WHOSE CONVERSATION?

Engaging the Public in Authentic Polylogue

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(The Political Quarterly, April, 2004)

According to the recently-conducted Oxford Internet Survey, most British people (61%) say that they frequently (22%) or every so often (39%) discuss politics with friends or family. But very few of them ever discuss politics with the people they elect to represent their interests and preferences. Most people (88%) have had no face-to-face contact with their MP within the past year. Three-quarters claim that within the past year they have never seen their MP on television, 80% that they have not written to their MP and 84% not to have visited their MP's web site. In a recent research exercise over two thousand people were asked to complete the following sentence: 'I don't feel connected to my political representative because …' A remarkable number of them expressed a sense that the politicians representing them came from another planet:

> …they live in a totally different world to the man on the street
>
> …they are disconnected from the real world.
>
> …he lives in a different world from me.
>
> …he is too remote and not on the same wave length as the people generally

> …they haven't a clue about the real world. They say they do but I feel it is just lip service.
>
> …I don't think they are on the same planet. They have no idea about normal life

These metaphors indicate that there is a radical cultural disconnection between the ways politicians think, act and express themselves and the norms of everday sociability. The rhythms of mundane social intercourse discord with the obsessive rhetorical beat of political oratory and Westminster-centric journalism.

This sense of intergalactic estrangement translates into a constellation of attitudes which underlie the contemporary crisis of public disengagement from official political institutions and processes. Whereas most people (79%) trust their local hospital, only a minority trust their local council (48%), the British Government (43%) or politicians (18%.) Only 16% of the public trust political parties; 98.5 per cent of British citizens are not party members and 14% express support for any party (compared with 44% in 1964.) 76% of the public believe that they have little or no power between elections and 66% agree that 'people like me have no say in what the government does.' In a 1999 survey by the US Council for Excellence in Government, almost two thirds (64%) of Americans agreed with the statement, 'I feel distant and disconnected from government.' 72% of the British public feel 'disconnected' from Parliament, with nearly half (46%) feeling 'very disconnected.' Over half of 35-44 year-olds (52%) and nearly half of 45-64 year-olds felt 'very disconnected' from Parliament. The vast majority (80%) of

people who did not vote in the 2001 general election felt disconnected from Parliament. 87% of those who *did* vote felt connected to Parliament.[1] All of which becomes very significant as voter turnout falls to the lowest point ever.

A vivid picture of the disdain felt by the ordinary public towards political activists can be witnessed during the annual party conference season. Not, to be sure, in the conference halls and fringe meetings where cultures of tribal belonging insulate the faithful from the complications of seeking to be understood,, but in the streets, guest houses and restaurants of Blackpool, Bournemouth and Brighton, where the locals look upon the passing presence of the political junkies with a mixture of suspicion and hostility: 'Who are these people who care so much about the incessant soap opera of politics? What's in it for them? What do they want from us?' The politically active respond with complacent derision: 'Who are these apathetic creatures who care so little about how they are governed? They lack civic duty. Without us to carry the participatory burden, what sort of democracy would they have?' Each of these groups has a grudging need of the other. The political junkies need the inert majority to look after and give them their votes. The disengaged need politicians to represent their interests and unspoken angst. Each regards the other as a hard-to-reach group. Their relationship is one of mutual contempt, fed by the negative energy of disappointment and indifference.

The phenomenology of disconnection

Politicians are concerned that citizens are disconnected from them. Interpreting disconnection as a one-way power failure which has cut off the demos from the discourse of governance, is misleading in three ways. Firstly, it implies that

*re*connection is primarily a matter of persuading disengaged citizens to feel good about participating in traditional political structures. But if the style and shape of existing political structures are themselves the cause of the original disenchantment, exhortations to connect or reconnect to them are unlikely to be heeded. Secondly, conceptualising the problem as being about disconnected citizens tells only half the story; the isolation of politicians and representative institutions from popular culture and discourse is both a cause and a reflection of their growing irrelevance. For most citizens, it is the disconnection of politicians from everyday life that is the problem. Thirdly, the current obsession with connection, reconnection and connectivity is over-reliant upon the technocratic magic of mediation (especially via new media) to deliver an experience of mutual and meaningful communication. In reality, communication technologies can transmit signals, but cannot automatically or deterministically reconfigure relationships. The persistent question that must be addressed by the modernising proponents of reconnection is, Connection to what?

Political participation is to a large extent driven by affective motives. Political activists enjoy meetings, speeches, intriguing and campaigning. They regard their pleasures as evidence of social sophistication and civic conscience. They are in favour of educational programmes, such as citizenship classes in schools, designed to promote their virtues within the wider community. The message of the political activists to everyone else is 'Be more like us and democracy will be all the better for it.'

Most people are wholly unconvinced by the activists' logic. As I showed in my recent study of political junkies (PJs) and *Big Brother* viewers (BBs), BBs have a good deal

of respect for politically active PJs, but PJs have little respect for the cultural perspectives and values of BBs. As importantly, while PJs are somewhat complacently convinced of their own civic and intellectual virtues and their lamentable absence in BBs, the latter are convinced that they possess a capacity to empathise and evaluate moral qualities.[2] Such public invigilation of private emotion appeals to BBs, but rarely concerns PJs. Can ways be found to translate the skill and energy of emotional intelligence into the discourse of political citizenship? Are there ways of making politics more sensitive to the informal, conversational discourses and interactions of everyday life?

From consultation to conversation

In the past we had consultations. These were top-down communications. The people at the bottom rarely took part (those who did were mainly unsuccessful activists: 'the usual suspects' who are not invited into the more exclusive realms of policy-making); the people at the top rarely took any notice. Evidence to the House of Commons Public Administration Committee inquiry into new forms of public participation, based on a survey of 332 UK local authorities, found that, whereas 20% considered that participatory consultation exercises strongly influenced final policy decisions and 16% thought that they led to better informed decisions, 20% considered that such exercises had very little impact on decisions and 20% stated that they merely confirmed decisions that were already made. In her evidence to the inquiry, Dr Sue Goss, Director of Public Services Development at the Office for Public Management, declared that 'While organisations are learning to consult, they are failing to respond effectively to consultation and this harms potential relationships between citizens and government.' [3]

In contrast to the tradition of ritual consultation exercises, Tony Blair has initiated what he has called 'a big conversation between politicians and the people':

> Over the coming months, I want our Party to begin a new discussion with the people of Britain. Across major policy areas the Government will publish a prospectus, discussing the progress we have made and the challenges our country still faces. We should have the confidence to open up the debate, be honest about the challenges, lay out the real choices.
>
> But this must not just be a discussion between us. Because if we want a Government in touch with the Party, we must have a Party in touch with the people.
>
> And so let us make this the biggest policy consultation ever to have taken place in this country. The Ministers from me down, our MPs out in every constituency hosting discussions that engage with the whole community.
>
> So, when we begin our manifesto process, when the policy forum draws our thinking together, I want it to address the big questions, engage with ordinary people's hopes and fears. A progressive, imaginative, vibrant public debate about how we together build a future fair for all. [4]

The notion of a 'public conversation' suggests a movement away from the bureaucratised relationships of traditional consultation. Conversations have three characteristics that differentiate them from institutionalised debate. Firstly,

conversations are reciprocal undertakings, in the sense that participants agree to enter into them and adhere to the protocols of a collaborative speech relationship Secondly, conversation participants possess equal rights to speak and respond, in accordance with implicit codes of turn-taking. Thirdly, conversations are informal, unpremeditated and unbounded. One rarely sets a time for a conversation to begin or end; genuine conversations tend not to be structured by agendas or expected outcomes. We should be suspicious of conversations that lack any one of these three characteristics.

In *Between Man and Man,* Martin Buber elaborates distinctions between genuine dialogue ('where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others … and turns to them with them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them'), technical dialogue ('which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding') and 'monologue disguised as dialogue' ('in which two or more men meeting in space speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways.')[5] Can a governing party, with all of its entrenched political interests, ideological commitments and institutional pathologies enter into a genuine polylogue with something as amorphous as 'the public', or must such an exercise inevitably descend into a technical, consultative ritual or, worse still, a publicity-driven 'monologue in disguise', presented as if it were a conversation?

The credibility of 'the Big Conversation' depends upon the authenticity of the intentions governing it. Without democratically meaningful intentions, the conversation would degenerate into a sham. It would not deserve to be taken seriously.

Prerequisites for honest political polylogue

In an age of reflexivity, talk about talk sets the norms for authentic verbal interaction. Two seminal contribitions to the analysis of everyday talk have been central to contemporary understanding. Firstly, Erving Goffman's account of 'forms of talk' distinguished between moments of performative and intimate expression. Goffman sought to explain the situated nature of talk: what people say depends upon where they say it and whom they think is listening.[6] A remarkable ethnographic study by Eliasoph illuminates the ways in which American community activists shift from being 'political' to 'ordinary citizens', depending upon the setting for their expression.[7] Secondly, Jurgen Habermas's account of the 'ideal speech situation' served to problematise inter-subjective communication and propose norms for the fair and reasonable conduct of public talk.[8] Although Habermas has been rightly criticised for devising an historically and culturally limited version of ideal speech rules, the very task of seeking to strengthen the substance of free speech by embedding it within democratic regulation is a step away from the myth that abstract freedom of expression for all constitutes a sufficient condition of democracy. Goffman's work tended to emphasise informal, often unintentional verbal interactions; Habermas tended to be more interested in purposive speech within the public sphere. If the informality of conversation is to be recruited to invigorate the discourse of the public sphere, attention must be paid to both of these perspectives.

Beyond public opinion

Measuring public opinion is relatively easy. Since the invention of opinion polling by Gallup in 1936, politicians have appealed with increasing frequency to the court of statistical popularity as evidence that they are in tune with the people. Critics of public opinion, particularly proponents of deliberative democratic theory, argue that such snapshot measurements capture little more than the unreflective prejudice and ignorance of the the public. To really understand how people think it is necessary to explore their values, which tend to be covert, affective and psychologically discrete. Values constitute the soil within which opinions grow. Whereas opinions are situational and contingent, values are global and enduring. In simple terms, values are where people start from; opinions are where they reach once they are exposed to specific policy questions. For example, to favour healthcare that is free at the point of use is a value; to favour the free provision of viagra or cosmetic surgery by the NHS is an opinion about how to interpret that value.

Genuine polylogue, in the sense suggested by Buber, entails openness to conflicting values as well as opinions. Within a deliberative context, openness involves the abandonment of fixed preferences and values and a willingness to give reasoned consideration to alternative preferences and values. A polylogue in which the contestation of values is off limits leaves participants unclear about why they disagree – or agree – with one another.

Taking listening seriously

The rhetoric of 'listening' is a key feature of late modern politics, commerce and therapy. Politicians increasingly speak about how leading involves listening. Critics of such an approach claim that it means governing by opinion poll and opens

politicians to charges of weakness or dangerous populism. According to opponents of public deliberation, the time for politicians to listen is when the electorate 'speaks' through the ballot box, after which they should have the confidence to lead without recourse to endless listening exercises. Roy Hattersley, writing in *The Guardian,* declares that

> Most voters do not want to be asked - even with the help of carefully constructed questions - to say something original and creative about how the country should be governed. They see themselves as critics in the melodrama of politics, able to recognise what is wrong without knowing exactly how to put it right. They have only generalised views about what should be done.[9]

The same refrain was offered by Tim Hames in *The Times:* 'Normal people expect to be led by politicians not listened to by them.' [10] At times it seems as if the politicians promoting 'the Big Conversation' are unclear about what such an exchange might entail. In an interview about 'the Big Conversation' on the BBC *Today* programme, Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, appeared not to share this conception of conversation:

> Conversation means you have a two-way exchange. You ask the question and I answer it. It's called conversation. [11]

Prescott was, in fact, describing an interview, not a conversation. Interviews are formal exchanges between mediating interrogators and a designated guests. Sometimes interviews attempt to simulate conversation, but they are essentially

formally structured events intended to cast light upon the views of the interviewee. In a conversation both (or all) participants have equal rights (and duties) to ask questions, give answers and change the subject in accordance with the principle of joint ownership. Where there is an imbalance of communicative power, such as in a job interview or police interrogation, the requirement to listen is indicative of subjection. In a collaborative dialogue, such as a conversation, listening comprises the silent, reflective part of speaking. Buber refers to moments of communicative interaction that are neither simply monologue nor reception as 'the between.' In this sense, a genuine conversation between politicians and people should be based less on speaking or being heard than those moments of common recognition where there is a fusion between speaking and listening.

Translation strategies

Most people discuss political issues in language that is informal and experiential. But, precisely because they are speaking about their own lives in their own words, they do not regard themselves as discussing politics. For most people, the language of politics is opaque and alien. To sound like a politician, in popular parlance, is to be disingenuous and devious. People who look or speak like politicians do not survive long in the *Big Brother* house, where popular cultural distaste guarantees eviction.

Whereas once the language of politics was suffocated by the jargon of ideology, now it is enfeebled by the catechisms of managerialism. The worst that could happen to 'the big conversation' is for it to resemble one of those excruciating 'workshops' in which managers and employees play games and engage in mock exchanges with a view to ensuring that the employees are as close as possible to the robotic models

required by the managers. Anyone who has sat through such an exercise would resist any claims to it being a democratising experience.

A political conversation between politicians and the public can only ever succeed as a process of translation. Rather than asking citizens to adapt their expression to that of their rulers, the default language of a democratic conversation should be the discourse of common experience. If policy-makers cannot comprehend what ordinary people are telling them, they are the ones who require mediating translation services to help them to follow the story.

Impact and outcome

Conversations exist in the present. They do not comprise agendas. They are not intentionally consequential. But a mass conversation comprising impersonal networks of participants, designed to address issues of common interest, must promise some kind of tangible outcome or else rational people will not participate in it. Most of us do not speak with strangers unless we have a good reason to believe that they can help us in some way. As strangers to most of the people they represent, politicians have to demonstrate that they are not only interested in talking, but responding.

Inefficacy is the most serious element of popular disengagement from politics. Unless the relationship between collective action (including talking) and political outcomes can be made, the spiral of disengagement will advance. So, unlike casual conversation, in which an exchange of comments sufficiently demonstrates sociability, a conversation between representatives and represented can only be

meaningful if it can produce a richer, more direct link between representation and the way people want to be represented.

It's big, but is it a real conversation?

Tony Blair's 'big conversation' is at best a metaphorical event. It is clearly not a conversation in anything like the usual sense of the term. Its success as a simulated conversation rests upon the extent to which those participating in it can give positive answers to the following questions:

- Did this interaction with governing politicians feel conversational, in the sense of being informal, open-ended and co-owned?
- Were the intentions of the more powerful parties to the conversation (the Prime Minister and his colleagues) consistent with the principles of going beyond simple opinion polling, genuinely listening and hearing, communicating in the language of the public and showing genuine commitment to responsiveness and outcomes?
- Was the interaction designed and managed in such a way as to maximise its democratic potential?

Because the online element of the 'Big Conversation' (www.bigconversation.org.uk) was the easiest to observe and commonly regarded as the most cutting-edge feature of this exercise, these questions will be evaluated in relation to the online context. There are three ways in which members of the public could contribute to the web site: they could fill in a short survey, add a 'story' or pictures about their lives or ask a question

to a politician in a live webcast. Clearly, filling in an online survey does not constitute conversational activity. The points of view submitted in the 'stories and pictures' section cover a wide range of themes and perspectives, but lack any scope for interactivity: nobody responds to what anyone else has said, rather like a phone-in programme in which caller after caller makes a short speech and then disappears into the ether.

To what extent can the live web-chats between leading Labour politicians and members of the public be classified as conversational? Each chat comprised approximately 1,300 words. Of these, approximately 800 words (61%) were provided by politicians and an average of 45 words by each member of the public. The structure of these interactions were not conversational. Firstly, members of the public were invited to put questions to the politicians rather than enter into an even-handed conversation with them. Secondly, there was no opportunity for supplementary questioning or for members of the public to comment upon their own questions or the politicians' responses. Thirdly, some politicians did not address the questioner when giving their responses. For example, Stephen Twigg, in the first live chat, referred to questioners by name ('I totally agree with Paul'), but addressed his responses to a wider, impersonal audience. None of this resembles the free flow of conversation.

Generally, the form of a communicative interaction is indicative of the intentions behind it. For example, a salesman who speaks very quickly and never looks you in the eye is usually regarded as untrustworthy; a web site offering you lots of ways to click-and-buy, but no ways to ask questions or make comments is probably more interested in making money than exchanging ideas; a politician who sends emails to

constituents, but refuses to let them have a personal email address so that they can write back, might be assumed to be more interested in self-presentation than democratic representation. A 'conversation' which does not look or feel like a real conversation is open to the accusation of being a misleading gesture: more a cultivated appearance of listening than an experience of sharing ideas.

Creating a space for mass public polylogue

Jay Blumler and I have argued that there is a need for a publically-funded 'civic commons in cyberspace', run by an independent body which would be

> charged to elicit, gather and coordinate citizens' deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies (ranging from local authorities to parliaments and government departments), which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussions. The resulting 'electronic commons' would be neither a talking shop in splendid isolation nor a replacement of representative by direct democracy. It would be instead an open-ended, institutionally-backed extension of people's opportunities to make contributions to public policy on those matters that specially concern them.[12]

How might such a space for democratic public communication meet the normative criteria of authentic and meaningful consultation? It would need to be guided by six principles:

Purpose

The reason for engaging the public – or a specific section of the public – in discussion about policy needs to be clarified at the outset of each consultative exercise. The expectations and boundaries of the process need to be agreed and then set out clearly. Politicians and other policy-makers need to be committed to the value and impact of the process and need to sign up to an agreed level of active involvement.

Design

Appropriate channels and software must be selected for the facilitation of the discussion. Most existing software is not well designed for deliberative communication: it is difficult to 'thread' discussions, navigate around them or summarise content. The discussion interface needs to be attractive and simple to use, not built by geeks for use by nerds.

Recruitment

Although some consultative exercises might want to hear from everyone, most will work best when they target specific stakeholders with experience and expertise of a policy area. Ensuring that the right mix of 'voices' are signed up to a discussion will determine its democratic outcomes. Recruitment should seek to be as inclusive as possible, seeking out potential participants from hard-to-reach groups across both the digital and broader socio-economic divides. All consultation processes should begin with extensive outreach, using a range of media, not just online.

Moderation

The traditional notion of the internet as a space of anarchy should be resisted. Democratic discussion requires regulation, especially when it involves large numbers

of participants who do not know one another. Moderation needs to be fair, transparent and inclusive. Moderators should be independent and trusted. Training and accrediting moderators should be encouraged.

Summation

In lengthy online discussions there is a need for regular summaries of what has been said, otherwise it becomes very time-consuming for late-joiners to enter the discussion. Credible, trusted summaries are vital for policy-makers who might not have time to read all contributions, but require a sense not only of what was said, but also the underlying narrative that emerges from the discussion. New techniques in 'conversation mapping' and 'discourse visualisation' are especially valuable in this respect.

Response and outcome

A link must be demonstrated between the initial purpose for engaging the public and the outcome of their participation. Such linkage provides democratic legitimacy for consultative processes. There should be a pre-consultation commitment to minimal levels of response from government (or other promoters) and these should include time limits for responses to be made.

In a cynical political age, the public is very unlikely to believe politicians when they claim to want to hear what they have to say. The language of politicians and the public is often mutually incomprehensible and neither has a strong commitment to engage in translation. Blaming the public for being apathetic is rather like a

shopkeeper cursing consumers for walking past his shop without even looking in his window. Indifference tends to reflect a sense that a product or project is irrelevant. The task for politicians is to demonstrate that they really believe that what the public says matters and to prove to the public that engaging in polylogical, consultative exercises can have meaningful effects.

ENDNOTES

1. Data from polls by yougov, ICM and Center for Excellence in Government
2. 'A Tale of Two Houses: the House of Commons, the *Big Brother* house and the people at home', *Parliamentary Affairs,* October 2003
3. Minutes of Evidence and Appendices to the Sixth Report of the House of Commons Public Administration Committee, *Public Participation: Issues and Innovations,* HC373-2, pp. 29 and 188
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6. Goffman, E., *Forms of Talk,* University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadephia, 1962
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