



Reflections by Jez Hall
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PB UnConference conversation on: Building the PB Network

The 2015 PB Network conference was our first big gathering in more than a year, and the fourth since the Network was established in 2012. During that time we have achieved a great deal, and that is recognised in the presentations, blogs and reports on the PB network conference webpage. Yet a capacity issue remains, and much more could be achieved if we were able to expand.

Partly this new growth may come from the new constitution we proposed at the conference, with a set of charitable objects that set out our aim to *“develop the capacity and skills of the public in the subject of Participatory Budgeting in particular but not exclusively in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in such a way that the general public are better able to identify, and help meet, their needs and participate in democratic processes more fully by providing information, offering advice, raising awareness, organising events, carrying out research and disseminating the results of that research to members of the public, to public bodies, to educational institutions and to organisations that operate for the public benefit.”*

Ok, that sounds a bit wordy and unwieldy. Constitutions aren't very sexy. More importantly many people signed a commitment to become members of a reformed PB Network. Over the next few months we plan to act on that commitment. Without being diverted from doing some practical things too. Which is why as part of the Unconference I asked for help setting out the direction we should take. Or as we put it: *“How to make the network live and last.”*

We might take a leaf from professional bodies, making sure learning about PB is linked to the ongoing 'continuous professional development' (CPD) of public employees. That means understanding the needs of members, and understand the working of professional institutes that often form 'from the bottom up' to fill a perceived need. Linking PB to the skills required within communications, engagement and democratic services departments for example.

Time is a critical and limited resource for such employees. Meaning a virtual learning network, with a strong element of peer mentoring, using the best of the available new technologies may be more successful than lots of events. That might allow us and them to be international as well. It was recognised these would require some specific skills to establish such a 'virtual' learning network, which meant structuring our work, with specific people tasked to achieve specific things, supported by a committed core body of active and committed members. A network won't build itself.

There was a challenge to think about our practice in the widest possible way. We shouldn't be caged by a focus on budgeting alone. PB was much wider than just considering how to divvy up financial resources, and included looking at shaping the distribution of skills (knowledge) and time (activity). PB has connections with many aspects of public governance. Ranging from planning, regeneration and physical investment, to service delivery and commissioning. As well as how to organise decision making within organisations. Even within political parties themselves. PB could be applied in a hugely varied way.

To make this case we had to create a buzz, and that meant tapping into live issues as they emerge. Being proactive in identifying where PB may play a greater role. Whether it be often highly political issues, such as the ongoing debates on the nature of a devolution of power to the regions, or more pragmatic and practical ways in sectors like Health, with ongoing reform aiming to put patients first, or dealing with budget pressure through co-production and asset based approaches.

The conversation moved on to the types of relations we wanted with our prospective members. The first time someone engaged with our network was critical. That experience needed to be a positive one. Some may be seeking a service, others to be signposted to somewhere else, or simply given more information. All will want to know our advice is based on real expertise and our relationships not controlled or partial. That meant being overtly non political, but crucially not lacking in values, or being unaware of our value.

Accepting that people will come with a specific interest may mean creating 'sub-networks', where they could search for and find information on specific topics. Such as health, policing or housing. Or by geography, such as Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or England. Our existing website allows for this, and could be improved, but we may need to find named individuals who can be a point of personal contact. A specific pitch was made for making peer to peer relationships with politicians and policy makers. It was noted how few elected members came to the conference this year.

There was concern about ranging too widely and being strategic rather than reactive. Perhaps focussing on one core project per year, and making sure we do that really well. And not to neglect the importance of our own annual cycle and that means starting to prepare for our next annual conference. Our success in paying for ourselves to meet this year and thereby getting a huge amount of new intelligence shows the value of coming together at an event run by and for our membership. What was clearly articulated was how short a one day conference is, and we needed to consider if our next, or future, events should include 2 days of activities. One perhaps more content led and the other more conversational.

A suggestion for the coming years' focus was on establishing our 'culture' as a learning organisation; one that fed the campaigning of others for greater citizen voice and fed into the wider advocacy for participatory democracy. We can't do it all, but we can help others do what they do better. We have some great examples from which to learn, such as the Iberian PB Network, which has become more influential by bringing expert voices together, giving politicians a platform, and connecting practitioners. We should make links with them and other networks such as that in Sweden, Poland and Germany; becoming a part of a European network of PB networks.

Partnership is clearly a way to go, whether it is with academics, able to access students to help run events, venues to hold events, or expertise in building our learning network. Or sister organisations, many of whom were present at our conference.

Finally, we focussed on governance. We agreed in our group that we should practice what we preach, and that includes avoiding a hierarchical structure as much as possible. This was true for example in our current heavy focus on Scotland, which is in affect a sub-national network that could subsume the network if allowed to dominate the agenda. Or rather, not allow a specific interest to capture the conversation. This alluded back to the relationship we have to PB Partners, who may have specific focuses based on its consultancy work. Something that might feed the PB Network, but mustn't define it.

We want a culture of autonomous, delegated 'horizontal' learning. That connects with the interests of our members, and through that spreads, not concentrates power. Giving voice and permission to all to sell the benefit of being part of the network. To grow our voice and our message in such a way as to benefit a wider participatory democracy movement, and so take our place within that movement.

A valuable conversation. Which led us to create a possible new description of our network:
"A network of, and for, citizen energy" ... putting the caffeine back into participatory democracy!

Written by Jez Hall

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