Book Review

Democratic Illusion: Deliberative Democracy in Canadian Public Policy (UTP, 2015)
By Genevieve Fuji Johnson

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Genevieve Fuji Johnson, the author of “Democratic Illusion” provides an interesting introduction to the literature of deliberative democracy and embarks upon the task of assessing if the ‘ideal of deliberative democracy’ has been achieved by analyzing four cases invoking procedures associated with deliberative democracy in Canadian public policy. In separate chapters, case studies were selected that were most likely to be successful in approximating the deliberative ideal, including the participatory budgeting (2001-12) of Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), deliberative polls (2004, 2005, 2009) of Nova Scotia Power Incorporated (NSPI), an iterative national consultation process (2002-2005; 2008-2010) of the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO), and embedded policy consultations (2000-2012) of the Government of Nunavut in regard to official languages. Rich detail is presented and analyzed through interpretive case studies, evaluating them using deliberative democratic criteria, including participatory inclusion, procedural equality, access to information and empowerment in policy decisions.

Dr. Johnson concludes that measures that appeared to empower the public in fact failed to challenge the status quo. Participatory budgeting at TCHC, similar to that employed in southern Brazil in the late 1980s), was implemented with contradictions in procedures. Contextual factors including a large capital deficit, questionable management practices, and sense of entitlement limited the scope of implementation. Although the deliberative polling of NSPI and the policy implemented were generally consistent, they were disconnected and decisions were based more directly on elite stakeholder negotiations, customer feedback, economic reasoning, regulatory directives and policy requirements. NWMO consultations confirmed the policy desired and preferred by preexisting power structures of adaptive phased management and deep geological storage. Finally, with Nunavut, after an impressive process of policy formulation, implementation has not occurred and the Inuit language use has diminished.
The frank and nuanced explanation of the weaknesses and failings of these cases provide fodder for how deliberative democracy can be implemented more successfully in the future. They also provide a solid basis to inform future deliberative democracy research exploring case studies perhaps of one genre (e.g. all deliberative polling or participatory budgeting, for example), or methodological processes (surveys of participants consistently across case studies), or refining the criteria of case study assessment. This book is an important contribution for policy scholars studying the engagement of people in policy making. The findings seem to confirm “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others” a quote attributed to Winston Churchill (1949).