

# Empowered Dialogue Can Bring Wisdom to Democracy

An emerging form of democracy offers hope for generating the wisdom our cultures need to survive the 21st century and co-evolve into higher levels of awareness and aliveness.

The new democracy is grounded in  
the power of true dialogue  
among diverse people  
to help The People (as a whole) transcend  
the limits of personal perspectives and  
resonate with each other and the world  
through the fact of their interconnectedness,  
revealing bigger pictures and deeper wisdom  
than any individual or group  
could find alone,  
making it possible to create together  
solutions, visions, communities and societies  
that make sense  
and serve Life  
now and for generations to come.

Thousands of people have experienced this sort of powerful "generative dialogue" in personal conversations, workshops, and spiritual communities. Some tribal societies have grounded their communal life for centuries in such conversations. But only recently has a movement emerged to bring the living power of generative dialogue into the very structures and processes of modern politics and government.

Some efforts involve helping existing officials and institutions use generative dialogue. Others involve creating entirely new institutions which place generative citizen and stakeholder deliberations at the center of social decision-making. People like the Dalai Lama advocate creating an entire "culture of dialogue and nonviolence" capable of generating democratic wisdom.

It is already happening. There is much reason for hope -- and for hard work. Let's look at some of the fascinating news and possibilities.

In 1991 the leading Canadian newsweekly, Maclean's, sponsored a dialogue about the future of Canada among twelve ordinary Canadians carefully selected for their differences. They were nurses, lawyers, teachers, musicians, company workers. They were White, Black, Native, male, female, from across Canada. Right from the start, they were passionately divided about minority rights and Quebec independence. They'd never seen the world through each other's eyes. They were arrogant, hurt, compassionate, intense. Maclean's brought them all together for three days of conversation facilitated by a team from the Harvard Negotiation Project, led by Getting to Yes co-author Roger Fisher.

After two days of ideological battles and emotional upheavals, a breakthrough happened. A peacemaking woman from Ontario listened with real compassion to a very upset woman from Quebec, and they bonded. The next morning the Quebec woman, in turn, deeply heard the Native woman. A spirit of partnership blossomed and by the end of the last day, the group had agreed on a vision for Canada that advocated more mutual awareness, connectedness, and collaborative activity. Their agreement fills five of the (amazing) thirty-nine pages of coverage provided by Maclean's in their July 1, 1991 issue, entitled "The People's Verdict." The event was also covered by a hour-long Canadian TV documentary.

It ended with hugs and heartfelt conversations among formerly bitter adversaries -- and tears all around when the favorite facilitator had to leave early for another assignment in Greece. It was a true marriage of head, heart and spirit, across all boundaries.

In their editorial reflections, Maclean's editors noted how many millions of dollars had been spent by the government on surveys, focus groups and call-in dialogues, all to little effect. No one had brought together an intentionally diverse group for real dialogue on behalf of the whole country. That is what it took to heal the rifts.

In retrospect, the Maclean's effort had three primary strengths that gave it legitimacy as "The People's Voice" and made it impossible to ignore:

- a. It was diverse in a way that reflected the diversity of Canada, so that it could not be dismissed as biased or reduced to "a special interest."
- b. It was so well publicized that millions of Canadians knew that it had happened and what had resulted.
- c. It demonstrated the power of generative dialogue among deeply divided people to come up with wise insights and creative proposals to benefit the entire country.

However, Maclean's effort also had several shortcomings that can help future efforts to politically empower generative dialogue:

1. It was an event, not an ongoing process. Had it happened every year, it would have a profound effect on the country -- especially because people would be anticipating it, over and over. As it was, it triggered months of public dialogue before fading from memory in the flood of conflict-based news and adversarial politics.
2. It lacked official status. Although its major media source provided more credibility than if it had come from a partisan nonprofit group, no private sector or "social sector" statement of the public good can have the same authority automatically granted to a public sector statement of the public good.

3. It was not directly plugged in to Canada's decision-making structures, with institutionalized answerability and follow-up to track implementation.

However, the Danish parliament sponsors official citizen deliberations that incorporate the positive factors and transcend many of the limitations noted above.

Once or twice a year, when they find themselves considering a technological issue (like genetic engineering), the Danish parliament calls on its official Board of Technology to convene a random panel of about 15 diverse ordinary Danish citizens. Board of Technology organizers commission briefing papers on the issue being considered -- their fairness ensured by a steering committee of opposing partisan authorities who can add to, but not delete from, the information being given the citizen panelists. The panelists study the materials and then work with organizers to select a group of experts to address their remaining questions.

The Board of Technology then announces a "consensus conference" -- a public forum at which those experts testify to the citizen panel, who then cross-examine them. The experts come from across the political spectrum (from Monsanto to Greenpeace, for example). After a few days of testimony, the experts are dismissed, the public go home, and the citizen panel begin intense deliberation, usually facilitated.

Struggling with their own diversity of views, they finally arrive at a consensus statement of findings and recommendations about this high-tech issue. Their statements tend to be clearly reasoned and nuanced in judgment. Nonpartisan observers usually see them as common sense, expressing a certain radical sobriety accented with flashes of creativity seldom seen in the existing debate on the issue.

With some fanfare, the citizen panel's statement is released to the public, the media, and the Parliament in a national press conference. The Office of Technology publicizes their report and engages the public in local dialogues about it.

Think about that. A community or country could use such an approach to address every major social or environmental issue they face. Not only does it incorporate an adequate diversity of perspectives (both citizens and partisans) and high quality dialogue, it provides citizens with high-quality information on the issue, and is an official institution, to boot.

Such citizen deliberations have been held -- albeit unofficially -- hundreds of times around the world. Danish consensus conferences are only one form. Others include citizens juries (Ned Crosby), planning cells (Peter Diemel), citizen panels (John Gastil, Ned Crosby, and Senator Mike Gravel) and wisdom councils (Jim Rough). New forms are being created even as I write.

This flexible model, citizen deliberative councils, could be used to bring citizen-based wisdom to the public evaluation of any social or environmental problem, any candidate or public official, or the general health of any community or country.

It has already been used

- \* by poor farmers in India to evaluate economic development proposals (they chose to empower local indigenous agriculture);
- \* by suburbanites in Australia to deal with pollution and erosion of their watershed (they came up with sophisticated low-tech community engagement strategies, rather than expensive high-tech solutions);
- \* by ordinary Britons to regulate biotechnology (including product labelling and constraints on multinationals in less developed countries)
- \* by average citizens in Missouri to evaluate solid waste management (they wanted more recycling and waste prevention)
- \* and hundreds of other people in other times and places, almost always grounding themselves in common sense community wisdom...

## THE FORMULA

Note the simple basics of the design:

- a) Officially convene a group whose diversity is a fair sample of the larger population concerned. Their typical diversity provides the challenges they need to expand their individual perspectives to embrace the bigger picture held and/or needed by the whole community.
- b) Ensure they have high-quality information and high quality conversation in which everyone feels heard, all contributions can find their proper place, and group creativity is engaged. This ensures their diversity does, in fact, produce more light than heat -- generating more useful wisdom than anyone could generate by themselves. (This usually involves a deepening process I'll say more about shortly.)
- c) Hardwire their dialogue and their findings into broader public dialogue and official political/governmental processes. If the process is set up so that the broad public takes notice, they'll talk about the results. The public will come to expect politicians and officials to pay attention to what "The People" have to say. If it is plugged into official decision-making processes, all the better.

Note that this isn't just an opinion poll. It is a highly visible public judgment arrived at through deliberation among diverse citizens. No comparable source of "The People's Voice" exists in adversarial majoritarian democracies. This innovation evokes a true "We, the People" for the first time -- and a wise We, as well.

WHERE DOES THE WISDOM COME FROM?

At its most basic level, wisdom involves moving from limited, exclusionary perspectives to more inclusive perspectives that embrace more of the whole picture, the common good, the long-term view, the depths of life, and so on.

Most famous wisdom comes from extraordinary people or extraordinary experiences. Unfortunately, most of us very ordinary people have a hard time following such extraordinary wisdom in our ordinary lives -- even simple advice like "Love Thy Neighbor."

The kind of wisdom we need in a democracy needs to be compellingly real and useful to the society's ordinary people, and preferably arise from within and among them. And it also has to contain a remarkable level of insight -- and even creativity -- to adequately address the complexities and nuances of our social and environmental circumstances.

Where can we find or create such wisdom?

Luckily, we have evolved so that deep within each of us is perhaps our most potent source of wisdom, individually and together. There, at the core of our being, lie our common spirit, our common life, and our common humanity, resonating together in the symphony of our interconnectedness.

I call this deep part of ourselves our core commons -- the ground of being that we all share. It contains the pure non-duality of the mystics, and what Quakers call "that of God in every person" -- our common spirituality. It contains the voices of the cell, the tree, the lizard, the mammal -- all beings that breathe, that self-create, that sense sunrise and hurricane -- and it contains our intrinsic sense of kinship with them, for we are of them, part of Life, and always have been. It also contains images and energies, memories and impulses, of the tribe around the circle, the lover, the mother, the warrior, the voices of passion and fear and hunger, for we are part of Humanity and share all this.

In the core commons, there is no Other. There, a voiceless voice of wisdom vibrates with knowledge deeper than our separate selves: We are All. In This. Together. And we resonate with that and, through that, with others and with life.

Separated from nature and each other, distracted by novelty, noise, speed, entertainment and the demands of our complex postmodern lives, we often lose touch with this deep place. But repeatedly we find ourselves stumbling into that sense of connectedness, meaning, caring, often triggered by a powerful picture of pain or possibility. We suddenly see clearly -- only to have mundane life sweep us into the flow of shallow urgencies again.

Dialogue is an antidote to this. In high-quality dialogue we encounter each other's unique diversity in profound ways that don't let us skim by in politeness, compromise and denial, or defend ourselves with ideology, attack and not listening. Dialogue calls forth a collective reality that is too great to readily comprehend, too dissonant to accept, too real to hide from.

So where can we go for comfort, for coherence? True dialogue knows the answer, intrinsically. It pulls us down into our core commons, where interconnectedness is waiting for us. Sometimes it triggers an emotional catharsis, a compassionate seeing of the Other, as happened in the Maclean's dialogue. Sometimes it evokes a mental struggle to weave seemingly contrary interests into a larger solution acceptable to all. Dissonance mounts -- and then cracks open. When the group "aha!" happens, what we've newly realized seems obvious, because we are all standing (way down deep) on the core commons, our shared being and life. Native leader Oren Lyons says, "We keep talking until there's nothing left but the obvious truth."

Significantly, this tends to happen even when there is no explicit appeal to deep spirituality, ecology or humanity. It happens simply because the core commons is the only place we can go to make sense of our diversity.

And so, although it is vital to have forums for people who share particular perspectives on spirituality, ecology and humanity, it is equally vital that there be forums which involve no prior agreements -- especially about spirituality.

Most democracies properly require "separation between church and state," partly to keep two sources of concentrated social power separate (in contrast to the "divine right of kings") and partly to encourage freedom of religion. People pressured or drawn into explicit group "spiritual" practices that they aren't comfortable with (from prayers and God-language to talking stick circles, candles and guided meditations) can feel set apart from the group in ways that alienate them from others and from their own core commons.

Thanks to the core commons, all deep dialogue is essentially spiritual, whether participants know it or not. Implicitly spiritual dialogue is as spiritual as explicitly spiritual dialogue. To empower such dialogue politically is to bring spirit to politics and governance in a very democratic way. It is to replace the power of special interests -- and even the power of poorly thought-out public opinion -- with the power of Life at its deepest and best.

Beyond this, we can always use more generative dialogue among spiritual leaders, among environmentalists, among peacemakers, among humanitarians, among justice advocates, among physical and social scientists -- and between people from all these fields -- to help them generate their own special kinds of wisdom, which they can then bring to citizen deliberations and decision-makers as expert testimony. Examples of such wisdom include the Precautionary Principle, the Natural Step, systems thinking and the Parliament of World Religions' "Towards a Global Ethic."

Another approach, a model called consensus councils, is used in Montana and North Dakota and proposed for the U.S. nationally to bring opposing advocates (rather than ordinary citizens) together in a facilitated consensus process to generate agreements that legislatures can then pass into law about their chosen issue.

Common to many of these efforts is the recognition that diversity is a resource for wisdom, for expanded perspective, as long as it is engaged in generative dialogue. The kind of diversity we

bring together governs the kind of wisdom that emerges. If the diversity reflects the diversity of a community, the wisdom will be especially appropriate for the community. If the diversity reflects the diversity of the environmental movement, the wisdom that emerges will heal and further the environmental movement. It is the combination of relevant, adequate diversity and generative dialogue that creates the wisdom. When people come together like that, they find powerful, insightful common ground.

Once found, such wisdom can be spread to the public and given to legislators and public officials. It can be embedded in stories, movies, art and performances; taught in schools; and discussed in bars, homes and places of worship and work. It can be institutionalized in official proclamations, in ballot initiatives, in voter information booklets -- even on the ballot itself (see John Gastil's BY POPULAR DEMAND). It can transform and heal the world.

To accomplish this we need to lift our heads above the foxholes of our adversarial issue positions long enough to welcome the power of dialogue to generate wisdom beyond our positions. We need to learn how to trust the processes of Life and Conversation, and invest the resources -- research, facilitation training, forum organizing, etc. -- that will enable them to do their miraculous work.

If we were to actually do that well, we'd suddenly find ourselves with a wisdom culture that knew how to transform itself consciously and navigate its future -- our future -- on the deep rivers of spirit, life and humanity.

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Source: [www.co-intelligence.org](http://www.co-intelligence.org)