

CROWDLAW FOR CONGRESS

INTERVIEW WITH JAY WEATHERILL

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Why did you decide to use/engage in a process that engaged citizens in different ways to make policy and law?

Well, we were 10 years into a government, and the view was that we were arrogant, out of touch, and we needed to have a new way of talking to the electorate, and I found myself as leader, and one of the key platforms I supervised was this idea of involving the people in the decisions that affect their lives; a new dialogue with people. So rather than us telling them what the problems were and then us revealing our solutions, we wanted to engage the people in the decision making process and get them to be part of it.

What was the outcome of involving people more in decision-making?

First thing it did was restore confidence because you were involving people in not just the solution but even checking the questions. So what are the things most pressing for you? I mean, what we as politicians often do is arrogate to ourselves the duty of defining the problem. You have to involve people in that whole question. The questions that we're interested in and we think other people are interested in might not be the right questions. So defining the question is really important, and the moment you do that, you engage people. And then the solutions: a good process of defining the problem often will mean that the solutions will fall out of that pretty readily. So the first thing it did was restore confidence in our government and our fortunes began to rise.

Was it the outcome you expected?

I had a suspicion that these things would work and that they would be an agenda which was popular. And it addresses this broader idea of the malaise in politics and in politicians, this idea that seems to be commonplace now that we've lost trust in the political process. The idea was to rebuild trust. To rebuild trust you have to start at the beginning by involving people in the decision-making process. And we coined a phrase, "debate and decide," instead of "announce and defend." We got very much in the business of designing these beautiful ideas behind closed doors and revealing them, and then holding on tight and defending ourselves against the inevitable attacks. So much decisions that we make are the product of at least some compromises, if you work at that behind closed doors and you don't involve people in the decision-making process. When

you do reveal the answer, people will pick out the obvious compromises and flaws and start to critique your plan. So then you're always on the defensive.

What were the big initial obstacles to overcome?

First, your colleagues because they're worried that you're outsourcing the decision-making of government to the mob. And of course, that's the opposite of what we're trying to do. In fact, the so-called "mob," which when you get the cacophony of noise that is mediated through the 24-hour news cycle, is already in charge of politics. So what we're trying to do is turn that sort of stampede that occurs towards a policy position that's destroying good policies or taking them into bad policy areas, and have a more deliberative process.

Would you do it again?

Absolutely. If anything, the demands for involving people in the decisions that affect their lives are a lot stronger now than they were when we embarked on this some 6 or 7 years ago. So I've got absolutely no doubt that if we're going to restore trust and faith in the political process and politicians, we have to find new ways of involving people in the decision-making process. It's not sufficient to say there's an election every four years; that's just not persuasive. People expect to be involved every step of the way. That doesn't mean they have to be consulted on every decision, but on the big decisions. You have to define why you're actually doing whatever it is that you're proposing to do, and spending some time--probably more time than we're used to spending--on the nature of the problem is the key to all of this. Because ultimately if you get good problem definition, the solutions tend to fly from there. The other thing that we should remember that there's a lot of skills and capabilities out there. Not all of this expertise resides in government. We don't have to take the burden of solving every problem. If we invite the community to be part of the decision-making process in an honest way, I think--while there might initially be some skepticism, because people are going to be used to the old system--I think people will appreciate that and accept that responsibility with some joy.