The Science Communication Conference 24th - 25th May 2004

Session 4 – Political Realities

Professor Judith Petts, University of Birmingham – Making Deliberation Count in Decision-Making Lessons from the GM Debate:

Okay thank you Suzi and good morning everybody. The first thing I think important to say is that I've been asked to talk about the GM debate, but I didn't facilitate it, nor did I evaluate it, but somehow I've been landed this year with talking about it on several occasions.

I have spent my life actually involved in designing, facilitating, evaluating, forms of public engagement, particularly deliberative processes which we will come to, and I have spent most of my life at the interface between science and the public.

Now, we're not going to talk about the GM debate in detail, but its appropriate perhaps, for those less familiar to just introduce it. It was a debate which took place last year in the summer. It of course had a very large context behind it and was grounded in a whole raft of controversy, changes in consumer patterns in the market. The drive of course to government decision making and the field scale evaluations. International tensions over regulation. The formation of the Agricultural Environment Biotechnology Committee itself. And in July 2002, Margaret Becket said that the government was committed to a 'genuine balanced discussion' and also listening to what people say, and perhaps we need to think about what those words mean in a political statement.

A steering board was set up of **[**A,B,C**]** to take forward the GM Nation Debate, and it's the last three or four lines of this that pull out some key components that they had in their minds around that debate. First of all in that sort of line the public will frame the issues for debate, and framing is very much something that I suspect all three of us will want to stress in the current context. It means engagement much much earlier in decisions than has currently been the mode of consultation if you like.

Providing meaningful information to government, I'm not sure why it thinks that information from the public might not be meaningful, but anyway, meaningful information to government about a spectrum of public views and particularly at the grass roots level. What was referred to as particularly wanting to get to the silent majority and perhaps that might be an area for discussion as to what we might mean by the 'silent majority' as opposed to active interests, representative interests etc, when we talk about deliberative processes.

The process I have to say was large, I would use the words potentially unwieldy, certainly multi-method which most of us who get involved in

designing processes of public deliberation would very much support, but multi-methods are actually very complex to actually pull together, and this particular debate had a set of foundation workshops, high level workshops designed to find out why people talked about this issue and then to produce some stimulus materials, unfortunately the stimulus materials didn't necessarily get used very much in the ongoing meetings, although they were always available.

And then the three tiers of discussion meetings right the way down from 6 very large high profile events in the regions, a large number, 40 meetings at what they call tier 2, anything between 30 people and 200 people turned up, usually those from the anti-GM voice and then an extremely large number, 600 different large local grass roots events literally managed run in a whole variety of means very much organised at the local level but not any way potentially embedded into the rest of the process, by using key people all the way through, using key components of information all the way through, trying to follow the same line of questioning all the way through. And then something that's called the 'narrow but deep process' which was first time this sort of concept was used in this type of process, the idea of using small focus groups, basically to try and get everyone who had missed the rest of the process so far, i.e, the silent majority, and these were closed meetings run over actually two sessions, people meeting twice to talk through issues and to engage with the process. Very large questionnaire, and an open call by the organisers for anyone to actually put in correspondence via letters, the web, etc. So the thinking is around 36,000 people took part in the GM debate all together. It's not by any means the largest and I'd refer you way back to the 1970s when the Dutch government actually managed to engage almost an equal number of people in a national debate on nuclear power and energy. Now, what do we mean by debate and deliberation? If you look it up in the Oxford English Dictionary, a useful place to start, debate refers to discussion or argument often in parliamentary terms. Deliberation has a whole raft of academic and non-academic meanings, but it's usually about communication through dialogue which includes reflection through preferences. And to achieve deliberation is something very different from debate, it certainly needs their interaction between people, talk, open access to information, time for reflection, particularly on very complex scientific areas where people need to feel comfortable with the information they may be hearing for the first time, start to formulate questions, start to engage their mind in the issues that they would like to hear about from other experts or to query experts, and a deliberative process means that you must respect the views of everybody who you are listening to, it is not just a process for shouting out particular viewpoints such as the sort of public meetings. So there is a very strong understanding of what deliberation means, and we have to question whether the GM Nation Debate achieved particularly those key components in the last bullet point there. The important thing about the deliberative process is that it is objectives lead. Its not just 'we want to hear what people think', there is something far more focuses and managed and I'll use the word managed very deliberately because most true public deliberative processes are managed

from day 1 with an aim and objective which the participants sign up to as well as the organisers.

The problem we have here is there was no real decision to be made from the process itself, but the public just wanted to listen to meaningful views from the public. There were no options to weigh up, the science and economic studies that were being done did not mesh with the public debate, they were going on parallel separate at a different time, there was not consensus asked for out of the meetings, the meetings weren't asked to produce recommendations for government to be taken forward, and perhaps we'd like to consider how you do that, and how you present recommendations to political arenas. There was therefore no clear agenda, or purpose interrelated across the various elements. And this is what would set apart a deliberative process that's going to influence decision making, as opposed to a consultation process.

Deliberative processes also have another key feature so that they are responsive to people and what is going on. Now that is rather demoralising because it means that you have to change what you are doing, it may mean that you need to add in a bit of extra time for people to listen to new information that they've asked for. It means that you may have to bring new information to the table that hasn't been gathered so far, so a responsive process really challenges the economics of some of the deliberative ideals but it is one that is the most likely to produce input to decision making.
Now the key issue here is that a responsive process is also one that is responsive to science, what in academic terms we tend to refer to as an analytic deliberative process, one in which science and deliberation are one. Science doesn't come before deliberation, it's not evidence that is bounced into the deliberative process. Its science that emerges with the deliberative process. Now this is fine to write about, it's fine to actually draw nice diagrams to suggest how you might achieve this but from someone who has tried to work in processes and have tried to achieve this for 10 years it is not easy to do, in the rigid structures and processes of formal decision making, but it is on which scientific analysis is open to questioning, the testing of claims, the validity of claims and it is one that is very much saying that expertise is asked for and demanded and is important , robust science is important to be bought to the process, but its one that allows for science to develop and be questioned as the decision process goes through.
How the process and the outcome is to be used in the decision making has to be made very clear, and the problem with the GM debate was it wasn't at all clear other than government saying that it wanted some listened-to public information and concerns, it wasn't clear how it was going to use any of that in the final decision.

Key questions arrive in deliberative processes in what you might call influence and independence, and whose science, whose views are allowed to influence, is clearly one question and we come to that issue of representativeness of view, this silent majority, whose views? What is the role of mainstream

science versus alternative science on a particular issue? And how do you weigh those together, because often of course views that are anti particular developments may be using difference science or a recourse to difference expertise than the mainstream view, and so the power of evidence is very important, and that's why you need a process that opens out science to questioning, so its quite transparent where the differences of opinion actually lie. And this couldn't happen in the GM debate, because of the way these multiple tiers were just put together as basic public meetings.

Independence also arrives in terms of the role of facilitators, and there is no doubt to anyone who has ever run a deliberative process this is an incredibly complex process, and unfortunately there are very few people who are really skilled and experienced in doing this. You have to achieve a very devilish balance between being viewed as independent, having sufficient subject knowledge to be able to guide the discussion without influencing it, being able to manage an objectives-lead process to an end outcome on time and usually in budget. And without being seen to bias it in your management. Now you might say, well that's what a good chair of any good committee can do, but when you are faced with divergent views, large groups of people, not all coming from the same perspective, those are extremely challenging and this afternoon I think you'll have some discussion or some experience of people running different processes, but this is a key area of concern as to how we run these processes.

So if we were to look at the GM Nation Debate, we have to say it's an extremely bold and I would think on the large a sincere attempt to engage people in what was obviously a controversy. There's no doubt this was not a deliberative process, and indeed the evaluation that was being done by UEA has shown that. Unfortunately they used deliberative criteria of effectiveness to judge what wasn't a deliberative process, but that's partly because those are the only real criteria of effectiveness that we've developed so far, but at times this was far more like a quarrelsome debate than a deliberation.
Did it have any influence on the decision? Well, it certainly isn't transparent that it did and of course the gut feel that a decision had already in fact been made and indeed many of the participants in the process were convinced already the decision had been made weren't convinced of their own participation value in the event.

The one thing that I'd like to finish on however, is the concept of what Jaqui Burgess and myself were involved in in another meeting immediately after the GM debate finished, we and got involved in some discussion of what we referred to as 'creative cookery'. There's huge pressure at the moment from government departments and other institutions for people to produce guides and recipes on methods of public deliberation. The sort of guide like a cookbook recipe book, we can take it off the shelf and it says 'Citizen's Jury – this has A, B, C and D, it requires X, Y and Z and you do it like G, F & H'. Unfortunately, true deliberative processes have far more nuances to the decision that has to be made and each decision is unique at the end of the

day, and so just taking methods off the shelf is not appropriate. Each process requires what we would call creative cookery where you throw away the recipe book in many senses and put together a deliberative process that matches the objectives that you want to achieve. The GM process used fairly standard approaches, fairly standard forms of meeting, and because the objectives weren't clear at the beginning it was quite difficult therefore the mould the process to achieve really meaningful outcome. And that's not just reflective of GM that's what's happened on many, many occasions. Now, what this means in terms of creative cookery is finally therefore a concept of what we might refer to as joint working, between those skilled in deliberative processes, including academics, government institutions, and scientists. Joint working is not where academics stand to one side and simply talk about what is the ideal deliberative process but never actually do it, and I think for the social science academics, and this might be a message for people like ESRC, there's no doubt its extremely difficult to get research funding to actually take part in these processes. Most funding for academics like Jaqui, Brian and myself, and other colleagues who do this type of work, does not come from the research councils because its not proper science after all. You know, dabbling with policy making can't possibly be proper science in RAE terms. But joint working is essential to these processes and it is perhaps something that we might pick up in the discussion as the way forward for bringing knowledge and expertise to these processes for future decision making. Thank you very much.