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DIVERSITY INNOVATION EXCELLENCE

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Public participation or public relations?

Sharon Beder[*]

Abstract

Many government agencies and corporations conduct public consultation exercises for the purpose of gaining community acceptance for hazardous facilities or undesirable developments. Since consultation in these circumstances is not aimed at genuine participation in decision making, it becomes a public relations exercise that seeks to manipulate public opinion and perceptions. PR tools for communicating risk, categorising "publics," dealing with intractable opponents, and fostering trust are all utilised under the guise of public participation. These are demonstrated with the use of a case study on efforts to site a hazardous waste incinerator in Australia.

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Formalised public consultation procedures were introduced in many countries during the 1960s and 1970s in response to protest actions and civil disobedience by environmentalists and local residents who were opposed to developments they considered to be undesirable. These processes, set up by governments, were supposed to enable members of the public to have a say in whether development projects should be approved and in the conditions of that approval. However, they were often instituted as a way of gaining acceptance for controversial government projects and policies. Dorothy Nelkin and Michael Pollak, who have studied technological controversies in various countries, have noted that whilst such processes "may increase direct public influence on the formulation of policy" and give policy makers advance notice of public concerns: "More often they are a means to manipulate public opinion, to win acceptance of decisions already made, and to facilitate the implementation of these decisions."[1]

The public consultation process used to site a hazardous waste incinerator in Australia provides a good example of a process that sought public acceptance rather than public participation in decision making. In many ways this case study is typical of the hundreds of attempts that have been made, with varying success, to site hazardous or unwanted facilities in towns and cities all over the western world--where the rhetoric of democracy precludes the imposition of such a facility on a community without consultation.

Such consultation usually has several common elements: the assumption that opposition is due to ignorance, the efforts to persuade the community that the facility is safe, the desire to win the trust of the community whilst discrediting opponents, and the need to provide the appearance of community participation without being genuinely responsible to community concerns. All these elements involve public relations (PR) skills and strategies which are applied with differing degrees of sophistication. However, because strategies are discussed and shared within the PR fraternity, the latest trends in consultation, often originating in the US, are manifest in siting disputes in many countries. This paper will canvass some of the assumptions and tactics often used by PR people, consultation experts and risk

communicators in such situations and consider how they were applied in this case.

The Joint Taskforce on Intractable Waste was set up in 1989 by the Australian federal government and the New South Wales and Victorian state governments to prepare the way for the establishment of a high temperature incinerator in Australia to burn hazardous wastes. The consultation process undertaken by the Taskforce was not to find out what the community wanted done with hazardous wastes--that was decided even before the Taskforce was appointed--but to win acceptance of a high temperature incinerator.

Several attempts had already been made to build an incinerator for hazardous wastes but none had been successful, usually because of the strength of local opposition to the facility. In its second report the Taskforce explained that its goal was to "achieve active public recognition that the proposal is in the public interest."[2] To do this it engaged the firm Community Projects Ltd to develop a community consultation strategy. Community Projects Ltd, an Adelaide-based firm, had successfully smoothed the way for other controversial projects in the past and it was hoped they could work their magic for the high temperature incinerator.

Incineration was viewed by government authorities, particularly the Waste Management Authority of NSW (the government body then responsible for managing and regulating waste in NSW), as the only safe means of disposing of hazardous organochlorine wastes which they referred to as "intractable wastes." These were mostly stored at a Sydney plant of chemical corporation ICI, although small quantities of discarded organochlorine pesticides and PCBs were stored outside of Sydney. The authorities had been under pressure to do something about these stores of wastes from sections of the community, the media and the environmental movement.[3]

Some environmentalists supported the establishment of an incinerator for this purpose, but others were opposed. Greenpeace Australia played the most prominent role in opposing the proposed incinerator; it had the resources to allocate a paid campaigner to the issue and had access to a wide information base through its international network of offices, campaigners and researchers. Greenpeace has a worldwide policy of opposition to incineration for two reasons. Firstly, the organisation believes incineration is unsafe because the emissions from the stack, leachate (liquids that leak out of buried waste) from the residues and other leakages during handling of the wastes can damage the environment and public health over the long term.

Secondly, Greenpeace argues that providing an "end-of-pipe" disposal solution will only encourage industry to continue generating these wastes: "In relation to hazardous waste management, industry and government have a clear choice. They can either follow the incineration path or the clean production path."[4] Greenpeace Australia argued that "intractable" wastes in Australia should be stored until they are no longer being generated and "safer" alternative technologies for treating the stockpile have been developed. It argued that with enough political commitment and funding this could be achieved within about five years.[5]

Supporters of the incinerator argued that there was no time to wait for such developments which they said could take ten or twenty years and even then might not be satisfactory substitutes for incineration. They promised that generation of intractable wastes would be prohibited by law within a few years. The incinerator would only have to operate for ten years to get rid of the stockpile and then it could be closed down and the problem solved once and for all. This, they argued, was far preferable to letting the wastes be stored for an indefinite period awaiting technological developments.[6]

Assuming community ignorance

The Taskforce assumed that most opposition "is based upon ignorance that can be overcome"[7] if the appropriate information is supplied. This is one of the most common motivations for public consultation. Nelkin and Pollak showed how European governments such as those of Sweden, Austria and the Netherlands attempted to increase public consultation as opposition to nuclear power grew in the belief that opposition arose from ignorance and a lack of understanding of energy options. These governments also thought that the opposition to nuclear power came from middle-class action groups and hoped that by broadening public interest in the nuclear issue, the fact that nuclear power was in the public interest would become evident, especially to the working-class majority.[8] They turned out to be wrong on both counts. Increased information and broadened debate did not increase support for nuclear power.

The Taskforce similarly set out to supply its version of information so that everyone would be reassured. Yet, like the nuclear proponents, the Taskforce was wrong to assume that opposition stemmed from

ignorance. The most fervent opponents to the incinerator were among the best informed on the issue. The Taskforce report actually admitted that supporters or potential supporters "tend to be less well-informed on the issues involved than are the opponents."[9]

Despite such failures to gain approval for technological projects through consultation processes, the myth still persists that opposition to controversial technologies is based on ignorance and the failure of the community to recognise what is in their own best interests. Politicians and the PR people who advise them still believed that if you educate people and give them a say then they will come round to the "right" point of view. This is often still the case in the area of risk communication which is often aimed at communities involved in siting disputes.

Risk communication is concerned with the problems arising from the communication of scientific and technical assessments of risk to various sections of the public. These problems have largely been construed as technical ones: how to transfer difficult material from "experts" to "people" with the maximum effectiveness and the minimum loss of accuracy and content. Many risk communicators think that members of the public and community groups perceive risks differently from those who construct risk assessments or commission them, and assume that expert risk assessments are accurate and correct. This being so, the self-imposed task of risk communicators is to disseminate various truths to an audience that is deficient in some fundamental and obstructive way, beyond "ignorance of the facts." They perceive those to whom risk assessments need to be communicated as lacking reason or being hampered by an assortment of psychological and political disabilities--bias, special interest, ideological commitment, and so forth. The notion that risk assessments themselves might be socially constructed and politically motivated is seldom contemplated.

The assumption that inaccurate perceptions are to be found amongst the public alone is widespread amongst scientists and engineers. For example, an article in the US magazine *Civil Engineering* informs readers that:

- While engineers may be satisfied with technical analyses of real, statistical and predicted risk, laypeople have intuitive fears that create perceived risk... Opposition based on perceived risk can be reduced through information and consultation that begins early on...[10]

A similar view is taken by government regulators. A US Environmental Protection Agency administrator expresses puzzlement over public fears over the wrong issues:

- It is an odd fact that communities that would not object to, or would even welcome, a manufacturer of chemicals locating nearby will offer strong resistance to a recycling plant or an incinerator if the fatal words `hazardous waste' are used. It is clear we cannot afford public ignorance in areas where waste disposal facilities are required...

  Not only must we raise, by direct action, the level of sophistication of the public's thinking about risk issues, but we must also do what we can to increase the number of people who can communicate effectively about risk.[11]

Much risk communication is therefore purposefully undertaken to correct the public's "false" view of risk and draw it more in line with the "correct" view of the risk experts. However an analysis of any controversy shows that neither side seeks to portray a true view of the risks but rather one that suits their agenda.

The Waste Management Authority described a hazardous waste incinerator as "an industrial facility which safely converts intractable wastes into harmless components."[12] Greenpeace Australia argued that "even the most modern incinerators pump out persistent and bioaccumulative toxins and spread them onto the land and into the air and water."[13] Greenpeace emphasised a "worst case" scenario and talked about what could go wrong with an incinerator, while the Waste Management Authority and the Taskforce emphasised a "best case" scenario and highlighted how well an incinerator could operate in ideal conditions. They argued that the facility would be built to the latest design and conform to the toughest standards worldwide. The Taskforce stated that:

- Excellent design and the best equipment must be complemented by the establishment of the necessary systems and procedures and the requirement for unfailing compliance with them.[14]

It characterised the emissions as a normal and familiar (and therefore predictable) part of the technological system which could be controlled to the point where they were insignificant. Part of the politics of persuading people that risks are small is to compare the risks of a proposed facility with risks of familiar technologies that the public uses without fear. The Authority pointed out that all combustion processes, including home heaters and car engines, created "minute traces" of these products which are generally accepted (and are, of course, familiar).[15] A member of the Taskforce argued along these lines that, if one were to oppose the incinerator on the grounds of the potential danger of its by-products:

- consistency would appear to require us to oppose all of these other incineration processes, which are very much more polluting as well. Even public transport would probably have to be restricted to rickshaws, pedicabs and yachts.[16]

The Taskforce also argued as follows:

- High temperature treatment, modern, advanced flue gas scrubbing and neutralization reduce these quantities to the point where many of them are virtually unmeasurable when they leave the stack.[17]

This view that every part of a technological system and everyone associated with it can be expected to unfailingly follow carefully defined rules in which uncertainties are peripheral has traditionally been fostered as part of the process of legitimation of technologies.[18] It carries two assumptions: (1) a facility such as an incinerator will routinely achieve the performance that it was designed to achieve; (2) there will rarely be any significant deviation from routine operation, which is a way of saying that accidents will seldom occur.

In contrast Greenpeace emphasised the things that can go awry with incinerators. Greenpeace sought to uncover uncertainties and throw into question the naive view of technological systems and replace it with one that portrayed complex technological systems as unpredictable and uncontrollable. To the rule-governed behaviour invoked by the Waste Management Authority, Greenpeace counterposed a version of Murphy's law--"Watch out because everything that can go wrong, is likely to go wrong."

Greenpeace stressed departures from the ideal. They pointed out that "no anti-pollution control devices achieve full particulate removal."[19] They argued:

- In real-world operation even the most modern and well-maintained incinerators deviate from ideal performance. These deviations--called combustion upsets--vary in severity and duration, ranging from explosions and flameouts to minor perturbations in small portions of an incinerator for brief periods of time.[20]

They argued that such deviations have a significant impact on the environment and claim that incinerator equipment and pollution control devices grow less reliable with advancing age.[21]

Greenpeace also emphasised fugitive emissions "during routine storage, handling, and transport" and accidental spills during transfer and transport. For them such incidents are the norm rather than the exception. They pointed to the failures and controversies surrounding the worst performing hazardous waste incinerators in other countries as examples of what could happen.

Dealing with various publics

Government authorities and their experts often attribute failure to win broad public acceptance for "risky" facilities to the role of environmental activists and groups such as Greenpeace, who are perceived to be responsible for spreading panic and a false view of the risks involved and thereby obstructing community acceptance for facilities. Recently public relations firms have been turning their attention to ways of dealing with these activists. Often these firms employ a "divide and conquer" strategy which exploits differences in the community between moderates and radicals.[22] Environmentalists and activists are categorised in order to devise a strategy to deal with them. Phil Lesly, a PR expert, divides activists into five personality classifications:

- advocates who argue for what they believe in;

- dissidents who, because of their character, are against many things;

- activists who want to get something done or changed;

- zealots who are overridingly singleminded; and

- fanatics who are "zealots with their stabilizers removed."[23]

He suggests that reasonable people can be dealt with using reason but zealots and fanatics have to be dealt with by withering away their power base and support.[24]

Similarly Ronald Duchin, from the PR firm Mongoven, Biscoe and Duchin, categorises activists as either radicals, opportunists, idealists or realists:

- [T]he activists we are concerned about here are the ones who want to change the way your industry does business--either for good or bad reasons: environmentalists, churches, Public Interest Research Groups, campus organizations, civic groups, teachers unions, and `Naderites.'[25]

Duchin describes radicals as those who want to change the system and have underlying socio-economic/political motives. They are anti-corporation and are the hardest to deal with because they won't compromise. Opportunists, according to Duchin, are activists who oppose corporations because they want power, attention and employment. The key to dealing with them is to offer them the appearance of a victory.[26]

Idealists are altruistic, highly credible, with a sense of justice. "They must be educated...Once the idealist is made fully aware of the long-term consequences or the wide ranging ramifications of his/her position in terms of other issues of justice and society, she/he can be made into a realist."[27] Realists are pragmatic and willing to compromise and work within the system. Duchin recommends concentrating any public relations activities on realists and seeking to cooperate with them. Generally a solution forged with the realists will become the accepted solution, he says.

Duchin's formula is therefore to isolate the radicals, turn the idealists into realists, co-opt the realists to support industry solutions and the opportunists will go along with the final agreement. The radicals, he says, need the support of the idealists and realists to have credibility. Without them they are marginalised and "seen to be shallow and self-serving."[28]

Public relations firms often classify local residents, as they do activists, into various publics so that they can concentrate on those likely to be persuaded of the benefits of the proposed project and marginalising those who are likely to oppose it. Desmond Connor, a Canadian PR consultant, advises against holding a public meeting early on before the various publics can be approached separately. He says:

- The proponent typically calls a public meeting in order to explain the project to them, confident that their opposition will then disappear. In fact, the public meeting usually crystallizes a more informed, organized and articulate opposition and generates widespread negative publicity for the proponent and the project.[29]

Instead he advises companies to identify "the latent and secondary beneficiaries of the project (the five volt positive people, compared with the 220 volt negative opponents)." These are people who "stand to benefit in small and indirect ways" from the project. These people should be kept informed and involved in a "joint problem solving process. As people work together, informed peer group pressure usually results in workable compromise solutions--not ideal from anyone's point of view, but acceptable to all or nearly all."[30]

The Taskforce on Intractable Waste attempted, with the help of Community Projects Ltd, to get broad

acceptance for the high temperature incinerator in principle before a location for it was chosen. This was supposed to ensure a detached, "rational" debate could take place before the emotions of concerned local residents clouded the issue and before the community living near the proposed incinerator site could muster support from the broader community.

To do this they set out to gain the support of the "realists" in the environmental movement. Although there was some dissent within the Australian Conservation Foundation, ACF gave its support and the three-person Taskforce included an ACF representative. However several other environmental groups opposed the incinerator including Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. A proposal to support the incinerator was also narrowly defeated at a NSW Nature Conservation Council annual general meeting. Other groups which had no policy were supplied information by the Taskforce and asked to lend their support.

Remaining opponents were categorised and dismissed as either ignorant, having vested interests, or, in the case of those stubborn yet well informed environmentalists who could not be co-opted, the Taskforce sought to discredit and marginalise them by saying that they "show clear signs of wishing to assume the role of champions."[31] According to the Taskforce:

- Champions are those who see some benefits for themselves in adopting one position or another in a potential conflict. They are sometimes more concerned with the opportunity to enhance their reputation than with the details of the case.[32]

The Taskforce did not intend to consult further with that part of the environmental movement opposed to the incinerator because it recognised they were unlikely to change their position.[33] It had spoken to opposition groups in order to distinguish "opposition likely to thwart a desired outcome (`effect') from that which is likely to be ineffective even if it is discomforting (`noise')."[34] The reason for needing to do this was that the Taskforce wanted to manage and control the debate or, as it put it, "limit destructive conflict." It stated:

- Unstructured public involvement is likely to be chaotic and potentially destructive to a proposal. In the absence of a structure for public involvement, individuals and groups will create their own mechanisms...

By providing a framework for public involvement, the form and direction of this involvement can be managed in the public interest. Under these circumstances public involvement in the development of a proposal is more likely to be productive and creative, and the scope for destructive conflict is significantly reduced...[35]

Of course the terms "productive" and "creative" and "destructive" are all defined in terms of achieving the goal of establishing a high temperature incinerator. Such an approach is used worldwide. In an issue of *Civil Engineering* it was observed that many engineers now see public education as an essential part of their work. A consultant to local government explained:

- We successfully educated our public because *we* controlled the agenda; we set the tone of discussion... In addition, we realized if we didn't educate the public someone else would. An uninformed public will always organise themselves. Finally we used our potential adversaries to our advantage. Our early efforts allowed us to co-opt potential opponents in time to enlist their help.[36]

By undertaking the consultation process before the selection of a site, the Taskforce was seeking to control the communication process, setting the terms of the debate and denying access to it to the people most affected. When the Taskforce invited submissions from local residents in country areas, its carefully worded messages cleverly left out the word incinerator. For example in a letter to various media outlets the Taskforce asked them to broadcast a message inviting submissions. It stated "An Independent taskforce, set up to advise the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Victorian Governments on the Minimisation and Management of Intractable Waste, is seeking public comment on its latest findings and recommendations..."[37] When community groups in Corowa (the first site chosen by the Taskforce for the incinerator) received letters similarly worded inviting them to a public meeting, few bothered to attend, not realising it had anything to do with a hazardous waste incinerator being put

in their neighbourhood. Corowa residents claimed that invitations were sent to business groups, community service groups and councillors but not to local environmental groups in town.

When the site was announced in October 1990, claims by Corowa residents that they had not been consulted were denied by the Taskforce which pointed to these invitations and media announcements. However the damage was done. The people of Corowa and of the other shortlisted sites felt that they had been excluded from the consultation process and that this facility was being imposed on them involuntarily. There was a massive angry reaction to the announcement which ended up in a backdown by the governments involved.

Cultivating trust

There is a growing literature on risk communication, much of which is aimed at advising corporations on how to deal with the fears that their operations engender in the community. Many risk communicators concentrate on developing ways to reassure the public. Joe Epley, past president of the Public Relations Society of America, writes of the need for public relations because "public opinion, fueled by hysteria, a desire to live in a risk-free environment, and unfounded perceptions of the industrial world, is making it difficult for many manufacturers to operate on either a local or global basis."[38]

Stuart Price, a communications consultant who has worked for Westinghouse Electric Corporation, advises in an article on "Learning to Remove Fear from Radioactive Waste" that "bringing concerned citizens into the decision-making process, rather than just launching one-way information packets in their direction, is a technique that can build good will and resolve many fears."[39] He recommends the use of advisory boards with local residents, environmentalists and workers on them, with regulators and waste generators present to provide expert advice and explain the "reality" behind the newspaper headlines.[40]

Some risk communicators acknowledge that many of the factors influencing a person's perception of risk are quite rational, for example whether the risk is imposed or voluntary. They nonetheless seek to change perceptions rather than reduce risks. For example, Peter Sandman's well used formula, Risk = Hazard + Outrage, is used by companies and government agencies trying to get community acceptance for hazardous facilities to work out ways to reduce outrage rather than to reduce the hazard. This is done by concentrating on communicating the concern, honesty and trustworthiness of the organisation proposing the additional risks.

In an article addressed to the chemical industry, James Lindheim, director of Public Affairs World-wide at PR giant Burson-Marsteller, explained how the relationship between a chemical company and a fearful community can be compared to a psychiatrist's relationship with an irrational patient:

- There is, for instance, a very interesting technique that psychiatrists use to deal with irrational and distressed patients. They call it the therapeutic alliance. When an anxious patient first arrives, the psychiatrist will be a very sympathetic listener. The whole time that his mind is telling him that he has a raving lunatic on his hands, his mouth will be telling the patient that his problems are indeed quite impressive, and that he the psychiatrist is amazed at how well the patient is coping, given the enormity of the situation...

- Once that bond of trust is established, true therapy can begin and factual information can be transmitted.[41]

Lindheim advises the chemical industry to do the same: to build a therapeutic alliance with the public, which has an irrational and emotion-based reaction to chemical risks. He says that scientists and engineers should avoid the temptation to try to explain to the public how safe pesticides and other chemicals are. "Obviously, people don't understand. If they did, they wouldn't worry and they certainly wouldn't be hostile."[42] Since the public is so concerned with protecting the environment, the chemical industry "must use its communications resources to demonstrate its commitment to solving environmental problems, and making environmental improvements."

- The industry must convince people that it cares, not by giving them facts about the true risks and benefits of chemical products but by creating a therapeutic alliance. It must accept the legitimacy of their concern, although some may see these concerns as misguided and irrational... The

industry must be like the psychiatrist: rationally figuring out how it can help the public put things in perspective...[43]

What is essential for good public relations, according to Lindheim, is trust. But trust "is built on emotion, not on facts," so increasing public understanding will not be helpful.[44] Similarly, Bill Brody, professor of public relations at Memphis State University, argues that "people are likely to respond to ideas, objects, persons, and events as much by what they think and feel about them as by what they know about them."[45]

There is, however, some evidence that messages of reassurance inadvertently communicate insincerity and dishonesty. The contradictions and incongruities that arise from the need to reassure rather than openly inform are easily picked up by those who are likely to be most affected and are amplified by opponents. Often unspoken messages work against spoken reassurances. For example, the decision to site the incinerator in rural NSW, hundreds of kilometres from the main source of the waste in Sydney conveyed a powerful message to rural people that the incinerator was too dangerous to be sited near so many people in Sydney. This was the message that spoke loudest to them. The Taskforce tried to explain the decision as follows:

- The Taskforce is convinced that there is no technical reasons why the incinerator cannot be sited in the same way as any other industrial plant of a similar type. This has been done successfully overseas. However, it is likely that the public in general would prefer the distance separating the facility from residential areas to be greater than would be acceptable for more familiar industrial plants of a similar type. This is likely to rule out its location in a congested, fully-developed industrial area.[46]

Other siting criteria also communicated hazard to the community. The Taskforce said that within a buffer zone of about one kilometre radius, "there should be no supply offtake of urban or town water, supply, for irrigation, or for intensive agricultural purposes."[47] It has also stated that for a combination of technical and perception considerations it is essential the site "be away from environmentally sensitive areas such as wetlands, national parks and significant streams and lakes."[48]

The people of Corowa, seven hundred kilometres from Sydney, were particularly incensed when their area was chosen by the Taskforce as the preferred site for an incinerator since the location was less than two kilometres from the Murray River, one of Australia's major waterways supplying drinking and irrigation water to three states. "Is the Murray not a significant waterway?" they asked government officials at an angry public meeting. The failure of those officials to give what locals considered to be an adequate answer to this and other questions communicated more to the audience than all the purposeful, reassuring statements they made all evening.[49]

When the governments finally backed down on Corowa as a site in November 1990, stating that it was unsuitable due to its proximity to the Murray River and a large number of wells,[50] this too communicated more to the people living near other nominated incinerator sites about the dangers of an incinerator than any environmentalist's media statement could have done. The contradiction between official statements of reassurance and other less conscious statements of risk did nothing to reinforce trust in the government.

The public consultation process undertaken by the Taskforce and the Waste Management Authority failed to win public acceptance of the incinerator. The Taskforce/Waste Management Authority communication process was flawed because (i) the portrayal of ideal technology working within perfect social systems was not credible; (ii) the effort at reassurance came across as salesmanship; (iii) inadvertent communications conveyed opposite messages to those which were intended; (iv) the failure to consult destroyed faith that the authorities were acting in the community's best interests.

Conclusion

Government and industry experts often assume opposition to their projects are based on ignorance that can be overcome with a good communication process that gives the community the "correct" information and the opportunity to express their views. They seek to reassure the public by promoting an idealised image of technology, a technology that is predictable and controllable and independent of social institutions and structures. The world that they want to create is one of order where everything is

under control, where the authorities can be trusted to do the right thing. Krimsky and Plough point out that:

- A scientist speaking to a community about the health effects of a hazardous waste site is part of a political ritual that aims to evoke confidence and respect. The technical information in the message is secondary to the real goal of the communicator: `Have faith; we are in charge.'[51]

The environmentalist argument which promotes a view of technological systems which are unpredictable and uncontrollable undermines that goal and so comes under bitter attack. Polarisation inevitably follows from the original formulation put forward by the promoters of the technology. It is reinforced by the media which are unable to discern which technological portrayal is "correct" and prefer to report the story of the conflict, in a way everyone can easily understand: a conflict between a responsible government doing its best to deal with hazardous wastes versus anti-industry environmentalists and local residents expressing the NIMBY syndrome (Not In My Back Yard).[52]

Where risk communicators have recognised that trust people have in social institutions is a crucial part of gaining acceptance for hazardous facilities or environmentally dubious developments, PR people have played a major role in advising government authorities and corporations on how to cultivate the trust of local residents. This effort to gain their trust is inevitably manipulative and cynically conducted and often that lack of sincerity is inadvertently communicated to the community, although sometimes it needs to be exposed by opponents.

Michael Pollack has observed that "relatively open, adversarial systems" combined with "public and intervenor-group lobbying" tends to be more effective at enabling the public to influence government decisions than the establishment of consultative procedures.[53] Mechanisms for public participation and consultative procedures that are controlled by policy makers seldom achieve this opening up. Those in power are able to control the structure of the decision-making agenda, lay down the boundary conditions for participation, define the scope of discussion, determine which types of argument will be considered, and generally determine the limits of legitimacy.[54] Moreover, where participation is introduced as an attempt to obtain approval for decisions or to aid policy makers rather than redistribute power, the impact of participation is carefully limited.

In this case, and many others, such attempts to control and confine public discussion can be overcome by local residents creating their own mechanisms for discussion, attracting media attention through actions, protests and stunts, organising their own meetings and rallies and newsletters, and generally bypassing or taking over the formal procedures that PR consultants have carefully contrived. The aim of those wanting to win acceptance for a facility is to narrow the scope of debate, so the aim of those opposing it is to widen the debate, to interest as many outsiders as possible and ultimately to attract so much attention that decision-makers cannot ignore them.

It worked for the residents of Corowa and other selected towns and in the end the governments involved decided not to build a high temperature incinerator in Australia, but rather to seek and develop specific solutions that would be appropriate for each type of waste stream rather than have a catch-all disposal unit that no one wanted. In the meantime, production of intractable organochlorine wastes has supposedly ceased.

Commentary by Gavan McDonell[*]

In recent years the transformation and production of nature through technological processes has been accelerating. The "selling" of technological change and innovation as progress, and its environmental impacts, are well strummed themes in academic discourse. Sharon Beder's pertinent example, the famous, even notorious, Federal/State initiative on the prophetically named "intractable wastes," comes from the late 80s/early 90s; but she could have found plenty of current cases of expert/lay disputes, strategic public relations campaigns and media manipulation on behalf of public policy programs. And the issues raised by the response she outlines in the last two paragraphs might well have been the main theme of the article, rather than its coda.

The article underscores the widespread expectation among many public groups and elected political representatives that legislation, such as Environmental Protection Agency Act, encouraging public involvement could have been effectively implemented in good faith, without the technocratic condescension and political doubletalk, and long processes of social learning, which she recounts.[55] The new legislation purporting to encourage participation opened deep problems of operational logic for

the system of liberal capitalism and its institutional expression in the West in representative democracy and bureaucracy. What emerged was, in large measure, the "impresario state," as Ulrich Beck has described it, which writes scripts and stages shows, and the lumbering venality and hypocrisy of this has increasingly stimulated criticism and new political thinking.

In the last few years much theoretical discussion has swung from conflict analyses deriving from what might be broadly called the descriptive methodologies, such as those of the sociology of scientific knowledge. Fruitful though these have sometimes been, they do not carry the conceptual supplies for a mission to devise an adaptive political theory. What is at stake is the basic issue for Western political philosophy of rethinking the constituting and action-coordinating arrangements of modern democratic societies in the new conditions brought about by the need to write nature in. The contrast in question here is that between the logics of (existing) forms of representative democracy and of (hoped for) participatory ones, or, more generally, between liberal individualism and republican communitarianism.

Since the early 90s this issue has fed some of the liveliest debates in political thought, especially within, on the one hand, poststructuralist, ecocentric and ecofeminist critiques of modernity,[56] and, on the other, within the neo-conservative reaction embracing economic liberalism (rationalism) and managerialism.[57] The liberal institutions of representative democratic government did not provide systematically for the mobilising of values other than through periodic elections or economic lobbying. [58] Some writers advocating more participatory forms of democratic process attempt to go beyond the reformist rubrics of "sustainable development" and "ecological modernisation." They criticise the anthropocentric and androcentric assumptions of Western traditions of the relations between nature and culture, and attempt to redefine the legitimating and decision-making arrangements of democracies. The hope is that new formulations will offer ways beyond decisionistic political science, now frequently invoked in policy debates, or descriptive treatments of risk and epistemological controversies, such as those common in the sociology of scientific knowledge literature, to discussions of political theory and action which bridge society, economy, polity and nature.

Commentary by Ben Selinger[*]

In the ongoing battles between the technocrats and the environmental activists, I believe that we are dealing with what is essentially an ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflicts typically have long histories which are taught, interpreted and promulgated in stark mutual contradiction and isolation. The myths on both sides, developed from the past, help motivate the combatants in the present. Sharon Beder explores some of the tactics and changing approaches of the Technocrats (her opposition), with pertinent quotes from within their ranks. Well done, but so what? When she has solved the problems of Northern Ireland, Bosnia, the Middle East and Central Africa, the lessons, applied to hazardous waste and the incinerator, will then be most helpful.

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Footnotes

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