Personalised deliberation:
how political leaders connect with their publics

Associate Professor Carolyn M. Hendriks

The Crawford School of Public Policy

Australian National University

carolyn.hendriks@anu.edu.au

Associate Professor Jennifer Lees-Marshment

School of Social Sciences

University of Auckland

j.lees-marshment@auckland.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

Much of the democratic burden in deliberative democracy rests on effective communication between decision makers and potentially affected publics. Yet remarkably little is known about how contemporary political leaders receive and make collective sense of multiple forms of public input. This paper prises open this 'black box' by examining how senior politicians understand the relationship between public input and their work. An analysis of 51 interviews with former ministers and state secretaries in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States finds that political leaders place a high premium on personal and informal modes of public input, such as spontaneous conversations with citizens. In these personalised deliberations decision makers connect with everyday people, hear 'real world' stories and learn how issues affect people's lives. This represents a significant hidden world of public deliberation taking place between executive governments and their publics. The empirical findings reveal that contemporary political leaders want constructive conversations with citizens, not staged participatory performances.

Personalised deliberation:

how political leaders connect with their publics

INTRODUCTION

'Politicians are much more connected to the people than anyone else I know. So if you are an academic you live in a bubble, if you're a journalist you live in the bubble. A politician doesn't live in a bubble. They're the least bubbled people I've ever met.'

(Minister, PL 43)

Political leaders around the globe are increasingly seeking direct input from affected publics. This is especially the case for elected officials engaged in local and regional politics where citizen engagement tends to find its home (Fung and Wright 2003; Leighninger 2012).[1] But participatory ideas are also making their way into the leadership practices of many state and national politicians (Gastil et al 2014; McGowan 2015; Warren and Pearse 2008). Indeed some well-known leaders have been strong advocates of public participation such as President Obama, who on his first day in office, signed a Memorandum on Open Government and Transparency calling for greater openness, participatory and collaboration in the political process (Obama 2009).

That political leaders are actively seeking to connect with publics is of great relevance to contemporary debates on democratic reform, particularly deliberative democracy. At its heart, deliberative democracy is a normative theory of collective decision-making; decisions

---

[1] An international team is archiving many of these initiatives on www.participedia.net

are legitimate to the extent that the views of those potentially affected have been considered through a process of public reasoning (Dryzek 2010; Thompson 2008). While broad and inclusive public engagement in political debate is central to both the ideal and practice of deliberative democracy, much of its democratic burden rests on effective communication taking place between those empowered to make decisions and potentially affected publics (Parkinson, 2012 p. 164). An essential ingredient of any consequential and legitimate system of public deliberation is that decision makers in empowered spaces are receptive to the ideas and discourses that emerge in the public sphere (Dryzek 2009; Habermas 1996).

Exactly how decisions makers take up the views of affected publics remains the 'black box' of deliberative democracy. In general, deliberative theory paints a simplified picture of this process: elected officials passively receive public input, which they deliberate upon and then make decisions. In the parallel literature on democratic innovation, decision makers tend to be conceptualised narrowly as recipients of outputs from deliberative forums involving citizens, or mini-publics (Grönlund et al 2014; Fishkin 2009; Smith 2009). Neither account does justice to the realities and dilemmas of contemporary governance where political leaders have to process and make judgements on diverse and conflicting sources of public input in complex decision making processes.

In this paper we examine how political leaders themselves understand the relationship between their work and public input. Drawing on 51 interviews with former senior ministers in five countries (the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States), we empirically examine what forms of public input political leaders use, what specific qualities they value, and what is their 'ideal' model of public input. This is ground breaking research in at least two respects. First, we extensively examine the relationship

between public input and political decision making from the viewpoint of senior politicians who have held positions of power. Much effort in deliberative scholarship has focussed on the public side of this process, such as the willingness of citizens to engage in public deliberation (Neblo et al 2010), rather than on the receptivity of decision makers to their inputs. Second, our analysis sheds light on the political realities of engaging the public at the presidential or prime-ministerial level of politics. This national perspective is rare in deliberative research; most empirical studies focus on deliberative forums run by local councils, state governments or non-government organisations (e.g. Fung and Wright 2003; Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Johnson, 2015; Papadopoulos and Warin 2007).

We begin by surveying how deliberative democrats conceptualise connections between decision makers and their publics. Next, we present our empirical findings and demonstrate how senior political leaders across five nations view public input as an asset to their work. They particularly value interactions with public that are personal, informal and dialogical. We argue that while contemporary decision makers are by no means practising deliberative democrats, many want to connect personally and informally with people affected by their decisions. To conclude we discuss the implications of this 'personalised deliberation' for the theory and practice of deliberative democracy.

DECISION MAKERS AND THE PUBLIC IN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Theories of deliberative democracy have evolved over the past thirty years (Ercan and Dryzek 2015) and so too have implicit ideas on the relationship between decision makers and their publics. In early deliberative scholarship decision makers are viewed as elected representatives who deliberate on collective issues amongst themselves in formal assemblies, such as legislatures (Bessette 1994; Uhr 1998). Here deliberation is largely

conceptualised as a formal small group-based process of "weighing up the reasons relevant to a decision with a view to making a decision on the basis of that weighing" (Cohen 2007: 219). What distinguishes deliberation from other forms of political discussion and conversation is that it is about deciding what to do; deliberation "has a practical orientation and involves giving, assessing and evaluating reasons for and against courses of action" (Chambers 2012: 58). Political decision makers along with many other elites participate in this process of mutual justification in their legislatures, committees and other elite institutions (Papadopoulos 2012).

In more citizen-oriented accounts of deliberative democracy, decision makers are largely depicted as passive 'recipients' of messages, discourses or inputs emanating from public sphere.[2] So, for example, in Habermas' (1996) two-track model of model of democratic legitimation, public opinion is formed in the public sphere (first track), which is then 'transmitted' via the mass media, elections and social networks to decision makers who debate and pass laws ('will formation') in binding assemblies (second track). A similar function for decision makers is envisaged in Dryzek's (1990) model of 'discursive democracy' where in the ideal decision makers are attune and responsive to the multiplicity of discourses in the public sphere.

Decision makers as the receptors or target audience of civic input is also an idea central to systemic accounts of deliberative democracy. In general terms a deliberative system refers to a broad communicative process involving not only persuasion and reasoning but also arguing, agitating, demonstrating and protesting (Mansbridge et al 2012). In any given

---

[2]Some scholars interested in how deliberative democracy can empower the marginalised tend to portray leaders or decision makers in a particularly negative light (e.g. Young 1999). Here deliberative democracy is understood as something less about binding decision-making and more about building democratic capacity within the public sphere through the empowerment of activists, interest groups and social movements.

deliberative system these diverse forms of political expression take place in overlapping and interrelated spaces, some public and expressive, others empowered to make decisions (Mansbridge et al 2012). Ideally claims and discourses emerging from public spaces are transmitted and considered consequentially by decision makers in empowered spaces of public deliberation (Dryzek 2009). According to Chambers (2012: 70), a deliberative system "is working well when there are high quality public debates about what citizens want, need, or care about that inform the legislative process".

Scholars propose different ideas for how public debates and ideas ought to inform decision makers in a deliberative system. For example, Dryzek (2009, p. 1385) identifies a number of transmission mechanisms through which "public space can influence empowered space" including: political campaigns, arguments, rhetoric, social movements and personal linkages between actors. Similarly, Mansbridge et al. (2012, 10) suggest that different spaces within a deliberative systems need to be loosely coupled by ensuring that communication flows between legislative houses, administrative bodies, business and a host of civil society organisations, as well as through the media, and informal talk. Others suggest there is a role for institutional design to couple public and empowered spaces of deliberation (Hendriks 2016). Yet much more work is needed by deliberative democrats to understand "the channels of communication" between decision makers and citizens (Parkinson 2012 p. 164).

More explicit attention has been given to the relationship between decision makers and public input in the literature on deliberative governance (which explores how deliberative ideals are applied in policy processes). For example, scholars have discussed the way in which deliberative processes involving citizens (mini-publics) can be used to thicken the communication between constituents and their representatives (Fung 2006); to guide

decision makers on how an informed public would vote (Fishkin 2009); and to supplement existing forms of representation (Urbinati and Warren 2008). Others argue that decision makers fulfil important leadership functions in making deliberative governance happen effectively; they are crucial for instigating, championing, protecting and acting on deliberative mechanisms (Fung and Wright 2003 p. 36; Kuyper 2012).

A far more pessimistic picture of decision makers is painted by empirical studies of citizen deliberation. Many studies find that decision makers fail to take up and directly act upon recommendations emerging deliberative forums involving citizens (Fawcett et al 2012; Goodin and Drzyek 2006; Johnson 2015; Parkinson 2006; Rose 2009). Some argue that politicians do not value public input because it challenges their traditional representative role (Hartz-Karp and Briand 2009; Head 2007; Gaynor 2009). Others suggest that politicians fear losing of decision-making control or that they only engage in consultation for public relations purposes or to back up pre-determined decisions (Bayley and French 2008; Fawcett et al 2012, 665; Klijn and Koppenjan 2000, 365; Johnson 2015). Some argue that politicians may be willing to listen, but often they lack the relevant decision-making power (Button and Mattson 1999, 629-30).

Overall empirical research casts political decision makers as disinterested and disengaged when it comes to considering public input. But what actually do elected officials themselves think of public input? Some preliminary studies offer glimpses into their participatory worldview. One empirical study from the United States finds that many state level elected politicians are high skeptical of the viability of deliberative forms of citizen engagement – especially their political feasibility (Nabatchi and Farrar 2011). Yet case-based research suggests elected officials are far more supportive of deliberative forums with citizens once

they have observed one in action (Hendriks 2016; Gastil et al 2012 p. 215). These studies represent useful starting points, however they provide little scope for political leaders to articulate how, when and in what form, is public input valuable to them. Moreover, the focus on discrete forums also sits at odds with the shift to understand public deliberation as a broad communicative system involving a variety of public talk (Jacobs et al 2009; Mansbridge 1999).

In this paper we explore how politicians themselves view public input and its role in their decision-making. The term 'public input' was used in this research (rather than public deliberation) because it is generic to allow elected representatives to express their perspectives on a range of different modes of public engagement some of which were highly deliberative and inclusive, other not. Whereas previous qualitative studies on this topic relied on interviews with government staff and advisors (e.g. Offenbacker and Springer 2008, Frederickson 1999; Ray et al 2008), we draw on interviews conducted directly with politicians. By listening to the preferences and stories of experienced political leaders, we are well-placed to understand how they interpret public input and its role in decision making.

HOW DO POLITICAL LEADERS VIEW PUBLIC INPUT?

The empirical research presented here draws on 51 interviews that were conducted in 2013-2014 with current and former ministers and state secretaries in the Harper, Cameron, Obama, Key and Rudd/Gillard governments (for a full list, see Appendix). The Ministers and secretaries of state (or people of equivalent seniority) were chosen because they meet the definition of being in a position of political leadership at a high government level,

enjoying enough discretion to be able to craft policy, allocate significant budget, and authorise decisions.[3] We use the term 'political leaders' throughout this paper when referring to both types of decision makers.

This data was collected as part of a larger research project exploring public input into government and the role of leadership in contemporary political life (Author). Interviewees were chosen purposively; the sample included a diverse group of political leaders in terms of political ideology, gender, seniority, portfolio and levels of experience.[4] Ideologically, 65% were right-wing (conservative) and 37% left wing (more progressive), reflecting the incumbency of the various governments at the time. Some interviewees (39%) were in a current ministerial position, while most (61%) were former (but recent) ministers. Of the 51 interviewees, 22% were from the UK; 20% Canada; 23% Australia; 29% New Zealand and 6% the US.

Our interview data offers rare insights into the views of senior political leaders who are notoriously difficult access (Richards 1996, Rhodes et al 2007). The interviews, which averaged 24 minutes in length, explored a diversity of themes including public input, public life and the nature and challenges of political leadership in contemporary democracies. Across all these themes we found no discernible difference in the nature of comments according to gender, ideology, country or current/former status (Author).

In this paper the interview data was analysed from the perspective of deliberative democracy, with a specific focus on how and why interviewees use public input, and what

---

[3] In the US, the sample included secretaries and deputy secretaries who, whilst not elected, are the most appropriate equivalent to ministers in other countries.
[4] For example, in terms of gender only 16% of interviewees were female, but this reflects the typical reality in government.

particular qualities of public input they find most valuable, and their ideal form. The analysis finds that political leaders value public input when it can inform their decision making, and connect them to 'real' people. They place a high premium on forms of public input that are personal, informal and dialogical.

1. Political leaders use public input to inform their decision making

For most leaders we interviewed the primary value of public input rested on epistemic grounds. Leaders explained how public input gives them access to more information and perspectives, and thereby helps them make informed decisions. For many interviewees, public input is seen as a process through which they can check the facts 'on the ground' and hear the evidence from the source, rather than the experts (PL21/PL37/PL22/PL23). For example, one leader describes how he uses public input to validate formal research:

> *'If someone's going to tell me that research tells us this, then I want to check that out with people on the ground floor.' (PL23)*

The motivation here is about getting a deeper understanding or appreciation of issues, or sourcing new ideas (PL43). Or as a few leaders put it, public input is part of the information you absorb in your role as a 'sponge' (PL15, PL45).

> *'You are a giant sponge as a politician; your job is to soak up information, process it, and order it in a way that makes sense, so you make sense of a problem.' (PL45)*

Interestingly there were few elitist remarks about the irrationality of the public or their lack of knowledge or skills. Instead many leaders spoke of how ordinary people are often underestimated:

'People are capable of understanding trade-offs and complexities around public policy issues that affect them, and so it's better to engage them as if they are capable rather than if they are incapable decision makers.' (PL21)

2. Political leaders use public input to connect with 'real' people

Leaders also value public input because it enables them to meet real people and hear the personal stories and judgements of everyday people (PL11, PL18, PL31). Here public input was mostly framed as a means to help political leaders stay connected. Several interviewees talked of the need to get out of 'the bubble' and feel 'the real pulse' (PL51). As one leader explained:

'Some of the most valuable input is what you get just from being out in the community. So you can be in that Wellington bubble, where politics is filtered through the media. And you really need to balance that with getting out and going to the rugby club and wandering up to the supermarket and actually people come up and tell you what they think.' (PL25)

Leaders also described the importance interacting directly with the public so they can get beyond the usual performances, the 'clutter' (PL31) and the 'headlines' (PL33). For example:

'I found there's nothing more effective than door to door. It sounds very un-technological but…I'd do that in my constituency a number of times through the year. And another way of getting unfiltered access to what people are thinking is simply sitting by a booth at a farmers market or a trade fair and people can just walk up and give you their views on unsolicited, unfiltered.' (PL51)

Some leaders described how public input enables them to hear from underrepresented or marginalised perspectives (PL4, PL31, PL16). For example, interviewees talked of the need to ask questions, explaining how government needs to ask:

> *'What are the underserved needs? And what's not being met? And trying to listen to the voices that are there, but also trying to hear voices that you don't usually hear.' (PL11)*

Others pointed to the importance of public input as a means to access the personal stories of real people living the realities of policies:

> *'So often when you're designing a policy, particularly as a minister, there'll be a huge number of people that will be affected. And to be able to…really understand those practical parts of the policy and how they might affect people and how you might need to tweak it [is] why I think often those personal stories are very important.' (PL29)*

> *'What you have to do is try to have...a government that's not interested in just hearing what it wants to hear, that it's willing to hear criticism and more than that, like what are the underserved needs? And what's not being met? And try to listen to the voices that, listening to the voices that are there, but also try to hear voices that you don't usually hear.' (PL11)*

These represent some of the more democratic motivations of public input expressed by leaders. Some overlap with deliberative ideals, for example, the notion that affected people and groups ought to have their perspectives heard (Fung and Wright 2003). However, for most political leaders public input is more about ensuring a variety views are on the table

before decisions are made, rather than sharing power with the public. As one leader put it: public input is about 'listening but not about joining hands and moving together' (PL12).

There were some notable exceptions. One leader talked of the importance of sharing power:

> *'You have to be prepared to share power. You have to be prepared to give a bit in order to get a better outcome.' (PL5 2013)*

A few leaders also reflected on public input in the context of changing power relations in contemporary politics. For example:

> *'I think political power is very much overstated these days. I think power in our community is very diffuse. And so, while politicians and ministers have a lot of power, I think the nature of democracy means that they very rarely have control of any particular problem and can't by themselves, or by the virtue of directing government, necessarily solve something. And so, if anything, my time in government taught me the limits of government capacity to solve problems or make changes without a broader community movement.' (PL7)*

3. Political leaders value personal and informal inputs

Politicians receive public input in multiple forms: from letters, emails, social media, focus groups, informal conversations to highly structured hearings or group based processes. Among these they particularly those forms of public input in which there is an opportunity for personal interactions between them and members of public. As shown in Table 1, this was described variously by interviewees as face-to-face, conversational, direct contact, or one-to-one.

Table 1: Personal Forms of Public Input Matter Most to Political Leaders

> - *'I like dealing with people one-to-one, or at least having some personal contact with them.' (PL23)*
> - *'Talking to people individually... Personal contact is a much underestimated mechanism of politics.' (PL17)*
> - *'The most valuable to me is the direct contact...I've got a pretty good feel, I reckon, for what's going on on the ground . And I get a lot of feedback directly from people.' (PL26)*
> - *'...actually meeting with people is ultimately more valuable than a number of the other, I suppose, more technological ways of connecting. So obviously you can facebook and twitter and get emails, and they're good. But face to face is probably optimal' (PL33)*

This personalised mode of eliciting public input is largely about being out in the public domain. For example, some leaders discussed how they value being out in the community (PL25), sitting down and talking to people, or actively approaching individuals door-to door (PL51). Others talked about being approached when walking down the street, or going to where communities or publics themselves meet, for example the markets, local businesses, or trade fairs (PL8/PL23).

When public input is more personal, leaders explained, they can probe deeper into issues and access perspectives 'on the ground'. As one political leader explains:

> *'You can actually unpack what it is that people are saying and why they're saying it and what the values and sentiments behind the headlines. So you understand what the real concerns are. If it's about immigration and you can may, see if underneath that's actually really about the insecurity with the jobs market.' (PL33)*

Informal approaches enable political leaders to interact directly with the community; they get to talk to real people rather than rely on filter messages from advisors or officials:

'On the road we meet with a series of different people on those days so we're hearing different voices. I don't let officials come with me generally because I think that changes the conversation. So I just try to put some checks and balances in place so that I can hear and get through clutter or barriers that can sometimes be set up around you to stop real people getting in and talking to you.' (PL31)

Political leaders want to discuss and engage with issues rather than simply watch a performance or receive scripted messages. As one Minister explains:

'Whatever is conversational is the most valuable. So the more formal it is the less useful it is I tend to find. ...the real impact is made by whether they're engaging you in a conversation rather than presenting you with a conclusion.' (PL35)

This same Minister goes on to explain that sometimes it is the spontaneity or accidental nature of these conversations that can be the most powerful of all:

'I spend a lot of time doing site visits; a lot of time out of the office, a lot of time out on the ground. And so it's those little side conversations that you have that are far more powerful than the more formalised lobbying where it's a "here's our set piece."...actually it's these [informal] consultations that very few people know about where you're most powerful anecdotes come from, and they're the moments when your mind is most likely to be change.' (PL35)

Through informal interactions political leaders are able to converse with ordinary people and hear their judgments:

'You're getting every angle. You're getting the perspective of a business man who comes around and says, "Why don't you pass policies to help my business?" You then want to hear the other stakeholder as you call them, the customers, the common sense, the tax payers, the ordinary person in the street, the person who's going to benefit, the person who is going to lose. You want their sort of judgement, which you can only get in casual conversation really by simply talking to people.' (PL18)

Size also appears to matter as well; interactions with the public need to be small enough to be meaningful. According to one leader, meetings are the best form of public input:

'Without question it's meetings; sitting down and talking to people face-to-face that provides the most useful kind of information…The bigger the group the harder it is to have any actual conversation…Small meetings…are enormously valuable in thinking through; trying to drill down to what's authentic, what actually is happening that, on your watch, needs to be addressed, and having the opportunity to sit down then with your team to figure out what to do about it…And then there's the opportunity…to test those propositions and "well, what if we did this?".' (PL11)

For some political leaders, personal connections with the public can come from sharing experiences, rather than through talk or dialogue. Consider this reflection by one Australian Minister*:*

'One of the most influential things that's ever happened to me was when as Environment Minister I'm in charge of the Uluru (Ayers Rock)… Some of the aboriginal men got me away from the department, away from my personal staff, and took me to part of Uluru that was fenced off for men only…sitting in the grass waiting for me was a very elderly man…he took me to a part of Uluru and showed

me particular things - they wanted a place to be able to keep them safely. Now his entire presentation to me was in a language I don't understand…but it was passionate, there was dignity, there was conviction, and I reframed the entire program to make sure they could get their keeping place.' (PL35)

4. Political leaders do not find formal modes of public input constructive

On the whole political leaders did not place a high value on formal, more structured modes of public input. Only a few interviewees positively mentioned conventional forms of public input such as: formal public submissions/inquiry processes/committees (PL44, PL20); summits/roundtables; and town meetings (PL39).

Instead interviewees lamented the dysfunction of formal modes of public input, particularly public meetings. They described them as spaces for venting, performing and antagonism, rather than dialogue. At the same time leaders recognise that formal spaces of public input can be important for building legitimacy and policy ownership, despite their communicative shortcomings. Consider the following reflection:

'When you get outside an office context the conversation changes fundamentally. And for the public generally it's making sure you do your big grand stand public consultation meetings were they can come along formally but that you are also are spending time in lounge rooms having cups of tea…You need to do the formal because the people themselves need to feel that that's happened… But realistically it's the informal where you're going to really change things.' (PL35)

While deliberative practitioners and scholars focus on running formal structured events, political leaders have found in practice that it does not produce the kind of useable constructive input they need for their decision making.

5. Political leaders prefer dialogical and interactive forms of public input

Interestingly when asked what an *ideal* form of public input might look like, ministers offered suggestions that resonate with classic deliberative ideals, both in terms of procedural norms and ideal participants. Many articulated procedural aspirations, for example, a forum based process in which different perspectives could come together into the one room (PL37, PL1,) so that the arguments could be interrogated; that ideas could be tested amongst peers (PL45). Some suggested a town hall style meeting where people with diverse views are defend their positions and interrogate arguments (PL7, PL37), beyond people presenting their spiel and going through the motions (PL47, PL21). In sum, in an ideal world, political leaders would like to bring different views together face-to-face to engage in a process of reason giving.

A number of leaders also described ideal attributes of participants in participatory processes. Several interviews stressed the importance of participants being diverse; it is crucial to get beyond one perspective (PL39) and canvass views from a mix of practitioners, academics, industry (PL45). Others emphasised having participants who are informed:

> *'The more informed the public is the better the government's chances of having good political leadership will be. So the more we can inform, the more we can engage, the more we can debate, the more we get to understand perspectives.' (PL4)*

Other interviewees described the importance of participants being reasonable:

> *'If there was a magic wand that everyone could be reasonable...you need*
>
> *reasonable people on all sides of the debate...' (PL38)*

Or people who are interested yet uncommitted to issues:

> *'So in my ideal world you'd have a lot more empirical feedback from people who*
>
> *are interested but not so exercised that they're literally either opposed to an issue on*
>
> *principle or in favour of an issue on principle.' (PL34)*

Similarly, a few leaders envisaged a participatory world where the media and interest groups were less centre stage:

> *'I would probably go back to the old Greek tradition and just have an ongoing*
>
> *forum of senators and members of the public. I think there is a real difficulty with*
>
> *interest groups dominating the debate. I mean one there's a question of who has*
>
> *power in the community? Newspapers or big business or what have you. But I think,*
>
> *also, there's just this constant tension ministers are dealing with between competing*
>
> *interest groups who sometimes need to agree on something because it suits both of*
>
> *them, rather than on the debate about a broader public good. And the debate is often*
>
> *confined to interest groups rather than the broader public.' (PL7)*

This resonates with some of the underlying motivations in many democratic innovations, where there has been a push to get beyond the 'usual suspects' and tap into broader public views, for example, by selecting participants randomly (Smith 2009; Fishkin 2009).

A number of leaders also talked about the need for public input to be constructive (PL7, PL31, PL21). There has to be a dialogue or a conversation between leaders and the community, rather than a performance of positions and stunts. One Minister described an experience he had at one public meeting where he was received by a very hostile community; people were scowling, protesting, and even got a coffin from the undertakers, put it behind his head, and started calling out "put him in it." He recounts that this had no influence or use for him in his decision making. He contrasts this experience with another far more constructive and conversational public meeting. It was the latter meeting that influenced him most; in the end he actually chose a different, more expensive option in his final decision (PL35).

Part of this notion of 'constructive' public input was a desire for the public to better appreciate the constraints and pressures under which governments operate:

> '...when we don't do exactly what's being suggested, then a lot of people think it's because we weren't listening. Well that's not actually true. It's because we were balancing the fifty thousand other suggestions that we had and the cost of all of those things and we came up with a set of priorities that might be slightly different. But people do need to have confidence…that they are being listened to. Some way to change that perception would be really good.' (PL27)

DISCUSSION: GOVERNING REQUIRES PERSONALISED DELIBERATION

Our empirical findings reveal that political leaders view public input as an integral component of their work. Through public input, they gain access to relevant information, connect with everyday people, and learn how issues affect people's lives.

On the surface, these research findings should come as welcome news to deliberative democrats. Indeed, a deliberative future looks far brighter with evidence that many political elites are not elitist in the way they view the public. We find that many political leaders are far less dismissive of public input than previous studies assume. On the contrary, experienced leaders value connecting to diverse publics. Many interviewees view democracy in much broader terms than simply competing in territorially-based elections for political office. A number of interviewees espoused democratic virtues celebrated by deliberative democrats such as the idea that public talk be inclusive of those affected; that it be diverse, that it be interactive and dialogical, and that it involves a certain degree of reasoning and scrutiny.

Reflecting more deeply, we see that for the most part public input for decision makers is about accessing better information rather than power sharing. Sceptics might conclude from this that politicians are simply using public input for their own personal political gains, rather than to improve collective outcomes. However, we interpret this data more optimistically. While political leaders may not be handing over explicit power, we contend that they are acting in a deliberative manner within the realities of the existing system of representative democracy. The interview data finds that many political leaders want to connect personally and informally with affected publics; they seek out constructive conversations with people so they can hear 'real' stories and listen to 'everyday' judgements.

This represents a significant yet hidden world of personalised political communication taking place between decision makers and affected publics. Our data shows that

contemporary political leaders mostly value informal, personal, and one-on-one interactions with the public that occur behind the scenes, after an event, in a meeting, or in everyday settings, such as a local market. It is not so much that these interactions take place away from the public spotlight (Chambers, 2005), but rather that they enable decision makers to connect personally with members of the public. Our data reveals that leaders want to engage in constructive conversations with everyday citizens, rather than to well-scripted messages from the usual suspects. This represents a different kind of informal 'everyday talk' to the kind of citizen-to-citizen discursive communication that some deliberative scholars have in mind (Mansbridge 1999; Jacobs et al 2009).

There is a noteworthy contradiction in the research findings between the forms of public input that decision makers find *valuable* in their work, and the forms of public input they identify as *ideal*. On the one hand political leaders value personal and one-on-one forms of public input with individuals or group representatives. Yet on the other hand when we asked about their ideal form of public input, leaders expressed a preference for more interactive forms of public input where diverse groups are brought together for the purposes of clarifying and sharing arguments. One way to interpret this apparent 'deliberative dissonance' is that it represents a pragmatic response to the deliberative and participatory failings of many formal procedures in contemporary politics where diverse groups come together to vent and battle, rather than to reason. What we learn from this research is that decision makers get around this conundrum by relying heavily on personal and informal forms of public input with individuals or group representatives. These one-to-one exchanges offer leaders a chance to tap into some of the epistemic benefits of public input, without the politics and interest group battles that accompany more structured, formal, group-based forms of public input. Pragmatically decision makers use informal modes of public input for

talk, negotiation and change, while formal participatory processes are used as means to build more official legitimacy, and occasionally ownership. Further research could usefully tease out these apparent contradictions.

Our findings also suggest an accessibility bias in empirical studies of deliberative democracy. For the most part, empirical studies of public deliberation have focused on formal, organised and visible participatory forums as these offer identifiable and accessible events for research. Far less empirical attention has been given to more informal modes of public deliberation that we uncover here to be highly significant for decision makers. The methodological challenge for empirically inclined deliberative democrats is to find appropriate and ethical means to study informal and less visible modes of public deliberation. Methods that focus on interpretation and meaning making, for example, interviews, direct observation and more ethnographic approaches are likely to be well-suited (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

Political leaders are important yet largely overlooked actors in contemporary deliberative systems. They authorize collective decisions and play a crucial role in connecting elite and civic spaces of public deliberation. Interviews with 51 former ministers and state secretaries from five western liberal democracies reveal that leaders view public input as an important ingredient in making informed and legitimate political decisions. Many experienced decision makers place a particular premium on personalised forms of public inputs, such as spontaneous conversations with individuals on the street or marketplace, or small face-to-face meetings. In these more informal and often unstructured interactions, political leaders

are able to step aside from their advisors and partisan politics, and connect with 'real' people and hear their personal stories.

To be clear we are not arguing that political leaders always listen to public input. They may *want* to listen and be responsive to the public, but this does not necessarily mean that their actions accord with these preferences, and of course they also listen to other sources, such as civil servants, advisors and their party. Yet our core argument is this: many political leaders are keen to engage in what we label *personalised deliberation*; they want to connect informally with everyday people and be informed about different views and the public consequences of their collective decisions. Indeed, leaders would prefer public input to be more interactive where diverse views could come together to find common ground. However, in their experience formal participatory processes rarely produce the kind of open constructive and usable public input that they need to inform their collective judgements. Our data suggests that leaders respond to this conundrum pragmatically: they use formal public engagement to build legitimacy and ownership, but rely on more informal spontaneous interactions with the public to inform their decision making and ground their public leadership.

Theoretically this research suggests that some of the most important coupling between empowered and public spaces in contemporary deliberative systems may be taking place in the informal connections and conversations between decision makers and their publics. The democratic implications of personalised deliberation are potentially significant. Many informal interactions between decision makers and affected individuals or groups are likely to be hidden from public scrutiny, and therefore may privilege private over public reason (Chambers 2005). It is also unclear how this very personal form public input can help build

the kind of broader public legitimacy central to systemic accounts of deliberative democracy (see Parkinson 2012 p. 162). Ideally in a legitimate deliberative system decision makers consider perspectives and inputs that emerge through mass public deliberation. But the prospects of realising this ideal are weak if decision makers mostly value small personal sources of public input. However, it may well be that more direct interactions between citizens and legislators may boost the willingness of people to engage in deliberative politics more broadly, as suggested by other empirical research (Neblo et al 2010). Further research is needed to fully flesh out the opportunities and risks that personalised deliberation presents to normative accounts of deliberative democracy.

The practical implications of this research are mixed. On the one hand they suggest a huge 'market' within executive government for more interactive forms of public engagement: political leaders are indeed open for deliberative business (Hendriks and Carson 2008). On the other hand, there is less appetite for highly structured and formal modes of public engagement at the top level of government. The fact that many such forums have limited sustained political impact (e.g. Johnson 2015; Goodin and Dryzek 2006), may well be because they provide few opportunities for political leaders to interact and form connections with publics in ways *they* value. Deliberative practitioners – and indeed government agencies and departments – need to create more opportunities for personalised deliberation, enabling decision makers to interact informally with diverse publics outside, and in addition to, formal participatory mechanisms. Contemporary political leaders want constructive conversations with citizens, not staged participatory performances.

REFERENCES

Bayley, C., and S. French 2008. "Designing a participatory process for stakeholder involvement in a societal decision." *Group Decision and Negotiation* 17(3): 195-210.

Bessette, J. M. 1994. *The Mild Voice of Reason: Deliberative Democracy and American National Government*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Button, M. and K. Mattson 1999. "Deliberative Democracy in Practice: Challenges and Prospects for Civic Deliberation." *Polity* 31(4): 609-637.

Chambers, S. 2005. "Measuring publicity's effect: reconciling empirical research and normative theory." *Acta Politica* 40(2): 255-266.

Chambers, S. 2012. "Deliberation and Mass Democracy." In *Deliberative Systems: deliberative democracy at the large scale*, edited by J. Parkinson and J. Mansbridge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp 52-71.

Cohen, J. 2007. "Deliberative democracy." In *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy: Can the People Govern?* Edited by S.W. Rosenberg. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 219-236.

Dryzek, J. S. 1990. *Discursive Democracy: politics, policy, and political science*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Dryzek, J. S. 2009. "Democratization as Deliberative Capacity Building." *Comparative Political Studies* 42:1379-1402.

Dryzek, J. S. 2010. *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ercan, S. A., and J. S. Dryzek. 2015. "The reach of deliberative democracy." *Policy Studies* 36 (3): 241-248.

Fawcett, P., Manwaring, R. and Marsh, D 2012, "Network Governance and the 2020 Summit", *The Australian Journal of Political Science* 46 (4): 651-667.

Fishkin, J. 2009. *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frederickson HG 1999 *How the Community Works: Office-Holder Perspectives on Democratic Self-Government and the Community*, Kettering Foundation.

Fung, A. 2006. "Democratizing the Policy Process." In *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, edited by M. Moran M, M. Rein and Robert E. Goodin, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp 669-685.

Fung, A., and E. O. Wright. 2003. *Deepening Democracy: Institutional innovation in empowered participatory governance*. London: Verso.

Gastil, J., R. C. Richards, and K. R. Knobloch. 2014. "Vicarious deliberation: How the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review influenced deliberation in mass elections." International Journal of Communication 8: 62-89.

Gastil, J., K. Knobloch, and K. Meghan. 2012. "Evaluating Deliberative Public Events and Projects." In *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement*, edited by Tina Nabatchi, John Gastil, G. Michael Weiksner and Matt Leighninger, New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 206-230.

Gaynor, N. 2009. "Deepening Democracy within Ireland's Social Partnership." Irish Political Studies 24(3): 303-319.

Goodin, R. E., and J. Dryzek. 2006. "Deliberative Impacts: The macro-political uptake of mini-publics." *Politics and Society* 34 (2):219-244.

Grönlund, K., A. Bächtiger, and M. Setälä. 2014. *Deliberative Mini-Publics Involving Citizens in the Democratic Process*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Habermas, J. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms*. Translated by William Rehg. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Hartz-Karp, J. and M. K. Briand. 2009. "Institutionalizing deliberative democracy." *Journal of Public Affairs* 9(2): 125-141.

Head, B. W. (2007). "Community engagement: participation on whose terms?" *Australian Journal of Political Science* 42(3): 441-454.

Hendriks, C. M. 2016. "Coupling citizens and elites in deliberative systems: The role of institutional design." *European Journal of Political Research* 55(1): 43-60.

Hendriks, C. M., and L. Carson. 2008. "Can the market help the forum? Negotiating the commercialization of deliberative democracy." *Policy Sciences* 41(4): 293-313.

Jacobs L. Fay Lomax Cook, Michael X. Delli Carpini 2009. *Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America* University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

Johnson, G. F. 2015. *Democratic Illusion*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Klijn, Erik-Hans, and Joop FM Koppenjan. 2000. "Politicians and interactive decision making: institutional spoilsports or playmakers." *Public Administration* 78.2: 365-387.

Kuyper, J. 2012. "Deliberative Democracy and the Neglected Dimension of Leadership." *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8 (1):Article 4.

Leighninger, M. 2012. "Mapping Deliberative Citizen Engagement" In Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement, edited by T. Nabatchi, J. Gastil, G. M. Weiksner and M. Leighninger. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp: 19-39.

McGowan C. 2015. "The Indi Way: Making Stronger Communities Stronger" *Cathy McGowan's webpage*. Federal Member of the Australian Parliament. http://www.cathymcgowan.com.au/the_indi_way_making_stronger_communities Accessed 16 November 2015.

Mansbridge, J. 1999. "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System." In *Deliberative Politics - Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, edited by S. Macedo. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp 211-239.

Mansbridge, J., J. Bohman, S. Chambers, T. Christiano, A. Fung, J. Parkinson, D. F. Thompson, and M. E. Warren. 2012. "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy." In *Deliberative Systems: deliberative democracy at the large scale*, edited by John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp: 1-26.

Nabatchi, T., and C. Farrar. 2011. Bridging the Gap between Public Officials and the Public. *A report of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC)*. Available http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/index.php/resources/member-posts/176-bridging-the-gap-between-public-officials-and-the-public Accessed 2 June 2015.

Neblo, M.A., Esterling, K.M., Kennedy, R.P., Lazer, D.M. and Sokhey, A.E., 2010. "Who wants to deliberate—and why?" *American Political Science Review*, 104(3): 566-583.

Obama, B. 2009. *Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies*, The White House, viewed 1 June 2016, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Transparency_and_Open_Government/ Issued January 21, 2009.

Offenbacker, B. and S. Springer. 2008. *Painting the landscape: a cross-cultural exploration of public-government decision making* A joint research project by the International Association for Public Participation and The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, International Association for Public Participation.

Papadopoulos, Y. 2012. "On the embeddedness of deliberative systems: why elitist innovations matter more." In *Deliberative Systems: deliberative democracy at the large scale*, edited by John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press. Pp.125-150.

Papadopoulos, Y., and P. Warin. 2007. "Are innovative, participatory and deliberative

procedures in policy making democratic and effective?" *European Journal of*

Political Research 46 (4):445-472.

Parkinson, J. 2006. *Deliberating in the Real World: Problems of Legitimacy in Deliberative*

Democracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parkinson, J. 2012. "Democratizing deliberative systems." In *Deliberative Systems:*

deliberative democracy at the large scale. Edited by John Parkinson and Jane

Mansbridge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp 151-172.

Ray, K., M. Hudson, V. Campbell-Barr and I. Shutes 2008. *Public Officials and Community*

Involvement in Local Services. Report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

see www.jrf.org.uk

Rhodes, R. A. W., P. T. Hart and M. Noortdegraaf. 2007. *Observing government elites: Up*

close and personal, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Richards, D. 1996. "Elite Interviewing: Approaches and Pitfalls." *Politics* 16(3): 199-204.

Rose, J. 2009. "Institutionalising participation through citizen's assemblies" in *Activating*

the Citizen: Dilemmas of Participation in Europe and Canada. Edited by De

Bardeleben, J. and J. Pammett. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 214-232

Smith, G. 2009. *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, D. 2008. "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science "

Annual Review of Political Science 11: 497-520.

Uhr, J. 1998. *Deliberative Democracy in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press.

Urbinati, N., and M. E. Warren. 2008. "The Concept of Representation in Contemporary

Democratic Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11:387-412.

Warren, M., and H. Pearse. 2008. *Designing deliberative democracy: the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yanow, D., and P. Schwartz-Shea. 2006. (Eds) *Interpretation and method: empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe.

APPENDIX: Political leaders interviewed from the Rudd/Gillard, Harper, Key, Cameron and Obama governments 2013-2014

PL1 Alan Griffin, former Australian Minister for Veteran Affairs, interviewed at Parliamentary House, Canberra Australia, 24 June 2013.

PL2 Andrew Mitchell, former UK Secretary of State for International Development, interviewed at the House of Commons, Westminster, London, 9 September 2013.

PL3 Baroness Neville-Jones (Pauline), former UK Minister of State for Security & Counter-Terrorism, interviewed in London, 10 September 2013.

PL4 Brendan O'Connor, former Australian Minister for Immigration and citizenship; Employment Participation; Home Affairs; Homelessness/Housing; Small Business; Humane Services; Justice; and Privacy, interviewed by phone 6 November 2013.

PL5 Caroline Spelman, former UK Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, interviewed over the phone 22 October 2013.

PL6 Cheryl Gillan, former UK Secretary of State for Wales, interviewed in Portcullis House, Westminster, London, 3 September 2013.

PL7 Chris Evans, Former Australian Minister for Immigration and Citizenship; and Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, interviewed over the phone 29 October 2013.

PL8 Chuck Strahl, former Canadian Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, interviewed over the phone 3 October 2013.

PL9 Craig Emerson, former Australia Minister for Competition Policy & Consumer Affairs; Small Business, Independent Contractors & the Service Economy; and Trade & Competitiveness, interviewed over the phone 25 October 2013.

PL10 David Emerson, former Canadian Minister of International Trade; Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver–Whistler Olympics, interviewed over the phone 14/15 October 2013.

PL11 David Ogden, former US Deputy Attorney General, interviewed in Washington, 3 February 2014.

PL12 Gary Grindler former US acting Deputy Attorney General, interviewed in Washington, 11 February 2014.

PL13 Jason Clare, former Australian Minister for Home Affairs and Justice, and Defence Material, interviewed over the phone 15 October 2013.

PL14 Jean-Pierre Blackburn, former Canadian Minister of Veteran's Affairs; National Revenue; and Minister of State for Federal Economic Development; and Agriculture, interviewed over the phone on 1 November 2013.

PL15 John Banks, New Zealand Minister for Regulatory Reform and Small Business, written answers to interview questions provided during meeting at Bowen House, Wellington, 31 July 2013.

PL16 John Boscawen, former New Zealand Minister of Consumer Affairs, interviewed at ACT headquarters Auckland, 20 May 2013.

PL17 Lindsay Tanner, Former Australian Minister for Finance and Deregulation, over the phone, 29 May 2013.

PL18 Lord Howell (David) Former UK Minister of State (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), interviewed at the House of Lords, Westminster, London, 11 September 2013.

PL19 Lord Green (Stephen), UK Minister of State For Trade and Investment, interviewed over the phone 23 October 2013.

PL20 Lord McNally (Tom) UK Minister of State (Justice), interviewed House of Lords, London UK, 11 September 2013.

PL21 Minister Bill English, Deputy Prime Minister of New Zealand and New Zealand Minister of Finance, interviewed over the phone 22 March 2013.

PL22 Minister Candice Bergen, Canadian Minister of State for Social Development, interviewed over the phone 4-5 December 2013.

PL23 Minister Chester Borrows, New Zealand Minister for Courts, interviewed Bowen House, Wellington; 16 May 2013.

PL24 Minister Craig Foss, New Zealand Minister of Commerce, Minister of Broadcasting and Minister of Consumer Affairs and former Minister for Civil Defence, Racing and Senior citizens, interviewed The Beehive, Wellington, 15 May 2013.

PL 25 Minister Jonathan Coleman, New Zealand Minister of Defence and Minister of State Services and former Immigration Minister and Broadcasting Minister, interviewed over the phone 10 May 2013.

PL26 Minister Judith Collins, New Zealand Minister of Justice, Minister for ACC, Minister for Ethnic Affairs and former Minister for the Police, Corrections and Veterans Affairs, interviewed Papakura Electorate Office, Auckland, 3rd May 2013,

PL27 Minister Michael Woodhouse, New Zealand Minister for Veterans Affairs and Immigration, interviewed over the phone, 27 June 2013.

PL28 Minister Murray McCully, New Zealand Minister for Foreign Affairs, interviewed Browns Bay, Auckland, 24 May 2013.

PL29 Minister Nikki Kaye, New Zealand Minister for Food Safety, Minister of Civil Defence and Minister of Youth Affairs, interviewed over the phone 7 June 2013.

PL30 Minister Oliver Letwin, UK Minister for Policy, interviewed over the phone 9 Sept 2013.

PL31 Minister Paula Bennett, New Zealand Minister for Social Development and Youth Affairs/Employment, interviewed in the Beehive, Wellington, 16 May 2013.

PL32 Minister Pita Sharples, New Zealand Minister for Maori Affairs, interviewed at Auckland University, Auckland, 19 April 2013.

PL33 Minister Simon Bridges, New Zealand Energy and Resources and Minister of Labour and former Minister of Consumer Affairs, interviewed by phone, 15 March 2013.

PL34 Minister Steven Joyce, New Zealand Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, interviewed Auckland University, Auckland, 1 May 2013.

PL35 Minister Tony Burke, Australian Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, interviewed Parliamentary House, Canberra, 25 June 2013.

PL36 Minister Tony Clement, Canadian Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario and former Minister of Health and Minister of Industry, interviewed over the phone 19/20 November 2013.

PL37 Monte Solberg, former Canadian Minister for Citizenship & Immigration; and for Human Resources and Skills Development, interviewed over the phone 30 September 2013.

PL38 Peter Kent, former Canadian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Environment, interviewed over the phone 30 September 2013.

PL39 Ray La Hood, former US Secretary of Transport, interviewed over the phone 13/14 January 2014.

PL40 Rob Merrifield, former Canadian Minister for Transport, interviewed over the phone 30/31 October 2013.

PL41 Robert Debus, Former Australian Minister for Home Affairs, interviewed over the phone 19 November 2013.

PL42 Robert McClelland, former Australian Attorney-General; Minister for Emergency Management; Homelessness; and Housing, interviewed at Parliamentary House, 17 June 2013

PL43 Rodney Hide, former New Zealand Minister for Local Government and Regulatory Reform, interviewed over the phone, 17 April 2013.

PL44 Secretary Vincent Cable, UK Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills, interviewed over the phone 8 Sept 2013.

PL45 Senator Kim Carr, former Australian Minister of Innovation, Science and Research; and Human Services, interviewed at Parliamentary House, Canberra 19 June 2013.

PL46 Sharon Bird, former Australian Minister for Higher Education and Skills, interviewed over the phone 24 September 2013.

PL47 Simon Crean, former Australian Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, interviewed 19 June 2013, Parliamentary House, Canberra.

PL48 Sir Gerald Howarth, former UK Minister for International Security Strategy, interviewed at Portcullis House, Westminster, London 5th September 2013.

PL49 Sir Nick Harvey, former UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces, interviewed in Portcullis House Westminster, London UK, 11 September 2013.

PL50 Steven Fletcher, former Canadian Minister for Democratic Reform and Transport, interviewed in Parliament, Ottawa, 9 October 2013.

PL51 Stockwell Day, former Canadian Minister for International Trade, Emergency Preparedness and Asia-Pacific, interviewed over the phone 9 October 2013.