

## Response to David Parker's Review of *Government for the Public Good*

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I would like to thank David Parker for his detailed review of my book *Government for the Public Good*, and pick up on a couple of points he raises.<sup>1</sup> Against my suggestion of participatory and deliberative (that is, discussion-based) democracy as an alternative to the more-markets trend of recent decades, he raises several important points.

Deliberation, he fears, privileges a certain kind of highly educated people who are good at political discussion, and crowds out other, more heated kinds of speech. However, there is reasonably good evidence that in the forums where deliberation occurs (citizens' assemblies and the like), people of different backgrounds are in fact able to contribute equally, as long as the forums are well designed and extremely well facilitated. These forums can also be designed so that poorer households are overrepresented, thus boosting their voice. What's more, as I make clear in the book, deliberation is not the whole answer, nor the only kind of political action we need. We will always want people, as the political theorist John Parkinson puts it, to be 'cajoling, performing, representing, jockeying for positions, attacking, accusing, scrutinizing, creating,

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1 See David Parker, 'Can Deliberative Democracy Put an End to Neoliberalism in Settler-Colonial States?' *Counterfutures* 8 (2019): 164–171.

seizing moments and muddling along'.<sup>2</sup> Deliberation is simply useful at the point where we have to construct policies and laws, which are, after all, cool and rational instruments.

Mr Parker also rather underplays the potential of deliberative democracy. He argues that studies of 'co-design' projects show they are unable to change fundamental social and economic structures. But co-design projects, as he knows, are only one small part of deliberative democracy. Co-design processes shape the delivery of services once the big decisions about those services have been made. Deliberative democracy as a whole is much wider in scope, and if implemented in full, and in such a way that the deliberation has direct influence (that is, in conjunction with participatory democracy), it does have the potential to reshape fundamental elements of our politics. Imagine a society in which decisions on key national issues were taken by assemblies of random citizens, residents could help directly set portions of local council budgets, people could put forward draft bills to go before parliament, and tick-box consultations were replaced by deep and rapid online discussion. That would be a profoundly different world.

Mr Parker, quoting Ian McGimpsey, also claims that the deeper involvement of citizens in designing services is 'the appropriation of labour and capital in the civil sphere'.<sup>3</sup> This passage is rather unclear, but suggests that, by extension, all of citizens' unpaid moments of democratic involvement are an illegitimate 'appropriation' of their time and effort, a surely untenable position.

Mr Parker then makes the claim that deliberative democracy 'cannot cope with' what he calls 'a pluralism of values'.<sup>4</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth: the whole idea that we need to foster forums for high-quality public discussion is based on the idea that there are multiple views on any given issue and a multitude of values at play. Deliberative democracy does often aim for consensus, it's true. But often that is simply a 'consensus'

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2 John Parkinson, 'Deliberative Systems,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, eds. André Bächtiger et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 441.

3 Ian McGimpsey, cited in Parker, 'Deliberative Democracy,' 170.

4 Parker, 'Deliberative Democracy,' 171.

that everyone can live with, rather than one of complete endorsement; it is only on a limited issue, such as which policies to implement to tackle obesity; and it assumes that debate will spark up again once the relevant forum is over.

Sadly, much of the rest of Mr Parker's review is hampered by the fact he has misunderstood the book's scope and purpose. He is startled by its lack of discussion of te ao Māori, and suggest that this renders the book useless for a Aotearoa New Zealand audience. But, as the book makes explicit, the focus is not Aotearoa New Zealand but the English-speaking countries in general; specifically, these countries' experiences with the more-market revolution inaugurated in the 1980s, and their potential to pick up participatory and deliberative democracy ideas as a useful counter. This information is essential for Aotearoa New Zealand audiences because we were not alone in the 1980s revolution, even if we did go at it harder and faster than anyone else. Our understanding of our experience is immeasurably enhanced by connecting it with that of others, so that we can spot patterns, similarities, and differences. Moreover, the most detailed evidence base about the failures of that revolution is to be found not solely in Aotearoa New Zealand but distributed amongst the English-speaking countries.

It is, of course, true that any attempt to make Aotearoa New Zealand's democracy more participatory and deliberative has to take into account our reality of, or ambitions for, power-sharing between Māori and Pākehā. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere, including in my recent public talks, that deliberative forums used overseas cannot simply be copied wholesale. I recognise and pay tribute to the powerful example of Matike Mai (which Mr Parker rightly references) and acknowledge that the ultimate goal must be to draw on the best of tikanga and Western traditions.

But if we are to draw on both traditions, we have to understand each of them fully first. Hence, I focus in my book on explaining a Western tradition of deep deliberation, much neglected in mainstream politics, to see what it can bring to that power-sharing experiment. Indeed, given my book's broad geographical ambit, to do anything else would have required

me to discuss all the Indigenous traditions of public discussion in half-a-dozen countries, an evidently impossible task given the likely size of the resulting work and the limits of my own knowledge.

In short, Mr Parker has fallen into the familiar trap of reviewing not the book that was written but the one that he wished had been written. This being so, there is little more to say except to note that it is great shame, as it limits his ability to bring forward more of the relevant criticisms that are otherwise made in his review.