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**Scotland setting the pace with participation by Geof Cox**

*What is your experience of being able to participate in your government?*

The vast majority of us cast a vote in local and national elections, after which we give up the opportunity to influence in any meaningful way until the next election. If you live in Scotland, this is about to change with the establishment of the Scottish parliament in July 1999.

The Scottish parliament is breaking new ground in many ways. It will be elected by proportional representation. The debating chamber moves away from the confrontational Westminster model (even in its temporary home while the new parliament building is being built at Holyrood). The committee structure is being designed to be more open and inclusive, requiring MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) to collect evidence and consult with the public before tabling business. It represents a very strong push towards widening participation in the process of government.

Henry McLeish MP, devolution minister, sums up the hopes and plans for the Scottish parliament in the words "We want Scotland to be the envy of the world." The parliament's consultative steering group is currently giving a good lead by taking the discussion around Scotland for public debate and planning to reach groups who have traditionally felt excluded from the process of government.

The politicians seem to have realised that participation is the key to success for government. Henry McLeish again: "Strong democracy relies on citizens being actively engaged in the business of government."

*What is your experience of getting changes on other social issues?*

Most likely, if you have chosen to try, you will have come up against a bureaucratic council, management committee, police authority, civil service, health board, etc., who at best consult with interested parties, and at worst just make decisions on their own dogma.

Once again in Scotland there are examples where major social issues are being addressed through involvement and real participation of the parties concerned: Some of the worst housing areas are being revitalised through partnerships between the local communities, housing associations and local authorities. The rift between police and young people is being bridged through involving young

people from high offending areas in training police officers at the National Police College at Tulliallan. Under the banner of 'Scotland's Future', there is an ongoing series of strategic dialogues to develop the future economic development strategy for Scotland. These dialogues go beyond the 'usual suspects' of the captains of industry and the academics to involve the widest possible stakeholder groups. A web site allows anyone to add their comments to the dialogue.

To many, the sudden recognition that participation and involvement do work may be seen as a 'blinding flash of the obvious.' However, others brought up in traditional management structures of command and control, or in the Westminster models of parliamentary procedure will not automatically appreciate the process. They will need to be converted like author and consultant Roger Harrison who used the 'blinding flash' phrase in his book, *A Consultant's Journey* (McGraw-Hill, 1995).

He came to the realisation, late in his career, that "...if we want people to work together to change things, we need to get them working from a common appreciation of how things are. If we want them to co-operate in planning and action, we have to find common ground between them on how they would like things to be different in the future, and we have to give them a stake in a shared vision of that future."

*What is your experience of involvement in the future direction of your organisation?*

Is the vision merely a statement of the ego of the Chairman or does it reflect the combined aspirations of all of the employees and other stakeholders in that organisation?

Again, most of us would recognise an organisation where strategy is decided by the senior management and then cascaded to other levels in a 'tell and sell' style. We want our staff to be motivated to put all of their energy behind that strategy to make it successful, yet we give them no part in its development. The Report on Tomorrow's Company by the RSA identifies companies which pursue a strategy that is inclusive of the needs of all of its stakeholders have outstanding long-term performance.

There are pockets of good practice in Scotland. Many of the Silicon Glen high-tech businesses run self-managed work teams. There are examples where high-involvement techniques are being used. The Scotland's Future dialogue mentioned earlier is one example, where Scottish Enterprise is using an inclusive process to develop a strategy for economic development. Elsewhere, North Lanarkshire Council are developing a youth strategy, and the Scottish Arts Council is creating a vision for the arts into the millennium.

The techniques used encourage maximum participation, ultimately leading to the co-creation of strategy. Many use the simultaneous participation of large numbers of people

— Ford USA have run events involving over 2,000 people; events involving hundreds of participants are the norm — to achieve rapid results in designing and implementing strategy. They include:

Future Search conferences, which gather all of the significant stakeholders together in the same room for two or three days to develop a shared vision and action plan for the future. These are particularly effective where the history is one of confrontation.

Open Space enables participants to create and manage their own programme of parallel activity around a core theme. Management guru Tom Peters describes these as ‘all-hands strategy sessions’ when the central theme is “What are the issues and opportunities facing us at ABC Ltd?” and the participants are the whole company.

Appreciative Inquiry moves away from the traditional problem solving approach of fixing things that have gone wrong. Instead it focuses on what works, and builds on that to release new possibilities.

*What is your experience of involving your own staff in decisions?*

Do you make the decision and then tell or sell? Do you consult? Do you allow participation? Do you co-create?

You do not have to be at the top of an organisation to use these techniques. Examples exist where one team or department has taken the initiative to be participative, while the rest of the organisation has remained in a more traditional mode. For example, the criminal justice team of a social work department has involved all their staff from the temporary secretaries to senior managers in developing their strategy. The Scottish regional sales team of a multi-national pharmaceutical firm co-created their own vision and mission, while the rest of the company followed a tell and sell approach to the future.

Collaboration and partnership are becoming the norm to meet the challenges of the new economy. Strategy is fast becoming everyone’s business. In Scotland the challenge of wider participation in government may yet have some effect on the governance of organisations. We will then be able to profit from greater participation in decision making. Our experience could set the pace for the rest of the UK to follow, not just in devolved political power but in the engagement and participation of employees in co-creating their futures.

