

Dialogue and deliberation, or business as usual: the case of nuclear power in UK in the early 21st century

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Public engagement has become a standard way in which public organisations are expected to operate as well as an important element of political discourse in Great Britain since 1990s. At a theoretical level, this trend can be explained as the new way of conducting politics in contemporary networked societies — a shift from government to *governance* based on deliberation and citizen participation in policy making (Torgerson, 2003). Communication, both in terms of techniques used but also in terms of the philosophy supporting such practical choices made in policy making processes, has come to the fore of attention (Pieczka & Escobar 2010). In Britain, *public engagement* operates as a catch-all term, including well established public information practices, formal consultation with stakeholders, but also, more recently, dialogue and deliberation.

Environment, according to Fischer (2009, pp.36-40), has been one of the important sites of experimentation, learning and institutional change supporting development of participative democracy. The specific question he pursues is about the ways in which expert as well as lay knowledge can together form the basis for public policy decisions in highly technical and complex areas.

This paper takes as its subject energy policy and, specifically, the recent policy change in UK to keep nuclear power as an element in the overall national energy generation strategy. The aim here is to reflect on the nature of the process which has delivered this policy outcome. This paper pays particular attention to communication practices utilised in the process in order to reflect on the nature and quality of public engagement. The preliminary conclusions indicate three key factors present in this case: the unresolved tensions between expert and lay perspectives, as well as between authoritarian tendencies and egalitarian impulses of policy makers; the reframing of the nuclear power as low carbon energy; and the discursive shoring up of risk management through the logic of competition introduced by the privatisation of the nuclear industry in Britain.

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Torgerson, D. (2003). Democracy through policy discourse, pp.113-138. In Hajer, M. And Wagenaar, H. (eds.) *Deliberative Policy Analysis: Understanding Governance in Networked Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.