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Standards Committees: Just an Interesting Idea, or Are There Wider Lessons We Can Learn?

In their article “Localism in Practice: Investigating Citizen Participation and Good Governance in Local Government Standards of Conduct,” Alan Lawton and Michael Macaulay offer us an interesting look into what was a unique approach to promoting good governance and good behavior among local elected members. Introduced by New Labour, the requirement to adopt codes of conduct and establish standards committees was an interesting approach to building better engagement with citizens and trust in democratic processes. The committees were composed of elected politicians, appointed officials, and independent members drawn from the wider community, whose role was, at best, part time.

In the years that the standing committees operated, it is clear that a substantial amount of policy learning took place. Well-established committees interpreted their role as being concerned with the promotion of local participation and the enhancement of good governance, and some branched out in a range of directions. The authors’ methodology, which uses case studies on the basis of the degree to which committees extended their focus beyond the statutory minimum, is helpful, as it assists us in understanding the potential scope of their activities and the possibility of innovation.

The article accurately notes the opportunity of committees to provide a path for citizen participation, albeit coalescing around their overall purpose to enhance governance and improve behavior. Given the opportunity for participation created by the committees, a key part of the research is to examine and assess the transformative nature of the experience on the independent members. The authors suggest, in terms of Bang’s model of “everyday makers” and “expert citizens,” that it might be more accurate to describe experienced committee members as having become “everyday makers.”

This writer was surprised by the broad interpretation the case study committees took toward their brief. In comparison to the “ethics” regime within New Zealand local government, the case study committees took an active interest in topics such as the recruitment and retention of staff, training and development of elected members, engagement with schools, and relationships with local and parish councils.
These are all very important topics, but they raise questions about where local policy agendas and priorities should be set. Where, for example, should policy on engagement belong? Are standards committees ensuring that their councils act consistently with legitimately established policies or actually setting the policy agenda themselves? Which organization, for example, should determine the relative weight given to representative or participatory democracy, and should we regard this as a local policy choice, or should it be set by the local government framework itself? Should there be a distinction between the committees’ role in ensuring ethical governance and managing complaints about councillor behavior and their promotion of good practice? One assumes that the latter will also be a focus of the local authority as a whole.

Viewed from a non-British perspective, the standards committees appear to have been given a broad mandate that would not always fit comfortably with the expectations of elected councillors, with Lawton and Macaulay noting that local politicians did not always like it. However, the rationale for an independent body to consider complaints and make suggestions on how governance practice may be improved has attraction. The New Zealand framework, for example, requires councils to establish their own committees, normally made up of councillors themselves, to consider complaints made under their codes of conduct. This clearly raises questions of objectivity and transparency, and in response, a number of councils have established independent committees to consider complaints.

The legislative regime that forms the basis of the study represents a particular historical period that, as the authors note, has now been superseded as a result of the Localism Act 2011. The Localism Act has replaced the standards committees with professional advisors to oversee the conduct and integrity of elected members and the adoption of voluntary codes of conduct, although some councils have maintained their committees. It is rather ironic that the authors conclude that the former standards committees, with the opportunity for direct citizen participation, should be seen as localism in practice.

To this writer, the important contribution of the article may have less to do with the success or otherwise of standards committees, which are creatures of their time, than with the way in which it documents the impact of participation. The experience of the standards committees provides an insight into what can happen when ordinary citizens are given the opportunity to act as subjects, not just objects, in the political process. In other words, participation does matter.