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Conference Report: Dispatch From Far Beyond

How Deliberative Democracy May Keep Pseudo-Democracy, The New Rule by the Few, From Bungling Into Global Catastrophes

By Ted Becker

Imagine sitting in a room with 75 fellow souls, all of whom speak strange sounding English...Australian and New Zealandese. Over 70% of them are government officials and political leaders from all levels of government.

But there is something stranger to American ears than their accents, inflections and idioms. They seem to be of a worldview as foreign to the normal political mindset as quantum physics. They talk excitedly about how some have been "engaging the community" and "empowering citizens" in planning and decision making. The presenters speak of "public visioning processes," "citizens juries," "21 century town meetings," "citizen assemblies." And they talk about doing it more. Why?

The Broader Context: Representative Democracy is Devolving.

"Australasia"--as they call Oz and NZ--is well within the mixed political-economic model globally known as "social democracy" (the most democratic of which is Switzerland and the most egalitarian being Norway)—all of which in the United States is misrepresented by its elites and media arms as "socialism." There are universal health care systems; heavily subsidized, dense and relatively efficient public transportation systems; the Green Party has several seats in the Australian Parliament; Australia has the power to amend its national constitution by referendum at the national level (most fail); New Zealand has citizens initiatives at the national level (though they are non-binding).

Moreover, each of these countries seem concerned about their past lives and their national karma. Thus, in each, there are serious efforts to integrate and atone for past misdeeds with their native populations, leading perchance to a deeper peace and harmony. (Canada does this too, but it is not genuinely dealt with in the United States other than an occasional official apology now and then or saying it's OK now that the "Indians" are rich because of their casinos.).

So, what's not to like in Australasia?

Well, to talk with Ozzies and Kiwis, and read the local newspapers, there seems to be as much disgruntlement with the lack of democracy hereabouts as one finds throughout the USA about the accelerating devolution of its democratic institutions.

It's much the same set of sour notes--concerning government at all levels: poor leadership; high level corruption; conflicts of interest and cronyism; stupefying and stultifying bureaucracy; corporate manipulation (if not control of) political parties and

governance; the "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) syndrome; the adversarial nature of politics (mud slinging, misrepresentations if not outright lying); an ever increasing concentration of central power for military adventurism abroad and interference with individual rights at home in the name of homeland security; under-funding many social programs and infrastructure; and on and on.

What it all boils down to, sadly, is that whether you live in a quasi-democracy (as in Australasia) or in a pseudo-democracy (as in America) it isn't a good form of democracy at all because it really isn't representative whatsoever of what the people want, desire, or could well imagine. It does not represent in any way whatsoever, the will of the public in general...who comprise the overwhelming numbers in society: the poor, the young, recent immigrants, the working class, the lower middle class, the small farmers, the small merchants, artisans and craftspersons..

What the vast majority of the people really care about is improved and affordable health and dental care; more accessible and more life-relevant education; how to prepare for and ameliorate the imminently forthcoming disasters from global warming and climate change; how they and their children can get along economically in the face of corporate globalization and its tactics of outsourcing industry to very low wage countries, cutting benefits and pensions to the workers, and the like.

So What About That Conference?

All I can say, after facilitating the "5th Annual Community Engagement Conference" in Sydney (organized by a company called *Innovative Quality and Productivity Center*, or *IQPC* and its project manager, Nicola Tweedy), is that it shows that a few good seeds have been sown here and there (mainly in the states of West Australia and Victoria)--and what a full garden in bloom might look and smell like: beautiful and sweet.

These are the kind of people with the kind of ideals and practices that must proliferate for a new kind of "deliberative democracy" to replace the toxic waste heaps of governance currently euphemistically called "representative government" that are decomposing around the world today...causing great destruction to many peoples around the world as well to the basic environment that sustains humanity, Gaia Herself.

Here, in this little noticed enclave at the fringes of the plague of bad governance that engulfs much of the "civilized" world, are patches of true democracy in action, in the hearts and hands of devoted cultivators of the will of the people, striving to nurture and tend to a genuine "public interest." .

Their efforts, sometimes over long periods of time and through periods of unusual duress, demonstrate clearly that such can flourish on this planet if given the chance and some fresh air and loving practice. The fresh air would be these new community engagement and citizen empowerment processes and systems. The practitioners are a burgeoning legion of designers, facilitators, and highly skilled technicians

These new citizen-friendly systems are humane. In the words of the self-styled American Christian right wing, they are God's "*intelligent design*." Small wonder, then, that ordinary citizens enjoy, no revel in, them. They find themselves to be far more tolerant of other socio-economic opinions and multi-cultural diversity than they ever knew themselves to be. They find their political senses and creativity stimulated in ways never before experienced. They find, through such collaborative and neutrally facilitated meet-ups (face to face, electronic and a mixture of both), that they can devise ingenious, instead of disingenuous, spaces of common ground. that resolve theretofore seemingly intractable social and political problems.

And who are "They?" They are you and I writ large. They are a blend of random selection, stratified sampling and the participation of concerned citizens and activated communities. Sometimes they are paid. Sometimes they are not. Sometimes these new deliberative processes are completed in a day, sometimes a few days, sometimes a year. A few of the models have even become institutionalized and are "permanent." All the time they are earnest about what they are doing because they know it is for the greater good. But at the same time, all these processes are exciting social events.

Down Under Is *Far Beyond*

Those who run our present systems of "representative democracy" are, in stark contrast, efficient only at maximizing their own interests and those of their high status patrons. They are ingenious only at hiding their true agendas. They need to be replaced by the kind of government officials and political leadership who revealed themselves in this unearthly parallel political universe I just experienced Down Under...which should be renamed *Far Beyond*.

This conference is proof positive that public spirited people can be in government and actually be what we suppose all of them to be but know they are not: **public servants**. Such folks must become the political leaders of a new generation. What they personify is a new kind of political leadership, one that empowers their constituencies to direct and correct the way government operates. It is **a leadership of facilitation**, not the leadership we have, of capitulation to wealth and manipulation of the commonwealth.

Back during the days of the Western "cultural revolution" that some call "*The Sixties*" (which actually ran from the late 1960s to the mid 1970s), huge masses of people protested throughout the Western world for "power to the people" and denounced the hierarchical and patriarchal institutions of governmental and corporate culture. I remember well when those people being yelled at finally yelled back: "And with what would you replace this system?" There was no reply. That articulate silence was because "Deliberative Democracy" had not yet been invented. Now it has.

This is not some "Blue Sky" theory. Maybe it was when Buckminster Fuller wrote about it in 1940 (*No More Second Hand God*), and Erich Fromm in 1955 (*The Sane Society*), or even when Ben Barber did in 1984 (*Strong Democracy*). But now it is far along in

empirical data. It is rich in real life experiments that prove over and over and over again that it works and works amazingly well. It is True Blue. How so?

It offers all the people of any society that embraces it all kinds of opportunities to show how well they know how to cooperate on thinking through what is best for the greatest good of that society as well as for the physical and social ecology that supports it. All the theorists and political scientists who for centuries have said that “the public” can have no opinion of its own that is worthwhile, that the public cannot devise policies for the good of all (See Walter Lippman’s classic propaganda tome *Public Opinion*, 1921)...and that this kind of planning, legislation and implementation is best left to educated elites...are all just dead wrong. ...whether they be named Socrates, Plato, Burke or Madison...or are the contemporary mainstream of modern Western political science. They were brilliant and perhaps correct for their time, but to cite or use them today, in post-modern times, is a miscarriage of philosophy, a badly flawed science, and highly deleterious to a stable future..

Listening to the several dozen experiments conducted in Oz and NZ in very recent times was as inspiring as it was heart warming. This conference was the largest of its four predecessors. Witnessing the audience response to each of the presenters made it clear that a lot of networking is going to follow, with new ideas, new collaborations, new process blueprints, a renewed zeal in the deliberative democracy enterprise resulting in many new community empowerments. And some day a critical mass will be reached in this gorgeous part of Terra...a welcome synergy. It will be a reincarnation of Aristotle’s *Republic*, where the people decide their future and the beginning of the end of Plato’s *Republic*, all the present day autocracies masquerading as representative democracy that lead only to the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many....and at the expense of a sustainable world economy and ecology.

Deliberative Democracy is Evolving: Genes, Memes and the Collective Subconscious

If this deliberative democracy cluster in Australasia is actually synergizing, what then? Aside from the highly selective audience of this online journal and a few other websites and blogs in the vast world of the internet, who really will know or care? That, of course, assumes that this Australasian phenomenon is the only such mutation in the evolution of democracy and that others are not occurring at roughly the same time in other parts of the world. Actually, there are similar packets of deliberative democracy energy elsewhere. Although they are far apart around the orb, and each differs in its particular wave/particle unit from those in this part of the world, they all have the same democratic DNA—they genuinely intend to and do empower the citizens to make choices that make a difference in their lives and in the broader view of democracy in their own countries or polity.

Several of the other **deliberative democracy thought/belief mutations or “memes”** (as Richard Dawkins, a British specialist in evolution, calls them) have been covered as “news” items in *The Journal of Public Deliberation*. The reader need only click/be on the “practitioner/public” side of this publication www.auburn.edu/jpd and see for him or herself. They are the Citizens Assemblies that have been and are in progress in British

Columbia, Ontario and the Netherlands...and a unique variation of that is gestating right now in Oz.. I also have a hunch that it is not too far in the future that another variant will emerge in the USA, probably in California (a little bird told me). It is highly doubtful it could actually impact at the national level...because of the rigidity of the U.S. Constitution and the many vested national, economic and religious interests in elitism and the privileges of hierarchy.

The South American democracy gene/meme has also been mutating with a lot of help from its governments at all levels. The most obvious is the acclaimed “Participatory Budgeting” conceived and started in Porto Alegre, but which has already spread throughout Brazil and even to other South American locales (Montevideo for one).

These processes, I might add, have made enormous, easily discernible differences in each municipality that uses it to redistribute their capital improvement funds to the neediest areas. Thus, schools, streets, sewers, power lines, health clinics in these places are well beyond what they have been in quantity and quality. A new variant of this has emerged elsewhere in Brazil, where the City of Ipatinga has connected the formerly isolated neighborhood face to face assemblages by the Internet so each neighborhood gets directly to see the bigger picture as they deliberate what’s best for their area.

Hugo Chavez, who is largely demonized in the Western media and by almost the entire Western and Westernized political spectrum as a “dictator,” “threat to stability,” or “madman,” has just promised to put \$5 billion into a fund to enable what he calls a nationwide network of “communal councils” to decide in small face to face groups throughout Venezuela how to spend that money to improve their collective lives.

Yes, we are in the early stages of a paradigm shift because the shape and state of the world economy and environment have been so badly mismanaged by those who say they are the “representatives” of the people, but are anything but that. What they represent are the holders of power in political and economic hierarchies based on carbon energy (fossil fuels), nuclear energy and which are connected to and mired in militarism and forceful, self-interested solutions to social problems. They wear ideological blinders that greatly diminish their intelligence and knowledge bases. They also are insulated from the collective knowledge and wisdom of the people by their insolence and condescendence about the people and thus suffer from ever increasing errors in their judgment about what is in the “public interest.”

As nature (and “intelligent design”) would have it, when any part of it becomes greatly dysfunctional within the new confines of the world in which it exists, random mutations occur, some of which keep the species evolving...to survive the new perils...and move the species into a higher state of being through adaptation. Democracy is part of this Earth’s ecology and has been so ever since the early hunter-gatherer days, way before Athens. It is a recessive gene, I think, and has been overpowered by the more dominant hierarchy gene, a more malignant form of the social governance gene. Now, given the threat of extinction being posed to the survival of the species—and the newly published urgent warning by 2.000 top Earth scientists bears witness to the ominous reality of

this—our species is creating these new memes that may survive the future life threatening conditions so that it may outlive its dysfunctional form.

That is why the Australasian variant is so important. It is a viable, regenerative form of many new combinations that maybe, just maybe, might save our genus from destroying the hospitable conditions of Mother Earth. It's going to take a lot of special scientific knowledge and know how—presented in “plain language” (as one presenter “loved” to say) to all the people—and their being able to apply their collected and processed information and opinion—to at least slow down the damage and possibly avert the worst case scenarios.

The mutations are local, state, regional and national so far. In each case, these new systems triggered, congealed and/or released—at one level or another—a type of energy that Carl Jung called “**The Collective Subconscious**” of that polity. This is the social equivalent of an earthquake. When it occurs it can move mountains and generate gigantic tsunamis of political willpower. Yet it happens out of our sight.

And yes, with the knowledge, expertise and the ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) presently available to almost all right now and which will be increased dramatically in the near future--but is presently used exclusively by the corporate and military titans in their lofty, narrow towers, their remote yachts, secluded islands and secret “hard” locations—the citizens of the entire world can be empowered to discuss, dialogue and deliberate on what's best for the species. These are not decisions that should be made by a few corporate to tribal “moguls,” “CEOs” and “billionaires” who now monopolize the most advanced aspects of this system. Put into the hands and minds of the global population, in continuing global disclosure of independent, well informed discourse and deliberated agreement on the best tradeoffs for a future that will benefit the species the most, the steep course downhill for humanity can change in a few years—a nanosecond of eternity.