

**Shared visions, unholy alliances: power, governance and deliberative processes  
in local transport planning**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper our aim is to bring some critical reflection to bear on the upsurge of participatory rhetoric in local governance. The research we discuss investigates two case studies of deliberative exercises used by local authorities to develop their Local Transport Plans, chosen as exemplars of authorities seen to be at the forefront of participatory transport planning. Our analysis avoids the rather simplistic 'check list' evaluative models based upon the Habermasian ideals of communicative rationality and instead develops an approach which attends to the power relations embedded in the process of participation. Significantly, the research, across a range of stakeholder groups, reveals a deeply problematic relationship between citizen involvement and established structures of democratic decision-making - reflected in an emphasis on (soft) relational outcomes to the virtual exclusion of (hard) policy impacts. We draw attention to the institutional constraints which account for the limited realisation of the participatory agenda in local governance. Conclusions are developed relating to both the process of participation evaluation and the wider consequences (intended and unintended) of the expansion of public involvement for the renewal of local democracy.

## **Introduction**

Since the mid-1990s an increasingly hegemonic discourse coalition has developed in the UK around the need to engage the public more directly in policy development and decision-making (Blair 1998, DETR 1998, LGA 1998, House of Lords 2000, POST 2001, UK Research Councils 2002, RCEP 1998). This discourse has emerged in response to a perceived crisis of legitimation in government and a questioning of the normative and functional adequacy of democratic institutions and of the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Traditional representative democracy, it has been argued, has become dysfunctional (Coote and Lenaghan 1997, Cooper et al 1995), unable to adequately respond to declining public participation in political processes or the growing public distrust of authority and expertise (House of Lords 2000, IPPR 2004). Accordingly, the current government's modernising agenda has sought to engender democratic renewal and reactivate citizen responsibilities (DETR 1998) - in part through vigorous engagement and an opening up of policy processes. The pervasive rhetoric of public dialogue and involvement in decision-making can be found across various spheres of governance including environment (Petts 2001, Jones et al 2002, Environment Agency 2002, Burgess et al 1998), health care policy and service delivery (Barnes 1999, McIvor 1998, Pickard 1998, Abelson et al 2003), urban planning and regeneration (Burns and Taylor 2000, Wates 1999) and risk management (Atherton and Hunt 2002, Cabinet Office 2002, DEFRA 2001, 2002).

Much of the substantial activity accompanying this rhetorical shift has taken place within local government. Driven by both the national government participatory agenda and local advocacy for the broadening of participation, UK local authorities have been

experimenting with 'new' and deliberative methods of stakeholder and public involvement. Local Agenda 21 provided an early catalyst for innovation with various models of local stakeholder involvement emerging in the production of sustainable development strategies at different levels of local and regional government (Buckingham-Hatfield and Percy 1999). Other processes of local policy and plan development have built on this experience, including participation related to the drawing up of local air quality management plans (DETR 2000a), local transport plans (DETR 1999) and community strategies (DETR 2000b). Within this local level activity the objective of enabling deliberation rather than consultation has often been central. Deliberation is defined by Wakeford (2001) as the process by which participants interact, engage in considered debate and modify their views based on information, shared views and respect for different perspectives. Deliberative methods seek to overcome the communicative barriers that lead to adversarial styles of interaction (such as traditional public meetings) and also aim, at least in principle, for a certain redistribution of power and an equalising of the resources and ability of different parties to speak.

Our purpose in this paper is to bring some critical reflection to bear on this upsurge of participatory rhetoric and activity in local governance, through in particular examining initiatives that have taken place in UK local transport planning. For whilst a move towards the broadening of involvement in local decision-making must fundamentally be 'a good thing' for those committed to democratic ideals, and a project we would broadly seek to support, we are equally concerned that this is taken forward critically and with full appreciation of the challenges involved. There are, for example, fundamental

questions to ask about what the aims and objectives of participation are to be and the relationship between new participatory processes and established practices of managerialism and representative democracy in local government. What are participatory initiatives actually delivering and what has changed from the processes that existed beforehand? Are participatory and deliberative processes making a difference, and is this difference an improvement?

Such questioning of the new participatory agenda has become an increasing feature of recent commentary and analysis, maybe inevitably as the first wave of enthusiasm for new ways of working has ceded to critical evaluation, reflection and learning from experience (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003). Owens (2000) argues, for example, that simply redesigning processes of participation will not be sufficient to realise a civic model of deliberation and could indeed be counterproductive. She calls for a critical consideration of how and whether new ways of engaging the public 'can avoid the pitfalls of the old' and for an analytical focus on the nature and failures of the institutional contexts within which processes are being employed. In a similar vein, Rayner (2003) raises the possibility that new participatory practices may be becoming part of a managerial approach to politics rather than instruments of real empowerment or democratisation; a concern also articulated by Hajer and Kesselring (1999) through an analysis of processes of engagement in transport policy in Munich. O'Neill (2001) highlights problems of representation in small deliberative fora, which, he argues, raise questions of political and ethical legitimacy and the need for 'a clearer account' of the role of such fora in democratic institutions.

A good deal of analytical attention has centred on and critiqued the Habermasian principles of communicative rationality that underpin much of the upsurge of participatory effort. For Habermas the roots of cooperation are found in the very structure of language. Through conversation and debate, he contends, people rationally and inevitably move towards reasonable (and consensual) judgements and agreements. The communicative rationality of a process of deliberation depends upon a number of principles being met - conditions of what Habermas terms the ideal speech situation. Individuals representing all the important interests in the issue must be at the table. All the stakeholders must be fully, and equally, informed and able to represent their interests. The discussion must be carried out in terms of good reasons, so that the power of a good argument is the important dynamic. It must allow all claims and assumptions to be questioned – and all constraints to be tested. Crucially, all must be equally empowered. For Habermas, power-equalising communicative practice is ensured by having a procedure where all claims are evaluated through commonly accepted principles of comprehensibility, integrity, legitimacy and truth (or accuracy). Like scientific method, the conditions of communicative rationality will never fully be met, but the attempt to approximate them should, it is argued, help ensure that decisions take into account important knowledge and perspectives, that they are in some sense socially just and that they do not simply co-opt those in weaker positions (Innes and Booher 1999).

Critiques of the Habermasian ideal and how this has underpinned the development and use of deliberative methods in local governance have, however, increasingly turned to Foucault's perspective on discourse and power and the notion that

participation (or discourse) is constrained by, hides, and at the same time perpetuates certain sets of power relations. For example, work in the field of critical planning theory has challenged the idealism of communicative rationality and questioned the emancipatory achievements and potential of participatory innovations in the UK and elsewhere (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998, Huxley 2000, McGuirk 2001, Flybjerg 1998a, Rydin 2003). Many of these authors have, in particular, questioned whether the process goal of consensus is possible or even desirable in a world of increasing difference. Seeking shared values they argue may actually silence rather than give voice (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998). There are interesting parallels here with recent highly critical accounts of the use of participatory methods in developing countries, with Cooke and Kothari (2001) arguing that these have become a 'new tyranny' facilitating the illegitimate and unjust exercise of power. Such a trenchant challenge to the current orthodoxy may at first sight appear inappropriate to the UK context, but the focus of this critique on relations of power and the ritualised use of participatory techniques may prove instructive for understanding the challenges and potential implications of the participatory shift that has taken place.

Alongside drawing on this literature we also seek to shed some critical light on the approaches that have been used to assess recent experiments in participatory democracy in the UK. Much of the participatory research, which explicitly deals with evaluation, is based on a set of rather narrowly focussed procedural criteria derived from the ideals of communicative rationality. These evaluative models typically involve an assessment framework which considers two meta-criteria: fairness and competence (Webler 1995). Fairness relates to the sufficiency of opportunities that each and every

person will have to protect and express their legitimate individual interests and to contribute to the development of the collective will. Competence refers to the ability of the participation decision-making process to provide the participants with the procedural tools and knowledge needed to make the best possible decisions (Petts 1995, 2001, McIver 1998, Beierle and Cayford 2000, Renn et al 1995, Webler and Tuler 1998, Rowe and Frewer 2000). In most cases assessment is systematically structured to allow comparability across different participatory methods. In contrast, only a small number of studies have considered the outcomes rather than the process of participation (cf. Seargent and Steele 1999). Most of these are based on in-depth case studies that explore participants' goals and satisfaction immediately following their involvement (e.g. Rosener 1981, Sommer 2001, Santos and Chess 2003, Burns and Taylor 2000) and few address longer-term policy or decision-making impacts (e.g. Beirele 2002) or the institutional constraints that impede policy outcomes. This lack of attention to impacts is, in part at least, down to the fact that questions about the temporality of outcomes go well beyond the scope and lifetime of most evaluative frameworks – which are characteristically short term and oriented to providing a judgement of efficacy. Linked to this are the difficulties involved in establishing cause-effect relationships when participation is one of many inputs into decision-making processes (also Abelson et al 2003).

The research we discuss in this paper, with the aim of contributing to both substantial and methodological debates, has investigated participatory activities in English transport planning. Whilst we do consider the specific circumstances associated with transport planning (see also Bickerstaff et al 2002) our principal purpose here is to

develop insights regarding the achievements and constraints to enacting the participatory agenda across local governance. As noted above transport is one of a number of areas of local government responsibility where public involvement has become more central, reflecting an expectation that this may garner wider local support for and ownership of transport decisions (DETR 1999, DfT 2004<sup>1</sup>). Authorities in England are required to plan and deliver Local Transport Plans (LTP's) - five-year programmes for managing and enhancing transport services within a comprehensive multi-modal strategy for the achievement of local and national objectives (DETR 1999). LTP's are essentially bidding documents with funding allocation dependent on assessment of the strength and quality of submissions based on a series of criteria set out by central government. Guidance on Local Transport Plans (1999) laid down government expectations and requirements for participation across a range of strategy domains. The first provisional LTP's were submitted in July 1999 with the full plans finalised a year later. The second round of LTP's requires local authorities to prepare a new plan by the end of July 2005 (provisional) to be revised and finalised by March 2006. Less prescriptive or demanding expectations are set out for involvement in the second round of LTP's with a stronger emphasis on engaging local stakeholders rather than 'the public' as such (DfT 2004). Particular importance is, however, attached to evidence that local authorities have sought to "achieve local support for potentially controversial transport proposals e.g. congestion charging" (Ibid, 16).

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<sup>1</sup> The Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DEFRA) was dismantled in 2002 with transport responsibilities transferred to the newly created Department for Transport (DoT).

Our research has investigated two case studies of deliberative exercises used by local authorities to develop their LTP's, chosen as exemplars of authorities seen to be in the forefront of participatory transport planning. In considering these two case studies we focus, in particular, on those aspects that are often hidden in simplistic 'check list' approaches to evaluating participatory processes - power relations, outcomes and democratic practice – but which we argue are central to understanding the tensions that are being played out at a local level. To do so, we bring together the voices of different actors involved in processes of deliberation to ground (theoretically and empirically) our approach and to expose commonalities and contrasts of perspective. For analytical purposes we distinguish between aspects of process (the discourse space) and outcomes (policy impacts, relational changes and the institutional constraints to outcomes) - although these categories do overlap. We also address the temporal abstraction of much research on public participation by exploring people's reflections at some distance from the original participatory and plan-making process. A similar post-hoc approach has been productively applied by Davies (2002) in evaluating the relational and policy outcomes of a partnership for sustainable development.

We begin our discussion with a brief description of the case studies and research methods and then move on to an analysis of interviewee accounts. We then draw conclusions related to both the process of researching participative and deliberative exercises and the wider consequences (intended and unintended) of the expansion of public involvement for the renewal of local democracy.

## **Case studies and research methods**

The empirical discussion in this paper draws upon a two-part project examining how 'public participation' has been conceptualised and implemented within local transport planning practice in England. In the late 1990's a new responsibility for the development of integrated local transport plans was given to local highway authorities – with expectations for public involvement in producing these plans laid out in national policy guidance (see also Bickerstaff and Walker 2001). The first phase of our research had the objective of establishing the extent to which both traditional and more innovative participatory processes had been applied in the development of LTP's. It therefore involved a broad survey of English highway authorities and a content analysis of provisional LTP documents (see Bickerstaff et al 2002, Bickerstaff and Walker 2001 for discussion of this work). The second 'case-study' phase, and the focus of this paper, sought to evaluate 'best practice' examples of participatory processes in more depth. Two local authority areas were selected - Warrington Borough Council (W.B.C.) and Warwickshire County Council (W.C.C.) – both standing out in the survey analysis as authorities that had not only employed a range of different involvement techniques but had also developed and adopted novel, deliberative methods. In addition, each authority performed well in our analysis of the LTP documents, which drew upon the public involvement criteria or descriptors used by the DETR to assess the quality of plans (DETR 1999). The cases were also selected to offer variation in terms of local authority political structure and culture. Warwickshire is a two tier County Council which, in producing a Local Transport Plan, must co-ordinate with five separate District Councils. As a county authority W.C.C. has experience of consultation under the previous funding framework for transport – a style of engagement characterised by the

authority itself as “draft, announce and defend” (W.C.C. 2000, 1). In contrast, W.B.C. is a Unitary Authority (a status attained in 1998) with less experience of consultation (under the prior political structure it did not hold transportation responsibilities), but seeking to assert an independent identity and a capacity to make decisions and decide policy without reference to an outside county authority. In contrast to Warwickshire, Warrington covers a smaller, largely urban, geographical area – associated with smaller numbers of interest groups. Finally, both authorities were prepared to cooperate in the research.

In terms of the participatory processes that the two authorities embarked upon, W.B.C. developed a programme which utilised a range of methods, beginning in 1999 with a major leafleting campaign. This was followed by four separate round-table meetings with key stakeholders (representatives of interest groups) - sessions that dealt with pre-defined issues central to the government’s White Paper on transportation (1998). Each roundtable meeting was attended by 12-24 participants. The stated aim was to solicit detailed comments on the substance of the emerging LTP from stakeholders with established knowledge and experience of transport matters (W.B.C. 1999, 30). The final element of the programme involved nine focus groups with sectors of the population that it was felt may have distinctive views on transport (e.g. the disabled, young people). A number of traditional participatory techniques (exhibitions, a household survey) were also used.

The second case study authority, Warwickshire County Council, adopted consensus-building methods involving a cross-section of stakeholders from across the county –

but as with Warrington attendees were all representatives of particular interest groups. The consensus building process began in 1998 consisting of four rounds of meetings, with between 75-100 organisations or individuals taking part in each event, following the main stages in development of the final LTP – from identification of problems and visions, to strategy development and then through to drafting targets and measures (W.C.C. 2000). Community groups were also given the opportunity to run their own consensus building exercises and meetings were arranged with groups who were felt to be under-represented at the main events (e.g. small community groups in rural areas). Several traditional methods (a representative survey and exhibitions) were, again, used alongside the deliberative exercises.

In order to access a diversity of actors' evaluations of these processes a total of 42 semi-structured interviews were undertaken - made up of 32 participants, six council officers (two of the officer interviews related to local authorities other than W.B.C. or W.C.C. that had used innovative deliberative mechanisms) and four council members. The interviews each lasted between 1½ - 2 hours and were designed to explore how the participatory exercises were carried out, what was achieved and not achieved, and how the various participants felt about their involvement. In the case of the participant interviewees, lists of attendees were first assembled with the assistance of local authority officers (these were partial given gaps in record keeping) and from this information two contact lists of 20-25 people were drawn up. Since all participants came as representatives of local interests in each of the deliberative processes (the Warrington roundtables and the Warwickshire consensus building exercise) sampling, as far as possible, aimed for a mixture of interests (business, user groups,

environmental interests, civic groups, residents groups) as well as a small number of local authority participants (from other sections/district councils). Contact was made with all of these individuals (in one case this had to be done initially through the local authority) and interviews carried out with those that were willing/able to take part.

The interviews took place between October and December 2000. This was after the publication of both the provisional LTP's in July 1999 (and the preliminary DETR assessment in December) and the final LTP's in July 2000, but just prior to the final assessment and allocation of resources from central government in the December 2000. Each of the interviews was transcribed and coded using an iterative procedure, where categories were identified and developed through an interaction between concepts and themes emerging from the data and theoretical ideas derived from communicative rationality and its critiques.

Our discussion of the interviewee accounts is structured into two themes, the nature of the discourse space and participation outcomes. In terms of criticisms of participation these themes recurred, both explicitly and more implicitly, throughout the interviewees assessments of the two deliberative processes. Although we do highlight some areas of contrast between the two authorities, our argument is that beyond these relatively minor differences we can identify generic reflections and concerns, which offer an insight into the realities of the 'participatory turn' in local transport planning and more broadly local governance. In the discussion which follows we use verbatim quotes from the stakeholder interviews, identifying whether the speaker was a participant (and if so giving representative affiliations), officer or council member.

### **The discourse space**

The (Habermasian) conceptualisation of deliberation aims for the achievement of an equality in the ability (or competence) of all parties involved in debate, to put views forward, challenge the claims of others and to have an influence on outputs and outcomes. As discussed earlier the central weakness and critique of the theoretically attractive ideals of communicative rationality is that relations of power are not simply put to one side on entering the deliberative forum, delivering some sort of relational neutrality, but are actually brought into and shape the process of deliberation.

The permanence of power relations within the LTP deliberations was a strong feature in the accounts of many participants, often supported by the remarks of council officers and members. In part this related to relations between participants and government institutions (cf. Davies 2002, Santos and Chess 2003). For many people early enthusiasm for the process had begun to give way to doubts and scepticism about the purposes and institutional drivers underlying these exercises. Participants often commented to the effect that the local authority was obligated to carry out participatory exercises, 'they had no choice', or that motivations were grounded in the legitimisation of decisions already made. Many were concerned that their involvement in processes of deliberation and consensus building was amounting to a process of co-option and a neutering of oppositional politics. Participants were consequently left to make choices about whether and how to participate given the potential links between inclusion and subordination. It was noticeable that this was a position most clearly articulated by those participating in the Warwickshire exercise. This greater cynicism regarding the drivers of participatory initiatives can be linked to what many people talked about as the

authority's poor track-record of engaging the local community. These concerns do, as the following remark demonstrates, present a very real tension between a closer interaction with the local authority and the ability or power to criticise and challenge (also Barnes 1999b, Abelson et al 2003).

I feel it's sort of softened up the debate a bit somehow and therefore, it's a bit like do you want to go down a Greenpeace line on these issues and just have your... strongly state your view, and don't sort of get into cosy relationships with people and you can go on doing that. Whether you want to take that line or whether you think you're going to get more results by being a responsible and patient negotiator on these issues with people who now want to be your friend rather than a faceless enemy (Participant, male, civic interest)

A central question for many participants related to the distribution of control over deliberation between stakeholders. The framing and scope of debate have been identified as critical in determining whether the process empowers people or merely legitimises established power relations (e.g. Irwin 2001, Pickard 1998, Pratchett 1999, Santos and Chess 2003). What was clear in both case studies was that the agenda for debate was strongly defined from above – a structure that was inflexible to any further revision. So in this sense community knowledge did not (and could not) determine or modify decision-making processes, but was instead articulated through and organised by existing professional structures (also Cooke and Kothari 2001, Rydin 2003). The narrow parameters of debate drew criticism from a range of participants – principally,

that events were too focussed on the generalities, ignoring big structural projects and circumventing all talk of money.

**Interviewer: In terms of improving it what would you say the key areas are?**

I think the main thing is the feeling that in the end we were powerless because we didn't have a say on how the money was divided up, how the bid was actually going to be made. We could say nice things, put forward nice idealist views but they then go away and make hard-nosed decisions.

(Participant, female, environmental interest)

Beyond the scope of debate, Owens (2000) raises the questions of how the baggage carried into deliberative fora bears upon the identities and values that they produce and how power is deployed within such processes. Reflecting similar concerns Cooke and Kothari (2001) point to the tyranny of the group – where group dynamics lead to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the already powerful. Our case study work similarly revealed distortions in deliberative processes based on relations between different participant constituencies and the (inequitable) distribution of communicative and knowledge resources (see also Abelson et al 2003, Flyvbjerg 1998a, DfT 2004). Individual participants often articulated, or were seen by others to hold, strong ideological and instrumental reasons for taking part, leading to distortions within the process of deliberation. In democratic terms the result was either intransigence and a lack of movement or a skewed 'consensus' reflecting the partial interests of a vocal and powerful (in a communicative sense at least) minority. In the

following extracts the speakers reflect on the limits to deliberation (or the achievement of a shared vision) given the strong positions that people taking part had adopted – and maintained.

And they're representatives of [erm] residents associations from a particular part of the town, and on their mind is one thing, we need a bypass through our bit of town, or whatever sort of issue there is, so that people bring their own agendas [...] So it probably wasn't realistic to expect to sort of get members of the public together to come up with a sort of shared vision in any practical way. (Participant, male, business interest)

From my experience when we've tried to organise residents groups or anything else the people who come are generally the people with some sort of an axe to grind, they've got some sort of an interest. (Council member, female)

In some cases the search for consensus itself was seen as a mechanism of silencing rather than of giving voice – where individuals held opinions that conflicted with the majority. As Huxley argues, drawing on Foucault, a conception of communicative action that presupposes consensus could come close to being an instrument for discipline and a rather unbearable group pressure (2000, 372). The following extract gives an example of such pressure:

Probably there's a thing to impress the others in the group. And this schoolmistress she [...] agreed with what I said, she told me "yes, I agree" – again that was during the break while no-one else was there, and again they're [the participants] frightened to say something, of upsetting the rest [...] But if you're asking me about the tables [the 'roundtable' discussions], they're almost frightened to say something. (Participant, male, civic interest)

These power inequalities and instrumental motivations were perpetuated through a range of strategies and tactics (not always consciously calculated), performed both within and external to the deliberative forum. Drawing on the typology of sociological action adopted by Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998) these strategies can usefully be grouped into teleological, normatively regulated or dramaturgical behaviours.

*Teleological action:* This is goal-oriented action where people used argumentative or other tactics explicitly or more implicitly to achieve their ends. This type of action includes recourse to alternative channels of influence beyond the deliberative forum (also Flyvbjerg 1998a), for example:

In our group we had a representative of a car company and he was a very high animal and of course he was an executive, he was able [erm], to speak his mind and manipulate people and he would always have an

answer on anything and he was constantly talking (Participant, female, residents' interest)

It is slightly beholden on us that if we do have views about various aspects to make those known separately, that, that ['deliberative' involvement] has to be done very carefully so that we're not sort of undermining the submissions that we've sort of supported. (Participant, male, business interest)

*Normatively regulated behaviour.* There are also instances where pre-defined common values are used to ensure individuals complied with a particular set of group norms (Rydin 2003). In a number of cases we found that representatives of a range of interest groups, who shared similar goals or values, chose to work together, to agree objectives and priorities. In this way they were able to pool power in deliberative fora to ensure a particular instrumental purpose was met. Such responses were more characteristic of the W.C.C. case – reflecting not only the greater continuity in involvement (i.e. participants could attend all rather than a single event) but also the more extensive and established interest group networks that were in place. Whilst W.B.C. lacked the number of what one council member termed 'consultation groupies' (and thus the potential for co-operative behaviours), several participants did comment to the effect that they would take a more tactical approach in future involvement. What we see resulting from participation, and evident in the quote below, is the acquisition of planning knowledge or an understanding of the institutional context, which supports the position of powerful actors (Ibid).

There were a number of us that were trying to achieve similar things and I think if we'd known better ahead of time we would have made more headway I think, but we were all novices at it relatively speaking

**Interviewer: In what way can you make headway if you don't know what you are going into?**

You're going into a consensus building process [...] and you know that it will be difficult to get a particular segment of view across so you'd work out strategies and tactics before going into it – which is much more difficult once you're into it because you're split up [...] because one of you's in this group, and one in that and another, and it's very difficult once the process is started to say look I really think we're going to fail to get across the point, that this is crucial - whereas if you'd gone to it knowing that this is a crucial point and everybody's agreed that it's a crucial point (Participant, female, environmental interest).

*Dramaturgical behaviour.* Participants sometimes chose to hide a particular image of themselves to evoke an acceptable representation to the 'consensus audience' in order to minimise antagonism. This was particularly the case for business representatives who felt that full openness about organisational goals and values, which were likely to conflict with the participating majority, would damage their 'public image'. Rather, they favoured alternative communicative channels to make their 'substantive' representations to the council. So to use the terminology of Irving Goffman (1969) we see, within the deliberative forum, front stage performances or modes of interaction

that conceal (not necessarily in an overt manner) the real reality of the back stage and come to be taken for that reality (see also Kothari 2001).

My view is that the degree to which we're able in that type of forum to have an open and honest debate is very limited – cause obviously the other thing is you've got an awful lot of people there that you can potentially upset if you say the wrong thing because of the nature of the people ....So you do have to, you have to mind your p's and q's when you're in that environment.  
(Participant, female, business interest)

The discussion in this section does clearly show how, within the deliberative process, power relations map onto the process of participation. Some individuals or groups have the skill or authority to present their interests in more generally valid terms, which others do not (Mosse 2001). Importantly, these power relations and the strategic behaviours that accompany them were very real to the participants in the deliberative fora. Such relational distortions are very far from the equalizing of communicative skills, procedural tools and neutrality of strategic objectives envisioned by the Habermasian conceptualization of the ideal speech situation.

We have, however, focused so far on the process of participation. It is also important to consider the interaction of relations of power with the outcomes of deliberative fora – that is the nature of policy and non-policy impacts including relational consequences and the institutional barriers which constrain change. It is to these outcome issues that we now turn.

## **The outcomes of deliberation**

The outcomes of deliberation are one dimension of participation evaluation which remains both poorly operationalised and in itself problematic to assess. This reflects a lack of agreement on what constitutes an outcome, how it should be measured, as well as the difficulty in tracking any impacts beyond the particular event and in establishing direct cause-effect relationships. Whilst we cannot hope to provide a comprehensive approach to conceptualising and assessing outcomes, the retrospective focus of the study does allow us to explore some of the distinctions and complexities raised by this dimension of researching participation. Here we distinguish specifically between policy outcomes, relational impacts and finally the institutional constraints that limit the outcomes of participation.

### *Policy outcomes: interpretation and transparency*

As noted already one of the key questions for participatory democracy centres on what new deliberative processes are actually delivering in terms of policy outcomes: how these deliberations are being interpreted by officials, and how decisions are altered as a result.

The general findings of research in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, which considers the impacts of participation, suggests that participation is not having a substantive effect on policy processes and decision outcomes (Flyvbjerg 1998a, Bickerstaff and Walker 2001, Davies 2002, Tewdr Jones and Allmendinger 1998, Tewdr-Jones and Thomas 1998, Lowndes 2001a, Barnes 1999b, Abelson et al 2003). A survey of best practice in local authorities by the Audit Commission found that three quarters failed to

link the results of consultation with decision-making processes (1999, 41). Indeed, an evaluation of the LTP process itself found that authorities had not been successful “in feeding the results of consultation back into the process in terms of redefining objectives or programme priorities” (DfT 2004, 44-45). The translation of the range of participatory outputs into usable policy instruments required the planners to sort through and prioritise an ‘argumentative jumble’ of inputs based on diverse systems of knowledge, value, and meaning (Healey 1997). As Mosse (2001) and others (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998, McGuirk 2001, Abelson et al 2003, Chess and Santos 2003, Barnes et al 2003, Flyvbjerg 1998a) argue, project actors are not neutral facilitators of local knowledge. At the most basic level officers own the research tools, choose the themes for debate, establish rules of dialogue and abstract and summarise according to relevant institutional criteria.

When officers and council members were asked to explain how the public deliberations had specifically influenced the development of the LTP they often found it difficult to do so (see also DfT 2004). Where direct links were made between public involvement and the LTP outcome, the ‘involvement’ was usually through a traditional opinion survey - for which quantified data could be reported and summarised in an accepted manner. For officers the survey data gave answers to precise questions – which, as Hoggett has argued (1995), reflects a preference for forms of consultation which only give expression to the power-holders’ definition of the problem. Importantly, a key concern of public agencies is to generate responses which are representative of their communities (also Leach and Wingfield 1999, Seargent and Steele 1999). In this sense the sample populations associated with large scale surveys (whether fully

representative or not) were talked about as more balanced and reliable, lending a legitimacy to policy-making that could not be matched by deliberative methods.

In the few cases where the outputs of the deliberative processes were referred to, this took the form of participant testimonies being used to legitimise the official discourse, rather than to structure aspects of the plan or present an alternative view. As one officer commented:

When you read the Local Transport Plan you'll be able to see places where their contribution [quotes] was actually slotted in (Transport officer, male).

Analysis of the LTP documentation from both local authorities similarly suggests a rather ambiguous interpretation of the outputs of participation. Overall, the W.B.C. plans did make stronger links between outputs and (changes to) the plan documents – a contrast which may in part reflect differences in administrative structure and political culture. In the case of W.B.C., whilst the provisional LTP gives little evidence of how strategies took account of the participation process, it does catalogue the responses and gives the council's reaction to them. In the final LTP (W.B.C. 2000a) the participation programme is attributed with influencing the wording of one of the core objectives (which correspond to those set out in government guidance), and the priority attached to different road uses. The plan's emphasis on road safety, developing walking and cycling strategies, proposals for improving public transport and the recommendation that congestion charging and paying for workplace parking should not

be pursued, are all linked to data (primarily quantitative) from the consultation programme. Whilst a companion report on the consultation process does detail the methodology, responses and application of results, it is still difficult to establish the precise role of the participatory methods, particularly the deliberative elements, and their importance relative to other decision-making inputs.

The W.C.C. consensus building process is linked in the final LTP document (W.C.C. 2000) to influencing the identification of transport problems and the strategic formulation of the plan. However, as with the Warrington LTP, it is not clear how far the consultation outputs contributed something new to the plan or their importance relative to other policy factors. The ambiguity in the status of participatory outputs and their transformation into outcomes is clear in the following quote from the LTP:

This new approach means that it is not possible to answer the question that has been posed “to what extent did the consensus building exercise influence the strategy?” [...] It cannot be answered when consultation initiated the process before any strategy had been drafted. The strategy emerged from the consultation in a ‘seamless’ manner. (W.C.C. 2000, 1).

Rather, ‘influence’ is demonstrated through the incorporation of results, again mainly in the form of statistics, where considered appropriate (Ibid, 3). Yet, it is not made clear what constitutes appropriateness and why. Like Warrington the council sought views on traffic reduction targets and associated demand management measures, and the selection of more conservative targets than set out in government advice was linked to

the results of a ranking exercise. Neither Warwickshire nor Warrington effectively addressed the issue of consulting disadvantaged groups in assessing the needs of the socially excluded – an issue which does point to the problems in widening participation beyond the ‘usual suspects’. Nor did they open the consultation agenda up to the subject of major infrastructural projects (i.e. new road schemes).

So both the interview and textual analyses suggest that deliberative materials are translated into, and filtered through, the technical language and structured analytical frameworks used by local authority officers (Healey 1997).

As far as most stakeholders are concerned, it then becomes an impenetrable ‘black box’ of ‘taken-for-granted’ knowledge (Ibid, 275).

The application of people’s deliberations was therefore oriented upwards, to justify or validate higher policy objectives or mobilise civic support rather than downwards to steer action. So, as the following extract from one local authority officer highlights, the use of participatory outputs often served a rather symbolic role – to signal good decision-making without necessarily influencing it (Mosse 2001).

If I can be slightly cynical – they’re (workshops) very useful in keeping people engaged and getting you know getting them involved and getting them on side because they are involved. What we actually get out of them is perhaps of less value than the mere fact that they’re happening [...]. But if I was a politician I would say I think the public consultation was excellent.

[...] To the politicians the public acceptance of it was very, very important.

(Transport officer, male)

It is not surprising, then, that participants across the two case studies were critical of the lack of transparency in the processes of analysis and decision-making or raised concerns about what, if anything, would be done with their recommendations (cf. Abelson et al 2003, McIver 1998, Santos and Chess 2003, Seargent and Steele 1999).

It's a bit of black box to me, I can see all the bits that went in and I've seen the documents at the end but what they did in the middle? (Participant, male, environmental interest)

The net result was a sense of confusion and frustration - people were unable to judge whether their involvement had made a genuine difference to the decisions made. This often led to an interpretation of the process as a manifestation of political rhetoric, with participation only occurring after politics had defined the problem and to a large degree the solution. It is noteworthy that Lowndes et al's (2001b) case study research similarly showed dissatisfied citizens to be preoccupied with a perceived lack of council response to their concerns and a feeling that councillors and officers did not take them seriously. What we see, then, is a level of ambivalence and ambiguity expressed by both participants and local authority officers (and members) on the direct policy outcomes of participation.

I suppose it's satisfying to a degree, but then is that the veneer of the thing, that I feel as though I've been consulted to a degree. So maybe this is an unholy alliance, the Borough Council, they feel as though they've done their bit, I feel as though there's been a consultation bit – we neither of us feel it has been done as well as it might have been done, but we're not quite sure how to do it much better. So we agree that we've done it without delving, and as soon as you start doing that you get into this thing, is it worth doing it, are we just doing it because the government have said we need to.

(Participant, male, residents' interest)

### *Relational outcomes*

The study of outcomes in much participatory research has tended to focus on the immediate policy or relational impacts of deliberations, with scant attention given to wider, longer term citizenship and relational changes (Bickerstaff et al 2002, Burns and Taylor 2000, Barnes 1999, Sommer 2000, Kuper 1997, Lowndes et al 2001a). In this section we consider the often unintended outcomes of participatory processes, focusing specifically on the educative effects of deliberation and changes in citizen-local authority relationships.

The first theme relates to the more intangible, non-policy impacts of participatory activities. Pateman, in the 1970's, developed the argument that the major function of participation is an educative one, educative including both a psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures. It is these 'softer' impacts - 'increased understanding', 'mutual respect', 'relationship building', 'profile raising' and

'getting to know the local community better' (also Beierle and Cayford 2002, Barnes 1999a, Lowndes et al 2001a, Bickerstaff and Walker 2001) - that dominated discussion of outcomes in our interviews. As one participant commented when asked what he felt had been the main good points of being involved in the LTP deliberations:

The people who went through the sessions, there would be some build up of networking, we would begin to pick out officers you wouldn't feel badly about ringing up and saying I've got a problem here and I don't understand it and what are you going to do about it and also other groups. You begin to pick out the ones that - with whom you felt you could work cause that's how change happens (Participant, male, user interest)

So whilst across the interviews people identified as beneficial the building of links between citizens and the local authority, such relational impacts do not in and of themselves redress power imbalances and uncover hidden policy networks. More broadly these knowledge and learning impacts were, for participants, often connected to the wider policy process, that is gaining an understanding of the complexities, difficulties and necessary trade-offs linked to local decision-making (see also Bickerstaff et al 2001, Stewart 1996, Lowndes et al 2001b).

Whilst these relational impacts can clearly be, and often were, interpreted as beneficial there remain (unintended) problems for the goal of reactivating citizenship and redressing power inequalities. For as Cooke and Kothari (2001) argue such 'educational' outcomes may more accurately be viewed as the acquisition and

manipulation of a new professionalized planning knowledge, rather than the incorporation of people's lay knowledge by local authorities. Through participatory learning, it is the 'usual suspects' who acquire this new planning knowledge and learn how to manipulate it (reflected in earlier extracts), thereby serving to widen inequalities within civic society (see also Mosse 2001, Rydin 2003). Indeed, for Abelson et al (2003) a greater awareness of the harsh realities of making difficult political decisions may mean that participants lose their lay perspective and their views become more aligned with those of the 'professionals' (247) – in effect serving as a mechanisms of political co-option. In the extract below a councillor reflects on how through repeated involvement a new professionalized category of participants is being created:

I mean I did find myself going to meetings to engage with the community and I found I knew a very large proportion of people I was engaging with from other places and so there is a danger there that it is not that open a community – it's a new sort of consultation groupie class or something.

(Council member, male)

Beyond these softer impacts of participation the research revealed other unintended consequences which could, over the longer term, only add to the already precarious position of civic deliberations within existing democratic systems. What we repeatedly observed, particularly amongst participants that could be described as the 'usual suspects', was the problem of consultation fatigue or overload (noted by Lowndes 2001a, IPPR 2004, reported by the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee 2001, DfT 2004). There were too many overlapping public participation

forums, demanding too much time of people (an issue also applicable to council staff) and, crucially, with no visible policy outcomes to result. Many of the key interest groups and their representatives were being overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of participatory events and the attendant workloads. The net result was a growing sense of disaffection and disinclination to take part (IPPR 2004, Copus 2003) – a situation, which, if it continues, will erode and further skew what is for most local authorities the bedrock of local consultative and deliberative processes.

The government have gone crazy on plans, people are absolutely inundated with plans on every subject under the sun and people are getting plan fatigue really. I think if you have too many of them people just go and lose interest and they're not going to be worth the effort really [...] After the two meetings I'm afraid I've sort of thought to myself well I've had enough of all this I want a rest now. (Participant, male, environmental interest)

You do get a bit punch drunk you know, in fact I felt I couldn't, I went to the local plan one the other evening... I quite honestly I couldn't take much more of it you know. If you've got a full time job and you've still got to get home afterwards you feel well actually why am I doing this [...] but in the end I suppose I felt that there's almost too much consultation going on. (Participant, male, civic interest)

Council officers and elected members also expressed reservations about the formal requirements for public participation across local government responsibilities - the

number of repetitive processes on closely related themes, the diminishing number and range of participants taking part (becoming increasingly narrow and exclusive), and a lack of local government resources and powers to carry out meaningful deliberation. In a comment that demonstrated the involved interplay between pressure on resources and concerns about representation and the legitimacy of deliberative processes, one councillor invoked the vocabulary of 'best value' to rationalise decisions on how much to spend on participation:

The government attitude has changed and consultation is one of the key planks of the council's community plan and we consult on all sorts of things. There again that's fine but you've got to get the balance between – if you go over the top and spend too much money on consultation, because yes we must consult, but if your consultation is so detailed and so pressure group focused that you get a distorted view you're not getting best value - so its striking that balance. (Council member, female)

### *Institutional constraints*

In reflecting on the impacts of participation, interviewees talked about a number of institutional barriers that related to the inflexibility of representative democracy, the obduracy of political cultures and the pre-determination of policy by central government. One persistent theme across the stakeholder interviews reflected the difficult relationship between deliberation and the political priorities and necessities of representative government (also Copus 2004). We observed, specifically in the comments of council officers and members, an underlying reassertion of relations between the government (the representatives) and the governed (the represented). In

these, often implicit, remarks we see evidence of political power shaping not only the process but also the outcomes of participation.

It was sold to councillors that it [public participation] wasn't taking away their decisions. It was their job to decide what goes in the Local Transport Plan but they would be better informed so that they could look at the fact that the general population was saying this but other people were saying that and then it's a question of political judgement which way they go.

(Transport officer, male)

There can be a feeling that a process that produces a programme by a different route than the representative democracy could be in conflict and could undermine your ability to pursue a particular objective (Council member, male)

There was a sense, in such comments, that beyond the more directly involved councillors we spoke to, other council members remained deeply cynical of or felt threatened by the new emphasis on public participation, and were reluctant to engage with local people or to reassess their own role in democratic governance (see also Copus 2003, Lowndes et al 2001a, 1999, Leach and Wingfield 1999). In the context of local governance, Wilson (1999) points to:

[A] deeply held view amongst backbench councillors that local democracy means representative democracy – hence their desire to marginalize the participatory democracy agenda (257).

So whilst (some) councillors may be supportive of participatory initiatives, their desire to retain decision-making power within the existing framework of representative democracy could, as Copus (2003) has argued, act as a barrier to developing greater involvement. As one council member we spoke to summarised the problem:

Councillors, if you're not careful can get the 'anointed not appointed syndrome' – you sit here and think well you know best (Council member, female).

Perhaps the pivotal democratic constraint, repeatedly identified across the interviews, was the practical workings of decision-making. Government guidance in this arena has, for instance, been criticized as too prescriptive, reflecting “an excessive focus on targets and ticks in boxes” (DfT 2004, 8). So, in a policy arena strongly shaped by national political concerns and objectives, local authority powers to influence anything but the most superficial aspects of the form and content of LTP's were heavily circumscribed. This underlying structural problem in large part precedes the issue of local political commitment to public participation. In this light, public involvement in the LTP process was repeatedly seen as having little if any agency - a matter of tampering at the edges of decisions essentially made. For instance, one officer talked about how the shift in New Labour policy on road building - from an early pledge to reduce road

build to the later encouragement of new schemes (subsequent to public participation) - had played a significant role on the content and specifically funding of the final plan.

[S]omething about the bypass schemes, it's only really that the government have completely changed their views

**Interviewer: In the provisional round were the major schemes accepted?**

No, in fact [the bypass scheme] was slated, they said we never want to see it submitted ever again, it was as strong as that you know: for a government office to say something like that and then they turned round. I think they've had word from above – they want to build some bypasses. I have to say our director and politicians all said we want it to go back in again. If it had been my decision after last year I'd of said you're wasting your time putting it back. (Transport officer, male)

Importantly, the extract, taken alongside the member comment below, highlights the multiple, often competing, pressures which act upon and shape decision-making: political group affiliation (members), professional independence (officers), serving or representing the community and, crucially, central government objectives.

Government guidance, political imperatives and then public opinion. Yeah, you've got the three legs of the stool I suppose, you've got to balance them to try and keep the stool on an even keel as it were with the three legs. In a way you could argue the more information you get the harder it is – all the

paper's piling on top of the stool as it were, and the higher that paper is the more wobbly the legs are likely to be – the more sensitive it is to be upset. You know if you haven't got much information and you just look at the political imperative, you just look at what your party policy is on something.

(Council member, male)

Taken together these comments highlight the tensions that underpin representative democracy and simultaneously reveal areas of tension in relations between members and officers in the interpretation of participatory outputs (cf. Copus 2003, Tewdr-Jones and Thomas 1998, Tait and Campbell 200; DfT 2004).

The constraints of statutory (or institutional) requirements and limitations, and the resulting narrow parameters set for debate, have been documented by researchers across a number of public policy and development fields (Beierle and Cayford 2002, Petts 2001, Barnes 1999b, Lowndes et al 2001a, McGuirk 2001, Martin and Boaz 2000, Tewdwer Jones and Thomas 1998, Cooke and Kothari 2001). In the context of local transport planning, and reflected in the comments of both officers and members, the prescriptive nature of government guidance has led to concern that the public may identify priorities that conflict with government objectives - raising questions over the validity of engagement processes if they cannot genuinely feed through into decision-making (also DfT 2004).

## **Conclusion**

In researching the practice of participation in local transport planning we have situated the achievements and failures of deliberative activities in relation to the wider political landscape of power and decision-making. Our analytical focus has thus come not from normative models of communicative rationality or discursive democracy, but rather from the theoretical and practical criticisms that have been levelled at this collective body of work. Accordingly our evaluative framework has avoided the mechanistic assessment of the specific process and/or outcomes of particular exercises prevalent in much participation evaluation. Instead we have adopted a grounded approach, bringing together the reflections of all stakeholder groups, accessed at some distance from the participatory experience and after policy decisions have been realised. Whilst there are inevitably some methodological limitations, such as the potential for selectivity of recall by interviewees and 'reinterpretation with hindsight', we would argue that this particular approach to researching participation is necessary if a more sophisticated and reflexive understanding of the manifestations and dynamics of power in the implementation of the current participatory agenda in the UK is to be achieved.

Whilst we have investigated only two examples of the use of extended and deliberative processes within one sphere of local governance, and although the two case studies differed in a number of respects, the participants, officers and councillors we interviewed do highlight some generic questions and complexities about the processes they had been engaged in and struggled with. At the heart of some of these tensions around issues of inclusion, consultation fatigue, power inequalities, and the dearth of practical outcomes, lies the difficult and unresolved linkages between representative

and participatory governance. What is the 'democratic' balance to be struck between formal politics and civil society, informing and listening to the public, professional and lay expertise, conflict and consensus? These are tensions that have not been adequately grappled with in policy arenas. Rather, what we have seen in the intense political and academic activity around participation over the last decade has been a disproportionate focus on innovation in process and method with a lack of attention to the thornier questions surrounding impacts - particularly in terms of institutional design and structures of democratic decision-making.

If we first take the analysis of aspects of process and the discourse space, our research revealed general perceptions of participation initiatives as dominated by particular and forceful interests (civic, business or institutional) or that these interests served to co-opt and neuter any dissenting or oppositional voices – reinforcing a distinctly unequal set of power relations. In terms of the participants, we have pointed to a range of strategies and tactics that participants and groups used to influence or to bypass the so-called consensus position – in some cases even before entering the deliberative forum. In this sense, more participation is clearly not the same thing as more democracy - and can in fact reproduce or even exacerbate existing patterns of social exclusion and disadvantage (cf. Wilson 1999). We need, then, to move away from the concepts of inclusivity and rational consensus in the Habermasian sense, which ignore the permanence of conflict, inequality, and domination, and turn instead to something more akin to Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy (1999). In this way participation and, in particular, establishing the democratic value of civic deliberations must recognise that decision-making involves conflict and partiality, and that attention

to power relations and difference necessitates the acceptance of unresolvable disagreements (Jasanoff 1996) and some forms of exclusion (McGuirk 2001). Dryzeck (1996) has argued that this is a necessary feature of healthy democracy, as a truly inclusive state corrodes the vitality of civil society through a destructive process of co-option.

For the participants we interviewed, perhaps the key tensions centred not on process but on policy outcomes and the lack of direct, observable and substantial policy impacts resulting from their involvement in deliberative exercises. Many interviewees recognised the value of more ambiguous relationship-building and learning impacts, but the very fact that these softer impacts dominated discussion of outcomes, reinforced the lack of direct influence seen as achievable or possible upon harder policy decisions. Indeed soft impacts can be emphasised largely *because* of the impossibility of more substantial outcomes being achieved (Stewart 1996).

Furthermore, and as we have suggested, such impacts can be interpreted as the acquisition of planning knowledge by an elite citizenry of the 'usual suspects' - and potentially a political mechanism of circumventing opposition - rather than the local authority developing an understanding of people's knowledge or delegating powers to citizens. Our analysis also revealed a failure on the part of authorities to set involvement in a transparent framework of outputs and outcomes (also DfT 2004). Indeed, the officers' interpretations of participatory materials, and specifically deliberations, underlined the predominance of deeply entrenched practices of elite decision-making or planning knowledge. As we have shown, the new methods of working with the public presented significant challenges to elected officials who often

believed it was their duty (and right) to represent their citizens (and not to involve them) or to those whose professional training taught them to separate themselves from those to whom they provide services (see also Barnes 1999a, Copus 2003, Tait and Campbell 2000). In addition, and as particularly those participants working within the local authority emphasised, the LTP was shaped by statutory requirements and limitations – the *Realpolitik* and *Realrationalität* (Flyvbjerg 1998a) of local transport planning. Fundamentally, the final plan had to conform to government guidance (cf. Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998, Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas 1998, Petts 2001). Under these circumstances, what Copus (2003) has described as ‘crises of representation’ become all too possible and likely. In other words tensions arise for council members and officers regarding the competing demands of the community (expressed through engagement processes) and those of central government or party affiliation – an inconsistency which is intensified by government ambitions to see greater citizen engagement in local government.

Consistent with political analyses that have emerged across a range of settings where participatory activities have flourished in recent years, our findings support the view that civic deliberations are failing to deliver significant changes in prevailing practices of local transport planning and more widely local government. In effect the formal planning system still controls access to decision-making processes. In this light, the patterns of consultation fatigue and a disinclination to become involved we have identified are not altogether surprising. Although this disjunction between the rhetoric of open exploratory interaction and the practice of a more constrained and closed mode of engagement may not be intentional, it does raise the danger that new forms of

deliberative democracy are providing something of a legitimacy veneer over existing relations of power within and between institutions and civic society (Hajer and Kesselring 1999). So rather than providing for the possibility of a radical challenge to existing power structures, professional positions and knowledge systems, these civic deliberations emerge as more or less compatible with traditional top-down decision-making processes (see also Cooke and Kothari 2001, Rydin 2003, Pickard 1998) and in their current form can be interpreted as part of a system of domination rather than emancipation. As Pløger (2001) has argued the formal and informal aspects of power prevent a fulfilment of public participation based on the power of citizens or the empowerment of weak groups, in the sense of Habermasian communicative rationality.

In these examples taken from local transport planning the arenas of national and local political concerns emerge as critical to understanding the problematic functioning of participatory activities in the context of actual impacts. Public involvement is not, to date, allowing change of the procedural system itself or contesting the power of these systems or the expert discourses that underpin them. Rather, what we are witnessing is a 'jarring' between the ideals of participatory democracy and the realities of representative democracy. Unless and until the current political enthusiasm for participatory activities is matched by genuine processes of institutional reflexivity and change, centring on the structures and practices of democratic decision making, then the impacts in terms of reinvigorating civic society and empowering citizens will be minimal. It may even be the case that the participatory turn in local governance is actually serving, in the longer term at least, to de-activate rather than reactivate citizenship, further skewing the civic contribution to local decision-making.

In practical terms these insights point to real weaknesses in formal approaches currently being developed and applied to evaluate new modes of participatory democracy. Much of this activity adopts a position of technical revisionism based on criteria drawn from Habermasian ideals. Yet as Santos and Chess (2003) argue, in a recent participant-centred evaluation of two citizen advisory boards, evaluation frameworks based on communicative rationality are inherently problematic. Drawing on participant criteria, derived from observation and interviews conducted with a range of different stakeholders, they stress not only the importance of outcomes but also the way relations of power influence the process and outcomes of participation. In this sense we would support the call they make for:

[F]uture research efforts to better understand [...] how power is distributed among participants in a participatory process and the corresponding impact of power on the process (Ibid, 278).

If researching new mechanisms is to meaningfully examine their contribution to democratic practice, this work will need to better account for the political settings and cultures in which participatory processes becomes embedded, the relations of power that are brought into deliberative fora (and how far they map onto or challenge existing relational inequalities), how these relations are worked through and incorporated into deliberative outputs and the extent to which real changes in the practices and outcomes of decision-making can be traced to deliberative outputs. Centrally, efforts need to move away from an emphasis on the goal of achieving some kind of equality of voice and consensual agreements, to a recognition of the politics of participation –

which encompasses both relations (and relational changes) inside and outside the deliberative fora. So, whilst we would not dismiss efforts which have emphasised the fairness and competence of process, we believe that until more basic questions regarding the distribution of political power and the institutional capacity for democratic change are addressed then evaluation will remain at best limited at worst deceptive in its conclusions.

*Acknowledgements.* The authors wish to thank those who took part in the research, as well as the editors and reviewers for their helpful comments. We would also like to acknowledge the support of The Leverhulme Trust.

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