# Through the Looking Glass: Social trends on citizen participation By Mark Creyton

"In another moment Alice was through the glass.... and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but all the rest was as different as possible."

Have we all gone through the looking glass with Alice? These days it is a truism to say we are living in times of rapid and significant upheaval and change. We have experienced changes across the whole spectrum of the social, the economic, the political and the technological. In fact we have choices and challenges in our private lives, our public lives and our work lives, many of which appeared inconceivable thirty years ago. These changed conditions have often been referred to as those characteristic of a post-modern era. In this article I will consider some of these transformations and their implications for citizen participation.

There are many approaches to and discussions on social changes and their influence on citizenship, participation and democracy (including Boyte and Kari, 1996; Chanan, 1997; Clarke, 1996; Cohen and Arato, 1996; Cox, 1995; Giddens, 1994; 1998; Habermas, 1996; Held, 1998; KMPG, 2000; Keane, 1988, 1996; Kemmis, 1996; Latham, 2000; May, 2000; Mestheneos et al., 2000; New London Group, 1996; Sirianni and Friedland, 1995, 1996; Trend, 1996; Benhabib, 1996a).  For this reason, this discussion will consider four key transformations that continue to impact upon our lives and our societies.  These transformations include globalisation; detraditionalisation, the uncertain and changing role of government, and the rise of new social movements.

## Globalisation

Through globalisation our daily lives are increasingly influenced by events on the other side of the world, yet the decisions and practices of local groups and communities can have significant global implications (Giddens, 1994: 5).

We now live and compete in a global economy. Transnational corporations can quickly move money and production, making vast impacts on our economies and employment opportunities. These corporations now account for "a quarter to a third of world output, 70 per cent of world trade and 80 percent of direct international investment" (Held, 1998: 17). There has been an increasing emphasis on individual consumerism and aggressive marketing strategies brought about by changes to the global economy. With the advancement of technology, we have seen an explosion in information and knowledge based industries.

With the advent of global markets and the move toward knowledge-based industries, the amount and the type of work available has fundamentally altered. In many western countries there has been a decline in full-employment and in its place is part-time or casual work. The most sought after workers are those who are highly educated and technologically proficient. The idea that we can have full employment is rarely considered or discussed. Concomitant with these trends have been changes to workplace culture, including flatter management structures, more focus on teamwork, quality and corporate values, and a focus on multi-skilling. The role of unions in these new workplaces has been significantly reduced over the past twenty years.

These economic changes have had a devastating effect on many of our regional and rural communities. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened, both globally and within our own communities. In prosperous economies there are numbers of people living in poverty and living on the streets. This disadvantage is not only about lack of income or unemployment, but about lack of access to resources, decision making and choices.  Those most disadvantaged have

often become concentrated into certain areas and regions and become socially excluded from society through a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, low income, inadequate housing and poor health.

In the process of globalisation we also have international telecommunications systems and multinational media conglomerates. Much of the news and information we receive through mainstream media is transnational rather than locally produced. Yet at the same time there has been a fantastic growth of alternative media and communication networks, through which individuals can access and share information across the world, and local concerns can be acted on globally. We have the opportunity to be far better informed about problems which concern us and can share our ideas for how to address them. This global communications network has in part led to our second set of transformations.

## Detraditionalisation

The second transformation has been through coming to recognise that ours is only one of many sets of beliefs, ways of thinking, acting and living. Those aspects of the world we once accepted as being 'universal truths', now appear to be relative. This applies not only to aspects of our ideologies and faiths but also issues related to gender, sexuality, family and work. Anthony Giddens (1996) refers to this process as 'detraditionalisation'. We have come face to face, through migration, travel, tourism, media and the Internet with many different cultures, values and life practices. The rise of the women's, the environment and the gay movement has also provided a series of challenges and alternatives to traditional norms and values.

A world which once appeared to have two competing sets of politics, communism and capitalism, now is a diverse set of political factions and ideologies. The traditional family structure has been transformed to a whole variety of different ways of living together and raising (or not raising) children. There is a new diversity and flexibility for individual identities and lifestyles, family structures and our visions of community. New networks and allegiances have been formed and traditional power structures have been challenged.

There have been a number of consequences of this detraditionalisation process, including a growing awareness of difference at a fundamental level. Writers such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard have shown that universal ideas have often been imposed on other cultures rather than accepted by them. Further, the writers have questioned whether we can truly communicate with others. It seems that concepts such as community, dialogue and communication have often been used to suffocate differences and produce a straightjacket of conformity (Bernstein, 1991) rather than encourage authentic dialogue and understanding.

In some regions we have seen a politics of difference acted out in civil war, terrorism and other forms of religious and ethnic conflict. In many other places we have seen a separate politics of difference, as women, gay individuals, indigenous peoples, ethnic groups and people of colour have sought to gain their full rights as citizens within the community.

As traditional roles and ways of life have come under question, people have become less bound by tradition and convention. This is heightened by a rapid increase in the sources and type of information available to people. There has been an increase in social reflexivity, as people seek information about the choices they make and act on that information. (Giddens, 1994). There has been a greater concentration on lifestyle choices and this has placed a sharper focus on the tension between individual self-interest and community interest. We no longer have a place and a role assigned to us.

It would appear in this post-modern era, everything is open to question. For some this has meant a sceptical approach to grand narratives and ultimate truths, yet others have sought certainty

through a return to tradition or fundamentalism  (Giddens, 1994; Usher, Bryant and Johnstone, 1997).


## The uncertain and changing role of Government

Transformation in the role of government is nowhere as clear as in the debate over the future of the welfare state. In the post-world war two era, the welfare state was regarded as the model to stimulate economic growth, ensure stability and provide a safety net for those who were disadvantaged. There was widespread support for the role of government in providing for the common good of all.

Over the past twenty years, the welfare state has come under increasing criticism for a range of reasons including:

- the increasing costs of providing a range of income support programs further exacerbated by the aging of the population,
- the ineffectiveness of bureaucracy and government to provide innovative or local solutions to social problems
-  the consequences of treating citizens as clients, often associated with the issues of welfare dependency
- the impact of needs based services on areas which become increasingly excluded and identified as 'problem areas'

(Cohen and Arato, 1992; Giddens, 1998; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993)

Many critics have argued for removal of the state from this role due to the limitations identified above. However, in more recent times, the devastating consequences of a market or economic rationalist approach to welfare have indicated the difficulties caused when government withdraws (Pusey, 1998).

The increasingly complex nature of social problems has meant that being an informed citizen on all aspects of government policy and practice is no longer possible.  There is an ever growing reliance on experts to inform social policy and provide solutions, which has resulted in the isolation of the general public from decision making. Participation in the political process is further limited by bureaucracy and a common perception that governments are primarily influenced by powerful lobby and interest groups, and advised as much by their publicists as by their constituencies.

Governments are also increasingly forced to deal with matters which are not under their direct control (Held, 1998; Latham, 1998).  Globalisation has meant that international markets have a major impact on the price of currency, the share market and trade and employment opportunities. Transnational corporations can avoid taxation and legislation through transferring funds and operations to more generous regimes. Governments attempting to pursue individual economic policy in global markets are increasingly isolated and ineffective. National security and defence are now dependent on international treaties and partnerships.

Environmental deterioration of our planet clearly shows that governments have been unable and unwilling to address the problems which confront us. We are faced everyday with the issues posed by global pollution and warming, population growth, decreasing natural resources and loss of eco-diversity. These are global problems outside the reach of individual governments. It has been the environmental movements around the world which have been most effective in bringing these dilemmas to the attention of people and instigating public action.

# The rise of new social movements and NGOs

The environmental movement has been one of the new social movements which have developed since the 1960s. Vast numbers of people have gathered together around particular issues including the rights of women and gays, civil and indigenous rights, access and equity for those with a disability, consumer and public health concerns and the treatment of animals (Cohen, 1996). We have seen also the development of a vast sector of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

These groups have been very effective in achieving significant social change. The role of the feminist movement in placing a range of matters onto the public agenda including equal opportunity, gender roles, reproductive rights, contraception and child support has been well documented. Through these processes the feminist movement, for example, has had a great influence on our values, lifestyles and norms, and played a key part in the detraditionalisation process.

Social movements have pressured and persuaded government to address some of the structural inequities for those marginalised and oppressed peoples in our society. Social movements have shown that while rights may be legislated by governments, they begin as claims from social groups and individuals within civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 443). They have also forced changes through working outside the government process.  The work of Henry Spira in the animal rights movement which  forced cosmetic companies to invest in non-animal testing through a variety of public and private strategies, is a case in point. Another example is the effort of Greenpeace and other environmental groups in forcing the Shell Oil company to abandon the sinking of its Brent Spar oil rig onto the ocean bed. This had a number of repercussions including Shell engaging in a series of strategies to demonstrate a new corporate responsibility (Giddens, 1998).

These groups have also provided places for people to define and struggle for their identity. Through participating in social movements many people have been able to speak in their own voice and construct and express their cultural identity (Fraser, 1992).

It is important to acknowledge that social movements have had power not only for social change but also for maintaining the status quo and traditional power relationships, as with the gun lobby in the United States. More significantly critics have noted that the rise of single issue politics has meant that social reform has increasingly taken the form of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, replacing the emphasis on a more radical redistribution of social resources (Wasserman, 1999). Sirianni and Friedland (1995: 3) argue that while issue-oriented lobbying allows for precise and focused campaigns, it also has disadvantages. It limits innovation in complex public problem solving, it does not encourage groups to work together toward broader issues of public concern and can erode the sense of the individual as a citizen of society at large.

A more substantial critique by Saul (2001) is that as NGOs operate outside the formal political process they are unable to convert broad based support into ongoing structural change and have a limited impact on the fundamental questions which engage us. The complete disregard of various governments towards hundreds of thousands of protesters against the war with Iraq is a case in point.


**Let us consider the effects of these transformations on citizen participation.**

Firstly there is concern that many people are isolated and disconnected from the traditional political process (Chanan, 1997; Cortes, 1993).  It is no surprise that a range of survey results measuring trust in government and institutions have shown a gradual decline in recent years and there is a marked decrease in political party membership and voter turnout (Cox,1995; Giddens, 1998;  Köhler, 1998; Wuthnow, 1999).  As noted earlier this has been replaced in part by various

groups pursuing rights and interests without engaging in broader social issues and capacity building (Sirianni and Friedland, 1995).   Party political policies around the left and right of politics, no longer reflect the voting patterns of the electorate and parties have struggled to find appropriate platforms to engage the populace (Giddens, 1998; Latham, 1998).

Secondly Cox (1995) and Putnam (1995) have identified a loss of social capital occurring throughout modern democracies. Social capital is intricately connected with participation and cooperation. It is important in how we work together to solve community problems and deal with diversity that ultimately plays a part in how we trust governments and other institutions (Lehning, 1998).  The increasing mobility of residents, the impact of economic rationalist policies on individuals and organisations and the greater recognition of difference are factors in this loss of community cohesion.  Social exclusion can lead to a further cycle of withdrawal from community life and a growing lack of trust (Giddens, 1998).

Thirdly the methods of community and political participation have changed. Meeting together in traditional public spaces, in clubs, in churches, in unions and in associations appears in decline (Putnam, 1995).  Management committees and governance bodies are finding it more difficult to attract on-going members and traditional organisations are finding it more difficult to attract volunteers. Yet membership of self-help groups has rapidly increased, as have the number of people donating rather than participating in organisations. There are new types of engagement and participation through social movements, alternative communal lifestyles, virtual activism and grass roots organisations.

These transformations have raised serious questions about the future of voluntary assistance and community care in general. Historically these practices have grown from the religious traditions of philanthropy, service and giving, or from the socialist tradition of solidarity to work together for socially desirable goals. There are fears that with the increasing secularisation of many societies, with detraditionalisation and the increasing discourse focused on economic outcomes, there will be a gradual decline in the values of community, participation and volunteering (Mestheneos et. al, 1999).

Fourthly our ideas of shared community and shared values have been transforming under the effects of social and cultural diversity. Broad based citizen participation must deal with the difficulties of communication in diversity, of deliberating on a common good within a multicultural society, and of deciding how resources can be effectively and fairly distributed in a climate of competing interests.

Finally governments are seeking a new relationship with these communities. They are seeking to engage citizens in a partnership role as they address the growing costs of resourcing programs and the inefficiency of government in solving community problems. Governments are increasingly arguing for a 'third way' which places greater emphasis on mutual obligation, active citizenship and community involvement. This 'third way' is often promoted as a politics beyond left and right, which balances the need to support a competitive market economy with a reliance on a strong inclusive civil society (Spall, 2000). Central to this notion is that "Government can act in partnership with agencies in civil society to foster community renewal and development" (Giddens, 1998: 69).