

Making Ends Meet: A National Conversation on Spreading Wealth and Opportunity

BY MICHAEL MCGRATH

In the summer and early fall of 2009, while both houses of Congress were in recess, senators and representatives across the land held town hall meetings to discuss the highly contentious issue of health insurance reform.

It would be an understatement to say that some of these meetings ended badly. Snippets of angry confrontations appeared on TV news shows and YouTube, casting neither side of the debate over health insurance reform in a particularly favorable light. There were angry protests, shouting matches, shoving contests, fistfights, hospitalizations, and arrests.

But some town hall meetings were more substantive and civil than others. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, Senator Jeff Bingaman asked the nonprofit, nonpartisan group New Mexico First to organize a town hall meeting on health insurance reform. In this meeting, participants were provided background reports on the issue to be discussed, asked to break into small groups to discuss the issues, and given an opportunity to present the senator with recommendations and questions.

New Mexico First was founded by Bingaman, a Democrat, and former Senator Pete Domenici, a Republican, to bring together people from all walks of life to identify practical solutions to statewide challenges. Since 1986, they have assumed the role of neutral convener of deliberative discussions on important topics.

The process is usually the same: develop background materials; invite participants and provide them with the backgrounders; hold small group meetings and come to consensus on recommendations in large group sessions. An implementation committee is formed to work with policymakers in the governor's office and the state legislature to turn

the ideas developed in the town hall meetings into laws and rules.

The National Issues Forums (NIF) are a network of organizations not unlike New Mexico First that brings together citizens to talk about the most pressing social and political issues of the day. This year the NIF network will be hosting a series of forums called "Making Ends Meet: How Can We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity."

These conversations are being held in libraries, community centers, churches, schools, universities, and other locations across the country. On May 5, 2016, the Kettering Foundation will organize a program called "A Public Voice" at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, to report the results of these conversations to public officials.

"Officeholders need to know not just what people want, but what they are willing to live with, since there are no perfect solutions," writes Kettering Foundation President David Mathews in a message to the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. "Which of all the things people care deeply about are really most valuable in a given circumstance? What would people give up, however reluctantly? And who do citizens think should be responsible for doing what needs to be done? Only the government? Are there some things that citizens must do for themselves?"

What the organizers of these dialogues and meetings have discovered is that when citizens are given the chance to have a deliberative, informed discussions of the real world trade-offs associated with various policy alternatives, ordinary citizens are capable of surprising levels of nuance and flexibility, even on controversial issues such as social security and health care reform. This may be news to public officials who get most of their information about

public opinion from top-of-the-mind polls or the news media.

The origins of NIF and Kettering's A Public Voice program go back to 1981 when the leaders of a group known as the Domestic Policy Association were looking for ways to engage citizens more directly in the public policy process. The idea was to hold a series of dialogues where important issues could be discussed by people with a variety of views and policy preferences.

Two years later, two former presidents, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, co-chaired a meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where citizens informed policymakers about the outcome of the forums that had been held. The Kettering Foundation began to hold a series of meetings known as Washington Week in 1998 to report on the forums to officials at the White House and on Capitol Hill.

In the 1980s and 1990s, these groups began organizing nationally televised events hosted by the likes of NPR's Linda Wertheimer and CNN's Frank Sesno. In 1991, A Public Voice, an hour-long public affairs program, was videotaped at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, and televised on public broadcasting and cable stations. By 2007, the programs were being broadcast by 300 public television stations across the country.

"The program was seen as the central thrust in the [Kettering] foundation's campaign to bring a new sense of politics to the consideration of the nation's political and media leadership," wrote Bob Daley in a 2015 article in Kettering's annual newsletter, *Connections*. "The video had a single purpose: to show that there is something we can call 'a public voice' on complex and troubling policy matters. And this public voice is significantly different from the debate on these issues as it is recorded in the media and significantly different from the debate 'as we hear it through the mouths of political leaders.'" (p. 37)

Considering the current tenor of political discussion these days, it is a lesson that bears repeating over and over. Too often, political leaders try to use issues as a wedge to divide the voters—hopefully, in a manner that serves their partisan interests—rather

than attempting to move from dialogue to consensus and then to action. In his article, Daley cites the example of the 1991 NIF conversations on abortion. As the discussions went on, people became less tied to their original hardline positions on the issue. "Public deliberation, we learned, was possible even with the most divisive issues," wrote Daley.

One key to the success of the forums is the compiling and distribution of detailed "issue guides." The *Making Ends Meet* issue guide begins with a description of the deliberative process and lays out the ground rules for the forums:

- Focus on the options.
- All options should be considered fairly.
- No one or two individuals dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- Listen to each other. (p. ii)

The guide includes a background summary on the issue, noting the declining numbers of the American middle class, the high levels of unemployment, and the large disparities of wealth between the Whites and African-Americans. For many Americans, the author notes, the recovery from the recent recession seems remote or even nonexistent.

Next, the guide lays out three potential options. Option 1 would be to focus on giving people the tools to start new enterprises to improve their circumstances. Option 2 would be to strengthen the existing social safety net for those in need. The final option would be to find ways of reducing the wealth gap between the very rich and everyone else, making it easier for more Americans to get into the middle class.

The guide suggests specific proposals or action steps in achieving the three optional approaches. The guide also lists the trade-offs and potential downsides to the various policy proposals. For instance, reducing taxes to achieve greater job growth (Option 1) might reduce revenues for programs to assist the poor. Or mandating high wages (Option 2) might inhibit job growth. Finally, the guide poses questions to give participants more personal and concrete ideas about how these proposals and trade-offs might affect their lives.

The guides will be used by the various forum organizers to brief the participants and provide much needed context for more fruitful discussions. The results of the forums will be recorded, summarized, and presented at the May 5 Event at the National Press Club, which will be broadcast and streamed to meeting sites across the country. The hope is that the various stakeholders in public life—the people, the media, and officials at all levels of government—will be able to hear and appreciate this quiet but important voice.

One upshot of the unruly 2009 town hall meetings on health insurance reform, as reported in an August 2013 article by Jeremy Peters in the *New York Times*, was that Washington insiders from both sides of the aisle were seeing a growing reluctance by elected officials to hold these town hall meetings. Some congressional offices reportedly were “going to greater lengths to conceal when and where the meetings take place.”

In describing the messy business that transpired that summer and fall, however, it would be overly generous to characterize these events as “town hall meetings.” Real town hall meetings usually involved an authentic exchange of views by ordinary citizens and local leaders. The deliberative forums on making ends meet are more in that spirit and could provide elected and appointed officials with a quiet but powerful voice if they are listening.

Over the years, the topics have changed, as have the technology and means of communication, but the goal has always been the same—to demonstrate to elected and appointed officials at various levels of government that there is a “public voice” quite different from the slogans and angry rhetoric that we typically encounter in the news media, especially around election time.

“The tone of a public voice is distinctive,” notes David Mathews in his message to the NCDD. “It is more than logical reasoning, yet it is reasonable. It blends our analytic and instinctive minds as it captures the passions that surround the things we hold most dear in political life. It is more provisional and contextual The tone is pragmatic rather than ideological.”

“It’s not a debate,” notes the author of the *Making Ends Meet* issue guide. “It’s not a contest. It’s not even about reaching agreement or seeing eye-to-eye. It’s about looking for a shared direction guided by what we most value. It’s about examining the costs and consequences of possible solutions to daunting problems, and finding out what we, as a society, would or would not accept as a solution.”

To find out more about A Public Voice, visit <https://www.kettering.org/content/public-voice-long-running-experiment-bears-promising-fruit>

References

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