3. The ‘how’ of engagement: contexts and achievements

While the rhetorical literature is abundant, it is difficult to obtain from it an overall sense as to what is happening in relation to engagement. The OECD’s (2001) comprehensive comparative study suggests that most countries have surmounted at least the first rung of the consultation ladder. Citizens’ rights to information are routinely enshrined in freedom of information acts (although the practical workings of these pieces of legislation are, of course, another matter).

Beyond this level, tracking achievement is most easily done by surveying the practical purposes for which engagement has been used and describing the development of the techniques that have underpinned its advance. The intention here is not to present a description of the many techniques that are available. Rather, it is to suggest how techniques and formats relate to the nature of the relationships that engagement fosters and beyond these relationships, to the values that they represent, and the purposes they aim to achieve.

I proceed by considering engagement in relation to the broad categories and purposes outlined in Chapters 1 and 2: first, consultation and the various kinds of information exchange that facilitate it; second, the use of engagement for purposes of conflict resolution; and third, the creation of participatory governance.

Consultation

If the number of manuals and handbooks was an indication of the extent to which consultation was really carried out, we might conclude that the practice has an assured place in policy making. This is clearly not the case: many policies are too political, too hastily assembled or simply too difficult to explain, to reconcile with the demands of proper consultation. Consultation requires considerable expertise and experience to organise successfully and many governments simply do not have the people to do the work. Nevertheless, consultation guides and manuals do, at least, tell us what governments think consultation is about, even if the reality is far less impressive.

In Australia, state and local governments have produced the most highly developed consultation manuals. While described by Catt and Murphy as ‘menu lists’ for consultation, these guides (at least implicitly) draw from the lessons of experience, as well as the dictates of commonsense. One of the most highly evolved practice manuals on community consultation was published under the auspices of the Local Government Division of the Victorian Department of Infrastructure and the Victorian Local Government Association.
The Victorian Local Government Association’s manual identifies a range of consultation interfaces, ranging from the strategic to the operational. We might call this ‘guided’ consultation, in which the consultation agenda is firmly established in the context of implementation. As the guide puts it, ‘[c]onsultation should take place early in the implementation of…specific services, so that councils can be sure that the principles of quality and cost standards, accessibility, responsiveness and continuous improvement are informed by consultation’ (VLGA n.d.).

The Management Advisory Committee’s influential publication Connected Government emphasises the importance of professional appreciation of the constraints on engagement (for example, the need to maintain cabinet confidentiality) while consulting as widely as practicable (MAC 2004:Ch. 6). ‘Whole of government’—that is, achieving outcomes by combining and coordinating previously disparate public resources—is particularly engagement intensive.

The OECD consultation manual is less specific, but highlights the importance of building an overall consultation framework, highlighting the objectives that the consultation is designed to serve and choosing appropriate tools to achieve the objectives. The manual stresses the importance of generating and maintaining trust, delivering on promises and, above all, looking at the occasion from the citizen’s perspective (OECD 2001).

**Information exchange**

While all forms of engagement involve information exchange, it is undoubtedly engagement with the community that has brought about the most innovation. We might summarise the techniques that have been developed as ‘putting out’ ideas in a way that elicits information either about the ideas directly or about the community’s attitude towards them. It is not, however, only community consultation that has been important in this context. A growing literature points to the importance of the information being appropriate to the purpose and the background of the participants, whoever they are.

Evidence from web sites and recent experience suggests that policy makers are prepared to engage outsiders in increasingly flexible ways. According to the widely used ‘policy cycle’, consultation is a phase in the process that occurs after policy analysis and before decision making. While this fits some types of consultation—for example, Treasury consulted with stakeholders before introducing recent legislation to curb insider trading—there are many others where consultation is used for other purposes. The Rudd Government’s 2020 Summit (April 2008), for example, was aimed at consolidating the government’s agenda, while giving the impression that it was prepared to go ‘outside’ the usual communities of interest to gather ideas.
Reductions in the cost of consultation have probably done more than any other single change to encourage its wider use. E-government has made it much easier to distribute information relating to the more conventional forms of consultation, such as exposure drafts and calls for comments on particular pieces of legislation. On the other hand, as we shall see, public servants have been slower than politicians to exploit the networking opportunities of new technology.

Green papers (setting forth ideas for discussion) and white papers (reflecting final decisions) are traditional staples of ‘inquiring’ modes of public policy. Newer forms of engagement stress the relevance of techniques and relationships that produce forms of knowledge that are often more personal and concrete than the rational model, and that actively involve the community in revelatory and/or deliberative ways.

Photographs
A specific example will be useful here. A council in rural New South Wales, using a state government grant, employed community development officer Joy Engelman to try to revive flagging townships in the area. To do this, she needed to consult with communities in the shire about what was important to them. Engelman contacted local clubs to help her organise meetings in each of the towns. She used these meetings to get ideas from as broad a base as possible. She also wanted to recruit a core group of volunteers in each town to push the ideas forward. It was sometimes hard going, but she found her six volunteers in each town.

Engelman’s next step was to find out what the important features of each town were for the people who lived there. Taking photos was the key here. She had three of her volunteers get out and about with a camera. They took photos of six things they liked and six they disliked. The photos were displayed at a public meeting organised by a fourth member of the team. When they came across something that needed improvement, Engelman told the relevant council people about it. ‘For example,’ she says:

[T]here was an uneven bit of pavement in the main street of one of the towns. It had been bugging people for years. I got in touch with the town’s engineers and it was fixed. That sort of thing doesn’t cost much, and it builds people’s confidence in the program, that it will actually achieve something (personal communication, late 1999).

Storytelling and anecdote
As the chair of a parliamentary committee investigating a social policy issue put it, ‘Getting the data is important. But what really communicates a human sense of the issues is when people sit around a table and tell their stories.’ Stories or anecdotes are used as the ‘medium’ of engagement in a number of contexts,
ranging from program evaluation to organisational development. Anecdotes might be no more than glimpses of a single episode or revelations of mood, but they are distinguished from opinion in the sense that they report a reality with which others can engage. As one practitioner put it, ‘Stories lead to stories. Opinions lead to other opinions.’

The theoretical case for the use of anecdotes in organisational settings derives from a number of sources, including complexity theory (see Snowden and Boone 2007). In many situations, there is no ‘right’ answer and learning to ‘think small’ in appropriate ways can be of more practical utility than searching for holistic (and probably wrong) solutions. There is also a hint of the work of the American organisation theorist Karl Weick, who notes that, far from being the rational machines some imagine, organisations depend for their effectiveness on their capacity to move beyond the bland. Effective organisations are, in fact, ‘garrulous, clumsy, wandering and grouchy’ (Weick 2008).

**Electronic networking**

In a modern democracy, the channels of communication are rarely silent, largely because of the ubiquity and power of modern media. When governments wish to influence citizens (as distinct from giving them information), the provision of information takes more calculated forms. The presence of citizens (as voters) shapes activity throughout the Executive, most strongly at the interface between the political and the bureaucratic executives. Governments must find ways of communicating with voters that give effect to a compelling narrative or story.

Governments (and oppositions) have a strong political motivation to track the opinions of citizens through opinion polls and focus groups. The importance of public relations produces a large, vaguely delineated area where genuine information overlaps with political merchandising. The marketing of new policies is carefully pre-tested—a useful step in implementation. In the lead-up to an election year, the problems become more pressing. Governments can use focus groups to design advertising campaigns. If the flow of information is one way, its effect will, nevertheless, be carefully monitored, measured and, where necessary, reacted to.

While hard data are difficult to come by, departments and agencies appear not to emphasise opinion-related information to nearly the same extent as the political parts of the Executive. ‘Evidence’ is usually construed as factual information obtained through research and analysis. When the Treasury famously ignored ‘anecdotal evidence’ of a gathering recession in the early 1990s, interest rates (then set by political decision makers) were arguably kept too high for too long as a result.

Communication technologies offer the promise of online canvassing of opinion. The OECD, for example, makes extensive use of e-consultation in preparing
guides and manuals. Apart from individual use of opinion sites and chat rooms, however, examples of public servants devising versions of these technologies for professional use are rare. Web sites enable agencies to inform users of their programs, tell them about the latest developments and, where feedback is sought, to consult with users. The OECD (2001:51) reported that all members were ‘making significant efforts to bring their governments and their citizens on line’. Only some countries, however, had made concerted efforts to establish standards for the type and quality of information provided through web sites.

Whether e-governance should be seen as a means for achieving traditional strategies more cost effectively or is itself at least potentially transformative has excited widespread debate (Dugdale 2008). Empirical work suggests that even techniques of discussion and debate, when employed in official or quasi-official contexts, are constrained in character. Chen (2004), for example, found that discussion lists in the field of political science remained tied to (and expressive of) existing institutional structures.

The use of information and communication technologies to help further community development has a patchy history. Sutcliffe and Richardson (2004) found that without prior investment in the development of social capital, little could be achieved through the use of technology alone. As Joseph (2004) notes, the problem is that the role of information in public policy is poorly understood. Information is not primarily about technology, but creating forms of information that will be useful.

Campaigning politicians have been quick to tap the interactive possibilities of networking and old dogs (or their staffers) quickly learn new tricks. A Facebook site is a must for the enterprising politician. In policy-related fields, information and communication technologies have revolutionised the often-cumbersome procedures of traditional information exchange. Lists of email addresses, grouped according to the need at hand, streamline interactions with stakeholders.

From community perspectives, the instant communication of email helps concerned groups keep in touch and respond quickly to developments. As soon as there is a change somewhere in the network, the others can be ‘onto it’ instantly. South Sydney’s REDwatch exists specifically to monitor what governments do. ‘Government knows that REDwatch is on top of all the changes and that they will be called to account’ (Inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development Inc. 2008:10).

**Fusing ideas and support**

Where the context is settled (that is, a document is produced and reviewed on a regular basis), gathering responses boils down to letting people know that the process is under way. Where the context is not settled (for example, gathering views and opinions about the future of a heritage area in a town), the choices
multiply. Often, processes are required (such as meetings with community groups) to get things going, before information-gathering techniques (such as focus groups) can be employed.

Depending on their resources, governments can employ broadly based, facilitated processes that draw out community sentiment, meaning and memory (such as ‘charrettes’). A charrette is a kind of workshop used to bring ideas, experts and the community together. The output is a design, plan or description. The charrette arose originally from the design field, where architects, developers and community members would meet together to produce broad design solutions that contained a realistic depiction of the future. Typically, in policy-related charrettes, a team of experts meets with community groups and with stakeholders to gather information on issues that face the community. This information is then used, in a transparent way, to produce a vision or general direction that reflects the values and priorities of those who are most affected.

Alternatively, those designing consultation can opt for a more strategic process that links to a community future or vision. Producing community visions helps people to describe and to define what is important to them. These are commonly large-group processes that can operate over many contexts and employ a variety of techniques. What is vital to the ‘vision’ is the articulation of values. Palerang Council, for example, used visioning workshops to tell it what it no doubt already knew: that most people saw the natural environment as their main reason for living in the area (Rogers 2006).

**Deliberative forums**

Deliberative forms and forums have ‘star quality’ in the annals of engagement and have been heavily discussed in the academic literature. It is, however, difficult to ascertain the extent to which deliberation is: a) really occurring; and b) what difference it is making. The literature tends to feature examples rather than inventories. A rare exception is Lyn Carson’s (2006) inventory of Australia’s (limited) practice. The situation is further complicated by the claims made by the growing number of firms offering to organise or facilitate deliberative events (see for example, America speaks, <www.americaspeaks.org>). Deliberation and deliberative techniques and software are being sold by business and not-for-profits to government, billed as mechanisms for accessing public opinion within wide-ranging citizen-engagement strategies (see, for example, Lukensmeyer and Torres 2006).

Deliberative forums, such as citizens’ juries, have been used to access groups often marginalised by conventional consultation. An Australian example, the Parra Youth Matters jury, brought together 17 young jurors from an area of western Sydney. The experience helped the participants to formulate their views on a number of issues, including the media. As a pilot project, the jury suggested
pathways for aligning deliberation among young people with continued community building (Carson et al. 2004).

Published examples of deliberative techniques in use suggest that they are used most extensively in relation to planning, transport and civic issues. For example, the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority (as reported by Lukensmeyer and Torres 2006) conducted a series of six citizen dialogues on the future of the city’s airport in an attempt to balance the interests of citizens with those of visitors. The dialogues were interactive and structured around real alternatives. The exercise showed how deeply citizens were divided on the question of values. Some welcomed a multipurpose ‘aeroplex’ to accommodate a wide range of uses, whereas others ‘were deeply opposed to the congestion and development patterns associated with the proposal’. The conclusion drawn was that any decision-making mode that did not take citizen input seriously would be deeply resented (Lukensmeyer and Torres 2006:27).

Because deliberative practice can occur in many ways, it is often difficult to disentangle ‘ordinary’ consultation from deliberation. For example, the process of ‘visioning’ is potentially deliberative, but in practice, visionary documents or strategies (such as the 10-year vision for the British National Health Service) incorporate input from a variety of groups that have been consulted: the ‘deliberation’ has occurred within the organisation preparing the words (see the interim report at <www.dh.gov.uk>). Hendriks (2002), reporting on the progress of citizens’ forums in Europe and North America, notes that these processes are employed as an adjunct to conventional decision-making processes, rather than as an alternative to them.

In Australia, deliberative forums—such as the Hawke Government’s National Economic Summit of 1983 and the 1998 Convention on the Republic—have been used for purposes of symbolic agenda setting and political management. If Australia is ever to become a republic it seems that some kind of prolonged public deliberation (leading to the necessary referendum) will be required. Australia’s original constitutional conventions of the 1890s would today be regarded as forms of deliberative democracy.

The British Columbia Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform, held in July 2003, showed the power of assemblies, selected on principles of stratified random sampling, to generate consensus on complex and deep questions of political organisation. Although a subsequent referendum to change the electoral system was narrowly lost, the assembly played a key role in legitimating the case for change (Sharman 2006). In the United States, the Utah Growth Summit played a significant agenda-setting role by engaging the public in discussing growth scenarios and outlining problem areas (Walters et al. 2000).

Deliberation would appear to have a role to play in contentious policy issues, where citizens must incorporate scientific or other professional evidence into
their thinking. Proposals to recycle sewage appear to lend themselves to precisely this type of forum, although, so far, no Australian government has been courageous enough to convene one. In relation to policy, one well-documented Australian example involved a citizen’s forum that was convened in 2000 (under the sponsorship of the NSW Government) to discuss container deposit legislation (Hendriks 2002). In this case, however, reconciling the views of business interests with those of the community (post deliberation), proved a major stumbling block to further progress.

**Dealing with conflict**

Governments do not like conflict, and indeed some types of engagement represent attempts to overcome or to defuse particularly fractious issues. Consultative forums—such as the Sydney Airport Consultative Committee set up in the 1990s in response to aircraft noise—can be used to legitimate decision making by bringing those previously excluded into the fold (Stewart and Jones 2003). Many consultative forums owe their genesis to this type of conflict resolution, but later become permanent features of the landscape.

**Negotiated agreements**

Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) have been much discussed in the Australian literature. While their substantive effects (in terms of the future of old-growth forests) have been greatly disputed, the verdict in relation to governance has been much more positive (see Stewart and Jones 2003; Mercer 2000).

As governance mechanisms, the RFAs brought peace to a highly conflict-ridden arena. This was achieved through an extensive process of negotiated trade-offs, brokered at a high level, but with the local details worked out in conjunction with affected interests. The willingness of stakeholders to form part of the process was crucial to its durability. As Stewart and Jones noted, the ideological distance between the greens and their opponents widened as one journeyed south. It was only when the balance of power between interests allowed for negotiation and change that institutional biases towards development were redressed.

**Committees of inquiry**

It is easy to be cynical about committees and commissions of inquiry. Although politicians resort to them for many reasons, one important motivation is in order to defuse a significant scandal. The Cole Commission of Inquiry into the Australian Wheat Board, which proved ultimately to be a harbinger of the end for the Howard Government, was established in response to persistent opposition questioning and public concern about sanction-busting sales of Australian wheat to Iraq.

Many commissions, however, have been epoch making, precisely because they have brought out, in a public way, events and concerns that would otherwise
have festered in silence. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police Force are obvious examples. Royal commissions do not always enable governments to control the issue. As Scott Prasser (2006) observes, they ‘have a habit of biting the very governments that appoint them’.

The framework of royal commissions is judicial and it is because of the perceived integrity and independence of those chairing them that the proceedings attract considerable attention, and the recommendations carry considerable weight, even if most remain unimplemented. Commissions of this kind are investigatory rather than consultative bodies, although some (such as the Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration) do have consultative elements.

Policy-related committees of inquiry (executive and parliamentary) also range widely. The process is usually open and anyone may put in a submission. Clearly, though, the more specialised the inquiry, the more likely it is that submissions will be received from key stakeholders and subsequent deliberations will take place in relatively closed forums. The Garnaut reports into emissions trading are a significant contemporary example of this kind of inquiry.

Inquiries are versatile and some have certainly been commissioned to deliver (and to legitimate) a preordained result. The Uhrig Inquiry, for example, brought in an external figure (a businessman trusted by the government) to drive through a series of changes to the governance of statutory bodies (Commonwealth of Australia 2003).

Inquiries can contextualise an agenda for change that goes well beyond their terms of reference. Originally intended to smooth the regulatory path for business, the Uhrig Report provided a rationale for bringing the administration of welfare closer to the departmental heartland (Grant 2005).

Creating participatory governance

‘Participatory governance’ denotes forms of governance in which non-governmental actors (usually ‘citizens’) are empowered to use the resources of the State to make decisions about matters that directly concern them. For empirical researchers, however, it has proved an elusive quarry. At times, it seems a reality; at others, no more than a chimera—a weird and (possibly) mythical hybrid.

Within the academic literature, there is a degree of ambivalence displayed towards the mapping of participatory governance. On the one hand, we are told that new (or newish) forms of governance are bringing new players and processes into what were previously hierarchical governing arrangements. As Ian Marsh (2002:3) puts it, ‘The vocabulary of governance reflects new interdependencies between the political leadership, public administration and the community…It reflects the new salience of strategic policy-making and the new contexts and
pressures shaping agenda development’. If this is so, however, it implies that engagement is developing spontaneously, independently of the wishes of public managers.

The problem with this literature is that we can never be quite sure whether it is describing something that is really happening or using a particular perspective to write about something that has always been present. Policy networks (where participants have a common interest) have been a staple of analysis for many years. At times, the more recent network literature seems more exhortation than fact. The implications for practitioners are also difficult to unravel.

If engagement is an irresistible force, the task for practitioners is one of adapting to it. Experience ‘on the ground’, however, suggests that participatory forms do not come easily. When they emerge spontaneously, they are often informal and ephemeral. When they are ‘designed’ deliberately by public servants, their sustainability and effectiveness depend on active strategies to keep them going.

Examining a number of networked initiatives in Queensland, Keast and Brown (2006) found that the sustainability of these arrangements depended heavily on the involvement of central government agencies, as well as the commitment of a number of key players, often at middle-management level, determined to do the hard work of keeping network members engaged and interested.

Rather than seeing networked governance as a kind of meta-force, it might make more sense to see it as the product of specific developments. The demand for networked governance reflects a number of trends—increasing complexity, certainly, as cities are impacted by the competitive demands of globalising economies. Developments in public administration, however, have also played their role. Partnerships between the public and private sectors in financing development, for example, have become more important, as government has itself become less willing to assume the financial risks involved.

Participatory governance has also assumed an increasingly high profile in the administration of development, where it is often found that working through government agencies leads to waste and corruption. In this context, participatory governance is intended deliberately to give those who would normally lack power in governance (such as women and the rural poor) more say over the expenditure of funds.

While Australia is not normally thought of as a developing country, we do have some examples of exceptional social and economic deprivation. The continuing problems of Aboriginal communities, which experience rates of disease and social dysfunction far higher than those of non-Indigenous Australians, have led to a number of experiments in governance, including forms of self-government or self-management for Aboriginal communities.

Two forms of participatory governance have received useful empirical coverage:
• partnerships in service delivery
• multi-actor policy making.

Partnerships in service delivery
Outsourced forms of service delivery provide rich opportunities for participatory forms of governance. Whether these forms emerge as true partnerships or as more instrumental forms of engagement bounded solely by contracts depends on the overarching values and priorities of the funding agencies.

In the United Kingdom, the years of New Labour brought about a wide variety of these collaborations, in the fields of social inclusion, crime management and neighbourhood development. The social inclusion policy is particularly instructive in this context, as citizens (in specified geographical areas) are engaged in co-delivering certain services.

Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) identify three modes of engagement:
• the strategic, in which broad directions are discussed and citizens are involved through peak bodies
• the sectoral, in which the focus is on the users and beneficiaries of particular services
• neighbourhoods, where the focus is on the participants themselves.

Policy settings—and the values they contain and project—are of particular importance in shaping the character of these collaborations. Work done by Stewart (2007) identifies three levels—the policy, managerial and administrative levels—in each of which participants must find communicative channels through which to deal with value conflicts.

Multi-actor (participatory) policy making
Described as a ‘decentralised unitary state’, the Netherlands provides many examples of efforts to improve the sense of ‘public’ ownership of decision making by encouraging the creation of localised, rather than central, steering. In a crowded country, the context is one of constant change and competition between interests for public and private space.

Interactive policy making is one form of this localised steering. It is defined as cooperation between governments, societal groups and citizens and is distinguished from public–private partnerships, which are focused on the development of particular products, in which risk, costs and benefits are shared (van de Meer and Edelenbos 2006:205).

Dutch commentators report on a range of projects that are managed through participatory processes such as networks (Kickert et al. 1997). The attraction of these arrangements is that they are adaptive over time—that is, if it does its job properly, the network will facilitate ‘double-loop’ learning, which can become
the basis for true institutional transformation. Examples include Dutch spatial planning policy processes, where ‘top-down’ forms of decision making and direction have been complemented by local-level detail and process (van de Meer and Edelenbos 2006).

As noted earlier, whether these processes are transformative or not depends on the values, purposes and priorities of those involved. True participatory governance requires politicians and public officials to share some of their power over policy processes. In particular, it requires them to share information with citizens and to learn how to communicate with so-called ordinary citizens about complex questions.

In *Renegotiating the Environment*, Stewart and Jones (2003) showed how, in certain conditions, forms of environmental governance could emerge in which the key actions of policy took place at the ‘mid level’ (between the national and the local), but involving a number of organisational players. Similar developments have been recorded in catchment management and urban regeneration. Where participants can be brought together (or come together) on the basis of place, there is often a more enduring basis for participation than if the commonality is more abstract (see, for example, Reddel and Woolcock 2004).

Information exchange in these situations is often built around interactive forums (see, for example, Success Works 2002). Those working across boundaries talk, nurture and talk some more. More formal processes must also be employed, particularly mechanisms for recording decisions and agreements. These are, however, punctuation points, rather than outcomes. If decisions (or even understandings) are involved, there will often be continuing interactive flow in order to implement them.

Where conflict resolution forms part of the interaction, a range of skills and attributes that are analytical and personal is required. Practitioners stress the importance of engendering trust and of creating some form of initial structure to ‘ground’ initial efforts.

**Participatory budgeting**

Undoubtedly, the acid test of participation is budgeting. While interest in participatory budgeting is growing, overall, governments continue to keep budget processes close to their chests. Local budgets (such as those of councils) might be discussed in community meetings and forums, but for reasons canvassed earlier in this chapter, such settings are rare at other levels of government.

At the state and Commonwealth levels, interests lobby ministers and treasurers, and many prepare budget submissions. It would, however, be stretching matters to call this engagement, or even consultation. Finance officers do not go out to communities to ask them what they would like in the budget. The communities would probably die of shock if they did.
The reality is that budgets are zero-sum games and—at least in executive-dominated systems such as Australia and New Zealand—the budget makers are able to shield the process from the pressures of competitive deal making. At the same time, budgets are the single biggest source of disaffection, setting-up consultative needs and pressures down the track.

**The role of public servants**

Is the management of engagement a core skill for public servants? If so, how much should they do directly and how much indirectly? The evidence is interesting on this point, in that public servants are at both ends of the innovative spectrum. They are still very much in the driving seat of what we might call ‘standard’ forms of engagement—that is, when there is a review of a specific piece of (relatively non-controversial) policy or legislation.

At the same time, it is public servants who play lead roles in participatory forms of community engagement where there is a strong element of innovation or, to put the matter more cynically, desperation. Public servants facilitated the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) field trial in western New South Wales (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5).

In other contexts, however, public servants are stepping back and outsourcing the management of engagement to consultants. Their expertise, often specialised, frees public servants for other tasks, while also giving a useful ‘shield’ between the raw politics of the issue and more formal departmental and cabinet processes.

In the Australian Capital Territory, consultants were brought in to massage community angst after a round of school closures in late 2006, through facilitating discussion on the fate of the school sites. Consultants were also used by the ACT Planning and Land Authority to facilitate discussion of the draft Planning and Development Bill (2006–07).

On the implementation side, the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries uses consultants to implement resource-sharing agreements—that is, the broad design of the policy is agreed on, but the detail requires negotiation and compromise and is facilitated by specialist consultants.

Deliberative forms might be the intellectual property of specific consultants or academics, working as consultants, might establish powerful fields of practice where political leadership is supportive. For example, between 2001 and 2005, Jeanette Hartz-Karp organised 36 deliberative projects for the WA Minister for Planning and Infrastructure. One of the most influential of these was the ‘Dialogue with the City’, an exceptionally wide-ranging and creative set of deliberative activities, culminating in the production of ‘Network City: A community plan for Perth and Peel’ (Government of Western Australia 2008).
Dilemmas of Engagement: The role of consultation in governance

**Summing up**

Engagement has expanded its reach as new techniques have been developed. It is, however, difficult to know the extent to which these enhanced capacities have been reflected in widespread application. There is no ‘moving front’ of engagement but, rather, a patchwork of initiatives, experiments and established routines. While governments perceive engagement favourably, practices reflect fundamental state structures and the incentives for political executives and bureaucracies to engage with the public. These incentives appear to operate most strongly at the local level, where issues play out in a particular geographic locality. At other levels, forms of networked governance have proved difficult to sustain. The evidence suggests that it is the need to resolve particular problems—such as conflict between interests or perceived inefficiency—that has driven the creation of more participatory structures and practices.

**Endnotes**

1 Information for this case study comes from Joy Engelman’s report *Cabonne Country for Cabonne Council’s Small Towns Development Project 1997–2000.*
2 From a speech given in Canberra by Annette Ellis MP on World Mental Health Day 10 October 2008.
3 From consultant Mark Schenk, speaking at a workshop on Narrative Techniques for Business held in October 2008.
4 See, for example, the Draft National Strategy for Participatory Budgeting put out by the United Kingdom’s Department for Communities and Local Government in 2008.