

# The issue of framing and consensus conferences

15

Helen Wallace

## Origin of consensus conferences

The consensus conference, at least in the form currently practised in countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and, to a lesser extent, in the UK, is an enquiry involving 10-16 citizens who are charged with addressing a socially controversial topic after meeting an expert panel in the subject. However, the concept was originally developed in a different context.

In 1976, the United States Congress became alarmed at the rapid increase in health care costs. In response, the National Institutes of Health established a new mechanism to identify and assess the safety and efficacy of new medical technologies. These 'consensus development conferences' generally focused on a specific technology, such as magnetic resonance imaging or dental implants. The conferences were exclusively composed of experts and, after three or four full days of deliberation, would produce a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the technology in question, including full references, an assessment of the quality of the data available and an explanation of the way in which differences of opinion were resolved. The model became widely used, not just in the US, but in European countries, such as Sweden and the Netherlands. By 1995, over 100 medical consensus conferences had taken place in Europe, including ten in the UK and a similar number in Denmark, France and Finland.

In the mid-1980s, having observed the success of the American model both in the US and in Denmark, the Danish Board of Technology decided to adapt the technique in order to 'bridge the gap between the general public, experts and politicians'. The terms of the adapted technique required that a panel of non-expert citizens was asked to enter into an 'open and unbiased dialogue' having been provided with the 'best available knowledge'<sup>1</sup>. Their final report was intended to inform decision-makers.

The introduction of so-called 'lay' voices into the consensus conference procedure has changed its character markedly. The format, combining lay investigation with expert testimony, has been used 13 times at a national level in Denmark, but only once before in the UK. In

general, the lay panel is asked to reach a consensus, though this requirement has been applied more (e.g. the UK) or less (e.g. Denmark) strictly in different nations.

The procedure of the consensus conference will continue to be refined and improved. However there are limitations to the extent to which, at least in its original format, it can be considered a form of deliberative citizen participation, according to the criteria commonly used<sup>2</sup>. To take three examples, participants:

- must rely on the range and characteristics of the experts presented to them, rather than being able to call for extra or different perspectives;
- are *not* generally presented with knowledge from one expert which is then contradicted or critiqued by another expert, (which would resemble debates on controversial issues in real life);
- have limited input into the format of the deliberations (excludes: agenda, house rules, moderation and decision-making procedures);

Despite these concerns, consensus conferences have clearly become a popular form of public consultation and are likely to continue to evolve.

## Radioactive waste

Radioactive waste has been produced by the nuclear industry in the UK for about 50 years, initially as a by-product of nuclear-weapons production and later through the development and use of nuclear power. The nuclear industry has claimed throughout this period that nuclear waste can be safely isolated underground. There is a link between the past and future expansion of the nuclear industry and the claim that nuclear waste can be safely 'disposed of' underground.

However, no underground 'repository' for long-lived, high-level radioactive waste is yet operational anywhere in the world. In 1997, following an extensive planning inquiry, the UK nuclear waste disposal company, Nirex, was

<sup>1</sup> Grundahl, J. (1995) *The Danish consensus conference model* in Joss, S. & Durant, J. (eds) *Public Participation in Science: The Role of Consensus Conferences in Europe*. Science Museum, London.

<sup>2</sup> Renn, O. et al. (1995) *Fairness and competence in citizen participation*. Kluwer, Dordrecht

refused planning permission to build the first stage of a nuclear waste dump near Sellafield in Cumbria. Evidence showed that the dump would leak, contaminating underground water supplies and ultimately the land, rivers and sea with radioactivity.

Environmental groups, including Greenpeace, saw this as a vindication of their long-standing position that there was no solution to nuclear waste and that there should be no further use of nuclear power or nuclear weapons. Those on the pro-nuclear side of the debate, on the other hand, adopted the position that they must work harder to win over public opinion. In particular, they decided to involve the public in order to reach a 'consensus' on the issue of a solution to the nuclear waste problem, whilst at the same time avoiding any impact on the UK's on-going nuclear activities. Once the problem had been 'solved', the way would then be open for the construction of new nuclear power stations.

The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee undertook an extensive inquiry into the management of nuclear waste. Whilst giving evidence, Greenpeace was criticised for saying that we would not necessarily accept the outcome of a public 'consensus' process and that we would still be likely oppose any attempt to build a new nuclear waste dump. One of Greenpeace's concerns was that a national 'consensus' on policy was unlikely to be acceptable in any case to those living near a proposed nuclear waste dump, or to the future generations whose environment would be contaminated. Obviously no consensus would be sought or reached with them!

## The framing of the 1999 consensus conference

In 1999, a UK National Consensus Conference on Radioactive Waste Management was organised by a consultancy (UK-CEED). It was funded by the Office of Science and Technology, Nirex and the Natural Environment Research Council. At an early stage Greenpeace, amongst others, pointed out that the current (and long-standing) debate was between those who advocated nuclear power but wished to see the nuclear waste problem 'solved' before new nuclear power stations were built, and those who believed nuclear waste presented intractable intergenerational problems, and for this reason (amongst others) advocated an immediate or phased exit from nuclear power.

Any 'consensus' process, beginning from the viewpoint that 'the waste exists, we must solve the problem', would inevitably skew the debate towards the pro-nuclear establishment, by leaving the key question '*should we be making nuclear waste at all?*' outside the frame of the conference.

Key to avoiding this problem would be:

1. including the future of nuclear power and nuclear reprocessing in the framing of the debate; and,
2. making clear at the outset that the panel did not necessarily need to reach a 'consensus' or 'solve' a problem that many believe to be in any case intractable.

## The conference in practice

In theory the framing of the Consensus Conference was opened up to be as wide as the panel wished. They were free to choose witnesses and questions, and were informed that they did not necessarily need to reach a consensus. The panel put much effort into studying what can be complex technical issues and produced a clear and interesting report (which incidentally agreed with the pro-nuclear side on some issues and the anti-nuclear side on others). This paper does not attempt to evaluate the process as whole, but to highlight (informally) a few issues relating to the framing of the debate.

First, it was clear from talking to the panel afterwards that they did feel quite strongly responsible both for finding a solution and reaching a consensus on the issue of what to do with existing nuclear waste. To anyone experienced in writing a joint report, this is unsurprising: it is time-consuming and difficult to broaden a tight remit and always difficult to take a minority view (although one member did so). Although the panel asked questions outside this remit, agreeing on a joint solution was the reason they felt they were there. A number of the panel clearly disliked being told by environmental groups that there was no solution to the problem they had agreed to come and help solve.

Another major problem with the remit arose: on its questions about the future of nuclear power, the panel interviewed three consultants, all of whom were pro-nuclear. The panel themselves found this frustrating and had been unaware that this would be the result of their choices. This was part of an overall strategy they adopted to avoid pro- and anti-nuclear groups as far as possible and rely on 'independent' consultants as witnesses. It is unclear why they were not advised that this was likely to result in evidence largely from those working for the nuclear industry.

The Conference was therefore rather unsatisfactory, in that the existing public debate was partially excluded by the framing of the process itself. Whilst this was obviously a problem from the point of view of an environmental group, it also left the key political difficulty (how to identify a new site) un-addressed, should the search for a new nuclear waste dump begin again sometime in the future.

Other problems with the consensus conference process as practised in the UK are reflected in other contributions to this issue (e.g. Glasner, Mirenowicz) including the following.

- *Biased briefing*: The briefing weekend for participants did not include anyone who questioned the need for continued reprocessing. Admittedly this was because one key participant dropped out at short notice, but no effort was made to overcome this bias in the information that had been provided.
- *Scope*: The citizens were not provided with any information or framework that could have allowed them to build a case for an alternative trajectory for the nuclear industry that would be anything other than a mild reform of the course already set by government .
- *Empowerment/Advocacy*: The organisers did not use the conclusions of the albeit flawed process to engender a wider critical public debate. Instead they used the conference's conclusions to bring premature closure in the way described by Glasner (this issue).

Where there has been an existing long-standing debate with opposing views, public involvement can be generally welcomed by all sides as a 'good thing'. However, such involvement does not take place in a vacuum and control over the framing is critical.

**Helen Wallace, Senior Scientist, Greenpeace UK,  
Canonbury Villas, London, N1 2PN, UK.  
Email: [Helen.Wallace@uk.greenpeace.org](mailto:Helen.Wallace@uk.greenpeace.org)**