Max Rashbrooke,
Government for the Public Good:
The Surprising Science of Large-Scale Collective Action,
Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2018, 352 pp

Can Deliberative Democracy Put an End to Neoliberalism in Settler-Colonial States?

DAVID PARKER

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the New Right's agenda was summed up by the notorious Reaganite quip that 'Government is not the solution to our problem, government *is* the problem'.[1] Government was likened to a monopoly firm 'with all the negative tendencies of a monopoly such as exploitative price-making, parasitic rent-seeking and general budgetary greed and institutional complacency'.[2] As the medicine served up in response to this diagnosis, the New Right's 'supply-side' economics and neoliberal ideology has completely transformed the state in many liberal-capitalist economies around the world.

We have now had 40 years of 'privatization, outsourcing, internal managerialism and agentification, the rejection of interventionist industrial policies, and the concomitant

---

1   Ronald Reagan, 'Inaugural presidential address,' 20 January 1981, https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/inaugural-address-2/

2   Abby Innes, 'The New Crisis of Ungovernability,' LSE panel discussion, *Whither Europe? Historical Perspectives on 2017*, 27 April 2017, 2. Transcript provided by author. Podcast version of the talk available at, http://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2017/04/20170427t1830vOT/Whither-Europe

development of quasi-markets in welfare provision, all within a context of liberalizing tax regimes'.[3] In that time, in the face of severe and deepening inequality which it has both failed to act upon and ruthlessly contributed to, 'the mainstream liberal centrist elite can been seen to have instrumentalized the powers of the state for party political or even private gain while simultaneously withdrawing the state's protections from the public'.[4] Thus, we have arrived at the disturbing and vicious endpoint of this logic that William Davies has accurately named 'punitive neoliberalism'.[5]

What might be the resolution of this increasingly brutal crisis? In his latest book, Max Rashbrooke sets out to explore in detail the policies and practices of a possible alternative—a government for the public good in the 21st century—and the public life of the civil society that it would foster.[6] Rashbrooke sets his analysis largely in what he calls the 'Anglosphere', namely Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In his deeply researched investigation, he draws on a vast array of literature from this 'Anglosphere', from theoretical tracts and academic studies to news items and popular commentary.

Strangely, perhaps, for such an accomplished journalist as Rashbrooke, there are no original interviews in the book. But even more unexpected is the almost-complete absence of Māori experience, of Māori analysis, of Māori voices, and of Māori solutions to the many problems generated by 35 years of punishing neoliberal hegemony in Aotearoa New Zealand. For a book published in 2018 that, according to the blurb on the back cover, 'offers New Zealanders a new way of thinking about government', this is a lacuna of stunning proportions.

I have said in a previous review for this journal that the easiest criticism to make of any book is to comment on what it does not do. Bearing that observation in mind, and given that Rashbrooke must surely have made a

---

3   Abby Innes, 'Draining the Swamp: Understanding the Crisis in Mainstream Politics as a Crisis of the State,' *Slavic Review* 76, no. S1 (2017): S30.

4   Innes, 'The New Crisis of Ungovernability,' 5.

5   William Davies, 'The New Neoliberalism,' *New Left Review* no. 101 (2016): 129.

6   Max Rashbrooke, *Government for the Public Good: The Surprising Science of Large-Scale Collective Action* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2019).

deliberate decision on what to include and exclude, I must take a moment to consider the unexplained decision to exclude te ao Māori from the book. With the research behind this book ranging across the 'Anglosphere' as it does, the vast majority of the cited literature would give no attention to Māori concerns. So perhaps adding a Māori dimension to the book might have appeared tokenistic and shallow; and so it would, if it were merely bolted on for appearances. The alternative, a thoroughgoing engagement with te ao Māori, would have to be an analysis grounded in mātauranga Māori as much as in Western liberal political thought. As I have made clear, this book does not do that. I am forced to conclude that this book is not really about or for Aotearoa New Zealand at all.

Nonetheless, if this is a book aimed at addressing the crisis of the state across the 'Anglosphere'—the UK and five of its colonised lands—the particular experiences of, and analyses provided by, Indigenous peoples must surely be acknowledged as significant. In other words, ignoring colonisation when discussing government in these countries means ignoring an issue that has fundamental constitutional, cultural, economic, and social implications. It means ignoring intergenerational historical trauma, and its ongoing impacts on the day-to-day lives of the Indigenous peoples who happen to live in this 'Anglosphere' as a result of invasion and colonisation.[7]

So, with my concerns about what Rashbrooke does not do in *Government for the Public Good* set out, let me turn to what he does do. The first part of the book investigates the successes and failures of both government and market. The neoliberal push towards 'more-market' solutions in areas of life formerly organised and/or serviced by government is analysed. The conclusion is that 'extensive outsourcing has left governments unhealthily reliant on private mega-contractors, and the attempt to remodel departments and agencies has been broadly unsuccessful'.[8] But

---

7   Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US can be best described as settler-colonial states. I exclude the Republic of Ireland from this list on the basis of its particular history, though it certainly did experience the disaster of colonisation in full measure. As for the UK itself, it still fails to come anywhere near facing the reality of its imperialist crimes.

8   *Government for the Public Good*, 27.

rather than seeking a role for government only in areas where markets fail, Rashbrooke has a much more positive, actively interventionist objective for government. Furthermore, the 'public good' that such a government would strive to achieve is not defined by a simple aggregate of personal desires and individualistic wishes, but is:

> What citizens, after discussion, decide that they themselves need (which may diverge from their initial desire) *and* what they would like to ensure others have. It encompasses the needs of future generations and the planet. And it incorporates certain qualities of a society: the depth of trust between people.[9]

The data that Rashbrooke draws together in support of this 'active-government' approach generally suggest that 'governments are remarkably effective and efficient. Public discussion, altruistic motives, and free provision, it turns out, often trump private purchases, fee-charging and the incentive of profit'.[10] Given that the tropes of neoliberalism have become so widely accepted as common sense, especially within the mainstream corporate media and other circles of power and privilege, this detailed laying out of an alternative viewpoint is a valuable piece of work.

The key to Rashbrooke's ideas for a government for the public good in the 21st century is contained in the phrase I quoted above: 'what citizens, after discussion, decide'. In other words, Rashbrooke looks to deliberative democracy as the means by which active government can be implemented by giving people an active voice. He says that it offers 'one possible path through the twin perils of managerialism and authoritarianism. It can answer the desire for citizen control that the former denies, but without the latter's violence and threats to basic liberties'.[11]

Deliberative democracy is not government by plebiscite or referendum. It

---

9   *Government for the Public Good*, 14.

10   *Government for the Public Good*, 27.

11   *Government for the Public Good*, 30. There is, of course, still the question of what (or who) defines a citizen. The UK has many degrees of 'citizenship', some of which, quite bizarrely, do not convey the right to live and work in the UK.

does not involve full participation in every decision. Deliberative democracy involves groups of people participating in 'profound conversations' where they 'give reasons for their views, confront the evidence, and listen to the logic and life experience of others'.[12] The aim is 'to leverage the wisdom of ordinary citizens to make well-crafted policies that the public supports'.[13]

These deliberative-democratic conversations can operate on a large scale, as in the planning for increased housing density which was debated via a deliberative programme in Seattle in the 1990s.[14] Each neighbourhood was given $10,000 to develop stakeholder analyses, outreach programmes, and, ultimately, their own plans for increased housing density. An extensive network of community organisers was involved, and 20,000–30,000 residents participated in the project.

An example of a somewhat different process is the drawing up of a 10-year, $5 billion financial plan for the City of Melbourne in 2014.[15] Deliberations began with a broad community engagement with 600 participants in meetings and online submissions. The results of this engagement were put to a 'citizen's jury' of 43 randomly selected Melbourne residents, students, and business owners (with economists and planners on hand to offer advice) who met six times over five months. The panel made 11 recommendations.

There are many other examples of such processes and projects cited by Rashbrooke, giving the clear impression that deliberative democracy, participatory budgeting, and so forth are not crazy schemes dreamed up by utopians but common practice across many jurisdictions. The intention of these various processes is to move participation and deliberation far beyond box-ticking 'consultations'.

Co-design is mentioned a few times by Rashbrooke but not discussed in depth or precisely distinguished from deliberative democracy. There

---

12   *Government for the Public Good*, 30, 266.

13   Claudia Chwalisz cited in *Government for the Public Good*, 267.

14   *Government for the Public Good*, 151–152. See also, Carmen Sirianni, 'Neighborhood Planning as Collaborative Democratic Design: The Case of Seattle,' *Journal of the American Planning Association* 73, no. 4 (2007): 373–387.

15   *Government for the Public Good*, 92.

seem, however, to be many similarities between deliberative democracy and co-design (or co-production). My sense is that co-design processes tend to operate at the detailed level of practical service delivery—an example Rashbrooke gives is the user-centred co-design of a hospital pharmacy—while deliberative democracy operates at the more conceptual level of policy such as making recommendations for a municipal budget, as described above.[16]

The engagement in either case, so far as I can tell from the examples in the book, is always driven in top-down fashion by some organisation such as a local council, hospital, or health agency which makes the running and determines how the process will work. This top-down impetus, and the involvement of paid staff from the interested organisation, immediately raises questions about the power dynamics at play in such processes. One must ask: who sets the agenda? Who is involved and who is not involved in the deliberations? Who is comfortable in the institutional context of the project, and who is alienated from it? Who is able to speak in their first language and who is asked to speak in a language which they do not speak in the home? One might also consider the degree of influence of the staff involved; are they front-line staff with no institutional power or are senior managers involved in listening to the participants and implementing their solutions?

The amount of control the participants in such deliberations have— or are permitted, it might be more accurate to say—was made clear in case studies of co-design projects carried out by Michelle Farr in the UK. Participants in co-design projects 'were successful in instituting changes at individual, local community, organisational service and organisational cultural levels' but 'had little power to be able to challenge or change policy, neoliberal economic structures or austerity drives'.[17] Going further in critiquing such projects, Ian McGimpsey argues that the 'systemic conjunction of civil and state institutions to make greater use of voluntary

---

16   *Government for the Public Good*, 279.

17   Michelle Farr, 'Power Dynamics and Collaborative Mechanisms in Co-Production and Co-Design Processes,' *Critical Social Policy* 38, no. 4 (2018): 623–644.

effort, community organisation and local social relations' in the co-design of service delivery and participatory budgeting is:

> The appropriation of capital and labour in the civil sphere by a . . . market-state [which] is not only an extension of neoliberal privatizing tendencies but also a fix for a 'market-state' undermined by the instability of globalised financial markets, service cuts, reduced living standards and heightened inequality.[18]

Yet deliberative democracy has some very high-powered intellectual backing. One of its leading advocates has been the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Rashbrooke acknowledges this when he writes that 'in good deliberation—high-quality democratic discussion in well-moderated forums—what holds sway is not someone's wealth but the strength of their case'; and he quotes Habermas to define the 'strength of the case' as 'the unforced force of the better argument'.[19] Deliberative democracy thus implicitly assumes a particular form of communicative rationality as the basis of a consensus about what is 'the better argument'. By doing so, it privileges those who have mastered the Western elitist form of communication and debate regarded as 'the rules of argumentation'. It certainly cannot be assumed that such abstract forms of argumentation are familiar to everyone; nor, as one encounter on a marae taught me, are they necessarily regarded as in any way acceptable as a culturally sound basis for 'high-quality discussion'.

Chantal Mouffe describes deliberative democracy's search for a 'final rational resolution' to political debate as 'misguided'. This is because a deliberative consensus-building process must, almost by definition, impose 'undue constraints' on the debate by attempting to insulate politics from the effects of the pluralism of values by privileging one particular worldview and excluding all others.[20] In other words, by Mouffe's analysis, the one

---

18   Ian McGimpsey, 'Late Neoliberalism: Delineating a Policy Regime,' *Critical Social Policy* 37, no. 1 (2017): 64–84.

19   *Government for the Public Good*, 53.

20   Chantal Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism,' *Political Science Series* no. 72, Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna (2000): 9.

thing that settler-colonial states can be sure about, that their societies contain a pluralism of values, is the one thing that deliberative democracy cannot cope with.

This brings me back to the particular context of Aotearoa New Zealand, a society which undoubtedly possesses a pluralism of values and where, in te ao Māori, there is an Indigenous worldview distinctly at odds with Western liberal individualism. Given these complicated circumstances, how might we best proceed? Fortunately, for us, we have had sitting on the table for some years now a document that proposes some ways forward: the Matike Mai report of 2016.[21] It is high time that tangata Tiriti engaged fully and at a national level with the innovative and insightful proposals provided by tangata whenua in the Matike Mai report. Rather than another helping of Western liberal thought, which is what deliberative democracy would provide, we need a much more radical constitutional transformation, and the Matike Mai report provides many highly constructive ideas to that end. A transformation of this nature would finally put the settler-colonial state behind us; and only then could we truly look to a government for the public good of all in a decolonised Aotearoa.

---

21   *He Whakaaro Here Whakaumu mō Aotearoa: The Report of Matike Mai Aotearoa – The Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation* (2016), available at, https://nwo.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/MatikeMaiAotearoa25Jan16.pdf