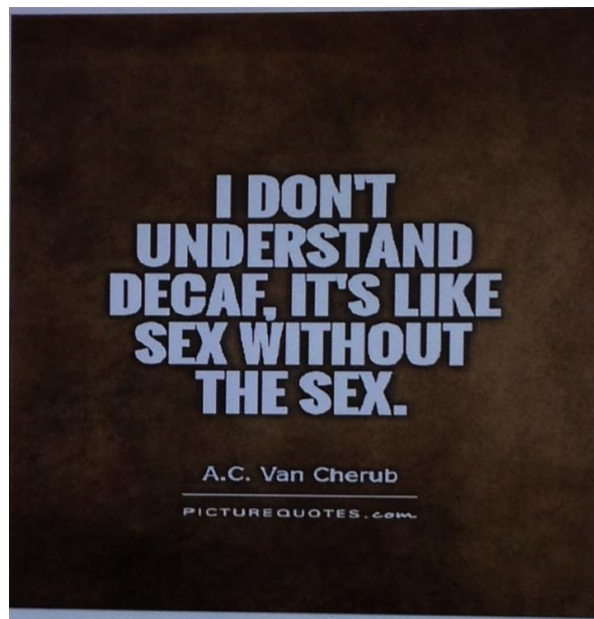


**Reflections by Susan Ritchie from PB Network Unconference 2015
26th October 2015, Birmingham**

Themes emerging from the national PB conference, 2015

As you got ready for work today did you prepare yourself with a nice cup of coffee? A caffeine shot to perk you up and take on the world? Are you one of the many that has moved to decaffeinated coffee for health reasons, and do you still get the desired effect? A.C Van Cherub says



The decaffeination of PB was a topic of conversation at the National PB Conference on 26th October 2015. International expert academic and practitioner, Giovanni Allegretti, reminded the conference that PB was born in Brazil in 1986 and is now an IDEOSCAPE (a model travelling around the world, which becomes real in the different places where it happens, and whose name is not necessarily that representative). He expressed his caution to those who hope there will be a trickle down effect, and urged those with public budgets to invest in the inclusive and deliberative principles of PB: the investment is important to achieve change.

I don't know about you, but one of my frustrations is the superficial way in which some agencies use PB (and other engagement techniques) to 'demonstrate' they have listened or they are co designing services. On closer inspection I notice that the activity can be a one off, isn't generally followed up to shape service delivery, and often gets 'tweaked' so much it becomes what has always been done within that organization, just with a different language. I think Giovanni was warning against that type of decaffeination.

As a drinker of decaffeinated coffee, Professor Graham Smith later shared his thinking about whether this decaffeination was more about shaping the essence of what is a tried and tested model of engagement and empowerment to specific local circumstances. As I will explore in the health workshop blog related to this conference, it is possible to keep the principles and shape a new model, but this must be done with genuine knowledge and must not give permission for officials to 'revert to type' for their own convenience.

Professor Graham Smith gave a great presentation that drew on Phil Collins' song by asking, "is there something in the air?" I think there is – the current political and economic climate is revealing a passion for politics. Ideology is becoming important and as a result UK politics will need to ensure it preserves the democratic principles underpinning our society.

PB brings a process and a budget to democratic goals, irrespective of party ideology. We know that from experience. The PB movement in the UK was started on the left, but is increasingly valued by those on the centre right – can PB galvanise all parties to renew democracy through better participatory approaches to the way they spend public money?

MSP Alex Neil thinks so. In his video address, which was supported by policy lead, Kathleen Glazik's, in person presentation, he spoke of the need to focus on social justice as the goal. In Scotland that has been reinforced through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act which makes provision for "a new regulation-making power enabling Ministers to require **Scottish public authorities to promote and facilitate** the participation of members of the public in the decisions and activities of the authority, **including in the allocation of its resources.**" So "PB is here to stay" for Scotland at least.

It may be the case that the Cabinet Office in Westminster adopt the same commitment in the next few months, as they ponder over the PB Network's proposal to allocate between 0.25 and 1% of the public budget to participatory budgeting <http://www.opengovernment.org.uk/engage/open-government-manifesto/#section-3>. That is out for consultation now so please do get involved if you share our passion for this.

If we want to rebalance power and improve our democracy for social justice we must make sure that we do not decaffeinate the tried and trusted techniques of high quality engagement. If decaffeination is genuinely an alternative to reflect the health needs of the specific public spend (and not a 'revert to type' excuse for doing what has always been done) then we must ensure it hits the spot!

There really is something in the air...