Representatives in Government - A Role for Social Planning Councils

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REPRESENTATIVENESS IN GOVERNMENT -- A ROLE

FOR SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCILS

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The ability of governments to meet the changing need for broader representativeness in decision-making processes is subject to continuing debate. As a contribution to this debate I propose that governments should find new approaches to broaden their representativeness and that non-governmental Social Planning Councils[1] are one way of accomplishing this end.

Is Representiveness More Than a Theoretical Ideal?

Many social scientists have expressed concern that maximum political participation of all the people is an unrealizable theoretical ideal. Carole Pateman (1970:3) points out that "data from large-scale empirical investigations into political attitudes and behaviour undertaken in most Western countries over the past twenty or thirty years, have revealed that the outstanding characteristic of most citizens, more especially those in the

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[1]Social Planning Councils in Canada and the United States take many forms and perform varied roles. The following statement prepared by the Committee of Social Planning Councils of Ontario in September 1972, summarizes their potential role. "Briefly stated, Social Planning Councils are independent groups of citizens, sometimes closely associated with United Appeals, who are involved in exposing and defining social need and devising the best possible response to it. Their weapons are the power of persuasion based on publication of facts. To work effectively they must have the goodwill of the public. Basically they become involved in three kinds of activities which may be defined as follows:

Social Review: The gathering of information about a community, its institutions, and the services that affect people.

Social Policy: Choosing the best course of action to effect the well-being of the people of the community.

Social Development: Advising and assisting groups involved in social action directed toward the social betterment of the community.

The report "Social Planning in Ontario" (Ontario Welfare Council, 1972) gives some indication of social planning activities in Ontario, Canada. Here 22 responding councils increased their total budgets 88% in 5 years, and of the 22 councils reporting, only 9 reported a budget in 1966.

lower socio-economic groups, is a general lack of interest in politics and political activity. . ." Bloomberg and Rosenstock (1968) state, "The first fact, and it overshadows almost everything else, is that most citizens use their political resources scarcely at all. . . When actual involvement in roles most directly concerned with making community decisions apart from elections is examined, the proportions drop below the 10% level." This view on the impracticability of widespread political involvement is reinforced through housing studies, poverty groups, youth and aged programs, etc., where overcoming broadly based client apathy has been a contributing factor to the failure of many of these projects.

The point stressed by theorists such as Rousseau (1965), John Steuart Mill (1910) and G.D.H. Cole (1920) seems to have gone unheeded. Their point, supported by many recent studies, is that people learn to participate by participating. This process of learning to participate by participating complements recent Canadian and American Government policy which has been increasingly supportive of direct involved representativeness. The alternative appears to be an apathetic electorate dependent on voting in competing minority elites who indirectly determine for people what their real needs are.

The argument for such elitist leadership with limited citizen participation is accepted by many social scientists. It assumes that historical pressures towards centralized bureaucratic power are inevitable. As a result, citizens feel remote from politics and this further discourages direct citizen participation other than through their vote.

On the other hand both Thompson (1970) and Pateman (1970) present considerable evidence from social science research that supports the proposition that it is possible to substantially increase citizen participation with resultant political benefits for the society as a whole. They both independently conclude that greater participation develops more politically aware citizens and that education (learning to participate by participating) is a major variable in this process of increasing representativeness.

The Need for Representativeness

Aside from the social science research supporting the benefits derivable from broader representativeness in government, the speed of change creates an additional imperative for

governments to broaden their base of representativeness. Marvin
Manheim (1970) has identified three critical dimensions of
change. These are demand, technology and values. Within the
context of broader representativeness in governmental decision-
making these three dimensions of change can be viewed as follows:

DEMAND for broader governmental representativeness is
increasing as population, income and education change. As the
awareness of this demand extends to broader segments of the society,
rising expectations of what government should do become almost
endemic.

Changes in TECHNOLOGY affect the need for broader represent-
ativeness in government in many ways. It is often suggested that
if technology can put men on the moon it should be capable of
insuring that government can meet the needs of people. Computers
can collect data and assist in analyzing alternatives that were
too complex to comprehend prior to the cybernetic era. New systems
analysis, such as Planning-Programming-Budgeting, that are dependent
on new developments in technology, are in the process of
implementation in governmental and non-governmental sectors.
Technology is capable, if properly harnessed, of providing reams
of information that can assist in the political decision-making
process. However, if the information going into the system is
not broadly representative, the processed data will reflect that
deficiency.

VALUES, both public and private, are changing in respect
to broader representativeness in the governmental decision-making
process. It has become increasingly clear that groups affected
by government decisions want an increasing say in what is
legislated "for" them. No longer is it considered sufficient to
design programs simply to serve users. Rather, a shift in value
emphasis means governments must now identify which groups are
adequately and inadequately served. Beyond the users, governments
must now consider the unintended consequences to other groups.
For instance, will an income maintenance scheme established for
one group, encourage outsiders to stop working to take advantage
of the benefits meant for others? There is little doubt that
differences in values and rapid changes in the values of many
groups are straining the governments' capacity to govern.

These changes in values, demand and technology further
support the changing need for broader representativeness in
governmental decision-making processes.

Existing Representativeness

Many governments have become increasingly aware of the moral and scientific debates on the need to broaden citizen participation in governmental decision-making processes. A recent article in the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (Auerbach, March, 1972) points out that probably never before has government policy been so supportive of the rights of individuals and groups affected by administrative action.

There appears to be general agreement that modern complex government is more effective "if public policies seek to maximize consent and minimize coercion in their formulation and implementation. To this end, all claims made by individuals and groups in our society should be heard and considered. Furthermore, no governmental decision is just if any such claim is denied a hearing or consideration." (Auerbach, 1972, page 2).

Problems of Representation

Problems arise, however, when the assumption is made that power in our society should be distributed "by the maxim of each according to his claim" (Lowi, 1969, page 292). This may satisfy many claims of strongly organized groups, but not of the weakly organized or unorganized. There are also dangers in delegating increasing powers to agencies and groups without meaningful legislative standards to circumscribe them.

Another problem of this interest-group liberalism could be that government would merely ratify bargains negotiated by competing interest groups. This would have the effect of reducing the governments' responsibility to wield democratic authority. Therefore, a key problem in broader representativeness for government is how to make interest-group concerns known to the decision makers, who must then determine policy by some political action.

In other words, it does not appear practical at this stage of development of our governmental processes to allow each individual and group equal power to <u>determine</u> the outcome of decisions. However it does appear important for individuals and groups to increase their <u>influence</u> over these decisions.

The Case for Administrative Representativeness

I have alluded to the problem of the dangers of delegating increasing powers to agencies and groups without legislative standards to circumscribe them. Kenneth Davis (1969) points out that this danger has been overemphasized. He suggests that legislatures have long recognized that time does not "permit them to make every law they pass so detailed that it could speak directly to citizens and be endorced directly in the courts. That is why administrative agencies were created. Today, the quantity of legislation considered forcloses even the possibility of the legislative prescription of meaningful standards in every case. Nor would such prescription always be wise.

Legislators cannot be expected to foresee and provide for all possible future situations and conditions. To achieve legislative objectives, close, even day to day scrutiny of these conditions and situations may be required to determine whether they are changing so as to call for modification in the applicable rules. As a practical matter, the legislature cannot assume this task, which often may demand specialized knowledge it does not possess."

Sometimes legislation extends only to the decision that the particular area should somehow be legally controlled. "To employ such a limited consensus in legislation which turns all the problems over to an administrative agency runs the risk of raising people's hopes and, inevitably, frustrating them. This makes it all the more essential for interest groups to participate in the ADMINISTRATIVE implementation of policy (as well as in the legislative processes themselves). Only then do they have any assurance that their special needs and circumstances, which the legislation was not able to reflect, will be taken into account by the administrative agency. Agency action then, too, will become more acceptable." (Auerbach, 1972, pages 5 and 6).

Unintended Consequences of Participation

I have pointed to a changing need for broader representativeness in government policy making. I have now further suggested that this broader representativeness must extend to the administrative as well as the legislative processes. It must be recognized, however, that opportunities to participate in administrative and legislative proceedings and to obtain judicial review of administrative decisions, do not guarantee the participating groups favourable outcomes. Unfortunately enlarged participation

creates dangers of its own.

Daniel Bell points out that "increase in the number of claimants leads, inevitably, to lengthier consultation and mediation, and more importantly, to a situation wherein thousands of different organizations, each wanting diverse and contradictory things, simply check each other in their demands." (Bell and Held, 1969, page 142).

The Role of Social Planning Councils

A recent research study by Marvin E. Olsen (1972) further supports the hypothesis that participation in voluntary associations is "positively and somewhat strongly related" to political activity. Olsen emphasizes the distinction between "mobilization" and "mediation" participation. The mobilization version - "which underlies the social participation thesis - maintains that involvement in voluntary, special interest, NON-POLITICAL (emphasis is Olsen's) associations will in time activate individuals politically"....., whereas mediation "sees voluntary associations as mediating between individuals and the political system, focusing on the ASSOCIATIONS' actions (emphasis mine) rather than their effects on members." He concludes that the mobilization process is much more crucial than the mediation process in producing political participation.

Growing empirical support for the proposition that participation in ANY organized social activity is beneficial to political participation leads to an obvious question regarding what factors influence people to join and become involved in organizational activities. An underlying assumption of this paper is that Social Planning Councils can play a significant role in providing accessibility and encouragement for the involvement of people in voluntary associations. The voluntary associations involved in various ways with social planning councils have the potential for considerable citizen appeal because they deal with the perceived local immediate needs of people. They offer opportunities for both mobilization and mediation participation and therefore, can play a role in increasing representativeness in government.

I suggest that non-governmental Social Planning Councils can assist individuals and groups to focus on the needs of people. They can further assist in counteracting the sense of powerlessness and consequent frustration that is a growing concomitant of increasing participation.

Social Planning Councils have the potential to perform many roles.

- They form information centres and volunteer bureaus to

assist in linking people to the communities' resources
established to meet their needs.

- They bring together organized groups and interested
  individuals around specific social problems, such as,
  day care and housing.

- They interpret complex legislation to local citizens
  and groups.

- They research into causes of social dysfunction.

- They collect data bank type statistics that focus on
  social problems.

- They assist in encouraging, developing and sponsoring
  innovating programs to meet the local social needs of
  people.

- They attempt evaluation and auditing of existing delivery
  of service systems with an aim to improving accountability
  to the local community, and to upgrading the quality of
  service provided to the user.

- They attempt to determine and publicize what is perceived
  as the local communities' most pressing social needs.

- They act as enablers with expertise in bringing coalitions
  of divergent interest groups through the broad range of
  alternatives facing their problem.

On the other hand Social Planning Councils are sometimes
described as lacking a mandate to plan. They are often accused of
being self appointed limited interest groups; of being agency
oriented, conservative, status quo oriented, activist, non-activist,
biased, lacking in power to implement, and so on. Criticisms such
as these overlook the significance of the point that somebody is
making political decisions that affect other people. If it is
correct to assume that people learn to participate by participating
and that participation in any form positively affects political
awareness, then Social Planning Councils have a basic role to play
despite many obvious limitations. This role underlies the many
potential programs referred to above. This role is to reinforce
representative processes in political decision making. The result
is more individuals and groups have an added means for making their
perceptions of their needs known to the decision makers. In
summary, since Social Planning Councils address themselves to

perceived local needs and problems, they have considerable
appeal, if properly organized, for plugging people and groups
into this representative process.

The Intermediary Role of Social Planning Councils

Because of inadequate resources and lack of expertise few
Social Planning Councils even attempt to undertake all the
activities noted above. The point is that no matter what form
the role of the local Social Planning Council takes, it acts as
an intermediary between the legislative and administrative levels
of government, and the individual person and groups who desire
to do something about their problem.

I suggest this intermediary role is important from two
points of view. First, it provides a local non-governmental
widely representative source for gathering information from
divergent groups around specific problems or issues. This informa-
tion could and should form an important link in the governments'
network of sources leading to broader administrative and
legislative representativeness.

Secondly, it provides a local forum for concerned citizenry
to discuss their concerns about inadequacies in our present
system. In attempting to co-ordinate interest and support for
their cause this citizenry come into contact through the planning
council with other views which can substantially broaden their
understanding on their problem, BEFORE they attempt to plug into
the representative processes of administrative and legislative
government.

In other words social planning councils provide one means
of drawing concerned citizens into the political process. Through
professional and volunteer social planning "enablers" people
are indirectly encouraged to broaden their experience in learn-
ing how to participate. The result should be a gradual increase
in interest, expertise and influence in politics and political
activity.

Regionalization and Representativeness

The trend toward regionalization has its roots in the
problems of representativeness. Existing governmental
jurisdictions at the local level are fragmented with an over-
lapping of boundaries and a confusion of administrative centres.

This overlapping and confusion has inhibited decision-making at
the local level and led to a concentration of power at the
provincial or state and national levels. Here people are
further removed from the real decision-making processes by what
I have referred to as the historical pressures towards centralized
bureaucratic power.

The rationalization of boundaries and removal of common
administrative centres to the region gives the appearance of
further shifting representative power from the local level. In
fact, regionalization is an attempt to bring legislative and
administrative power closer to the people. The rationale behind
this shift is that at this level the needs of the area can be
determined through a representative information system capable
of producing decisions in the region, implementable for the region.

Social Planning Councils also face the problems of
fragmentation with an overlapping of boundaries and a confusion
of administrative centres. Somewhat removed from the grass
roots citizen and local agency, these councils are moving towards
a level of representativeness analogous to that of regionalization.

This trend to regionalization is consistent with the
changing need for increased representativeness that reaches the
real legislative and administrative decision makers. It is
also consistent with the need to overcome the powerlessness
resulting in part from participation that is in itself often
increasingly fragmented.

In other words, if increasing power to make legislative
and administrative decisions resides in the region, then social
planning councils for the reasons discussed in this paper, should
be providing non-governmental access for those affected by these
decisions.

                            Conclusion

        I have referred to a key problem of how to make individual
and group concerns known to the decision makers without ignoring
the weakly organized and unorganized—and without putting both
the legislators and administrators in the position of merely
ratifying bargaining negotiated between these interest groups. I
have suggested non-governmental Social Planning Councils have a
potentially significant role to play in the changing need for
representativeness for the myriad of strong, weak and unorganized
groups and individuals.

This role recognizes the feedback benefits resulting from the proposition that people learn to participate by participating, and that social planning councils can provide neutral professional expertise to help accelerate that learning process. This role for social planning councils, through the involvement of interested and progressively better informed citizens, allows for the collection and dissemination of information that could be an important source for augmenting citizen participation in social decision-making.

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