Integrating Public Input into Political Leadership: an initial research report

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Introduction

Public input has significantly expanded and diversified, raising hope that we are moving to a more interactive form of democracy. Furthermore, top level politicians, Prime Ministers and Presidents talk of working in partnership with the public and that government does not have all the answers. A range of events and methods to obtain public input are run across all levels of government which taken collectively would represent substantial public expenditure in this area.

However both practitioners and academics bemoan politicians for not listening to this input. Despite repeated academic studies of weaknesses in how government uses public input, few academics – or practitioners - consider the perspective of politicians who are supposed to digest and respond to this public input. Politicians have to consider conflicting inputs and constraints as well as showing leadership. There is a big gap between public input practice and theory and government itself which we need to bridge.

This report is an initial report of results from an ongoing academic research project for a book *Integrating public input into political leadership* by Dr. Jennifer Lees-Marshment at the University of Auckland. This report explains the new trend in public input and speeches by top level politicians and notes the problems with current practice, before suggesting hypotheses for how to make public input work for political leadership. This research, funded by Auckland University, is derived from a synthesis of mostly academic literature in several fields and exploratory interviews with a range of practitioners, and the report summarises the findings mid-way in the project. It is very brief, without the usual detail and references used in conventional academic work, because it has been produced and disseminated via IAP2 to provide background material to participants at a workshop to be run by the university and IAP2 Auckland branch in February 2013.

The report may be quoted as long as it is fully cited using the usual conventional referencing [Lees-Marshment, Jennifer (2012) *Integrating Public Input into Political Leadership: an initial research report*, IAP2 (International Association for Public Participation) Auckland branch workshop briefing]. If anyone has any comments I would be glad to receive them as I complete the project over the next two years.

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The New Trend in Public Input

Public Input (PI) is expanding and diversifying

Public input is collected continually by government regardless of political cycle; it is gathered at all levels of government from local councils and mayors right up to the White House and Downing Street. PI is both current (what do you think of existing services/politicians/policies); projective (what would you like to see x do/change in future); and behavioural (what might simulate x societal behaviours). PI informs future decisions and behaviours, not just communication of those already decided. Most recently, it is becoming more conversational, dialogic, relational, deliberative and is playing a more profound role in government as political leaders talk of working with the public to solve problems and develop policies.

There are many different forms of public input (PI)

Public input comes in many different forms, including consultation, engagement, deliberation and market research. Whilst there are of course differences between them the common theme is they convey citizen views to politicians. There are variations in method and quality within all types but this report is interested in the holistic impact of all of them.

Behavioural analysis – Choice Dialogue 0 Citizen advisory board - Citizen juries - Citizen panels - Citizens assembly - Citizens parliament – Community Meetings – Community visioning - Consensus conferences - Deliberative polls - Discussion paper - Focus groups - Forums - Ideas factory - Listening exercises - Local parliaments – Mediation – Meetings - National deliberation days - National issue forums - Neighbourhood initiatives - Online chat group - Participatory budgeting - Planning cells – Polls - Public hearing - Referendum - Role play – Roundtables - Stakeholder forum – Study circles - Summits - Survey (face to face, online, deliberative) - Televoting - Town hall meetings

Theoretical ideals of PI

Such expansion fits with democratic ideals often ascribed by academic and practitioners to PI; namely that it increases government accountability, it ensures the policy process reflects issues important to citizens, improves chances of policies working, increases political efficacy and makes politics more democratic.

Politicians increasingly talk of working with public

Recently, political leaders around the world have begun to talk of the need to work in partnership with the public; that government – and they as leaders – cannot solve all the

problems by itself. This is a new approach and attitude to leadership, which may suggest a change in the way politicians, and political leaders especially, think about their role and that of the public:

	The best policy comes from a true partnership between Government and people (UK Prime Minister Tony Blair 2005)
	We need new ways and means to bring together citizens to discuss proposals for change (UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown 2007)
	Government does not have all the answers... tapping the knowledge and experience of ordinary Americans (US President Barack Obama 2009)
	You only really change things if you bring people with you and if they play their part (UK Prime Minister David Cameron 2010)
	A partnership...soliciting the best ideas from our people in how to make government work better (Obama 2011)
	'We are going to be here in force as a Government...eager to tap into your insights, eager to hear your perspectives.' (OZ Prime Minister Julia Gillard Australian tax forum, 2011)

The Problem

Wasted Hope: Key problems in current Public Input practice

Despite such talk by politicians and the clear value to public input, in practice there are many problems in the way government has run PI, noted by both academics and practitioners. The three main issues are that:

1. Public input is not run properly: poor information is given, there is biased participation, and it follows standard traditional discourse which encourages adversarial attitudes, consumerists demands and individual perspectives
2. Consultation is only done for artificial reasons: these include statutory requirements and politicians' desire to engage in public relations
3. PI has no impact because politicians don't listen to the results: this is the biggest disappointment of all those involved in PI whether as an organizer, observer or participant.

Significant funds, time, resources, staff and energy are used throughout the world yet most of it is used badly. This is a waste of resources and wastes the hope and promise of PI.

The gap to bridge: public input ignores politicians

However this research has identified a big gap in the way PI is conducted – it tends to ignore politicians. Theoretically, deliberative democracy argues for a more mature and constructive dialogue yet seems to ignore the fact that politicians exist and have to get elected – and in fact are the only democratically elected actors in government. Politicians face democratic dilemmas with regard to public input. In particular, those politicians in leadership positions need to lead, they need to show vision, take the country in a new direction, and influence others. If they just follow public input there will be problems pragmatically (they could lose public support) and normatively (they could risk not doing what is right for the country).

The Research Question

The question for this research has therefore been to try to bridge this gap, and find an answer to a key question: how can public input be integrated into political leadership?
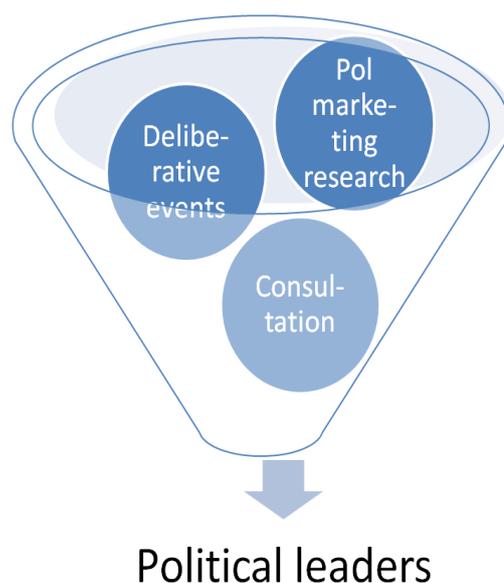
The project is therefore exploring
• How can public input be managed effectively to overcome problems of previous practice?
• How can the public evolve to provide better quality PI?
• How will political leadership evolve in response to increased PI?

To answer this, firstly it has tried to understand what is the root cause of politicians not listening to PI, to understand the perspectives of politicians themselves – something that both academic and practitioner commentary of PI rarely tries to do.

Why do politicians not listen to public input? The mucky reality of government

A rare report into politician's perspectives on deliberation concluded that 'legislators doubt the viability of public deliberation – especially its political feasibility.'[1] There are a range of potential causes for politicians not listening to PI. The first is that politicians are not involved in PI; most of it is run independent of politicians, missing them out of the process. Secondly, what is in it for politicians? No one has made clear what the benefits of PI are for politicians; the value is not measurable; the fear is it will just produce more negative ranting.

Thirdly, most PI is unusable for politicians. It is too slow, doesn't address issues the government is dealing with, it fails to provide realistic solutions or options. Furthermore, the nature and realities of government hinder integration of public input. Government culture, government staff, crisis, pressure make proper consideration of PI difficult.

A very important pragmatic point is that politicians are still needed to make the decisions – someone has to. It would be impossible to govern using PI; despite the value of public views there is still a need for a final, objective, overall judgement. More broadly, what is a politician for if we use public input so extensively? Increased PI challenges the traditional role of politicians. It also changes conceptions of who has the power. Politicians have to consider electioneering considerations not just formal public input and even where politicians do listen, the link between input and output is hard to communicate because it gets lost in the system of government.

Finally, there is the important issue of leadership. PI is rarely run in a way that allows politicians to show leadership. In a normative sense – i.e. for the benefit of democracy itself - politicians still need room to be politicians - to think, reflect, consider other sources of information, and lead.

Despite these difficulties, and that this might be somewhat of an insolvable problem – the dilemma of listening versus leading, it is possible to draw together understanding from academic and practitioner literature to identify how PI could be made to work more effectively. At the end of the day, significant public money is currently spent by government on PI and it could be used for much greater effect. In drawing up hypotheses for how PI might be made more effective, this research has taken an appreciative inquiry approach. It has deliberately avoided the usual pattern of expanding the list of failures and problems and has instead focused on more positive exemplars or parts of previous practice that did work to identify potential success factors for the future.

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[1] *Tina Nabatchi and Cynthia Farrar Bridging the Gap between Public Officials and the Public - a report of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, 2011; at http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=92*

Making it work: hypotheses for how the public, political leaders, and process of public input might develop

Below are a series of hypotheses, or ideas, for how PI might be integrated into government more effectively, discussing how the public and political leaders might develop as well as how PI itself could be managed. As this report is on research in progress, it is expected that these hypotheses will be refined, expanded, changed and detailed over time. Furthermore, in some cases there is considerable debate and a final recommendation is not possible so only options can be provided at this stage.

How to develop the public

These hypotheses draw on evidence that suggests the public can provide high quality PI and play a constructive role if they are managed appropriately. However they still need further layers of development…such as how to train them, and how to foster a change in mentality.

1. Train and develop skills of the public to provide valuable input (e.g. reasoned, mature, appreciation of government constraints) useful to politicians
2. Create a range of roles for the public to play to suit their life, from low to high involvement in PI, and including running PI themselves
3. Enable the public to help design, produce & deliver solutions to problems so it's not just about asking them what they want from government, or even what government should do, but being the solution themselves
4. Foster change in mentality and attitudes towards political leaders and government which accept leaders can't solve everything and we all have responsibility to make it work, for our own health etc

Changing Political Leaders

Recent literature on political leadership suggests that changes in the political environment require new approaches to leadership. Here are some initial ideas of ways in which politicians are changing or will in the future, but there is still room for further discussion such as which kind of new leadership style would be more appropriate.

1. Leaders stop pretending to know/do everything all by themselves
2. Leaders share responsibility as well as power with the public, engaging the public to find solutions
3. Adopt new leadership styles more suited to the new environment (reflective leaders, learning appreciative collaborative, and facilitatory leadership)
4. Use PI to find the space for leadership as it can show possible options, how public views might change if given an argument, how to adjust policy proposals to make them acceptable
5. Use public visibility to support PI events
6. Take a range of positions in relation to public input, not just follow/ignore, thus leaving room to exercise judgement
7. Retain room for quick decisions at elite level at certain times such as crisis but always explain afterwards
8. Use new styles of communication – complexity, context, empathy, emotions, vision, reflectiveness, explanation

What are the potential benefits for politicians?

One of the weaknesses with previous work on PI is that the case had not been made for why it is valuable to politicians; instead the argument was theoretical from a democratic perspective. This research has found that there are a range of potential benefits PI can bring for politicians.

Most importantly, if used correctly PI could help politicians resolve the leading/following dilemma of political leadership as it can:

- Create consensus and mutual respect even on controversial issues
- Identify a political solution in a seemingly impossible situation
- Create a broader range of options and possible solutions to a problem for leaders to consider
- Create space for political leadership
- Reduce pressure on leader to know/do/solve everything
- Avoids costs – resource wise and political and lifewise – of bad decisions
- Help implementation of policy goals
- Build a broader momentum bigger than just one policy, so they can achieve that overall vision

More broadly it can increase positive perception of government and politicians

Managing public input

How PI is collected, and what is done with the results, are crucial factors in making PI more valuable for government and political leaders. There are several aspects to this – who is asked to contribute to PI; what they are asked about when there; how they are asked; and how the results are processed.

Who to ask

The general consensus is make sure you ask the right people – however there is significant debate about who that is. Options include:

1. General public – a representative sample
2. Under-represented social groups
3. Stakeholders - those most affected; local representatives and interest groups
4. Expert publics (ordinary citizens who become 'expert' by coming together and sharing peer expertise, through experience of government/a problem, their own professional experience, or through education within the PI process)
5. Professional Staff (those working within a government service or department, on the ground)
6. Professional experts

OR

7. a mix

What to ask

In PI events, the right kind of questions need to be asked in the right way, such as:

1. Ask for prioritisation of demands
2. Community needs not individual demands
3. Solutions not just demands

This avoids asking for individual demands and treating the public like a consumer of goods. It also helps provide politicians with more usable, realistic feedback.

Another aspect to this is to make sure PI asks about the right issues – but this is debatable. Options are:

1. Let the public, experts or politicians decide what issue to focus on
2. More manageable issues
3. Crisis and tough issues, as there is so much to be done
4. Not foreign policy
5. Issues important to the public – that are salient; affect people directly; connect with values; and so will motivate people to get involved
6. Issues that work across geographical and political boundaries

7. Issues politicians haven't yet decided on

Or

8. any issue!

How to ask

The way that the PI is run is considered important – previous PI initiatives that achieved some success credit this to small details about the way the event or data collection was managed. Ideas to make it a success include:

1. Effective facilitators who are trained, skilled, knowledgeable, have the right attitude and open things up but are also good at hosting e.g. media figures
2. Conversational, dialogue, two way, listening as well as talking
3. Surprise elements as this gets people to open up
4. Accessible and well structured information
5. Ensure end suggestions are potentially usable by politicians by considering government constraints so ideas are doable, conflicting opinions/needs, focusing on solutions not problems and suggesting several not just one option politicians can then consider
6. Find a way of making it big enough to create pressure on politicians to consider it, such as a series of local but connected events
7. Use a range of methods

Processing the results

This is an important stage often neglected or nonexistent in current PI practice. It is particularly important because this is where the connection needs to be made back to politicians and government. Thus recommendations include:

1. Involve politicians; show them the benefits; get their buy in; they can champion it; get them involved in design; send the results
2. Do it at the right time in the policy process; some say early others any time as long as the parameters open for discussion are clear but make it quick enough
3. Be open about potential influence; say what is off the table/decided
4. Process results effectively with a well resourced team using money already spent (badly) on PI. Do less but do it better
5. Create a 'space' for a leadership response from politicians; not instant; involving politicians but also maybe government staff; including them saying yes, no, maybe, not now, not quite but maybe similar – and why. And track input to output.
6. Make it a permanent programme/body; centralised with localised events; publicising of results; improvement in practice over time; trained staff; and thus create a brand of PI
7. Make it of, even if not in, government such as run by a university or think tank well connected to political leaders aka Electoral commissions that supervise voting