

The Margaret Chase Smith Essay: BRIDGING THE DISCONNECT

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by David Mathews

In 1991, Richard Harwood had just completed a study for the Kettering Foundation on the way Americans felt about the political system and insisted that the conventional wisdom—that the public was happily apathetic—was misleading. The people he heard in focus groups across the country weren't apathetic. They were mad as the devil about a system they believed had spun out of their control; a system run by a professional political class of powerful lobbyists, overly incumbent politicians, and a media elite; a system in which their votes no longer made any difference because money ruled; a system with its doors closed to the average citizen. When citizens come to these conclusions, the basic social compact that provides legitimacy for a representative government is undermined.

Changing Ways of Relating

Today, the gap that separates the people of this country from their governments is widening. For new relationships to form that will bridge the disconnect, we will have to overcome deeply held stereotypes on both sides of the divide. Citizens see the officeholders they have elected through lenses so dark that "politician" has almost become synonymous with "criminal." The observation by a county commissioner that "the average citizen doesn't care one way or another about public issues," reflects what many officials believe. Officeholders usually see themselves as the true guardians of the real public interest. After listening to the public's concerns, they see only two options: to exercise their best judgment about what should be done or leave the community (or country) to the anarchy of the popular whim and interest group warfare.

Unfortunately, perceptions like these don't change by direct attack or logical arguments; they change when human beings experience each other in new ways. But the settings where citizens and officials typically encounter one another—hearings and so-called public meetings often make poor relationships worse, confirming negative stereotypes.

If this situation is to change, citizens may have to take the first step. They may have to create conditions that will allow institutional leaders to overcome the many barriers that block better ways of relating. When officials try to engage citizens on different terms, they run into a variety of problems: attacks by interest groups that want advocates for their causes, criticisms from the press for listening rather than acting, and loss of influence with other officeholders who see responsiveness as grandstanding. So, ways must be found to join citizens and officeholders in shared work that recognizes the different but equally important contributions of each.

When Officeholders Need a Public

While many officials may want citizens to leave them alone to do their jobs, our research shows they sometimes find themselves in situations where they need a public. Indeed, more and more, they are discovering that the citizenry can't be "managed," can't be treated as consumers and sold a solution. And officials are sometimes confronted with dilemmas where their professional skills can't help them-such as when values are at issue and conflict has gotten out of hand. Also, when the nature of the problem is unclear or the goals of the community aren't defined, officeholders are often at a loss. It is difficult for them to make trade-offs in situations where there is no public consensus about which choice to make.

In these circumstances, officeholders need a public that is more than interest groups as well as an exchange with citizens that is more than a debate over solutions. These circumstances create an opportunity for common work at the beginning of the decision-making process, with naming problems and framing issues in terms that reflect what the public considers most valuable rather than in the expert or technical terms in which issues are typically framed.

Another form of common or shared work is through the deliberations that the public uses to make decisions on major issues, once they are named in public terms and all the options are on the table. Some officials report that being asked to sit in on public deliberations without being put on the spot or asked to take a position is refreshing. The deliberative forums give them a chance to see how citizens come to terms with tough trade-offs. And citizens have a better understanding of what makes the issues so difficult to deal with.

Of course, while citizen initiative is essential in changing the relationship, officials don't have to sit around and hope that a group of citizens will show up to work with them. In an experiment going on with the cooperation of the National Civic League and National League of Cities, a small group of locally elected officials is exploring what they can do to strengthen the public sector in their communities. One possibility they are considering is that elected officials might create more space for public-choice work. An approach they have considered is to wait on making their decisions until the citizenry has wrestled with all the options and conflicts that make the choices so difficult.

At the heart of all these new ventures, is a simple but profound idea, one that counters the prevailing wisdom that the public is the governed, the electorate, or the client of institutions. The idea is that there are certain things that a democratic public must do-like making hard choices about purpose and direction on policy issues-before republican institutions can do their job. The idea is that the public is a necessary political actor.

The insight that officials and citizens are coproducers, not supplier and customer, is powerful enough to restructure relationships between the two parties in fundamental ways that go beyond merely making improvements.

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