

Ruben F. W. Nelson\*

Review article  
Note bibliographique  
**Running to catch up**

A Review of the Working Papers on Citizen Involvement Prepared for the Committee on Government Productivity of the Ontario Government (COGP)

Citizen Involvement. *By* the STAFF OF THE COGP, 1972. Pp. 50

A Public Communications System. *By* LLOYD AXWORTHY, 1971. Pp. 60

Gone Today and Here Tomorrow. *By* CATHERINE STARRS and GAIL STEWART, 1971. Pp. 89

Public Bureaucracy and the Possibility of Citizen Involvement in the Government of Ontario. *By* GEORGE S. SZABLOWSKI, 1971. Pp. 37

Participation and Liberal Democratic Government. *By* FREDERICK C. THAYER, 1971. Pp. 41

All are available from the *Queen's Printer, Government of Ontario*; \$1.00 each

The trouble is that today there are no Marxists. We simply do not have a Marxist theory ... Socialism also needs a continuing, critical, and demystifying analysis, and this must be done on the world scale. No one is doing this. No one thinks of it. What is happening is grotesque. Lacking a theory, Marxists are condemned to trail along after daily events. Collective movements erupt and are called 'spontaneous' – the movements of students, the young, and so forth – and then the Marxists run to catch up with the events, to understand them after the fact. Their theory is little more than a rationalization for their surprise ... Under Stalinism, there are no theorists, only tacticians ... We are still Stalinists. Stalinism is more than the evils of Stalin ... It is quite simply the substitution of tactics for theory ... Again and again we are left only with the tactics. We run after the protest movements without understanding them. to say nothing of having foreseen them.<sup>1</sup>

Do these words, spoken by a Marxist to describe Marxism, apply with equal force to our own society? Which of our Canadian institutions has a theory that enables it to understand the turmoil of our time? Which is not skilled in the tactics of survival but virtually bankrupt regarding the

\* The author is President of Square One Management Limited and is at present contracted to the Department of National Health and Welfare, Government of Canada.

<sup>1</sup> FRANCO FERRAROTTI, 'A Conversation with Gyorgy Lukacs,' *World View*, 1972, pp. 31-3.

purpose and outcomes of its all-too-feverish activity? Which is not reduced to running after unforeseen events, trying to understand them after the fact? Which has maps and a compass that are reliable guides to a humane future?

Is the judgment implied in these questions too harsh? Maybe we are only stunned, rather than lost and bewildered. Maybe we should trust those who, believing either that our theory actually increases understanding or that understanding is unimportant, urge us to hope in the new techniques – of policy formulation and analysis, of organizational structure and functioning, of model-building and simulation. Maybe the ascendancy of technocrats, of Theory Y language, of quantification and belief in quantification are social indicators that justify confidence rather than fear.

Yet the suspicion remains that, in our condition, to be fearful is not to be paranoid, that fear is a justified response to a deep and critical appreciation of our situation. At least an increasing number of responsible persons are coming to share this view. One such person is Norbert Préfontaine, who, because of his concern, recently argued in this journal 'that our present problems are primarily conceptual in nature and not technical, administrative, managerial, or even financial, ... (and) that our continued use of our present conceptual images and decision rules will (not) allow us to identify, let alone solve, the problems we actually face.'<sup>2</sup> If this claim is well founded – as I believe it is – then, as Préfontaine asserts, we need 'to fundamentally re-examine the understandings of man, society, and human and social well-being that are reflected in and reinforced by our present social policy.'<sup>3</sup>

The question he raises – the future adequacy of the conceptual foundations of our society – is an issue which, over the next ten years, will become much more visible in North American society. This issue has not yet fully grasped the public imagination, although there are signs that it is beginning to stir among us. One of the signs is the increase in the number of citizens who ask whether it is safe and sane to continue to trust, rely upon, and refine the knowledge, the techniques, the orientations, and the conceptual sets which have become dominant in and among us. Put more crudely, their question is, do our established authorities know what they are doing?

Citizen participation – the widespread demand for it, the commotion surrounding it, the variety of understandings of it – may be another such sign. If it is, it bears watching and understanding. During the last six years, citizen participation has been watched, even if not yet understood. The line up of watchers is truly remarkable – the federal Cabinet, federal

2 NORBERT PRÉFONTAINE, 'What I think I see: Reflections on the Foundations of Social Policy,' *Canadian Public Administration*, Summer 1973, vol. XVI, no. 2, p. 304.

3 *Ibid.*

departments, Ontario Hydro, municipal councils, church boards, community associations, and special interest groups ranging from manufacturers to the poor to (I suspect) most who read this journal. All of us, in order to understand the events of citizen participation, have run like Lukacs's Marxists to catch up after the fact. Lacking a theory, we have developed rationalizations for our surprise. However, we have not yet developed an adequate theory to account for the demands for citizen participation or to guide our responses to it.

If understanding is important to right action, and if theory is important to understanding, then we need to ask of any writing on citizen participation whether it advances our understanding and moves us toward the development of theory, or whether it merely counsels us to yet another tactical response. This is the approach I will take to each of the five documents which resulted from a seven-month study of citizen involvement in public decision-making undertaken by the Committee on Government Productivity of the Ontario government.

Regarding each document I shall ask: is it worthwhile, literally worth a person's time to read and ponder it closely? How sensitive is the author to the issues raised by Lukacs and Préfontaine? Some might suggest that these questions are inappropriate, since the COCP seems to have fulfilled its own hopes, namely 'to identify for the Ontario government the challenges of the decade ahead and suggest ways to meet them,' and to produce 'a useful vehicle for developing debate and discussion on this important topic' (Foreword). However, unless one is willing to argue that all contributions to a debate are of equal value, or that all debates themselves are well formed, my apparently tougher criteria for evaluating these COCP documents are not inconsistent with the COCP's own intentions. They hoped to make a substantial contribution to the discussion. The question is, have they?

The answer is, barely - and then by accident. Had the COCP-assigned topics been adhered to, the most important document in the set would not have been written. However, Starrs and Stewart explicitly rejected the topic offered by the COCP because they believed it to be too narrow, and instead set their discussion of citizen involvement in the widest possible context. Because of the importance of their document, I will return to it. Before doing so, I want to consider the process by which these documents were created, and then to consider each of the other four documents.

### **The process**

On the basis of an initial analysis and literature search, the COCP staff proposed to the Committee that the 'citizen involvement in public decision-making' theme be explored and included within the COCP work.

The staff proposal set out five areas for study: the mechanisms of citizen involvement in the Ontario government, communications technology, the public service and citizen involvement, liberal democratic government and citizen participation, and the citizen in large organizations. The first study was undertaken in house; the other four were contracted to persons who lived in Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Pittsburgh. Upon completion of the substudies, a small conference was held north of Toronto to review and analyse them. In attendance were members of the COCP staff, the authors of the substudies, and a few outside experts, e.g., officials of other government departments and a president of an Ontario university. On the basis of its own work and the seminar, the staff of the COCP prepared its working paper, entitled 'Citizen Involvement.' This was published by the Ontario Queen's Printer in April 1972, along with the four commissioned studies.

The above approach is noteworthy because it is typical of the approach to important questions which is commonly used by government commissions and departments. It is assumed that an important subject cannot be explored whole; therefore, it is broken down into what are assumed to be its constituent parts. Each part is then assigned to a different person, who is selected on the basis of his expertise in relation to the part assigned. If a seminar is held to explore the subject area, it takes place after the substudies are complete and focuses its discussion on the constituent parts.

This pattern is so familiar, and indeed natural to us, that some may ask why I bother to point it out. I do so because it rests on and reflects, as does any other pattern, certain assumptions regarding the nature of our world and our knowledge of it. At the very least we should be conscious of our assumptions, for should they turn out to be unfounded, our commonly used procedures for organizing and obtaining knowledge would be called into question. More specifically, by using well-known procedures, the COCP staff may have unwittingly made the achievement of their desired goal – the understanding of the phenomenon of citizen involvement – more difficult.

The COCP's procedure assumes that: (1) Reality is made up of and is the sum of many smaller parts which do not change fundamentally over time. (2) To understand any aspect of reality, we need to break it down into its constituent parts and examine them separately. (3) Wholeness of knowledge or understanding is a sum; it is achieved by adding together our knowledge and understanding of the particular parts which constitute the whole. (4) The nature of the constituent parts which make up the larger whole is a matter of fact, and therefore an area in which expertise can be established. (5) Exploration of the separate parts can best be done by those who have developed an expertise and understand-

ing of such parts. In short, reality – the phenomenon of citizen participation – is perceived and responded to by the COCP in the images of a mechanical system.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of the assumptions of our culture regarding reality, knowledge, and human consciousness, although an adequate understanding of citizen participation is finally dependent on such assumptions. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note two things. First, the exploration of citizen involvement by the COCP faithfully reflects the above-mentioned assumptions. Second, these same assumptions are being called into question with increasing frequency.<sup>4</sup> Patterns of understanding which are linear, fragmented, and mechanical, and which pay insufficient attention to interrelations and contexts, are simply not adequate to develop what might be called 'ecological' understanding (by which everything is seen as inherently related to, as opposed to coincidentally along side of, everything else).

The COCP's procedure for exploring citizen involvement probably accounts for the unrelated nature of its documents. This, in turn, accounts for much of the frustration of the reader in working through a 'set' of material which is held together primarily by sponsorship, broad subject matter, and cover design. A creative synergistic relationship does not exist among these documents. They are not equal to more than the total of their individual sums because a rich conceptual interplay is not possible among the documents.

It is interesting to speculate about the type of documentation that might have been produced for the COCP had they used a different exploratory process. If the COCP staff had seriously doubted, rather than affirmed, their ability to explore and understand citizen involvement, they might have first asked, "What do we need to be conscious of (think, feel, sense, intuit), in order to adequately understand the clamor about citizen involvement?" On the basis of this question, the process and product might have been very different indeed.<sup>5</sup> The result might have been a coherent statement regarding citizen involvement, its context, history, and significance rather than the present series of almost unrelated documents.

4 See especially DAVID BOHM, 'Fragmentation and Wholeness,' *Structurist*, no. 11, 1971, pp. 7-18; and his 'Fragmentation in Science and Society,' *Impact of Science on Society*, vol. XX, no. 2, 1970, pp. 159-69.

5 The immense difficulty of initiating this approach and carrying it through should not be missed. To begin with, when faced with a problem we seek advice, almost by reflex – from those who are said to know about it, and not from those whose angle of approach is different and unexpected. Further, few of those whose help we normally seek have any experience in approaching and handling social phenomena as if it were whole, alive, and personal rather than as fragmented, static, and impersonal.

### Citizen involvement

After a shopping-list review of some of the characteristics of the citizen participation phenomenon, of some of the pressures for greater citizen participation, and of the question of whether participation should be discouraged or encouraged, the COCP staff study comes to three conclusions. 'First, governments should realize that not all forms of participation are desirable and should avoid promoting those likely to have negative results ... Second, governments should devote considerably more resources to planning and implementing ways of actively encouraging positive forms of citizen involvement in their decision-making process ... Third ... an approach to implementing mechanisms for citizen involvement should be continuously exploratory.' (pp. 26-7) The study then goes on to comment briefly on some of the steps that governments might take to respond to pressures for greater citizen participation.

The main thrust is toward citizens having access to both civil servants and politicians in collegial, face-to-face problem-solving groups. It is hoped that in such settings, civil servants can be both civil and servants, and that citizens - who often begin their participation in defence of their own interests - can widen their focus of concern and responsibility. The document is careful to point out that such problem-solving groups should not have 'ultimate decision-making authority, but merely make recommendations to an elected body or to an administrator; (and) that all perspectives within the community wanting to be heard must be represented on these committees' (p. 32). Finally, the staff study suggests that not only should there be a more open and participatory relationship between the bureaucracy and its citizens, but the bureaucracy itself must become an environment within which staff are both enabled and encouraged to participate. The study also includes a very brief, but to my mind accurate and well-timed, warning against the all too common assumption that a vastly increased use of social survey research will both meet the government's need for information and solve its relations with its citizens.

The COCP staff study is a series of 'helpful hints for harried (government) householders,' and is a good example of the type of document that results when governments, lacking a coherent theory and orientation to their society, are overcome by the turmoil of events. There is no theoretical understanding of participation, or even a broad strategy for action in relation to it, but only tactical recommendations regarding short-term adjustments. This is in spite of the fact that the document itself acknowledges that 'unless perceptions of the phenomenon are widely shared, discussion on why it is taking place and what our response should be may bear little fruit' (p. 3). Unfortunately, the promise of this insight is not fulfilled. The document may be important not so much for what it

says, but for other reasons. First, its existence is one indicator that at least some within the Ontario government feel that the phenomenon of citizen involvement should be attended to. Second, it may provide a clue to the kind of thinking that is considered to be bold by the Ontario government – at least it is likely as much as the COCP was willing to be associated with.

### **Participation and liberal democratic government**

Frederick Thayer's discussion of citizen participation is set in the context of his perceptions of a growing crisis of authority in our society. Central to this crisis is the rejection of the right or ability of any person or institution to represent the claims and interests of others. Thayer accepts this rejection at face value and runs with the tide. He argues, therefore, that we must move into a future without representative institutions. This is the case, he argues, because at present representative institutions necessarily create 'outsiders' and 'losers.' This is increasingly intolerable. Outsiders are created, he argues, because the heart of traditional democratic theory is 'a struggle for votes,' which, by definition, some are bound to win and others to lose.

Thayer goes on to argue that citizen participation overcomes the dangers and problems of the adversarial approach which is inherent in representative democratic theory. Further, although he says it is not well understood because the underlying assumptions of democratic theory are seldom explicitly identified or explored, citizen participation is finally incompatible with and cannot be grafted on to any form of liberal representative democracy. What is required, therefore, if we are to deal adequately with citizen participation is a fundamental conceptual revolution. As Thayer understands it, such a new theory of democratic government is, in fact, emerging. It is, he states:

... one which defines 'participation' as the central right of all citizens. By this is meant the involvement of the individual in the design and policy processes of organizations to which he belongs as well as other policy processes which affect his or her future, regardless of formal memberships. Voting, in *any* form, does *not* meet any meaningful definition of 'participation' and, over time, electoral processes will diminish in importance ... The fundamental unit of organizational activity in analysis, so it seems now, will be a collegial, non-hierarchical, face-to-face problem-solving group large enough to include the perspectives and expertise necessary to deal with the problem at hand, but small enough to assure each participant that his or her contribution is substantial, meaningful, and indispensable to the process (pp. 3 and 4).

I find Thayer's document to be interesting and suggestive, but finally inadequate. I fear that because of its fragmented nature, his document will neither be convincing nor helpful to those who do not already share a good part of the ground on which he stands. Discussion is not suffi-

ciently sustained at any level of generality to enable the unconvinced reader to understand and weigh the import of his thesis. This is particularly frustrating since, apart from Starrs and Stewart, Thayer is the only author in this series who seems to understand the importance of theory and who attempts to deal with it. It is unfortunate, therefore, that he does not lay a sufficient theoretical and strategic base on which to rest his tactical recommendations – moving away from voting and towards collegial, face-to-face decision-making groups. If the Ontario government does not act on Thayer's recommendations, it may not only reflect hard-heartedness in the student, but rather the inability of the teacher to make himself understood.

Further, I am not satisfied with Thayer's assumption that the present crisis of authority and representation necessarily entails the abandonment of representative institutions. Is it the case the conflict, winners and losers, and therefore outsiders are a necessary feature of *any* representative arrangement, or only the ones we have developed to this point? I, for one, am not convinced that he has made his case. Specifically, the distinction – which Thayer does not make – between voluntary and coercive representation needs to be explored and understood. Thayer's comments apply to those who represent me without my consent or blessing, to those who represent me whom I do not trust and to those who represent me who are chosen by a group of people whom I do not trust. Such situations, I agree, necessarily involve alienation and the creation of outsiders. However, not all who represent me do so without my consent or trust or are chosen by people whom I do not trust. Therefore, I am inclined to think that representatives, like the poor, will be with us always.

This defence of representation is not to say that I am in sympathy with the frantic scramblings of public representatives who invoke the importance of representation to put down citizens' groups and protect their own interests. My point is that without adequate theory, it is hard to tell whether the turmoil within legislatures and bureaucracies regarding representation is more than the refinement of survival tactics by those who enjoy their roles as representatives of others' interests. In short, we still need an assessment of citizen alienation, participation, and representative institutions which is more fundamental than has yet been undertaken in Canada.

### **Public bureaucracy and the possibility of citizen involvement**

George Szablowski has reassuring words<sup>6</sup> for beleaguered politicians and bureaucrats. In response to the question, 'What is the future of citizen

<sup>6</sup> It is not clear whether his paper is intended as advice to be acted on or merely description. There are no signs to indicate that it is not to be read as both.



participation in Ontario?' he answers, 'Not much!' At worst, he says, citizen participation 'may acquire a limited authoritative recognition ... However, (it is) unlikely to have significant and enduring influence on the Ontario political system generally and on the executive/bureaucratic policy-making process in particular' (p. 31).

Szablowski bases his conclusions on observations regarding the political culture of Ontario (it is conservative and elitist) and on the emerging requirements of the executive/bureaucratic system (bureaucracies are and must become more professional and will be required to undertake more comprehensive planning). In effect, Szablowski argues, it is just as well that the people of Ontario have no great desire to be involved in public decision-making because the patterns of future decision-making necessarily exclude all but the most highly educated and skilled. If the Ontario government is to do its job, it must move into a new era of public administration and decision-making – an era characterized by the use of powerful analytic and technological capabilities which must be used because of their promise that the resulting decisions will be vastly improved in quality and effectiveness. As he puts it:

Outdated, non-rational procedures must be replaced by new 'total' procedural systems which can prescribe every step in the arduous task of decision-making, whether in the area of resource allocation, or strategy determination. The principle of technological rationality must become omnipresent throughout the system and the process ... In such a system, the goals of efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity would dominate over all other values, including those of participation, openness, and wider access to public policy making ... (pp. 25 and 28).

What can one say? If Szablowski is right, then governments – or at least those in Ontario – need no longer attempt to understand and respond to the demands of citizens for increased participation. Rather, energy should be expended in explaining to citizens that they not only are, but must necessarily be, excluded from public decision-making, and this for their own good.

All this may come as comforting news to governments. However, I would urge them to ensure that it is well-founded advice before attempting to deal with this problem by yet another ad campaign. That is, has Szablowski missed anything?

I would say that he has. His piece reflects little understanding of either social context or conceptual underpinnings. Szablowski appears to be what John W. Gardner calls an 'uncritical lover.' Apparently he has unshaken faith in both sociological research and the successful application of 'technical rationality' to all areas of human endeavour which are of interest to governments and citizens. There is no suggestion that public decision-making is a human and therefore political process. Technique

conquers all. Further, he shows no sense that what he offers as knowledge can and is being called into question. Rather, he presumes that his position is both established and rational, and therefore that no defence is necessary. I object less to the position he asserts, though I deeply disagree with it, than to the presumptuous manner of its assertion.

My point can be put more gently. I would like to talk with Szablowski, not regarding his paper as such, but rather regarding the assumptions on which his position rests. Has he explored other understandings of rationality than the one to which he is committed, or does he assume, as did Aristotle, that his understanding of rationality is timelessly and cross-culturally valid, rather than culture-specific? What are his images of a full human and social life? Is his document only a description of the past, or also advice for the future? Has he made the assumption that trend is destiny?

More fundamentally, before I know what to do with Szablowski's piece, I would need to determine through conversation with him whether I can trust him, or whether, as a professor of mine used to say, 'he knows the words but he doesn't know the tune.' This may sound unduly harsh, for a man I do not know and whose piece includes such a rich bibliography as does Szablowski's. However, in my view, the issues of our culture are much too critical for us to ignore the issues which underlie agreement or disagreement regarding intellectual position. Finally, the issues are issues of trust or distrust, of fear or acceptance, and of whether we can live together. I fear that Szablowski does not understand this. Insofar as he does not, he is ill-equipped to understand the demands of citizens for significant participation – demands which have much more to do with fear and distrust than they do with agreement or disagreement with a government's policy.

### **A public communications system**

Any document which begins with 'government is the basis of civilization' (p. 1) and ends talking of 'a society in a constant state of change' (p. 55) can't be all good. A careful reading of Lloyd Axworthy's paper sustains first impressions. The bulk of his document is little more than a recital of recent developments in communications technology (telephones, broadcasting, cable, satellites, computers, etc.) set in the context of an uncritical affirmation of the understanding of communications which is widespread in Canadian universities and in the federal bureaucracy.

Axworthy's analysis follows a familiar pattern: 'Democracy particularly depends upon a two-way flow of information between government and the governed' (p. 1). When the flow of information is inadequate, as at the present time, both citizen alienation and inappropriate government

decisions result. Therefore government needs to develop better feedback techniques. To do so it should use modern communications technology because 'it is a technology which has the potential for solving some of the basic problems of citizen estrangement and alienation from their government systems and can be a major factor in giving people a greater degree of involvement in the making of decisions' (p. 55). Those who so argue see themselves to be, and are commonly seen to be, the good guys. They are in favour of greater citizen participation and more open government. Why, then, am I critical of Axworthy's document?

To begin with, he does not articulate an explicit understanding of human communication and its relation to citizen participation. He offers no explicit model to guide the development of both understanding and tactical action. This is not to say that theoretical understanding is absent from Axworthy's piece, but only to say that it is implicit rather than explicit and uncritically assumed rather than critically articulated. In addition, at least two of the main conceptual underpinnings of his paper, although common, are questionable.

First, Axworthy's paper not only focuses on information flow between government and the governed, but does so largely from the point of view of the government – its need for information is paramount. Even his concern for citizens' right to information focuses on their need for information about government programs, feelings, and intentions. Beyond this, he uncritically accepts the need for government officials to 'have better information about the needs and interests of people if (they are) to plan good programs and avoid costly mistakes' (p. 4). All this assumes that government is and ought to be the prime shaper of social reality and that citizen participation should take place within a context set by government. It follows from such an understanding that the government has every right to insist<sup>7</sup> that citizens provide it with any information about their wants and desires which the government says it needs in order to adequately plan and act for them.

My questions are: are governments really as important to citizens, let alone to civilization, as Axworthy assumes? What needs do citizens have to freely inform each other regarding whatever is seen to be important to them, without reference to government? Is there any threat to human well-being in the assumption that it is government and not citizens that has a primary need 'to know and be known?'<sup>8</sup>

7 Statistics Canada 'insists' to the extent that it will take those who refuse to complete census questionnaires to court. It recently lost its case against a Winnipeg man because he could not be positively identified by the Statistics Canada interviewer. Maybe in the future Statistics Canada will arm its staff with polaroid cameras to cover such situations.

8 *To Know and Be Known*. Report of the federal Task Force on Government Information, 1969. The similarities of interest, understanding, and approach between this document and Axworthy's document are striking.

I have even more difficulty with the understandings of information and communication which are found throughout Axworthy's document. The understandings he reflects are common, but they are no less adequate for being that. Basically, Axworthy approaches 'information' as if it is a thing, as if it can be possessed, transferred, channelled, feedback, and collected. Accordingly, 'communication' is understood essentially as a technical rather than a human process, the difficulties of which are amenable to new technology and new techniques.

My questions are: what are the differences between a flow of information and a flow of traffic; between conveying information and conveying a letter; between accepting information and accepting a bribe; between sharing information and sharing a beer on the one hand and a bed on the other? The point, of course, is that Axworthy talks of information as if it were an objective thing, independent of persons and of communication as an equally person-independent process of conveying the thing that information is. He talks of a noun - 'information' - and has almost nothing to say about the verb - 'to inform' - or the process of informing. I raise this not as a minor semantic issue but rather because I suspect it reflects a deep conceptual confusion not only in Axworthy's document but in the culture generally - witness Information Canada and *Branching Out*.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, if what is critical to an informed citizenry is not merely the collection of data but rather the processes of human interaction involved in becoming informed, then Axworthy's document is almost wholly beside the point, if not importantly misleading. It does not help us, for example, with understanding what it is about the present federal government that does not allow it to 'accept information' (p. 42). Nor is it necessarily important, as Axworthy claims it is, that because of advances in computer technology 'citizens groups can have data equivalent to that possessed by the government officials' (p. 8). Nor is it necessarily the case that 'community television can ensure the citizen's right to be informed and can give the citizen the right to inform' (p. 38). In short, Axworthy focuses on hardware and misses all the important issues related to the hardness of our hearts. I am making an empirical as well as a moral point - Axworthy not only cannot help us, he may mislead us if information and communication are not what he imagines them to be. As with Szablowski, the Ontario government would be ill advised to act uncritically on the basis of this advice.

### **Gone today and here tomorrow**

This piece by Starrs and Stewart is the one COGP document which is worthy of special attention. To begin with, as noted earlier, they avoid

<sup>9</sup> HANS BAEYER, *Branching Out*. Report of the Task Force on Computers, Ottawa, Information Canada, 1972.

the fragmented approach taken by the COCP. The stated reasons for their approach are important, especially in the light of the inadequacies of the other COCP documents and the comments by Préfontaine and Lukacs.

Rather than zeroing in on the question of citizen involvement, we have moved out and away from it in all directions, trying to establish the context of the phenomenon in very broad terms. This done we have moved in to focus again on the issue itself. By eschewing an approach which defined and isolated and examined the issue it was primarily concerned with, and by choosing instead to move outwards and see the issue in context, we are clearly running counter to what is regarded as appropriate research technique in much of our society ... Uncomfortable and difficult and controversial as such a process may be – 'too philosophical' – we believe it an essential prerequisite to any of us engaging in effective action. In other words, we see it as the only practical approach to any current policy issues, particularly when people are beginning to appreciate that complicated social problems do not yield to mechanical definitions or solutions, no matter how well intentioned – indeed may even be aggravated by them (pp. 5 and 7).

Starrs and Stewart base their approach on the observation that 'something is happening' in our society to which attention should be paid. Although they offer only a tentative analysis, they are quite certain that fundamental shifts of orientation and values are occurring in and among us. If this is the case, they reason, then any understanding of citizen involvement based only on current concepts or even on future projections of current concepts is likely 'to risk irrelevance in short order' (p. 1). The reasoning is sound, but can the antecedent be affirmed?

Eleven persons who believe the answer to be yes – including Bruce Hutchison, Abraham Maslow, William Davis, and Allan McEachen – are quoted in their first section. The excerpts are not quoted as proof texts but only as evidence that at the very least questions directed to the most fundamental aspects of our culture deserve a fair and more open hearing. Finally, however, one's assent to the claim that important shifts *are* occurring in our culture is not unrelated to one's analysis of *what* is happening. Therefore, the Starrs and Stewart analysis needs to be laid bare and explored. Its fundamental propositions follow:

- 1 Citizen involvement is best appreciated as an aspect of the more general issue of decision-making in our society.
- 2 The personal or institutional attention and decision processes within a society rest on, reflect, and reinforce certain basic understandings about the nature of man, society, and their respective well-being.
- 3 Such basic understandings are so much a part of us that they are virtually invisible. Identifying them is at best difficult and often painful. Rarely are persons or institutions critically conscious of their deepest assumptions.
- 4 Nevertheless, in order to ensure that our understandings and actions are well-founded, we need to risk the pain and to make the effort to

become critically conscious of the assumptions which are inherent in our personal and institutional decision processes.

5 Most persons and institutions in Canada function in terms of two different 'sets' of assumptions and understandings. One of the sets is dominant and well-developed; the other is recessive and not well formed. Roughly speaking, the dominant set is applied to our public lives – our lives as functionaries; the recessive set is applied to our private lives – our lives as persons. The dominant understanding leads us to see our lives together in terms of a 'mega-machine' or factory; the recessive in terms of persons-in-relation or families. The split therefore between the mega-machine understanding and a person-centred understanding is not so much between institutions or cultures as in each of us as persons.

Characteristics of the two sets follow:

Mega-machine understanding	Person-centre understanding
System centred	Person centred
Mechanical images	Personal images
Categorical assertions which are independent of social context	Conditional assertions which are context dependent
Hierarchical, sequential view of human needs	Interwoven and idiosyncratic view of human needs
Focus on production/outputs	Focus on process/relationships/outcomes
Scarcity is central concern based on fear	Sharing is central concern, based on acceptance
Narrow focus – many 'externalities'	Wide focus, in principle, no 'externalities'
Exclusive, non-participatory processes	Inclusive, participatory processes
Fragmented	Holistic
Specialized understandings	Comprehensive understandings
Separates quality-quantity, value-fact	Integrates quality-quantity, value-fact
Progress in terms of increased goods and services (affluence)	Progress in terms of increased harmony and richness of relations
Exchange and threat relations are common	Gift, integrating relations are common
Prime human roles: producer/consumer	Prime human role: relater
Concepts seen as society-wide and context free	Concepts seen as relative to plan/time/persons
Little diversity, standardization of behaviour and view	Great diversity of behaviour and view
External restraints/discipline	Internal restraints/discipline
Power (money, knowledge, access) to powerful, experts	Power shared, consciously and deliberately
Information (noun)	Informing (verb, human process)

6 Continued use and refinement of the mega-machine understanding and decision rules is not desirable because it finally is not compatible with a humane future. Specifically, the understanding of man and society which dominates our culture is self-defeating – it reinforces the very ills it is trying to resolve.

7 Much of the present social turmoil can be accounted for by a growing consciousness of the nature and implications of the assumptions of the mega-machine and a shift which is both away from them and towards understandings which are more comprehensive and person-centred.

Significant numbers of us appear quite suddenly to be seeing ourselves more clearly, against a longer historical perspective, across a broader cultural spectrum, and against a clearer reflection of our relationships with the people around us, with nature, and even with ourselves (p. 33) ... The net result is that the balance of judgments is subtly and slowly altered throughout society as a whole (p. 35) ... It is clear that the scarcity-focused world and its institutions will continue to be with us for a long time to come and that the world we know today will not be transformed overnight (p. 35).

8 This analysis of cultural shift has great implications for policy makers. First, the continued uncritical use of present decision rules and assumptions is not merely foolish, but could well be fatal. Second, in the future 'policies must be judged by their effects on people.' Specifically, 'it is better to develop policies in terms of avoiding or reducing damage to people than in terms of seeking to promote their well-being against pre-defined or standardized criteria or measures of "success"' (p. 49).

This then is the context within which Starrs and Stewart suggest citizen involvement must be discussed and understood. They are quite explicit in warning against any attempt to reduce the phenomenon of citizen involvement merely to the participation of citizens in the present decision processes of our present governments.

More specifically, Starrs and Stewart suggest that the phrase which by now has an almost catechetical status within government, 'citizen participation in decision-making by those affected by the decision,' is wrong-headed. They expose the fragmenting nature of that phrase by suggesting that only those who are sure to be unaffected by a decision not be allowed to participate in it. By this criterion, they point out, few people can in principle be excluded from consideration. Even the decisions of the government of Pakistan, Israel, or South Vietnam impinge on Canadians. As they themselves admit, they are only pointing out that in fact in our world we are related one to another. Therefore the drawing of artificial boundaries as if they were real should be resisted and finally stopped.

Are Starrs and Stewart suggesting – as many advocates of community participation seem to be – that each one of us should be involved in

every decision in which he has a legitimate interest? Interestingly, they do not follow this tide. Rather, they state that 'it is patently obvious' that everyone cannot participate in every decision, not even in every decision which directly affects him. Rather, they say that the vast majority of those affected by decisions are and will necessarily remain dependent upon the perceptions and the good faith of those who are directly involved in making them. Fundamentally, they argue, the issue of citizen involvement is the issue of whether we can learn to act, individually or institutionally, in a way that is responsive and responsible to those on whom our actions impinge. By implication, citizen involvement must not become merely a rallying cry for those who wish to establish their rights against other people.

The final section of the Starrs and Stewart document is a brief review of present communications policy. This is included as a more explicit example of specific policy consideration in light of the wider context and a concern for citizen involvement. They begin by noting that our present patterns of communications hardware have been developed in the image of the mega-machine. That is, communications is now treated as a scarce resource. Specifically, it is basically one-way, with little public access to the sending equipment because of both government regulation and expense. Further, the use of communications technology has been subject to the basic test of the market, namely productivity in producing a profit. Starrs and Stewart note that our common images of communication are very different from those associated with personal communication. They note that personal communication is two-way, inexpensive, with direct access, the point of which is understanding, not financial gain. They note further that communication is not at all like trading goods - one does not lose what one gives away. They conclude, therefore, that our present public images of communication are essentially distortive of human reality. Their comments reveal the magnitude of the task which faces any government which would seriously place communications technology in the service of, and not merely in the hands of, its citizens.

Unlike the other authors in this series, excepting Thayer, Starrs and Stewart attempt to get at the underlying issues of our culture. They not only wrestle with what shape we are in, but with what it is that shapes us. The framework they rough in is suggestive, imaginative, and appears to be capable of expansion in both breadth and depth. More importantly, their framework invites each reader to critically reflect upon his or her own experience. They probe the fissures and inconsistencies within personal experience, looking for clues which illuminate our culture. The reverse search is also undertaken. Their analysis raises questions regarding which aspect of our experience we are going to trust and finally live in terms of. As they point out, the world does not neatly divide between the good guys over here and the bad guys over there. Rather, the divi-



sions are within us. Unlike most who quote Pogo's famous phrase – 'We have met the enemy and he is us' – they do so not as a cliché, but rather as if their lives depend upon it.

This is the fundamental strength of their document. Its tone is hesitant and gentle, as if human life is both frail and precious. They sense that citizen participation finally has to do with binding people together in trust and acceptance; that without such ties, no society, regardless of its communications hardware, gross national product, or even patterns of income distribution, will be a place where persons can flourish. For these reasons alone, they must be taken seriously.

Of course there are questions. The beauty of the Starrs and Stewart document is that it raises meaty questions – questions on which one can be nourished.

I have no difficulty agreeing that 'something is happening,' or any difficulty agreeing that the understandings, images, patterns, and techniques which have come to dominate our society are losing their grip. The churches are not our only institutions within which there are fewer believers. This seems to be true of universities, governments, trade unions, and professional guilds. This withering of belief does not always take the form of withdrawal of membership – rather the withdrawal is psychic. The conviction grows that what one is doing is not of sufficient intrinsic worth to find one's life in it, but since the game must be played, and one must do something, one will stay, but no longer live there. From one point of view, therefore, our institutional structures and techniques appear to be massive, unmovable, and unmovable. From another, they appear to be incredibly fragile and unstable because if an attack comes, few of the inhabitants will lay themselves on the line of defence. In short, our psychic-social fabric is unravelling.

However, Starrs and Stewart not only see all this, but they urge us to believe that new cloth is being made, that new and healthier patterns are being woven. While they are not advocates of 'the' counter culture, they are optimists. I do not share their optimism. Most of our present social turmoil, including citizen participation, can be accounted for on the basis of the inconsistencies of our present arrangements and an increasing unwillingness to give ourselves over to them.

Further, while we can learn established and institutionally reinforced habits and perceptions by 'osmosis,' and even by 'osmosis' lose faith in such perceptions, the alternative conceptions which are sufficiently coherent and powerful to form a base for a genuine counter culture are hard won by deliberate action. As yet, I see little evidence that large numbers of us have undertaken or are willing to undertake the kind of hard work which would be involved in creating what Starrs and Stewart called a person-centred world.

Since realities are socially constructed – with this Starrs and Stewart agree – one underlying question is ecclesiological; that is, the question of human community. Without a community in which those who are attempting to live a person-centred life can be healed and nurtured in the 'faith,' nothing will change. To think otherwise is to seriously underestimate the capacity of our present established institutions to persuade, threaten, and finally coerce those who depend upon them. To deny this is to overestimate the capacity of frightened and bewildered people to withstand pressure when they think they have been abandoned by their friends. Richard Schaul speaks of this when he says:

There are rare moments in history when the crisis of institutions is closely linked to a crisis of the process by which people make sense of their life and work in society. Goals offered by that society are not attainable; when they are achieved, their promise turns out to be empty. The most basic values which undergird people's lives lose their power; nothing makes sense any more. In such moments, struggle for radical social change has to do with the development of new processes by which people break the hold of old values and ways of life, discover new reasons for living as well as a form of struggle to make such a new life possible.<sup>10</sup>

Starrs and Stewart fail to address themselves to the development of the new processes of which Schaul speaks.

My next question bears on the first. Bluntly put, is conversion necessary? What is the nature of the shift between a mega-machine understanding and a person-centred understanding? Does it result from the addition of information, or do our patterns of perception themselves have to change? Starrs and Stewart are apparently undecided. On the one hand they talk as if additional information were enough, and yet they suggest that the shift amounts to 'a virtual flip in perception' (p. 38). This is an important question, for without an adequate understanding of the nature of the change which has to occur, a sound strategy for spreading the word will not be developed, nor, of course, will we be in a position to test either ourselves or other people to see if our 'converted understanding' is deeper than a new vocabulary.

Starrs and Stewart claim that in the future policies must be judged 'by their effect on people.' They suggest further that 'it is better to develop policies in terms of avoiding or reducing damage to people than in terms of seeking to promote their well-being against pre-defined or standardized criteria or measures of "success"' (p. 49). This approach, similar to Préfontaine's call for a social policy which will do people no harm, is significantly different from that embodied in our present programmatic social policy with its preset categories of persons and definitions of

10 RICHARD SCHAULL, 'On "Containment and Change" 1966 and 1972,' *World View*, March 1973, p. 19.

human well-being. But even a call to a person-centred social policy is not enough, because the important questions are questions regarding the 'nature' of persons – who we are, how we get to be who we are, what can harm us, and what heals us. We must remember that those who live in terms of the systems of the mega-machine differ from Starrs and Stewart, not in their concern for persons but in their understanding of them. It is unfortunate that Starrs and Stewart do not deal more explicitly with their understanding of persons and how it differs from our common perceptions.

Further, since any fundamental understanding of persons is in large part a function of one's implicit epistemology, a powerful and coherent epistemological model is required if we are to move towards a genuinely new future. My final questions, therefore, will be directed to epistemological assumptions which appear to be implicit in Starrs and Stewart's document.

Starrs and Stewart do not include an explicit statement of the epistemological model on which they base their work. Therefore the following statement of what appears to me to be their working model may be inadequate. First, the basic understandings which underlie and shape our society arise out of our specialized roles as doctors, teachers, secretaries, bureaucrats, lawyers, street cleaners, etc. As a result, the images, concepts, and categories in terms of which we commonly live are narrow and specialized, assertive and rigid. Further, the reality comprehended by means of such categories is less than what really is. That is, reality is reduced to that which can be categorized. As a result, mega-machine understandings focus on concepts, on abstractions.

In contrast to this, they argue, a person-centred understanding is more comprehensive, with fewer externalities and blurred rather than sharp distinctions. There is a sense that what is seen to be real should not be taken for granted because concepts, theories, and myths are finally conceived in the minds of men and are nothing more or less than a set of interpretations of the world around us. The basic shift occurring in our society, therefore, can be seen as a shift away from realities which are no longer useful toward images and a mythology which are more adequate.

What can we make of all this? Clearly Starrs and Stewart wish to move towards a world in which human judgments are time limited and based on wider appreciations of any given situation than is now commonly the case. With this I have no quarrel. However, unless such a shift is well founded, there are no guarantees that such comprehensiveness of appreciation will be risked and persisted in. The questions which follow, therefore, are some of those which need to be pursued if the kind of world which Starrs and Stewart dream of is to be realized.

Where do our specialized understandings come from? They cannot be biologically determined, for then there would be no hope of ever escaping them. Are they shaped by something else? What? What is it about us or our world that causes us (Western man) to live in terms of specialized understandings?

What is the relationship between 'narrow and specialized' understandings and 'inadequate' understandings? Are our common understandings inadequate because they are narrow and specialized, or narrow and specialized because they are inadequate? Further, what is the relation between narrow and specialized understandings on the one hand and assertive and rigid understandings on the other? Can narrow and specialized understandings also be tentative and fuzzy? If not, why not?

'Social reality under specialized understandings tends to be reduced to what has been or could be categorized.' Does this suggest that some aspects of reality cannot be categorized? If so, how are they known? That is, how are we conscious of them? Is human consciousness possible without categorization? Do we suffer because we categorize, or because our categories are inadequate?

Following from the above, what is the relationship between categories and abstractions? Starrs and Stewart speak more than once as if all categories were necessarily abstractions. They talk of categories, abstractions, and experience as if uncategorized human experience is available to human consciousness and as if we mistakenly abstract and distort such experience by forcing it into categories. If we can experience without categories, why do or should we categorize? What is the relation between human experience, human consciousness, language, and reality?

Starrs and Stewart talk of the cultural shift they see taking place in terms of our abandoning concepts that are no longer useful. I do not question that social concepts are changing, but how do they know that the social concepts which are being abandoned are inadequate and distortive? By what criteria do they establish their claim that the concepts we are moving toward are more adequate to human experience? Can we not also abandon truth? They seem to assume that the evolution of concepts must necessarily be toward adequacy and utility. In short, they do not address the problem of moral blindness.

Finally, Starrs and Stewart talk of the media distorting perception, and attribute this view to McLuhan. As I read McLuhan, he talks of media shaping, not distorting, perception. The distinction is important. To shape is not necessarily to distort. However, if Starrs and Stewart are right, is undistorted perception (perception without media) possible? What would such perception be like?

These questions should not obscure the importance of the Starrs and Stewart document. They indicate rather that if we are to understand the

social turmoil of our day and the role of demands for citizen involvement within it, we must move not merely beyond their position, but beneath it.

### Conclusion

Since it does not take an article to indicate that only one of five studies is really worth reading, what is the significance of all this? The point is not only to argue but to demonstrate that we will not come to understand the issues which face us and therefore to act responsibly with intention - we will always be running to catch up - unless we learn to pay attention to the conceptual foundations of our culture. The cooP studies on citizen participation are all too typical of studies which assume that fundamental questions do not need to be asked. For too long we have paid lip service to the importance of theory and of understanding, while at the same time we have confused statistical correlations with the former and the ability to deliver short-term results with the latter. For too long we have let ourselves off the hook of critical self-consciousness with the claim that the immediate pressures of our situation do not allow us the luxury of doing our conceptual homework and that while concern for our conceptual foundations is nice it is finally idealistic and impractical. Contrary to this conventional wisdom, I would argue that the expenditure of energy on a disciplined and critical reflection of the most fundamental issues we can handle is necessary if we are to learn again both as persons and as a society who and where we are and therefore what actions are appropriate if our goal is humane survival. For what does it profit a government or its people if, having been elected (or re-elected), they know not what they do.