Labo(u)r Governments, Consultation and the New Social Democracy

Five case studies of consultation by Labo(u)r governments in Britain and Australia (1997–2008)

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Table of Contents

Summary ***9***

Declaration ***11***

Acknowledgements ***12***

List of Abbreviations ***15***

List of Tables ***17***

Introduction ***21***

The Original Contribution of the Thesis 25

How the Thesis is Organised: an Overview 26

Chapter 1 - The New Social Democracy and Democratic Renewal ***30***

The New Social Democracy—Labo(u)r Government Responses in Britain and Australia 31

The Third Way, the NSD and New Labour 32

Australian Roots of the NSD 35

Influence of the NSD on the ALP and the British Labour Party 40

Defining the NSD 42

The Main Themes of the NSD 46

The NSD and its Critics 48

The NSD - the Role of the State and Civil Society 51

The NSD and Interest Politics 53

The NSD and the Ensuring State 55

The NSD—the Democratising of Democracy 58

NSD and Governance 63

The NSD and Labo(u)r Governments—a Recap 68

Chapter 2 - Understanding Political Participation ***71***

Understanding Political Participation 72

Classifying Participation and Engagement 72

From Classification to Evaluation 78

The Evaluative Framework of this Thesis 81

Evaluating Different Models for the Democratisation of Democracy 85

Participation and Democratic Theory—a Short Overview 90

Limits to Democratic Renewal 95

The Deliberative Challenge to Representative Democracy 98
Labo(u)r Governments and the Democratisation of Democracy 102

Chapter 3 - The Continuity and Change in Patterns of Political Participation 104
The Changing Patterns of Political Participation and Support 105
Defining Political Participation and Political Support 106
Explaining Political Participation 111
Patterns of Political Support and Participation 116
Interest in Politics 119
Trust and Confidence 121
Trust and Confidence in Australia 122
Trust and Confidence in Britain 124
Trust and Confidence: Britain and Australia in Comparison 125
Decline in Voter Identification with the Two Major Political Parties 128
Membership of Political Parties and Trade Unions 132
Electoral Participation 136
Non-electoral Political Participation 139
Trends in Non-electoral Participation in Britain 140
Trends in Non-electoral Participation in Australia 142
Organisational Membership in Britain and Australia 145
Political Participation and the Internet 149
Access and Use of the Internet 150
Using the Internet for Civic Purposes 152
Political Participation and Political Support—Summary 153
The Sociology of Participation 158
The Sociology of Participation in Australia 160
The Sociology of Participation in Britain 164
The Sociology of Participation— Overview 167
Political Participation and the NSD 169

Chapter 4 - Methodology and Methods 171
Introduction 172
Methodology-The Comparative Approach 173
Problems in the Comparative Approach 174
The ‘Most Similar Systems’ Approach 175
Comparing Britain and Australia 183

Similarities between Britain and Australia 183
Dissimilarities between Britain and Australia 186
Britain and Australia—Political Opportunity Structures 189
Similarities, Differences and Links Between the ALP and the British Labour Party 191
The Comparative Case Study Approach 196
Defining the Case Study Approach 197
The Case Study Approach Versus Other Research Strategies 198
Strengths of the Comparative Case Study Approach 199
Triangulation of Data Sources 200
Criticisms of the Multiple Case Study Approach 201
The Policy Transfer Framework 206
The Policy Transfer Framework and the NSD in Britain and Australia 209
Methods 214
Documentary Analysis 214
Semi-Structured Interviews 217
Secondary Statistical Analysis 219
Summary of Methodology and Methods 221

Chapter 5 - Case Study 1 - New Labour's Responsive Government: 'The People's Panel' (1998–2002) 223

Introduction 224
The Democratic Renewal Agenda and New Labour 226
New Labour's Democratic Renewal and Modernisation Programs 229
New Labour's Modernising Government Agenda 231
Growth of Panels and Participatory Methods 234
The People's Panel 236
Governance and Overview of the Panel 237
Use of the People's Panel 238
Main Findings from the People's Panel 239
Importance and Satisfaction in Public Services 241
Information Provision 244
Summary of the Panel's View of Public Services from 1998 to 2002 244
Other Findings from the People's Panel 245
Summary Evaluation of the People's Panel 248
Media Reaction to the Panel 249

Overview of the Strengths and Weaknesses of the People's Panel 250
Representativeness and the People's Panel 253
Responsiveness and the People's Panel 256
Management of the Panel 259
Impact on Policy 261
Political and Public Service Commitment to the Panel 266
Public Service Support for the Panel 269
The People's Panel: A Bold, But Failed Experiment 271

Chapter 6 - Case Study 2 - New Labour's 'Big Conversation' (2003–2005) 273

Introduction 274
'Modernising' the Labour Party 275
'Modernising' the Party, Consolidating the New Labour leadership 278
Plugging in the hearing aid: Labour Learns to Listen 280
Origins of the Big Conversation 282
Timing of the Conversation 283
Organisation of the Big Conversation 286
Starting the Conversation – a 'Future Fair for All' 287
Framing the Big Conversation 289
Conversing about Democracy and Citizenship 291
Response to the Consultation 294
Immediate Reaction and Responses 295
Media Reaction 296
Big Conversation in Detail - High Profile Regional Meetings 297
Use of Facilitators 299
The On-line Big Conversation 303
Summary Evaluation of the Big Conversation 306
Responsiveness 306
Impact on New Labour's 'Democracy and Citizenship' agenda 309
The Big Conversation, Not the Big Proposition 311
A Genuine Conversation? 314
Representativeness and the Big Conversation 316
The Aims of the Big Conversation Reconsidered 318
The Big Conversation – A Transitory Device 321

Chapter 7 - Case Study 3 - The 'Growing Victoria Together' Summit (2000) 323

Introduction 324

The Victorian Political Context 325

The Cain Legacy 327

Bracks and the NSD 328

Origins of GVT 331

GVT Summit 332

Outcomes from the GVT Summit 334

Media and Political Reaction to the GVT Summit 336

GVT—the State Plan 340

The Bracks Government's Approach to Inclusive Politics 345

Community Cabinets 345

VEESAC 348

The Indicators of Community Strength Project 350

Evolution of the GVT Agenda 353

The Future of the GVT Agenda 357

Summary Evaluation of the GVT Summit and Democratic Renewal Agenda 359

Scope and Aims of the GVT Summit 359

Representativeness of the GVT Summit 361

Responsiveness and the GVT Summit 362

Representativeness and Responsiveness in the GVT Democratic Renewal Agenda 363

The Bracks Government's Approach to Inclusive Politics—Reconsidered 364

Chapter 8 - Case Study 4 - Consultation on South Australia's Strategic Plan (2006) 367

Introduction 368

South Australian Political Context 370

Rann, Consultation and British Labour 371

The Rann government and the New Social Democracy 372

Genesis of South Australia's Strategic Plan 376

The State Strategic Plan – 2004 377

Community Engagement of South Australia's Strategic Plan 380

Talking Regions – The Regional Consultations 383

Community Forums 384

'Talking Targets' 385

Other Presentations and Submissions 386
Preliminary Findings from the Consultation Process..... 387
The Community Congress..... 388
Outcomes from the Consultation..... 390
Summary Evaluation of South Australia's Strategic Plan 392
Scope and Aims of the Initiative 393
Representativeness..... 395
Responsiveness 400
Public Awareness and Ownership of the Plan 401
Community Ownership..... 405
Political Ownership of SASP 407
Responsiveness – Impact on Policy..... 409
Lack of Responsiveness 415
Specific Response to 'Political Participation' Targets..... 416
The Wider Democratic Renewal Agenda 422

Chapter 9 - Case Study 5 - The Rudd Labor government's '2020 Summit' (2008)..... 425
Introduction..... 426
Background – the Election of the Rudd Government..... 427
Labor and the New Social Democracy..... 429
The Australia 2020 Summit..... 434
The Future of Australian Governance Stream..... 436
Inspirations for the 2020 Summit..... 437
The 2020 'Package'..... 439
Format of the 2020 Summit 441
The 2020 Agenda..... 443
Facilitators and Scribes..... 444
Discussions and Ideas from the Governance Stream 444
The 2020 Initial Report..... 447
Key ideas from the Governance Stream 450
2020 Summit Final Report and the Government's Response..... 452
The Government's Response..... 454
Summary Evaluation of the 2020 Summit..... 461
Representativeness and the 2020 Summit..... 462
Responsiveness of the 2020 Summit..... 470

Response to the Democratic Renewal Agenda 471
Influencing the Rudd Government's Agenda 471
Overall Summary 474

Chapter 10 - Conclusion - Evaluating and Comparing Five Cases of Experimental Consultation 476
Conclusion: The New Social Democracy and Democratic Renewal 477
Restating the Research Questions 479
Comparing the Case Studies 480
Representativeness 482
Responsiveness 485
Consultations as Deliberation 489
Institutionalising and Sustaining the Consultation 491
Consultation 'On-The-Run' 492
The Future of Consultation as part of the Democratising of Democracy 493
The NSD and the Democratic Renewal Agenda 495

Appendices 499
Appendix 1 499
Appendix 2 501
Appendix 3 502
Appendix 4 504
Appendix 5 506
Appendix 6 508
Appendix 7 510

Reference List 513

Summary

Labo(u)r governments in Britain and Australia have shown a renewed interest in democratic renewal. A confluence of agendas has triggered an attempt to reformulate the relationship between the state and civil society: the dominance of neo-liberalism, the influence of the New Public Management, declining political trust, and crucially, changing patterns of political participation. Yet, despite these factors, these Labo(u)r governments have been ambivalent about the value of democratic renewal. Their experiments in 'democratising democracy' have been limited to top-down 'big-picture' consultations. The consultation experiments have been underscored by a number of difficulties and contradictions, not least a tension between devolving responsibility but centralising power. Moreover, these 'new' attempts to reconnect with the public have done little to address the persistent inequalities of civic engagement.

This thesis critically evaluates this agenda by examining five cases of attempts at innovative consultation. In all cases, the influence of the New Social Democracy (NSD) is evident. The NSD is a political project to 'modernise' social democracy. and it has evolved from the 'Third Way' paradigm most closely associated with the British New Labour government and the political thought of Anthony Giddens. The Australian and British Labo(u)r parties have been increasingly drawn together by the nexus of ideas that inform the NSD; as they attempt to transcend both neo-liberal and the 'old' Labo(u)r statist approaches to politics. Democratic renewal is a recurrent, but low priority and under-theorised, theme in the NSD. These tensions and difficulties are evident in the case studies reported in this thesis.

The fives cases reported in this thesis are all either consultation 'firsts' or are large-scale examples of engagement undertaken by the Labo(u)r governments. There are two British cases: New Labour's 'People's Panel' (1998-2002) and the 'Big Conversation' (2002-04) initiatives. The People's Panel is the first time that a citizens' panel has ever been used by a national

government. The Big Conversation is the largest consultation ever undertaken by a British political party. There are three Australian cases. The first is ‘Growing Victoria Together’ (GVT) agenda (1999 – Present) instigated by the Victorian State Labor government. This Victorian Labor government was the first Australian State government to develop a State-wide strategic plan. The second Australian case is the 2006 consultation on South Australia’s Strategic Plan (SASP), and is the largest consultation ever undertaken in that State. The final case study examines the Federal Labor government’s ‘Australia 2020 Summit’ (2008). The 2020 Summit was a unique elite exercise in political consultation with a 1000 prominent Australians invited to Parliament House to debate ideas for Australia’s future.

The five cases are evaluated in a comparative context using, as the two main evaluative principles, the notions of responsiveness and representativeness. This evaluation reveals the cases as bold experiments, albeit with significant flaws. Many of the tensions and contradictions associated with the NSD program for democratic renewal played out in the five reported cases. The thesis concludes that the consultation exercises can be seen as providing a ‘glittering façade’ to the anaemic and lacklustre response to democratic renewal exhibited by these Labo(u)r governments.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature……..

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List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AES	Australian Election Study
AuSSA	Australian Survey of Social Attitudes
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ASBO	Anti-Social Behaviour Order
AWB	Australian Wheat Board
BES	British Election Study
BNP	British National Party
BSA	British Social Attitudes
CIR	Citizen Initiated Referenda
CEB	Community Engagement Board
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CSR	Comprehensive Spending Review
DPC	Department of Premier and Cabinet
DVC	Department of Victorian Communities
EDB	Economic Development Board
EPG	Empowered Participatory Governance
FOI	Freedom of Information
GM	Genetically Modified
GP	General (Medical) Practitioner
GVT	Growing Victoria Together
IAP2	International Association for Public Participation Australasia
ICPSR	International Consortium for Political and Social Research
ICS	Indicators of Community Strength
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
JPC	Joint Policy Commission
LGA	Local Government Area (Australia)
MORI	Market and Opinion Research International (now called IPSOS MORI)
MP	Member of Parliament
MPSG	Modernising Public Services Group
NCH	National Children's Home
NEC	National Executive Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHS	National Health Service
NPF	National Policy Forum
NPM	New Public Management
NSD	New Social Democracy
NT	Northern Territory
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PiP	Partnership in Power
PSA	Public Service Agreement
SA	South Australia

SACOSS	South Australian Council of Social Services
SASP	South Australia's Strategic Plan
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SIB	Social Inclusion Board
SSP	State Strategic Plan (now SASP)
VEESAC	Victorian Economic Environmental and Social Advisory Council
WA	Western Australia

List of Tables

Number	Name	Page
1	Labo(u)r Governments in Australia and UK	22
2	Arnstein's Ladder of Participation	73
3	Shand and Arnberg's Continuum of Participation	74
4	IAP2 Spectrum of Public Engagement	75
5	Bishop and Davis – Typology of Participation (2002)	75
6	Petts and Leach's Criteria for Evaluating Public Participation	79
7	Summary of Limitations of Various Models for Democratic Renewal	87
8	Five general theories for explaining Political Participation	112
9	Changes in Political Participation in Britain (1984 & 2000)	141
10	Membership of voluntary organisations by demographic group (2003)	163
11	Characteristics of Political Participants and Non-participants in Britain	165
12	Dolowitz and Marsh's Policy Transfer Framework	203
13	New Labour's 1997 Manifesto Commitments for Democratic Renewal	232
14	Key Proposals from 'Modernising Government' White Paper (1999)	227
15	Strengths and Weaknesses of the People's Panel	250
16	Drivers of Satisfaction Levels with Health Services	258
17	Examples of People's Panel Impact on Policy Making	261
18	Growing Victoria Together – Democratic Renewal Agenda	343

19	SASP Regional Consultation Meetings	384
20	SASP Thematic Consultation Meetings	386
21	Main SASP Recommendations	391
22	SASP – Over and Under-Represented Groups	395
23	Rann Government's Response to SASP Consultation	411
24	Summary of Changes to SASP Targets following Consultation	418
25	2020 Governance Stream – Key Ideas	451
26	The Rudd Government's Overall Responses and Actions	458
27	The Five Case Studies in Comparison	481
28	Held's Models of Democracy	499-500
29	Framework of Political Support	501
30	Hypotheses for Falling Political Trust	502-03
31	Political Participation in Australia (1969-2005)	504-05
32	Use of the People's Panel (1998-2002)	506-07
33	The People's Panel - Satisfaction with Public Services	508
34	The People's Panel – Access to Information	509

List of Figures

Number	Name	Page
1	Interest in Politics – Australia (1967-2004)	119
2	Interest in Politics – Britain (1988-2004)	120
3	Ratings for Australian Federal and State Members' Ethics and Honest - (1976-2000)	120
4	Trust in British Governments (1994-2003)	124
5	Trust in British Politicians to put the National Interest above Party Interest (1996 – 2003)	125
6	Strength of Party Identification in Britain (1987-2004)	129
7	Strength of Party Identification – Australia (1967-2004)	130
8	Combined First Preference Vote for Main Parties in Australian Federal House of Representatives (1987-2007)	130
9	British Trade Union Membership (1995 – 2006)	134
10	Voter Turnout at British General Election (1945-2005)	136
11	Acts of Political Participation in Australia (2005) and Britain (2001)	139
12	Acts of Political Participation in Britain (1986-2003)	141
13	Acts of Political Participation in Australia (1993-2004)	143
14	Membership of Voluntary Organisations in Britain (2001) and Australia (2003)	146
15	Membership of Voluntary Organisations in Britain (1959-2001)	147
16	Members of at least one group in Australia (1967-1994)	147
17	Policy Transfer of the NSD between Britain and Australia	212
18	Local Authority Panels 1992 – 1999	235

19	The People's Panel – Satisfaction with Public Services (1998-2002)	240
20	People's Panel Satisfaction vs. Importance of Universal Services	242
21	People's Panel Satisfaction vs. Importance of Non-Universal Services	243
22	Overview of the Big Conversation	287
23	Proportion of Victorian that feel they have a say on issues important to them	355
24	Overview of SASP Consultation	382
25	Knowledge of SASP (2005-06)	401
26	Community Involvement with SASP (2005-06)	403
27	The Consultation Diamond	412
28	Indicators of Community Strength in 3 South Australian Local Government Areas (2007)	421
29	2020 Representation Age Profile	464
30	2020 Representation by State Population	465