



Sustaining democracy in disaster: The seeds of recovery

Provocation

Bronwyn Hayward

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Bronwyn Hayward is Associate Professor of Political Science and Head of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Canterbury New Zealand

The city of Christchurch New Zealand is built on very shaky ground. On September 4th, 2010, its residents were reminded of exactly what it means to live on the boundary of two of the earth's major tectonic plates – the Australian and the Pacific – when Christchurch experienced a 7.1 magnitude earthquake. In the two years that followed this event, the city rocked and rolled with 3,800 quakes at magnitude 3 or greater, including 59 quakes of magnitude 5 and a devastating 6.3 earthquake which killed 185 people on 22 February 2011. Taken together, these events comprised the largest national disaster New Zealand has experienced and one of the biggest natural disasters to befall an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country since World War II¹.

In an earlier time, Christchurch was also at the epicentre of another major upheaval, a democratic event of equally seismic proportions, which changed the political landscape of New Zealand. In 1893, the country became the first nation to enfranchise women in a suffrage movement led by prominent Christchurch resident, Kate Sheppard and her colleagues² who strategically and determinedly used petitions to secure universal franchise.

However, the recent earthquake events have tested the democratic heritage of Christchurch and shaken the principles of inclusive, participatory and transparent decision making in New Zealand. In his book *Strong Democracy*, democratic theorist Benjamin Barber reminds us that making decisions democratically is rarely easy, because it requires us to ask, “(W)hat shall we do when something has to be done that affects us all, we wish to be reasonable, yet we disagree on means and ends and are without independent grounds to make the choice?”³

In the confusion, grief and fear that accompanied the Christchurch earthquakes, New Zealand was confronted by precisely the problem Barber describes. At times our city recovery has seemed an overwhelming task. So it is not surprising, but deeply disappointing, that many well-meaning people often argue that “democracy is over rated”. Or, they believe that the situation is so serious and urgent, and the problems so far reaching, that decisions need to be taken by informed experts, or small groups of key stakeholders, not by the community as a whole, let alone elected local

¹ Bollard, Alan (2012) *New Zealand Reserve Bank Bulletin*, September. <http://www.rbnz.govt.nz/-/media/ReserveBank/Files/Publications/Bulletins/2012/2012sep75-3.pdf>

² Brookes, Barbara (2016) *A History of New Zealand Women*, Bridget Williams Books; Wellington.

³ Barber, Benjamin (1984) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley, LA; University of California Press.

representatives who would simply squabble over particular interests⁴. The seductive rhetoric of managerialism and the logic of the market, suggest it would be more efficient if decisions were led by the private sector or central government, and not 'left' to 'messy', 'risky' or 'uncertain' processes of everyday democratic practice.

Arguments to suspend democracy in the face of emergencies are not unique to New Zealand; they are an increasingly common response to emergencies⁵. Yet as I will argue here, the experience of Christchurch also illustrates why suspending democracy in the face of a crisis, is misguided. On our dynamic planet, cities will experience more global disasters of greater severity, in the form of storms, floods, or heat waves. These events will test the ability of our national, regional and city governments to make decisions in a changing climate. In this context, we need to find ways to maintain democracy in the face of disaster, otherwise we risk stripping future generations of their rights to both a democratic future, and a more sustainable one.

Destabilising local democracy: responding to crisis, disastrously?

As Graham Smith has argued, what is distinctive about democracies is that the authority for political decisions and actions ultimately rests with us, the people, through three key principles of decision making: inclusion, participation and transparency⁶. These principles are often fiercely contested and interpreted in remarkably varied ways, yet these intense debates also underscore how important these principles are for contemporary democracy.

Taken together, these principles create a democratic presumption that decision-making should be open and transparent, enabling active citizen participation, and that robust reasons must be offered to justify any action to exclude or restrict citizens' rights in public life. So it is disturbing that the first action of the New Zealand Government after the September 2010 earthquake was to breach the Constitution and expand extra-ordinary powers, excluding local voices in decision making, despite extensive protest from legal scholars and citizens alike⁷.

In 2012, colleagues from political science departments around New Zealand joined me in writing an open letter to the New Zealand Prime Minister to express our deep concern about the exclusion of citizens from core areas of decision making⁸. These exclusions affected decision making in three key ways. First, planning for local city rebuilding was taken out of the hands of locally elected councillors and replaced by appointed officials, working for a newly created central government department, the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Agency (CERA), accountable to a single Minister with extraordinary powers. Second, despite widespread objections, a controversial suspension of regional elections was extended. Elected representatives were replaced with government appointed commissioners to manage water, particularly irrigation permits to support a controversial period of dairy farming intensification and expansion. Third, locally elected school boards were excluded from

⁴ See for example, Minister of the Environment Nick Smith and Associate Minister of Local Government, Louise Upston quoted in the Christchurch Press in 2015 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/67438119/Democratic-ECan-carries-too-many-risks-says-Nick-Smith>

⁵ Honig, Bonnie (2009) *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law and Democracy*. Princeton University Press xv

⁶ Smith, Graham (2015) 'Options for participatory decision-making for the post-2015 development agenda', Working Paper commissioned for the UN Expert Group Meeting 'Formal/Informal Institutions for Citizen Engagement for implementing the Post 2015 Development Agenda' <http://www.fdsd.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Options-for-participatory-decision-making-paper.pdf>

⁷ Hayward, Bronwyn (2012) 'Canterbury's Political Quake'. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/perspective/6664104/Canterburys-political-quake>

⁸ Hayward, Bronwyn et al (2012) 'Letter to the NZ Prime Minister'. <http://growing-greens.blogspot.co.nz/search?updated-min=2012-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&updated-max=2013-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&max-results=8>

decision making for the future of local school education by a rushed Ministry of Education plan to merge and close many schools across the city after the earthquakes⁹.



Protestors against school reorganisation (Photo Credit: Bronwyn Hayward)

In her well known *Shock Doctrine* thesis, Naomi Klein argues that governments frequently seize on disasters, real or manufactured, to promote unpopular, far reaching economic policies¹⁰. Under normal circumstances, Klein argues, these principles would be rejected or at least hotly contested. But in cases where a community is distracted, tired and overwhelmed, controversial policies can be rushed through.

In Christchurch, urgency was used to justify limiting opportunities for inclusion, participation and transparency in local decision making. Lines of accountability became confused, opportunities for public deliberation were undermined and structures of local representation weakened. The process of merger and closure of schools was especially destructive. Much research on children coping with disasters stresses the importance of maintaining supportive social networks¹¹. So the action of New Zealand's Ministry of Education officials to use the moment to reorganise the school system, despite extensive community grief, was deeply disturbing. Schools are often the frontline of support for many families, children and teens in disaster. These changes removed crucial support at the time it was needed most. Canterbury children and teens continue to suffer disproportionately high reported rates of mental illness and youth suicide.

The outcomes of excluding the public from water management and city planning was also concerning. High rates of river deterioration continue seemingly unabated and there is wide spread confusion and concern at the lack of transparency in decision-making over insurance repayments and the slow rate of home rebuilding.

⁹ Hayward, Bronwyn and Cretney, Raven (2015) 'Governing Through Disaster', in Janine Hayward (ed.) *New Zealand Government and Politics* 6th Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.403-415.

¹⁰ Klein, Naomi (2008) *Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism* New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

¹¹ National Association of School Psychologists (2008) *Global Disasters: Helping Children Cope* <http://www.psychology.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2-Global-Disasters-Helping-Children-Cope.pdf>; MacDonald, Nikki (2016) 'Why More Children and Young People are Asking for Help', 2 April, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/77974796/why-are-more-children-and-young-people-seeking-help-for-serious-mental-health-problems>

I have described the situation that emerged in Christchurch as an example of a **FEARS** model of governance¹². In this model citizens' agency (or the ability to imagine and effect desired change) becomes **Frustrated** and communities are **Excluded** from environments they value as decision making becomes **Authoritarian**. In the FEARS model, justice is defined in increasingly **Retributive** ways, and expressed harshly as blame, often on individuals. In the process of truncated decision making, our democratic imagination for new possibilities and alternatives is at risk of being **Silenced**.



The Central City Cordon: a source of frustration



Local residents as spectators rather than citizens

(Photo Credits: Bronwyn Hayward)

Practises that help sustain democracy in disaster

Disasters threaten societies. Whether it's a series of slow cumulative, almost imperceptible daily changes like a change in climate or a sudden cataclysmic event like an earthquake, these challenges test more than our physical resilience. They tear at the fabric of our societies, economies and our citizenship. Yet disaster also brings opportunity for new insight and a chance to rethink basic principles – including how we 'do' democracy.

The experience of the Christchurch earthquakes also offers hope, in the form of innovative citizen actions which have sowed the seeds for alternative, more imaginative and democratic responses to disaster recovery. In the first instance, Christchurch youth in particular took an active approach to inclusion and participation in decision-making post-quakes.

The Student Volunteer 'Army' created by students from Christchurch and the wider Canterbury region is a stand-out example of the spontaneous way community collaboration can happen after a disaster. University student Sam Johnston¹³, and a small core group of colleagues from a local university hostel and musical theatre group, initially organised one hundred students overnight on Facebook following the September 2010 quake.

¹² Hayward, Bronwyn (2012) *Children, Citizenship and Environment: Nurturing a Democratic Imagination in a Changing World*, London: Routledge.

¹³ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/6434252/Sam-Johnson-named-young-NZer-of-year>



The self-coordinated Canterbury Student Volunteer 'Army' (Photo Credit: Eve Welch)

By the end of September, the group numbered 4,000. Working parties spread across the city cleared mud and silt which had inundated streets and houses as liquefaction. Building on what they learned from that experience, it took the students only two weeks following the February 2011 earthquakes before they were communicating with 24,000 people via Facebook. They organised working parties of up to 100 and dispatching an estimated 10,000 young volunteers to help all over the city to assist residents, especially the elderly and communities hardest hit by the inundation of mud and silt that accompanied these earthquakes. It wasn't just Facebook and Twitter that enabled this astonishing, youthful collaboration. There were pre-existing conditions that helped young Christchurch citizens (and similar adult groups) to successfully and spontaneously cooperate. In particular, the students drew on pre-existing networks, across different groups in the city, including small business and media firms, charities and the non-profit sector. In particular, the social capital and communication skills of Sam Johnson and his small core team helped students to successfully lobby and resist initial rebuffs to their offers to help by civil defence officials so they could step up and lead (albeit carefully prescribed) aspects of city recovery.

Other seeds of more democratic responses to the earthquakes were sown in a city-wide consultation event known as *Share An Idea* in early 2011, organised by the local council soon after the February 2011 earthquakes¹⁴. An estimated 100,000 people turned out to offer ideas for re-planning the city. This highly successful week-long event involved nearly a third of the city's residents, young and old, in writing submissions, visiting exhibits and discussing city planning options. However, the enthusiastic outpouring of local insight came to an abrupt halt when central government stepped in, sidelining the city council and community. They developed their own '100 day plan' based around precincts and anchor projects developed by a small team of experts and including expensive and controversial large scale stadium and convention centre proposals intended to attract business to the central city¹⁵.

Nevertheless, the spirit of a more inclusive and active approach to community planning has lived on in numerous groups of artists, students, heritage advocates, community gardeners and social organisations which formed loose alliances to build "transition projects" – provisional, experimental and temporary activities that have popped up all over the city¹⁶. These transition projects are often playful and provocative ways of exploring new ideas. For example, pop up 'inconvenience stores' that sell second hand clothes and food, but only when the community has time or a surplus, offered a way in which citizens were invited to imagine alternative economies and to physically come

¹⁴ Christchurch City Council (2011) 'Share an Idea'. <http://www.ccc.govt.nz/the-rebuild/strategic-plans/share-an-idea/>

¹⁵ Farrell Fiona (2015) *Villa on the Edge of the Empire: 100 ways to read a city*, Auckland: Random House.

¹⁶ Barnaby Bennet et al. (2014) *Once in a Lifetime: city rebuilding after Disaster Christchurch*, Free Range Press <http://www.projectfreerange.com/product/once-in-a-lifetime/>

together to reclaim and use public space, and to literally, 'think differently'. The latter is a phrase made popular by one of these 'gap-filler' transitional projects: a shared library of second hand books stored in an abandoned refrigerator at a time when many public libraries were commandeered for emergency government offices.

Finally, democracy was reinvigorated by pop-up protest which took place regularly all over the city. Citizens joined together to protest slow responses to insurance payments and for example, to celebrate Suffrage night, previously a poorly recognised and supported event on the city calendar. Regular suffrage protests have created a 'public moment' notably highlighting children's and environmental concerns and hopes for the city. Suffrage rallies unrolled a giant petition of calico hand-printed by children protesting their schools' closures as one simple physical action of reclaiming the tradition of Kate Sheppard's remarkable democratic legacy. These events have added energy to further plans, such as a 'child friendly city' and a Christchurch Future Generations Act, similar to the Welsh Government's ground-breaking 2015 legislation. It has also given some impetus to the debate about lowering the voting age to 16. In many ways, the outpouring of citizen protest and resistance to command and control from central government in the aftermath of the earthquake has reinvigorated a more radical tradition of post-colonial debate in the city. For example, indigenous Maori local iwi (or tribal representatives) from Ngai Tahu have taken up new opportunities for representation on government boards; communities have debated re-imposition of English settler architecture; and the city has been confronted by deepening social inequalities, now rendered starkly visible in the uneven process of recovery of broken homes and displaced communities¹⁷.



School children creating suffrage petitions

In summary, despite a 'disastrous' initial democratic response to the earthquakes by the New Zealand government, the subsequent actions of citizens have sown the seeds of hope for new ways that Christchurch citizens might yet sustain a more inclusive, more active, and more transparent local democracy – a democracy that could yet support future generations to flourish in the face of disaster.

Concluding remarks

A growing body of research calls for a nuanced approach to understanding the politics of disaster, one which is sensitive to different time scales of recovery and the experiences of citizens¹⁸. There is much evidence to suggest that in the wake of natural disasters, inequality often deepens and

¹⁷ Pickles, Katie (2016) *Christchurch Ruptures*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books.

¹⁸ Pelling, Mark; Dill, Kathleen. (2010) 'Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaptation of sociopolitical regimes', *Progress in Human Geography*, Feb, Vol. 34, Issue 1, p21-37.

democracies will struggle. However, the weakening of democracy is not inevitable. Citizens who experience inadequate government responses to disaster, may 'lower' their 'evaluations of democratic institutions', but we should take care not to conflate citizen frustration with reduced 'democratic values and practices'¹⁹. In the Christchurch experience, the New Zealand government certainly responded to the earthquakes with some 'disastrously' undemocratic institutional reform. However the subsequent actions of Christchurch citizens, including spontaneous collaboration, collective resistance, and public contestation, should not be dismissed. Citizen action matters. Through protest, mutual support, and creative art, citizens have created complex counter-narratives which also point the way toward more inclusive, more active, and more transparent responses to disaster. These counter narratives are tentative but hopeful democratic legacies, which also have a powerful potential to sustain and inform alternative responses to disaster for future generations.

Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development, Floor One, 51 Southwark St, London, SE1 1RU

Email: info@fdsd.org Web: www.fdsd.org

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¹⁹ Carlin, Ryan; Gregory Love and Elizabeth Zechmeister (2014) 'Natural Disaster and Democratic Legitimacy: The Public Opinion Consequences of Chile's 2010 Earthquake and Tsunami', *Political Research Quarterly*, March, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 3-15.