

Community Engagement: Practical Strategies for Empowerment or a Wishful Narrative?

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Abstract

Community action shapes the urban landscape of Australian cities and towns. Our urban future will be determined through vigilant and resourceful action by residents' groups and environmentalists.

Vigorous community action is clearly an important element of planning processes in Queensland's South East region. This rapidly growing coastal area and its hinterland struggle to reconcile population growth with the maintenance and restoration of a mega-diverse natural environment. Community groups in the region have responded to this challenge with creative and tenacious strategies to conserve and restore habitat, minimise waste and consumption, educate, entertain and protest. On the Gold Coast, and in the rural village of Maleny on the Sunshine Coast, community action has generated involvement, awareness and sustainable enterprises, and averted some of the more destructive development tendencies and proposals.

Civic and conservation groups in these and other Australian cities and towns participate actively in government-initiated community involvement activities, but often find engagement and consultation processes have minimal impact on planning decisions. As a result, residents with clear priorities for their urban future rely on community action, organising and mobilisation to influence decisions. Their experiences suggest local and state government authorities are struggling with deliberative, inclusive and iterative decision-making processes. Campaign anecdotes recounted here through an activist lens shed light on decision-making processes for a sustainable urban future.

Community action: vital to sustainability

Community action is vital to sustainability. Without the active involvement of community members in shaping towns and cities, development is unlikely to follow a sustainable pattern. This conclusion has been consistently drawn in sustainability blueprints since (at least) the 1989 World Commission on Environment and Development's Brundtland Report 'Our Common Future'. International and domestic sustainability plans including Agenda 21, the consensus action plan that emerged from the 1992 World Earth Summit, reinforce this conviction. Broad public participation in decision-making and genuine partnership between community, government and industry are prerequisites for the achievement of ecologically sustainable development (ESD). The practical benefits of community involvement have become a mantra at all levels of Australian government. Through active self-determination, citizens mobilise resources including funds and volunteerism that may not have been available otherwise, generate and share knowledge, contribute to better decisions, create community, and generate solutions in tune with community needs (Wates, 2000, pp.4-5). Public participation also has the potential to accomplish a more equitable distribution of environmental risk or even a decrease in risk for all (Schlosberg, 2002, p.13).

The 'sustainable community' narrative comprises a set of assumptions or beliefs: (1) decisions are ideally made through equitable, deliberative and inclusive processes that allow community members a range of options for involvement; (2) these processes encourage and support social learning, negotiation, and community building (a positive feedback loop); and (3) the resulting decisions are ones that everyone can live with, and that steer the community toward sustainability. A fourth thread is that subscription to the narrative is universal and in the public interest. This narrative motivates elected representatives and planners to actively involve stakeholders in decision-making, and encourages community members to

participate in civic life.

Contemporary social life in Australia cities demonstrates both the potential benefits of this narrative, and the consequences of over-writing the storyline of environmental democracy with that of top-down, decide-announce-defend governance arrangements.

Two Australian communities - a booming coastal city and a small rural community - provide the backdrop for this discussion. Few Australian cities illustrate the dilemmas of sustainable urban development better than the Gold Coast. The sixth largest city in Australia is expecting to grow by one-third, to 700,000, in the next fifteen years. Having started its life as a holiday resort village, the Gold Coast now extends along almost seventy kilometres of coastline and is rapidly extending its tentacles into the coastal hinterland, one of Australia's fifteen biodiversity 'hotspots' (DEH 2005). The Gold Coast City Council (GCCC) considers the city the most biodiverse in Australia. The protection of the flora and fauna in the region clearly warrants urgent government and community action, as do the institutions that support community involvement in the burgeoning city. This is equally true of the rural village of Maleny on the Sunshine Coast hinterland. The village of roughly 1,700 is located on the Maleny Plateau, which has a dispersed population of around 4,500. Maleny, other hinterland towns and villages, and the coastal cities of the Sunshine Coast, are also experiencing rapid population growth and consequent pressures on both the biophysical and social environments.

Empowered communities, powerful women

The good news is that community action is alive and kicking. The Gold Coast City Council's on-line community directory lists more than 2,000 non-profit community groups, including fifteen environment groups. The diversity, resourcefulness and tenacity of community action is revealed by looking closely at one of these groups, the Gold Coast and Hinterland Environment Council (Gecko). Six local environment groups founded the umbrella organisation in 1989.

Gecko House, on the banks of Currumbin Creek, is a hive of voluntary activity. As well as advocacy and community building work, Gecko has created three non-profit businesses. Gecko Regen coordinates tree planting and revegetation projects, including the rehabilitation of landfill sites. The business employs thirty people to manage its nursery, field projects and training. Gecko Recycle is modelled on the successful Reverse Garbage enterprises in Brisbane and Sydney, and redirects resources from the waste stream. The third enterprise, Gecko Ed, helps schools and other educational institutions engage qualified environmental educators. Volunteers also provide a free information service and website. Gecko is perhaps best known for community events including the annual World Environment Day 'Do' and Clean Up Australia Day on the Gold Coast. Both events provide opportunities for thousands to participate in environmental learning and action and have been recognised through awards and sponsorship. Gecko creates further community involvement opportunities with regular information nights, conferences, seminars, its monthly meeting of member groups, Walk With Wildlife guided bushwalks and artGecko participatory cultural events.

For a small village, Maleny on the Sunshine Coast has a remarkably strong community sector. An online directory (Sunweb, 2005) lists almost seventy diverse community-based organisations in the town, from the Recorder Group to the Nursing Mothers, Film Society, Landcare group and Hospital Auxiliary. Jordan and Haydon (2003) interviewed members of almost 150 groups in the village. The City of Caloundra, of which Maleny is a satellite settlement, boasts at least twenty-three voluntary community-based environmental organisations (CC 2001b). A striking feature of community life in Maleny is the

proliferation of cooperative ventures. More than twenty cooperatives have been established since the 1970s. Their objectives include the coordination, provision and support of: housing; whole foods; social and cultural activities; education and learning; artistic and publishing enterprises; conservation and waste minimisation; credit; finance; and business incubation. Maleny's cooperative sector, for which it has received international attention, has contributed to the town's spirit of cooperation and enterprise (Schwarz and Schwarz, 1997) in a time when Australian rural communities have been in decline. Cooperatives have created at least 130 jobs directly (Jordan, 2000, 2003) and hundreds indirectly. Maleny's Local Energy Transfer System (LETS) facilitates the exchange of bunya, a non-cash currency named after the edible nut prized by the region's traditional owners, in return for required skills and labour. The system was the first of its kind in Australia and is now replicated in at least 240 other communities nationally, and is being implemented internationally (Douthwaite 1998). In researching Maleny, it is impossible to ignore the narrative of an empowered community seeking to determine its own sustainable destiny. This shone through in radio interviews (ABC, 2/6/03) in which Maleny locals spoke of their community having a high level of social capital and cohesion. They compared Maleny to a 'tribe' and an intentional community, and suggested these attributes provide a degree of resilience in a time of rapid change. For this reason, the unsuccessful community campaign examined here is of particular interest.

Another feature of community action in Maleny, Gold Coast and other Australian cities is the pivotal role played by women. Lois Levy and Sheila Davis have been the public faces of GECKO for fifteen years. Lois' profile on Gecko's website communicates her belief that "an educated community plays a vital role in protecting and caring for nature". As well as being a full-time TAFE instructor and social worker, she received an Order of Australia medal in 2001 for services for the environment. Sheila is widely recognised as a tenacious battler and community builder. She juggles being Gecko's Campaign Coordinator with raising two children, as well as writing and volunteering for several other community groups. Jill Jordan is arguably Maleny's best-known community activist. During the last thirty years, Jill helped found and steer cooperatives in Maleny and around Australia. She served as a Councillor for the rural Division of Caloundra City encompassing Maleny in the early nineties. Jill, Sheila, Lois and the many, many women involved in the community action described here are part of a bigger picture. Women often drive grassroots campaigns both in Australia and internationally. This is clear from Kathleen McPhillips' edited collection (2002) of activists' accounts of community toxics campaigns in Australia, Lois Gibbs' leadership against toxic waste dumping in Love Canal, USA, and the leadership of women in the demand for justice in Bhopal, India, where Union Carbide released poisonous chemicals in 1984 and opposition to nuclear power stations in Europe (Shiva and Miles 1993, p.14).

Eisler (1987, p.189) attributes women's dynamic contribution to community life to socialisation processes that encourage men to "pursue their own ends, even at the expense of others" whereas women are socialised to "see themselves primarily as responsible for the welfare of others, even at the expense of their own well-being." Milbrath (1989: p.54) concludes that, "women have a much better chance of saving the world than men." Gender forms an additional element to the narrative: women occupy positions of leadership in healthy communities on the path toward sustainability.

Government initiated community engagement

Local Government, as the form of government closest to the community, has a better opportunity than state and national governments to engage, involve and mobilise communities around sustainability objectives. This opportunity is affirmed in Local Agenda 21, the international campaign endorsed at the

Rio Earth Summit in 1992 which, “promotes a participatory, long-term, strategic planning process that helps municipalities identify local sustainability priorities and implement long-term action plans.” In the ten years after Rio, 6,400 local government authorities in 113 countries implemented LA21 initiatives including the establishment of stakeholder groups to develop and implement local sustainability plans (ICLEI, 2005). LA21 is embraced by the Local Government Association of Australia, and by both the Gold Coast and Caloundra City Councils.

This commitment to active community participation and to the sustainable communities narrative permeates government discourse. Caloundra City Council’s Corporate Plan (CC 2001a, p.6) set the 2006 objective to “be a City and a community which has created its own destiny and which continues to refine and redefine its future on a regular basis.” Elected representatives also express this vision in both cities’ corporate and strategic plans and State of the Environment reports. Caloundra’s Mayor, Don Aldous, has argued that to meet the challenges of governing this rapidly growing and changing city, “Council cannot do these things in isolation” and “needs the enthusiasm and participation of its community” (Local Government Focus, 2004).

The Gold Coast City Council (GCCC) claims to take a consultative approach to decisions about flood mitigation, catchment management, rates, beach and harbour management, transport, tourism, crime and safety. The importance attached to community involvement in decision-making is evident in the Harbour Planning Study, one recent planning process, which GCCC refers to as having reconciled “traditionally competing interests to construct a long-term mechanism for area management” that integrates “broadly-based community, environmental and business interests” (GCCC 2003). Conservationists were active participants in this policy-setting exercise and the parallel Waterfuture Strategy, which examined water quality and quantity options for the drought-prone city. In developing the Waterfuture strategy, GCCC utilised a range of community engagement strategies. Following initial research, Council disseminated a discussion starter that outlined problems and possible solutions and held community information sessions, workshops and focus groups. A newsletter and survey were distributed throughout the city, generating 9,000 responses. To develop a strategy that will “create a feeling of joint ownership” (GCCC 2005a), Council has identified and addressed questions of community trust and confidence in Council”, to ensure the strategy does not “ignore community opinion” as it could be “difficult to gain trust.” (GCCC 2005b). This council is far from unique in experiencing some distrust and criticism concerning provision for community involvement in governance. Woolcock, Renton and Cavaye (2003) note these concerns are widespread and substantial. Council also remains open to community opinion year-round through its online consultation panel which provides regular opportunities for community members to contribute to decisions through surveys and focus groups.

And these opportunities are valued by community groups. In fact, the pursuit of their vision for a sustainable region and their members’ wide range of interests motivates Gecko to participate in up to a dozen advisory and consultative committees with state and local government authorities at any one time. Lois Levy would like to see the group even more involved in policy making.

Conflict: a competing or complementary narrative?

Despite these strong expressions of support for community involvement to steer sustainability, both Maleny and the Gold Coast have generated headlines nationally and internationally in recent times for sustained conflict over development decisions. The high level of engagement suggested in local government plans and strategies cited above, and described by community activists interviewed for this

chapter, has been a backdrop to urban planning decisions characterised by rancorous conflict, litigation and allegations of secrecy and corruption. In Maleny, this conflict has been triggered by the construction of a supermarket beside picturesque Obi Obi Creek, which crosses the village's main street. On the Gold Coast, a controversy is raging around a proposal to develop a terminal for cruise ships on The Spit, a strip of dunes that separate the city's harbour (the Broadwater) from the ocean. Both developments are contrary to Local Area Plans that were developed through extensive community consultation. These disputes communicate a contrasting narrative that includes the following threads: (1) community action is an essential safeguard against solely economic interests that are, by nature, unsustainable; (2) government-initiated community engagement practices have strictly limited capacity to counteract these economic interests, especially when local government is overtly influenced by the development industry or over-ridden by the Queensland Government; and (3) community action that builds power to confront government and industry is an essential part of the mix.

The suggestion that a large supermarket may be built in Maleny has been brewing for years. And the town's history of cooperative enterprises, and buying locally has consistently generated opposition to the notion. Community members participating in the development of the town's Local Area Plan (from 1999 to 2001) ensured the planning scheme explicitly ruled out this possibility. Naturally, locals were up in arms when a supermarket development in the heart of the village was subsequently proposed. In 2002, community spokesperson Michael Berry urged Caloundra City Council to "exercise its duty of care" by protecting "the retail and social heart of this town" (Range News 13/12/02). Berry noted, as visitors to the village do almost immediately, that Maple Street embodies the community's spirit. Conducting interviews with locals at sidewalk cafés on Maple Street, I was continually interrupted by the greeting and connections typical of a close-knit town. This spirit was spectacularly demonstrated when the village's existing independent supermarket celebrated its centenary and almost 2,000 people turned out.

Even before Woolworths secured its site, community organising began in earnest. People were galvanised by concerns about traffic generated by the proposed supermarket's 180 parking spaces, stormwater and trade waste management, anticipated impacts on the town's economy and character, the loss of open space and impacts on a recognised platypus habitat. Maleny is one of very few towns where these shy monotremes can be regularly observed in the heart of the urban area. Another significant point of community opposition to the proposal was the decision-making process. Community members felt left out, and expressed their outrage through a long series of community meetings, rallies and publications. As the development approval processes gained momentum, so too did the community campaign. Council's failure to embed the wishes of the community into its 2004 Strategic Plan (the local town planning scheme) resulted in the supermarket decision being taken out of the community's hands and becoming the responsibility of the State Government. A petition asking for this decision to remain Council's responsibility was signed by 2,000 Maleny residents but failed to sway State Government. The situation prompted Michael Berry to note, "We are locked out of the process and Council has no duty to take heed of resident objections. In other words, a developer living in Melbourne can decide to fundamentally change the character of the Maleny township without ever having been here and without the township having any say in that change" (Range News 13/12/02). In the ensuing conflict, Councillors, town planners and community leaders pointed the finger at each other while Woolworths moved closer to realising their intention. One Councillor suggested that community representatives in the local area planning group were responsible for failing to include the provisions of the plan in Council's planning scheme. Jill Jordan is quick to point out, however, that the voluntary committee members "gave up their nights and Sundays for three years to do a great job on developing a Plan that the community wanted and had "signed off" on, and they shouldn't be castigated for not doing what the Council Planning Department, whose planners are being paid \$80,000 per annum, should have done!"

Community action throughout 2004 and 2005 culminated in a series of well-attended rallies and protest actions. There were also regular community-initiated negotiations involving Woolworths, the

construction company and Council. In April 2004 the Deen Brothers, who came to fame for their part in the midnight demolition of several heritage buildings in Brisbane, were hired to clear forty large trees on the site. Heavy machinery rolled into town during the night. The community's condemnation was palpable with at least 200 people attempting to stop work despite having no prior warning of this destructive activity. With the support of local Aboriginal groups, approximately seventy protestors occupied the site (Courier Mail 06/05/05) chanting, "We won't shop there" and, "We shall overcome". Around twenty of the protesters erected tents and marked out the platypus burrows they believed would be destroyed. Maleny local Daniel Jones climbed one of the remaining bunya pines, where he stayed for 100 days. His supporters in the community (including local businesses) provided warm meals and solidarity throughout the winter months, further demonstrating the depth of community support for the protest. In May 2004, Woolworths developer Cornerstone Properties offered to sell the site to Council and the community for \$1.89 million, considerably more than the \$600,000 paid nine months previously. A community petition with 5,300 signatures (more than the town's entire population) contributed to an effort by Council to acquire the land as a community asset. Despite extraordinary fundraising efforts by the community and a part-commitment by Council, the asking price was not achieved. This whole scenario was played out again in July 2005 when an eleventh hour deal was brokered with the new Woolworths developer, Uniton Pty Ltd. to purchase the site for \$2million. By mortgaging their homes and pledging donations, the small community raised \$2 million within 48 hours. The cheque which was presented was spurned by the developer on the grounds that Woolworths would not agree to the deal. The opportunity for a win-win conclusion to the conflict was lost, and construction commenced. Even so, community opposition to the supermarket continues to be expressed creatively and vociferously. In July 2005, Maleny residents laid head to toe in a nearby park to spell out anti-Woolworths slogans. And in August, Daniel Jones again entered the construction site. On this occasion, he locked himself to heavy machinery dressed in a platypus suit.

It is difficult to imagine a Woolworths supermarket succeeding in Maleny. Throughout the village, placards, stickers, t-shirts and banners that read "Don't shop there", "Support small business", "Spare Maleny from bad planning" and "Keep Maleny's character" urge shoppers to boycott the supermarket. On-line activists around the country are being urged to register their opinions on the www.WeWontShopThere.com website. The gate of the construction site has been decorated with ribbons as a reminder of local opposition. And locals speak with conviction about ensuring the business fails. Jill Jordan swears the community will, "frustrate them at their own game" and, "teach them about economics". "At the beginning," Jill says, "it was really just the radicals. As the campaign's gone on, it's just grown and grown. As Woolworths have shown themselves to be the bullies they are, it's drawn more and more the conservative community who are now contributing to the strategic options of how we can make this thing fail." Around the country, people sympathetic to the community's battle are abandoning shopping trolleys filled with non-perishable items in Woolworths supermarkets as a statement of solidarity.

On the Gold Coast, a similar battle is raging. Community groups including GECKO contributed to the Gold Coast Harbour Study which identified the Spit, a peninsula of sand dunes and open space immediately to the north of the city centre, as an important asset to be retained and enhanced. The Study resolved, in particular, that there would be no further private or commercial development on the Spit (GCCC 2003). Lois describes the consultative processes that led to this policy as "exhausting". GECKO submitted written responses to Council's monthly drafts and proposals, and eventually "carried the vote". Despite the policy, a terminal for large cruise ships and associated on-land development is now on the drawing board. Community groups have identified a range of concerns about this proposal including: loss of open space, amenity and recreational access on land and water; pollution; economic impacts; waste management; and impacts on marine habitat and biodiversity.

As in Maleny, the dialogue between the community and its local government is now in some ways

irrelevant as the development decision is now to be made by the Queensland State Government. The project has been declared a significant project and is being championed by the Department of State Development, which will act as both the proponent and assessor. The cruise terminal will be exempt from the State Coastal Policy. Having decided the area north of Sea World will be a port, the State Government is not obliged to recognise the City Council's planning guidelines. This top-down approach, combined with secrecy surrounding a State Government study of liner movements in the seaway, compounds Gecko's lack of confidence in the modes of consultation and engagement on offer. Lois, Sheila and other community leaders declared the foreshadowed Environmental Impact Statement a "rubber stamp for development" and called for more meaningful dialogue. The conflict has been waged in the press with media releases declaring, "The Premier and his Government have failed the accountability and transparency test by refusing to provide the community with any information" (Gecko, 4/7/05) and warning, "They're going to override our town plan. If they do it once what's to stop them doing it again. It sets a precedent" (Courier Mail 16/9/05).

A forgiving appraisal of these two scenarios might let government agencies off the hook. After all, local government authorities cannot be held responsible for the planning decisions and methods adopted by state agencies, and vice versa. In some instances conservationists blame Queensland's Integrated Planning Act for State Government decisions which contradict prior community consultation by local government. From a community perspective, however, this justification is not convincing. Citizens who have actively contributed to policy decisions at either level will naturally react with disappointment, if not outrage, if jurisdiction is subsequently assumed by other agencies.

Having exhausted the usefulness of community delegations and submissions, Gecko and their allies soon turned to alliance building and mobilisation. The Save Our Spit (SOS) Alliance was formed to pursue the shared concerns of more than twenty groups including conservationists, residents and ratepayers, surfers, divers, recreational fishers and local businesses. In April and July 2005, the alliance held rallies in the Doug Jennings Park on the Spit, drawing more than 2,000. During the rallies, picnics and public information nights, the alliance collected 6,500 signatures on a petition which was carried on a surfboard by a group of local surfers into a meeting of State Government parliamentarians and ministers in July 2005.

These struggles have seriously tested the 'sustainable community' narrative. Community members participating in consultative policy-setting exercises in Maleny and the Gold Coast speak of being outnumbered by pro-development interests, having their input ignored, receiving little or no support for their participation while generous allowances are available to others, and of 'burning out' their voluntary delegates. Having been a councillor previously, Jill Jordan observes, "local government is basically a numbers game. If you have 6-5 you're home. If it's 5-5 you have to woo the chairperson and you're home and hosed. And if you are down and you don't manage that wooing, you're bugged." She considers council's community engagement activities are "rigged" and that outcomes that might impede development are ignored. Despite maintaining positive relationships with council planning officers and working solidly to facilitate collaboration, Lois Levy says "the lines are drawn" between Gecko and the Gold Coast City Council and that relations with the development industry are worse. During the last five years Gecko has noted with concern the termination of the environmental advisory committee and the current Mayor's "lack of interest in community engagement". Their experience is at odds with the State of the Environment Report (GCCC, 2001b, p.2), where the Mayor acknowledges "the achievements of the many individuals and community groups who have generously committed their own time to sustain the environment which benefits all of us." Community groups in both cities consider secrecy is a regular feature of decision-making.

It is tempting to suggest a discontented minority fuels these disputes, and to suggest that more effective or creative engagement processes can overcome the conflict by creating a deliberative space for all views

to be heard and integrated. But these explanations just don't work. The observations and interviews that inform this chapter suggest that in these and other communities planning decisions are infrequently made through satisfactory community engagement and consensus-based decision-making. The failure to adhere to basic standards of transparency and inclusiveness is acute. During the conflicts described here, a probity audit was conducted to investigate Caloundra City Council's decisions as developer and assessment authority for a golf course and residential development in Maleny. Simultaneously, the Gold Coast City Council was embroiled in a Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) inquiry concerning allegations of misconduct and election bribery in the 2004 Council elections, when a secret developer-backed election campaign fund was established to support a majority of 'like-minded' (pro-development) councillors. The Inquiry will also pursue allegations that a subdivision of one of the region's last cane farms "ignored Council officers' advice and state government planning regulations" (The Australian 3/10/05). The Inquiry will also pursue allegations of misconduct and election bribery in the 2004 Council elections. Lois Levy is certain that, "It won't matter what happens now with the CMC. That Council is dead and buried. Nobody will ever believe them again."

In terms of democratic legitimacy, voluntary community-based groups enjoy broad and resilient foundations. Citizens trust and rely on community sector groups more than government or industry, especially with respect to environmental information (NSW EPA, 1994, 2004). Citizens are also highly responsive to the rallying calls of conservation groups. Gecko's rallies to conserve the Spit attract growing numbers, and their membership is strong. The Maleny protests were well attended and, when it looked like the supermarket site could be bought from the developer, \$2 million was raised within forty-eight hours.

Reconciling the two narratives

It's easy to draw the conclusion, from the experiences of community activists in Maleny and the Gold Coast, that polite discussions about the future of Australian cities and towns are unlikely to steer anybody toward sustainability. Even though government, community and industry almost universally embrace dialogue and deliberation and attempt creative mechanisms for this dialogue, there are compelling reasons for conservationists to rely on mobilisation and grassroots politics rather than community engagement. And their conservation victories achieved outside the deliberative space are impressive. In the recent past, community groups on the Gold Coast prevented construction of a cableway through the Springbrook World Heritage Area and cabins in an adjacent conservation area, attempted to prevent further development on the city's major flood-prone area, the Gurungumbah Floodplain, and successfully opposed creation of the Eastern Tollway through koala habitat. At the same time, they have seen prevailing decision-making approaches result in the incremental erosion of parkland and remnant vegetation: what Lois calls the 'nibble syndrome' and the wholesale destruction of areas of remnant vegetation for housing development. Community action of an oppositional nature prevented a cement batching plant being established in Maleny. It seems unlikely that the spirit reflected in these campaigns will be diluted or defused. Even as bulldozers cleared the Woolworths site, one Maleny local predicted the campaign loss "will actually strengthen the idea of Maleny as being an independent community which stands up for its rights and what it believes in" (ABC, 12/7/05).

But there are long-term consequences of failing to provide satisfactory mechanisms for deliberative planning, of forcing conservationists and other community groups to choose between dialogic processes and oppositional community action that may outstrip these short-term gains. Lester Milbrath (1989) is in good company when he suggests the 'dominator society' is incapable of sustainability and that social learning through approaches involving partnership and collaboration is urgently required. Community activists in Maleny and the Gold Coast know this. Despite years of "hard slog" on committees where they

are “hopelessly out-numbered by rednecks with no idea about environmental planning”, Lois, Sheila and Gecko remain committed to dialogue. Jill Jordan is similarly committed to fixing engagement practices, rather than rejecting them. Drawing on her experience in cooperatives, Jill advocates a local government system that would facilitate learning by electing only half the Councillors at each election. (A similar practice to this currently operates in New South Wales Councils.) This would reduce the disruption to corporate memory and relationships. She and others in Maleny also imagine Maleny being governed by a Hinterland Council more attuned to local needs. Uninterrupted community-government-industry dialogue that is well facilitated, maintains equitable representation and fairly supports participants is part of the answer.

“Conflict can be magic,” Jill assured me, “but only when people are genuinely willing to listen, and to change their position on the basis of what they’ve heard.”

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