

Comments on the Executive Committee Meeting: Perceptions of a visiting researcher

by Barbara E. Ribeiro

On April 15, 2013, in the River Valley room of Edmonton City Hall, the City Council's Executive Committee heard and commented on the recommendations of the Citizens' Panel on Edmonton's Energy and Climate Challenges and received their Final Report for information. Since I don't live in Edmonton nor was I previously involved with Alberta Climate Dialogue (ABCD), I attended the meeting as an outside observer, almost free of expectations and preconceptions regarding the event. In the following report I share some of my thoughts on the development of that meeting, together with related issues that came to mind. Please note that these thoughts do not attempt to be conclusive and by no means represent those of ABCD.

While there was great support to take measures to prevent climate change, and this support was unambiguous during panelists' presentations, personally I would have liked to have seen a more critical position on the part of the citizens with respect to the solutions presented in Edmonton's Energy Transition Discussion Paper (DP). While citizens raised doubts regarding the effectiveness and cost of some alternatives, this was not challenged in terms of other potential externalities or the degree of uncertainty related to their full deployment. Even being the case that during the panel deliberation there was an attempt to discuss transversal issues such as values, impacts and the uncertainty in science-making, panelists' testimonies indicated that alternatives were mainly taken as win-win solutions, demonstrating a high level of acceptance of the recommendations addressed in the DP. Similarly to countries like Denmark, The Netherlands or the UK, for example, this could indicate that citizens in Edmonton show a considerable level of trust in science and that they support scientists. However, it may also suggest that the way in which the problem was framed and the options that were given was central to the development of the dialogue, with the problem-frame working as a powerful guide in the deliberation. I would venture to say that the frame could be regarded as another stakeholder; in this case, one that remained largely unquestioned after deliberation panels and in the communication of recommendations to City Council.

Different rationalities debating a common issue seemed very evident in the room. Policy-makers tend to orient their arguments within the realm of action and simplification, while scientists tend to be much more reflexive and present their arguments in more intricate ways, and at a different pace. While these are not negative or exclusive features of these groups, it might

constitute a problem in the interplay between science and politics when used with the goal of undermining the others' arguments. This was the case of the posture assumed by conservative councillors towards the Office of Environment (experts). Rather naïve or simplistic questions would emerge on the part of some councillors with the sole intention of delegitimizing scientific efforts in addressing the problem of climate change linked to the responsibility of Alberta, and Edmonton, in the process. Although councillors are not experts (and they shouldn't be obligated to hold technical expertise), the problem is not how you communicate science to lay people, but how you stimulate a 'clean battle', i.e. real dialogue, in an arena where rules for a less destructive dialogue between science and politics –when science is against certain political-economic interests, are yet to be invented.

Science researchers, in general, need to partner more often with citizens and policy-makers. That partnership should be healthier and stronger. Science demonstrated a strong relationship with politics in war times during the first half of the 20th century (though perhaps not a positive one). That trust was shaken in the 70's, when some sectors of science, along with social movements, started to question the negative impacts of development on the environment. Particularly in neoliberal societies, scientists that flirt with the environmental cause, become direct opponents of some sectors in politics, usually the strongest ones in terms of the economic power of the actors' they represent. We need to find ways of dissolving this antagonism and empowering the sectors of science that engage with the public. Fostering deliberation in settings like the Citizens' Panel is definitely one of these tools.

Citizens also need to engage with policy-making and attempt to partner with politicians more often. Deliberative democracy is something new, apparently seen as a threat for some who are in power. It shouldn't be this way. Our own culture of power, one that takes for granted and normalizes the hierarchical relation between social actors in terms of decision-power – politicians being on top of the pyramid – hinders the acceptability of the deliberation processes in decision-making. For example, during the Executive Committee meeting there seemed to be an implicit "awareness" that that is simply how things *are*, i.e. that some hold more power than others. In my opinion, it seemed that there would be no surprises if conservative councillors, who advocate for polluters, just decide to do nothing about it (regarding the DP) in the future. However, the matter of power was not on the table. While central in the interplay between policy-making, science, technology and society, 'power' remained an unquestioned feature in the deliberation exercise. It might also be the case that our political structures are not yet prepared for broad and more frequent public engagement with political affairs. However, and

again, I believe that it is through initiatives like the Citizens' Panel, that current structures and the political *status quo* will be threatened. Though it is equally important to foster structural redesign and reinvention of deliberation spaces and to bring up the issue of power inequality to the discussion.

Everyone, every group, advocates something and is an advocate for someone. There are no reasons to pursue neutrality because there is no such thing as a neutral opinion, even in the case when the discussion is backed up by scientific evidence. Arguments are never value-free and one should not be ashamed of being 'biased'. We are all biased; it was clear in the River Valley room that day, and is valid for policy-makers, citizens, scientists and the rest of the attendants. By the moment you make a statement, there is an interest behind it and there is no other reason to convene all these people in City Hall if there was no dispute of interests and the need to reach a formal agreement. Reaching agreements - the heart of politics - has everything to do with reasoning. Especially in the case of discussing complex problems such as climate change and energy transition, the "best" arguments in a scientifically politicized society are those based in credible numbers and reliable scientific evidences. Now, while scientists are somewhat licensed to come up with these numbers and evidences by interpreting the data, everyone can make use of them, including scientists themselves. For you to backup your argument, you have to decide on what evidence to use. This, alone, depends on particular choices, and it is itself an arbitrary choice: and therefore biased. How could it be different with such a variety of interests on the table? In my opinion, the problems with bias are twofold: first, the negative connotation that has been attributed to the adjective when, in reality, the real problem is one of transparency; and second, the use of the term as a strategy to discredit the argument of others. Discussing who is biased or not seem for me now a waste of time. I would like to see the issue of transparency in argumentation and decision-making as the new protagonist in the debate of credibility.

I believe that the meeting at the City Hall – the physical encounter of ABCD, citizens and Administration, was a very important moment for Edmonton and for the political visibility of the climate change discussion in Alberta and beyond. Despite all the weaknesses that one might recognize in the efforts of bridging the gap between science, the citizens and policy-making, the achievement of having citizens' recommendations endorsed by and in the hands of politicians is already a success.

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