Political legitimacy, cultural legitimacy: Promoting ‘practical reason’ by facilitating deliberation on policy for sustainability

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Abstract
Deliberative democratic forums have often been used to support participation in public debate. However, the political impacts of deliberative forums remain mixed. This paper discusses a series of deliberative forums that aimed to foster what Frank Fischer calls ‘practical reason’. Deliberative forums that aim to develop practical reason do not merely seek to effect political or policy outcomes but to simultaneously promote learning amongst a policy community. This is important, because the forum discussed here had little direct political or policy impact but did demonstrate a form of practical reason. The forum brought together a ‘critical reference group’ of representatives from community-based organisations, businesses and local and state governments in a major Australian city. The group’s objective was to identify critical policy issues as these relate to the overarching issue of ‘residential sustainability’. Even though the political or policy impacts of the forum were negligible, it did provide an important means for broadening participants’ understanding of sustainability as a cultural and political undertaking rather than a merely technical problem.

Introduction
Concepts such as ‘sustainability’ offer an indeterminate orientation for action, one not readily adopted by policymakers or grasped by citizens. Policymakers have only a marginally clear idea of what are the technical requirements of measuring or planning for sustainability. In some cases, sustainability requires a ‘greening’ of market economies by ‘internalising externalities’, in others it demands an expansion of opportunities for citizen consultation on a range of issues, in yet other cases a complete overhaul of one or more aspects of social reproduction may be warranted. Similarly, citizens generally do not have a clear idea of the kinds of ‘lifestyle’ changes that achieving sustainability will entail; for some it may imply less work and more leisure, or more access to parklands or unspoilt nature, while for others, it implies increased incomes and expanded opportunities for ‘green’
or ‘ethical’ personal-use commodity consumption. Understood in these terms, sustainability is more like a shared ideal or secular virtue, the practice of which implies certain rights and obligations be fulfilled. This gives to the concept ‘sustainability’ a meaning akin to other, more familiar yet similarly loaded, cultural-political concepts, such as ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ or ‘equality’, for example. These are all more ambiguous than clearly delineated one-dimensional technical goals, such as setting a minimum wage, growing the Gross Domestic Product, reducing chlorofluorocarbon gas emissions, raising literacy or immunisation rates.

Action to address sustainable development thus raises the problem of the legitimacy of policy directed at achieving the ideal or putting the virtue into practice. This said, legitimation can be thought about as both a political and a cultural problem. On the one hand, ‘political’ legitimation refers to the ongoing ratification or support proffered by citizens of the institutional authority, usually grounded in the state or subnational government, to organise and administer the rules for life held in common. On the other hand, however, ‘cultural’ legitimation refers to the sharing in-common of narratives of meaning or belonging that define a community and, as such, are largely set beyond dispute or ‘left unspoken’. Cultural legitimation therefore issues from what Raymond Williams describes as ‘structures of feeling’ and can be defined in terms of discourses that express commonalities and differences, continuities and discontinuities of meaning over time for a community; legitimate cultural discourses represent what makes a ‘good’ shared narrative of belonging with others, what makes life meaningful and worthwhile for members of a community. For example, while almost all people in liberal democratic societies share in a culture that values individuals’ ‘freedom’ to pursue a chosen life goal or goals — so long as this does not impinge unfairly on the right of other individuals to do the same — there exists a great deal of political tension over how a community should facilitate this: through a strong social security, public healthcare and education system supported by progressive taxation, or a low tax society that provides only police services and civil defence and allows individuals to ‘get on with it’.

Dividing the problem of the legitimacy of policy for sustainability into analytically separate dimensions is of particular importance in settler societies of the Anglosphere, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. These nation-states and the communities that they encompass are often regarded as political and cultural ‘climate change laggards’. From an urban planning perspective, it is often argued that unsustainability is designed into the very fabric of the cities and towns in such societies, which are said to provide ‘ubiquitous consumption landscapes’ that offer few alternatives for political engagement or cultural expression on important policy debates, beyond those of the atomistic consumer ‘price signals’ that markets and governments aggregate in order to make policy.
This paper addresses the issue of facilitating greater emphasis in social science inquiry upon the political and cultural dimension of the legitimacy issue, as related to the ideal or virtue of sustainability. It first examines some different approaches to promoting ‘rational’ political debate with the aim of influencing policy through ‘deliberative democratic forums’. It then discusses some of the problems that have become associated with these approaches over recent decades, before examining some alternatives that have been designed to place a greater emphasis on the cultural dimensions of deliberation. The main section of the paper picks up the line of argument proposed in these alternatives and describes, in the form of a case study example, how such a shift in the focus and aspirations of the deliberative enterprise can reveal a situation in which the cultural legitimacy of policy for sustainability is increased, even as the political impact of deliberation appears negligible.

**Social indicators and deliberative democracy**

One way of addressing the problem of ‘legitimacy’ in relation to questions of sustainability is to see it as a normative political-cultural problem, one that can be ‘corrected’ through the persuasive use of rational argument. That is, both politicians and policymakers as well as the public or community will be persuaded by ‘the better argument’ to follow a particular course of action. Interesting in this respect are social or sustainability indicators projects (SIPs). SIPs are policy advocacy and public tools that ‘capture and measure a particular aspect of … policy in an easily communicated form, allowing monitoring and the subsequent “steering” of policy, whether by internal management or external political pressure’. Although often informed by international initiatives—such as the United Nations’ ‘Local’ Agenda 21, the Commission of the European Communities or the World Association of the Major Metropolises, for example—SIPs are neither top-down nor state-centric programs. Nor are they fully techno-scientific efforts or grassroots movements by citizens. Although some might derive impetus from either or both, SIPs are most often promoted by civil society networks, and tend to require support and input from national, state-provincial, regional and/or local-municipal governmental, scientific or educational institutions. Such support usually involves granting access to, and in some cases collecting quantitative demographic and statistical data for, interpreting and managing data and collaboration. The influence of SIPs to some extent relies on their capacity to clearly delineate a policy problem by providing a base-line for tracking the impacts of existing policy on social conditions over time.

However, while early research found localised, deliberative SIPs to be promising, a less sanguine tone has crept into recent empirical and theoretical work on them. Local collaborative SIPs have thus been criticised for lacking influence over decision-making, engaging true participation or reinforcing central-local relations that privilege political expediency. Indeed,
there is no reason that SIPs cannot work merely as tools for ‘branding’ a city in ways not dissimilar to the commercial ‘world’s most liveable city’-type indices that have flourished over recent years.\textsuperscript{10}

This said, a significant body of literature does situate them as examples of deliberative democracy.\textsuperscript{11} In this view, local deliberative SIPs can serve as catalysts for establishing networks of trust between and across policy communities. They help to construct meaningful dialogues about the nature of sustainable development or quality of life that become embedded institutionally over time, even if policymakers are for political reasons loath to embrace them directly.\textsuperscript{12} Taking a step back to a more abstract level of discussion, however, the communicative model central to deliberative SIPs has itself been criticised for mimicking too closely the ideological contours of ‘network society’.\textsuperscript{13} As normatively desirable—as is the deliberative ideal of instituting a process through which open-minded actors are informed about a policy issue, consider its implications in non-coercive terms and provide reasoned arguments for settling on a ‘rational’ course of action\textsuperscript{14}—many of its advocates recognise that in practice consensus-driven deliberation can produce ‘questionable developments for democracy’.\textsuperscript{15} These include the use of deliberative forums to push specific interests and agendas, the emergence of a deliberative consulting industry\textsuperscript{16}, a tendency to sometimes deepen conflict between sectoral interests\textsuperscript{17} and inadequately deal with the tensions between technical and scientific issues or claims about ‘sham’ participation.\textsuperscript{18}

Refinements in deliberative democratic theory and practice seek to remedy some of these shortcomings by adopting a more practical perspective. This approach to ‘practical deliberation’ treats deliberative democracy as an ideal against which actual practice can be compared and contrasted.\textsuperscript{19} Hence, another way of addressing the confusion surrounding the proliferation of indices and their expedient uses is through action aimed at supporting critical social learning\textsuperscript{20} amongst both policy communities and communities of citizens. An important contribution to action of this kind is found in the use of deliberative forums aimed at establishing SIPs. Such SIPs aim to support the development of measurable indicators of progress towards a common good, such as sustainability. Such projects draw upon inter-sectoral collaboration across different tiers of government, business and civil society to clarify, define and monitor policy impacts or lack thereof. Examples include the Sustainable Seattle Indicators in the US; the Community Accounts developed in Newfoundland, Democratizing Data program in Ontario, the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory and the National Index of Wellbeing in Canada; the Community Indicators Victoria and Australian National Development Index projects in Australia; and, the Citizens’ Panels on Indicators of Community Involvement in the UK.

On the one hand, such SIPs aim to support deliberation over what a public feels should be measured and monitored as signposts on the path to operationalising sustainability or other social goods. On the other
hand, they can make known what achieving it will involve for the policy community and the broader public. Indeed, conceived as such, SIPs are said to be ‘modifying the civic epistemologies of democratic societies’\textsuperscript{21}, shifting policy discourses away from one-dimensional concerns, such as with free-market economic growth, unspoilt nature or, potentially, politically expedient notions of sustainability. These are ‘working out new arrangements for making public knowledge and connecting it to public decisions’ about the common good and how best to achieve it.\textsuperscript{22}

**Combining theory with practice: residential sustainability in a liveable city**

This paper focuses on stage one of a two-stage SIP. Stage one of the project was designed as a deliberative forum centred on a representative ‘mini-public’ convened with the aim of identifying key critical issues in relation to the problem of ‘residential sustainability’ in Melbourne. The critical issues that were identified in stage one of the project were used in stage two. This second stage focused on the development of a decision-support tool involving further forum-based interpretation of sustainable development priorities and competing goals, and this is not reported upon here.

The residential sustainability issue was selected by the City Sustainability Team Leader prior to project design, based on his judgement that this would be the most relevant and interesting issue, given the ongoing publicity granted to Melbourne’s ranking in the indices, and the City’s recent public engagement in developing the ambitious FutureMelbourne Plan for benchmarking indicators. The following discussion begins by describing the research method and selection of variables for analysis of stage one of the City of Melbourne Residential Sustainability (CoMRSI) project. It then outlines the theoretical background and reasons for the project design. Stage one of the CoMRSI project is then discussed in terms of the analytic approach. Finally, conclusions are drawn about the helpfulness of stage one for the overall project. The key contention that is being tested here is that the use of deliberative forums to establish SIPs can help to support a policy community to reframe the kinds of knowledge that ‘indices’ embody.

The project design centred on addressing the perceived problem of establishing a deliberative forum that would be both technocratically feasible and shaped by socio-cultural demands. The normative problem was conceptualised as one of tempering the technical rationality implicit in the indices with the socio-cultural rationality central to ideals of the common good, like sustainability. Recognising this situation was seen to raise a need for action in support of ‘social learning’ that goes beyond merely offering ‘the facts’ and expecting a policy community to digest them. For Frank Fischer, technical reason has its place in policy and politics but too often drives them. For him, technical reason ‘emphasises scientific method, logical consistency, empirical outcomes, and generalisation of findings’.\textsuperscript{23} Alternately, socio-cultural reason is regarded as either being ‘irrational’, or having no place in policy decision-making because it is hard to measure,
predict or control and is therefore hard to convert into the language of efficiency. Socio-cultural reason ‘is geared to social processes … knowledge gained from experience – personal and otherwise – derived from being a member of society’.  

The project design also focused on establishing a format for action that can, through a process of deliberation, foster practical reason and help to cut a pathway between ideal and actuality amongst a policy community. In Fischer’s terms, practical reason ‘while lacking the formal rigor of technical reason … offers a solution to the problem [of technocratic over-reach] by incorporating technical information into a normative framework’. Practical reason is by definition a deliberative achievement, insofar as it brings to bear upon a problem three interrelated normative criteria that require public or community negotiation. First, practical reasoning concerns the relevance of the impact of a technical decision on the particular social context which it affects. Secondly, it directs the deliberation to the impact of a technical ‘fix’ on the larger societal system. And thirdly, it raises the possibility for questioning whether or not a community accepts this social system.

Following from this there were three key variables for assessing the achievement of practical reason. The first concerns evidence of awareness of the relevance or applicability of a technical decision, such as a decision to monitor a particular issue using an established indicator seen to relate to the main issue of ‘residential sustainability’ (Awareness of relevance). The second criterion was evidence of deliberation over the impacts of technical reasoning on the city, such as over the effectiveness of eco-efficiency drives or information campaigns (Deliberation over impacts). The third criterion was evidence of questioning the status quo in relation to existing residential policy in general and residential sustainability policy in particular (Questioning the status quo). In this sense, the analysis of stage one of the City of Melbourne RSI (CoMRSI) project conforms to an action research paradigm and employs techniques derived from practice research engagement, which aims to support inquiry into the democratisation of knowledge by drawing participants’ attention to social change. Hence, the three variables were selected to provide a basis for assessing the quality of stage one of the CoMRSI project as an action designed to bring together technical and socio-cultural reasoning in a deliberative forum with the aim of fostering practical reason amongst a policy community.

Orienting stage one of the CoMRSI project towards the task of eliciting the formation of practical reason in these terms was based in earlier theoretical work on alternatives to the commonly used ‘three domain’ or ‘triple-bottom line’ model for community ‘stakeholder’ engagement in sustainable development initiatives. This alternative has been developed around engagement with three discipline areas: critical realist political philosophy, critical pragmatic political sociology, and ecological economics. Although detailed theoretical discussion lies beyond the ambit of this paper, the key
claim that is defended in this alternative approach is that the three-domain (social-environmental-economic) model tends, in a deliberative setting at least, to support the conflation of non-economic and non-environmental dimensions of a problem under the banner of ‘the social’, such that economic or ecological problems define the overall social problem in ways that ignore or underplay the influence of political and cultural considerations. The key point is that sustainability is first and foremost a social problem that has economic and ecological but also political and cultural dimensions. Use of the category ‘the social’ tends to subsume those facets of social relations not tied to the ascription of (economic) value and the use of (ecological) resources. This tends to blind deliberation to possibilities that existing political power structures and cultural narratives might, themselves, be contributing to unsustainable development.29

Deliberating to establish critical issues

The process

A review of City policy prior to stage one of the project found that reasons given by the City for taking action and deploying particular initiatives referred strongly to the contribution that public participation would make to debates over future sustainability in the city and beyond. However, City efforts to enlist public participation in residential sustainability initiatives had been largely unsuccessful. Attendance at public forums was patchy at best. The FutureMelbourne Plan (FMP) was developed by a ‘reference group of partner organisations and prominent Melburnians [who] worked with the City to provide leadership, guidance and editorial overview’ based on 6,500 logins to the online FutureMelbourne Forum site and ‘200 individuals across the age, cultural and ability spectrum [who] discussed the plan at forums across the city’.30 For this reason, participation had increasingly, since the development of the FMP, become limited to consumer information and eco-efficient technology distribution campaigns.31

The FMP established six goals to be achieved by 2017: to be a city for people, a creative city, a prosperous city, a knowledge city, an eco-city and a connected city. The Melbourne City Council Plan 2009-2013 (CP)32 also set ambitious targets for achieving sustainability citywide by 2020 and incorporates the FMP goals as well as adding two more: to lead by example and manage our resources well. The CP was designed to encompass all aspects of life in a ‘bold, inspirational and sustainable city’ and was under development during the CoMRSI project. The project was thus cast against the backdrop of efforts to maintain or improve sustainability and liveability, insofar as ‘family resemblances’ between the FMP and CP goals and the indices are clearly visible. Moreover, of the 48 strategic indicators chosen for the CP, the city’s ranking in the World University Cities Index and the 2 Think Now Innovative Cities Index are included.
In light of the difficulties faced by the City in engendering significant public participation in its sustainability efforts, the research team sought to engage a ‘representative mini-public’ in the project. In this respect, the CoMRSI cannot be considered ‘deeply inclusive’ in the sense that such a descriptor is used in the deliberative democracy literature.33 Rather, the mini-public is a policy community forum that was convened on the expectations set by the ‘all-affected principle’.34 The Critical Reference Group (CRG) consisted of seventeen members; representing the City Sustainability (2 persons) and Research (1) departments of CoM, state government planning and community development departments (3), public and private utilities providers (2), migrant (1), low-income (1), local and international student housing (1) and welfare organisations (2), environmental and community activists (3), building owners (1) and a city university (1). A consensus-based approach was suggested at the first meeting and accepted as the fairest and easiest way to make decisions about critical issues within the residential sustainability framework. The discussion below draws on observations made in the six, quarter-yearly one-hour meetings that constituted stage one of the CoMRSI project. Analysis in relation to the three variables (awareness of relevance, deliberation over impacts, and questioning the status quo) was qualitative and based on hand-written notes and audio recordings of the meetings, which were held between November 2008 and March 2010 and on the finalised table of ‘critical issues’ agreed upon by the CRG in meeting six (see Table 1). Average attendance at all but meeting five—which was attended by only eight persons—was twelve persons, above the agreed quorum of nine. In the discussion double quotation marks are used to indicate direct quotes made by participants.
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Critical Issue</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic</strong></td>
<td>Linking rates to h’hold efforts to be sustainable</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Costs to h’holders of rates, gas, water and electricity</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H’holders’ (strata bodies’) preparedness for climate change</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>City aspirations — ‘global city’</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td></td>
<td>City aspirations — tourism</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H’hold consumption of council services, gas, water and electricity</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parking spaces in city</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to public transport within city</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bicycle lanes within city</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ecological</strong></td>
<td>Greenhouse gas emissions of h’holds (by dwelling type)</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hard waste (by h’hold, by h’hold type)</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘E’ waste (by h’hold, by h’hold type)</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Public parks</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Proportion of people living and working in Melbourne versus those working but living elsewhere</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local food consumption (sourced within 50km limit)</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Localised (h’hold or neighbourhood) power generation schemes</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NABERS 6* compliance (Building and Development Applications for demolition, new construction, redevelopment and refurbishment of residences)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political</strong></td>
<td>Residents’ participation in decision making</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residents’ right to know their own h’hold sustainability status</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Residents’ right to know what Council is doing</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Residents’ feeling safe in the community</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legitimacy of Council in residents’ eyes</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legitimacy of Council in commuters’ eyes</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust in Council as regulator</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural</strong></td>
<td>Council tells city-based CBOs it knows what it is doing</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Environmental state of the city’ reports/forums</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Council information to residents</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Council openness to residents’ responses to policy</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Council follows through on stated objectives regarding residential sustainability</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Link between liveability and resource intensive services, i.e. inputs imported with high embodied energy or >50km -

Public cultural infrastructure (libraries, museums, galleries, etc) +

Private cultural infrastructure (‘3rd Places’, cafes, bars, galleries, clubs, etc) +

Community centres, schools and healthcare +

Quiet nights for residents +

Discussion

At the first meeting, the research leader introduced the project and explained its aims and scope. A member of City staff also addressed the meeting, stating that driving the focus on residential sustainability was a need to “clarify where we are at as a local government, as an important local government in the [Australian] scheme of things”. The spokesperson went on to say that there were several key motivations behind the City’s decision to support a deliberative SIP in relation to the residential sustainability issue. For a start, the issue was seen as an opportunity to promote and increase public “participation in sustainability, [as] it is an issue that concerns everyone, one that everybody living in the city can feel part of”. Awareness amongst the Sustainability Team at the time was that policy was being “dragged in different directions”, not least in some political responses to regular media reports on Melbourne’s status in commercial indicator rankings. It was recognised that the City has a limited capacity to influence residential sustainability. It was also generally accepted that, as an arm of local government, the City is deeply affected by state and federal policy decisions, as well as economic and cultural changes that are the products of wider global trends. A related motivation for Council was that residential sustainability policy—based in ‘rational’ communication strategies, such as the Green Tram information campaign, an Environment Resource Centre in Public Library branches, periodical Green Leaflet newsletter and eco-efficient technology distributions of light globes and showerheads—were seen to be important, yet exhausted, avenues for action. The success or failure of these was also said to be difficult to assess.

The first meeting also considered the terms of reference and responsibilities of the research team and the CRG, structure of future meetings and feedback to be given to the group based on the project outcomes and in terms of the uptake of CRG recommendations. In the first meeting, it was also suggested and agreed that a questionnaire—aimed at understanding residents’ trust in the City and beliefs about responsibility for sustainability and knowledge of the issue itself—be developed and distributed to residents. Such a questionnaire was developed and distributed by the researchers, however the low response rate and sampling difficulties meant that the analysed responses were not deemed useful for direct use as an input to policy.
making but better suited to use as a heuristic tool alongside the EcoCity goals in subsequent CRG discussions.

The four-domain model—i.e. economy, ecology, politics, and culture—provided the ‘headlines’ for meetings 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the CRG. The objective of these meetings was to identify what kinds of things, classified in terms of each of the four domains, the City should monitor as critical issues in relation to residential sustainability. Key prompts to discussion at meetings 2, 3, 4 and 5 were: ‘Who benefits and who loses in the current situation, and how might this change?’ and ‘How, in what terms, can you [the CRG] suggest that this be measured or assessed as an “issue” of critical importance?’

Discussion in the second meeting cleaved between those advocating closer measurement of residents’ consumption of, for example, electricity and gas, with the aim of imposing sanctions on overconsumption and those advocating policy proposals that would cost the city money to develop but would possibly lead to greater ‘sustainability’. It was said that residents need to know “what they’re in for” in terms of costs to the ratepayer and that the City “needs to know what people stand to win or lose if it uses ratepayers’ money to act on sustainability issues”. On the other hand, it was argued that the City should be more proactive in pushing residents to act in sustainable ways, possibly by linking council rates to “efforts to be sustainable” and not relying on “endless info campaigns that annoy some people”. Brought into question were also ‘city aspirations’ to be a global and knowledge city, and how this would impact upon cost of living for residents, or if residents actually regarded this as important. It was suggested that such a question be included in future questionnaires. Insofar as such aspirations are informed by the city’s ranking in the commercial indices, it would seem that such considerations demonstrated a strong degree of awareness of relevance and deliberation over the impacts of decision-making based on such aspirations. Also, the ‘hot-button’ issue of the moment—new bicycle lanes—was discussed, specifically in regard the cost of installing these for a minority of ratepayers (as it was argued that most bicycle commuters cycled from outside of the local government area) It was suggested that the city should work more closely with the public transport and roads authorities at the state level to ensure that bike lanes were not a burden on ratepayers.

Discussion in the third meeting centred on elaborating further measures that could be applied in order to support the existing suite of indicators in the FMP and CP. In this sense, the discussion almost exclusively centred on questioning, and in some cases quite strongly supporting, the relevance of the FMP and CP indicators, deliberating over the relevance of the indicators to CRG members’ concerns that the concerns of the groups that they represented. It was recognised that “more adequate and comprehensive monitoring of household waste levels, greenhouse emissions … would be very difficult and costly, very difficult”, but was necessary if the city was
to “get serious”. It was also recognised that much of the ecological load generated by the city came from businesses and non-residents, so focussing too strongly or directing too many resources towards addressing the residential sustainability issue itself would divert them away from these areas.

A lengthy discussion about public parks ensued, specifically concerning the divisive issue of city policy on native planting to replace non-native trees that had died as a result of the drought. It was felt that those in the public who were deeply concerned to ensure replanting of “water-hungry European trees just need to get real, we can’t go on like this”. In light of both these issues, conversation around the selected issues was deeply oriented to questioning the status quo, not merely to critique but also to provide a rationale for accepting or modifying the FMP and CP indicators.

Although all participants were in some sense what deliberative democracy theorists label ‘partisans’35, the abstract nature of the discussion, and the diversity of the group itself, meant that those acting on vested interests found it difficult to influence decisions on the issues. Indeed, the focus upon questions of regulation in the ‘Political Issues’ in Meeting 3 was embraced by business representatives as well as those from low-income and migrant community-based organisations (CBOs) as potentially leading to a means of “being able to know where we stand” in relation to policy changes and regulatory requirements. City strategy prior to the CoMRSI project was known as largely technocratic and top-down, based in ‘patrician’ consultative engagement rather than the more comprehensive forms of popular control that deliberative democrats see as democratic goods. This history created some pressure from within the CRG for more comprehensive and “real” engagement with residents, even though City staff mentioned that participatory measures were often under-subscribed. This point was indeed demonstrated in the problems associated with obtaining a significant sample for the questionnaire.

A central theme under discussion was that of responsibility: “Who is responsible for what here; individuals, the city, the country, business?” Moreover, it was asked, “How can residents make an impact when government [at all levels] is failing to act?” “Is trust in government at any level well founded?” The City needs to know “what residents believe are their obligations, and what the City should be doing”. Conversely, the city was seen not so much as being responsible for specific goals—which were largely attributed to state and federal governments—but more for responding to questions such as “How can the city relieve anxiousness about climate change?”

Greater participation in decision-making was also demanded, again drawing a response from City staff that efforts thus far were not that well attended. This rather unfruitful conversation gave way to identification of issues around citizens’ rights to know their status in relation to sustainability efforts, as well as on what the City is doing in this regard. It was suggested
that rates notices include this information. It was also proposed that the City regularly assess its own legitimacy, especially in the wake of relatively recent electoral system reforms that were widely seen as handing over unfair advantage and influence to non-resident big business ratepayers in the city. In this regard, the debate over issues certainly spilled over into a robust questioning of the *status quo* and deliberation over the impacts of political aspirations to become liveable and sustainable.

The main FMP and CP indicators dealing with the issue of culture were criticised quite heavily, insofar as they were deemed to be “too much like measuring ‘bums on seats’”. The issue of communication by the City about the effectiveness of actions taken in the cultural sphere and in particular concerning the city’s assessment of the effectiveness of its engagement with cultural CBOs and especially with international student associations. Some degree of coordination between such associations and the City was seen as an important issue to be monitored over time. The City was seen as being very supportive of international students—at a time when street crime against international students was a topical issue in the media—and particular reference was made to the City’s open-handed approach to allowing students to use library and community centre facilities. The issue of coordination by the City of relations with such CBOs was also seen as important: “It is often good but sometimes more consultation prior to a decision would prevent under-resourced groups from doubling up”. The “City could offer more information to CBOs about what they are doing in relation to cultural development and support issues”.

Interestingly, the issue of linking ‘liveability’ and the existing FMP and CP indicator relating to carbon kilometres was deemed inadequate. One member of the group was quite explicit in demanding that the ‘50km’ indicator be amended to include an embodied energy calculation, arguing that local but energy intensive farming may generate more carbon emissions than farming further afield. This aspect of the discussion was the strongest example of the deliberative forum raising awareness of the relevance of a technocratic innovation—in this case a specific indicator—and direct questioning of the *status quo* surrounding the cultural meanings that are either becoming or failing to become established in relation to questions of sustainability.

**Conclusions**

The experience discussed above has demonstrated how a representative mini-public assembled around a local collaborative SIP can develop what Fischer calls practical reason. As an example of deliberative democratic participation, the CoMRSI project minimised the influences of partisanship, NIMBY-ism and ‘stacking’. The practical deliberation aimed at developing practical reason sought not to establish consensus on a single issue but rather to achieving agreement on a raft of sometimes conflicting issues. The critical issues decided upon thus reflect a broad range of interests and goals. The decisions reached give expression to, and foster, a reflective
form of practical reason, insofar as awareness of the relevance of existing issues and indicators was debated, deliberation over the impacts of policy enacted in light of existing indicators took place and questioning of the status quo was facilitated.

The four-domain model central to the CoMRSI project was shown to be helpful in opening up to deliberation the political and cultural issues that may have otherwise be subsumed by economic or ecological considerations. In this perspective, the project has shown how local collaborative SIPs can be at the pointy end of a broader critical democratic project to redefine links between ideals such sustainability and operational goals such as quality of life and ‘strong’ sustainable development.

By contributing to the development of practical reason amongst a policy community that could be expected to have otherwise favoured either strongly technocratic or rather romantic and ‘soft’ recommendations, the CoMRSI project has contributed to the development of practical reason. As such, while the City of Melbourne is yet to take up the model—given that it is time consuming and requires voluntary input from staff—the CoMRSI project demonstrates the importance to social science inquiry of analysis that seeks to interpret both the political and cultural ‘legitimacy-dimensions’ of policy for sustainability. The extent to which the deliberative forums in this project facilitated practical reason showed that even in situations where political aims are not met, cultural aims of social learning can emerge.

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Endnotes


9. Rydin, ‘Indicators as a governmental technology?’.


16. Ibid.


22. Ibid., p. 431.


24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., p. 156.


34. Ibid., p. 163.