

## **Deep Democracy: It's Not About the Math**

In my role as Islands Trust Council Vice-Chair, I had the pleasure of attending a workshop on the art of chairing meetings. As well as providing some helpful tips about managing a speakers' list, handling motions, and other technicalities, workshop leader Eli Mina offered some insights on the way the decision-making process connects to the health of our democracy.

### **Majority Rules?**

Mina started out by suggesting that, although "majority rules" is technically correct, in practice if we want to make truly representative and fully-informed decisions we need to stretch our thinking beyond this simple formula.

It's not about the math, he said. If four out of seven decision-makers, or 50 out of 70 community members, agree on a course of action, that doesn't necessarily make it right. A majority can make mistakes. The minority group, regardless of its numbers, often (maybe always) holds important pieces of information that are vital to a good decision.

Dismissing the minority will erode the relationships that give communities their strength and resilience. It can lead to post-decision revolt and a poisoned environment. Also, everyone in the minority has to live with the outcome of all decisions, so in the name of fairness their views need to be considered.

### **Democracy Means Learning**

Although Mina did not use the word "humility," I think that's what he was requesting: anyone involved with decision-making should consider that our passionately-held, to-us-absolutely-convincing beliefs are not necessarily the truth, or not the whole truth. We need to remember that our so-called "opponents" or "adversaries" hold essential pieces of wisdom.

"We need to sit at the table as learners rather than aggressive pushers of agendas," said Mina. "When we listen and learn from each other, we make good decisions. Democracy works well when people are learning from all sources."

This means that we need to find a way to listen to those who are inarticulate, who meander off-topic or rant angrily, or who offend our sense of decorum, logic or political values. Somewhere in their (to us) off-putting discourse, they have their truth, perhaps even a nugget of wisdom.

### **Voices of the Voiceless**

Once we've heard everyone in the room, we're still not done. What about all those who are *not* in the room? We need to listen to all voices, but we also need to think of those who don't have

voices: the 90% who don't show up, the babies, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the plants and animals, the water and air, and the planet as a whole.

If you've ever walked away from a Local Trust Committee meeting wondering why the Trust Committee didn't vote in tandem with what appeared to be the majority view, hopefully the above is helpful.

### **The Knowledge Pie**

But there's still more to it: "community" is just one of three sources of input that decision-makers are asked to consider. The other two are "policy direction" and "professional expertise." "Policy direction" refers to over-arching guidelines that reflect a long-term community vision or goal. For us, this means our Official Community Plan as well as the Islands Trust Policy Statement. "Professional advice" refers to technical information and analysis provided by planners, environmental scientists, geotechnical engineers, etc.

Each of these information sources makes up a one-third piece of what Mina calls "the knowledge pie." At the Islands Trust we have no political parties to dictate voting, so we are free to make decisions according our own discernment, based on this pie, on common sense, and on our deepest sense of what is right for this very special place.

Because trustees are tasked with looking at the big picture, we can't make election promises -- or at least we can't keep them! Promising voters we will support their particular agenda can get us into trouble. We need to keep an open mind, because at any point we may hear information that suggests the best decision is not the one we promised. And our task, above all, is to make good decisions.

To help keep all this in perspective, I like to imagine a hypothetical Denman islander 50 or 100 years from now, looking back and asking if we made good decisions. They won't much care if we made our voters happy or brought satisfaction to a particularly articulate or particularly angry segment of the community. They will care about the long-term effects of our actions on the Island as a whole – humans, critters, ecosystems, and all of nature's elements.