

Jonathan Rose: Citizens' assembly a chance to take posturing out of politics

5:00AM Monday June 16, 2008

By Jonathan Rose

New Zealand has an historic opportunity that should not be squandered by partisan politics. The recent Budget included a citizens' assembly to examine the issue of public funding of political parties. In promising to repeal the assembly if his party was elected, National deputy leader Bill English has conflated the existence of a citizens' assembly with his party's position on the Electoral Finance Act.



The fact that this act is contentious is the very reason to hold a citizens' assembly. The experience in Canada has demonstrated that these are the sorts of issues where an assembly is most suited. Assemblies are ideal when politicians have a conflict of interest, when there is no obviously right answer or when it is important to hold a public conversation on an issue.

Because they are independent of government and have a transparent process, they are imbued with authority and legitimacy – the hallmarks of their process. Since they have no agenda, their recommendations are viewed as sound ones by stakeholders, politicians and the public.

While it sounds like a radical idea, its roots can be traced back to ancient Greece where deliberative bodies were used as a more robust form of decision-making than voting.

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly, in which I was involved, was a body of randomly chosen citizens of all walks of life, ages and backgrounds. Random selection ensured their diversity and helped to guarantee that the assembly was blind to race, colour, age, professional standing, learning ability, and class. Through an intensive learning phase, citizens were taught that policy is a product of values and complex issues have no easy answer. Over a period of 12 weekends from September 2006 to April 2007, its 103 members learned from experts, fellow citizens and most importantly, each other. They examined the strengths and weaknesses of all options including the status quo and its recommendation was put to all voters in a referendum.

Assembly members took their responsibility seriously. Over the nine-month period, there were never more than five absent and no one dropped out. That speaks volumes about their diligence and commitment.

It takes as its core assumption that citizens are able to make rational policy decisions and understand the implications of different policy trade-offs. If given sufficient time to learn, consult and deliberate, assemblies demonstrate 'the wisdom of crowds' to make policy free from political posturing or interest-based arguments. Equality based on reciprocity and mutual respect characterise their deliberations.

Like all great institutions, they need careful nurturing. They also need time, expert guidance, independence but most of all, trust. If the Canadian examples are any indication, the public's trust in them is well placed. Politicians place their trust in citizens every election which is why they say 'the voters are never wrong'.

I have no doubt that if political parties place their faith in a citizens' assembly it will produce policies which are based on sound judgment and a coherence with the values of ordinary citizens.

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This story was found at: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/466/story.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10516484