1. Conceptualising engagement

In the broadest sense, engagement is a form of participation, a way of involving (or sometimes, re-involving) citizens in the processes of governance. A fundamental concept in democratic theory, ‘participation’ emerged as a concern in the radical 1960s as a reaction against the dominating influence of big business and big government. The term ‘participative democracy’ describes the theoretical arguments for reinventing democracy in this way (see Pateman 1970). ‘Deliberative’ or ‘discursive’ democracy describes the theory and practice of implementing participation by generating direct ‘conversations’ between government and citizens (compare Dryzek 1990, 2000). Participation is, therefore, a significant value in its own right, one that can (and in my view should) be pursued for its own sake.

‘Engagement’ is clearly a related concept, but it is more instrumentalist in character. By engagement, I mean deliberate strategies for involving those outside government in the policy process. ‘Policy process’, in this context, means ways of making policy decisions and ways of implementing them. It encompasses, in particular, the processes of ‘horizontal’ engagement, through which those in government (the political and bureaucratic executives) relate to those who are not in direct power relations with them.

Engagement concerns the constitutive aspects of policy making—that is, not the authoritative allocations implied by hierarchy, but the more fluid relationships implied by networks (Colebatch 2002). While engagement can develop in its own way, and along its own lines, it is clearly an area in which the values of public servants (and their political masters) are of prime importance in determining the extent to which it occurs and the extent to which policy is altered as a result.

There is a long history, in political science, of attempts to classify or categorise the ways in which policy making intersects with the interests it affects. From a management point of view, however, description must morph into prescription and characterisations into strategies. It is usual to classify these strategies according to the extent to which they ‘engage’ (in the sense of involve) particular groups of interest (see Table 1.1). These degrees of involvement are often thought of as a continuum, with particular actions or activities corresponding to, or being typical of, that degree of engagement.
Table 1.1 The continuum of engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of engagement</th>
<th>Strategy and target</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Informing citizens of proposed policy changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>Seeking feedback/comment from the public (community consultation) and/or from stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberation</td>
<td>Fostering formation/transmission of new views/opinions through structured conversations among citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnerships</td>
<td>Contracting with non-governmental organisations to perform functions such as service delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory governance</td>
<td>Involving ‘outsiders’ in policymaking functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegation</td>
<td>Giving full authority to bodies outside government to make key decisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these kinds of distinctions are useful, it is important not to take them too far. Issues of process need to be distinguished from those of context. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2003), for example, distinguishes between ‘giving information’ (essentially a one-way activity) and ‘consultation’ (essentially a two-way activity), with ‘active participation’ constituting a third level. Empirically, however, when we look at the way policies move and evolve, we find that it is almost impossible to analyse what is happening in this clear-cut fashion. Interaction and exchange occur in multiple ways, and are reflective of evolving relationships.

Engagement and power

Because of the importance of relationships, characterisations of engagement should not be regarded as a menu of choices from which managers can pick and choose. It is important to recognise that engagement is shaped by power relationships and by the rules that govern what participants may and may not do. Public managers are not autonomous beings, but must operate in highly political (and often politicised) environments, in which access to the arenas of power is a much-contested resource.

We should remember, too, that those outside government have their own ideas about when, how and to what purpose they wish to be consulted. The boundary between what is inside and what is outside the State is constantly changing. The boundary itself might be becoming increasingly porous. Some commentators argue that information technologies, particularly networking tools and the ‘blogosphere’, are bypassing conventional policy altogether (Benkler 2006:21–2).

From the manager’s point of view—these factors notwithstanding—forms of engagement reflect not only a logic of appropriateness, but a logic of obligation. The logic of appropriateness describes the sense of ‘fit’ between circumstances and objectives. This logic is, however, shaped by a logic of obligation, which reflects the degree of compulsion or pressure to consult. It is true that public servants have a duty to consult with those who will be affected by policy choices.
and, increasingly, this duty is spelled out as a component of specific pieces of legislation and also in more generally based consultative policies.

There is, however, also a harder form of Realpolitik lurking beneath these choices. When the choice is government’s alone, it can consult with people to any extent it wishes and use (or not use) what they say, depending on the specifics of the situation. When governments consult because they have to (either because the interests concerned are powerful or ministers insist on it), they have passed beyond consultation to forms of negotiated participation in governance.

The history of writing about engagement reflects this tension within the idea of obligation. Arnstein’s famous ‘ladder’ of engagement was, in fact, a highly political paper dating from the more radical era of the 1960s, when citizen participation meant (ideally) ‘citizen control’. Citizen control occupied the top rung of the participation ladder. As citizen control was lost, so corporate manipulation increased (Arnstein 1969).

Later developments of the idea ‘managerialised’ it, so that participation became one aspect of a suite of tools for public managers to use (Bishop and Davis 2002; Catt and Murphy 2003). From this perspective, degrees of engagement became degrees of loss of government control, rather than loss of citizen control. Table 1.1, for example, starts with the simple transfer of information and ends with ‘delegated’ situations (such as referenda) in which governments are obliged to heed the results. Delegation can also imply situations in which decision making is handed over to the community or to stakeholders.

Whatever we think of these models (and they have been contested in the academic literature), they do at least highlight the fact that engagement raises questions of power or, in the practical sense, issues of control (Edwards 2008). Power shifts downwards and outwards to the extent that interests external to government are able to influence (or shape) policy values and their implementation.

**Metaphors of engagement: ladders or stars?**

While it has been traditional to regard engagement as a type of ‘ladder’ or, less metaphorically, as a continuum, contemporary thinking sees engagement in more fluid terms. One possible metaphor is to see engagement as a star-like arrangement of techniques and sites, with each arm of the star corresponding to a particular set of opportunities. From this perspective, types of engagement are strategies corresponding to different kinds of situations and outcomes, rather than indices of power differentials. Note that the definitions that follow are ‘types’, set up to clarify terrain and possibilities, rather than clearly demarked empirical realities.

*Consultation* emphasises information exchange. It can be broadly or narrowly based, but its intent is to elicit response, or to gauge reaction, rather than to
include or to incorporate. Consultative strategies do not aim to change preferences; their primary intent is to find out what those preferences are. *Deliberation* describes the use of processes for the evolution of citizen preferences. In other words, deliberation is as much a vehicle of learning as it is of representation.

Deliberation can be thought of as having a weak and a strong form. In its weak form, it is used as an indication as to what a representative group of citizens, fully instructed, might resolve on a particular issue. A number of techniques, such as deliberative polls and citizen juries, are used to structure the discussion. In this form, deliberation is best regarded as a form of designed consultation, in which the opinions of citizens are ‘mixed’ with substantive policy information. In their strong form, deliberative assemblies can carry a powerful weight in their own right.

Partnerships bring ‘outsiders’ (often in the form of not-for-profit or for-profit agencies) into contractual relationships with government. Partnership-related consultation, therefore, is geared towards implementation (although depending on the scale and type of partnership, it could have major policy implications as well). The terms of this form of engagement are defined by the work to be done and can involve service delivery or co-production of policy resources (such as training programs).

*Participatory governance* gives stakeholders the opportunity to engage in policy making directly. The result is cross-boundary forms of negotiated order that involve government agencies and other stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation. Again, this is not entirely a new phenomenon (forms of corporatist policy making are partial examples). What are different are the range and depth of stakeholder involvement and the development of networked relationships between bureaucratic players.

### Who to engage?

If engagement is a form of participation, a key question, conceptually and practically, is ‘Who will participate?’ This question can never be answered definitively, but finding good ways of visualising the problem can be helpful. If, following the Canadian political scientist Paul Pross, we regard governance as a series of concentric circles, with the key institutions of cabinet and the coordinating departments in the centre, other agencies close by, organised interests further out and the community further away, we see that answering this question means making choices about how inclusive we (as public managers) want a process to be (Pross 1986). As with any value, inclusivity has its risks (and choices can be constrained by external factors anyway). Setting out the ‘who’ of engagement in this way does, however, enable us to name some of the key features.
Community
Let us start at the outer ring of the set of notional concentric circles—with ‘the community’. Communities are groups with shared values and a sense of interdependence; they are in a sense the underpinning of social capital. (Social capital refers to the stock of goodwill, or trust, that develops from mutual engagement.) Communities need not be geographically defined. They can represent coalitions of citizens with shared commitments and values—for example, the ACT Mental Health Consumers’ Network brings together those with a shared experience of living with mental illness. A sense of exclusion, injustice or just plain outrage is often the beginning of engagement with government.

The important distinction between communities of this kind and, for example, ‘policy communities’, is that policy communities are professionalised by continuing engagement with government, whereas communities based on identity or concern retain a strong sense of personal affiliation among their members. In relation to public policy, then, ‘community’ denotes groups of citizens who are interested in, or affected by, a particular issue. Some policy structures have a permanent place for community representatives (for example, community representatives may sit on consultative bodies). In many instances, though, ‘the community’ tends to be defined by the issue, so that, for example, a health issue might galvanise a quite different part of the community than a sports issue.

Community consultation enables a policy initiative or proposal to be ‘road-tested’ by giving affected members of the community the opportunity to comment on it. While the results of community consultation can be glossed over or ignored, the process requires agencies to define and try to reach groups that can be defined in many different ways—from personal attributes to residence in particular geographic locations.

The community has a warm and cuddly feel—in the abstract. The reality is that when the community is most engaged, it is also likely to be most critical of government. The closer to home (often literally) the issue happens to be, the more likely are so-called ordinary citizens to be concerned. Communities are not usually stirred up by trade policy negotiations, but even the most apathetic become engaged when, for example, a new motorway is proposed for their suburb.

The methods for reaching the community almost always result in those who feel most passionately about an issue becoming community spokespeople. Traditional democrats often discount the results of community consultation for this reason. If the community consists only of a few malcontents, they argue, why bother about it? This would, however, be a dangerous assumption to make. The views coming through could represent much more widely held opinions—the tip of the iceberg towards which the ship of state is heading. 1
Involved stakeholders

A stakeholder is now commonly defined as a key individual or entity with an interest (a ‘stake’) in the outcome of a particular policy debate or decision. A stakeholder can also be a powerful interest, but this is not a necessary condition for stakeholder status. For those undertaking stakeholder analysis, the identity of the key players is often self-evident—so much so that their participation has become institutionalised through advisory bodies.

Advisory bodies have been familiar features of the bureaucratic landscape for many years and continue to play prominent roles in the definition of agendas and the administration of programs. Advisory bodies, if they are used well, allow governments to tap into a range of stakeholder communities, securing interest-based and knowledge-based reactions to proposals.

The term ‘stakeholder engagement’ describes more active initiatives (by governments) to bring together groups of stakeholders, usually in response to a specific consultation exercise or policy need. From the perspective of those ‘invited in’, stakeholder engagement gives those affected by policy a sharper focus on their relationship to government and at least the beginnings of an entree into government itself. From government’s perspective, to engage stakeholders means (or should mean) not just listening to them, but being prepared to take notice of them.

Powerful interests

At a minimum, governments must engage those whose cooperation is needed for the implementation of policy. Business, for example, was a key implementing agent of the Australian goods and services tax (GST). In this case, although the Tax Office was legally able to sanction non-complying businesses, in reality, there was a substantial interactive period after the passage of the legislation, during which business and the Tax Office grappled with the practical detail.

Planning agencies find themselves engaged with developers (and with the political executive) on a regular basis. Legislation prescribes these interactions and the level and circumstances in which they take place, but it is often the ‘engagement’ (information exchange, sometimes agreement making) around these matters that shapes the outcomes.

The extent to which interests should be included in the early stages of policy making (that is, before definite design characteristics have been decided on) is problematic. There is a danger that strong interests will fail to agree on a framework. The Rudd Government’s process for developing policy to control carbon emissions was extensively consultative, but within specified values (that is, growth should be sacrificed as little as possible) and design parameters (an emissions trading scheme). On the other hand, an imposed framework might simply displace dissent to less public arenas.
Other government agencies

The landscape of government is populated by a bewildering diversity of public organisations. Indeed, for public servants contemplating engagement with the broader public, a key prerequisite is understanding and identifying the interests of other agencies that are involved. The Management Advisory Committee’s *Connecting Government* describes a number of structures that can be used to bring different elements together, including the use of interdepartmental committees (IDCs), task forces and cross-agency partnerships (MAC 2004).

Task forces differ from IDCs, in that participants leave their home agency’s priorities behind them and focus on solving a problem, usually in a short time frame. The Howard Government used task forces to bypass more conventional processes and to bring ‘outsiders’ into the heartland of bureaucratic policy development (Stewart and Maley 2007). In situations in which governance is evolving, rather than established, agencies often circle warily around each other, with little incentive to interact productively, unless (often) contingent factors serve to break the ice (see Stewart and Jones 2003). The risky activity of ‘boundary riding’ (talking across departmental boundaries) is essential for this type of engagement.

Summing up

Engagement (of those outside government in the policy process) is a difficult concept to visualise clearly. ‘Ladders’ of engagement are problematic, because techniques are not clearly differentiated from the relationships they serve. For example, ‘consultation’ can be equated with a two-way exchange of information and ‘partnering’ can be used to describe closer forms of involvement. Clearly, however, consultation (in the sense of ascertaining opinion) lies at the heart of all forms of engagement, however close (or distant) are the relationships implied.

It is suggested here that a significant characterising variable is the degree of power that is shared between those ‘within’ and those ‘without’ government. Power takes many forms; the key question is ‘how much or how little’ do I need to take into account the views of those I am consulting? From the perspective of those within government, the ‘who’ of engagement might involve individuals or groups that are close to the structures of executive government or those further away. Power to engage (or to withhold) does not, however, necessarily diminish as distance increases. The community can (on occasion) demand engagement, while (depending on context) agencies within government might not be able to insist on inclusion. The success of the public manager will depend on his or her ability to ‘read’ these contexts and structures.
Endnotes

1 There are a number of manuals describing community consultation in detail, from a 'toolbox' perspective. One of the most comprehensive is *Best Value Victoria: Community consultation resource guide*, put out by the Victorian Local Governance Association and the Victorian Department of Local Government.