The Interface between the Public, the Politician and the Professional Planner in Plan-Making Exercises

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Abstract:

Deliberative democracy theorists argue that inclusive processes of stakeholder engagement generally result in more rational and more legitimate policy outcomes when compared to other conventional approaches of decision-making. Examination of inclusive stakeholder engagement processes undertaken in the development of spatial urban planning documents reveals that a tension exists between the process of inclusive stakeholder engagement and the implementation of policy outcomes. Literature on deliberative democracy suggests that both a top-down and bottom-up approach to decision-making will help reconcile that tension by drawing upon the legitimating roles that the public, the professional planner and the politician bring to the process of plan-making. What is missing however is literature which describes the change that occurs in the relationship between these three groups. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore how the literature on deliberative democracy describes the relationship between the public, the politician and the professional planner in the plan-making process. By examining the interface between these three main groups of stakeholders questions emerge regarding how the change in relationship between the groups affects the quality of the policy outcome.
1.0 Introduction

The emerging relationship between the distribution of population growth in metropolitan regions, the rising price of oil and climate change is changing the focus of urban planning. Metropolitan spatial planning, for instance, defined by Healey (2004: 46) as ‘self-conscious collective efforts to re-imagine a city, urban region or wider territory and to translate the result into priorities...[of] strategic infrastructure and principles of land use regulation’ is one mechanism to help mitigate the negative social, economic and even environmental implications associated with the pressures of growth, high oil prices and climate change. In addition, such planning documents are often developed to help coordinate responses to these challenges among the wide range of stakeholders.

Part of the challenge of plan-making in urban planning is to understand how best to plan for the social, ecological and economic sustainability of the region given the known challenges faced by urban regions both today and into the future. The other part of the challenge of plan-making is to implement policy outcomes in a timely and effective manner. Policy outcomes that are legitimate (Selman, 1999) and rational (Dryzek, 1987, 1990; Smith, 2001) ostensibly result from inclusive processes of stakeholder engagement (Cohen, 1989: 22; Smith, 2003: 56). This relationship between legitimacy and rationality (outcome) and stakeholder engagement (process) is supported by the theory of deliberative democracy, which offers a normative framework on how to engage people in processes of decision-making. Deliberative democracy, however does not account for the change in relationship that occurs between stakeholder groups when the process of plan-making transitions from the formal engagement process to the process of determining the content of the plan. The
change in form the relationship takes between stakeholders from one point in the process to another point affects the quality of the policy outcome.

The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which the research on deliberative democracy addresses the change in relationship between politicians, planning professionals and the public at different points throughout plan-making exercises in urban planning. Firstly this paper introduces deliberative democracy as a normative framework for adopting a process of stakeholder engagement. By exploring the limitations of deliberative democracy within the context of devising metropolitan spatial plans the tension between theory and practice is described. Secondly, this paper examines how the relationship between the politician, the professional and the public has changed in light of the adoption of inclusive public processes. By examining the interface between the public, the professional planner, and the politician, questions arise regarding the relationship between these stakeholder groups and the impact these relationships have on the quality of the policy outcome. These questions are presented in the concluding section of the paper.

2.0 Confronting the Tension between the Theory of Deliberative Democracy and the Reality of Plan-Making

Deliberative democracy is described as an inclusive (Smith, 2003) and unconstrained (Dryzek, 1990) process of engagement that produces policy outcomes that are more rational (Dryzek, 1987, 1990; Smith, 2001) and legitimate (Selman, 1999) than conventional models. The inclusive and power neutralizing qualities are quite different from the qualities which define more conventional approaches to decision-making such as pluralism, corporatism and neo-liberalism. For instance, in pluralism,
the power distribution between competing groups is unequal (Held, 1987: 187). In corporatism power is concentrated in the hands of relatively few organizations (Healey, 1997: 225) and in neo-liberalism power is extended out to the market where subsequently the role of the state is minimal (Hayek, 1944: 40; Held, 1987: 243-4; Low, 1991: 178). These conventional approaches, described as ‘models of democracy’ by Held (1987) are limited by their power inequity among competing interest groups, and by their support for individualism and the pursuit of private gain, all of which contradict commitments to resolve collective societal challenges (Martell, 1994: 141).

Deliberative democracy evolved in response to the perceived weaknesses associated with these more conventional styles of democracy described above (Smith, 2003: 56). Interestingly, however, while the perceived weaknesses may warrant a new democratic model to replace the more conventional models, deliberative democracy is presented in the literature as a ‘desirable ingredient’ of democracy (Saward, 2000: 68). Institutional structures that enable active participation by stakeholders are therefore, not rejecting conventional forms of democracy, but rather, as Eckersley (2004: 2) argues, introducing a ‘post-liberal’ state which includes deliberative democracy. The incorporation of deliberative democracy is attractive to practitioners in urban planning who want to achieve policy outcomes that are easy to implement.

Part of what makes deliberative democracy attractive to metropolitan planning is the application of a deliberation process between stakeholders. By integrating a deliberative component into the process of plan-making, policy outcomes are determined by the quality of the argument which emerges (Habermas, 1987). This
exchange of reasoned arguments is quite different from how decisions are made in the conventional approaches where decisions are made through command and control, voting, or strategic negotiation (Fung & Wright, 2003: 18). By arguing and deliberating between preferences, the process of open reflection, criticism and debate will result in an outcome that is more rational and legitimate (Low, 1991: 249). Ostensibly, these rational and legitimate outcomes are more widely owned on the basis that they emerged from a more inclusive process (Healey, 1997: 249).

It is argued that a process of policy decision-making which is inclusive and affords stakeholders the opportunity to introduce and question claims, to put forward reasons, and to express and challenge needs, values and interests (Smith, 2003: 7) will enable a greater sense of empowerment and fulfillment among stakeholders (Senbel, 2002: 3). As a result the subsequent policy outcomes are more legitimate (Selman, 1999: 162) and are strengthened by the deliberation that occurs between stakeholders (Dryzek & List, 2003: 1). Even when a consensus is not reached in deliberation, the policy outcome is more legitimate because, as participants, the stakeholders understand how and why the outcome was reached (Miller, 2002: 201). Thus, a formal process of stakeholder engagement which is inclusive and unconstrained is argued to be the most defensible method of achieving legitimacy in a process of decision-making (Smith, 2005: 209). Consequently, a rational and legitimate outcome offers an attractive reason why politicians and bureaucrats would want to design plan-making processes that are inclusive.

Applying the features of deliberative democracy into practice has triggered a number of concerns. One of the leading criticisms toward deliberative democracy is this idea
that power can be neutralized between stakeholders. Skeptics have argued that
deliberative democracy is flawed because some stakeholders simply have louder
voices (Sanders, 1997: 11) or are better positioned financially to have their voices
heard over others (March & Olsen, 1989: 144). In the case of metropolitan planning,
often the larger, more populous and wealthy local governments are better positioned
to have their voices heard over smaller less populous local governments. The
problem therefore is that deliberative democracy does not account for how status and
power shape communication (Sanders, 1997: 14). Dialogue that is inclusive must be
unconstrained and free from domination and deception (Dryzek, 1990: 36). As power
imbalances between stakeholders can not neutralize themselves, Habermas advocates
for the removal of coercive and manipulative forces (Torgerson, 1999: 114-5).
Furthermore it is argued that by removing manipulative forces power relationships
stabilize and decisions are made based on the ‘power of rationality’ (Flyvbjerg, 1998:
194).

In response to the challenge presented by power inequality between stakeholders,
urban planning has witnessed the role and responsibility of the professional planner
change with the emergence of more collaborative and deliberative approaches to
decision-making. Subsequently, the professional planner has transitioned away from
being an ‘expert’ of knowledge to being an agent that facilitates or mediates the
emergence of knowledge (Forester, 1999: 129 &169). This is different from the more
conventional approaches to policy decision-making where the outcome is determined
by technical expertise and political ideologies (Healey, 2006: 330-331). Even with
the introduction of skilled facilitators to assist with the stabilization of power
relationships between stakeholders, tensions emerge between process and outcome.
Tokenistic stakeholder engagement processes create this tension when bureaucrats and politicians do not adequately reflect stakeholder sentiments as policy outcomes. For example, it is argued that a token process of public engagement was used to design the State of Victoria’s metropolitan strategic plan called *Melbourne 2030* (Department of Infrastructure, 2002). This process was criticized for lacking rigorous evaluation of growth scenarios and for politicians pre-determining outcomes prior to the start of the engagement process (Mees, 2003: 297). Inclusion of the public into the engagement process is important; however problems often arise at the final stages when the plan is being written up and public inclusion subsides.

A formal process of stakeholder engagement has become commonplace in the development of metropolitan spatial plans. Adopting a deliberative and democratic approach to decision-making will allow policy outcomes to emerge as ‘more knowledgeable, better coordinated, more creative, more inclusive and hence more legitimate’ (Healey, 2006: 330-331). The challenge, however, is applying the principles of deliberative democracy in practice without falling victim to tokenism. Examining the interrelationship between the public, the politician and the professional planner will offer answers to why some policy outcomes are more legitimate and rational in some instances, but not in others.

3.0 The Interface between the Professional Planner, the Politician and the Public in Plan-Making

Examining the different instances when stakeholders deliberate over the course of a plan-making process illustrates that a shift in the relationship between the stakeholders occurs. Derived from his experience creating the *Livable Region*
1976/1986: Proposals for Managing Growth of Greater Vancouver (LRP) (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 1976) plan for Greater Vancouver, Lash (1976) created the six-sided triangle model. This six-sided triangle interconnects what he sees as the three main stakeholder groups. One point on the triangle is ‘public’, the other is ‘politician’ and the third is ‘planner’. Lash makes the argument that each side of the triangle has a specific role to play; if one side breaks off, the triangle collapses (Lash, 1976: 11). The six-sided triangle concept emerged in response to limited public engagement associated with conventional procedural models of planning (e.g. survey-analysis-plan and the rational comprehensive model) (Lash, 1976: 45-6). By emphasizing the importance of stakeholder engagement, ostensibly, the incidence of socially and economically fragmented cities would be reduced (Throgmorton, 1996: 33).

The model devised by Lash was, however, ahead of its time. Urban planning for many decades after WWII was defined by ‘predict and provide’ modeling exercises (Owens, 1995: 44; Taylor, 1998: 65) whereby decisions were made exclusively by ‘expert’ professionals who had the technical knowledge. Several years later the popularity of collaborative planning increased, influenced by the work of Patsy Healey (1997) and John Forester (1999). Consequently a new role for the professional planner from that of ‘expert’ to that of facilitator occurred (as discussed in the previous section). The transition made by the professional planner from expert to facilitator became more commonplace in the engagement processes.

Interestingly, the professional planner described in Lash’s model engages in two important roles. While the professional planner takes on the role of facilitator Lash
also presents the role of the planner as a technical expert with the authority to deem a decision poor if their technical knowledge suggests that the decision may not be viable (Lash, 1976: 79). The six-sided triangle approach enables decisions to be discussed regarding technical feasibility (knowledge provided by the professional planner), political feasibility (knowledge provided by the politician) and also examine if the policy reflects values held by the public (Lash, 1976: 79-81). The idea that planners must define the problem and scope of inquiry independently is abandoned. What emerges instead is a methodology enabling engagement of a wide range of stakeholders to define issues and identify opportunities for the region collectively (Lash, 1976: 54).

A fine balance between the public, the politician and the professional planner needs to be achieved throughout the process of plan-making. To better enable the implementation of policy outcomes, literature emerged examining the stakeholder engagement processes in urban planning, but this time emphasizing the importance of the wider institutional context (Healey, 2006: 332). The significance associated with the institutional context is that it provides the parameters around what is politically, economically and socially possible (Beauregard, 2005: 204). Ideas that emerge in the formal stakeholder engagement process are considered rational and legitimate if they reflect the broader goals of the region, and fit with what is politically, economically and socially feasible.

To reconcile the tension between expert planner and the desire for an inclusive and power stable stakeholder engagement process, Parkinson (2006: 24) recommends that both a top-down and bottom-up approach be adopted. The argument is further
presented by Squires (2002: 142) that legitimacy can be achieved through either a top-down or a bottom-up approach. By integrating both approaches into the formal plan making process the broader institutional contexts are more likely to be considered (Albrechts, 2005: 258). While the emphasis in deliberative democracy can skew in favor of broad civic engagement, Albrechts suggests that the expertise provided by planners should be incorporated to critically examine driving forces and institutional barriers which exist (Albrechts, 2005: 266). This idea is supported by Sanyal (2005: 228) who proposes that the expert planner be immersed in the stakeholders engagement process to make participants aware of possible institutional resistance. The argument presented by Parkinson (2006: 174) is that legitimacy is achieved by dividing the formal process of stakeholder engagement into phases which include problem definition, discussion, decision-making and implementation. Stakeholders are then given legitimating roles throughout the process (Parkinson, 2006, p174).

The adoption of collaborative and deliberative forms of plan-making in urban planning has helped shape the role of the planning professional. The professional planner has evolved from expert to facilitator to the integration of both expert and facilitator in the same process. The relationship between the professional planner, the politician and the public will change throughout the process of developing a planning document and these changes need to be accounted for. Absent from the discussion however is how the role of the professional planner, the public and the politician changes at the juncture point between the formal engagement process and the process of deciding the content of the subsequent plan.
4.0 Conclusion: The Changing Relationship between the Public, the Politician and the Professional Planner in the Process of Plan-Making

Presented in this paper is the tension between deliberative democracy as a normative framework for public engagement and the reality surrounding the process of creating planning documents. The literature reveals challenges associated with power inequalities between stakeholder groups. To rectify this issue the emergence of the planner as facilitator provides a way to give equal chance to all stakeholders to express viewpoints. The problem that subsequently arises however is one of tokenism between the process of public engagement and the quality of the policy outcomes.

While a process may include the public the actual uptake of the ideas by politicians and/or bureaucrats charged with writing the final document may produce a different policy outcome. Here the policy outcome may not reflect the sentiment expressed by the stakeholders during the formal engagement process. Then there is a perceived inconsistency between the knowledge which evolves from the formal process of public engagement and the knowledge which supports the content of the subsequent plan. The challenge that arises is how to produce policy outcomes that are legitimate. Each stakeholder has the potential to legitimize the outcome by reflecting the wider institutional, political and cultural context. An inventory of the literature on deliberative democracy reveals opportunities for further research into the roles that stakeholders undertake when the formal process interfaces with the process of decision-making. Therefore further research examining the relationship between the public, the professional planner and the politician will help to uncover why so many planning documents go unimplemented.
Reference list


