

**IF**



Interactivity Foundation

**Contrasting Possibilities  
and the  
Interactivity Foundation  
Discussion Process**

**An IF White Paper**

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**November 6, 2009**



# **Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process**

**an IF White Paper\***

**By Adolf G. Gundersen**

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**\* An earlier version of this paper was presented at The International Conference on Deliberative Democracy and Chinese Practice of Participatory and Deliberative Institutions, held November 18-21, 2004, in West Lake, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, People's Republic of China.**

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Printed in the United States of America  
Interactivity Foundation  
P.O. Box 9  
Parkersburg, WV 26102-0009  
[www.interactivityfoundation.org](http://www.interactivityfoundation.org)

Feasts to which many contribute may excel those provided at one man's expense. In the same way, when there are many [who contribute to the process of deliberation], each can bring his share of goodness and moral prudence; and when all meet together the people may thus become something in the nature of a single person, who—as he has many feet, many hands, and many senses—may also have many qualities of character and intelligence. This is the reason why the Many are also better judges [than the few] of music and the writings of poets: some appreciate one part, some another, and all together appreciate all.

—Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1281b, §§2-3

I sometimes wonder who came up with this.

—P.V., Interactivity Foundation Panelist

It's a good thing—this document bears no individual imprints.

—D.L., Interactivity Foundation Panelist

I would like to introduce my paper by asking what I admit is not an innocent question: Would we consider a conference like this one a success if we left having reached consensus on the role of consensus in democratic deliberation? I doubt many of us would think so. Why not? Because this sort of conference isn't supposed to produce agreement among participants; it's intended to allow them to do something else: explore and exchange views, gain new insights, widen their perspectives. The goal of the conference, in short, is not to coalesce and affirm a single option, but to multiply possibilities. Doesn't something very much like this expansion of possibilities have a place in democratic discussion more generally? We at the Interactivity Foundation (IF) think so, and our work is aimed primarily at ensuring that it does.

The analogy I've just drawn is admittedly neither complete nor perfect in all details. IF is not out to remake democracy in the image of even the best sort of academic exchange. But stimulating constructive inquiry aimed at a broadened sense of the possible defines our mission and orients our practical work. I will discuss both our understanding of our mission and our practical work in what follows. I will also describe the results that are beginning to emerge from our work. This first part of the paper is primarily theoretical. It explains why we do what we do—why, that is, our focus is on contrasting possibilities

rather than on consensus. The second part of the paper is primarily practical. It describes the features of our discussion process that we consider most essential in producing contrasting possibilities (and avoiding consensus). The third part describes the possibilities arrived at by a number of our early projects and asks just how contrasting they really are. The first three sections outline why IF is committed to contrasting possibilities, how we strive to achieve them, and the results of our efforts to do so. The fourth section suggest a number of ways in which the IF Discussion process might be relevant to Chinese deliberative practice, especially as described in Dr. He's conference paper. A Postscript raises the question of how IF might best assimilate the practical suggestions made in the conference papers.

Much of what I shall have to say in the following two substantive parts of the paper depends in varying degrees on some appreciation of IF's work as a whole. That, then, seems to be the right place to start.

### **Introduction: An Overview of the Interactivity Foundation**

The Interactivity Foundation's mission is to stimulate and enhance democratic discussion or deliberation (we use the terms more or less interchangeably). Although our activities are eclectic, by far and away the most important means by which we pursue this mission is to conduct deliberative discussions among

- students in college and university classrooms
- small groups of selected citizens in a "sanctuary" setting
- other groups in public settings.

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***Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process***

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The latter two activities are closely linked. The panel discussions we conduct in sanctuary yield “Discussion Reports”—initial descriptions of contrasting governance possibilities in the area of concern under discussion—that will later serve as springboards for wider public policy discussions. The sanctuary discussion reports are, in other words, intended to yield more productive public discussion, the ultimate goal of the Foundation’s work.

We are an operating rather than a grant-making foundation, which simply means that we do our own work rather than contract out for it. We currently have four Fellows directing projects; another is in training. Fellows choose and direct projects with a great deal of interactive input from our peers and “management,” but very little central direction. (Our interest in contrasting possibilities thus applies as much to our internal processes as to the discussion process we employ in the projects themselves.)

Each project involves two intimately linked phases. In the first, “sanctuary,” phase of each project two panels—one of professionals, experts, or “specialists” in a given field, the other of non-professionals, citizens, or “generalists”—discursively explore a selected area of social concern, develop a series of contrasting governance possibilities to address it, and then ask what the consequences of each governance possibility might be were it to become reality. In the second phase of the each project, the director works with an editor to turn the panels’ discussion notes into a report capable with a range contrasting governance possibilities capable of generating public discussion.

During the projects’ sanctuary phase two panels meet in isolation on a monthly basis for roughly a year and a half and then come together for a second series of four to six months’ of joint sanctuary meetings during which they fuse their respective work products. Panelists spend a total of between 60 and 100 hours deliberating in sanctuary.

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### ***Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process***

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The IF sanctuary Discussion Process culminates in a set of alternative policy responses intended to encourage further discussion by the larger public. These alternative responses are not intended to be an exhaustive catalogue of concrete policy actions. Instead, they describe a set of general policy directions that panelists believe will facilitate and enrich wider public discussion. Their emphasis is on what we refer to as “governance”—conceptual underpinnings and normative orientations. They constitute policy “possibilities” both in the sense that panelists have found them worthy of further reflection and in the sense that panelists have found their wider consequences to be generally acceptable or desirable.

The governance possibilities presented in each project’s Discussion Report are in many ways comparable to a set of rival scientific theories. Although they are practical rather than explanatory, the policy possibilities, like scientific theories

- have been scrutinized;
- are self-consciously both tentative and general;
- cannot all be chosen; and
- are intended to be “answers that invite further discussion.”

In our sanctuary discussions, IF consciously and systematically rejects consensus, whether considered as a deliberative means or a deliberative end. We believe deliberation should be oriented to plurality, both procedurally and in its outcomes—at least initially. The philosophy guiding the IF Discussion Process and the work products that result from it can thus be summed up this way: “Contrasting perspectives in; contrasting possibilities out.”



***Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process***

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In his conference paper, Dr. He observes that “In the deliberative process the nature of a problem is demonstrated, and different solutions compared, and new alternatives crafted.”

His characterization fits most deliberative processes. Ours is importantly different in that

- we begin with a diffuse “concern” rather than a concrete “problem”;
- the concern is then “explored” rather than “demonstrated”; and
- the outcome consists of “possibilities and their consequences” rather than “solutions.”

The principal contrasts between the IF Discussion Process and consensual decision-making are summed up in schematic form in Table 1, below.

| <b>Feature</b>                      | <b>IF Exploratory Discussion Process</b>                     | <b>Decision by Consensus</b>                    |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Purpose</b>                      | Enhanced public policy                                       | Forge agreement                                 |
| <b>Outcome</b>                      | Possibilities  | Decisions                                       |
| <b>Timing</b>                       | Early in policy making, sometimes anticipating it altogether | Varies, often at point of decision              |
| <b>Number of participants</b>       | 12 discussants, 1 facilitator                                | 2-24  |
| <b>Selection of participants</b>    | Choice + deliberative competence                             | Both voluntary and involuntary                  |
| <b>Participants' motives</b>        | Personal: inquiry<br>Other: serve public                     | Personal: own interest<br>Other: group interest |
| <b>Distribution of rewards</b>      | Equal  | Equality can be subverted in various ways       |
| <b>Mode of selecting, excluding</b> | Deliberate, cooperative, requires judgment/discrimination    | Agreement (may or may not require judgment)     |
| <b>Threats to openness</b>          | Countered by sanctuary                                       | Ego, emotion, fear of group, other(s)           |
| <b>Rules/procedures</b>             | Informal/purposive   | Informal/ psycho-moral                          |

***Table 1—Contrasting Features of the IF Process and Consensual Decision Making***

Once the Report flowing from the project is done, the wider community is encouraged to further discuss the panels' preliminary deliberations or "staff work." At this point, IF's rejection of consensus is considerably softened. The questions of where and how democratic discussion can or should take place once our sanctuary discussions are over and our Discussion Reports are ready both admit of more than one answer—answers which we believe will vary by project content and circumstance and so cannot be established except on a case-by-case basis.

We concede that consensus could conceivably have a legitimate role under certain circumstances—but only *after* suitably thorough non-consensual deliberation has taken place. In terms of our own work, what this means is that we accept the notion that once our Discussion Reports are being discussed by the public, consensus *may* be an appropriate outcome. I will have more to say about this limited, but important, caveat in the Conclusion. Until then, and except where otherwise noted, what I have to say will apply to the first, sanctuary, phase of our work, because it is there that the value of contrasting possibilities is most pronounced. It is also where, given our short history of some eight years, we have the most experience.<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Why Contrasting Possibilities Rather Than Consensus?**

### **The Allure of Consensus**

Recently John Dryzek and Simon Niemeyer nicely captured the status to which consensus has been elevated among Western political theorists since the deliberative turn

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive overview of the IF Discussion Process, see Gundersen, 2003. A description of IF and its Discussion Process is also available on our website at [www.interactivityfoundation.org](http://www.interactivityfoundation.org).

in democratic theory took place about 1990. “To many political theorists,” they wrote, “consensus is the gold standard of democratic legitimacy” (2003: 1). Although Jürgen Habermas’s concept of an ideal speech situation—designed to yield an uncoerced consensus—got this ball rolling and kept it rolling through the early 1990s, other influential theorists helped it gain momentum, including John Rawls (1987, 1993, 1997), Joshua Cohen (1989), and Jon Elster (1986).<sup>2</sup>

The gold analogy is a good one. It underlines the fact that consensus retains an inherent appeal, even for those committed to alternative norms. Whence this appeal? Ultimately, I think it comes down to the way in which consensus appears to resolve the political version of the ancient conundrum of “the one and the many,” that is, the way in which consensus can (given the right circumstances, such as discursive equality) forge a collective “one” from “the many” even while it preserves the integrity of the individuals who constitute the many.<sup>3</sup> Consensus presumably gives us both unity and autonomy. Who could resist?

### **Alternative Views**

It’s a credit to democratic theory that resisters there have been. At first their attention centered on practical objections. Consensus offers too many opportunities for manipulation. It takes too long. It’s unwieldy except in the smallest groups. It’s too expensive to arrange. Another practical problem: due to personal, group, or cultural differences, even the “force of the better argument,” to use Habermas’s original formulation, may be insufficiently forceful to carry the day. These factors may be

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<sup>2</sup> By 1992 Habermas himself had admitted the reality of conflict in the German version of *Between Facts and Norms* (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Murray Bookchin’s effort to develop a theory of confederal municipalism is perhaps the clearest contemporary example of this. Those unfamiliar with Bookchin’s prodigious output would do well to begin with the works listed in the References section.

problematic in and of themselves, singly or in combination. They may also combine in various ways to create a kind of Hobbesian tyranny of inactivity, in which hold-outs prevent action of the very sort necessary to preserve either the autonomy of individual members, the cohesion of the group, or both. In this way, consensus—in some, if not most, circumstances—becomes self-defeating from a practical point of view. To the extent it does, consensus cannot be defended even as a “regulative ideal” because it is—practically speaking—self-contradictory.

In more recent years, resistance to consensus has increasingly been based on normative concerns. Some theorists resist the allure of consensus on the grounds that consensus inevitably tends to thwart individual autonomy and that individual autonomy is the higher value (Femia, 1996: 378-80). Others advance a parallel analysis, substituting “justice” for “individual autonomy.” (Acting unjustly is not pardoned simply because it resulted from a consensual decision.) Among these I would count “difference democrats” and certain post-modern theorists. But these objectors are not the most interesting, at least not in the present context, for in throwing out consensus, they tend to throw out the deliberative bath water as well.<sup>4</sup> More substantial, given our present interest in the role of consensus in deliberation, are the objections raised by deliberative democrats who stress alternative deliberative aims.

Consider the following list:

- Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin’s deliberative opinion poll is designed to replace participants’ “non-attitudes” and “pseudo-opinions” with “refined preferences” (Fishkin and Ackerman, 2004; see also Fishkin, 1991)

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<sup>4</sup> Not all do. Ethan Leib and Baogang He are two clear and present exceptions. Leib urges deliberative reform while noting in his conference paper that “The pressure to agree is absolutely fatal to making a true effort to hear the voices of the dispossessed” (Leib, 2004). An analogous concern is expressed in Dr. He’s conference paper, when he writes that “[D]emocratic procedures need to be firmly anchored in the process of genuine deliberation to avoid tyranny of majority rule” (2004: 2).

- John Dryzek argues that “discursive designs” should produce “workable agreements,” incorporate “green reason,” and allow for “contestation” (Dryzek, 2000; Dryzek, 2004)
- Baogang He parses the aim of Chinese deliberative practice as “finding maximal consensus” but also notes that “A deliberative democracy should let people make mistakes in a process of deliberation and learn lessons from them” (2004: 20, 14)
- Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that deliberative “bootstrapping” can and should produce mutual understanding and respect which, they believe, can contribute to ameliorating even deep moral schisms (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996)
- Charles Lindblom argues that “probing” should help citizens overcome “impaired thinking” (1990)
- Thomas Spragens’ grounding analogies for the role of reason in democracy are Wittgensteinian language games and post-positivist understandings of science (1990)
- Charles Anderson’s view of the “rational enterprise” requires the active participation of citizens who think alternately as trustees, critics, and entrepreneurs (1990)
- My own theory of “Socratic democracy” views deliberation as a process of challenge and response capable of promoting citizens’ normative, speculative, and empirical understanding (Gundersen, 2000a)
- David Schlosberg views “much of the literature of deliberative democracy as designs for the intersubjective banquet that both [William] James and [William] Connolly imagine” (1998: 605).

What I would like to draw attention to is not the length of this list, but the family resemblance its members bear to one another. All, it would seem, see deliberation as more than an end in itself. More to the point, all seem to agree that deliberation, rightly understood, is instrumental to *learning* or *reason* of some kind.<sup>5</sup> Finally, I think all of them would agree that consensus—or at least “precipitate” or non-deliberative consensus—is a barrier to the public deliberation, reason, and learning.

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<sup>5</sup> Political learning conduces to what in their conference papers both Baogang He and John Dryzek term “public policy performance,” though it can itself be considered inherently valuable.

## **IF's Understanding of the Goal of Deliberation**

For IF, too, deliberation's ultimate rationale is tied to its contribution to intelligent policy making. Expressive participation may be valuable, but cannot alone justify public deliberation. Deliberation should produce more than sound and fury; it should produce insight, understanding, and a greater appreciation for what is possible (and what is not). Public discussion should in the end aim to produce neither the heat that accompanies adversarial exchanges nor the cool that follows consensual agreements. It should aim, rather, to produce light.

IF's view of democratic discussion is practical, not theoretical. I mean this in three related senses.

1. We are largely unconcerned with foundational questions. Those of us who work for IF agree on the value of exploration, but have arrived at this commitment via sometimes very different paths—just as the theorists included in the previous section's bulleted list have different reasons for agreeing on the value of some form of learning.
2. Our practical orientation means we are open to change, and this applies as much to our conception of what we are trying to accomplish as to anything else. We try to “learn by doing,” and this includes continual learning about the nature and value of exploration itself.
3. As the next paragraph will explain in greater detail, our understanding of “exploration” is not abstract but operational, based on what we perceive to be the concrete failings of democratic deliberation and its contribution to policy making. This may not seem very important, but having an operational grasp of what exploration entails is what allows us to structure panel discussions in a coherent way.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It is also, we think, more useful than simply calling for “more deliberation.”

We have evolved our own operational understanding of deliberation by identifying discrete failings in the way policy discussion typically unfolds. IF's explorations are intended, in particular, to counter contemporary policy making discussion's tendency to

- focus on narrow self-interest (whether of individuals, groups, or segments of society)
- leave unchallenged the sort of prudence that leads individuals to protect themselves rather than speak their minds
- lack foresight
- lack breadth
- respond to “crises” rather than anticipate social concerns
- lack empirical knowledge
- lack theoretical grounding
- privilege instrumental over practical thinking.<sup>7</sup>

### **Contrasting Possibilities as Encouraging Learning**

The contrasts among the possibilities in the Discussion Reports generated in sanctuary are intended to serve four important and interrelated functions, all of which we believe will counter one or more of the pathologies just listed. Contrasting possibilities will, we think,

1. enhance readers' understanding of the substance of the policy possibilities themselves;
2. simultaneously discourage partisanship and encourage discussion;
3. clarify the possibilities' *limits*, which in turn acts as a spur to further criticism and the recognition and elaboration of further possibilities; and
4. aid in setting priorities—that is, making choices.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> From this list it should be clear that we believe our Discussion Process can and should *complement* rather than supplant other forms of deliberation that serve similar ends. Because we are engaged in practical work, we are at least mildly “evangelical”—but we are also ecumenical.

<sup>8</sup> By “choices,” I mean “individual choices” here, but this description applies to collective choices as well. As John Dryzek has noted, “[I]ntroducing additional dimensions can make social choices *more* tractable.

More generally, it could be said that IF believes that contrasts will promote deliberation, which in turn will promote political learning.<sup>9</sup>

## **II. The IF Discussion Process—Arriving at Contrasting Possibilities**

Many features of the IF Discussion Process are intended to contribute directly to bringing out the kind of contrasting possibilities we believe are good for democratic deliberation. Table 2 (on following page) lists the most important of these features, and indicates how each contributes to the contrasting possibilities that constitute the panels' Staff Work.

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[Deliberation] can help to uncover dimensions that were previously compressed into a single choice, thus making it more likely that responses can be crafted responsive to the various dimensions at issue" (emphasis in original; Dryzek, 2000: 73-4).

<sup>9</sup> This is far from an iconoclastic view. For parallel analyses see Dryzek, 2000: 72-3; Gundersen, 1995: 145-46; Gundersen, 2000a: 88-91; and Sunstein, 2004.



| <b>Discussion Process Feature</b>  | <b>Contribution to Contrasting Possibilities</b>  |
|--|---|
| <b>1. “Sanctuary” setting</b>  | Encourages full and open expression by guaranteeing participants’ anonymity   |
| <b>2. Requirement that Citizen Discussion Reports Contain Plural Possibilities</b> | Encourages diverse possibilities  |
| <b>3. Non-Consensual Decision Rule</b>   | Downplays individual ownership; encourages cooperation; achieves closure without excluding alternatives; allows individual possibilities to go forward with backing of single participant |
| <b>4. Selection of Participants</b>  | Participants selected for ability to contribute to creative exploration of possibilities; reinforced by use of both citizen-generalists and expert-specialists                            |
| <b>5. Focus on Governance</b>  | Breadth; public-spirited consideration of normative and conceptual rather than technical issues and specific recommendations; foresight; creativity                                       |
| <b>6. Exploratory Nature of Process</b>  | Allows inquiry to proceed in non-linear fashion; broader view of area of concern and insight into consequences of alternative policy directions   |
| <b>7. Pragmatic Use of Language</b>  | Linguistic constructions subordinated to conceptual thinking  |
| <b>8. Facilitator Guidance</b>   | Keeps panelists aware of purpose; ensures inclusive participation; keeps process moving; focus on breadth and creativity scrutiny of possibilities; ensures closure                       |

***Table 2—Features of the IF Discussion Process that Contribute to Contrasting Possibilities***

Table 2 may raise a question in many readers’ minds: How can such a structured process leave room for creativity, inquiry, and free thinking? The short answer is that structure is necessary for deliberation.<sup>10</sup> A great deal of thinking and experience has gone into the component elements of Table 2. The IF Discussion Process has evolved in the way

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<sup>10</sup> As Cass Sunstein observed not long ago, “The value of deliberation, as a social phenomenon, depends very much on social context—on the nature of the process and the nature of the participants” (2004: 124). In what follows I will be commenting on both.

it has as the result of a carefully considered series of choices about what would most directly contribute to creativity, openness, self-expression, and exploration. In other words, Table 2 identifies what, according to our accumulating experience and reflection, provides a positive context, arena, and the support for inquiry. It represents a set of (evolving) conclusions about what best promotes useful policy thinking at this stage of public deliberation.

That the contents of Table 2 stand in sharp contrast to the Habermasian stricture against discursive rules goes without saying. But that has been very conscious on our part. Unconstrained by rules or structure, spontaneous individual utterances may qualify as “democratic,” but are likely to be genuinely communicative only in special circumstances, and truly “deliberative” in only the rarest of cases. Our experience and analysis over the course of nearly eight years have convinced us that some deliberative “rules”—parameters, really—are necessary and that some work well, some not so well, and still others not at all.

Although exploration and choice are encouraged throughout the IF Discussion Process, the features listed in Table 2 were developed to avert the kind of consensus that might thwart them. In what follows, I comment briefly on each of these eight features, beginning with those easiest to capture in “formal,” procedural, or analytical terms.

### **Feature 1: “Sanctuary” Setting**

The sanctuary setting which characterize IF projects begin guarantees all participants anonymity. Participants are required to sign a confidentiality statement, in which they agree not to attribute particular statements to individual members of their panel. All records of the project, including the final Discussion Report, are thus anonymous.

Panelists have universally been willing to forego public authorship of the project because they have understood the distinctive advantages they gain in return. Immediately, and for the duration of the project, panelists are freed to speak their minds openly without fear of either psychological or material reprisal. (They are, for example, able to resist pressures to conform to the group's point of view when they believe the consensus view is mistaken.) Almost as quickly, this freedom produces deliberative gains. Aware that there is to be no public "tally" of who contributed what, competition and unproductive criticism is kept to a minimum. And confident that they won't be "betrayed," panelists rapidly begin to trust one another and interact openly, positively, and empathetically, rather than guardedly. In this way, sanctuary insulates discussion from imbalances of power.

The sanctuary setting alone would not produce contrasting possibilities. But it goes a long way toward creating a discursive space in which panelists can explore and articulate them. Sanctuary by itself does not guarantee fruitful deliberation; but it plays a crucial role in enabling it. Sanctuary frees panelists from the need to protect themselves and, in so doing, allows them to widely and deeply explore the area of concern and possible responses to it from the start of the project on. Other features of the Discussion Process encourage panelists to make full use of the deliberative opportunity provided by sanctuary.

## **Feature 2: Requirement that Citizen Discussion Reports Contain Plural Possibilities**

IF Citizen Discussion Reports must contain at least four contrasting possibilities.<sup>11</sup> By "contrasting," we mean first of all that in some hard-to-describe fashion, the contrasts between the governance possibilities that will make up the panel's Citizen Discussion

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<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, a "possibility" evokes, if it does not logically or practically entail, other "possibilities." Still, those who later discuss our Citizen Discussion Reports might be tempted to mistake a single "possibility" as equivalent to a recommendation. The same would probably be true of Reports with even three possibilities, which might still leave readers thinking that the "middle" possibility was the "right" one.

Report must be “real” contrasts—they must exhibit distinctions that make a difference. Additionally, the governance possibilities should resist being arrayed along any single conceptual axis, such as “Less to More Statist” or “Less to More Liberal.” To put it another way, because our mission is to enrich public deliberation, the aim of the sanctuary discussions is to produce Citizen Discussion Reports that represents a “field” rather than a “spectrum” of possibilities.

This procedural stricture is no guarantee of success. It doesn’t render the production of contrasting possibilities automatic. It doesn’t even make the Process any easier. In fact, it sets the bar at rather a high level. And we always reserve judgment on the results of our even our most promising projects. In that respect, it may be more accurate to call this feature of our sanctuary work a “goal” rather than a “procedural feature.” What allows us to reach it, when we do, are the other aspects of the Process that I will now discuss.

### **Feature 3: Non-Consensual Decision Rules**

The first feature of the Discussion Process that encourages panelists to actually act on the deliberative freedom provided by the sanctuary setting is that we eschew consensual decision making in favor of two alternative procedures. The first applies to both the exploration of the area of concern and the governance possibilities as a whole, and might be called “The Inclusionary Veto.” The second, which applies to the various elements that go into each of the governance possibilities, could be called “Decision by Convergence.”

Panelists begin the Discussion Process by exploring the various dimensions—moral, economic, social, political—of the area of concern. None of these is “edited out,” either by participants or by the Facilitator acting as editor. Later, responses to the area of concern in the form of governance possibilities begin to take form. Once panelists begin to develop

governance possibilities, individual governance possibilities can be dropped, but, according to the Inclusionary Veto, any *single* panelist can ensure continued consideration of a particular governance possibility for inclusion in the final Citizen Discussion Report. No governance possibility is dropped from discussion, in other words, unless all panelists agree that it would *not* contribute to public discussion of the area of concern.<sup>12</sup>

According to Decision by Convergence, direct debate is discouraged, on the one hand, while explicit decisions are deferred to allow exploration to continue, on the other. In his way, explicit decisions are delayed until incremental movement has produced not agreement, but a tentative willingness to accept a working formulation of a given conceptual or linguistic construction.<sup>13</sup> (Other “preference aggregating” mechanisms, such as voting, have played a negligible role in IF projects, though they are considered legitimate means of last resort to keeping the process moving.)

As noted above in Table 2, these procedures discourage individual ownership of individual governance possibilities, in the process encouraging cooperation. This point comes across well in the report I filed the night of my own final project meeting:

The general mood tonight was part accomplishment, part amazement. The two were clearly linked, since the amazement was rooted in a clear grasp of the interactivity responsible for [the Panelists’] accomplishment. ‘I sometimes wonder who came up with this...’ I recall one Panelist saying. Another said: ‘It’s a good thing—this document bears no individual imprints’ (Internal IF memo; June 17, 2004).

Non-consensual decision processes also work to ensure that the Process achieves closure within the time constraints agreed to by the participants *without* sacrificing

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<sup>12</sup> In theoretical terms, it might be said that this rule—like the sanctuary setting—preserves “authentic” communication by protecting individual participants from manipulation.

<sup>13</sup> This emphasis on “working formulations” is closely related to our understanding of language. See subsection 7, below. Convergence also plays at least some role in Chinese deliberative institutions. See He, 2004: 6.

contrasting alternatives in the process. All of the projects have yielded possibilities that were either preserved by single panelists or were largely the brainchild of a single panelist.

#### **Feature 4: Selection of Panelists**

In selecting participants for the panel projects that will lead to Citizen Discussion Reports, IF Fellows are careful to choose individuals we think will be thoughtful deliberators in general and good at generating contrasting possibilities in particular. But we do much more than that. We look for individuals with a variety of perspectives—based on education, training, life experience, or some mix of these. And we rely not on one set of panelists, but two. One panel is made up of “expert-specialists”—individuals selected not so much for their technical know-how as for their analytical ability. The other is made up of “citizen-generalists”—individuals selected for their capacity to think creatively and broadly. Our goal is not simple demographic diversity or “reasoned discussion” *simpliciter*, but diversity of *perspectives* and reasoning *styles*.<sup>14</sup> Only after they deliberate in isolation from each other for approximately 40-50 hours are the panels brought together to fuse their respective governance possibilities into a joint product.

Why two panels rather than one? As I have explained on another occasion,

Our expectation was that the ‘citizens’ would complement the ‘experts’ tendency to be (1) conservative (2) value-blind, and (3) bound by disciplinary and institutional setting. How? Through contributing thinking that would tend to exhibit (1) creativity (2) breadth of view, and (3) a ‘relatively dispassionate interest in promoting the public good, broadly

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<sup>14</sup> Cass Sunstein concluded a recent piece by noting that “It is desirable to create spaces for deliberating groups without insulating group members from those who have opposing views, and without insulating those outside the group from the views of those within it” (2002: 124). Our process does not guarantee “opposing views,” but it comes close. And the explicit and public nature of the resulting work products ensures that outside discussants of the resulting Reports gain insight not only into panelists’ conclusions, but into how they arrived at them, as well.

conceived.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, we expected the ‘experts’ to complement the tendency of the ‘citizens’ to be (1) overly optimistic (2) uninformed by empirical and theoretical knowledge, and (3) less than rigorous. How? By contributing knowledge, rigor, and a measure of realism (Gundersen, 2004: 8-9).

Our panelist selection process has not been without disappointments. But by and large it has produced able participants. The use of two panels has for that reason been a real success. To a significant degree, citizen-generalists have shown themselves able and cooperative participants, even when brought together with their expert-specialist counterparts:

- the separate panel structure has encouraged contrasting possibilities simply by virtue of employing two panels rather than one;
- the complementary nature of the panels has further heightened the contrasts between the possibilities generated by the panels (Gundersen, 2004); and
- the generalist panels have indeed tended to be less conventional in their thinking (Gundersen, 2004).

Getting the right panelists and the right mix of panelists and then providing them with a sanctuary setting in which each could speak freely and preserve even unpopular options while developing contrasting possibilities were crucial elements in each our projects. Each deserves a fuller description than I can give here. But I must now move on to some of the subtler ways in which the IF Discussion Process encourages contrasting possibilities.

### **Feature 5: Focus on Governance**

The actual content of IF Citizen Discussion Reports are *governance* possibilities rather than specific recommendations for government action. They focus on concepts rather than

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<sup>15</sup> *Pace* Plato, we looked for—and found—our generalists not among the philosophical elite, but among the *hoi polloi*.

facts; norms, values, and emotive orientations rather than technique; ways of thinking about the future rather than diagnosing past errors or solving current problems.

This focus on governance, as opposed to detailed questions of administration, further encourages the development of contrasting possibilities by allowing and even encouraging panelists to “think outside the box.” Thinking about possibilities can be difficult. But it frees one from the personal “givens” of class and status, temperament, upbringing, training, and experience as much as from the socio-historical “givens” of the political status quo. As one of my colleagues observed after directing a project on human biotechnology, focusing on the conceptual exploration of possibilities rather than factual description or analysis

seemed to be liberating and served to open up the discussion, especially at times when it threatened to get bogged down in disputes about how things currently work, etc. Freed from the responsibility of making recommendations (or advocating for particular ‘solutions’), the panelists seemed more open to pursuing a broader array of policy possibilities. This was another reminder that required near constant repetition, but was powerful nonetheless. (IF Internal Memo; October 8, 2004).

### **Feature 6: Exploratory Nature of the Process**

Before the sanctuary participants arrive at contrasting governance possibilities, first as separate panels and then as a joint panel, decisions are made following the processes of inclusion and convergence already described. But decisions are preceded (and, indeed, sometimes permeated) by extensive exploration. I liked to tell my panels that their first task was to “explode” the three questions with which they began the project: scrutinize what they assumed and what they left out, chart their various dimensions, and examine alternative meanings of key terms. This process multiplies the alternatives at every stage of the Discussion Process, enriching the raw material from which the governance possibilities are crafted as it does.



This same sort of wide-ranging exploration recurs once the panels begin to develop tentative answers to the now expanded set of questions they have produced and then happens a third time when they “test” the various governance possibilities for practical consequences. Only after all of this exploration is considered complete does each panel proceed to make actual decisions about what to select, what to exclude.

Exploration tends to seep into other phases of the Discussion Process as well. Very frequently, panels have declared themselves finished exploring questions, or answers, or consequences, and then decided to return to one or another aspect of these tasks. These detours are considered not only acceptable, but desirable. The Process is intended to allow for such “non-linear” discussion, for it is invariably prompted by a felt need to continue the exploratory process. And it is from exploration that new—and contrasting—territory is often discovered.

My IF colleague Jeff Prudhomme offers this helpful metaphorical clarification of this apparently paradoxical feature of the IF Discussion Process:

In German the expression ‘Holzwege’ means ‘forest paths,’ but it also suggests ‘dead ends.’ Heidegger drew out some positive indications here: a forest path might meander here and there and eventually disappear in the thick of brush, or it might lead to a clearing—where the forest would be illuminated. Sure, following those paths may lead to some “dead ends,” but it may also lead to some spectacular illumination. I think that’s a big reason for the ‘non-linearity’ of our Process—we let our panelists follow out these threads of discussion, which may seem to be dead ends (or meandering tangents) because they may lead to quite creative insights about the policy area, or about diverse policy possibilities. (IF Internal Memo; October 8, 2004)

### **Feature 7: Pragmatic Use of Language**

Unlike most philosophers, lawyers, and policy analysts, IF studiously avoids all attempts to “fix” the meaning of concepts during all but the very end stages of the Discussion Process, when a premium is put on finding the simplest and most coherent way

of communicating the panel's work to the larger public so that they can engage the Discussion Reports. Before that time, panels are encouraged to avoid disputes over the meaning of terms and multiple words are used for important concepts.

The resulting linguistic ambiguity is valuable for two reasons. The first is that strict definitions very often take on a life of their own. When symbols displace reality, it becomes tempting to alter the relationship between the symbols rather than the concepts or the reality they were created to describe (and/or change). Second, linguistic ambiguity may serve clarity, but it is no boon to further conceptual openness and exploration. Rigidifying content in language necessarily means including something(s) to the exclusion of others. It tends to foreclose inquiry.

Our goal, both during discussions and later, when Facilitators render the panels' work products in formal language, is to use language to "describe, not define." The distinction may not seem very weighty from a practical point of view, but sticking to it has yielded important positive results. One project leader describes them this way:

This distinction has proven to be quite powerful—whether it has been spelled out in these precise terms or not. There were times when panelists would begin to argue about the precise sense of terms or about the 'definitive' way of seeing something. At those points I'd tell (or remind) them that they might think of their task more in terms of offering *a description* (i.e., one among many possible) rather than *the definitive account* (i.e., the one and only, the authoritative or conclusive account). This really seemed to free them up at those points in the discussion; where things had been getting contentious and closing down, now they opened up again (IF Internal Memo; October 8, 2004).

### **Feature 8: Facilitator Guidance**

As the previous quotation indicates, panelists do not instinctively tolerate ambiguity. They need help in overcoming their resistance to it. There the Facilitator has an important

role to play.<sup>16</sup> But it is only one of numerous ways in which IF project directors help panelists move creatively and developmentally toward contrasting governance possibilities.

As project organizer, meeting facilitator, and editor, IF project directors make indispensable contributions to all of the features of the Discussion Process already discussed. Project directors

- select panelists based on both individual suitability and fit with other panelists
- arrange for a suitable sanctuary meeting place and confidentiality agreements
- help panelists develop truly contrasting alternative governance possibilities by reminding them of the project's purpose and staying alert to emerging contrasts
- encourage (and enforce, on the rare occasion it becomes necessary), convergence and the use of the Inclusionary Veto
- stimulate exploration by asking probing questions and providing ample time for discussion
- in their facilitation role, remind panelists that agreement on appropriate language can wait until the latter stages of the Process and in their editorial role preserve various descriptions of important concepts in project work documents
- keep panelists focused on governance.

The last item on the list is worth singling out. Focusing on governance facilitates the development of contrasting policy possibilities. But governance is also what the IF Discussion Process is about—not detailed administration or legislation. Hence it is doubly important for Facilitators to keep their panels from getting distracted by technical details or arguments about the successes and failures of current policy. This isn't always easy. A

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<sup>16</sup> To practitioners in fields as diverse as social work and business consulting, this will come as no great revelation. Political theorists are gradually beginning to take up the issue of "democratic facilitation" as well. One who has made a good start, based on John Dewey's work, is Frank Fischer (2004). IF has developed several practical "Facilitation Guidebooks" based on our experience.

colleague's characterization of this process applies equally well to all of IF's other projects.

Keeping panelists focuses on governance, he noted,

required repeated repetition, but proved to be quite effective (again not always stated in these exact words). Both panels would tend [...] to focus on the way things currently function, on current policy. When that happened, I'd ask them to try to generalize from those specific examples, to try to unearth the underlying fundamental issues, etc. I'd also remind them that part of our mission was to re-think the whole policy area—not simply to tinker with current arrangements. [I]t [also] helped to remind the panelists that our goal was not to come up *the right answer(s)*. Freed from the responsibility of making recommendations (or advocating for particular 'solutions'), the panelists seemed more open to pursuing a broader array of policy possibilities. This was another case of something that required near constant repetition, but was powerful nonetheless (IF Internal Memo; October 8, 2004).

Project directors also contribute in other at least two other ways to the panels' ability to develop contrasting governance possibilities. First, editing panelists' work documents provides an opportunity to inject coherence into a process that can otherwise lose focus and begin to meander. The purpose of the IF Discussion Process is to produce useful Reports for public discussion, not to conduct panel discussions for discussion's sake. Second, project directors, both as facilitators and as editors, help panels clarify and elaborate concepts.

As "interventionary" as all of this sounds, project leaders' principal responsibilities are still to capture and further their *panels'* work. The project director is, as I used to tell my panels, "captain of a democratic ship." At least five features of the Discussion Process ensure that IF Facilitators steer each panel's ship according to the panel's judgment rather than their own

- Areas of concern are generally selected on which facilitators have no clear "position" of their own; indeed, many areas of concern are deemed attractive candidates for IF projects precisely because even the questions they raise are unclear at the outset of the project

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### ***Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process***

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- Prospective panelists explicitly agree to the goals of the IF Discussion Process and reaffirm them repeatedly over the course of the project
- Panelists' first task is to explore—and thus reconfigure as they see fit—the very questions the facilitator chooses as starting points for discussion
- Panelists review and amend the facilitator's editorial contributions to their work products after every meeting, a process that has tended to become more active as projects progress
- IF supervisors monitor all projects to ensure that the panels' work is not contaminated by facilitator bias

Evidence that these safeguards have been effective comes in two forms. First, copious face-to-face and anonymous written feedback has shown that panelists have found IF Fellows' facilitation useful—useful, that is, in achieving the goals that panelists themselves agreed to pursue during the project.<sup>17</sup> Second, although the final editing of the Citizen Discussion Reports is in the hands of the project manager and is subject to review by IF, Citizen Discussion Reports have in practice been little unchanged from the documents that receive final joint panel approval.

### **III. Results from Eight IF Projects: Intelligence, Autonomy, and Unity**

The IF Discussion Process has now been used in eight different projects, representing some 600-800 hours of deliberation. The results in terms of producing contrasting possibilities have been quite encouraging—remarkable in some cases. What may be even more remarkable is that these results, which we hope will contribute to the intelligence of policy discourse more generally, did not require the sacrifice of those gains that are purportedly the exclusive residue of consensual processes—autonomy and unity. On the

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<sup>17</sup> As my last working session concluded, one of my panelists rose to put on his coat and declared: "We did it!" When I agreed, he replied: "No, *we* did—not you!"

contrary, along with successfully producing the intended contrasting governance possibilities, the IF Process has empowered participants individually and created strong group bonds.

### **Political Intelligence**

How contrasting are the possibilities that result from the IF Discussion Process and to what extent do they really represent a gain in political “intelligence”? For the reasons I gave in Section I., that would be hard, if not impossible, to answer in any absolute terms. But I do have an answer for it—actually five answers. Each answer originates from a different set of observers: the participants themselves; the project leaders and our supervisors; and two external groups—policy makers and citizens who have actually used an IF Citizen Discussion Reports for purposes of public discussion. There are minor differences among the perspectives each group offers. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that public discussions of our Citizen Discussion Reports are still in their early phase. But although it is too early to draw firm conclusions, all indicators are that we are succeeding in producing Citizen Discussion Reports that are useful springboards for public deliberation, and that they are useful largely because of the contrasting nature of the governance possibilities they describe.

***Project Participants’ Perspective.*** Almost without exception, participants on our panels have indicated satisfaction with their collective efforts. An early internal document summarized this open-ended feedback this way:

The overwhelming response (to date) of panelists, when asked about the usefulness of the experience to them, was that they valued the opportunity to work with other knowledgeable, concerned citizens to explore public policy possibilities. They especially valued the opportunity to explore issues in a

relaxed, non-threatening manner. Virtually every responding panelist made comments to this effect (Internal IF memo; October 7, 2004).

This sort of feedback has continued. Many panelists have gone on to serve on other project panels and recommend them to others. More to the immediate point here, numerous panelists have indicated that IF projects had proved personally valuable because they had provided an opportunity for learning how to develop ideas that were, in one panelist's formulation, "greater in depth, scope, originality and creativity than the sum of the individuals' thoughts" (Internal IF memo; October 7, 2004).

Another significant series of indications of panelists' satisfaction, or pride, in the product of their deliberative labors has been the wide and very intense interest in the end result of their efforts: a mixture of curiosity about how the final Discussion Report will be used; desire that it be discussed widely; and hope that such discussions will have a tangible impact on policy.

***Project Facilitators' Observations.*** There is universal agreement among current IF Fellows that our projects have yielded products that look good, and that they look good in large measure because of the contrasting nature of the possibilities they contain. No more than half way into our first round of projects, I could say that our panelists were

doing a good job at countering the usual pathologies of public discourse... That is, the policy possibilities they've devised seem to be practically nuanced (in the Aristotelian sense), conceptually well developed, broad in both scope and understanding of the public interest, and, perhaps most important, innovative, as well. [...] Some are interesting variations on old themes. Others are well reasoned and articulated versions of notions that are usually left implicit or unexamined in public dialogue. But each set of alternatives contains a ringer or two. **Even more than the ringers themselves, it is the combination of contrasting alternatives that we expect will spur the public's thinking.** Even in their embryonic form, then, the alternative possibilities under development by our panels encourage one to think of a new world—by thinking first of a new solar system (emphasis added; Gundersen, 2003; 17).

That our panel discussions were headed in the right direction became rapidly and abundantly clear in my own project on “Health Care: The Case of Depression.” Before joining IF, I had been researching a book on the project topic nearly full time for about a year and a half. As a result, I considered myself something of an expert on the topic. My goal in the book had not been very different from what I was asking my panels to do: explore depression as a socio-political rather than a purely medical phenomenon and develop innovative responses to it. It took only eight three-hour sessions for my citizen-generalist panel to far surpass my own thinking, despite lacking my policy and theory background and the work I had put into this particular subject. Attempting to capture my surprise and delight as I contemplated their progress, I wrote:

I am quite pleased with where things stand right now, primarily because of the innovativeness of the Generalists’ five Governance Possibilities.

- Only one of the current Possibilities focuses on the formal health care system (2. Enhance Efficiency and Justice). But that Possibility is less ‘mainstream’ than appears at first glance because it rejects the usual view that efficiency and equity are antithetical.
- Another Possibility emphasizes individualized care (1. Focus on Individuals), an idea that is currently gaining ground in the delivery system. But its emphasis on supporting individual responsibility is an important new twist, I think.
- I had personally anticipated the Possibility that focuses on individuals’ immediate social environments in my own research and writing on depression. But that Possibility (1. Nurture a Responsive Social Environment) goes much further than anything I’d come up with, and takes on added punch through the contrast created by the other four Possibilities.
- The remaining two Possibilities focus on civic engagement (4. Promote Social Interaction and Democracy) and economic factors (5. Support a Vibrant Middle Class). Neither qualifies as something entirely ‘new under the sun.’ But both took me very much by surprise. They are conceptually tight and strike me as far fresher and more sophisticated than anything I’ve come across in my own reading so far.



The book on depression that I was working on as I joined IF was going to be an attempt to correct what I saw as the overly individual approach our society has taken to this area of concern. But this Panel has gone beyond anything I'd thought of in terms of a response based on 'significant others,' added an entirely new way of thinking about what a social response might mean (community rather than significant others), developed an economic perspective, and rethought just what an individual response might mean. All that, and a national health care system, too.

Count me one 'public intellectual' who's learned first hand the value of working directly with the public's intellect (Internal IF memo, July 17, 2003).

This judgment has since been confirmed by both my own and my colleagues' experience. All of us had high expectations going into the projects. But they have generally been exceeded. The emerging work products of IF's current projects *have* produced contrasting possibilities, in that they all

- are conceptually rich
- display a wide range of normative options—and of their consequences to people in all walks of life
- contain at least one (and usually more than one) innovative, even inventive responses to their respective areas of concern.

***Project Supervisors' Evaluations.*** The adjective "interactivity" in IF's name applies as much to our internal processes as to our mission and the manner in which we pursue it. Several supervisors guide Fellows' projects, monitoring progress and discussing suggestions as they do. Their views provide a third perspective on the panelists' developing work products.

Although it is important to note that our supervisors generally have been satisfied with the degree of contrast they see in the panelists' governance possibilities, two more specific observations are relevant here as well because they add nuance to what has already been

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***Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process***

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noted—nuance that might have been lost on those of us who are immersed in daily project work. Project supervisors have over time noted that (1) the expert-specialists have in general tended to move away from disciplinary and professional formulae, and that (2) the citizen-generalists increasingly belied the stereotype of partisan bickering as the sanctuary process unfolded. These observations confirm our expectations about the positive deliberative effects of the IF Discussion Process on participants' ability to interactive cooperatively and creatively.

***Expert Evaluations of IF Staff Work.*** Expert commentary on our work has so far been limited, but also quite positive. Only eight Citizen Discussion Reports have been completed, and they have had only limited distribution. But more than a few bond fide experts, both academic and practitioner, have judged these documents insightful, stimulating, and provocative. Additional strong interest in IF Citizen Discussion Reports was expressed by scores of prospective expert panelists who declined to participate in the four current projects due to time constraints. There has, finally, been significant international interest in the Foundation's work. A Latin American group of scholars and foundations has hosted an IF Fellow for a series of discussions. And IF Fellows have participated in academic and policy conferences in China, the UK, and continental Europe.

***Citizens' Use of IF Staff Work.*** The most significant indicator of the value of the IF Process has come in actual small group citizen discussions. Public discussion of our Citizen Discussion Reports began in earnest some two years ago and are now ongoing in several parts of the country. About 50 have been held to date. We have only just begun to accumulate systematic data on the discussions. Nevertheless, the feedback we have

already collected from participants and facilitators strongly suggests that the discussions are functioning well as a means of both stimulating and enriching further discussion. Participants in the public meetings have reacted positively to our Citizen Discussion Reports, essentially recommending their further use, and have themselves been able to use them as a springboard to advance the panels' discussion. Without exception, the Reports have not only encouraged discussion, but enabled participants to pick up where panelists had left off rather than being forced to reinvent a series of conceptual wheels, as well.

Perhaps the most telling testimony as to the value of IF public discussions has been behavioral: participants not infrequently sign up for subsequent discussion series on other IF Reports or volunteer for the more time-consuming job of sanctuary panelist.

***Summary of Observations on Contrasts.*** To sum up, although the focus may vary, the general picture that emerges from the various perspectives just described is quite consistent: all five perspectives agree that IF Citizen Discussion Reports serve as productive catalysts for public discussion due to the contrasting nature of the possibilities they contain.

Panelists in each project have developed at least four alternative governance possibilities.<sup>18</sup> Most contrast with conventional policy thinking—even where that rises from the level of policy specifics to what we call “governance. And each set of alternatives contains a surprise or two. But, to repeat, more than the mildly innovative nature of the

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the governance possibilities reported out of my panels' sanctuary discussions were these:

- Universalize Coverage, Individualize Care
- Universalize Coverage, Enhance Client Participation
- Support the Supporters
- Stimulate Social Interaction and Provide Community Support
- Meet Basic Human Needs
- Accelerate Research and Development

run of IF governance possibilities or the occasional surprise, it is the *combination* of contrasting alternatives that has tended to spur the public's thinking.

Taken together, these sets of observations repeatedly and solidly confirm our expectations. They confirm our expectations repeatedly in the sense that they are drawn from five different sets of observers. They confirm our expectations solidly in the sense that they are based on eight different projects involving upwards of 600 hours of discussion among about a hundred panelists on the one hand and 50 public discussions totaling some 300 hours of discussion among about 300 individuals on the other. That's a fair amount of data and inter-coder reliability.

At this point I want to turn to the not inconsiderable secondary effects of the IF Discussion Process—secondary, that is, to our principal aim of enriching public discussion by producing contrasting governance possibilities. IF panels are in the business of generating and facilitating public discussion. They make no decisions; they are not vehicles for “will formation.” Consequently, these secondary benefits are not identical to those long claimed on behalf of consensus. But they are similar in kind—and have the distinct advantage of being quite real. The IF Discussion Process does not aim to produce even a deliberative version of the *volonté générale*. However, by according panelists a due measure of *égalité*, it contributes powerfully to their felt sense of *liberté* and *fraternité*—or what I will refer to more prosaically as “individual empowerment” and “group cohesion.”

### **Individual Empowerment**

The IF Discussion Process yields precisely the kind of personal growth traditionally advertised by participatory democrats. Participants in all four projects have been nearly

unanimous in their enthusiasm for their work. The explanations they offer for their enthusiasm are nearly as unanimous. As already noted, panelists have found the opportunity to deliberate in a sanctuary setting personally enriching. Panelists have been given a chance to speak their minds, yes. But more than that, they've had a chance to explore ideas in a respectful atmosphere. And with that has come deepened understanding, enriched perspective, and a heightened sense of their ability to contribute to public deliberation. All of that adds up to individual empowerment—sometimes lots of it.

These gains are well earned. Indeed, earning and empowerment are linked here as much as they are in other realms. There is, in other words, a kind of deliberative labor theory of value at work here. Deliberative work confers value on the process in the participants' eyes, even apart from its products. Meetings generally end with panelists fatigued, but satisfied. Some of the satisfaction is the result of progress toward addressing the social concern at hand. Mostly though, it has to do with what panelists derive from the process as individuals—not as contributors to the public weal.

There are two lessons in this: one fairly obvious, the other subtler and potentially far more profound. The obvious lesson is that deliberative democrats should not lose sight of the intrinsic value deliberation can confer on participants as they contribute to public intelligence. But the subtler and potentially far more profound lesson is that *the intrinsic value individuals find in public deliberation can serve its "instrumental function"—promoting intelligent public policy.* Participatory democrats have been both right and very wrong on this point, it seems. The value of public discussion to IF's "participants" has been immense. But this value has accrued to them as individuals, not as citizens speaking "in public."

Given the long-standing terms of debate in democratic theory it may sound paradoxical, but our panelists can accurately be described as “liberal” participatory democrats.<sup>19</sup>

A telling indicator of deliberation’s transformative power in this regard came, ironically, in the context of my own expert-specialist panel, one of whose members had felt none too special as the project began. By project’s end, however, she was saying that

This has been incredible. . . . a transformative experience. I doubted I was in these people’s class, because they were all so well educated. Like F.—she is a really ‘big wheel.’ But now I find myself being able to communicate with them. Everyone is learning that they have their own expertise. W. is not shy anymore. Things come out of my mouth that I can’t believe.

It is worth repeating in this context that these spontaneous comments have been repeatedly validated on other occasions. In joint panel meetings, members of the “citizen-generalist” panels have had no difficulty “standing up” to members of the “expert-specialist” panels. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that a genuine spirit of discursive equality has pervaded joint panel meetings. When asked to address this question in writing, there has widespread agreement among panelists in both sets of panelists that the interactivity with their peers had been supportive and constructive and that the opportunity to explore the area of concern and possible responses to it had been intellectually stimulating and led to considerable learning. It appears that the successful use of the IF Process breeds deliberative confidence.

### **Group Cohesion**

Individual panels have bonded rapidly; the separate panels, while initially showing some signs of “friendly competition” while still in isolation from each other, have without

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<sup>19</sup> Something very like this apparent paradox surfaces in Dr. He’s discussion, as well: “Deliberative institutions enhance community cohesion, empower citizens to participate in political processes, and help them to develop democratic skills and disposition” (2004: 13).

exception come together almost seamlessly and worked cooperatively from their first joint session on.

The latter development took us somewhat by surprise. We had been concerned that the citizen-generalists might be either overly deferential to the expert-specialists or defensive regarding their own work products. We had also been concerned that the expert-specialists might use their standing as “experts” to attempt to preempt their counterparts.

But experience has put the lie to these concerns. Perhaps because the citizen-generalists had ample time to develop a sense of deliberative confidence and/or because the expert-generalists had ample time to develop a sense of deliberative humility *before* the separate panels came together, the joint panel sessions have generally followed the pattern of the separate panels—except that familiarity with the Process has accelerated the process of developing group rapport and trust. There has been essentially *no* effort on the part of *any* of our expert-specialists to exclude any of our citizen-generalists from the joint panel process *nor* a willingness on the part of any of our citizen-generalists to acquiesce to the expert-specialists. In my own project, expert-specialist panelists even went so far as to radically alter their approach to one of the key themes of their work after nearly a year and a half’s work *in direct response to what they saw as the superior reasoning of the citizen-generalist panel*. More telling still, at least two panelists from my own expert-specialist group went out of the way during the joint panel sessions not simply to welcome the citizen-generalists’ input, but to offer an *explanation* as to why it was so valuable, pointing out that professional policy analysts need to have their conclusions and speculations checked by the people they are intended to benefit.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Neo-Aristotelians reading this will be happy to learn that this sort of caterer is still in business.

My last sanctuary panel meeting ended with embraces all around—and plans for a six month reunion (IF Internal Memo, September 24, 2004;).<sup>21</sup>

#### **IV. Possible Chinese Uses of the IF Discussion Practice**

If our work is about anything, it is about the value of contrasting possibilities. I offer the ideas presented in this paper in that spirit. They represent one possible way of approaching deliberation—not a recommendation, much less a blueprint or design. Still, it's worth asking to what extent IF's Discussion Process might represent an attractive possibility for Chinese researchers, citizens, and policy makers intent on injecting democratic discussion into Chinese policy making.

I admit that despite having learned a great deal at the conference, I am hampered by no small ignorance about Chinese politics, culture, and institutions. But I will hazard a tentative assessment.

In thinking about the potential usefulness of the IF Discussion Process in China, I am struck most by its reliability, adaptability, and availability.

- The IF Discussion Process is *reliable*. It has been well tested—admittedly in a country that differs in many ways from China.
- The IF Discussion Process is *available* (at minimal financial cost) to interested parties willing to invest the time and energy to learn how to use it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> On the rationale for, selection of, and interaction between the citizen-generalist and expert-specialist panels, see Gundersen, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Dissemination of the Discussion Process will always be constrained by our organization's non-profit status and our resource base. But we anticipate that availability will grow over time as we accumulate explanatory documents that provide instruction and guidance on how the Discussion Process is put to best use. For access to an updated catalogue, consult our website: [www.interactivityfoundation.org](http://www.interactivityfoundation.org).



- The IF Discussion Process is *adaptable* to a wide variety of
  - locations
  - subject matters
  - groups
  - levels of decision making.

The adaptability of the IF Discussion Process invites a number of further comments:

- The IF Process excludes no content on formal grounds. It makes due allowance for interests, preferences, principles, concepts, consequences *and* emotions and thus may especially relevant in a culture in which *Kentan* regularly involves “emotional expressions” (He, 2004: 7).
- By providing individual participants with a sanctuary environment and ensuring that their voices are not only heard but also represented in the panels’ work product, the IF Discussion Process may help ameliorate Chinese culture’s tendency to blunt or silence productive disagreement (He, 2004: 15).
- Though ultimately aimed at stimulating and enriching public dialogue, the IF Discussion Process explicitly integrates the perspective of “expert-specialists” and “citizen-generalists” and so might—like Professor Bell’s notion of a bi-cameral legislature (2004)—be viewed as *a way of fusing traditional “Confucian” concerns and more recent “popular” trends in Chinese politics.*
- The IF Discussion Process yields products—in the form of contrasting governance possibilities—which might later be used as *starting points for other consensual processes* aimed at actual decision making (such as work places, neighborhoods, or village governments).
- Because it is directed primarily at political learning, the IF Discussion Process may be as useful in enriching Chinese *political culture* and/or processes of *opinion formation* as it is valuable in enhancing Chinese political institutions.

At the same time, the IF Discussion Process is not infinitely adaptable. There are limits on what it can be expected to achieve.

- The IF Discussion Process is not a problem solving tool. On the contrary, its focus is, as I have said, on governance, or what might be called “anticipatory

policy making,” not on dealing with current or pressing concerns, much less making authoritative decisions about them. Hence if employed directly rather than as a precursor to other forms of deliberation, it will probably be far better suited to China’s consultative meetings than to evaluative meetings, on the one hand, and village and urban assemblies, on the other.

- In putting a premium on plural possibilities, our process can be counted on to enhance innovation—but won’t be much help in maintaining social order, at least not in the short term.

## **Conclusion and a Caveat**

Having taken Aristotle’s metaphor quite literally, IF has so far produced what might legitimately be called a “feast” of policy possibilities. I have offered five different sets of observations that confirm that the offerings have been satisfying and that they have been satisfying precisely because of the variety of the contributions “guests” have made to it.<sup>23</sup>

I want to close by underlining the caveat with which I ended Section I, namely: IF’s wholehearted rejection of consensus does not extend beyond the first, sanctuary, phase of our panels’ work.

As we take our sanctuary Citizen Discussion Reports to the wider public, we are open to situations in which democratic discussion can further develop their content. Our aim is to encourage deliberation, not substitute for it, and so our focus will remain on citizens, not policy makers.<sup>24</sup> Ours will be a grass-roots effort because we believe, with Dr. He, that “To improve the quality of deliberation one must rely on the participation of ordinary citizens, their associations and civil society in the bottom-up process (Baogang He, 1997)” (2004: 19).

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<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, we expect that those who sample it will expect, be encouraged to discuss which was the “best” dish—or whether this or that dish was better left out or included.

<sup>24</sup> In his conference paper, John Uhr (2004) provides an analysis of statist barriers to deliberation in Australia. Although he emphasizes Australia’s uniqueness, I was impressed by how many of these same barriers exist in the United States. More generally, our view is that actual decision making tends to be anything but deliberative—in the ways and for the reasons explained in Section I.

Although consensual processes do not necessarily subvert this aim, they do tend to make it more difficult to achieve. The urge to arrive at consensus inhibits exploration; the need to arrive at consensus places severe limits on exploration; arriving at consensus positively ends exploration (Gundersen, 2000b). However, inhibited or limited exploration may be the best that can be hoped for in certain circumstances. In others, particularly small decision making on a small scale, consensus may be the most appropriate decision making rule. But such circumstances are likely to present themselves less frequently than the advocates of consensus might hope. And we plan to judge circumstances as they arise.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, we expect to find many opportunities for non-consensual public discussion of our Citizen Discussion Reports. Because we believe that consensus is too stern a taskmaster to spawn the creativity we believe is indispensable to the democratic process, we will generally look to non-consensual processes first in our ongoing efforts to contribute to political learning.

### **Postscript: Possible Conference Contributions to the IF Discussion Process**

My Foundation is now hard at work carrying forward public discussions of its Discussion Reports. But continue to actively reflect on how this might best be accomplished. This conference has greatly multiplied the options before us.

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<sup>25</sup> “[T]he larger the scale at which an issue arises, the harder it is to introduce discursive designs to resolve the issue (Femia, 1996, pp. 392-3). It therefore comes as no surprise that decentralization is implicit in many calls for deliberative democracy, explicit in others, as it is in Nino, 1996: Chapter 6, and Dr. He’s conference paper (2004: 13).

The conference papers describe a rich variety of deliberative forums and formats, including

- “sub-national government” (Dryzek, 2004)
- “a variety of organizations (social and economic as well as political)” (Dryzek, 2004)
- “networks that cut across different governmental units” (Dryzek, 2004)
- “the international system” (Dryzek, 2004)
- “political association and interaction oriented to public affairs, but whose actors do not seek a formal share of state authority” (Dryzek, 2004)
- the “roles the state might play in underwriting, enhancing, and enabling post-statist forms of democracy” (Warren, 2004)
- “deliberative opinion polls” (Fishkin, 2004)
- “common practice,” “transformative,” and “reasoned justice” groups (Rosenberg, 2004)
- popular deliberative juries (Leib, 2004)
- popular constitutional challenges (Uhr, 2004)
- a “precinct system”(Zwart, 2004)
- village self-government, especially where employing a “charter or assembly to fight money or power influence” (Qingshan, 2004)
- consultative meetings (He, 2004)
- citizen evaluation meetings (He, 2004)
- residential or village representative assemblies (He, 2004)
- a bi-cameral legislature with a deliberative upper house (Bell, 2004).

This is an intriguing, exciting—and lengthy—list.<sup>26</sup> And therein lies our problem. We are a practical organization that must make choices. Our challenge now will be to answer the following question: How might we at IF, or others in similar circumstances, go about sorting through and acting on an expanding menu of deliberative choices like that on offer here?

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<sup>26</sup> Our own list of specific possibilities for public discussion numbers in the dozens.

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