

# CALLING OUT BAD PUBLIC CONSULTATION

## **New book calls for better public consultation in government decision making**

A new book, titled *For the Love of Community Engagement*, written by prominent Australian-British community engagement expert Becky Hirst, is now available for pre-order.

Since embarking on her community-focused career in the UK during the early-Tony Blair years of the late nineties, where social inclusion and community involvement were key priorities, this book draws on Becky's insights over the last 22 years.

The book challenges the current top-down paternalistic ways that government and corporations engage people in their decision making and calls for a total rethink, to enable more citizen-centric and community strengthening processes to be used.

Becky's insights are presented as 20 easy-to-follow chapters, accompanied by 100 'conversation starters' to encourage the reader to reflect and act on what they read.

"I have written this book to sound an emergency foghorn. The ways in which government and corporations are currently involving people and communities in their decision-making is, in the majority, causing more harm than good. We see very little good public consultation, and a whole lot of what has been nicknamed 'non-sultation'..."

Ms Hirst continues, "I hope that public servants, planners, policy makers and current or aspiring politicians will read my book and reconsider their roles as leaders within our communities. I hope that they will appreciate the importance of genuine listening, authenticity, and empathy, far beyond the once-an-election-cycle, or 'top-down' presence in communities that many currently have."

Self-published, via Tablo Publishing in Melbourne, *For the Love of Community Engagement* is available in eBook, paperback and hardback versions.

The book is currently available for pre-order from bookstores worldwide, will be released on 19 April 2021, and officially launched at an online Industry Q&A webinar with the Author on 2 June 2021.

\*\*\* ENDS \*\*\*

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# MEDIA KIT

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OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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FOR THE  
**LOVE**  
OF **COMMUNITY**  
**ENGAGEMENT**

Insights from a personal expedition  
to inspire better public participation

**BECKY HIRST**

WITH A FOREWORD BY DR. WENDY SARKISSIAN



# IMPORTANT DETAILS

## ABOUT THE BOOK

**Title:** For the Love of Community Engagement

**Subtitle:** Insights from a personal expedition to inspire better public participation

**Author:** Becky Hirst

**Foreword:** Dr. Wendy Sarkissian

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**Pre-orders open:** 28 March 2021

**Release date:** 19 April 2021

**Official industry launch event:** 2 June 2021

## FIND BECKY ON THE SOCIALS

**#fortheloveofcommunityengagement**

**Facebook.com/beckyhirstcommunityengagement**

**Instagram.com/theoriginalbeckyhirst**

**Twitter.com/BeckyBHC**


**Linkedin.com/in/beckyhirst/**

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**Book a time:** Or just book a time in Becky's diary instantly via Calendly!





# ABOUT THE BOOK

## BLURB

**Becky Hirst is a skilled community engagement practitioner who is willing to tell it how it is. And she has grave concerns for the future of public participation.**

To have a thriving society, we need people and communities who are actively involved in civic life. For politicians, public servants, corporations, or planners to engage with communities in any positive way, they need to learn a new way of doing things.

A wealth of sophisticated public consultation slogans, methods and frameworks are frequently seen. But we are close to breaking point. Some fundamental things are missing. And, right now, we need to focus our energies on them. As a matter of urgency.

Whilst this book shines a clear light of day on hard truths we can't escape, the stories within it are about love, passion, enthusiasm and a heartfelt commitment to community empowerment and community building.

Becky's expedition through her career to date is authentically presented as 20 easy-to-follow key insights, combined with 100 conversation starters to provide the reader with calls to both reflect and act.

**For the Love of Community Engagement seeks to inspire better public participation - and that it will!**





## AUTHOR BIO

### WHO IS BECKY HIRST?

Becky Hirst is a multi-award-winning community engagement specialist, author, public speaker, mentor, and trainer. She lives in the beautiful McLaren Vale region, 45-minutes south of Adelaide in South Australia (Australia), with her partner Dan and two young daughters, Elsie (9) and Florence (4).

Born and bred in Gloucester (UK), Becky began her community-focused career in 1999 in the early Blair years of UK politics - a time when social inclusion and community involvement were high on the agenda.

After migrating to Australia in 2007, and since founding her consultancy practice in 2009, Becky has worked with over 100 government agencies and local Councils, helping them to successfully involve people, groups and communities in problem solving and decision-making processes. She estimates that this work has included connecting with over 50,000 people in conversations about things that matter!

Becky is proud to have been one of the founders of Engage 2 Act and a co- instigator of Global Community Engagement Day, which is now celebrated internationally every year on 28 January.

Becky is well known and respected for her innovative and creative approach to community engagement and has a genuine desire to build stronger communities through getting the right people involved in the right conversations.



## WHO IS WENDY SARKISSIAN?

Having worked in the field of community engagement since 1966, Dr Wendy Sarkissian has done more banging on about community engagement than most people have had hot dinners.

But Wendy has not been involved exclusively in community engagement. She's been a community planner for decades, owner-built an eco-house in Nimbin, written books about planning history, housing design, healing grief ([www.stay-close.com](http://www.stay-close.com)) and the healing power of wild Nature (forthcoming 2021) and done a midlife PhD in environmental ethics.

She is an expert social planner, social researcher, author, facilitator, trainer and speaker. Her consulting work has involved numerous clients across Australia and overseas, helping to solve complex problems about community engagement, housing planning and design, planning policies, and the design of open space. When she was elected to a Life Fellow of the Planning Institute of Australia (2011), she was absolutely amazed. How could that be!

Regardless of everything she's been involved with, her passion remains "listening to the softest voices."

For Wendy, who now lives in Vancouver, Canada, that includes listening to the voices of the greater-than-humans.

She's delighted to partner with a greater-than-human human, Becky Hirst, and to support her book by writing its Foreword and assisting with its editing.





## INTERESTING FACTS

- For the Love of Community Engagement contains 20 insights (presented as chapters), 100 conversation starters and just under 73,000 words.
- It took Becky just 5 months to write, edit and publish *For the Love of Community Engagement* - and all whilst juggling parenting, client work and life in general! Becky quit drinking alcohol in late September 2020, and attributes much of her productivity and focus during this time to her new found clear head!
- *For the Love of Community Engagement* is dedicated to Becky's friend and colleague, Mellita Froiland, nee Kimber. Becky and Mellita worked together in 2008 for the Children, Youth & Women's Health Service and greatly admired each others approach to both work and life. Mellita died very suddenly of pancreatic cancer in September 2020.
- The cover of the book is an image of one of Becky's favourite housing tower blocks in West London - the Trellick Tower. This fascinating tower was designed in the Brutalist style by architect Ernő Goldfinger. The imagery on the cover - of the concrete building and red heart - depicts the concept of the most tangible community engagement being EMOTIVE and CONCRETE.
- Becky estimates that during her career to date, she has engaged with over 50,000 people in conversations about things that matter!
- Becky runs a successful and highly sought after community engagement consultancy out of her office on her beautiful. 2.5 acre property in Blewitt Springs, near McLaren Vale in South Australia.
- This is Becky's first published book, but definitely won't be her last. She's caught the writing bug!

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## 15. Treat the community as your client

*When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.*

— Toni Morrison<sup>26</sup>

A high point of the sweet spot lifestyle I have chosen by being a sole practitioner is my ability to pick and choose my work. I have reached a point in my career (some might call it luck, but I explain it as years of determination and calculated, focussed steps) where I generally have enough consulting opportunities presenting themselves in my inbox to pick and choose my work.

I enjoy remaining nimble, agile, and responsible only for my own actions. I decide what I'm going to work on next, or where I'm going to focus my energies. Recently, I've started declining work that is about conflict resolution in communities, knowing that this is not where my passion lies. I decline that work, explaining that I have chosen to apply my energy to situations where we can engage well and engage early, so we don't reach such points of tension. Just this week, I had a call from a local council inviting me to work with them on an 'issue' in their community. I declined, saying that I work only on 'opportunities' in communities!

Given my strong personal values and passion for community, my ability to pick and choose my work has meant that declining projects that don't meet my desire for authentic, high-quality, and genuine community engagement is a very real option. I take that option if I doubt the intent of work that comes across my desk.

Even more dramatically, from time to time, or for one reason or another, I'll end up actively working on a project that I suddenly realise doesn't align

with my values. At that point, as a values-driven practitioner, I've had to make some hard decisions. In 2019, I was contacted by a state government department to undertake engagement on an organisational restructure to affect people on the receiving end of services that department delivered. I should have realised it was dodgy when it was exceptionally last-minute. All they really wanted was my group facilitation skills for a meeting with the affected people the following week.

In my briefing meeting with the client, after having said yes and my quote being accepted, I smelt a rat. I asked a few challenging questions about the purpose of the engagement process. I wasn't happy to hear indirectly that it was just a paper-shuffling process to get the new governance structure approved. There was little opportunity for participants to inform the decision-making process. My heart was pounding as I listened to the usual excuses: 'Things are moving too fast on this project for many changes now'. Or 'the Minister needs to get this through Parliament next month, so we really need to tick the box that we've held this meeting'. And I began to question my involvement.

I know that there are facilitators who will come onboard to help the meeting go smoothly for their client (in this instance, the client was the government). And there are facilitators who will come onboard with the interests of the people attending at heart. I consider myself the latter. I always introduce myself at these kinds of community meetings as a person who is there to help participants get the best out of the time they've contributed, but, equally, my role is to help my client get the best out of everyone's time together. I'm here to ensure that the decisions they make are well-informed.

But on this occasion, it was apparent that my client wasn't interested in hearing what the people had to say on the issue. They wanted the workshop run in a bog-standard format, with a PowerPoint presentation by the Suit-Wearing-Big-Boss-Guy to start and then the opportunity for Q&A from the 'audience'. Whenever I hear anyone propose such a drab, unengaging processes, I immediately suggest alternatives that would be more engaging and productive, and this occasion was no exception. I therefore prepared an interactive process that at least provided opportunities for comment on specific parts of the proposed restructure.

As the day drew closer, I was still questioning my involvement and began to hear murmurs that a large attendance at the meeting was likely. In my mind, I was weighing up the option of walking away. It wasn't a large piece of work so wouldn't be a financial disaster if I did, but I was concerned about letting a client down, no matter how little they apparently cared about genuine engagement. I'd heard that the participants were angry about both the proposed restructure *and* the so-called 'engagement' process. They, too, were smelling rats.

I decided it was too late to back out. And I also decided that I needed to manage this meeting with absolute precision. I empathised with the people attending and understood their frustration and anger.

The day arrived and everything I anticipated came true. The client was there to help set up the room, but then announced she was leaving to attend another meeting. She assured me everything would be fine in my hands. 'You can't even bring yourself to front up to them to listen to their concerns?' is what I shouted at her in my mind as she swiftly hopped into the taxi that pulled up outside. A couple of admin staff on the door, the Suit-Wearing-Big-Boss-Guy and I were left waiting for the angry people to arrive. I was livid.

The people started to arrive and take their seats. I could sense the tension in the air, but everyone was civil. None of us knew what to expect of the next couple of hours. I did my usual Becky-style meet and greets, particularly with the angriest-looking people, desperately attempting to build some rapport or trust with these passionate people. But of course, at that point in proceedings, I was the bad guy. They saw me as 'one of them' and if they'd worked out who I was, they then saw me simply as 'the consultant'.

The session began and the Suit-Wearing-Big-Boss-Guy began his presentation. It was dry, dull and severely lacking in lustre. People shuffled in their seats as he continued through his slides. I hovered with my run sheet on the sidelines, waiting for him to get to the end. As he did, I launched into the next part of the session where people could provide their feedback.

I'm never a fan of a theatre-style set up for this kind of meeting as it creates such a divide between 'us and them' with the experts at the front and people sitting neatly in rows in front listening. I had set up the room 'cabaret-style', with small tables with six or seven people, enabling a greater level of dialogue. I'd set up each table with a different topic for discussion and invited all participants to add their notes to the huge, pre-printed sheets of paper I'd placed on each table.

I announced that this session would be very much about *them* and their opinions. I wanted them to wander around to different tables in their own time, meeting others as they did, adding notes of the things they discussed on the paper at each location. It was like a hybrid World Café meets Open Space Technology methodology that placed the participants at the centre of the process, and allowed them to follow their own energy and interests.

We were about one-third into this session and the best thing happened. Perhaps not in my client's eyes, but I consider it the best thing because I'm all about supporting the needs of the *people*. Right? One participant wrote in large letters on one of my beautifully presented large pieces of paper in the centre of the table: 'This is not a consultation. This is a tick-box exercise. We have chosen not to engage because we don't feel listened to. Sign here if you agree'.

I was proud of this group for calling out bad practice. By this stage, I had decided that my role as the facilitator was not to hush their anger, but to support them and advocate for their voices to be heard, even if it wasn't what my client wanted. As my neatly planned workshop timeline and plan fell away, the participants became more and more animated, encouraging each other to sign the petition on the table, as well as other angered statements as shown in image 18. I used my position of privilege (as the person 'in control' of the workshop format and the one with the microphone) to announce that Kelly had started a petition on Table 6. Anyone was welcome to view it and sign if they agreed.

This one small move showed the participants that I was the 'real deal' and believed wholeheartedly in them, even if the organisation paying my bill didn't. As the momentum in the room gathered, they all started writing additional statements alongside the petition as shown in the image opposite. I couldn't leave my Suit-Wearing-Big-Boss-Guy looking so pale and bemused in the corner, so

I whispered to him reassuringly, 'I need to let them voice their opinions. They must be heard. I've got this'. He nodded, knowing there was no way out.

The workshop was rounded off with the planned Q&A session with the Suit-Wearing-Big-Boss-Guy. But everything was now different. I had let it roll. The voices that were to be silenced were heard. As the workshop came to a close, many people thanked me for being so flexible and adaptable, as well as giving them the opportunity to voice their concerns. My report expressed and supported their honest, angry perspectives. I owed it to *them* to offer authentic the opportunities to be heard. *They* were my client.

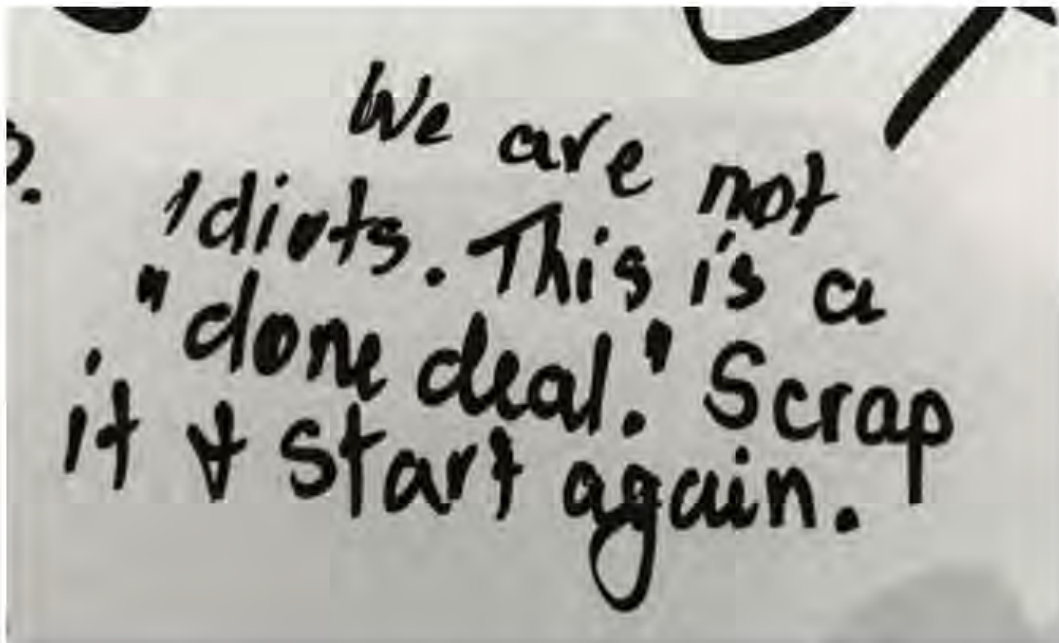


Image 18 - The participants of a disingenuous engagement process took pen to paper to start a petition in the workshop I was facilitating for my client. And I encouraged it.

On the way home from the meeting, I recorded an episode of *Thought Bubbles – Sparkling Insights into Community Engagement*, having a big rant about the client. I posted it to my YouTube channel. *Thought Bubbles* has always been a positioning tool for me and my business, with me providing thought leadership to interested viewers on a range of community engagement topics. But it has equally provided me a cathartic process of debriefing on processes that frustrate me, perhaps

because of my lonely existence as a sole practitioner, with no water cooler in the office kitchen around which I could debrief with colleagues.

In this episode of *Thought Bubbles*, I'd kept the client anonymous and spoken only generally about the meeting's topic, and how I was so angry at my client's lack of interest in genuine engagement. Word soon spread, with people knowing the exact meeting I'd been talking about. When the local ABC radio called me requesting an interview about the client and their lack of genuine intent to engage, I declined on the grounds that they were still my client. I needed to draw the line somewhere on how far I took my disgruntled experience. That would be it for me as a consultant if every client feared I'd go to the media if they put a foot wrong!

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## TARGET AUDIENCES

- **Students** - anyone studying communications, public policy, politics, civics, or planning.
- **Professionals** - Public servants, consultants, urban planners, policy makers, project managers, community engagement and development specialists.
- **Community leaders** (including anyone who's ever experienced BAD public consultation or 'community engagement').
- **Current and aspiring politicians** and their advisors.