

Citizens and Carbon

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The first Australian Citizens' Parliament was held over 4 days in February 2009 – it was that terrible weekend of Black Saturday. I had the privilege of being one of 150 persons randomly selected for this - I was the member for the electorate of Canberra! Citizens' assemblies have proven they can contribute to better government in Australia and other countries, notably Canada. An assembly on carbon pollution reduction as proposed by Prime Minister Julia Gillard would make a strong contribution, if done properly. If she does not proceed with it a privately funded assembly is an option. The Australian Citizens' Parliament was largely funded by the New Democracy Foundation.

The Australian Citizens' Parliament was asked to deliberate on the way Australia is governed and recommend improvements. (see <http://www.citizensparliament.org.au/>) It was also itself an experiment in using this kind of deliberative process on a national scale to contribute to governance. I think we all came away thinking it a success. Some of us thought it a great success. These 150 people were strangers to each other apart from meeting at some preliminary regional gatherings, were from all walks of life and came with a range of philosophies, opinions and attitudes. Remarkably, over the period of four days, they came to a high level of agreement on many issues, some of which were quite contentious. Importantly, many, if not most, had never previously had to come to grips with some fairly sophisticated ideas on national constitutions, voting systems and public administration. And quite a few had not a great deal of formal education. Even so, after some effective learning sessions, all were able to make strong contributions to the deliberations.

Critical to its success was that, apart from the broad task of improving governance, the participants set the agenda. A citizens' assembly on carbon pollution must be able to do the same. In any case 150 ordinary Australians, if I know my fellow citizens at all, simply would not meekly accept restricted terms of reference. In this, such an exercise is very different from the normal inquiry processes that governments use; processes which all too frequently are carefully designed to tell governments what they want to hear.

So what might we expect from a citizens' assembly on carbon pollution? I am sure it would not limit itself to simply offering its views on an emissions trading scheme (ETS). The group should also be able to decide on the experts, community organisations and businesses it wants to hear from. However, since it is likely that few of the assembly members would themselves have scientific, economic and public policy expertise more than a little guidance on this would be needed.

Being randomly selected, which they must be for the exercise to be valid and be seen to be valid, a significant number would be yet to be

persuaded that we need to do anything about anthropogenic CO₂. Therefore the assembly would first have to consider the latest science on carbon and climate change. The assembly should of course hear both sides of the argument, but I think this must be in proportion in terms of the relative weight of scientific analyses and conclusions. I suggest it likely that the majority would accept that returning the amount of carbon to the atmosphere that has taken plant life millions and millions of years to store in the earth's crust over just a century or so is likely to be having an effect to which the biosphere and we won't easily be able to adapt. I think any minority could be persuaded to continue to participate on the assumption that anthropogenic CO₂ needs mitigation. This of course might not be so and the assembly could fail at this point, but I doubt it.

Secondly, they would want to consider the full range of options for mitigation and adaptation, which must include possible fiscal measures such as a carbon tax. They would hear that markets are best at allocating resources to achieve efficiency. But, they would want to assess all options in terms simplicity, cost, possibilities for rorting and predictability and thus conduciveness to investment. And they would see the failings of the ETS in Europe. (These are well documented in papers by the Foundation for Effective Markets and Governance in association with the Monash Centre for Regulatory Studies at <http://www.law.monash.edu.au/regstudies/consumer-advocacy-panel.html>. I was a contributor, but the principal author was Allan Asher, former UK Energywatch CEO, now Commonwealth Ombudsman.) They would note that many top economists (e.g. Joe Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs, Nicholas Stern) think a carbon tax ticks all the boxes. Of course governments have to be strong enough to set taxes and increase them as necessary to achieve the needed effect.

One thing I am really confident about is that whatever scheme such an assembly agreed upon, it would be fair to ordinary Australians and would adequately compensate the disadvantaged and help them to reduce their carbon footprint. It would be unlikely to over compensate big corporation polluters, rather few representatives of which would be randomly selected for the assembly.

But more than all of this, partly because Dick Smith has effectively put it into the public debate, a citizens' assembly would quickly realise that efforts to cut carbon pollution will be of limited effect if global population growth is not contained. I think it would be a good idea if the assembly invited Dick Smith to address it.

Where might it go on this? Would it not come to the view that the question of what Australia should do about carbon pollution is part of the wider question of how Australia can best and should contribute to bringing the biosphere back to sustainability or at least reducing the projected trend in unsustainable growth? If so it would note that the biosphere is under pressure from humanity in many ways – loss of biodiversity, pollution at the regional level of many kinds and degradation of soil and water resources. The need to deal with carbon must not take away from what can be done about these other problems. But we are up against it

while coping with the needs and wants of the present global population of about 6.8 billion. If we cannot slow the growth rate, it's predicted we'll have to cope with the needs and wants of another 3 billion or so in the next three or four decades.

It is now pretty well established that lifting people out of poverty, but especially giving young women in developing countries educational opportunities, markedly reduces population growth. So maybe the assembly would conclude that besides cutting our carbon pollution, one of the best things Australia could do is to put a lot more into gender equality in developing countries, especially in education. We can certainly afford this. As a percentage of GDP we spend on development cooperation much less than other rich countries. (Australia - .about .3%, Sweden – about 1%, UN target - .7%)

In all of this the assembly could help a lot in developing the understanding of the Australian community of the problems the world confronts. This would assist Kevin Rudd in his work on the UN High-level Panel on Global Sustainability and contribute to Australia's preparations for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012.

It has been said that we don't need such an assembly as we have the Federal Parliament. I think it has proved itself over many years now of being incapable of effective deliberation. There is also the view that these matters are best left to experts. We need experts, but in the end public policy is for the public and what better way to be sure that it is than to involve 150 members of the public in making it. A parliament is obviously a group of people with political ambitions. A citizens' assembly just might have one or two with such ambitions, but generally its members will have no interest beyond getting what they can out of the experience and putting what they can into the task for its duration, and then going home. Also, they are beholden to no one for their temporary position – just the roll of the die.

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