

What If Elected Officials Held Space for Meaningful Community Conversations?

Image



Change to traditional town hall format a step in a new direction

A climate change town hall held in Vancouver this summer modelled a step in a new direction for the place various levels of government might hold in relation to their communities.

The July 12 event swapped the typical town-hall style of mostly lecture-like presentations for an approach centred largely on enabling meaningful conversations between citizens.

Addressing four issues on climate change, the town hall was charged and serious. Some came ready to protest.

But in the end there were no demonstrations, although those who came prepared to demonstrate and grandstand were heard.

Jonathan Wilkinson, North Vancouver MP and parliamentary secretary to the minister of environment and climate change arranged the town hall. Change consultant and facilitator Charles Holmes, along with colleague David Thomson, presented and led the unique structure.

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*North Vancouver
MP Jonathan
Wilkinson*

Holmes works with and draws extensively from the work of numerous colleagues and collaborators including author and consultant Peter Block. Block calls for leaders to provide the means or architecture “for gathering people in a way that will build communities in which citizens will choose accountability and commitment.”

‘People could share what was in their soul’

Alysa Huppler-Poliak, a Capilano University student, showed up at the town hall in part to watch how it was done. Huppler-Poliak is helping set up another climate change town hall scheduled for sometime in September at the university.

She was captivated by the atypical invitation for attendees to join small-group conversations on topics that mattered to them.

“There would be six to eight people discussing one topic, so all this energy and all these creative thoughts would be going towards that one topic.

“That was really powerful,” Huppler-Poliak says, noting that the design of the dialogues allowed people to express divergent viewpoints without intimidation.

“It was a really encompassing format.

“People just felt like they could really share what was in their heart and in their soul.”

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*Facilitator
Charles Holmes*

‘I actually got to say what I thought and I felt like I was heard’

As someone long keen to engage citizens in a way that feels meaningful, Wilkinson says he was most energized by the participation and response of the town hall attendees.

“People really engaged (the different format) and really actively participated in it,” he says.

“The most common comment I heard from people as they were leaving was, ‘I actually got a chance to say what I thought and I felt like I was heard’.”

While the town hall was also meant to gather insights and ideas from constituents in order to inform the direction of Wilkinson’s work, it was the larger intention of holding space for meaningful conversations among citizens that makes it stand out.

“This is partly about creating forums where people can have conversations with their neighbours about issues that are of concern to them,” Wilkinson says, noting how the prevalence of isolation in urban centres.

“It’s both about building stronger communities and enabling people to have a voice in what happens.”

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Alysa Huppler-Poliak, a Capilano University student

A small-group conversation prods action

Marlo Firme took time to join the town hall as a volunteer with the grassroots organization, Citizens' Climate Lobby.

A conversation he had with Wilkinson prodded him to act on an issue he cares about deeply.

Firme talked with a couple of other people and Wilkinson in a small-group conversation in which he learned first-hand about the MP's understanding and care for some of the same climate change issues.

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Climate Change Lobby members, including Marlo Firme (second from right) with MP Wilkinson.

"At one point during our meeting we were talking about the millennials and I said, 'It's good that you guys are getting to millennials. And (Wilkinson) said, 'Yeah, and you should convince your parents to act on climate change'," Firme recalls.

"In my head I thought, 'That's impossible'."

But the next day Firme found himself tweeting the question, "How do we convince our parents about the need to act on climate change?"

The suggestions in response triggered him to scrawl a heartfelt letter to his parents, openly expressing his worries about the future and why he wants them to help him and his generation act on climate change. Firme tagged his parents on social media, [directing them to the letter](#), which they went on to read.

“They’re a work in progress as well. But I felt like they heard me,” he says.

“It’s both about building stronger communities and enabling people to have a voice in what happens.”

“My mom wrote me something like, ‘Do you take it to heart, these things that you’re talking about, these issues?’ and I said, ‘Yes, I do.’

“And she wrote, ‘Do you get anxiety from it?’ I told her, ‘I don’t get anxiety but sometimes I feel bad about it, but I think it’s okay to feel bad about things. You can learn a lot from those kinds of feelings.’

“I was able to tell her that and she understood a little more where I was coming from.”

Change happens at the speed of trust

In his blog, [The Change Spectrum](#), community development consultant Cormac Russell writes: “If we’re truly honest with ourselves we know that social and political change does not unfold in linear chronological way. It is emergent, messy and goes as fast as the speed of trust.”

Firme's story shows how one small meaningful conversation built on trust can swell into another small meaningful conversation, also built on trust, on the path to larger transformation.

This may, in fact, be the only way to fashion real and lasting change.