



## Deliberation - Lessons from Brazil

Andrea Cornwall, 10th February 2010

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By giving people permission to dream, space to debate, chance to learn, opportunities to contribute to righting deep-rooted wrongs, Brazil is creating a nation of informed, politically engaged citizens. The UK can learn from its example.

About the author

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Call me romantic, but there's something about ordinary people feeling as if they have a right to have a say about what their government does that moves me.

Picture these scenes. A bus, a mode of transport used only by the poor, rolls through the countryside in northeast Brazil. We are surrounded by sugar cane plantations, scenes of some of the most brutal exploitation and inspiring activism in this region. The man in front of me reaches into his bag and pulls out a book. I glance over his shoulder at what he is reading. It is a highly technical account of the obligations of his government to involve the public, a handbook on what the Brazilians call *controle social*.

He is probably, I think, one of the many thousands of ordinary citizens who serve as *conselheiros* – members of the participatory sectoral councils that the Brazilian government created in the 1990s as a way of channelling good ideas, concerns and desires for improvement into the way public services are run.

The bus arrives in a grubby, sprawling town. As I walk down the main street, I recognise the old, black man who limps towards me. "My friend!" he exclaims, "and how are your people". Swiftly, the conversation moves to the ups and downs of the participatory council I've been studying since 2003.

Abelardo's from the rural areas, from a farm settlement in which there is abject poverty; he only had a few years of primary schooling, but has acquired, over the years, a keen interest in local affairs and knowledge of the policy process and of the complexities of local government bureaucracy that would rival that of any researcher.

I walk towards the shabby office in which the participatory council is housed. As I enter, I see twenty-something Josinete, the Brazilian equivalent of a health visitor, and Adson, a resident from one of the poorer neighbourhoods and the current health council chair, deep in conversation. Josinete tells me, later, that she got a taste for politics when she was small and that her daughter takes after her.

At the age of five, she prefers coming to meetings than playing with dolls. The debate they are having expands to involve others coming into the office to find out what's new. It is about the finer points of how to ensure the council is as representative as possible, and what rules of the game need



to be enforced to ensure that everyone has a chance to join in the discussion and it isn't just dominated by a few vocal activists.

These are ordinary people. The kind of ordinary people who, in Britain, have no chance to have a say about their government's policies – apart from at the ballot box. They are less educated than many of Britain's citizens. There is a country with a relatively recent history of democracy, not one in which democracy is an ancient and proud tradition. And they are, in their hundreds of thousands, part of a way of doing government that ensures that the slogan "Brasil: um país de todos" (Brazil: a/one country for everyone) has some meaning.

Every month, citizens meet with those who commission and provide services to monitor the implementation of plans and policies, and debate what can be done to ensure better service delivery. Every two years, state-level conferences are held at which citizen-delegates meet with state-delegates to deliberate state policy. And every four years, there is a national conference at which almost 5,000 people, from all over Brazil, come together in intensive debate about the current and future policies that can make their country a better, fairer place.

Picture this last scene, from the Brazilian national health conference. I am standing in a huge queue for lunch. The woman in front turns to ask why I – so obviously a foreigner – am there. She's travelled two days by bus from a remote rural area in the north of the country to be here: nothing, she said, would have kept her away. She effuses "it's marvellous, the whole of Brazil is here".

My eyes scan the room and linger on the sign that reads "Here, it is permitted to dream". By giving people permission to dream, space to debate, chance to learn, opportunities to contribute to righting deep-rooted wrongs, Brazil is creating a nation of informed, politically engaged citizens.

[Power 2010](#) [11] offers UK citizens opportunities to vote for the solution they feel is most needed to correct our glaring democratic deficit. It's a difficult choice. Much is wrong with our political system and our society. Electoral reform seems a priority – but unless citizens are politically engaged, they won't bother to vote under proportional representation any more than they do at the moment.

A [written constitution](#) [12] would be excellent – but who is going to write it, and how are they going to ensure that citizens or the state pays any attention to what is in it? [Stronger local government](#) [13] – all very well, but what are the prospects for this translating into local democracy? A precondition for most of these solutions, if they are to really bring about the kind of change that our moribund political society needs, is an active, informed, engaged citizenry.

My vote goes for [public consultation through a deliberative process](#) [14].

New Labour has given public consultation a bad name, despite a wealth of really innovative experiments in deepening democracy through public engagement. It has come to stand for something that's fake, that's boring, that's for 'usual suspects' rather than the ordinary person – and even that's it about giving the extreme left or the extreme right airspace.

But from what I've seen in Brazil, ordinary people have a lot of good sense to bring to discussions about how government can work best to do what it is there to do. They don't always agree; lively debate is what keeps democracy vibrant, and by listening to very different views, people shift their own opinions.

Most of all, democratic spaces are places where people learn what it means to be a citizen. The word 'democracy' has for centuries been associated with the idea that the people have the right to have a say about what their government does for them. Let's make that word have some meaning again. Otherwise, for all the reforms to the architecture of elections and governance, we will not be able to get the government we deserve.

**Topics:** Democracy and government





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