressed the relative lack of technical capacity and skills possessed by council representatives and their constituents by aggressively educating them and by assigning them responsibility for learning and understanding budget details (Abers, 1996: p. 45). Government officials interviewed by Abers commented on how quickly participants became proficient in mastering the details of the budget. They explained further that the constant scrutiny and questioning by citizens had forced officials to improve the budgeting process.

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11One of the oldest municipal participatory structures in the United States is the system of ‘district councils’ created more than 30 years ago in St. Paul, Minnesota. http://www.stpaul.gov/index.asp?NID=1859
PB has increased citizen participation in public affairs generally. Baiocchi (1999) has shown that, since its inception, the number of civil society organizations in Porto Alegre has increased dramatically. In short, participation in the budgeting process has generated new opportunities and incentives for citizens to participate in public life.

The results have been equally impressive, Heller writes, with respect to expanding the scope of democracy. Before PB, allocations mostly reflected patronage and were more or less fixed from year to year. The introduction of PB brought with it the principle of community-defined priorities, and in each year since, adjustments have been negotiated to meet redistributive criteria and to expand representation at every level of the budget-making process. In consequence, the range of services now provided by the city has widened significantly.

**Popular setting of development priorities**

Kerala is a state on the tropical Malabar Coast of southwestern India. According to Patrick Heller (Heller, 2001), the People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning, launched in Kerala in 1996, constitutes the boldest and most comprehensive decentralization initiative undertaken in India to date. While the State Planning Board has played a critical role, the People’s Campaign has produced a high level of direct participation.

Building on Kerala’s tradition of popular mobilization, the Planning Board, assisted by community-based organizations, has invested considerable effort in encouraging participation in ‘Grama Sabhas’—ward-level meetings presided over by elected local Panchayat (village-level government) officials. In the GramaSabhas, citizens discuss and set priorities for development and then elect sectoral development committees charged with preparing an overall plan. After completing a detailed review of problems and recommendations, the development committees elect task forces that are charged with the actual design of projects.

In 1996, the Planning Board estimated that over 2.5 million people participated in the Kerala Grama Sabhas. More than 120,000 persons served on 12,000 task forces, from which 100,000 projects emerged. The People’s Campaign has also created and empowered an intermediate layer of actors that perform the critical transmission function between direct (and necessarily intermittent) citizen participation and government action. More than 100,000 trained volunteers have played active roles in the development committees and some 13,000 elected Panchayat officials have seen their powers, resources and responsibilities vastly expanded.

Expansion of the scope of decision-making has been equally dramatic. With the devolution of unrestricted funds to local governments, decisions that were once the prerogative of state departments are now being made in Panchayats and their task forces. The devolution of planning and financial resources to Panchayats has shifted the balance of power from the bureaucratic state to local institutions and thereby brought government ‘closer to the people’. Significantly, with each passing year, the number of projects rejected on grounds of technical infeasibility by the Planning Board has declined and fund utilization has increased.

The impact of autonomous local decision-making is most evident in the shift in the prioritization of budgetary allocations. For example, far greater resources have gone to housing schemes, sanitation, and drinking water. Another noteworthy result has been the mobilization of local resources, in the form of both financial and labour contributions that the citizens are giving their time and money in order to advance local government initiatives suggests that institutional reform has created new incentives and opportunities for local action.

**Lessons and implications**

What lessons regarding institutionalization of deliberative public participation may we draw from these and other case studies? Let’s begin with some benefits and advantages:

1. **Collaborative governance strategies and participatory public deliberation can help**
Institutionalizing deliberative democracy

communities address challenging problems that government is unable to solve on its own. Such strategies create new opportunities and incentives for citizens to participate in the public life of their communities and to take action in response to problems and issues that concern them. As a result, the number of civil society organizations may increase dramatically, thereby leveraging the effectiveness of individual efforts. Moreover, collaborative governance and participatory public deliberation can mobilize community resources and encourage much-broader acceptance of responsibility for responding to problems that may be complex and deeply rooted in the conditions of social life.

2. **Citizen participation may create and empower an intermediate layer of actors** who serve in the indispensable role of liaison between identification and articulation of community needs and concerns, on the one hand, and on the other hand, government policy decision-making and implementation.

3. **Public officials can ask people to take responsibility for resolving controversial issues that otherwise would leave officials in the ‘no-win’ situation of being unable to satisfy everyone and hence having to disappoint everyone.**

4. **Constant questioning by citizens helps officials improve policies and the policy-making process.** New ideas and solutions as well as unrecognized problems may come to their attention. Moreover, official responses to citizen concerns are more likely to fit the specific, concrete circumstances in which people find themselves and hence are more likely to prove effective than ‘one-size-fits-all’ policies. Involvement by citizens also brings into play the principle of community-defined priorities, thereby making it easier to overcome the resistance of special-interest groups and to enact necessary but unpopular policies such as increased traffic or higher taxes.

5. **Deliberative participation may ‘bring government closer to the people’**. When power is devolved and citizens gain the opportunity to exercise real authority on issues they consider important, their levels of distrust of and hostility towards government decline.

6. **When decision-makers work alongside citizens, they strengthen both government and the community.** Accepting citizens as partners encourages people to hold government accountable, which in turn generates strong incentives for members of the public to follow through on suggestions and recommendations that might otherwise fail for lack of sustained attention, support and effort. When public deliberation is embedded in public institutions, action is more likely to occur because it receives sufficient resources and affords the ‘key players’ opportunities to work together. Finally, when deliberation is institutionalized so that it is practiced repeatedly over time, the experience, knowledge and skills of both citizens and officials improve, enabling them to accomplish more with more partners.

7. **Even if public deliberation does not lead to consensus and action, it at least encourages people to keep an open mind and to seek mutual understanding of their respective needs, interests, and aspirations.** Public deliberation is valuable even when it does no more than help participants to identify the reasons others have for disagreeing with them and to distinguish subjects on which they can agree from those on which they are unlikely to reach accord.

8. **Deliberative, collaborative governance strategies show that the relationship between government and civil society, and between social movements and formal political institutions, is not ‘zerosum’.** Strained, hostile or dysfunctional relationships are not inevitable, but rather an artifact of history and thus can be changed. There is no barrier in principle to coordination and complementarity between the public and its government.
Though institutionalizing deliberative public participation yields considerable benefits, it also carries with it certain costs, difficulties, and limitations:

1. *Deliberation does not inevitably generate consensus*, especially in larger public bodies such as big cities, states, provinces and nations as a whole (Gastil and Levine, 2005). Although people frequently change their views in the course of deliberation, they seldom reach unanimity, at least at the level of policy specifics. Because disagreements persist in conversations about almost all public issues, action may be impossible unless there is some mechanism, such as voting, that forecloses further deliberation, at least for a time.

2. *Good deliberation does not happen automatically or by itself* (Gastil and Levine, 2005). Instances of poorly organized public involvement events and processes that fall below the threshold of what most practitioners would consider sufficiently participatory and deliberative remain all too common. They far outnumber skillfully conducted public encounters in which participants listen to and attempt to understand appreciate, the reasons others give for alternative views and proposals. In order to achieve high-quality deliberation, someone must organize a discursive process, frame the topic, recruit participants, select methods and tools, establish agendas, prepare background materials or invite speakers, supply facilities and raise the funds necessary to do these things. This requires expertise, experience, time and resources.

3. *In order to achieve a level of political and social significance, public deliberation initiatives must scale ‘out’*—they must include an ever-increasing number of participants, even if the great majority are engaged only intermittently and indirectly (Gastil and Levine, 2005). In large populations, deliberation may require the involvement of hundreds or even hundreds of thousands of persons. One way to make formal deliberation more salient, engaging and accessible to more people is to increase the frequency with which occasions for deliberation occur (multiple sessions over time, multiple levels, etc). Another way is to link deliberations to the broader public debate through reporting in conventional media such as television news and newspapers. Additionally, online deliberation, although still in the early stages of development and yet to make a significant impact on policy development and decision-making, holds great promise in its potential to scale ‘out’ public deliberation.

4. In addition to including more participants, *public deliberation also faces the challenge of scaling ‘up’ to address problems and policy issues of state, national and even international concern* (Gastil and Levine, 2005). The great majority of experiences with and accomplishments attributable to public deliberation involve local issues such as development and planning, public education and the like. But more and more aspects of daily life are affected by decisions and actions that occur far beyond the boundaries that define towns, states or provinces, and even nations. There have been a few noteworthy instances of deliberation about issues of a ‘supra-local’ nature (in Australia, the United States, England, and Denmark). However, there has been little meaningful large-scale public deliberation on the world’s most pressing issues.

5. *Even high-quality public deliberation does not necessarily lead to social or...*
political change. Most public deliberations do not lead directly to government decisions and actions. Moreover, in their recent study Fagotto and Fung (2008) found that deliberation seldom leads ‘average citizens’ to mobilize and to take action in response to matters of public concern. Indeed, many practitioners of public deliberation have only recently turned their attention from the question of organizing and facilitating public deliberation to that of linking talk to action. For the results of deliberative processes to matter, powerful actors must be encouraged, persuaded and even compelled to pay attention to these discussions and to heed their outcomes.

6. The results of deliberation are most pronounced and are most readily sustained when organizations and institutions adopt deliberative practices internally and invest their own resources or political capital in an effort to respond to publicly-deliberated outcomes. However, this has seldom occurred, as illustrated by the continued citing (in this paper as elsewhere) of the same celebrated cases, such as Hampton, Virginia and British Columbia. (For discussion of this point, see the following section.)

7. Citizen-government collaboration is often a messy, slow, uncertain and resource-intensive way to conduct a community’s business. No level of government should adopt it without being fully committed to it from the outset. The commitment of both elected and appointed government officials is crucial. Everyone must be prepared to devote time, energy, funds and patience to the process and be prepared to learn from one other and grow together.

8. Officials must overcome their scepticism about the ability of ‘ordinary people’ to deal effectively with complex issues and problems. As experience repeatedly shows, it is possible to bridge the gap between the competing values of technical sophistication and citizen participation. Officials need to accept that people can master the technical aspects of problems and issues with surprising alacrity.

9. Citizens and city officials alike must see results and enjoy successes right from the beginning. Failed attempts at deliberative collaboration can be worse than not making the attempt at all because of the debilitating effects of raising expectations and then not delivering on them.

10. Government officials must recognize and accept that, by empowering citizens, they are unleashing an enormously powerful force. (Morse, 2004: Ch. 5) They must prepare themselves for a very different, and more-demanding, way of serving the public interest. Once in the embrace of a newly aroused and energized public, there is no letting go.

Institutionalization of public deliberation in Australia

The experience of pioneering efforts in deliberative democracy in the Planning and Infrastructure portfolio in Western Australia (as well as initiatives in other countries) suggests that reform is not only possible but also quite feasible—if the political will is there.

Reasons for pessimism

Government in Australia, like government elsewhere, does not have a good track record of involving citizens in the development and implementation of public policy. Although community consultation has been ensconced in rule and regulation, especially in the environmental and planning portfolios, the results have been overwhelmingly disappointing. Rather than enabling citizens to add value to the policy-making process, consultation often has backfired, leaving participants feeling misled, ‘used’ or more apathetic and cynical than before and leaving public servants feeling hapless, cynical or ‘burnt-out’.

It is not difficult to see why consultation has fallen so far short of expectations. Community consultation has been tacked on to our technocratic, managerial system of democratic
governance. In part, consultation is an afterthought because Australian society, like advanced techno-economic societies throughout the world, has become so meritocratic, specialized, and focused on the acquisition of credentials that the public has unquestioningly handed over much of the necessary decision-making to ‘experts’, to whom implicitly we have assigned the ability to determine what counts as knowledge and what does not. Thus policy-makers too readily accept their own views as sound, but treat the views of ordinary citizens—even in regard to matters properly within their realm of ‘expertise’, such as values and priorities—as mere ‘preference’ and ‘opinion’.

Most forms of community consultation attract chiefly persons and groups having narrow interests that, simply by being ‘particular’, exist in some degree of tension with the public interest as the public would define and articulate it through deliberation. The ‘uninterested’ public generally has neither incentive nor capacity to participate effectively in an arena best suited to the staking out and defence of pre-formed policy positions. In part this is because the ‘uninterested’ public does not have a pre-deliberative view, as interest groups do. The public’s ‘interest’ must emerge from intra-public deliberation. Moreover, the public’s interest is not just another interest, one that is ‘on all fours’ with other interests. By definition, it includes those interests. Consultation fails to weave together a genuine public perspective and to define an authentic public interest because it is not designed to do so. Indeed, it rests on conceptions and assumptions that make such notions well nigh impossible even to conceive.

There are many obstacles to institutionalizing deliberative democratic practice that we cannot address adequately here. However, we do wish to draw attention briefly to the question of public officials’ beliefs and attitudes concerning deliberation with citizens.

George Frederickson of the University of Kansas has written that, although it’s perfectly evident to officials that current forms of interaction between themselves and citizens are inadequate to the task of solving many problems and resolving many issues, few believe there is a need for a fundamentally different type of relationship with the public (Frederickson, 1999). This view, Frederickson argues, is rooted ultimately in officials’ self-conceptions as representatives of the public:

First, government officials see effective governing as something they achieve and maintain through ‘leadership’ exercised through the authority of the institutional roles they occupy. In turn, they understand leadership as devising and promoting solutions that most constituents will accept. Hence they tend to regard listening as a chance to hear opinions and already-held policy positions—to learn where individuals and groups stand on issues—and to view talking as the opportunity to explain matters to members of the public and to persuade them.

Second, from their institutional perspective, officials see the public as an aggregate of constituencies: neighbourhood associations, business and civic clubs, professional associations, interest groups, government departments and agencies and blocs of voters. They have little understanding of the public in any sense other than as a collection of persons and groups with narrowly defined interests and circumscribed perspectives. Viewed through this lens, the community (or the public) as such is difficult for officials to discern.

Third, officials’ acts of listening and talking to members of constituencies are policy-specific, having to do with particular problems or issues. They see public discourse as primarily policy discussion for the purpose of problem-solving. It’s not unusual, therefore, for the elected or appointed official to regard public ambivalence, apathy, conflict or frustration as a function of the peculiarities of a particular policy matter, rather than as an indication that the relationships that make up the ‘civic infrastructure’ of a community are not as robust or resilient as they could or should be.
Fourth, officials know that issues rooted in ideas, outlooks, values and principles usually are harder to resolve than interest-based issues because the latter are more susceptible to bargaining and hence mutually acceptable compromise. Pragmatic officials understand interests and know how to deal with conflicts between them. Value- or principle-based issues, in contrast, appear as no-win headaches and efforts to resolve them seem to be a thankless task. For just this reason, officials (like constituent groups) seek institutional resolution rather than resolution within the community or between the community and governing institutions. From their perspective, institutions produce clear, definitive solutions because outcomes are justified not on the basis of an ill-defined, elusive consensus, but on the basis of votes or an ‘objective’ administrative calculation of costs and benefits.

Less charitably, we would add to Frederickson’s explanation of officials’ understandable reluctance to engage citizens in deliberation an observation on the seduction of political power. Because power increases (in a democracy, chiefly as a function of enhanced authority) as one ascends the ladders of administrative and elective government, the gateways to decision-making are strongly and jealously guarded. Citizens possessing extraordinary influence (stemming from extraordinary status or resources) may be admitted to the decision-making arena. Ordinary citizens, however, are excluded not only from decision-making but also from access to information that might provoke them to action. The community is frequently cajoled to ‘have a say’, but then finds participation is not linked to influence over decision-making. The institutional defenders of ‘representative government’ typically contend that government is democratic if the public has its ‘say’ at the ballot box on the election day. Of course, such ‘democracy once every 3 or 4 years’ works to the advantage of candidates who can rely on ‘mass marketing’ to portray themselves as ‘listening’ to their constituencies.

**Reasons for optimism**

Despite the plethora of obstacles to institutionalizing deliberation as part of the policy-making process, there are also some encouraging signs that the cause of public deliberation is making headway. For governance in Australia (or anywhere) to become more democratic, collaborative and deliberative, governments and communities must alter the nature of their interactions. Governments, of course, are institutions and institutions are notoriously inertial, resistant to change and ‘behind the curve’ in relation to social and political changes occurring in the environment they inhabit. Yet, the time may well be ripe for public and government to start moving in the direction of greater democracy, collaboration and deliberation.

One of the authors (Hartz-Karp) had the opportunity to participate in the recent 2020 Summit. In his opening remarks, Prime Minister Mr. Rudd expressed a view that received much media attention: ‘Government, irrespective of its political persuasion, does not have a monopoly on policy wisdom’. Subsequently, in the introduction to the 2020 Summit preliminary report, the Prime Minister urged that we make the question of reform a matter for widespread public consideration:

*The challenges facing Australia are great and all Australians need to think about how we meet them. Our discussions this weekend should not be the conclusion of the national conversation that has begun to develop over the past 10 weeks, but rather a stimulus to engage an even larger number of Australians on the questions we have debated.*

To be sure, the Prime Minister’s remarks about ‘throwing open the windows of democracy’ and ‘turning to you, the people of Australia’, while heady stuff, did not signal the advent of a new stage in the evolution of democratic governance. After all, the Summit was hardly a ‘people’s convention’; it was rather closer to a meritocratic conclave of the
‘best and brightest’—as one commentator noted, ‘a gathering of people selected on indeterminate grounds of general outstandingness’ (David, 2008). Moreover, it is a telling commentary on the state of democracy today that the Prime Minister’s observation—that elected officials do not have all the answers and must to look to the public for assistance in finding them—was interpreted widely as being profound (and, in some quarters, profoundly mistaken).

Such realism notwithstanding, the Summit may prove in retrospect to have been what one participant called a ‘sentinel event’. Sentinel events are essentially one-off events that at the time of their occurrence are not always recognized as significant. ‘They throw light on the settings in which they occur and help identify the direction of system changes’. In this instance, the change is perhaps in the direction of greater inclusion and openness albeit within the limits of the current structural capacities of the political system. It is the latter point that is of interest here; for any real strengthening of the role of citizens to occur, it must be accompanied by an increase in the structural capacities of the system. The question is whether the public can either drive change in public institutions or create ‘parallel institutions’ that government must heed.

A proposal for an Australian experiment and model

Historically, Australia has been a leader in democratic reform, having invented the secret ballot and becoming one of the first nations to introduce women’s suffrage and a democratically-elected upper house. As elsewhere, though, real reform has stagnated. There has been much commentary on the dysfunction of contemporary adversarial democratic systems that emphasize partisan and contention, which enervate or even render representative government impotent in the face of the critical challenges of our time.

Unease about the state of democracy today was manifest in several of the discussion streams at the 2020 Summit. In fact, it was the governance stream that sounded a clarion call for ‘collaborative governance—revolutionizing the way governments and communities interact’. Whether this call portends a new era in which Australia once again leads the way in democratic reform—this time by fully and effectively institutionalizing deliberative democracy—depends on whether the nation can gain traction on the rocky road that must be travelled.

What follows is a modest proposal, a proposal not for revolution but rather a ‘radical’ (in the sense of ‘going to the root’) improvement to our current system of representative democracy. Representative democracy can be significantly more relevant, responsive and effective if it is augmented with citizen-government collaboration and public deliberation.

Criteria for collaborative, deliberative participation

1. Decision-making must be more inclusive and representative of the demographic characteristics of the population. To the extent that participants are truly representative of the larger population from which they are drawn, it is possible (with varying degrees of accuracy and confidence) to infer the probable conclusions of the
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population as a whole, were everyone able to deliberate together in the same manner as participants.

2. Decision-making must be more deliberative. It will take all views into account and weigh the reasons for and against different courses of policy action consistent with those views. A deliberative outcome will provide a more precise, more nuanced and more reliable guide for official policy-making than does the comparatively superficial and shifting contemporary alternative, ‘public opinion’.

3. The contributions of ordinary citizens must be more influential. Decision-makers should indicate at the outset of the process the extent to which the outcomes of deliberation will influence policy development and decision-making. The presumption should be that institutional decision-makers will take direction from those outcomes and will bear the burden of explaining why they cannot in good conscience allow their actions to be guided thereby.

Practical requirements for embedding deliberative participation

In order to institutionalize deliberative participation by citizens, a number of practical requirements will have to be met. Here are two likely ones:

1. Institutionalization will not occur in the absence of commitment from all stakeholders. ‘Buy-in’ depends on persuading everyone that deliberative participation will not place their particular interests at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the interests of others with whom they find themselves in competition. In short, institutionalization requires that deliberative participation be ‘equi-partisan’. A key indication that political partisans view deliberative participation as ‘equi-partisan’ would be its appearance as a ‘plank’ in party electoral platforms. Parties should be able and willing to compete not only on the basis of the quality of their policy proposals but also on the basis of how much they do to create civic space for participation and deliberation and on how responsive they are to the public voice that emerges from that process.

2. At the same time, institutionalization must be non-partisan. In its design and execution, deliberative participation should serve the public interest: the stake everyone has in healthy political institutions and practices. Serving the public interest is a precondition for widespread acceptance of deliberative participation as a legitimate extension and expression of the foundational, universally accepted values and principles of democracy, such as political equality, accountability, transparency and responsiveness.15

Outline of an initial experiment

Here is a broad sketch of an initial test of institutionalized deliberative participation:

- First, an independent group—perhaps a university or universities, perhaps a collection of non-governmental organizations, etc.—volunteers to serve as a convenor and organizer of a deliberative event or

15Inclusiveness—ensuring that all perspectives are represented—is one way to affirm the non-partisan character of deliberative participation. Another is to make participation mandatory—asking citizens to accept a duty to participate. A requirement to participate would apply to citizens ‘called’ to serve, just as it applies to citizens called for jury service. Citizen deliberators, like jurors, might be excused for sufficient cause (which citizens ought to have a hand in specifying when this question is addressed). Because participating in deliberations concerning issues of public policy is not essential to the operation of the political system in the way serving on juries is essential to operation of the legal system, it ought to be rather easier for persons to be excused from the former. Nevertheless, for the purpose of constructing an experiment and model, there ought to be a strong expectation that most citizens will participate if selected. This expectation might be accompanied by incentives that help offset unavoidable costs of participation that approach or exceed those citizens are expected to bear when serving on a jury. Non-partisanship can be demonstrated as well by providing citizen deliberators with access to independent sources of advice and assistance concerning the framing of questions, process design, facilitation, oversight, monitoring, articulation, evaluation and identifying areas for modification and improvement.
process that will take place during an election campaign period (for the sake of convenience, let us call this group ‘the Commission’). The Commission asks political parties to choose—collaboratively or independently, as they are disposed—one or more important issues they believe citizens can and should help resolve through deliberative participation both within the public and between citizens and policymakers. The Commission plays the role of ‘honest broker’ in addressing concerns and resolving disagreements that might prevent the parties from joining the experiment.

- The political parties state clearly and unequivocally the extent to which, if elected, they are prepared to act on the findings and recommendations of the citizen deliberation. This commitment may range from merely taking note of the outcome, to constructing a referendum on which the public may vote, to adopting the recommendations on a trial basis (perhaps by enacting ‘sunset’ provisions in the authorizing legislation), to working jointly with citizens to design, implement, and evaluate specific policies.

- With financial support, chiefly from government, the Commission oversees the tasks of ‘framing’ (defining, describing, characterizing) the issue(s) to be deliberated, generating a range of options consistent with the full range of public perspectives and assembling arguments for and against each option. The Commission ensures that these tasks are carried out in as non-partisan a fashion as possible and that the resulting information is acceptable to and accessible by both stakeholders and members of the general public. The Commission also assembles a design team of practitioners, scholars, political figures and citizens to study and recommend the methods and tools best suited to the deliberation of each issue.

- Using voter rolls or other suitable lists, the Commission oversees the drawing of samples of the population that collectively are broadly representative of the public’s demographic diversity. It sees to it that people are ‘called up’ randomly for the ‘civic duty’ of deliberating on behalf of their fellow citizens. Participants are afforded instruction and practice in deliberating so that differences in individual confidence, skill and other key factors are minimized.

- During the campaign period, the Commission administers the deliberative process and then aggregates and synthesizes the findings and recommendations of the deliberative sample.

- At election time, voters evaluate the parties at least in part on the question of how well they have heard, understood and responded to the expressed public’s concerns, values, priorities, ideas and recommendations, as these have been identified, formulated and voiced by members of the public who have deliberated together on the public’s behalf.

- The Commission monitors the efforts of the parties, both in office and out, to incorporate the conclusions and recommendations of the deliberative sample into policy and practice.

- The Commission evaluates the deliberative process and proposes improvements for the next election period. In light of the initial experiment and prospects for the future, it also recommends ways to ‘scale up’ and ‘scale out’ deliberative participation and to enlarge the structural capacity of the political system to introduce and sustain such deliberation as a continuing feature of democratic government.

**Conclusion**

There are many ways in which a more participatory, more collaborative and more deliberative democratic politics might be achieved in Australia and elsewhere. Theorizing about the exact shape of an institutionalized practice of deliberative democracy is helpful, but by itself it cannot answer the question of what shape would be best. We need to begin experimenting with forms of citizen-government collaboration and participatory public deliberation that will yield the evidence required for empirical description.
and analysis. We can then identify best practices and begin the work of transforming our democracy into a set of institutions that are adequate to the tasks we need them to perform, and that are genuinely responsive to the will of an increasingly alienated, disaffected and restive people.

In our conversations and discussions of when, where and how to bring citizens into the public decision-making process, let us bear in mind that the stakes are of the highest order. Democracy—and probably much more—hangs in the balance.

References


