

# Challenging egos and the adversarial paradigm:

Facilitating collaborative decision making processes in political organisations.

Janet Rice November 2004<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

This genesis for this paper was a research project I undertook as part of an Advanced Councillor Training Course run by the Municipal Association of Victoria in April – June 2004. It has been an evolving work since then, benefiting hugely from discussions and input from a range of people since, from the local government sector, The Greens and my facilitation networks.

I presented this paper as part of a workshop at the Australasian Facilitators Network 2004 Annual Conference in Wellington, New Zealand. The discussion afterwards I found useful and stimulating, A summary of some of the key points discussed at the workshop is attached as an Appendix. A key point which was explored in this discussion but not focused on in the paper, is the need for any group attempting to make decisions collaboratively to firstly develop a shared vision for the group.

I am aware that much of what is outlined in this paper isn't 'cutting edge'. It is in essence an outline of my journey of the last six months, understanding the paradigm shift required for people to work collaboratively when their experience and culture is working adversarially. I encourage your feedback: I certainly don't feel I am at the end of my journey! I present it to you in the hope that it may be useful material for your journey also.

## 2. My background

### a. My experience with Greens and social change groups

I first worked as part of social change campaigns in the environment movement in the early 1980's. I had the great fortune and privilege to begin my life as an activist working with people who were well trained and versed in non violent action and consensus who were leaders of the campaign to save the Franklin River in Tasmania. I have worked in one way or another in and around the environment movement and in The Greens ever since, and that culture has been an ongoing feature of the organisations I have been involved with. I didn't really have to grapple with voting as a decision making process until I was elected to Maribyrnong City Council ( in the inner West of Melbourne) last year – after 20 years of consensus it came as a bit of a shock!

I was a founder of The Greens in Victoria in 1992. The Australian Greens have a constitutional commitment to consensus. Have grown from a structure of a small number of branches, largely Melbourne based with maybe 40 active participants to

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Rice  
Footscray Victoria Australia  
janet@janetrice.com.au  
(+61) 0439 363 846

a structure now of around 50 branches grouped into around a dozen regions. Our membership has grown from a few hundred to over 2000 in that time. New members have come from a much wider range of backgrounds, and many have not had previous exposure to collaborative decision making.

In contrast if people have come from other political parties or with experience in 'standard' community or business organisations they are often well versed in making decisions by voting, and are used to the cut and thrust of adversarial decision making processes – winners and losers, the need to 'get the numbers together' and be set up in often quite strident and destructive opposition to the 'other side'. These may be the very features they have fled from, but this is people's understanding of how political parties, and governments and other major institutions in Australian society make decisions.

A big challenge we face is to skill people in collaborative decision making, because where we don't do it well people rebel and think that we just have to vote on things to be efficient

The Greens structure in the mid '90's consisted of a state council attended by 20 to 30 people which elected an executive of 10. In 2004 we have an executive of the same size, a state council of 60 or so which consists of regional representatives; and regional councils in each region which in turn are made up of branch and other local representatives. The aim is to make decisions in all parts of the structure by consensus. The constitution states that if consensus can't be reached then a decision may be made by voting, with a 75% majority required for a decision to be made this way.

Our decision making processes have needed considerable tightening up with this increase in size of the party and background of members. We have had a strong focus on better articulation and clarification of our decision making techniques at State Council meetings and have encouraged branches and regions to become trained and skilled in consensus decision making techniques.

## b. My experience as a Councillor

In March 2003 I was elected as a Councillor to the City of Maribyrnong. I am one of two Greens Councillors on a Council of 7. There are 4 Councillors who are members of the Australian Labor Party and one independent Councillor. The four ALP members caucus and will speak with a unified voice about significant decisions, but act independently on other decisions.

Our Council structure includes having a briefing session to discuss significant issues but there is neither an expectation that we will try to find common ground about an issue, nor substantial opportunities to allow this to occur. If there are different points of view we have the debate in the Chamber, and the majority wins the vote.

The bottom line is that I am part of a minority on Council. I do not get invited to ALP caucus meetings. I do not get to have a say as to who will become Mayor. Decisions are made by voting and often I will not have the numbers to achieve what I think would be a preferred outcome, nor any readily available opportunity to negotiate over the issue. There are a small number of major issues where my

fellow Greens Councillor and I have one view and the ALP Councillors have another. There is generally no attempt to try and find a way forward through this difference. They have the numbers, they win, we lose.

What has surprised me is the number of decisions that are made that I think are acceptable but could be better. This is particularly the case where there has been community opposition and my background in consensus tells me that if we could only get all the players together to hear from each other, understand where others are coming from, and see if we could work out an alternative way of going forward then it would be possible. This possibility is not offered.

Just as surprising has been sharing experiences with other Councillors, and finding that a significant number of elected Councillors have few skills and little experience in working collaboratively. They operate under the dominant paradigm of winning and losing by voting, focusing where necessary on getting the numbers together, then making (relatively) quick decisions that are seen to be 'fair' because they have majority support. If you lose, you live with it. You can always try again later after doing some more work behind the scenes.

What made this of even greater interest to me was the realisation that this acceptance that 'the majority rules' or 'those with power rule' regardless of whether they are making the best decisions, and attendant lack of experience and inclination in making decisions collaboratively flows through to attitudes and practice in involving the community in decision making. How is it possible for local government to promote and embrace community empowerment – "allowing the community to share in and influence decisions that affect their lives", when its very structures mitigate against it? If elected representatives are comfortable with the 'tyranny of the majority' and not properly engaging with the views of the minority even on Council, then although they may be comfortable with community consultation: listening and receiving viewpoints; they are unlikely to be at all enamoured of inviting people to share in the decision making process, unless these people happen to agree with them. The decision making power stays firmly in the hands of those who are elected

If the decision makers know they have got the power to make the decision, and don't have sympathy for a particular point of view they can just ignore it. They don't need to engage with that point of view or negotiate or see if they can work out a solution that everyone can live with. The decision rests in their hands, and if they have the numbers on the decision making body then the decision is made the way they want it to be made. People can go away unhappy, see if there are other means of over-turning the decision, and ultimately vow to vote them out at the next election.

How then can we have 'community building – harnessing the energy of communities so that they can shape their own futures'<sup>2</sup> How can we meaningfully engage in 'community work – which 'assumes that disadvantaged people can only have full control of their lives when social structures and institutions are changed.

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<sup>2</sup> (John Thwaites, Minister for Victorian Communities, quoted in 'The Poetry of community building' by Martin Mowbray, *New Community Quarterly* Vol 2, No 1, page 58

To change institutions is to challenge existing structures and wrest power from dominant groups<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The ins and outs of collaborative decision making

#### a. Advantages of collaborative decision making

- △ Builds trust, respect and understanding amongst participants. All viewpoints are considered to have validity and are respected
- △ Reinforces group coherence and togetherness. Vastly reduces the potential of division and undermining of decisions
- △ Decisions which are made have the support of all the group so all the resources of the group can be put toward carrying them out
- △ Results in better decisions which take into account the range of people's needs and views
- △ Encourages flexibility in the decision making process and incorporates the ability to modify the decision to incorporate new information
- △ Participation in a consensus decision is genuinely empowering. People's views are taken into account and incorporated into the outcome
- △ Decisions are more likely to be longstanding and withstand changes in leadership
- △ Encourages participation. Everyone is encouraged to contribute and their contributions are valued.

#### Disadvantages of voting

- △ Often doesn't end up with the best decision because the wisdom and knowledge of opponents is easily ignored or dismissed
- △ Divisive. Voting accentuates the differences between people and their positions rather than focussing on what is agreed between them
- △ More likely to end up with simple inappropriate 'solutions' to problems which don't take account of the complexity of an issue
- △ Decisions may be made on the basis of who are the most articulate and powerful orators, rather than the substance of their position. People who aren't as articulate can end up being ignored
- △ People who lose don't have ownership of decisions they lose. This is a big loss of resources. People who could be working with you to implement a decision at best may be neutral and at worst may be actively working to undermine the decision

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<sup>3</sup> Key Principles of Community Work' by Philip Mendes, Community Quarterly No 47, page 43

- △ Although the initial decision may have been made quickly, decisions don't necessarily stay made. If the opposition get the numbers together then they can overturn a decision and chart a course diametrically opposed to the previous one. This can lead to lack of certainty, and cause big upsets in the running of an organisation
- △ Division into a majority and an opposition can lead to people spending a lot of energy fighting each other rather than focussing on the issue at hand
- △ Division into a majority and an opposition can make it very difficult to present a united front on a issue, because of the oppositional dynamic that is set up – the majority can find it hard to accept the minority's views as valid even if they have validity; and some people find themselves firmly in the opposition camp and that's where they feel comfortable, and they will oppose for the sake of opposing
- △ Being able to ignore or dismiss the views of a minority can lead the minority to feel disempowered, not listened to, and bitter and resentful to those in the majority
- △ The losing side can be painted as ignorant and misinformed. This is a small step towards feeling justified in labelling them as 'different', 'other', not worthy of being listened to, and not treated respectfully. Treating the opposition disrespectfully becomes justified in a way that would never be acceptable if they were on your side

#### b. Pre-requisites for collaborative decision making

- △ Shared values - in particular values such as equity, human rights and the importance of protecting our environment for future generations. For example people who believe that some people's opinions are more worthy of respect because of their status are will find it difficult participating in a decision making process which values all views. People who believe that the overwhelming value of the earth is as a resource for humans will find it difficult to reach consensus on environmental issues with those who believe that all species have a right to exist in their own right.
- △ Respect for the validity of others views - this isn't however a one-way street - others also need to be willing to respect yours
- △ Willingness to share power. Willingness to not just listen to minority voices, but actively work to reach a decision so that their concerns and desires are included.
- △ Mature participation from all participants. They have to be ready to listen to other points of view and realise that they don't have all the wisdom on the topic themselves.
- △ willingness to shift position – not hold fast stubbornly to something regardless of other people's points of view.
- △ Acceptance that the benefits of finding a decision that everyone can live with outweigh the costs of having to give ground .

△ Skilled facilitation

#### 4. Challenges to collaborative decision making faced in The Greens and other social change organisations

Presuming that there are shared values and the other pre-requisites are met there are still the following challenges:

##### **Skills, experience and commitment to process**

- △ Many people don't have a lot of experience of consensus processes. To them they can seem rather bamboozling and inefficient
- △ People who are used to operating in an oppositional framework may find it difficult to consider the views of those who have been the opposition with respect.
- △ Takes time – and we've got a world to save out there!

##### **Needs good process**

- △ Needs good facilitation. A poorly run consensus process can be dominated by the loudest voices, and be disempowering for others. It may stifle the voicing of opposition views if people feel pressure to agree to go along with others, rather than because they do actively agree
- △ A group can get frustrated if most people agree and a small number are viewed as stalling the process
- △ A long-drawn out decision making process can be 'won' by attrition. Those that can stay the longest get to be the only ones remaining!
- △ Can be perceived as leading to more conservative decisions in order to take account of everyone's views
- △ Can lead to decisions not being made in the time available

##### **Then there are the challenges that are trickier – but can be considered as being characteristic of working in a political environment**

- △ Egos – Big egos. These challenge people's willingness to respecting others views as valid as their own. After all if some-one feels that they are God's gift to the party and they have been or are going to be elected to Parliament are they going to find it easy to respect the views of others who they know don't know as much as they do??
- △ People who enjoy the sense of power of winning over someone can find it difficult to not exercise that power.

In comparison voting can be seen as easier because

- △ People understand the system and it's easy – there's little need for training or explanation
- △ It's relatively quick and efficient
- △ People who are disruptive or difficult can be 'shut down' relatively easily in a forum
- △ A small minority doesn't have the opportunity to take up more 'air-time' than they warrant

Overcoming these challenges in The Greens has so far been through an organisational commitment to consensus, because of its long-term benefits – but there's no doubt that some people find it difficult!

## 5. And then... some additional real challenges faced in the 'real world'

- △ lack of shared values – in particular commitment to equity and respect for all views regardless of status or background. A vote is seen as a fair way of making decisions that then allow you to disregard voices that aren't valued
- △ big time egos as above
- △ little willingness to share power – people see the benefits of winning as worth the potential cost of defeat – the long-term implications of division and inequity are discounted because of short-term gain.  
Rather than a willingness to share power there is a willingness to tough it out in an oppositional framework. There isn't acceptance or understanding that the benefits of finding a decision that everyone can live with usually outweighs the costs of giving ground. The decision making power stays firmly not only in the hands of those who are elected, but in the hands of the majority
- △ enjoyment of winning and having power over
- △ People have the opportunity to grandstand and feel victorious if they have won a vote and defeated an opposition.
- △ The media are more likely to be interested because of the conflict – important in keeping your profile high
- △ Huge history of working in this way. There is no trust or belief that others aren't going to lie, cheat and deceive you so you may as well join them!

## 6. Overcoming the barriers

### a. In organisations with shared values such as The Greens

- △ recommit to shared values as necessary. Identify different approaches if they are emerging. Name, and validate different views on the best way of achieving our long-term aims, but re-iterate the underlying shared values
- △ recommit to the long-term benefits of consensus. We need to begin a process where we name the tension, validate it, discuss it.

△ Skills in good process

b. In the real world

This of course is the tricky bit!

I began my exploration of these issues this year with a determination to get more collaborative processes in place. I now feel I have a much better understanding of the barriers in the way.

So can it be done?

First base would be (in the local government example) for Councillors to decide that the benefits of finding a decision that everyone can live with and having a united Council if possible outweigh the costs of having to give ground and share power.

Of course this is challenging stuff. It challenges power relationships and threatens the power of those with the most money, the most influence, the best ability to gather the numbers. It is not how politics is generally practiced .

It goes against the usual methods of doing deals, getting the numbers together, beating and denigrating your opponents, and using what power you have to maximise the benefits to you and your mates.

As such, this makes it very difficult to introduce pure consensus processes in most of Council's decision making processes.

But I think it should be possible to reach agreement to give it a go, to consciously set up processes that try to negotiate through differences, just to see if consensus is possible, without setting up an expectation that consensus will be reached.

These processes would genuinely attempt to reach consensus, and time and resources would be put into this process. However, there is an understanding that differences in underlying values may mean that consensus isn't possible, and so then taking a vote will be the best way to make a final decision.

c. What would this mean in Council decision making processes?

Between Councillors this means processes where:

- △ all Councillors having the opportunity to be heard and to share in processes aimed at finding a collaboratively reached decision. This means spending the time negotiation through differences, with the aim of reaching consensus if possible. If there is a working majority then this majority need to engage with the minority to see if a solution can be found that everyone can live with.
- △ This would mean use of informal non-decision making briefing sessions either confidential or open to the public, where an explicit aim is to hear and understand the different points of view and try to reach a consensus
- △ if there is difference encountered then time is spent to try and understand these differences and see whether there are underlying differences in values
- △ If the differences are deep and reflect different values then a vote would be taken to make the decision

Even if a vote does end up being taken, there will have been huge benefits gained from going through such a process. These include:

- △ clarity about where the differences really lie – and so reducing the tendency for people to view people with opinions different from their own as merely obstructionist and difficult. It means people can retain respect for others and agree to disagree
- △ shifts in positions anyway – people are exposed to viewpoints, value sets and paradigms different from their own and get to understand those differences and may in fact be more willing to accommodate them over time.
- △ Better decisions. Even if consensus isn't reached, having a good shared understanding of where each party is coming from leads to a better decision that does take account of the various positions, even if not fully.

Community involvement processes would feature

- △ participants understanding and agreeing that processes they are participating in are trying to reach consensus, and so be aware of all the features of consensus decision making previously outlined.
- △ All parties at the table, and able to listen to and hear from each other
- △ If consensus can't be reached then it should be clear what is standing in the way – are there underlying differences in values that are impossible to reconcile?
- △ trust that the process is genuine.

This would mean

- △ greater use of community reference groups where all stakeholders are at the table and aim to reach consensus, and
- △ Use of citizens panels to engage a random selection of the community to develop solutions to issues

A significant characteristic of such community processes is that they don't have decision making power.

The most power they have is if they reach consensus, for if they do then it would be usual for the elected Council to accept their decision

.If council is unhappy with the outcome because of different perspectives or knowledge then the process needs to be revisited, with Councillors engaging in the process as equal partners with the community.

## 7. Conclusion

The challenges are big and real, but they are worth giving a red-hot go!

## 8. Appendix

### Reflections from participants at the AFN conference workshop session, Wellington, October 2004

These reflections were what was recorded as participants key learnings and reflections from the session, after this paper had been presented and a discussion about it had taken place. I grouped them after the session.

#### Need for group to have a shared vision if it is to work collaboratively

- ★ Articulate shared vision – what will it take for us to get there
- ★ My belief in the importance of creating shared vision and values for collaborative decision making is reinforced
- ★ Remember to focus on shared vision etc during discussions
- ★ Sharing visions and values at the beginning of and also continuously through a group's formation is one of the most important tools
- ★ Significant groundwork is required to ensure the pre-requisites are met for collaborative decision making: vision, values, maturity etc. All take time
- ★ It's not the point of difference, it's the point of sameness we need to focus on

#### The challenges of paradigm shifting...

- ★ Need to identify that another way is possible, is desirable, can be achieved, and can occur at a personal/ community level to be real
- ★ Collaboration versus voting the greater dilemma
- ★ Importance of gradual self-learning and transformation to major change/ shift
- ★ Changing people's state appropriately a little over time can bring enough change
- ★ Change can occur through identifying leverage points and working there – eg external reference points
- ★ Without a change in paradigm behavioural change will be temporary at best. Paradigm shifts start with small baby-steps!
- ★ Where paradigm shifts are threatening, slow and gentle forays into different ways of working in low risk situations may reduce the perceived threat
- ★ The tiniest task is to build relationships and establish support for cdm  
The small task is to identify common values and reflect on the mission the group must operate within  
The big task is to redefine democracy
- ★ Democracy is a difficult process

#### Reflections on ways of working

- ★ When we define people as a group we ourselves limit change and often evoke polarity that binds us to create and re-create the same situation and responses
- ★ Naming the issue
- ★ Informed decision making
- ★ Creating a safe environment for decision making
- ★ Practice 'listening without the burden of agreeing'
- ★ Swap positions of power as a facilitation tool

#### Other reflections

- ★ Minority rule will usually fail to please the majority
- ★ Where its happening is where its at
- ★ Value of discussion and hearing different viewpoints
- ★ I'm not alone in feeling like I'm the only one who wants consensus
- ★ I have enough tools and knowledge if I am prepared to risk using what I know, feel and think
- ★ Hang in there- because it's going to take a while!