

## How Collective Political Intelligence produced better policy

Political Task Committees in Gentofte, Denmark

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## HOW COLLECTIVE POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE PRODUCED BETTER POLICY

### Political Task Committees in Gentofte, Denmark

*Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing*

#### **The story**

In 2015, the City Council in Gentofte, Denmark, decided to change the way it made decisions. In this town of 75,000 people just north of Copenhagen, elected officials were increasingly discontent with the conventional way of developing policies. Most public decisions were negotiated behind closed doors in City Hall based on input from public administrators, rather than from the people they represent or the populations those policies would affect the most. This lack of dialogue with citizens not only hampered the Council's ability to make policies that worked for the intended purpose or to come up with innovative ideas, but also to secure public support for the decisions made.

The idea was to introduce Political Task Committees (PTCs) as the new format for municipal policy-making. A PTC is a political *ad hoc* committee commissioned by the Council to prepare a policy proposal, composed of politicians from different parties and citizens of diverse backgrounds. We rarely see the concept of collective intelligence used in analyses of political life, but the events in Gentofte provide a welcome opportunity to investigate how a systematic staging of dialogue between politicians and citizens and other stakeholders can make them build something intelligent together.

This chapter aims to show that Gentofte's PTC model not only holds the potential to advance what we denote as collective *political* intelligence, but also that the model's ability to fulfill this potential hinges on skillful facilitation.

First, we specify what we mean by collective political intelligence. Then, we describe the new format for policy-making in Gentofte and present insights from a longitudinal case study of the policy impact of the PTCs. Finally, we conclude by considering how a collective political intelligence perspective can inform efforts to reshape representative democracies.

#### **A concept of collective political intelligence**

At a general level, the concept of collective intelligence under scrutiny in this handbook insists that intelligence is not only a property of individuals, but that sometimes a group

of individuals collaborate in ways that seem intelligent (Malone and Bernstein, 2015). As such, collective intelligence can emerge from collaborations between a variety of actors that involve different degrees of aggregation and integration of perspectives and ideas.

Many research disciplines, from psychology and sociology to business studies, economics, computer science, and organizational studies, have analyzed the phenomenon of collective intelligence and how it can be promoted and put to work for different purposes (Bonabeau, 2009; Woolley et al., 2015; Chmait et al., 2016; Mao and Woolley, 2016; Gloor, 2017; Beckre et al., 2017; Peters, 2021).

In recent decades, the interest in collective intelligence has also found its way into political science and public administration under various labels. In governance theory, a new strand of research is interested in how co-creation and co-production between public and private actors can enhance the quality of public policies and effectiveness of public services (Peters and Heraud, 2015; Ansell and Torfing, 2021). A wave of public sector innovation theory is scrutinizing how collaboration between actors with different mindsets, experiences and expertise can spur public innovation (Torfing, 2016; Sørensen, 2017). In democratic theory, there is a growing interest in how collective intelligence can advance the legitimacy of representative democracy. Helene Landemore (2012) looks at how deliberation among randomly selected citizens can contribute to developing a particular kind of democratic reason or “collective wisdom.” Geoff Mulgan (2018) has pointed to enhanced dialogue between politicians and citizens as a promising way to promote learning and reduce the impact of fake news and partisan misinformation.

A common feature uniting the growing interest in new models of collaboration in political science and public administration is that they tend to emphasize cognitive aspects of collective intelligence, such as knowledge, reasoning, information, and learning, but largely fail to address the specifically political aspects of such collaborations. We define politics as *the making of collective decisions in the face of diverse and more or less competing perceptions of what is valuable for society and its members* (Mouffe, 2005; Runciman, 2014; Dahl and Lindblom, 2017; Lasswell, 2018). Moreover, theories aiming to capture what collective political decision-making entails coin it as a process of negotiation that takes place between actors who accept pluralism and the undecidable character of views and opinions as a constitutive condition for making joint political decisions (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1994; Crick, 2005; Mansbridge and Martin, 2015; Hajer, 2013; Gutmann and Thompson, 2014; Knight and Schwartzberg, 2020).

Political negotiation can involve consensus, but so too does it often require bargaining, compromising, and patient coalition-building. As such, developing a concept of *political* collective intelligence means asking what kind of knowledge, reasoning, information, and learning is produced by the aggregation of ideas, viewpoints, and perspectives in such negotiations. We propose that collective political intelligence comes in the shape of *a realistic and deep understanding of what the disagreements are, what it would require to make decisions that satisfy several views, and what the costs would be of making decisions that produce losers*.

Moreover, we propose that the production of a collective political intelligence does not only rely on horizontal political negotiations between different citizens or different political elites, but also *between political elites and citizens*. Hence, the advancement of collective political intelligence relies on politicians that can exercise a particular kind of interactive leadership that thrives on extensive and close dialogue with citizens on the substance of policy, and aims to integrate this activity in the institutional architecture of the policy-making process (Sørensen, 2020).

## **The Political Task Committee model**

In deciding to establish PTCs, the City Council in Gentofte has stepped into the role as interactive political leaders. Since 2015, these committees have brought together politicians and citizens in a joint effort to develop policy proposals that build on a foundation of collective political intelligence. The PTCs engage politicians from different parties and citizens with very different backgrounds in framing and negotiating a policy proposal. These negotiations last several months, during which the committees have access to institutional support and rich opportunities to seek input from various sources of expertise at different stages. Before discussing the impact of the PTCs and the turn to interactive political leadership of policy-making processes in Gentofte, let us briefly describe the background for this reform and how it was designed.

Gentofte is one of the most affluent, well-managed, and innovative municipalities in Denmark. For decades, it has been under the leadership of a powerful mayor with an absolute majority in the City Council and a history of forming broad coalitions that include several small parties.

As such, there is a well-established practice of cross-party collaboration within the Council. Nevertheless, by the spring of 2014, many councilors were ready for a departure from the status quo. These elected officials felt that they spent too much time on casework, had very little opportunity to develop policies, and rarely were in any kind of conversation with the citizens except for when affluent and well-educated citizens protested against City Council decisions. For the most part, administrative staff framed the policy questions and prepared the substantive proposals. To the extent that elected politicians were involved in policy formulation, these discussions took place in standing political committees that did not involve relevant and affected citizens and stakeholders. Wary of their limited impact on policy, on the one hand, and their limited contact with citizens, on the other hand, Gentofte's councilors wanted a new way to hear directly from their constituents and to get an opportunity to explain and revise their own ideas.

Why would a powerful mayor, in office 20 years, agree to such an experiment in collective intelligence? First, the need for innovation was aligned with his own political situation. Though secure in the mayor's chair, his party was not a national force, meaning that it was unlikely that he would ascend to higher office. Whatever impact he would have at a greater level in Danish politics would be through the innovations he was able to bring to fruition in Gentofte.

Furthermore, he had recently seen up close the weaknesses of the traditional top-down approach. A year prior to the decision to institute PTCs, his administration had announced the creation of a new park with a "skate center" for the city's young people. In traditional fashion, the mayor had hired a respected architectural firm to conceive the design. But, shortly before the design was to be made public, when he went into the street and showed it to a group of young skaters, their response was immediate: "the person who made this is not a skater. It will not work." The mayor immediately decided to abandon the firm-produced design and start over with proposals from the kids themselves. As he explained to us later, "What I realized is that we make so many mistakes because we don't talk to the people who actually use the service."

He realized, too, that this way of doing business – top-down proposals with no input – had become endemic.

I called the city manager and said that I wanted a measurement from the administration of the number of policy proposals from my office that were passed without changing a comma. He worked on it a few days and called me back – it was 97%.

So the mayor had seen both the need and the model for how to conceive policy differently. What he needed was a way to de-risk any innovative proposal. This is when he called us. As researchers, we had presented a blueprint for a PTC-type idea to the city council in 2011 and 2014, including how decision-making would work in the committees, oversight mechanisms, and the like. Out of the blue one day the mayor called us: “We just did it, the city manager and I. We totally reorganized how the council works. Would you two like to evaluate it?” By bringing in technical experts at the right phase, with the right combination of political actors behind him, the mayor was taking a bold – but much less risky – step into the unknown.

Based on discussions in the Council, the mayor proposed a new political model that was debated, amended, and finally approved by the Council and enacted on August 1, 2015. From that day forward, all new municipal policies were to be formulated by PTCs composed of five politicians from different parties and ten citizens of diverse backgrounds. The guiding principle for appointing participants is to maximize the diversity of the group as a whole. A small group of public administrators – some trained in facilitating collaborative processes and others with relevant policy expertise – was established to assist each committee throughout its six to eight months of operation. Within each PTC, an elected official serves the role of Chair and another as Deputy Chair. Each committee is free to organize its work process as it sees fit within the overall mandate given by the City Council, and members can decide to invite guests to testify, make excursions, form working groups, and host events to gather further input from communities with an interest in the issue.

Tasks for the PTCs are identified through a multi-stage process within the Council. First, the Council holds an “inspiration seminar,” featuring open discussion among the politicians on which political problems are most suitable for dialogue between politicians and citizens. The city councilors then agree on establishing a certain number of PTCs. After lengthy political discussion, the City Council issues a written remit or mandate for each of the new committees. The mandate describes the background and nature of the topic at hand, the overall political objectives that should guide each PTC, and the timeframe and expected deliverables from the PTC to the Council. The final deliverable can take the form of a vision statement or policy proposal, strategy, or action plan.

The mandate issued by the City Council also defines the “competence profiles” of citizens that will be invited to participate in the PTC. People from relevant stakeholder organizations may participate as single individuals with particular competences, but not as representatives of their organization and its specific interests. The guiding idea for drawing up the competence profiles is to make sure that a broad variety of actors are included. The municipality advertises the mandate for each of the committees and issues a call for interested citizens who match the competence profiles in local newspapers, on different websites and via posters in local public institutions. This call for participants urges citizens to register at the municipal website if they are interested in becoming a member of a particular PTC and think that they match one or more of the competence profiles. The politicians and municipal staff also use their local contacts and networks to encourage citizens to sign up for relevant PTCs.

At a subsequent City Council meeting, the politicians compare the self-registered citizens with the competence profiles in the different mandate and formally select and appoint the ten citizen participants based on the criteria they had defined. To avoid discouraging those

who were not selected, the Council invites them to take part in other activities that could benefit the city, including participating in a subcommittee, workshop, “innovation camp” or public hearing.

The “innovation camps” were a particularly interesting element of the new governance model. The seed of the idea was to find some way of involving a greater number of young people, including those who had not been selected for the PTC, into the discussions over city policies for youth. Supported by four members of the city administration, the PTC for youth organized a weekend-long “innovation camp” at the city hall, where the committee would show a preliminary version of their goals and ideas to the larger group and challenge them, “How can we make these ideas happen in practice?”

As the weekend of the first camp unfolded, however, the organizers of the event came to a realization. “We knew that we wanted the kids from the PTC themselves to be the facilitators,” said one of the organizers.

The adults would be guests, playing a supporting role with tools and information as needed. But watching the kids at work, we saw how complex this kind of facilitation really is! To communicate clearly and organize people into brainstorming groups, then compare the ideas as a group of 50 – this was really tough, and the kids who facilitated did an amazing job. It made us realize we needed a new kind of public administrator.

Following the first innovation camps, the municipality made a commitment to hire and train facilitators from the community, as well as offer new training opportunities in facilitation methods to city staff. “Before, the staff used to just defend themselves when there was a problem,” she continued.

Now they say, ‘Come in and help us fix it so it will work better next time’ – they realize they need facilitators too, not just technical experts. This way of working has spread to all corners of the municipality.

As this culture of facilitation grows, the challenge for Gentofte is to keep building this new network of high-quality facilitators while ensuring that they truly facilitate, as opposed to step in and influence the process themselves.

The Council retains the role of guarantor of the values of the PTC process, and decides which of the local councilors will participate in what PTC. It appoints those politicians based on a mathematical model that ensures proportional representation of the political party alliances across all committees. When each PTC concludes its work, two citizens from the PTC present the policy proposal to the City Council for endorsement. This format ensures integration of the PTCs in the formal political process in the municipality. Moreover, the detailed regulation of the PTCs aims to align politics in the PTCs and politics with the power balance in the City Council and to secure broad inclusion of different types of citizens.

The results of this experiment in collective political intelligence are striking: following adoption of the PTC model, the mayor was re-elected in a landslide. The PTCs are now an established city institution. Unlike participatory initiatives in other cities, no party is against them, meaning that if the Council, administration, and citizens are able to maintain the spirit of continual learning and improvement, the prospects for this new way of governing are bright.

## **What science tells us**

### ***PTCs as drivers of collective political intelligence***

In a longitudinal case study from 2015 to 2021, our research team investigated how the PTCs have accommodated and shaped the dialogue between politicians and citizens, the degree to which they have advanced the collective political intelligence of the policymakers and the effectiveness, innovativeness, and perceived legitimacy of its policies (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2022).

These studies draw on different data types including observations, interviews, mini-surveys, and document studies – and there is plenty to study. The Council started out by establishing eight PTCs and after six years, more than 42 PTCs have produced policy proposals that the City Council has subsequently enacted. Topics addressed by the PTCs cover the whole spectrum of municipal policy areas. Among them are youth policy, professional insertion for refugees, health and well-being, ways to make the city green and sustainable, and a plan for turning libraries into cultural hubs. The general practice has been that each PTC meets monthly, and supplements these regular meetings with (i) smaller working-group sessions where not all participants are present, and (ii) a variety of thematic events where other citizens or politicians contribute to the discussions. Our research team has observed meetings, working groups and events in selected PTCs, and interviewed a large number of citizens, politicians, and public administrators, just as we have conducted a number of surveys (Sørensen and Torfing, 2022).

The study shows that the PTCs have indeed contributed to strengthening the political conversation between politicians and citizens as well as between different citizens and politicians across party lines. As documented in a large survey conducted in 2016, politicians and citizens, as well as the public administrators who facilitate the PTCs, find that the committees support the development of a more nuanced understanding of the problems at hand and provide input and stimulate discussions that lead to innovative policy ideas and strategies for carrying them out. Mini-surveys and interviews conducted in 2021 support this finding (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016, 2022).

An illustrative example is a PTC that the City Council in 2016 assigned to formulate a proposal to support young people in the city. At the first meetings, it gradually dawned on the participants that despite other differences, a joint challenge and source of stress for young people in Gentofte is an intense pressure to perform in school as well as in their social lives. This revelation triggered a conversation about how young people experience life on social media, in school, and in family life, and the Citizen Council subsequently decided to establish a new PTC to investigate how to reduce these pressures on young people.

As another observation from the PTC on youth policy and from some of the other early PTCs, the politicians tended to be rather quiet and mainly listened to what the citizens had to say in the first PTCs. For various reasons, they were reluctant to state their opinions openly. However, when citizens demanded to hear what they had to say, the politicians changed their behavior and began to engage more in the discussions. This had the effect of invigorating the conversations, even as it risked bringing thornier and more sensitive issues to light. Our research showed that participating in such discussions gave the citizens a better understanding of the difficult priorities and complex issues that politicians deal with, while also giving the politicians valuable input for inter-party political discussions in Standing Committees and plenary sessions of the Council. Hence, the politicians began to function as “boundary spanners” between the PTCs and traditional city institutions, with the result

that policy proposals developed in the former stood a better chance of gaining recognition within the political system as a whole.

The study of different PTCs revealed that their policy proposals are products of neither broad consensus nor hard-nosed bargaining. They result, rather, from subtle negotiations between citizens and politicians that involve integration as well as aggregation of diverse positions. Although facilitation methods of the PTCs stimulated an alignment of perspectives, views, and opinions – including exchanges that change minds and generate ideas and intentions that no one had at the outset – disagreement among the participants continues. However, rather than resulting in open conflict, most PTCs manage to produce a policy proposal that most of the involved actors can support even when they do not get things exactly their way. Sometimes the policy takes the form of a balanced mosaic of different viewpoints and ideas that are voiced by the participating politicians and citizens. At other times, it is an aggregated list of proposals. However these diverse views are managed, they serve as an important source of inspiration for the City Council and the municipal staff, while also giving participating citizens a sense of real inclusion in the political process.

This outcome was not universal: in some PTCs, participants reported the sentiment that they did not get a chance to fully speak their mind or did not end up influencing the final proposal as they had hoped. From the range of evidence available to us, the most important factor affecting the way PTC members evaluated the policy-making process and its outcomes was the quality of the facilitation and the role of the policy experts. When there were limited scope for open-ended debate between citizens and politicians, when the facilitators did not do enough to involve those participants who were less prone to speak up, and when there was overly lengthy input from experts, these factors limited the degree to which the PTCs ended up producing proposals that all participants accepted.

### **Do's and don'ts**

The study of the Gentofte PTCs indicates that lengthy conversations between politicians and citizens can produce a specific kind of collective political intelligence, and that such an intelligence can stimulate the development of effective, innovative, and legitimate policies.

We may ask, then, what are the implications of these findings for the current challenges facing representative democracy (see, e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Runciman, 2018)?

We propose that a concept of collective political intelligence is helpful in understanding that political negotiations, for all their messiness, can be an essential force in coping with the disagreements that are natural to a pluralist way of life. The PTC model shows how subtle forms of political aggregation and integration can harness these political practices for productive and inclusive ends.

How to make such a model work? Here are our suggestions:

1. **Start by identifying a problem that people care about.** Too many city administrations seek to innovate by “making the hammer first, then go around looking for nails.” Whether it’s sanitation, education, or public safety, focus on the community problems that are relevant and urgent for the greatest number, then build processes adapted to those specific problems.
2. The problem-centered approach will require **a change in mindset from city administration.** Collaborating with citizens on complex problems cannot work if the city team is stuck in a “business as usual” mentality where citizens are treated as cases to be resolved instead of as partners. Inspiring political leadership and lots of one-on-one



- communication are needed to bring about this mentality shift. Once a first wave of administrators starts acting in a new way, it may become easier for others to follow.
3. **Citizens also will need to change the way they think.** Rather than a posture of “just solve my problem,” they will also need to feel ownership and responsibility to act. The best way to do this is to build interactions among politicians, administrators, and citizens that “feel different” from the traditional complaint-and-response. New meeting locations, workshop formats, and even seating arrangements can help change the dynamic and get people interacting as people, not as bureaucrats or politicians.
  4. Constructing new ways of governing means deconstructing as well. Conventional accounts of politics tend to pit representative democracy and direct or people-driven democracy as fundamentally opposed. Our experience in Gentofte points to a middle ground. **It is the connection between the two, not the victory of one over the other,** which is going to make democracy better. Technical expertise and citizen expertise are both fundamentally important in solving hard public problems. This is true particularly in the context of national problems, but this truth is manifest at the local level as well. Democratic practices such as PTCs are helpful for public decision-makers in a context where the public has become very demanding, with high expectations which are hard to respond to from public office. Gentofte is a radical example which other cities are beginning to adopt.

The case study from Gentofte illuminates how promoting collective political intelligence is not only relevant for saving pluralism from harmful polarization within society, but also for mitigating the antagonism between citizens and political elites that has opened the door to populist and authoritarian alternatives. We note that it is not only in well-off cities that this model has worked. In fact, the PTC model has been implemented in a poor municipality in Norway which was prone to political conflict and it has drawn excellent results, comparable to the ones obtained in Denmark.

The message is clear to scholars and policymakers who seek new strategies for meeting this crisis: If collaboration between citizens and politicians is carefully designed, it can not only function but also thrive within the larger framework of representative democracy. Collective intelligence can make for good politics as well.

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