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Title:

The 'new social democracy' and Labour government community engagement and
consultation strategies: Emerging findings from South Australia

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of the 'new social democracy' (NSD) on specific attempts in Australia and Britain to foster democratic renewal. The NSD attempts to reinvigorate progressive social-democratic politics, and it emerges from the debates about 'third way' politics within the labour tradition. Most of the literature on the NSD tends to focus on its prescriptions for welfare reform rather than its call for the 'democratising of democracy'. In addition, there is little research on how NSD-influenced governments have attempted, in practice, to engage in wider community engagement and consultation. This article addresses these gaps, and proceeds in three sections. Firstly, the main structural changes in political participation and political support in Britain and Australia are outlined. It is argued that while these changes do not amount to a 'crisis of democracy', they do pose a particular challenge for Labour governments. Secondly, the NSD prescriptions for the 'democratising of democracy' are critiqued. The NSD arguments for democratic renewal are, in part, a response to the underlying structural changes. Thirdly, specific NSD attempts in Australia and Britain that respond to this call for greater democracy are outlined. The preliminary findings of the first case study of this research are also outlined – the 2006 consultation on the South Australian Strategic Plan.

Introduction

This article explores the influence of the 'New Social Democracy' (NSD) in Britain and Australia, and its attempts to foster democratic renewal and civic participation. The NSD is an attempt to re-orient Labour¹ politics to embrace the 'new' challenges facing post-industrial societies. To some extent the roots of the NSD lie in the Australian Labor Hawke/Keating governments which, in turn, influenced the Blair-led 'New Labour' project in Britain (Pierson and Castles, 2002, Johnson & Tonkiss 2002). The New Labour government is often cited as the archetype of the NSD, and in turn this has influenced other governments, including a number of Australian state Labor governments.

A key part of NSD-thinking is its attempt to reinvigorate the democratic 'conversation' by reconfiguring the relationship between the state and wider civil society. Anthony Giddens remains the strongest proponent of the NSD, and has called for further democratic renewal under the rubric of the 'democratising of democracy' (Giddens 1988, 2001, 2002; Giddens and Diamond 2005). A number of NSD-influence governments in Britain and Australia have responded by implementing a range of predominantly 'top-down' community engagement and consultation strategies to supplement the formal democratic electoral institutions.

Most critiques of the NSD have tended to focus on its prescriptions for welfare reform, rather than the 'democratic' part of the New Social *Democracy*. Furthermore, there has been a lack of research on some of the specific initiatives by NSD-influenced governments to foster democratic renewal. This article is part of a wider research project to address these gaps.

In part, these government-driven community engagement and consultation strategies can be seen as attempts to respond to the changing patterns of political support and political participation occurring across many advanced industrial societies (Dalton 1999, Norris 1999, Nye 1997, Sawer and Zappala 2001, Marsh 1995, 2005, Stoker 2006). Some of the main trends include falling voter turnout at (British) elections; citizens 'identifying' less with the main political parties; and the rise of social movements. While they do not amount to a 'crisis' of democracy, these trends pose significant challenges for governments in advanced industrial nations as they place greater stress on what Richardson (2002) calls 'the burden of legitimation'.

This article examines the politics of the NSD and its prescriptions for democratic renewal, and highlights some emerging findings from a specific initiative. The article is organised in three main sections. The first section summarises some of the key trends in political participation and political support in Britain and Australia. The second part outlines and offers a critique of the NSD's programme for the 'democratising of democracy'. The third section outlines the emerging findings of a specific case study – the 2006 consultation on the South Australian Strategic Plan. The article concludes with some reflections on what this case study might mean for further attempts at democratic renewal.

Changing Patterns of Political Participation and Support in Britain and Australia

Dalton (2002), Marsh (1995), Sawer and Zappala (2001) Norris (1999) Nye (1997), among many others argue that citizen political behaviour and political support is undergoing a transformation in the advanced industrialised democracies. Whilst there is a great deal of debate to account for these changes, there appears to be widespread agreement that they are taking place. A quick

¹ For ease of reference the use of the term 'Labour' will be used as a short-hand for both the British Labour Party and the Australian Labor Party (ALP). The 'u' was dropped from the ALP in 1908 to reflect the then growing influence of the American Labor movement. The use of the term 'labor' in this article will therefore refer specifically to the ALP.

'snapshot' of the following trends underscores the central contention that the dynamics of political support and participation are changing in Australia and Britain:²

- The decline in voter identification with the two major parties (Goot 2002; Marsh 2005) (The Power Inquiry 2006)³. (Sanders, Clarke et al. 2005, p.5) note that the "intriguing long-term feature of party identification in Britain has been its progressive decline".
- In Australia, a (small) decline in the overall votes for the major and minor parties at federal elections. (Woodward 2006).
- In Britain, falling electoral turnout at General (national) Elections. (For example, the 2001 result with only 59.4% of the electorate voting is the lowest turnout since 1918. Turnout has clearly fallen since 1997, when the Blair government came to power^{4 5} (Bromley, Curtice et al. 2004, The Power Inquiry 2006).
- The decline in political trust in the advanced industrial societies (Bromley, Curtice et al. 2004, Nye 1997, Dalton 1999, Klingeman 1999, Norris 1999, Burchell and Leigh 2002, Leigh 2002)⁶.
- The decline of political party membership and trade union membership (Mair and van Biezen 2001, Jaensch, Brent et al. 2004).
- Changing patterns of non-electoral forms of political participation. In Britain, the number of people who were members of an organisation has declined, while the number of 'individualistic' acts of political participation has risen (Pattie, Seyd et al. 2004). In Australia, the overall hierarchy of participation has remained relatively stable for the past 30 years. Group membership is much higher in Australia, although there is some suggestion that membership for some traditional groups maybe declining (Lyons 2001).
- The changing social base of mass parties (Scott 2000). In particular, the Labour parties in both Britain and Australia can be characterised by a decline in support from the blue-collar workers, and an increase in support from white-collar workers⁷.

In the Australian context, Sawer and Zappala (2001) also identify a number of other trends – which broadly also apply to British politics.

- The loss by the major parties of their agenda development role
- The loss of capacity of the major parties to aggregate the ever-increasing number of interests given expression through social movements
- The rise of post materialist voting patterns

² It is beyond the scope of the article to outline all these trends in detail. References are provided to the main data sources and commentators on some of these key trends. It should be noted that some of these trends and patterns are contestable – particularly Inglehart's thesis on post-materialism (for a critique of the case of Australia see: Tranter & Western (2003). These trends should not be over-stated, and it should be made clear that the trends have not all taken place at the same time, or to the same degree. However, with these caveats in place, there are clearly demonstrable and significant changes in political participation and support that have taken place in Australia and Britain (along with other advanced industrial societies) which do pose a set of challenges for these democracies institutions.

³ While the trends is falling voter identification with the major parties is discernible in both Britain and Australia, these trends should not be over-stated. Not least, while the major parties may have fewer 'rusted on' voters, they still constitute a significant percentage of all voters.

⁴ Caution needs to be exercised when interpreting this data. For example, some commentators do not see this as a 'crisis of democracy' given other patterns of political participation in the UK (see: Bromley, C. et al (2004). They suggest turnout was low for the elections in 1997 and 2001 as the result was seen as fore-gone conclusion. However, The Power Inquiry highlights the low turnout as a factor in increased public disillusionment with the main political parties and the current political system (The Power Inquiry 2006).

⁵ The use of compulsory voting in Australia means that it is not possible to directly compare with Britain. There is some evidence that if voting in federal elections in Australia were voluntary, voter turnout would still be high (Farrell & McAllister 2006). However, other commentators have suggested that this might not necessarily be the case, as in many respects the Australian government (compared with their British counterparts) actually make it harder *not* to vote (see: Smith, 2001).

⁶ An important caveat to note is that trust has also fallen in a range of other public and non-public institutions.

⁷ These changes are in accord with Bell's (1974) 'post-industrialisation' thesis, and reflect the broader decline of the number of manufacturing and labouring people in both countries.

- The rise of non-traditional parties, minor parties and independents;
- The decline of importance of geography to politics and representation

A key trend to add to this list is the argument that over the past 20-30 years, there has been a rise in prominence of interest movements and interest groups (Marsh, 1995). This is supported by those such as Stoker (2006) who also argues that in more recent times the growth in interest movements has led to the increased 'professionalisation of activism'.

If not a 'crisis', then what?

Norris (notes that "theories of democratic crisis have gone through periodic cycles of hope and fear" (Norris, 1999: p.3). In the 1960s and 1970s several theorists predicted a 'crisis of democracy' (Huntington, Crozier et al. 1975). The 1980s were marked by a renewed sense of confidence, whereas the situation in the 1990s is marked by a "more diffuse mood of *angst*" (Norris, 1999: p.5). While not a 'crisis', the trends and patterns of political participation and support summarised above do pose a challenge for Labour governments.

It is useful to view this challenge through the lens of the 'burden of legitimation' (Richardson 2002). Richardson argues that all governments have this 'burden' since they impinge on freedom. For the major political parties, the 'burden' of legitimation is being placed under new levels of stress by these underpinning structural changes. Falling levels of trust, falling political party membership, declining voter identification with the major parties, falling electoral turnout (in Britain), and a dip in the two-party preferred vote in Australia indicate a disillusionment with the two-party system. These trends should not be over-stated, for example, it is striking that they are not being matched by an increase in acts of 'protest' politics, or that general 'interest' in politics is falling (Goot 2002, Sanders, Clarke et al. 2005).⁸ However, the central premise does hold that citizens are not as engaged with the major political parties in the same they were 20 or 30 years ago – a finding borne out by the British NGO-led 'Power Inquiry'(2006)

For Labour parties and governments these broader trends are supplemented by other trends which have added to their 'burden of legitimation'. Falling trade union membership is a significant long-term trend; which points to the changing role of the Labour party - historically the political expression for the wider labour 'movement'. In both Australia and Britain, the political parties are no longer 'mass parties' they once were 20 or 30 years ago. In addition, the social base of the Labour parties has changed significantly, increasingly drawing support from the middle classes (Scott 2000).

Partly in response to these underlying structural changes in wider political participation and support, the Labour parties in Britain and Australia (and elsewhere) have been searching for a new narrative to reconfigure their role and purpose. The most significant of these to emerge in recent years is the 'New Social Democracy' (NSD)⁹.

Defining the New Social Democracy

The NSD attempts to reinvigorate progressive social-democratic politics, and emerges from the debates about 'third way' politics. Its main proponent is Anthony Giddens – a key figure in

⁸ While the central argument of this article is that a number of significant trends (such as falling levels of trust in government) suggest greater disengagement with the two-party system, it's also important to note that in other areas, there are consistent trends which underline the levels of political stability.

⁹ Of course, there is nothing 'new' in the Labour parties grappling with their over-arching role, purpose, and tactical approach to wider political changes. The heterogeneity of the 'labour movement' has seen vigorous debate since its inception. In more recent times there was renewed debate following the publication of Tony Crosland's 'The Future of Socialism' (1957). . This debate about the revision of socialism has continued to influence NSD politicians such as former British 'New Labour' Home Secretary Jack Straw: (Straw, J. (2006). In this respect, the NSD is only the latest 'school' of labour thinking in a long tradition.

influencing government policy in the British New Labour government¹⁰. One of the central criticisms charged at the 'third way' is that it is a vague and opaque political project (Giddens 1988). Giddens cites a comment by Jeff Faux that the term has become "so wide as that it is more like a political parking lot than a highway to anywhere in particular" (Giddens, 1998, p. 8). A useful interpretation of the NSD is provided by White who argues that it a "relatively general normative framework...which can be rendered determinate and concrete in a number of ways" (White 1998, p. 4). However, White is adamant that it "does not add up to anything like a complete political philosophy in itself". Pierson and Castles see it "less as a programme and rather more as an omnibus term for a particular reorientation of parties of the centre-left in the face of a series of substantial changes in their external environment" (Pierson and Castles 2002, p. 685). A number of commentators argue that the NSD has taken a variety of forms, and that there are even 'multiple third ways' (Cuperus, Duffek et al. 2001, Merkel 2001, Giddens 2003).

Essentially, the NSD seeks to develop and deliver government policy which 'transcends' both the 'traditional' Labour statist approach and also the neo-liberal conservative market-driven position. One of the main drivers for the NSD is the 'growing disaffection with mainstream politics and parties' (Pierson and Castles 2002, p.684; Giddens, 2002).

Fitzpatrick (2003) makes an important link between the apparent 'thin' ideology of the NSD and the New Labour project. Fitzpatrick's analysis of the NSD political programme is to examine it "in what arguably remains its purest form, that of Tony Blair's post-1994 Labour Party and the ideas which have been deployed to both motivate and justify its approach" (p.13). Fitzpatrick argues that it is the very thinness of the NSD 'ideology' which allows the analysis to focus on the actions and discourse of political parties. This observation has important implications for this article, as it validates the approach that to understand the 'democratic renewal' aspects of the NSD, it bears fruit to examine concrete case studies of the NSD in practice.

The NSD arrives at an interesting moment in the history of social democracy. Gamble and Wright (1999) argue that social democracy has never been more widely practiced, yet with the rise of neo-liberal politics the aims of social democracy have never been more called into question. Critics such as Fitzpatrick (2003) and Hamilton (2006) argue the NSD arrives (rather too conveniently) as the 'saviour' of social democracy, particularly with its appeal to 'pragmatism'. Hamilton argues:

"the Third way came from nowhere, sparkled briefly in the political firmament and then winked out. Its function is now clear. It provided an ideological vehicle – a cover story – for former social democrats who had decided to abandon the ideas of the past but did not want to be seen to have cast their lot with the conservatives" (Hamilton, 2006, p.19)

New Social Democracy & Democratic Renewal

A number of core themes underpin the NSD. White (1998) identifies the following central values that are identifiable in Giddens' writings on the NSD. White argues that the main values of the NSD are an emphasis on 'real opportunity', 'civic responsibility', and 'community'. In terms of the role of government he identifies 5 main sets of ideas:

- The State should be guarantor (not necessarily direct provider) of opportunity goods
- State needs to be receptive to forms of 'mutualism'
- New thinking about public finances
- employment centred social policy

¹⁰ There is a wide-ranging (if a little tedious) debate about the terminology of the NSD. Hitherto, it had been largely referred to as the 'third way'. There is a large overlap between the two, but some differences. Since the NSD is now what Giddens himself (the chief proponent of the 'third way') calls it, it will be used throughout this article. (See - Giddens, 2002).

- 'Asset-based' egalitarianism

These values have been echoed and reinforced by the leading figures in the Labour leadership in both Australia and Britain. Blair identifies the main values as: 'equal worth of each individual', 'opportunity for all', 'responsibility' and 'community' (Blair 1998). Blair envisages a modern government based on partnership and decentralisation, "where democracy is deepened to suit the modern age" (Blair, 1998, p.7). Former ALP leader Mark Latham, strongly advocated NSD politics, and the same themes are identifiable in his writings (Latham 1998; 2001).

In the NSD conception of politics the historical divide between left/right is no longer the central division in society. Blair argued that,

"Most confusingly for modern politicians, many of the policy prescriptions cross traditional left-right lines. Basic values, attitudes to the positive role of government, social objectives - these still divide among familiar party lines, but on policy cross-dressing is rampant and a feature of modern politics that will stay." (Wintour 2006)

Gamble and Wright consolidate this analysis and argue that "...party leaders are no longer the representatives of a unified, disciplined labour movement, but brokers in an increasingly pluralistic and diverse politics" (Gamble and Wright 1999 p.3). This leads the proponents of the NSD to argue that the Labour parties need to represent and lead from the 'radical centre' (Fitzpatrick, 2003).

It is beyond the scope of this article to outline the NSD in detail or the suite of criticisms that have been leveled at the NSD 'project'¹¹. Rather the focus of this article is what the NSD has to say about democratic renewal. The NSD seeks to reconfigure the relationship of the state and civil society, and reinvigorate democracy¹². Giddens argues that the lesson from state socialism is that state power can be suffocating, and argues there is a difference between a 'big' state and 'active' state. Government for Giddens is a vehicle for confronting apathy, and fostering 'active citizenship':

"The self-reform of government and the state needs not only to meet efficiency goals, but to respond to the voter apathy from which even the most established democratic states are suffering. In many countries, levels of trust in political leaders and other authority figures have declined while the proportions voting in elections and expressing an interest in parliamentary politics have also dropped". (Giddens, 1988, p.60).

These comments have been supported by Blair and Latham (Latham 1998, p.34). Blair argued that "...the democratic impulse needs to be strengthened by finding new ways to enable citizens to share in decision-making that affects them". (Blair, 1998, p.15).

Giddens calls for a "second wave of democracy" or what he calls "the democratising of democracy" (Giddens, 1988, p.61). Giddens gives some indications of the general forms that this might take: such as constitutional reforms, and also "experiments with democracy" including citizens juries, electronic referenda, and forms of 'direct' democracy. Giddens emphasises the role of civil society in constraining the state and the economy.

"Civil society, rather than the state, supplies the grounding of citizenship, and is hence crucial to sustaining an open public sphere" (Giddens, 1988, p.65).

¹¹ Giddens (1988) collated many of these criticisms and attempted to rebut them. Another survey of the criticisms is offered by Fitzpatrick. See: Fitzpatrick, T. (2003).

¹² There is an ongoing debate by NSD proponents about the role of the state. Initially, there was an emphasis on the 'active' state (Giddens, 1998, Blair 1998). Latham and others have advocated for an 'enabling' state (Latham, 2001). More recently, Giddens has conceptualised the role as 'the ensuring state' (Giddens & Diamond, 2005).

The tension between the state and civil society highlights an ambivalence in Giddens's dictums for government (a problem also for other NSD proponents such as Blair and Latham). Interest groups are clearly identified as entities that need to be 'regulated' and 'faced down', and yet government also has a central role in reinvigorating civil society.

Despite the various NSD calls for democratic renewal (Giddens 1988, Blair 1998, Latham 1998, Bentley and Halpern 2003, Giddens 2003), the actual content and character of what the 'democratisation of democracy' should look like is rather vague. Giddens talks about the need for 'experiments' at the local level, but it is one of the least extensively developed areas in his writings on the NSD. Likewise, Bentley and Halpern (2003) strongly argue for concentrating more power into communities, but their prescriptions are still rather suggestive. They call for;

“...devolving responsibility for service management and priority setting to local governance, and creating new subsidies and support for specific communities to develop their own health, education or crime reduction strategies” (p.85)

Ultimately, the central difficulty for NSD-influenced governments is how to achieve this aim. There are a number of reasons why the NSD attempts at democratic renewal might only be partially successful.

Firstly, democratic reform is a 'second tier' issue in the NSD. It is interesting to note, that it is only a sub-theme of the main areas identified by White (1998). It is far less developed in Giddens' work than other issues such as welfare reform and reconciling public services with economic growth. This is due, in part, to the historical back-drop of the past few decades where the Labour social democratic parties have lost ground to Conservative parties on these latter issues.

Secondly, a number of writers identify an ambivalence in wider social democratic theory about the place of democracy (Marquand 1999, Fitzpatrick 2003). The NSD's commitment to formal democracy is tempered by a tendency for the state to be used as a 'surgeon' operating on the 'patient' (citizen body). In its 'purest' form - New Labour - the NSD devolved responsibility but centralised power.

Thirdly, thorough-going democratic reform often takes place at a slower pace than other aspects of public-policy making; and the results can be less tangible for NSD-influenced governments. It can be hard for governments to maintain a focus on democratic reform when they are so often 'fire-fighting' on a range of different issues. The recent growth of 'governance' structures also makes this task more complex (Kjaer 2004). Reforming representative democracy in itself is an inherently complex and difficult project. The NSD does not rigorously differentiate between advocating for democratic reform as an end in itself, or as a means to achieve particular ends (such as greater equality of opportunity or outcome).

Arguably, it is for these reasons that the NSD prescriptions for renewal remain rather under-developed. In the case of New Labour it is also indicative that after some early reforming zeal (for example, creating the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly), other constitutional reforms have been considered 'half-baked' (Toynbee and Walker 2005, p.299). A more open verdict is that, "...the local modernisation reforms of the current British government highlight the tensions inherent in trying to balance vertical and horizontal accountabilities" (Smyth, Reddel et al. 2005, p.200)¹³. There has also been much debate in Britain about the concept of 'subsidiarity'¹⁴ (see

¹³ A good example is the introduction of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in the UK. These are partnership bodies comprising local public sector agencies, set up by statute, with spending powers. However, it has remained unclear how they relate to, and interact with, the locally elected Council members.

¹⁴ - Subsidiarity is taken to broadly mean that citizen decision-making should be devolved to the lowest level possible, where appropriate.

Giddens 2003, Bentley and Halpern 2003) but institutionalising this concept has remained more elusive.

Without a clearer set of prescriptions for democratic renewal, the main response from NSD governments has been to (re)-apply 'traditional' methods of citizen participation, to fill this 'void'. There is a sense that NSD has still yet to find the right framework where these 'experiments' in democracy can bolster and enrich the existing formal democratic institutions.

The Case Studies of NSD-influenced Democratic Renewal

The central contention is that the NSD prescriptions for the 'democratising of democracy' remain under-developed, and have not moved beyond calls for 'experiments' with democracy. The final part of this article examines one such example of a NSD-influenced government's attempt to re-invigorate community engagement and democratic renewal.

Before the first case study is outlined, it is worth noting that there has been an increasing number of NSD-influenced community engagement and consultative initiatives. As might be expected, under the 'prototype' NSD New Labour government there has been a greater raft of examples, including:

- The 'People's Panel' a rolling survey of a representative sample of 1000 citizens which ran from 2000-2004
- The 'Big Conversation' – apparently the biggest consultation ever undertaken in Britain (2004) – following on the back of other UK large-scale consultations such as the 2003 consultation on GM foods
- Statutory legislation for local authorities to create Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), and requirements that they also have 'Community Empowerment Networks (CENs)
- Range of initiatives emanating from the Home Office's 'Active Citizenship Unit', for example instigating annual 'citizenship surveys'
- Creation of 'Patient Forums' in all NHS Health Trusts – an attempt to link patient views closer with the management of the Trusts

In Australia, there have been fewer examples, but nonetheless, there are significant initiatives by many Labor State governments at community engagement and civic renewal. ¹⁵:

- The 2006 South Australian consultation on the Strategic Plan – arguably the largest consultation ever undertaken in SA.
- A range of initiatives in Victoria under the Bracks' government – particularly linked to the 'Growing Victoria Together' State Plan
- The use of community cabinets in Queensland (and other states), and initiatives under the community development directorate
- Consultative activity that supported the Tasmanian state plan, and the governance through the Progress Board

This is not a comprehensive survey of all such initiatives, but it gives a snapshot of some of the activities taking place to make stronger connections between the state and civil society. What links these initiatives is that while they vary greatly in scope and approach; they are broadly speaking a 'family' of related Labour programmes attempting to supplement the democratic 'conversation'. Importantly, many of these are well-resourced initiatives that go beyond traditional methods of government's consulting on individual pieces of legislation.

¹⁵ One of the main drivers for renewed Labor state government activity in developing new community engagement and consultation strategies is that a number of states and territories have developed whole-of-state 'strategic plans'.

The Consultation on the South Australian Strategic Plan

There are clear NSD Influences on the Rann government in South Australia. Rann has been described as a 'policy bowerbird' (Anderson 2004) and has regularly brought in policies developed outside South Australia, in particular the Blair New Labour government¹⁶. (Macintyre 2006) notes:

“There are parallels with the Blair government in Britain. By trying to re-orient political battles, Rann has sought to shift the emphasis of spending expectations that might have been held with a more reforming Labor administration to those built on more modest reforms” (p.129)

The South Australian Strategic Plan (SASP)

The genesis of the South Australian Strategic Plan lies in the governance arrangements set up by the Premier soon after winning the 2002 state election¹⁷. Rann invited prominent businessman Robert Champion de Crespigny to head up the Economic Development Board to examine key economic trends and issues facing South Australia. The EDB produced its final report in 11th April 2003, which was then the basis for a two day economic summit held from 11-12th April¹⁸. A key recommendation was the proposal to develop a state-wide plan.

After considering a range of possible models, including the 'Tasmania Together' plan, the South Australian government opted for the US 'Oregon Shines' Plan as the basis for the SASP. The first SASP was produced in March 2004, and set out 84 targets on a broad range of issues under the following headings¹⁹:

- Growing Prosperity
- Improving well-being
- Attaining Sustainability
- Fostering Creativity
- Building Communities
- Expanding Opportunity

While the first iteration of the plan covered a range of issues, it was clear that primary focus was to improve the state's economic growth. Most relevant to the NSD agenda for democratic renewal are a number of targets related to 'political participation'; including targets aimed to reduce the number of informal votes at elections, and also increasing turnout at local elections.

The emphasis on economic growth reflects the influence of the NSD on the state plan. It is also noteworthy that the idea for the state plan did not emerge from the wider labour movement. It was

¹⁶ Rann has readily taken ideas and policies from the British Labour Party. An early example is when newly installed as Leader after the ALP were decimated at the 1993 state election, Rann instituted a series of 'Labor Listens' events. This was directly inspired by Neil Kinnock's Labour Listens' events following the heavy loss at the 1983 British General Election (Manning 2005). At the 2006 state election, Rann used a 'pledge' card based on a version devised by New Labour at the 1997 election. Rann has taken a hard-line on many criminal justice issues, which is a strong element of NSD politics (Giddens, 2002). Rann's experiments with new governance arrangements (for example, bringing the heads of the Economic Development Board and Social Inclusion Board into Cabinet), also reflects similar decisions made by Blair. Rann also set up the Social Inclusion Board – which was directly borrowed from New Labour's Social Exclusion Unit

¹⁷ For details of the 2002 SA state election see Parkin, A. (2003).

¹⁸ The idea for the economic summit was inspired by the Hawke government's national economic summit in April 1983.

¹⁹ All SASP related documents are available from: www.stateplan.sa.gov.au.

widely agreed that the first iteration of the state plan was 'top-down' driven, and imposed without much consultation and public awareness (Anderson 2004; Spoehr 2004)²⁰.

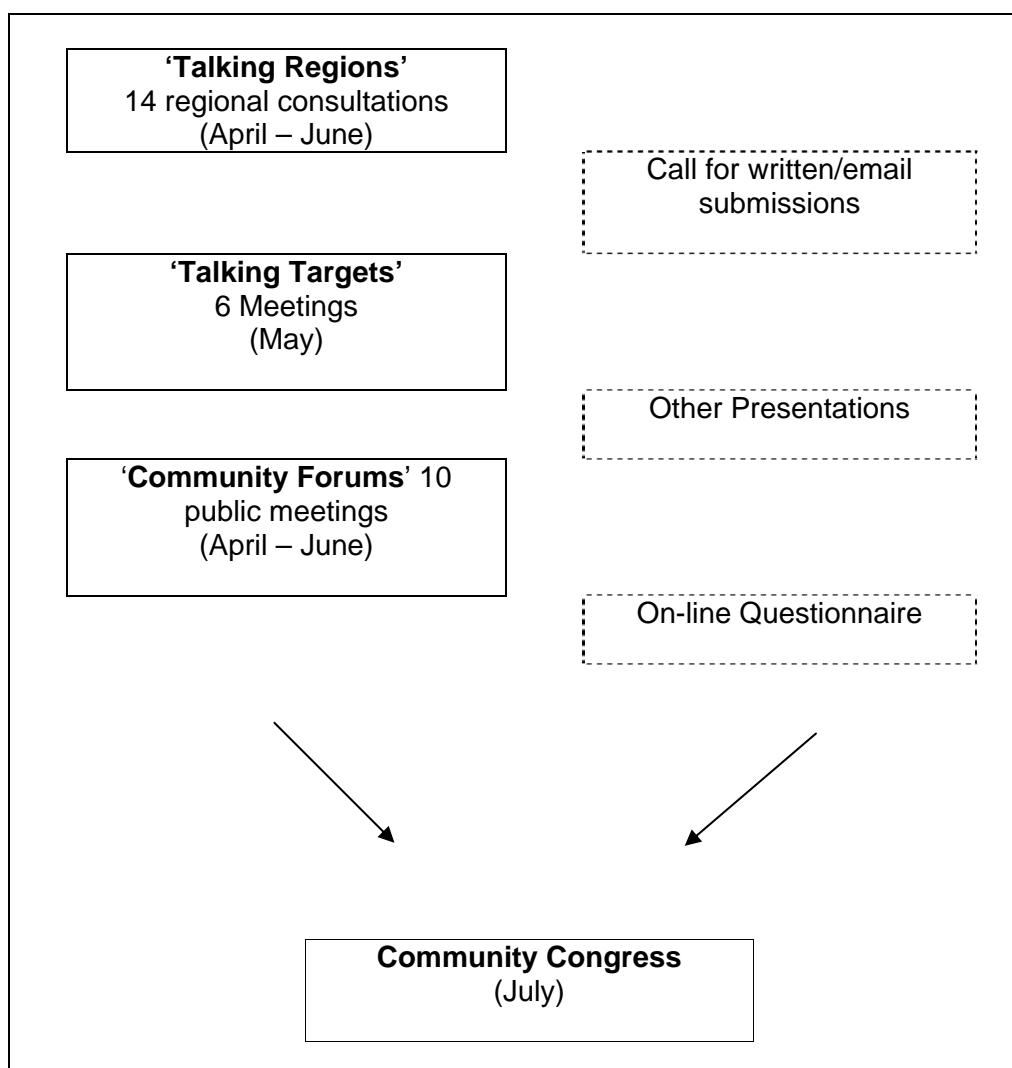
As part of their commitment to the SASP, the government committed to publishing regular updates on the plan by an external body; and also consulting on and updating the plan every 4 years. The first progress report was published in June 2006 and argued that progress in meeting the targets was seen 'mixed' (South Australia's Strategic Plan Audit Committee 2006).

The 2006 Consultation Process

In 2006, The Rann government appointed Jeff Tryens (who headed up the Oregon Shines Progress Board) as head of the SASP Update Team to devise and implement a consultation strategy on the SASP. An outline of the consultation process is outlined in the following table:

²⁰ While there was limited direct consultation on the first version of the SASP – mainly conducted through bodies connected to the EDB, there was a much wider range of consultative activity taking place that did influence the first SASP. For example, the SA 'Generational Health Review', and also consultative activities undertaken by the Social Inclusion Board and others.

Table 1: Overview of 2006 SASP Consultation Process



The community engagement process had three main stages. Firstly, a series of 14 regional meetings ('Talking Regions') were held across the state from April to June 2005. The next stage involved a series of 6 meetings ('Talking Targets') which looked at each of the 6 broad thematic areas in more detail. During this time from April to June, a series of 10 'community forums' or public meetings were held.

In addition, the SASP Update Team ran other activities including a web-based questionnaire, call for written submissions, and other ad-hoc presentations to various organisations. The Update Team produced a 'Preliminary Community Engagement Report' which was presented to the 'Community Congress' in July, outlining the issues to date, and shaping the Congress. A Final community engagement report was produced in November 2006 sessions; which was the basis for the revised SASP, published in early 2007.

It is beyond the scope of this article to outline the consultation process in detail²¹, but rather a few indicative findings are outlined below.

Summary findings of the SASP consultation

²¹ Fuller details are contained in the SASP Preliminary and Final Community Engagement Reports available from www.stateplan.sa.gov.au

Scope and aims of the consultation

According to the Update Team, the 2006 consultation of the plan "...is the most comprehensive, whole of state exercise conducted in South Australia" (South Australia's Strategic Plan Update Team 2006). This claim is rightly made, and apparently over 1,600 South Australians were 'consulted' albeit to varying degrees. Outside of the electoral process it was one of the most substantive efforts made to engage South Australians on a massive range of issues.

In 2005, the state government ran an advertising campaign for the plan. Prior to this campaign, the State government ran a poll which showed that awareness of the plan was 15.7% of the wider population. Post-campaign, a follow-up poll showed that awareness was 23.2%²² (Gov of SA, 2005). It is noteworthy that the government did not set a benchmark for overall awareness, and there is also evidence to suggest that awareness levels have subsequently dropped.

One of the main observations to make of the consultation was the tension between two of its main aims. Ostensibly, there are two separate strands to the overall aims of the consultation: to promote awareness and also gain feedback. A senior figure interviewed as part of this research suggested that more effort and resources could have gone into raising awareness of the SASP before the consultation itself, as many participants were coming 'cold' to the plan. The implication is that inadvertently the government is able to have a greater degree of control over the SASP agenda.

Representation and Feedback

Most literature on political and civic participation confirms the overall 'inequality of voice' of many forms of participation. The more affluent socio-economic groups are more likely to engage than lower socio-economic groups (Verba, Nie et al. 1978; Verba, Scholzman et al. 1995; Pattie, Seyd et al. 2004). A key issue for a 'whole of state' plan is the degree to which the consultation on the plan represented all parts of the wider population.

For the SASP Update team, the aim was to engage "interest groups, community organisations and individuals around the state" (Final Community Engagement Report, 2006). The Update team also developed a broad definition of 'community leaders' (which might encompass head-teachers, people running sporting clubs, etc). At the main planning sessions, these were the main attendees. The Update team noted that the business community was under-represented – in the main due to the all-day nature of the planning sessions. It is also notable, that government agencies also tended to be a significant proportion of attendees at the different planning sessions, with some complaints by a number of community sector bodies that they tended to dominate proceedings.

Community Representation

The only demographic profiling of the planning events was on grounds of gender. Female participation in the community planning events was disproportionately lower than the male participants (approximately 1:3). Given the balance of population, there is also a case to be made that regional South Australia was over-represented compared with metropolitan communities. However, the focus on targeting community/interest groups was 'representative' to the extent that there was a wide range of participants from diverse community groups, including disability, education, health, and other areas. In this sense, the participants were broadly representative of the community sector. However, the key events were by invitation and although the Update team did make strenuous efforts to engage widely, there is a suggestion that that

²² A number of public servants were keen to point out that this is a higher level of awareness than was achieved in Oregon after 14 years since the first 'Oregon Shines' plan

those groups *already* engaged with government networks were more likely to be a part of the process.

Public Representation

However, the level and representation of *public* engagement was poor and, at worst, tokenistic. The 'community forums' were poorly attended, even scoring a 'nil' attendance at one event. Arguably, one of the main reasons for this lack of engagement is that the types of people most likely to attend these were the 'community leaders' already invited to the main planning sessions. One upshot of these poorly attended forums was an acknowledgement by the Update Team that they needed more guidance on how to engage the public more widely. (Prior to the consultation, Jeff Tryens had considered running focus groups to supplement the main sessions, but these were not pursued, which in hindsight seems a missed opportunity). The SASP was seen as too esoteric to engage the wider public, and so only those 'interested individuals' were actively approached. In effect, this became a self-reinforcing strategy.

The danger for a consultation that is ultimately aimed at the community sector, is that it makes assumptions about the overall 'health' of the community sector and its ability to engage in such activities; or that it provides sufficient incentives for them to do so. In the NSD context, the ambivalence about engaging with 'interest groups' is a predominant theme – groups to be faced down, and yet engaged with. This was borne out in South Australia to some extent with low levels of trust from parts of the community wider sector as a key barrier to engagement.

Feedback Mechanisms

The SASP Update Team was the main filter for all the feedback that arose during the consultation. Throughout the consultation there was a clear commitment to record all comments, and at least ensure that they were fed back to the relevant government agencies. This was a symbolically important move, but was not part of the formal feedback process. Interviews with key civil servants reported an on-going difficulty in grappling with making the consultation as transparent as possible – particularly for potentially negative feedback on the Rann government.

The SASP Update Team framed their recommendations for the revised plan around those issues which had the 'weight of opinion', a skilful way of avoiding a case of majority-rules. This may explain why the profile of aboriginal issues was so prominent throughout the consultation, since the prominence of specific-indigenous groups and people engaged in the consultation was small (even by proportion of population levels). Inevitably, in a consultation where the government claim over 1,600 people were involved not all issues and concerns were incorporated into the plan – a necessary filter, and also an important democratic safeguard some would argue.

The main findings from the consultation were presented to the 400-plus 'community leaders' held in at the July 'Community Congress', and were framed around a series of 10 'propositions' which were broadly endorsed by the 400 people involved in the 'Congress'. A series of 10 Working parties, each chaired by a government official, but comprising delegates from the Congress, then refined the final suite of targets.

Government Responsiveness and Control

The degree of government responsiveness to the consultation is an important indicator of the overall government commitment to the process. This is a major theme borne out in the academic literature of community engagements (Arnstein 1969, Bishop and Davis 2002). If the South Australian government's responsiveness is judged only on the criteria of how much the updated version of the 2007 SASP was influenced by the findings of the 2006 consultation, then there is good evidence to suggest they responded well to all the final recommendations made by the Update Team.

However, in the broader view, the state government commitment's to transparency is more open to question. In the Preliminary and Final Community Engagement reports, there were concerns about seeking further guidance on how best to consult with the public (particularly in view of the poor response to the community forums), and also about improving government consultations overall. While it is too early to judge on the former issue, to date there has been no significant or formalised response to the latter issue. There are also further concerns that some of the goodwill and openness generated by the consultation is now being lost.

The 2006 SASP consultation was launched as just the start of an *ongoing* process to engage with the public. In this respect its impact has to be judged in the longer term. The South Australian government's commitment to embedding community engagement with the updated SASP is to establish the Community Engagement Board (CEB) - comprising 26 'community leaders' all pooled from government appointed advisory boards²³. There is an interesting question about the status of the CEB and the degree to which it represents the wider 'community'. It is striking that a number of SA-based 'peak' bodies have lobbied – unsuccessfully – for a seat at this table.

This relates to the issues of government control. The first iteration of the SASP was widely seen as top-down and 'imposed'. The consultation itself was government driven, and the government was final gatekeeper who defined the terms of access for all participants. It was to a degree, highly controlled, where the most important feedback sessions were those 'invite-only' sessions.

Despite a largely successful consultation with the key parts of the broader 'community' sector, it is clear that the government still has final oversight and control of the SASP agenda. Herein lies the underlying tension. The South Australian government has resisted the idea of setting up a more community-based 'progress board' (such as the Tasmanian model) as in their view this has the effect of down-grading the plan as a priority. The greater the community control, the lower the priority it becomes for the government. While the South Australian government has committed to consulting every 4 years on the SASP, there is a danger that such exercises are little more than expensive exercises in 'legitimation'. The South Australian government has, at times, conflated the 'community' engagement on the SASP to refer to both the community sector *and* the wider public, whereas in effect the consultation was with the former. This gives a much more misleading picture at the amount of broader public awareness and support for the SASP²⁴.

Specific Targets on Political Participation

The SASP targets relating to wider political participation link most closely with the NSD attempts at the 'democratising of democracy'. The initial target on reducing the amount of 'informal voting' has been dropped in favour of a new target to increase youth voter registration. This first target was dropped as it was not seen as the best 'indicator' of overall civic engagement. Throughout the consultation there were a small, but significant, number of calls for further opportunities for democratic engagement. However, these did not find final expression in the updated version of the SASP. The government would only commit to including new targets if they were 'measurable' (rather than aspirational). A broader target for enhancing either the quality or quantity of civic engagement was not found, and this, in part, reflects the complexity of defining and measuring the

²³ A striking characteristic of the Rann government is the creation of a range of external 'independent' government-appointed advisory boards.

²⁴ The term 'community' is a recurrent theme in NSD politics and draws heavily from communitarian theory: see: Tam, H. (1998). However, Giddens argues that the term 'community' does 'too much work' in communitarian theory. In the SA context, 'Community' has been used rather broadly, and without much differentiation. It is also interesting to note the *symbolic* measures take by the Rann government to foster wider 'community' buy-in. The original plan was called the 'State Strategic Plan' (SSP) but was re-named in 2006 as the 'South Australian Strategic Plan' (SASP) to encourage wider ownership. Also the SASP Update team comprised 26 'community leaders', but the input by the majority of these leaders was minimal to say the least, as the consultation was effectively run by Jeff Tryens and his team. These were useful strategies, but to a large degree, symbolic ones.

'ideal' of participatory engagement. In other words, there was support for the view that the level of civic engagement across the state might be 'improved', but there was no consensus about how this could be framed in a target²⁵.

In some respects, this lack of a broader political participation target might reflect the absence of an effective and wider 'democratic' community/interest based group (or a national group/lobby with an effective local presence). The group most likely to advocate for this are the SA Greens – but the danger is that this would 'party-politicise' the issue, thus excluding it from wider support.

Concluding Remarks

The changing patterns of political participation and support are posing new challenges to the governments in advanced industrial countries. NSD-influenced governments in Britain and Australia, have responded, in part, by instigating new community engagement and consultation initiatives. However, the degree to which these initiatives are able to meet these underlying structural challenges is more open to question. As Pratchett observes of New Labour's drive for democratic renewal, there is "...an implicit assumption that any form of participation contributes to democratic practice" (Pratchett 1999, p.626). Pratchett argues that Beetham (1994) has two main criteria for evaluating democracy: *popular control* and *political equality*; and judged by these criteria, Pratchett argues that of these new 'modes of participation' have shaky democratic credentials.

This poses a direct challenge to the proponents of the NSD, and other political scientists seeking to enrich and embed democratic renewal. It may well be that a much clearer institutional framework is needed to supplement the formal institutions of democracy, rather than make further exhortations to introduce more democratic 'experiments'. It is too early to evaluate the longer-lasting effects of the community engagement on the South Australian Strategic Plan. However, despite a well-resourced and largely laudable consultation in South Australia, the initiative seems rather 'thin' particularly in view of the lack of wider public engagement. In this respect, the lack of more tangible 'democratic' outcomes in South Australia perhaps also reflects that democratic renewal has a 'second tier' status in the New Social Democracy.

²⁵ However, the 2007 SASP does include a measure for the amount that people 'feel involved in their community' – this is an attempt to capture a Puttnam-style 'social capital' indicator. This may be a useful proxy measure, but there are no government actions or resources attached to this beyond the measurement of this amongst South Australians. The emphasis on measurability also explains why new targets were included in the plan on women's and Aboriginal leadership – as there are seemingly easier to measure.

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