



## Wise Democracy: A strategy to involve citizens, overcome partisanship and solve impossible public issues

By Jim Rough

Communities and their governments face big, messy, impossible-seeming public issues including inadequate resources for public goods, inequities in how people are taxed, a declining education system, increasing citizen frustration, and a failing environment. More and more these days, governmental leaders are blocked from addressing these issues in any real way because the public conversation is a partisan battleground.

Consider the ideal of “Wise Democracy”—where all citizens work together with government, face the difficult problems collaboratively, understand the deep systemic nature of the issues, and create a clear mandate that everyone can get behind. If we could somehow structure this kind of public conversation, many seemingly impossible issues would go away. Plus, there would be radical new solutions, adequate funds, changes to the structure of the system, and people willing to help one another in a collective effort.

Practical experience tells us this ideal is impossible. Consider these recent high profile attempts to transcend partisanship in the United States:

- President Barack Obama entered the Presidency with a mandate for change. His aim was to enact major health care revisions in a bi-partisan way using facilitative leadership. Result: The public conversation, especially on health care reform, became even more partisan and the level of change was limited.
- The citizen initiative process in California, theoretically a pure form of citizen involvement, has restricted legislators from enacting needed changes and brought state government to its knees. Result: Special Interests and partisan battling dominate the process more than ever. Each year there is a budget crisis accompanied by draconian cuts in basic services. The public is increasingly frustrated and California bonds are rated at near “junk” status.
- Seattle Times columnist Danny Westneat describes the efforts at citizen involvement in his city: “We debated the monorail for ten years, deliberated the viaduct for nine, and discussed the 520 bridge for eight. Actual action so far: naught, nothing, and none.”

Despite these experiences, today there are new social inventions that make the Wise Democracy ideal far more achievable with minimal risk and cost.

## AN EXAMPLE

In Bregenz, Austria, on Lake Constance in the heart of Europe, there are often bitter battles over each new public development project. The mayor was concerned about a new project scheduled for the center of the city, near the lake. This time, however, Dr. Manfred Hellrigl, the Director of the Department of Future Related Issues in the state of Vorarlberg, proposed holding a Creative Insight Council (CIC) and the mayor agreed.

Twelve citizens were randomly selected from the voter registration roles as a microcosm of the city, symbolizing all citizens of Bregenz. They met for two days. They listened to a description of the existing project proposal along with a range of different views about it. The group was facilitated to address the issue in a creative way using Dynamic Facilitation (DF). The group had a breakthrough: They realized that this project offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the city to link itself more closely to the lake. They suggested shifting the project's center of gravity to the second floor instead of the first, by building a wide bridge over the railroad tracks rather than the underground tunnel that had been planned. Plus, to further connect the citizens with the lakefront, they suggested adding a sweeping set of steps on the side toward the lake. Adopting this new emphasis, linking the city to the lake, would be better for citizens and save money for the developers.

First, the CIC presented their unanimous perspective to the investors, architects, city planners and mayor. All were surprised by the depth of the group's thinking and pleased with the result. The principal investor who had been working on the project for two years said, "We had been looking at the trees and had not seen the forest."

A few weeks later the CIC, speaking as a symbolic "voice of the common good," presented their insight and the story of how they arrived at it to a community gathering with a large media presence. One at a time, each CIC member spoke about the Council's findings and how enjoyable and rewarding the CIC experience had been. Also at this meeting the investors, mayor, and architects expressed their support. The audience listened to the presentations and then, using the World Café model for large group meetings, they talked about this new idea in small groups. The entire audience was inspired and enthusiastic about the outcome. Sponsored by government, this process helped the city bypass the usual partisan argument. It facilitated a new public conversation that was a creative quest for what's best.

This CIC process could be used to involve citizens in addressing and solving the impossible-seeming issues mentioned earlier. It provides a way to take the public conversation beyond "bi-partisanship" to one that transcends partisanship and creates a clear mandate from the people. Here's a way that, finally, deep systemic issues can be addressed and solved, where the people support government to implement the changes.

## WISE DEMOCRACY

To envisage how Wise Democracy might come into being imagine a device that when activated, sets up an energy field of listening and creative thinking. Any person in this field finds him or herself performing at a very high quality, interested in different viewpoints and seeking breakthrough answers that bridge those differences. Regardless of partisan beliefs, cultural backgrounds, or level

of education each person is accepted and feels heard. This frees him or her to become curious, creative and collaborative. Breakthroughs and shifts occur naturally.

If you could buy one of these devices you might set it up in your house for your family, or in your organization for meetings. Or, governments might buy big versions that work for the whole city or the whole country. Just from turning on this device, there would be less partisan wrangling, more spirit of community, more trust in government, more sense of fairness, more citizen involvement, increased knowledge and empowerment, and better collective decisions.

Actually, in our society we already have this device in operation. But the dial has been set to facilitate a different field, one where we are all competitive, partisan, and self-interested. The public conversation is structured to be a political battle where collective decisions are viewed through the question, “How will it affect our bottom line?” Ordinary citizen involvement strategies don’t work well because they operate within this larger field. The Wise Democracy approach is to switch the dial on the machine so that the overall field is set on “mutually creative” rather than on “competitive.” There are four social innovations that allow us to make this change:

### **#1 - Choice-creating**

Choice-creating is the quality of thinking we seek, the kind of thinking at the core of true democracy. It is where people face big issues creatively and collaboratively, and seek answers that work for everyone. It is like dialogue because it is heartfelt and creative, but in choice-creating we also develop unanimous solutions. It is like deliberation because it reaches specific conclusions, but choice-creating relies on creativity and not judgment to reach those conclusions. Choice-creating is what often happens in a crisis, when everyone “gets it” that they have to face the crisis, that current answers won’t work, and that they have to work with others to find something new. When this happens, empowering shifts and insights arise and people accomplish more than they thought was possible.

Since most people do not experience choice-creating regularly, they think of it as a fleeting and random spirit that happens only occasionally. They don’t imagine that it could be reliably evoked. But it can be, through Dynamic Facilitation.

### **#2 - Dynamic Facilitation (DF)**

DF is like the device we talked about earlier. It establishes the creative field where people face difficult issues, think at the level of choice-creating and create win/win solutions. A dynamic facilitator (DF'er) encourages people to select issues they care about, regardless of how impossible they may seem. He or she encourages people to speak naturally from the heart about these issues, welcomes divergent viewpoints and protects each participant from judgment.

The DF'er asks simple questions, such as, “If you were in charge what would you do?” This kind of question is designed to draw out what each person is really thinking or feeling. She also uses reflections to help people clarify their thinking, and to help everyone understand and appreciate each contribution. Using four charts — Data, Solutions, Concerns and Problem-Statements — the value of each comment is brought forward, and the group tracks its progress. Participants enjoy this kind of meeting, finding it to be close in spirit to a natural conversation, except with

exciting progress as the result. Since randomly selected participants speak only for themselves and do not represent a constituency, with enough time they are able to put aside partisan positions and seek win/win answers. (See [www.DynamicFacilitation.com](http://www.DynamicFacilitation.com))

### #3 - The Creative Insight Council (CIC)

The CIC was illustrated earlier. Just as Dynamic Facilitation establishes a field of choice-creating in a small group, the CIC extends that field of thinking to a large population. It begins with a difficult, impossible-seeming issue that needs addressing, like the development project in Bregenz. Twelve people are selected randomly from voter registration roles to meet for a few days to address the selected issue. The Council hears from experts and stakeholders, meets in the spirit of choice-creating, discovers new possibilities, and presents its unanimous conclusions to the community. With complex issues, a series of two or three CIC's can be used. Each new CIC takes the issue forward another step.

### #4 - The Wisdom Council Process (WCP)

The Wisdom Council Process is similar to a CIC but ongoing. Every four months twelve citizens are randomly selected for a few days to engage in a creative exploration *on issues of their choice*. Each Council arrives at a shared outcome, which they present back to the community in something like a "state of union" address. This ongoing process structures a new public conversation into being and evolves a new public entity: "We the People" — all of us together.

In practice the conclusions of Wisdom Councils and Creative Insight Councils are thoughtful and innovative. At their presentations most everyone who hears the results supports them. Also at these presentations, each Council tells the story of its progress. Council members talk about the awkward place they started, facing some issue they didn't think they could address. They talk about insights along the way, and their excitement as they became clear on what the real problem is, what we really want, and how best to achieve it. Their story is a heroic story that becomes our story. (See [www.WiseDemocracy.org](http://www.WiseDemocracy.org))

The usual methods of citizen involvement are arrayed on a spectrum from 1) informing citizens, to 2) finding out what they think, to 3) considering their ideas, to 4) partnering with them, to 5) turning over decision-making to the public. This sounds like the whole picture, but it doesn't include the Wise Democracy ideal that we seek. Using the four tools of Wise Democracy facilitates a new kind of public conversation altogether, beyond decision-making. It offers the possibility of a new and powerful public entity, "We the People." To the extent this new coming together of all-of-us happens, we can make changes that currently seem impossible.

These Wise Democracy tools were developed in the United States, but they have found a foothold internationally. In Victoria, British Columbia, for example, a citizens group has been experimenting with the WCP for a number of years. ([www.WiseDemocracyVictoria.org](http://www.WiseDemocracyVictoria.org)) In the State of Vorarlberg, Austria, different city governments have been working with the CIC and the WCP to stimulate citizen involvement and address important public issues. ([www.tinyurl.com/ybemqmn](http://www.tinyurl.com/ybemqmn))

## A SUGGESTED STRATEGY

Below is a suggested three-pronged strategy for how government might proceed.

### **#1 - Government uses CIC's to address BIG issues**

When facing a difficult, ill-defined, complex, conflicted, or seemingly impossible issue, government now has a way out. It can convene one or a short series of Creative Insight Councils on the issue. Government can ask for guidance from the citizens, describing the situation in simple terms: "We don't have enough money to provide the services we think you want, but we don't want to raise taxes!" or ask a question: "What are our priorities about the environment vs. jobs?"

The concept is simple: Gather twelve randomly selected citizens to meet over a few days on the issue. Being dynamically facilitated they will have shifts of insight and understanding and present a clear perspective of the public interest. Usually, they will reframe the problem in a new way and suggest some solution strategy. When the public hears the results, the story of how the results were developed, and the personal statements of CIC members, most people will resonate with the conclusions and support them. Key is to structure the CIC so that as many people as possible hear the results.

### **#2 - Government (or a Citizen Group) builds Dynamic Facilitation capability in the community**

Another starting place is to convene a four or five-day seminar aimed at developing Dynamic Facilitation skills and enthusiasm for Wise Democracy among citizens, consultants and government employees. This builds the overall capability throughout the system and establishes a core of people who understand the process, are excited about it, and who are skilled in taking it forward. It also improves the quality of life for individuals and makes meetings more effective.

### **#3 – Working with government a citizen group establishes the Wisdom Council Process (WCP)**

Wise Democracy is, or should be, an ongoing process. One high-trust public conversation using a CIC is only a temporary shift in the public conversation. Shifting back to the old mode can cause hurt feelings, a sense of betrayal, and undermine the spirit of trust. The Wisdom Council Process is the desired structural change. It is designed to transform the public conversation permanently, involving ever more people and facilitating the emergence of "We the People."

Ideally, the WCP should be chartered into existence by "the people" through a vote, a citizens initiative, or constitutional amendment. But in practice, government or even a NGO can start the process by committing to a series of Wisdom Councils. Along the way particular Wisdom Councils unanimously say, "Hey, this is a great process. We need to keep it going." In this way, the WCP can charter itself into legitimacy.

## CHOOSING WISE DEMOCRACY

Elected officials often respond to this out-of-the-box strategy with concern that this process really won't work to transform the public conversation; that the effort to involve citizens will take extra

time, cost more money, or will threaten a loss of status, control, or authority; or that the citizen voice will be critical, ask for more resources, advocate poor proposals (as often happens with citizens initiatives), or just state the obvious. The opposite is true.

***Can twelve people really transform the public conversation?***... Yes. Key to understanding how lies in experiencing and understanding choice-creating, which is different than the usual forms of citizen involvement, like dialogue or deliberation. For example, this is not where a random selection of people is presented with a problem and a set of options, and where they deliberate and vote hoping elected officials will pay attention to their decision. Nor is it like in a jury, where the group of twelve consent to a unanimous position. Neither of these approaches generates the needed resonance of all. With choice-creating it's a symbol of all progressing as one, reaching unanimity through creative shifts and breakthroughs. Not only does everyone on the Council support the results, but most people who hear the story also support the results.

Even then, if you or I disagree with the conclusions of the Council—remember, few do—others are curious. The Council is gone but we find ourselves in a new kind of public conversation, wanting to share our unique perspective with others interested and curious. Rather than teaming up to try and defeat the minority as currently happens, in this new conversation we appreciate different viewpoints and seek to bridge the differences. Then in a few months, when the next random Council gathers, it builds on what the last Council did and on the subsequent conversation in the community.

***What's the risk in this approach?*** ... Not much. This process basically involves a random selection of people who meet for a short period of time, give a speech, and then disband. The Councils have no coercive authority. They merely express a view of "the common good," with the rest of us resonating (or not) to this perspective.

***How does action happen?*** ... Through the usual means. Elected officials, government agencies and community groups carry forward, only now having a clear public mandate for intelligent action. After a CIC presentation there may be a "responders meeting" where different government agencies and nonprofit organizations meet to publicly coordinate a response to the voice of "the people."

***How much does it cost?*** ... The immediate costs for implementing a CIC are relatively small. There are fees for the dynamic facilitator, travel costs for participants, and maybe a stipend for their participation. In addition there is the need to organize the community gatherings, and a web presence for extending the conversation to the whole community (video, web, media, etc.).

The primary costs occur if this approach is not chosen. Most existing public battles are a waste of money and human resources. They spread distrust among citizens and government, keep us all in denial about the real problems, hold back the creative potential of citizens, and assure that special interests will triumph over the general interest.

***Do we know this works?*** ... Through experiments in different settings we know that randomly selected, diverse people come together, creatively tackle impossible-seeming issues, and generate thoughtful unanimous perspectives. We also know that those who hear the report of these groups generally support the answers and the process. And we know, at least within organizations, that

this conversation spreads into the larger population, improving the spirit of community and generating new individual and group actions. We need more experience in public settings, where the whole community pays attention to the presentation of the Councils. Then we can see the extent to which this process can transform the public conversation of a large system.

Today our communities, cities and nations are encountering huge, impossible-seeming problems. Government is stymied, largely avoiding trying to answer the big systemic questions because the politics is so destructive. Individual actions and organizational actions help but largely they do not transform our dysfunctional system, but keep it alive. To really address the issues we face, all of us must pull together and think systemically about what we really want, and allocate the necessary long term resources to achieve it. ... With this approach, there is a way to facilitate this coming together. It's simple and easy. It offers immense benefits with miniscule risk and cost. And it is inevitable. This coming together will happen because it must. What is currently needed is for those who see this to step up and advocate for this approach to government and to others.

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