

## Experts vs the people: democracy in jeopardy

Written by Hsu Shih-jung 許世瑛

Wednesday, 17 March 2010 07:56

---

Department of Health Minister Yaung Chih-liang (楊志良) recently criticized the government, complaining about how too many democratic elections “interfere” with public policy. This attitude is perhaps best illustrated by the way in which the ruling party is determined to sign an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) with China despite widespread opposition.

The proposed agreement with China has also prompted the Taiwan Solidarity Union and more than 50 pro-independence, labor, business and industry groups, to call for a referendum in the hope of stopping it. This situation illustrates the need to reconsider the relationship between democracy and specialization. Failure to do so could undermine the legitimacy of democratic participation and its role in the determination of public policy.

Public policy is related to the pursuit of public interest. In the past, when governments were more authoritarian, public interest was mostly decided by those in power. However, as Taiwan embraced democratization, businesses and members of mainstream society were encouraged to participate in the process by making their own proposals. This demonstrated an understanding that definitions of public interest could differ, and that in any society, public interest is an ongoing competition between different forces. If we want to achieve consensus on what public interest entails, as many different people as possible need to participate.

In contrast, those currently in power appear to have done the exact opposite. In addition to applying the knowledge of so-called “experts” to the formation of public policy, officials seem determined to embrace their ideas as the only standard worth listening to. Administrative organizations have worked hard to apply the ideas of experts to the resolution of complex social problems. While this may reduce the severity of certain problems, results can just as easily fall short of expectations and in some cases make problems worse.

When experts are unable to solve social problems, strange things happen. For example, such individuals often believe that problems are not caused by a lack of specialized technical knowledge, but by a lack of reason or rationale. This leads to the conclusion that it is society and democratic politics that need to be reassessed and reformed.

Another example of this trend can be seen when people oppose solutions proposed by experts. When this happens, these people are invariably accused of “politicization,” of being irrational, subjective and biased. Those in power say that irrational, mainstream opinions must be eliminated from the policy formulation process. This approach has been applied a great deal lately and has resulted in social problems being reclassified by those in power as special problems that can only be solved by a minority of experts. The implication is that democratic participation is a hindrance to effective policy making.

This is very worrying; it forces us to ask whether “government by experts” is really in tune with the public interest. In the rapidly changing age of the Internet, are not the opinions of experts themselves also limited?

## Experts vs the people: democracy in jeopardy

Written by Hsu Shih-jung 許世瑛

Wednesday, 17 March 2010 07:56

---

We need to consider how best to combine specialized technical knowledge with more generalized knowledge, and ways to bring together individuals from academia and social groups to reach a consensus on public interest. When public policy decisions are being made, experts and those in power also need to accept the importance of the democratic process, rather than simply dismissing the ideas of those who are not in power or experts in related fields.

Hsu Shih-jung is a professor in the Department of Land Economics at National Chengchi University.

□ TRANSLATED BY DREW CAMERON

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2010/03/17](#)