REINVIGORATING DEMOCRACY:
Dealing with September 11th Through Modern Town Hall Meetings

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BY John Graham

FEW WOULD DENY THAT THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN CANADA AND INDEED IN ALL WESTERN COUNTRIES HAS BEEN ON THE DECLINE FOR DECADES. INDICATORS ABOUND. WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, THE PRIMARY ACT OF CITIZENSHIP – VOTING IN ELECTIONS – HOLDS LESS AND LESS ATTRACTION. THE LAST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN THE UNITED STATES DREW JUST OVER 50 % OF AMERICAN CITIZENS, A RESULT VERY SIMILAR TO THE FEDERAL ELECTION IN CANADA IN NOVEMBER 2000[1]. CONFIDENCE LEVELS IN POLITICIANS (AND IN INSTITUTIONS IN GENERAL) HAVE DROPPED SHARPLY SINCE THE 1960S[2]. AND MEDIA CYNICISM OF GOVERNMENTS' MASSIVE RELIANCE ON POLLING, 'SPIN' DOCTORS, ADVERTISING AND OTHER MARKETING TECHNIQUES TO STAY 'CONNECTED' TO CITIZENS IS PALPABLE[3].

As the most recent Human Development Report published by the United Nations notes: "For politics and political institutions to promote human development and safeguard the freedom and dignity of all people, democracy must widen and deepen." [4]

Do the benefits justify these costs? AmericaSpeaks claims they do and points to significant achievements of each of their events.

The aim of this article is to illustrate one means for widening and deepening democracy – the 'reinvention' of the town hall meeting, a technique that uses face to face dialogue facilitated by modern technology to engage large numbers of citizens. We begin by laying out the principal elements underpinning this new technique, then describe how it was used in New York City in July of this year to deal with the aftermath of September 11th and conclude with some implications for Canada.

MODERN TOWN HALL MEETINGS: THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Founded some seven years ago, AmericaSpeaks[5], a small, Washington-based not for profit organization, has developed and applied large scale "21st Century Town Hall Meetings" at the local, state and national levels. Recent applications include:

- In Washington D.C., in creating the city's strategic plan and budget, and in engaging youth in the city
- At the county level, in developing a long term vision as part of a comprehensive plan
- With the National 4-H Council in creating a comprehensive national youth development agenda
- At the national level, in holding forums in 25 states and engaging more than 45,000 Americans in discussing social security reform options
- And, most recently, in the City of New York, in two sessions to discuss options for the redevelopment of the World Trade Centre site and, more broadly, of lower Manhattan.

Involving anywhere from 500 to 5,000 citizens, these modern town hall forums, which last for most of a day, rest on seven design principles:

1. *face to face dialogue in small groups of 10 to 12 informed citizens assisted by a trained facilitator* – Participants spend the whole day seated in small groups of 'diverse' individuals. They receive information on the issues at hand both before and during the event though formal presentations, an information booklet and access to experts. Two key indicators of the effectiveness of the small group discussions are a) whether participants become better informed on the issues; and b) whether they modify their initial views based on what they hear from others in the small group.

2. *the large number and 'representativeness' of the participants* – The event has to be of sufficient scale to attract the attention of the media and decision makers. (Scale also adds to the sense of the event's importance shared by participants.) Further, participants should reflect the demographic diversity of the target population to give the results added weight. Thus, event organizers, while issuing an open invitation to participate, actively recruit other participants through a wide variety of means – collaborating with local media and using community groups to name two – in order that participants reflect the diversity of citizens in the area. This means that the minimum number of participants should be in the 400-500 range to achieve a level of confidence in the recommendations of the meeting.

3. *'neutral' organization and management of the event* – To have credibility among participants and citizens at large, the town hall meeting has to be organized and managed by a third party with no stake in the outcome. Neutrality is important in a variety of ways – from the information put together to inform participants; to the framing of the agenda and the specific questions put to participants during the session; to the creation of a summary of the event's main conclusions. A key challenge facing this neutral third party is to work with event sponsors - usually governments or other organizations seeking citizen input – in a manner that ensures the relevance of the results while maintaining the integrity of the event.

4. *a highly structured, carefully conceived agenda* – Following participant introductions and general information- sharing about the purposes of the meeting, participants at their round tables usually begin with a question aimed at identifying the values participants deem important in underpinning any solutions they propose during the course of the day. The idea is to get participants "to think beyond themselves" from the very beginning of the meeting and to have an ongoing touchstone to test ideas. Subsequent questions posed to the round tables follow a well thought through sequence so that there is a logical building of information. Questions are often tested before the event by focus groups.

5. *the judicious use of technology to synthesize major themes and ideas emerging from the group discussions* – Each table has a lap top computer that is connected to a central 'theme team' of analysts and each participant, a portable polling key pad. As group discussions progress, one of the participants records the results on the lap top and feeds the data into the theme team, who analyse the results and identify common themes. These in turn are presented on large screens throughout the meeting hall. Session organizers can then invite participants to use their key pads to indicate major preferences among these themes. The technology allows these polling results to be posted instantaneously.

6. *the commitment of decision makers to attend the event and to listen* – This is a critical element in recruiting citizens to spend an entire day wrestling with difficult, complex issues. The greater the clarity decision makers have about the input desired and the

choices involved, the greater the value of citizen deliberations. Widespread media attention to the event means that decision-makers often require little cajoling to attend and speak.

7. *follow-up with participants after the event* – Participants receive a report following the event, a report that summarizes the major themes, ideas and conclusions reached during the meeting. They are also given other options for pursuing their interest in the issue - for example, participating in further meetings or becoming part of an on-line discussion group.

This type of large-scale meeting offers surprising versatility. It can deal with a wide variety of issues including: policy dialogues, city-wide strategic planning, regional and urban planning, visioning and community priority-setting and complex national issues like health care or social security reform. Further, it can take place at a variety of different stages in the decision-making process, from discovering potential needs and issues to discussing specific options and making recommendations.

That said, it is not appropriate when there is a specific proposal to be voted on or a number of 'closed-ended' questions to consider.

As for cost, these meetings can be expensive – several millions of dollars for events involving thousands of participants. The major variable is the number of participants, which drives such key items as project management, outreach, web site management, food and beverages, site and security costs, translation services, AV production registration, transportation, print and advertising, technology and communications.

Do the benefits justify these costs? AmericaSpeaks claims they do and points to significant achievements of each of their events. For example, in the initiative to discuss social security reform, they engaged some 45,000 citizens, significantly influenced the debate and proposals drafted, changed perceptions of public's willingness to reform Social Security and received extensive national and local press coverage about reform options.

Certainly participant satisfaction levels with this type of engagement appear to be high. In the first New York City event held in February 2002 involving some 600 citizens, 73% of participants indicated their overall satisfaction with the event was 'very high' or 'high'[6]. Comfort levels with the technology were even higher with some 88% indicating satisfaction with the technology as 'very high' or 'high'.

A MODERN TOWN HALL MEETING IN ACTION

To illustrate how some of these key design features play out in practice and the nature of some of the challenges in staging such activities, it is useful to describe one town hall meeting in detail.

Along with seven[7] other Canadians, we were invited to attend "Listening to the City", a day long forum held on July 20, 2002, in which more than 4,000 people from New York City and the surrounding area gathered at the Jacob Javits Centre to play a role in rebuilding Lower Manhattan. Following an earlier forum in February 2002, this event had three specific objectives:

- to respond to six concept plans for rebuilding the 9/11 site;
- to advise on the creation of an appropriate memorial for the victims of the attack; and
- to recommend solutions – in terms of housing, transportation and economic development – for rebuilding lives affected by the 9/11 events.

"Listening to the City" is a project of the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, a coalition of nearly 100 groups "... committed to devising strategies for the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan". The Civic Alliance engaged AmericaSpeaks to organize and manage the event. Also attending the forum were many of the key decision-makers including officials from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (the owners of the Trade Centre site), the State of New York and New York City Mayor's Office and City Council. Officials from the Port Authority and the LMDC were active in the planning of the event itself.

Among the factors that made the planning and staging of the event so challenging were the large number of participants; the emotionally-charged nature of the 9/11 attacks, involving some 2,830 victims[8]; the large number of decision-makers implicated; the complexity and breadth of the issues from a Memorial to a regional redevelopment plan; and the huge financial stakes involving billions of dollars for the Trade Centre site alone.

Event organizers were successful in attracting participants broadly representative of the age and sex distribution of the target audience – that is, the victims' families and those who live or work in New York City. On the other hand, they were less successful in attracting African-Americans (7 percent of participants versus 20 percent of the region's population). Similarly, participation was disproportionately higher among high income groups and residents of Manhattan.

Several of the decision-makers responded to participants, indicating that they had heard the messages and would consider them carefully.

Approximately 500 volunteers from every American state and several countries including Canada came to the event at their own expense to serve as group facilitators. They were recruited primarily through the internet site and received a three hour orientation on their arrival. Volunteers served in many other capacities as well – for example, in registering participants.

Following registration, participants went to assigned tables where they met their volunteer group facilitator and received a package of materials including a 15 page participant guide, some worksheets, a brief history of Lower Manhattan, a sheet on discussion ground rules and the roles of the facilitator and lap top operator, an evaluation form and a backgrounder on the impact of the 9/11 attacks. During the event, each table received material describing the six concept plans.

Media presence was impressive. Close to 300 media representatives attended the forum, representing local, regional, national and international print and electronic news outlets as well as a number of documentary crews. As one indicator of event coverage, a picture of the forum was on the front page of the *New York Times* the next day directing readers to an extensive and, on the whole, positive article inside the paper.

Through the small group discussions synthesized by a theme team of some 30 individuals and through the use of the voting pads to indicate priorities among themes, the following key messages[9] emerged from the meeting:

- Participants rejected all six of the concept plans; they wanted bold, innovative designs that reduced the amount of office space and that included schools, libraries, recreational centres and affordable housing.
- They wanted a memorial that is "inspirational and serene" and that preserves the footprints of the towers
- Participants supported job creation, especially for those affected by the events of 9/11, affordable housing and cultural institutions
- 57% indicated the importance of adding a major symbol to the New York skyline
- Almost 90% said it was important to eliminate West Street as a barrier between Battery Park City and the rest of Manhattan.

Several of the decision-makers responded to participants, indicating that they had heard the messages and would consider them carefully. Indeed, following the event, it now appears that the Port Authority has agreed to reduce the amount of commercial and retail space and has 'opened up' the designs accordingly.

The budget for this event was approximately $2 million US. Funding sources included the LMDC, four foundations, the federal government and a number of business corporations. Fund-raising continued after the event.

OUR ASSESSMENT

In a series of 'post mortems', our group of nine Canadians gave the event high marks overall: the logistical skills of the organizers were impressive; the supporting technology, despite some glitches, did the job; decision-makers appeared genuine in their willingness to listen and be influenced; the participants worked hard throughout the day without so much as a break (an estimated 70% indicated that they had changed some of their opinions because of what they had heard); the lead facilitator, Carolyn Lukensmeyer of AmericaSpeaks showed consummate skill, being prescriptive at times but always respectful and deferential; the event had an element of "just-in-time democracy" in its ability to adjust to quickly moving events such as the release of the six site designs a few days earlier; and the legion of volunteers ensured that the groups functioned effectively.

What we need in Canada is a commitment by governments at all levels – federal, provincial, municipal, and First Nations – to embark on and to fund further experimentation of the kind we witnessed in New York.

That said, the event was not without problems. Too much time was spent by 'talking heads' in making presentations. The late start meant that the groups did not commence discussions until well into the morning. The use of the voting pads may have been excessive, breaking the rhythm of group dialogue in places. The design of the agenda appeared questionable, as some subjects did not build on each other. Some of the volunteer facilitators appeared to lack the necessary skills. Some of us wondered whether the quantitative data would be more highly valued than the qualitative information. The degree of genuine dialogue in some, if not many, of the groups may have been low. And it was unclear what opportunities for involvement would follow this event.

CONCLUSIONS

That there is a growing gap between elected leaders in western democracies and their citizens seems beyond debate. Consequently we applaud attempts by groups such as AmericaSpeaks and many others to develop approaches to engage large numbers of citizens in matters of public interest so as to reinvigorate democracy.

But more than applause is required. What we need in Canada is a commitment by governments at all levels – federal, provincial, municipal, and First Nations – to embark on and to fund further experimentation of the kind we witnessed in New York. To be clear, the scale of the New York event is appropriate in only the most special of circumstances. Nonetheless, the basic principles outlined in this article – convening large, representative groups of citizens; providing them with information on the issues to be discussed; having them work through a carefully crafted agenda in diverse, small groups with trained facilitators; having the means to synthesize and set priorities so that concrete messages are delivered to open-minded decision-makers during the event – appear sound and worthy of further exploration.

This type of experimentation involving large numbers of citizens is not cheap. But the cost should be compared to what governments now fund in the way of public opinion polling. (At the federal level this figure is in the tens of millions[10].) Furthermore it is not realistic to expect foundations and private companies in Canada to share in the funding of experiments in democracy. Indeed, such funding should be squarely in the public domain.

As a next step, the Institute on Governance intends to publish a paper on variations of the methodology used in New York, variations that appear suited to the Canadian context. Stay tuned.

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The full references for this article can be found on the ACS web site at http://www.acs-aec.ca/e_magazine.html