

## EPISODE 1

**Nivek Thompson [NT]:** This is the first episode in a bonus series of Real Democracy Now! a podcast, talking about deliberation, culture, and context.

Welcome to Real Democracy Now! I'm Nivek Thompson and Real Democracy Now! Is a podcast for people who think we can, and should, improve how democracy works. This podcast looks at democracy from different angles to help you think about how democracy might be improved.

Welcome to episode one in this special bonus series of Real Democracy Now! a podcast, talking about deliberation, culture and context. This bonus series has been made in collaboration with the [Centre for Deliberative Democracy & Global Governance at the University of Canberra](#).

In this series, I will speak with a number of people who participated in the Centre's recent conference which brought together scholars from around the world to examine the different forms, meanings, and significance associated with deliberation in various cultures and contexts.

This conference was supported by John Dryzek's ARC Laureate Fellowship entitled "Deliberative Worlds: Democracy, Justice and a Changing Earth System."

In this episode, I'm speaking with [Jensen Sass](#) one of the conference organisers. Jensen is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance.

**NT:** You were part of the organising group for the Deliberation, Culture, and Context Conference. Can you tell us a bit about what was the purpose of that conference?

**Jensen Sass [JS]:** Deliberation is a topic of considerable interest among political theorists. It's also a topic of interest in the wider public in Australia and elsewhere.

The interest usually begins with a concern. Concern with the quality of public deliberation—whether that's in the press or in parliament, or elsewhere—is in a state of decline.

I guess you can say that the problem is that verbal brawling is ugly and it doesn't live up to what we would hope our representatives represent in a liberal democracy and you know, when our representatives speak this way, when they stoop to base rhetoric, when they pander to our low instincts, we feel the institutions are being disrespected.

Well, it turns out that deliberation isn't restricted to liberal democracies in developed countries. And it turns out that people everywhere engage in collective deliberation.

Although despite being widely prevalent, deliberation doesn't take the same form everywhere that it turns up. Deliberation's always embedded within social structures and political institutions and it's undertaken by people who are performing different kinds of roles. So, not everyone is welcome to participate in all places and not all of those who participate are afforded equal voice.

In a general sense, we know all of this. But the aim of the conference was to render all these questions a bit more concrete, to examine what implications they may for political theory. And also, for our own political institutions.

The theme of the conference, put rather directly, was to consider how our context and culture shape the character and consequences of political deliberation. Now this is a topic that I first started thinking through in an article titled ['Deliberative Cultures'](#) that I wrote with Professor John Dryzek a few years ago. And the conference is really an attempt to flesh these issues out, to look at them in more depth with a pretty brilliant group of overseas and domestic scholars.

**NT:** Who did you bring together for this conference? And I suppose, why?

**JS:** I mean the topic of the conference is a bit unusual. Because this is not actually a well-established area of inquiry. There's not really a list of people who you would go to automatically to flesh it out. There's not a group of people who study deliberation in this comparative sense. So, in that way, the conference involved bringing people together whose work crosses over with the themes that we set out. And that actually included people who haven't really worked on deliberation in the past.

So, an example of that is [Professor Stephanie Lawson](#) who's from Macquarie University in Sydney. And she has extensive experience doing field research in Pacific Island nations. Although Professor Lawson hasn't studied deliberation directly, she has written extensively on the relationship between traditional political institutions and in particular, she's written on the idea of consensus-based decision making and their relationship with modern electoral institutions where consensus-based decision making is pretty rare, at least within the legislative context.

So, Professor Lawson was especially good at keeping our feet on the ground. She was able to ground a series of otherwise abstract discussions in some specific examples that are drawn from her experience in her field research.

And another one of our guests was [Professor Mark Warren](#) who's from the University of British Columbia. So, we invited him because he's conducted extensive work on deliberation and he's an expert on the study of democratic institutions. And our general sort of view was we just thought that his presence would be invaluable regardless of the substantive topics that we were addressing. On contacting Mark, it turned out that he is actually working on the very questions that our conference sought to address.

So, in a paper that he's writing with Kathy Walker, who's an indigenous legal scholar from Canada, Professor Warren is examining the ideals and norms that motivate and regulate political deliberation and collective self-governance among the Cree people. Although they described their research as being very preliminary, the Walker & Warren paper was really fascinating. It opens up, I guess you could say, a universe of ethical concepts which describe proper relations between people, the non-human world, and future generations. All of which shape the character of deliberation and self-governance among the Cree historically and to a certain degree in the current era.

Another person we invited was [Dr Emmanuel Ani](#), a philosopher from the University of Ghana and, as in the case with Mark Warren, here's a speaker whose current work intersected really nicely with the themes of the conference, although they emerged from a very different sort of intellectual environment.

So, in the work that Dr Ani presented, he considered how traditional speech norms among the Akan, which is a multi-ethnic

group from West Africa, regulate rude and insulting speech in political affairs. So, Dr Ani's work is really pertinent to the politics of many post-colonial states where they find electoral politics too contestatory, indeed too rude. And the result of this is that there's sort of scepticism towards democratic institutions and there's often discussion about abolishing these institutions on the grounds that they give rise to forms of public discourse that people find distasteful.

So, the alternative vision that's sometimes proposed in these contexts, as in the case of Professor Lawson's work, is the idea that instead of democracy, that we'd have some kind of consensus rule. Or should I say instead of party-based democracy, some kind of consensus rule.

And on Dr Ani's view, such proposals should be treated with a lot of care because one-party rule always threatens to sort of devolve into authoritarianism even dictatorship. So, he proposed a different path and the idea there is that rather than abolishing democratic institutions, countries that are dissatisfied with rude and insulting public discourse should examine how to reintroduce and enforce traditional speech norms. Which historically speaking were quite successful in reigning negative passions or at least their expression.

And another one of our speakers was [Dr Vijayendra Rao](#), who's a lead economist at the World Bank. And his specific interest is really the study of political deliberation as it manifests within village assemblies in Southern India.

And he's written a series of papers on this in collaboration with other scholars in the World Bank and elsewhere using lots of different methods. And in the particular paper he presented, he wanted to look at the way gender influences participation at the village level. And he was able to investigate this and discuss this in a very systematic and comprehensive way because of the massive amount of data he's collected on this topic.

So, from an outside perspective, you might think, 'Oh well this is the study of deliberation in Indian villages, so the key question should be well how does culture shape the character of deliberation that we see there?' But Dr Rao's approach is a bit different in that his central interest is with gender and in particular, the way that the institutional structure of village assemblies shapes women's

participation and he had some pretty sharp findings in this. The first thing is that women participate less than men, which would be no surprise. But the interesting thing was that the institutional structure really does matter so in the village assemblies, they have a quota system, such that at least one in every three presidents at the village-level is a woman. And sure enough, Dr Rao discovered that actually having a female president within the village assembly has a really substantial impact on the prevalence of women speaking within those assemblies.

Another one of our speakers is [Arabella Lyon](#) who's a Professor of English at the State University of New York, Buffalo. And her interest generally is the comparative study of rhetoric. And of all our speakers, Professor Lyon might seem like the most unlikely to invite to a social science conference. But it's really important to remember the centrality of rhetoric to deliberation. Rhetoric, very simply, is the study of persuasion and argumentation. And that's a good part of what deliberation is about too. Although this connection hasn't been sort of recognised as clearly as it should've been.

So, Arabella's paper was directed to the question of audience within political deliberation. And her premise, or starting point in all of this, is that audiences in the study of deliberation are usually overlooked. They're just seen as the target of political speech, that's to say that audiences are just a group of people to win over. And in the study—in the comparative study of rhetoric, Arabella's key point of comparison is actually Chinese rhetoric. So, in the paper she presented, she examines the Confucian Analects for a different conception of audience. One with a strong ethical element. And she argues that there are considerable resources within Confucianism with which we can rethink the way those engaged in political speech or to conceive of those who form their audience. So not least, they should think about their ethical duties to their audience.

Well, the idea that we might learn something from Confucianism may seem counterintuitive not least because Confucianism is not democratic in any ordinary or obvious sense. And yet the insights that Confucianism provides us about speaking in audience as Arabella Lyon argues, are actually quite compelling.

The last speaker that I'd like to mention is [Professor Melissa Williams](#), who's a Professor of Political Science at the University of

Toronto. And she opened the conference with a paper titled, 'Globalising Democratic Theory' and the premise of this paper was that our theories of democracy must take a new form given the changing place of the national state within politics. And in particular increasing range of problems which are transnational in scope.

Professor Williams thus examined notions of democracy that are drawn from outside the usual canonical and mostly Western sources. Among other things, she examined the appeal to democratic rule made in *tianxia* thought in China as well as local level democracy movement in that country. And she also examines the ideas of democratic rule that are derived from the La Via Campesina movement, which is a global peasant movement.

**NT:** You've set out nicely the range of thought and it was a very diverse group. How did you actually find the people? Was it a sort of Google Scholar search or word of mouth snowballing? How did you do it?

**JS:** There's a mixture there. A couple of our speakers, Professor Melissa Williams and Professor Mark Warren, are just really well-known within the study of deliberation, so in their case, almost any topic that you would want to talk about that concerns deliberation, they would have something to contribute. So, they're pretty obvious.

With the other speakers, there were sort of different strategies involved. One of them, [Vijayendra Rao](#) from the World Bank, I mean he's written on a lot of different topics about deliberation and about development more generally. And his work has come to the attention of people who study deliberation within the last, I don't know, five or so years. So, his is a name that you could say is circulating.

The other two speakers were a little bit more haphazard. In the case of Professor Stephanie Lawson, I've been reading a little bit about the Pacific Islands and traditional practices there. And if you do that, you necessarily come across her work and although she hasn't written on deliberation, she has written on democratic theory and I just thought, well, this is someone who fits, who has a lot of knowledge about local context but also knows how to relate back to theory. So, that's how she came into the picture.

And Arabella Lyon is someone who's not yet well-known among people who study deliberation but I suspect she will be.

**NT:** The conference is over now, and I'm really interested what's the takeaway for democracy broadly and for deliberative democracy I guess in particular from the conference?

**JS:** There's a few different ways to approach this. So, I'll start off just by saying a few things about the academic takeaway and then I'll say a couple of things about sort of policy and politics.

So, in one level the conference was really about setting out a research agenda. So, we wanted to explore some themes, test some possible lines of research, and to do that with a really cluey and switched on group of people who could let you know quickly whether something's worth exploring or whether you might just be better off cutting it short.

So, one of the really obvious academic takeaways of the conference was that it showed the range of methods that you can bring to be on the study of deliberation, culture, and context. Often if you mention culture in there, with respect to academic research, you think, oh, well this is about ethnography. This is about participant observation and getting to know a context very closely by being there. And of course, that's true, that's one very powerful way to study culture. But what the conference did is to show some different approaches. So, I mentioned Vijayendra Rao's work, which involved these quantitative methods in the study of deliberation within village assemblies. So, what Vijayendra Rao and his co-researchers did was actually record lots and lots of speech that's happening at the village level and then digitise it. And then there's a set of methods that are becoming more popular called topic modelling which basically allow you, in a systematic way, to analyse the topics that are being discussed across you know, very many different contexts. And now the reason that this is valuable is because it actually allows you to make very strong generalisations about what people are talking about, who's talking, the effects that it has. So, it's really a quite powerful innovation I think in the study of deliberation and can be used in a way that's complementary to ethnographic work.

Pushing in a very different direction from the perspective of method was Professor Arabella Lyon's work. What she did is this very close rhetorical reading of the Analects. So, we're talking

about some works in social and political philosophy that are you know more than 2,000 years old. And you might wonder, well, what does that have to do with contemporary deliberation? Well, on the one hand, you know, not very much because the Analects are not widely read anymore. But the context within which she's writing is actually one where Confucianism is making a big comeback in China. Chinese scholars are interested in it. Chinese political actors are interested in it. And if you can read the Analects closely, or if you can read other Confucian texts and demonstrate the relevance that they have to some contemporary policy or political problem, you can actually secure a pretty large audience. So, in her work, showing that Confucianism entails ethical duties towards our audience, which is you know the idea that we have to treat our audience as more than a passive target for arguments, does have the capacity to influence the way deliberation is seen in China. And it's especially significant because there's a real take-off of deliberation at the local level in Chinese governance. And pushing in a different kind of direction, her work really shows, I guess, the relevance that non-Western political theory could potentially have, you know, to our own political theories and our practices. And it's counterintuitive once again to think Confucianism might motivate the way we undertake deliberation in Western countries. But if Confucianism is what compels us to think about our audience and the audience of political speech in general, I think that's a very valuable thing.

The policy level, I think two clear messages stand out.

The first is that culture can shape deliberation in very productive ways. So, you know, you might come to this and think, 'oh well, traditional culture, that's what stands in the way of reasonable discussions in politics'. It's once we get rid of our cultural traditions that we can, you know, we can be more rational. But really, what the conference showed is something pushing in a different direction. So, in the context that was studied in West Africa and among the Cree in Canada for starters, we really see how cultural norms and meanings can render political deliberation much more civil and probably more productive than it often is in the rationalised and disenchanted modern context of Western democracies.

I'm not sure what the implication of this is exactly. But one reading that you might take from it is the idea that we actually need some kind of public ethics to guide political deliberation in Western



democracies. Perhaps we need much stronger speech norms such that we can know—so that we know clearly how to deal with politicians and other public figures who stoop too low in the kinds of rhetoric they use and the kinds of appeals they make.

The other message I think that came from it is that culture, under certain circumstances, can be overcome. So, again. Dr Vijayendra Rao's research demonstrates quite clearly that carefully designed deliberative institutions can themselves be a context in which the inequalities brought by caste and gender can be challenged and successfully so. Low-caste women in the assemblies he studied claim equal status to men and members of higher castes, by speaking as though they were equals. So, in a society like India, one that prizes liberal democratic institutions and the values on which they're founded, this is surely a good thing. Deliberation in this respect can be an engine of social change. I think that's a really powerful message that came out of the conference.

**NT:** That's wonderful.

**JS:** So, the conference was funded by Professor John Dryzek's ARC Laureate Fellowship. What Professor John Dryzek's Laureate Fellowship is about is the study of the global governance of climate change and in particular, it asks what the global governance of climate change would look like were it democratic.

Now, obviously, democracy at the global level, the level of global institutions, isn't at this present time going to entail normal Western liberal democratic electoral institutions. So, the emphasis is really on the deliberative aspect.

So, part of what this conference was trying to do is to develop the intellectual framework which might guide the institutionalisation of deliberation at the global level. And the premise there is that if people from different societies and cultures are going to engage in deliberation at the global level, the forms of deliberation that we institute have to somehow resonate with traditional practices. Or at least practices that have become familiar to them in the societies that they're from.

**NT:** In future episodes in this bonus series, I'll be speaking to people who presented at the conference, talking about their papers, as well as talking to some of the people who were on the final roundtable, reflecting on the conference overall.