Democratic illusion. Deliberative democracy in Canadian public policy, by Genevieve Fuji Johnson

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To cite this article: Carolyn M. Hendriks (2016) Democratic illusion. Deliberative democracy in Canadian public policy, by Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Critical Policy Studies, 10:3, 380-382, DOI: [10.1080/19460171.2016.1232345](https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2016.1232345)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2016.1232345>

Published online: 14 Oct 2016.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Democratic illusion. Deliberative democracy in Canadian public policy, by Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2015, 182 pp., US\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4426-1124-5

Over the past two decades, we have seen a steady increase in attempts to make policymaking more inclusive and deliberative. Deliberative procedures, such as participatory budgeting and citizens' juries which have long fascinated researchers, are now of growing interest to governments, advocacy organizations, and corporate actors. These policy developments have opened up opportunities to empirically study what happens to deliberative forums in the real world of public policy. One of the latest contributions to this growing literature is Genevieve Fuji Johnson's book *Democratic Illusion* in which she shows how seemingly successful participatory and deliberative projects are not what they appear because they fail to shift preexisting power relations and challenge elite interests. Johnson's research explores the complex policy contexts in which deliberative procedures are enacted. Her analysis sheds new light on the significance of elites in not only making deliberative governance happen, but in affecting long-term change.

This is a rich and provocative book structured around four diverse case studies of participatory and deliberative governance in Canada. In each case, we learn about the motivations behind the deliberative projects, how they were enacted, and to what effect (in the short- and long-term). Johnson pays particular attention to the policy context of each case focusing on six factors: (i) framing of the topic, (ii) characteristics of the participants, (iii) elite commitment, (iv) public pressure for participation, (v) policy requirement, and (vi) predominant economic and strategic interests. We do not learn why she focuses on these specific aspects, and why some seemingly obvious contextual factors, such as electoral cycles and party politics dynamics, are not included.

The task of drawing broader lessons across these empirical studies is tackled in a short concluding chapter. Johnson argues that all four cases appear on the surface to be sustained instantiations of deliberative democracy; they each involved inclusive and deliberative procedures that were embedded in real policy settings, supported by political will and affected policy outcomes. But digging deeper, Johnson identifies a number of imperfections of 'real world' deliberative governance, which she distills into two kinds of limitations. First, there is often a discrepancy between the aims of the procedures and the significance of their outputs for policy. Second, she finds that deliberative procedures struggle to change existing power structures, and shift hierarchical modes of governing.

Johnson's study provides strong empirical evidence of how context shapes the form and ultimate impact of deliberative governance. Her argument accords with early skeptics of deliberative democracy who pointed out that deliberation represents only a small part of democratic life, and that its 'proper place is dependent on the other activities that it doesn't constitute or control' (Walzer 1999, 68). The rich case descriptions show how in practice citizen-oriented deliberative procedures and their outcomes are embedded in complex governance landscapes where non-deliberative practices abound.

What are we to make of Johnson's study of the limitations of discrete deliberative forums? Pragmatically we might ask: if attempts to make policymaking more inclusive and deliberative have limited effect on existing policy and even less on embedded hierarchical practices then why should we bother? Alternatively, we might question whether we are

expecting too much of small-scale efforts at deliberative democracy. Johnson herself remains committed to the pursuit of deliberative governance and argues that we need more, rather than less. Suggestions for how deliberative procedures might be more robust and sustained are touched upon in the final three pages of the book. Johnson points to the role of procedural design in bolstering deliberative governance – a curious move given the book's emphasis on context. She also advocates for a prescriptive approach whereby public participation becomes 'routinized' and 'entrenched' in policy formulation and implementation (123).

On the surface, this book may appear to be simply offering further empirical fodder for skeptics of deliberative democracy. The research supports other studies that show the instrumental uses of deliberative procedures, and that their outcomes can be filtered, circumscribed, or ignored (e.g. Boswell 2014; Parkinson 2006). Indeed, given that corporations or industrial bodies were the instigators of the deliberative projects in three of four of the cases, Johnson's findings are perhaps not surprising. However, a closer read of Johnson's book reveals a unique aspect to this study that deserves particular acknowledgment, namely attention to the temporal dimension of deliberative governance. By examining deliberative procedures and their impacts over a relatively long time period, Johnson finds that the successes of deliberative projects are often short-lived. The broader message is that in practice the effect of deliberative governance is project bound and rarely spills over to alter existing policy practices. Her cases show how many of the immediate influences of deliberative democracy are difficult to sustain over time, and how they can be quickly replaced by hierarchical modes of governing.

While I find Johnson's detailed explorations of deliberative governance in practice illuminating, I found some aspects of the book unsatisfying. Greater connectively could have been made between the empirical findings and recent debates in deliberative democracy, particularly on the role of mini-publics in deliberative systems (e.g. Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2014). Indeed, interpreting Johnson's case material from a deliberative systems perspective could yield fascinating insights into the capacity and limits of discrete participatory forums to promote democratic reform.

For me, the concept of 'democratic illusion' remains woolly and it probably deserved further elaboration. Johnson seems to suggest that there is a kind of active deception going on behind the democratic intention of deliberative practices (e.g. she labels the democratic appearances of forums as 'deceiving' (4)). While I have no doubt that this occurs, it paints only a portion of a more complex picture. There are also many instances of deliberative governance – including some in Johnson's study – where there is an explicit (rather than deceptive) intention to use citizen deliberation for purposes other than democratic empowerment, for example, to test ideas, to gather information, or for public relations. Rather than deception per se, an alternative interpretation is that the form and function of deliberative governance is shaped by the political, institutional, cultural, and economic context within which it is embedded.

For a book committed to 'context', there was remarkably little attention given to the broader structural forces that constrain democratic reform in contemporary public policy. In many cases (including Johnson's own), the weak capacity of deliberative procedures to produce profound changes in democratic relations is not necessarily the result of strategic and deceptive acts (agency), but often a product of the inertia and path dependency inherent in political systems (structure). It would have also been useful to learn more about what the cases collectively reveal about the capacity of Canada's political culture and institutions to accommodate deliberative governance. Moreover, to what extent are these findings transferable to other countries?

Overall, this is a rich empirical book that will be a useful resource for scholars and students interested not just in deliberative governance, but in contemporary policy practice

more broadly. Johnson writes in a very accessible, engaging, and reflective style. Interpretive researchers will find her methodological epilogue at the end of the book on the challenges and rewards of case study research particularly insightful. For me, the take-home message is an important yet sobering one: that there is still an enormous distance to travel between existing approximations of deliberative governance and achieving a form of democratic empowerment that challenges dominant interests and power relations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2016.1232345>

Communicative capacity: public encounters in participatory theory and practice, by Koen P. R Bartels, Bristol, Policy Press, 2015, 304 pp., £70 (hardback), £26.99 (e-pub), ISBN: 9781447318507

The core of Bartels’ book is a well-crafted and realistic account of three contrasting ‘public encounters’ in Scotland, the Netherlands and Italy, which make for a stimulating read. He also puts forward an innovative and effective analytical framework for the examination and comparison of the cases. Finally he draws on American philosopher and management theorist Mary Follett’s work, to explain why these cases – like so many similar encounters – are relatively unsuccessful, and to provide a normative theory for better engagement between state officials and the public.

These are linked by Bartels’ focus on the practices of all concerned, and so to emphasizing the obvious but rarely examined fact that encounters take place between real people. How they create and manage their relationships is therefore of paramount importance in determining how well (or badly!) the encounters evolve. While he clearly positions himself in the lineage of the deliberative turn, his empirically plausible claim is that while more public participation has taken place it has not necessarily been very good, and to understand this we need a normative and explanatory framework other than democratic theory.

This is a very welcome approach, as is Bartels’ engagement with the ordinary and not very successful. The book – and many subsequent chapters – opens with long quotations