

Horizontal engagement

Chris Guthrie
re-imagines citizenship

We might call citizens, who engage meaningfully in the traditional political arrangements, 'vertically' engaged. What interests me is how 'horizontal' engagement might look and how it might integrate with the older, more traditional vertical model.

Truly engaged citizens would be actively involved in the processes that create decisions that impact directly and indirectly upon their lives. In this new order, citizens would not only help to inform policies in a whole variety of areas from which they may have been excluded in the past, but they would also begin to drive the policy formation agenda.

To use an economic analogy: traditionally, citizens have filled the 'demand' function. That is, policy has been supplied to them by the various agencies of government (of whatever hue). The flow of policy is often one-way: from the top down. Recent public consultations notwithstanding, policy still tends to emerge from the top. This has been true, for example, for issues around anti-terrorist legislation, or data storage and monitoring. Horizontal engagement would involve citizens exercising some of the supply function as well: suggesting policy they would like to see implemented.

The horizontal engagement model I have in mind is both mediated and enabled by technology. This is possibly where the most interesting challenges lie for both citizens and policy makers.

Virtual citizen

Much academic effort has gone into positing what the digital or virtual state might look like and what it has to offer. Rather less work has gone into imagining what the virtual or digital citizen might look like.

ICT-enabled engagement is already showing us how different it is to our more traditional models. It allows for a less hierarchical set of relationships,

in which the location of leadership, power, influence and authority is not immediately obvious. This tends to negate traditional forms of negotiation. These ICT-enabled relationships can be *ad hoc* and single-issue or more long term, appearing by turns to be either dormant or maintaining a watchful eye.

If, as the De Bono Foundation asserts, the illiterates of the future will not be those who cannot read or write, but rather those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn, then perhaps a similar lesson can be applied to horizontal engagement. Here, success and influence will rest with those citizens who have the ability to form, uniform and reform networks which in turn are used to mobilise and influence opinion and thus shape policy.

Challenges

However, the integration of vertical and horizontal models of engagement poses significant challenges for both citizens and policy makers. For citizens, the issues are around their willingness to spend the time and effort to create, inform and mobilise ICT-enabled networks, and ensure that they do not simply become 'Radio 4 for the fingers'. By this I mean that it would be a great pity if these new ICT enabled spaces and forums were to be colonised exclusively by those citizens who are already engaged.

For policy makers, the challenge is greater. It requires an enormous internal cultural change whereby ease of management is not the primary driver behind administrations. It requires that both policy makers

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and administrators acknowledge citizens as co-funders, co-creators and co-owners of policy and the policy making process.

Here in the UK, the national indicators as set by central government appear to place a high priority on enhanced and enhancing civic behaviour. Perhaps therefore it is time for reimagining citizenship. I feel that horizontal engagement is rich with possibilities for a fuller, more enhanced 21st century democracy.



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Science at the epicentre of government

Phil Willis is checking up

The government is to support the scrutiny of UK science by re-establishing a Commons Science and Technology Select Committee. This decision was greeted by almost universal approval by the science community. The fear that science scrutiny may have been lost when the Government Office for Science was located within the new Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) super-department was genuine.

However, six months away from a general election, will the new committee be little more than a sop to the increasingly vocal science community?

The challenge is hugely important. The drive to put science and engineering at the heart of government and to establish the principle of evidence-based policy making has been the hallmark of successive science-focused select committees. The new one will be no exception.

The recent dismissal of Professor David Nutt as Chair of the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs highlights the challenge for scientists when presenting evidence which contradicts political policy-making. However, independent scientific advice is essential, even when it tells uncomfortable truths.

Policy scrutiny

With UK science and engineering research and development already under threat from the current recession, public sector investment must not only be maintained. It must match in ambition that of the US, where President Obama has set a target of three per cent of gross national product invested in research and development as the route to future economic success.

If we are to persuade a sceptical UK public that increased investment in science and engineering is fundamental to our future, the government must be seen to take a lead. But for investment to be

successful, scrutiny of policy and not mere assessment of outcomes is essential.

I welcome the move by Professor Beddington, the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, to continue the internal scrutiny of departmental use of science and engineering, with a target that all areas of government are to be reviewed by 2011. I also welcome his pledge to reduce the 'ludicrous' time such reviews take. Hopefully he will re-appraise the decision to privatise government-owned laboratories, and ask where departments gain independent advice.

Evidence check

Recognising the importance of such work, the first task of the new Commons Science and Technology Select Committee during the summer recess was to seek from every government department an 'evidence check' for a small number of key policies. The checks were varied to test the thesis that research was commissioned, gathered or used prior to implementing policies.

We asked the Department of Health: What scientific evidence was considered during the formulation of the licensing regime for homeopathic products? We asked the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: What evidence and expert advice has been used to determine government policy regarding genetically modified crops? Our question to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) was: What evidence and expert

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advice will the government seek to underpin future regulation of synthetic biology? To the Department for Children, Schools and Families: What evidence has the government used to determine which are the most cost-effective measures for improving literacy and numeracy? On the basis of the responses, the Committee will then decide how best to shine the scrutiny spotlight onto government use of science.

Increased transparency

It is worth noting that the scrutiny of science in government is infinitely stronger and vastly more transparent than it was a decade ago. Every major department other than the Treasury has a chief scientist. Increasingly, advice is sought from scientific advisory committees. Research is routinely published. All this demonstrates a growing confidence by Ministers that science, evidence and scrutiny have key roles to play in policy effectiveness.

Lord Drayson, the unashamed champion of science, goes so far as to claim that with science now located in BIS, it is now 'at the epicentre of Whitehall and government'. I wonder if the Treasury agrees?



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