Introduction

To what extent should governments seek input from citizens and stakeholders into the processes of policy making and the business of governance? Many public servants express a degree of ambivalence on this question. While consultation with stakeholders has a long history, wider forms of engagement (in which ‘outsiders’ are potentially directly involved in decision making) are often seen as impractical or risky, or both.

This research monograph seeks to establish a case for proactive engagement (by public managers) of those ‘outside’ normal policy communities in Australian policy making. I argue that there are theoretical and practical reasons for a more adventurous approach. It is true that there are many potential pitfalls, for both consulters and the consulted, in extending public policy in this way. The research reported here discusses these and also suggests ways of avoiding them.

The discussion is developed along theoretical and practical lines. I have sought to bring out key themes from the large and sprawling academic literature that has grappled with the task of building conceptual tools to understand engagement. In addition, I convened a project of practical research—the ‘dilemmas project’—in order to add to the stock of relevant case studies. These case studies, which form the basis of Chapters 4 and 5 of this monograph, were presented and discussed at a special forum at which practitioners (from within government and without) shared their perspectives. Above all, I have tried to relate the existing literature and this developing research to the central (if vexed) question: what works?

‘What really works?’ is always a vexed question, because it can be answered only in relation to the values, expectations and purposes of those participating in any given system (and/or of those analysing it). While there are technical dimensions to the issues (for example, in relation to designing consultation so that it meets a specified need or objective), the more fundamental questions go to the heart of the politics of policy making.

If managers are to maximise the benefits of engagement, they must be prepared to discuss these political questions, rather than hoping engagement itself will somehow smooth them away. This is, perhaps, the fundamental dilemma of engagement: that those seeking its benefits must be prepared to share some of their power with those outside the system. Deciding when, how or indeed whether to do this can be a tough call.

This monograph is not an engagement ‘manual’. It will not tell the manager what to do when. Rather, its objective is to provide ways of thinking through engagement in practical contexts. The first half of the monograph sets out what is known, in broad terms, about engagement. Rather than simply ‘rehearse’ the extant
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literature, I have presented it in relation to the ‘sticking points’, the dilemmas of engagement.

The discussion then moves on to theoretical questions. It is important to discuss the normative arguments about engagement—that is, should public managers do all they can to encourage engagement because it widens and deepens our democracy? I then consider practical arguments for and against engagement, before moving on to an overview of general trends in Australia and elsewhere. The empirical heart of the book examines engagement in many different sites and settings, drawing out the importance of context and highlighting (from a number of perspectives) the problematic aspects of the process. Finally, these problems are further analysed to bring out the fundamental dilemmas of engagement: dilemmas of risk, control and values.