



Editorial

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I. INTRODUCTION

'A change is worthwhile if those who benefit could more than adequately compensate those who lose.' This formulation (a re-statement of the Pareto principle, attributed to Kaldor & Hicks) is at the core of the municipal engineer's assessment of a scheme. We try to identify and quantify who gains and who loses, and by how much.

However, our application of welfare economics is faulty, unless it has an ethical base. There are two necessary ethical components.

- Clearly we should concern ourselves not just with the direct consequences of our scheme but also with the 'spillovers' (the environmental consequences, such as noise and pollution).
- We need to arrive at an ethical consensus, that is generally acceptable to the community affected by our scheme.¹

Traditionally, we have seen the latter as the politicians' role. They must decide what the policies are and what relative priority each should be accorded. So the engineer might identify who gains and who loses, but the politician decides whether such an 'income redistribution' is acceptable. In short, it is they who decide whether the scheme should be implemented. But the real responsibility for ethical judgement should lie with society as a whole. We are too well aware that decisions reached by the political process will almost always rest on a narrower basis of consent.

Many are perplexed by the current change in the role of the politician. However, the drive for change is not a newly discovered weakness of politicians. Rather, the nature of the decisions made is changing.² At their conception, local authorities were primarily concerned with basic needs: sanitation, making roads usable, shelter. Maslow³ named these basic needs 'physical biologic'. Few would argue their importance. Nature reminds us, from time to time, of our vulnerability. So, we must continue to safeguard ourselves against the re-emergence of physical biologic needs as our overwhelming concern.

Maslow demonstrated that once our primary needs are met we seek to satisfy further needs. He constructed a pyramid of needs ascending through

- physical biologic
- safety/security (physical safety, job security)
- social (belonging, association, acceptance)
- ego-esteem (recognition, prestige, reputation, confidence)
- self-actualisation (use of abilities, aptitude and need for creativity)—as the pinnacle.

Where do today's municipal engineering schemes fit within this hierarchy of need? We widely recognise ownership of a car, while a travel convenience, also fulfills a high order need of ego-esteem for many. Indeed, many of the policies debated at length relate to the higher level needs. Divergence of opinion is much more likely in matters relating to ego-esteem or self-actualisation. So it is little wonder that politicians are faced with complex and difficult ethical decisions. If the responsibility for such judgements rests with society, then society ought to make them.

But politicians themselves face a dilemma. Many sought election in the belief that they were well placed to make such decisions on others' behalf. Some have come to enjoy the sense of power. What should their role be in the future? Do we require fewer, with the right to make the final judgement placed in the hands of very few? The cabinet system of government being adopted by UK local authorities may well concentrate the power of decision making to far too few. While the notion of scrutiny committees sounds fine, will they work? Can they exert significant checks on the power of the few?

If society should determine ethical judgements, the sooner everyone can be engaged in the process the better. Best Value emphasises the primary importance of 'consult'.⁵ But there is a real danger in believing this might be a new concept, peculiar to local government. Not so! Best Value fundamentally transplants the best private sector management practices into public authorities. The Audit Commission would do well to remember this before creating a new jargon and repeating the past mistakes of the private sector.

The best performing private companies view the customer as their focus of attention. Carlzon⁶ comments 'remarkably, many business executives begin by devising goals and strategies, and only later back into an examination of the business climate and customers' needs ... Sadly, by the time many businesses recognise they should have planned the other way around, it's too late'. Many public authorities are in danger of making the

same mistake. So where is your authority in their thinking? What should the politicians' and the communities' roles be? Does your authority have an active market research strategy?

The first step in understanding is to analyse the current processes. Martin Rogers analyses a key decision-making process in Ireland and demonstrates its weaknesses. If we are to involve communities in ethical decisions, they must have the necessary understanding to form rational judgements. Jo Field describes how to provide an evidence base for community strategies. Dick Huskinson offers alternative means of involving the community in local government. While the techniques he describes may be seen as a tool kit from which to draw, community involvement is not a 'one-off' but is a fundamental and permanent feature of good government. Necessarily the municipal or, as Brian Planner would describe, the 'community' engineer must play a dynamic role.

But we must not forget the changing role of the politician. The opinions expressed by Alex Varden, a council member, offer an insight into the re-balancing of the politician, professional officer and the community. Indeed, if politicians and the community are sidelined, as in the case of the site selection process for landfill in County Galway (Ireland), then as Martin Rogers and Berna Gist demonstrate the result will be less than satisfactory. In contrast, Jeremy Seldon explains how a waste strategy can be developed with full public involvement.

There follow several papers describing how the society might be involved successfully on even quite complex and potentially controversial issues. Richard Haisman charts the progress of the renaissance in Rugeley (Staffordshire) and how the community was involved. Colin Chick describes the techniques he has used to involve the community in determining their own solutions to traffic problems. We must not forget that, however much support a scheme might have from the majority, individuals may still strongly object. Such was the case in completing the Avon ring road. John Bickerstaff and Chris Kearns describe the community involvement in *extremis*. Taken all the way through the English legal system, objections to the road were finally overturned but the cost and delay of the benefits to the rest of the community were considerable. Should the rights of individuals be limited? How would you deal with such a situation?

This last example reminds us that 'the community' is not homogenous, but is a wide variety of individuals with differing needs and perspectives. The paper by Beata Duncan-Jones describes the particular needs of the visually impaired. Adrian

Davis deals with an important sector of the community often overlooked by engineers – children, and discusses how we might better understand their needs.

Finally, Owen Simon returns to our key theme of our awareness of politics. In giving an economist's view, I believe he underestimates the involvement of municipal engineers in the issues of community involvement and the way politicians make decisions. Indeed, I hope he is wrong! We would do well to remember why civil engineers seek ingenious solutions to problems. In the words of the Treadgold definition, it is 'for the use and convenience of Man'.

2. DISCUSSION

Should you disagree with any of the opinions or methods described in this edition of the journal, please email up to 500 words to the editor, at simon.fullalove@ice.org.uk. Your contribution will be sent to the author for a reply and, subject to the editorial panel's approval, will be published with the reply in a future issue of the journal.

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4. FUTURE ISSUES

Each issue of *Municipal Engineer* is dedicated to a subject within the scope of municipal engineering. Future issues will cover: Managing for excellence in municipal services; International development (further details can be found at the back of this issue) and Sustainable Transport Policy. Information regarding the submission of papers can be found on the inside front cover but for further information please contact Kathleen Hollow at kathleen.hollow@ice.org.uk.

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