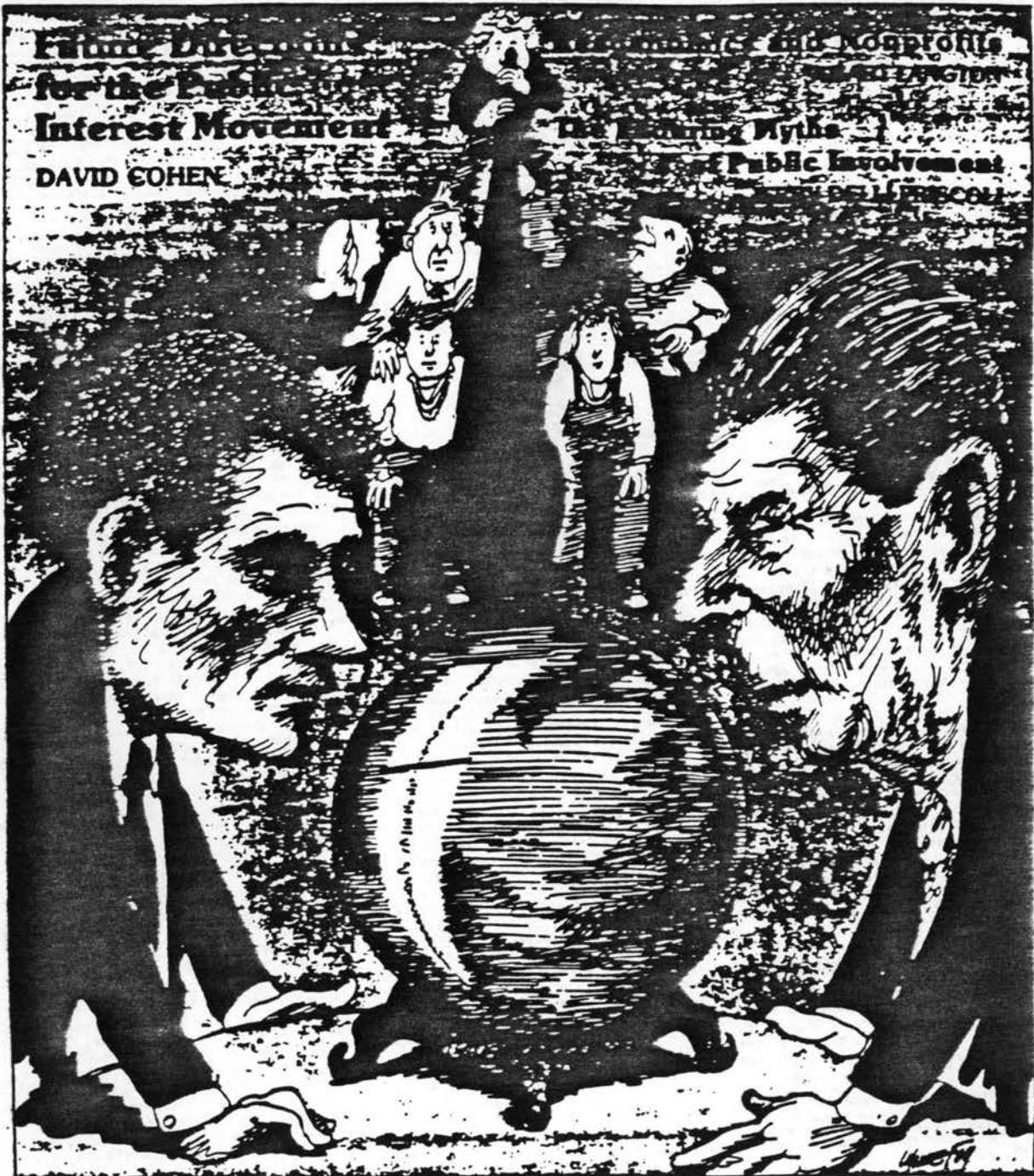


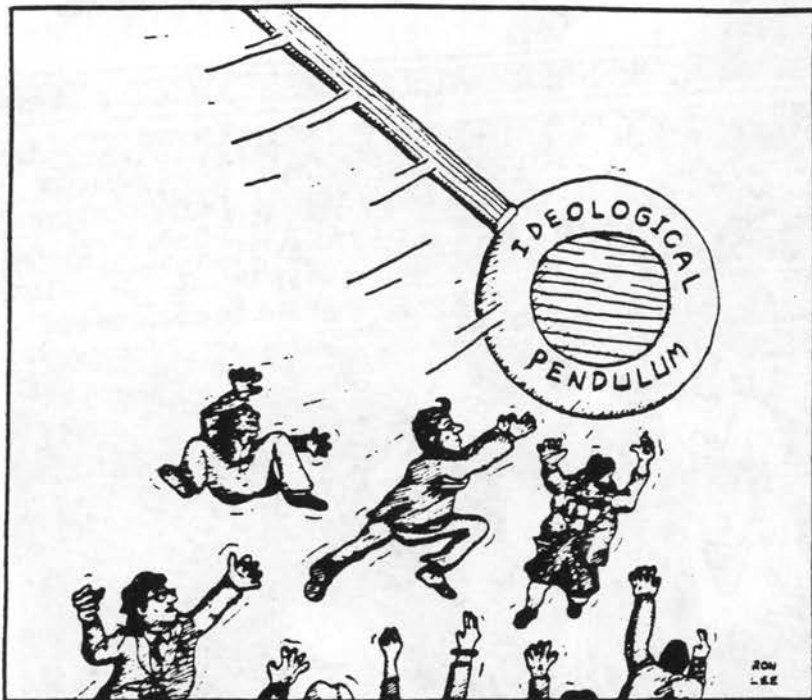
Citizen Participation

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THE ENDURING MYTHS OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

by Jerry Delli Priscoll



Imagine you are to build a several million dollar power plant or waste disposal site. How much would you be willing to invest to reduce the possibility of project stoppage? Suppose you are to manage an extensive water quality permit program. Would you invest one-half or one percent of the project funds to reduce court case loads by 50 or 40 percent? Public involvement in administrative decision-making can, and has, performed such management functions.

Yet somehow the public involvement of the 1960s and 1970s seems less important to the 1980s' free market ideology. We agency bureaucrats speak of a pendulum's swinging back. Agency public involvement regulations are modified or eliminated; budgets are cut; OMB tightens citizen advisory group regulations; volunteerism is touted as the only legitimate form of participation. Why the undercurrent of retrenchment? One could offer many reasons. I will discuss six and then offer opinions of where we are going with public involvement.

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT = PARALYSIS OF ACTION AND INEFFICIENCY

Most legislation throughout the 60s and 70s required some form of public involvement. Along with its positive benefits of open government, the legislation was sometimes confusing. In effect,

Congress passed laws requiring public involvement at the same time they stated specific substantive policy ends. For example, Congress passed the #208 water quality program calling for cleanup of U.S. waters by a certain date and, further, for involvement of the public in reaching these goals. Some of the best public involvement done under 208 reached the opposite conclusion—that cleanup, as defined in legislation, was too expensive. Consequently, the good bureaucrat, concerned with efficiently achieving legitimately established goals, was frustrated. When all that resulted was expensive reports and few plants, the public was also frustrated.

More generally, public involvement came to symbolize "anti-project" or "anti-bureaucratic" goals. The public, at least those who participated, were seen as adversaries, not partners. Increased access meant increased delay. As both agencies and the public turned to legal mechanisms to resolve conflict, extreme positions solidified. The major reasons for access—to share information, to create new approaches, and to negotiate reasonable tradeoffs—were thus subverted. The combination of access in the hands of extremists, bureaucratic intransigence, increased regulation, and fixation with legal tactics to manage conflict, created paralysis.

Still, many outstanding exceptions emerged. All of us concerned with public involvement programs sought to find and describe them. But to many within bureaus, public involvement simply meant negative paralysis. In short, the posi-

tive rationales for participation—to build coalitions and to create consensus as a precursor to action—were forgotten.

Although often viewed differently, public involvement is pragmatic management. Over two thousand years ago, no less a pragmatist than Pericles stated: "... Athenians, ... instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, ... think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all. ..."

As we reexamine our public service commitments, we are in danger of succumbing to a false illusion of efficiency. So what if we sneak into town at night and get the hazardous waste disposal license with no one watching? Is this efficient when citizens subsequently shut down an operation after it's begun? So what if we produce an elegant flood control plan in four rather than 15 years? Is this efficient when the project is delayed by local residents and national interest groups after 20 or 30 percent of capital costs have been sunk into the project?

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Efficiency is illusive in a pluralistic society where authority is fragmented across many bureau offices and departments. Limiting public access to bureaus and offices in the name of efficiency is a very dangerous path in a society that calls itself democratic. If the government—that means its administrative as well as its legislative branches—demonstrates daily disdain for fundamental social ideologies, you cannot expect the larger public to long hold those beliefs.

Public involvement is symptomatic of broader changing social values in society. Within administrative agencies, it can be a tool to build consensus or to find proof, or disproof, of constituency support for project alternatives. Public involvement really says, "Two heads are better than one." However, its synergistic effects cannot be realized when met by bureaucratic indifference. We bureaucrats should spend more time summoning the creative and positive power to public involvement than eulogizing its policy death. The question is not "Should we do public involvement," but "Can we do anything without it?" Seeing public involvement as equal to paralysis of action will be an expensive myth to cling to, should we so choose.

2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT = A SINGLE POLICY STAND

This impression is particularly strong in the natural resources and environmental policy areas. Public involvement has come to mean environmental groups. Since much of its visibility was achieved through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), this is not surprising. But even the environmental community is beginning to question the equation. What happens when you achieve public involvement and the result is not environment? Which belief is jettisoned? Look at the debate over the

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Clean Waters Act's 404 permit program. Many water-based sport and recreation groups who tend to support the current regulatory reform initiatives are in favor of reducing the paperwork burden imposed by the government. They are also in favor of wetlands and 404 regulations to protect their industry. However, that 404 permit program processes over 19,000 permits a year, most of which involve small and medium-sized individual projects. These same groups become ambivalent when participating in public involvement efforts to write general regional permits designed to reduce the citizen burden of individual permitting.

For years, natural resources agencies worked under the consensus of the "self-evident" truth that economic development was always good. Recently, environmental protection groups challenged this concept with their own "self-evident" truths, such as decreasing resources and increasing vulnerability of public health. The truth lies in some blend of these extremes. Public involvement is a "process" belief that assists the achievement of some substantive synthesis between these views. It is beyond a substantive single issue focus. Those who falsely invoke the legitimacy of public involvement in the name of substantive policy values will ultimately compromise their own credibility.

3. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT - VOCAL MINORITY

"Whom do they represent?" How often have you heard, or maybe used, this statement? Bureaucrats, as well as citizen participants and special interest

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groups, often claim to represent the silent majority. If they would only speak, they, the silent majority, would surely support our position. Of course "they" never do speak; that is why they are called silent. One consultant has referred to the silent majority as the "mythical beast."

Those who enthusiastically question the validity of public participation often do so feeling that they possess a special hotline to the mythical beast. This misses the point, which is, as another consultant states, to "create the greatest possible number of unsurprised apathetics." Not everybody is, or perhaps should be, involved in every issue. Public involvement provides a means for those who feel strongly and are consequently likely to be major actors, to express feelings. It is a representation of values, not necessarily members, which is critical to the administrator.

If it does nothing else, public involvement confronts the administrator with alternative sets of values. Development of technical options without public involvement begins simply to reflect the values of their bureaucratic creators. Without multiple "realities," the taxpayers' money will be increasingly wasted on unrealistic and unimplementable alternatives.

How often have you heard the following statement: "Well, the environmental groups only represent a leisure middle

class anyway." The fact that we administrators are from that same middle class is often forgotten. Rather than a reason to discount their views, the middle class bias is crucial. It is symptomatic of value differences within our own middle class.

So the majority-minority perspective is misleading. Administrators need a broad representation of values. It is the interested and committed, those willing to coalesce into action, not necessarily the inactive, whom we should seek. Both goals are served by public involvement and, like it or not, are part of the bureaucratic reality. No amount of executive orders will change that reality.

4. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT - IRRATIONALITY AND INVALID INFORMATION

Early in my career, I was attending a public meeting with several hundred participants. After listening to one participant pour her heart out in tears over a proposed project, the presiding officer responded, "Thank you, Ma'am. Now do we have any factual comments?"

The officer was unaware that he had just received some of the best factual data anyone could ask for. Feeling and intensity are among the most important "facts" any administrator requires to design implementable alternatives.

For us bureaucrats, armed with advanced engineering and scientific degrees, this is a hard pill. To us, emotions are irrational; facts can be separated from values.

Both environmental groups and bureaucrats often summon the "perfect information" myth to climb out of this box: "Once the public has the facts, they will understand." Well, perfect information can just as easily lead to perfect conflict as it can to consensus. It can perfectly describe the reality of basic conflicts. No amount of "factual" information will automatically overcome such value conflicts.

We administrators must realize that facts and values are not separate. Our elegantly constructed algorithms and projections of the future are based on human assumptions. They are statements of how we feel the world ought to be.



And the public knows it. They are not fools. It takes about two months in the public involvement business to discover a variant of Newton's second law: for every Ph.D., you can find an equal and opposite Ph.D.! Yet we continually couch our assumptions in complex jargon, effectively locking out meaningful contributions from those whom the projections are to service.

I don't know whether we do this to reassure a sense of technical competence, or to assure our continual role. There is nothing wrong with values. It is only when we deny their existence that we both look suspicious and deny ourselves access to this most crucial source of information.

In our business, the idea of a pure, objective observer of natural and social systems serves us poorly. Actually, it is questionable science. Note what John Wheeler, the well-known physicist, says on the topic:

May the universe in some strange sense be brought into being by the participation of those who participate. . . . The vital act is the act of "participation." Participation is the incontrovertible new concept given by quantum mechanics. It strikes down the term "observer" of classical theory, the man who stands safely behind the thick glass wall and watches what goes on without taking part. It can't be done, quantum mechanics say.

If you think the public is irrational, you only have a few choices. One is to ignore them and wait for disaster to descend. Another is to tell the public what is good for them and force them to accept it. Another approach is better stated by Thomas Jefferson:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In other words, not only must we educate the public, but we must also be willing to be educated. As Wheeler's comments reflect, and public involvement experience confirms, reality is a process of shared creations. Jacob Bronowski reached a similar conclusion:

There is not a field of science which has not been made over from

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top to bottom in the last fifty years. Science has filled our world because it has been tolerant and flexible and endlessly open to new ideas. In the best sense of that difficult word, science is a democratic method. That has been its strength: that and its confidence that nothing can be more important than what is true.

Administrators should search less for excuses to separate values from facts in our decisions and concentrate more on developing skills to synthesize them. Public involvement techniques provide tools to hone such skills.

5. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT - SUBVERSIVE ACTION

Nobody enjoys being threatened, and public involvement can be a threat. Most bureaucrats are dedicated people who honestly do their job. It is hard to understand why the rest of those folks out there don't see it that way.

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However, as administrators in a world of fragmented authority, information is our power. It is difficult to share power. Among other things, public involvement requires sharing information and power. That can be uncomfortable to the expert.

After all, "I spent a lifetime in training, working, and being concerned about this issue. The idea that Joe Sixpack knows more about nuclear engineering or bridge building is ridiculous." While Mr. Sixpack might not build the bridge, he is likely to use it, look at it, and feel the good and bad consequences of its construction. In our society this qualifies him for participation in the engineering decisions.

As experts, we must employ our technical expertise to create new technical options which had not previously been conceived. If we talk only to ourselves, this is difficult to accomplish. Often it takes outside and even uninformed naive questions to spur a look at that which we thought unthinkable. This is the design, or creative, aspect of professional engineering which Samuel Florman has called the "existential pleasures of engineering."

Much of the environmental and natural resources debate in the 1970s centered around forcing public engineering bureaucracies to create and embrace new technical solutions. Far from a threat, this is a need which is crying out for technical expertise. Not to answer the cry—not to reach for Florman's "existential pleasure"—is to deny our country a needed technical professionalism. It is to condemn our society to technology fix. We become solutions seeking application rather than problem-solving capabilities ready to create new options. It will gradually push the expert into a

role of limiting, rather than expanding, possibilities. When this occurs, the experts' legitimacy deteriorates. If the technical expert cannot help our society design and create new opportunities, society will quickly jettison its experts as expensive overhead. Public involvement is a principal tool to assist the technical expert in providing such service. It is subversive and threatening only to the degree that we, ourselves, have become sedentary, unenthusiastic, and fatalistic.

6. FORGING SYNTHESIS IN 1980

The forward-looking administration of the 1980s will be rewarded for implementation, efficient delivery of services, timely action, and innovative mixes of private and public funding packages. The critical administrative skills will be management of uncertainty, negotiation, conflict management, coalition building, and consensus formation—precisely those skills which formed the heart of public participation in the 1970s.

For example, a businessman's notion of efficiency is not simply analytical economics, but also implementability. It does no good if the deal is elegant but cannot be closed. Public involvement is an investment in reducing closing costs and closing the deal.

Competition over funds for capital investment will increase. Most projects will require multiple funding sources. Putting together funding and cost-sharing packages will require far more public involvement than previously experienced. More numerous funding sources bring that many more competing values. In an era of tight money, those putting up funds will ask more penetrating questions about how their constituencies will be affected. As states scramble to meet increased service responsibilities, and the private sector performs more public service functions, the ability to negotiate, to build awareness, to resolve conflict, and to have public involvement will grow.

Successful administrators will be those who forge workable plans that compensate local people for bearing a highly perceived risk—often not in dollars—to provide geographically disbursed

benefits. A successful administrator will seek information about how people perceive risks. They will seek to know how a proposed project may assist communities to reach established goals or even assist communities to establish future goals. Without agreement on goals, administrators will need to know how to mitigate negative project effects within communities. They will have to assess whether intractable conflict is likely. Successful administrators will build "win-win" options by planning with, not just for, people; by interacting with, not just observing, those impacted by their projects.

If the experience of the 1970s taught us anything, it was that good project management demands a blend of analytical and process skills. Successful administrators in the 1980s will encourage such synthesis. The tool kit of the successful administrator will include, among other tools, a working knowledge of nominal and other small group-process techniques; listening and communication skills; meeting and workshop designs; conciliation and mediation techniques; values analysis and mapping skills; institutional analysis; policy profiling; trend and cross-impact forecasting; community service impact projection assessment; and tradeoff analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

The degree to which public involvement is dead in the minds of us bureaucrats. Perhaps we yearn for a simpler world, for a time when consensus was clearer and our job simpler. Perhaps we carry bitter tastes of public involvement experiences. However, public involvement is central to our social ideology and public service responsibility. It is both a great frustration and a great job. As with Pericles' Athens, public involvement places us apart and makes us better. Thomas Jefferson once noted:

...the execution of the laws is more important than making them. . . . To introduce the people into every department of government. . . is the only way to insure a long-continued and honest administration.

"... we can choose to see public involvement as a negative burden or a positive opportunity."

As with most issues in life, we can choose to see public involvement as a negative burden or a positive opportunity. Just as in other engineering and technical programs, we can choose to see public involvement as managing probabilities in order to increase potential acceptability or decrease potential conflict. Choosing a positive outlook means creating incentive for compromise in building a middle ground, expanding opportunities by forcing new technical options, and building new coalitions of support. When we feel our traditional engineering products rejected, we should ask whether it is the fault of the consuming public, or whether we should either modify the old product or develop a new product.

So where is public involvement? Alive, resting, and awaiting our call to public service. □

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