



Enhancing Government Relations through Public Engagement: A Case of Christchurch Mosque Attacks

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ABSTRACT

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To the world, New Zealand has always been conceived as a safe and peaceful country, however has pronounced its two sequential massive terrorism attacks of mosque shooting in Christchurch, during Friday prayer, on March 15th, 2019. The attack started at the Al Noor Mosque at 1:40pm which followed by the second attempt at the Linwood Islamic Centre 15 minutes subsequently. A 28-year-old Australian-citizen gunman has live streamed the attack via his Facebook account - the tragedy has claimed the lives of 51 and injured 49 others. Evidently, numbers of politicians and world leaders criticized the attacks, and as the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern in her standing ovation at Christchurch Memorial deemed saying that the attack witnessed as 'one of New Zealand darkest days' and 'the role of combatting terrorism attacks, condemnation of violence turn now to a collective response, not the government alone'. This paper aims to emphasizes on the conceptual and practical understanding on the concept of collective response through public engagement - it is fairly a new term and practice that comprises of various ways to assemble people together as a mean of putting the public concerns forward. In this context of crisis, the government has constantly encouraged open communication with the citizens, the affected family members, in particular, by involving interaction, and listening. With the goal of generating mutual resolution, these efforts are considered as a compliment to a practicing democratic country as direct involvement of ordinary people in a crisis resolution is significantly noticeable. The main contribution of this paper lies at the government efforts at repairing the damage and securing the well-being of nations. This paper approaches literature review as a research methodology by putting the perspectives on government relations alongside with public engagement as a mean of enhancing understanding on how these two entities reciprocate each other, at times. For future research, the emphasis of analysis can be given onto the roles of media at reporting the government efforts at combatting such social or racial crisis.

Keywords:

Government relations, Public engagement.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Government Relation

Government relations - is such a broad practice under the umbrella of Public Relations, as its name suggests, this virtue involves fundamental interactions between governments and various publics through anticipating and interpreting public opinion, researching activities of action to well-inform the public, setting objectives and plans to convey a particular agenda. Far beyond that, this dealing too involves

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communicating with the public about legislative policy decisions; conveying an organization's responsibilities as it relates to those policy decisions; and having an opportunity to influence and change public policy.

From a broader spectrum, the practice at federal government's level highlights on an interaction between the government and its various branches and officials - this is the area of public relations that helps build and strengthen positive rapport between an organization and government officials. From time to time, the government relations relies heavily on communicating about regulatory issues, one-on-one conversations with government representatives, and lobbying efforts on behalf of a group or organization.

1.2 Public Engagement

An effective government relations plan helps building and fostering advocacy opportunities. However, numbers of citizens seem not to earn a clear understanding and knowledge on how the citizen and government could establish and come into contact in an event of crisis or issue resolution. This term inspires to gratify the expectations, needs and values of the citizens; the ones who have elected the government officials.

A comprehensive definition as suggested by the Economic and Social Research Council (2008) quoted in Maile and Griffiths (2014, p. 15) refers to the “involvement of specialists in listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with non-specialists”. In the context of this study, specialists may refer to the State and policy-makers while non-specialists refer to the citizens of the respective countries. Therefore, it can be extrapolated that public engagement refers to the nation’s participation in the policy-development process of the State. Rowe and Frewer (2005) proposed the three stages of public engagement. The very first phase involve the passive public engagement which is correspond able through public communication include newsletters, leaflets, and non-interactive TV programs. This level takes one-way information flow; from the State as the information supplier to the citizens as the end- consumers. The second stage of public engagement is the quasi-active public which is is achievable through via public consultation and conference and might involve voting, referendum, petition signing, and surveys. At this stage, the information-flow remains one-way but the process of information transfer from the citizens to State is subjective and fairly open. As for the third level, the engagement of public with State policy-development process shows an increase of progressive, information flows in both directions between members of the public and the State in a deliberative manner as each entities attempt to modify the belief and actions of the other through deliberative opinion polls, focus groups, public hearing, and citizens’ panels.

From other continuum, Rowe and Frewer (2005) suggest that there are two categories of public engagement; firstly, the Participatory Democracy which usually would involves balloting, referendum, petition signing and surveys and intent to respond to the quantitative dimension of mass democracy by finding out how many people were involved in arriving at a certain decision in the state. On the other side, the deliberative democratic tradition highlights on the discourse and argumentation between citizens and the state as the process of decision or policy-development take place at the state level (Fung 2003). These activities made possible through deliberative opinion polls, focus groups, public hearing and citizens’ panels. Both Participatory and deliberative democracies are alleviated through public engagement.

While the terms might suggest similarities in terms of perception and expectations, the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) (2007) asserted that a few other connotative concepts to public engagement are public information, public consultation, public involvement, public collaboration and public empowerment. Public information is alike to the denotated meaning to public communication which refers to the provision of balanced and objective information to the public in order for them to understand current problems encountered by the State or policy makers. Public consultation refers to getting public feedbacks on alternatives or solutions decided by the State. Public involvement ensures public inputs are considered in the development of alternatives and that feedbacks are provided on how this has been resolved. Public collaboration implies public inputs that are adhered to not only the development of alternatives but also the identification of preferred solutions. In this context of study, the concept of public information and public consultation are seen as the closest possible practice undertaken by the New Zealand government; whilst they are trying to look out for the best solution at fighting the global issue on terrorism, at the same time repairing the damage done by joining the people on the ground, hearing up to their concerns and finding the best solution possible.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

Literature review is also better known as narrative review, which seeks to describe, summarise, justify, clarify, compare and integrate the existing primary inputs. It uses existing inputs/ reports of primary or original knowledge, and does not report any new primary knowledge itself. The primary reports used in the literature may be verbal, but in the most of cases reports are written documents. The input derive from a variety sets of approaches; namely empirical, theoretical, critical/analytical or methodological. Besides, the existing review does benefit the researchers for the fact that it emphasizes on the previous works the scholars have made in the field of interest and how the current findings or discussion could fairly relate to earlier scholarly works.

This methodology requires four main steps; step 1: search the existing literature in the area of research, step 2: review the literature obtained, step 3: develop a theoretical framework, and step 4: writing up the literature review (Cooper, 1989). When conceptualizing the definition of the literature review, we consider further the following ideas of Greene (2006). A methodology for social inquiry gains credibility and persuasiveness when all of these domains act in concert with one another, when their interlocking connections are smooth and well oiled, when the overall presentation is strong, coherent, well-articulated and thus persuasive. (p. 94) Literature review is a research methodology due to its potential of bringing a “coherent foundation for inquiry with tightly interconnected logics of justification, positioning,

procedures, and rationales” (Greene, 2006, p. 94). To be precise, this research approach carries high value of philosophical substances.

3.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Christchurch Mosque attacks indeed have placed Jacinda Adern both in distressing and comforting stage of her political office; while she strives for the most workable solutions to the crisis, she must too able to console the Muslim community of her country. Not only her warm appearance of embracing the family members of the victims catches global attention, but also her influential and stand firm policy on gun regulations, funding funeral cost, and further stringent the control over social media content demonstrates her rapid practical measure. With the mission of bringing down the global crisis against terrorism, the government of New Zealand has shown their very clear disposition of resolution through public engagement by which the public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into governmental decision; aiming for better decisions supported by the public - to a point that citizens are considered at all.

4.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To define the practice of government relations and public engagement in the case of Christchurch Mosque Attacks
- To identify the post-tragedy strategies undertaken by the New Zealand government.
- To seize the effectiveness of New Zealand government handling the attacks

5.0 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Models of Public Participation

Several models have been put forwarded by political and social scientist in order to explain the government-citizen

relation. While there are differences between them, the majority have a common characteristic – they analyze the government-citizen relation based on the level of involvement of the citizen in the decision-making process. This of course leads to having two extremes, one in which the government does not have any kind of interaction so there is no form of participation and the opposite when we have engaged citizens. Though both these situations are possible in theory, most cases take place somewhere between. One of the early and most cited models is proposed by Sherry Arnstein, where public participation is seen as a *ladder of participation* with the bottom of the ladder represents no participation at all while the top is the highest level of engagement (Arnstein, 1969):

- 1.Citizen authority over decisions or delegated authority
- 2.Negotiated decisions
- 3.Shared partnership in decision making
- 4.Opportunity to offer advice
- 5.Opportunity to develop self-confidence
- 6.Opportunity for citizen support of programs already planned.

Arnstein’s research indicates that public administrators seldom pass enough control to allow citizens to be part of the decision-making process (Callahan, 2007). In most of the situations, however, citizens may offer suggestions, new information for the decision maker or negotiate different conditions and elements of the proposed policy. This model has long established, hence a cognitive attempt has been taken up by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) - the Spectrum of Public Participation to explain the role of public in planning and decision-making, as well as the degree of influence they hold.

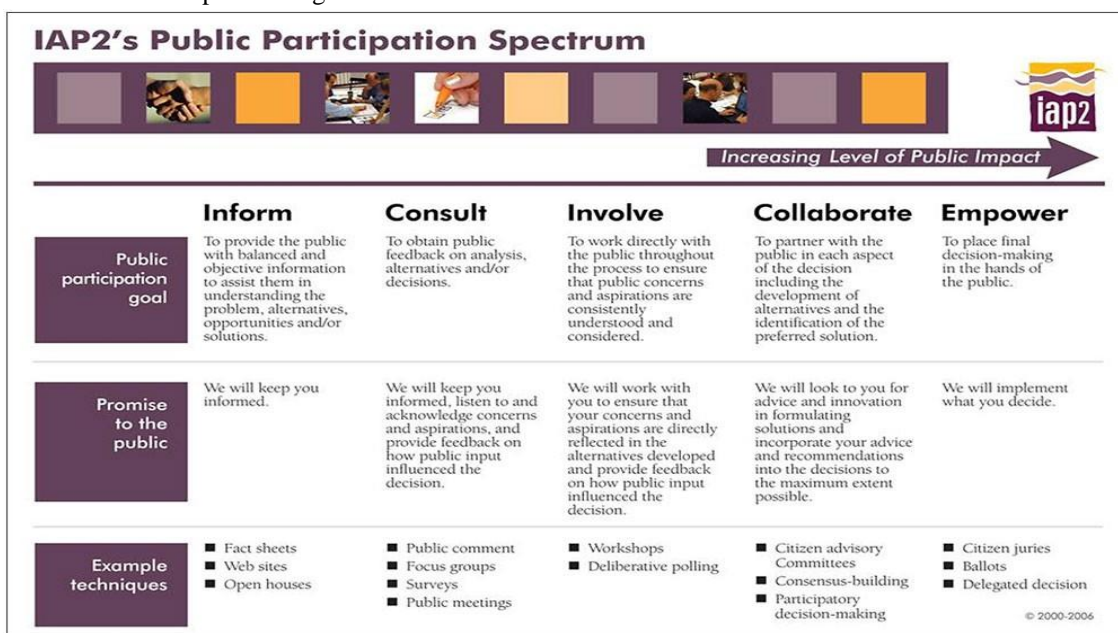


Figure 1: Spectrum of Public Participation
 Source: International Association of Public Participation (2007)

5 Levels of Spectrum of Public Participation as outline by the International Association of Public Participation (2007):

5.1 Inform

Inform, is not really community engagement because it only involves a one-way flow of information. Despite it not being community engagement, the Inform level can be quite appropriate in many situations including letting people know about changes to legislation, health promotion messages or informing people about benefits they might be entitled to.

5.2 Consult

Consult is quite a low level of community engagement being “the basic minimum opportunity for public input to a decision. Essentially it involves obtaining feedback about plans, ideas, options or issues, but with little interaction. The promise is to “listen and acknowledge” issues raised, but not necessarily to act on them.

5.3 Involve

At the this level, the community is invited into the process to a greater extent than with Consult. As can be seen, the goal is to work with the public throughout the process: it is not a one-off. While the promise implies that issues raised should be taken into account, decisions at this level are generally made by the organisation or department rather than the public.

5.4 Collaborate

The Collaborate level is about partnership and sharing power. The promise sets high expectations as it promises to incorporate advice and recommendations “to the maximum extent possible.” It implies an interactive process with an emphasis on two-way processes. While decision-making still lies with the organisation or department, there is much greater input from the community.

5.5 Empower

The Empower level places the final decision-making in the hands of the public. It does not necessarily mean it is the highest level of community engagement. Whereas Collaborate requires a high level of community engagement, Empower does not necessarily require the same degree of community engagement. At this level, a decision could be made by the community through a process that requires little interaction or engagement through referendum.

Contextualization of Public Engagement and New Zealand Government in the Case of Christchurch Mosque Attacks

This study adopts the idea of Spectrum of Public Participation with an attempt to understand and leverage public participation through government relations in New Zealand post-tragedy, which are justifiable as follows:

1. The affected citizens should be well- informed about the situation:

This level wishes to provide the publics with balanced and objective information and to assist them to understand the problem, alternatives, and opportunities.

Adern has asserted on the immediate practical measures for the safety of Muslim community post attacks, and broadly for everyone else’s. According to Adern, to heighten the nation’s security, there are ongoing and additional security presence in Christchurch at mosque around the country. Besides, Adern has also ensured visas for family members overseas are being prioritized so that they can attend funerals. One of the most important aids provided by the State is providing mental health and social support. In addition to that, Adern asserted that “The clear lesson from history around the world is that to make our community safer, the time to act is now”. Ardern also made it clear that Christchurch survivors will be able to take advantage of government programs that provide funeral grants to citizens and visitors who are injured in an accident in the country. Since many of the victims of the shooting were their families’ breadwinners, she promised that the government would provide financial assistance to survivors left without income, according to The New York Times.

Adern too, promised to cover the funeral costs of all those slain. The death toll itself was a catalogue of New Zealand’s budding diversity. “Among the dead were worshippers from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, Somalia and Afghanistan,” my colleagues noted. “The youngest was a 3-year-old boy born in New Zealand to refugee parents from Somalia.” Adern presented the facts before the members of Parliament while they took the seating.

As the lists of updated information from the State to the citizens goes on, this level seems play great function to connect these two entities initially. This study places this level of ‘to inform’ at the top most important level of public engagement as the citizens must be able to have faith in the government while the State must earn the trust the people on the ground, by keeping them updated on the truth. Though it is a one- way communication, a matter of informing what the State intends to fulfill has commonly been the major activity the State will proceed with.

2. The government of New Zealand should consult with the affected citizens

This level involves low level of public engagement - minimum opportunity for public input, rather places higher value on listening and acknowledging issues raised - not necessarily to act on them. Since the attack, Ardern has visited and listened to the grieving community, pledged to make reforms to gun laws, and repeatedly emphasized that

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Muslims are a vital part of New Zealand's community. While giving her statement at the Christchurch memorial, March 28th, 2019 Adern said that "We will remember the new resolve we have formed".

Rebecca Wright, the New York-based correspondent for New Zealand's 1 News pointed out that Adern has met this moment with compassion, with empathy, with love, and also, crucially, she has met it with strength. For the first time, New Zealanders are having to confront the issue of racism and they are meeting the conversation head-on.

3. The affected citizens should be given room to get involve

Absolutely, it is nothing about involving the affected citizens into making decisions, it only take some area of freedom for those affected citizens to know far in advanced about the State planning and policy-development process.

In this case, Adern promised to pursue with changing New Zealand's gun laws. She said that her government will announce plans within 10 days of this horrific act of terrorism that she believes will make their community safer. Adern has discussed full bans on these semiautomatic weapons as well as potentially requiring licenses for individual guns. During a press conference on Monday, March 18th, 2019, Adern secured to announce reforms to New Zealand's gun laws within 10 days of the attack, although she has not provided details of these reforms. While giving her statements at the Christchurch memorial, March 28th, 2019, Adern further added that "To the families, we cannot know your grief but we can walk with you at every stage. We can and we will surround you".

As compared to the other two levels discussed earlier, this level does not seem prioritized as in the shocking state, the Government might choose not to disclose much of details of their plannings and agendas as this will surely involve meticulous discussion, risk management strategies and solutions.

4 The Government should collaborate with the citizens

While both government and the affected citizens are striving for the best workable solutions, and decision-making remains in the hands of the State, this level of engagement allows two-way activities with higher level of consideration on citizens' input are taken into account. While giving her remarks at the Christchurch memorial, March 28th, 2019, Adern emphasized that "We have work to do, but do not leave the job of combatting hate to the government alone. We each hold the power, in our words and in our actions".

In the aftermath of the shootings, the country's three largest broadband providers worked together to identify and suspend sites that hosted video footage of the shooting, in an attempt to limit "the publicity the gunman was clearly seeking."

Executives from the three companies subsequently wrote to the heads of Google, Facebook, and Twitter, and urged them to be a part of an urgent discussion to find the right balance between internet freedom and the need to protect New Zealanders, especially the young and vulnerable, from harmful content."

Speaking of the level of collaboration, the State imposes the authority to work alongside with the government onto the hands of specialists, and in this case the major broadband providers company at detecting and suspending the social media sites suspectedly used for the activities of terrorism, with almost zero participation from the affected citizens.

5.5 The Government should empower the citizen for decision-making and solutions

This level proposes the highest level of public engagement; however, it does not warrant the most involvement of citizens in the process of decision-making or its similar activities. Adern during her visit to Christchurch, asked the bereaved what her government could do rather than deciding on their behalf how resources are allocated. "Our time is for you to determine," she told them. As such, Aderns appears open and egalitarian leader during the hard times, allowing and willing to listen from the bereaved on how would they wish the government to deal with the crisis. While giving her remarks at the Christchurch memorial, March 28th, 2019, Adern suggested that "we also ask that the condemnation of violence and terrorism turns now to a collective".

Her statement as representing the decision and viewpoint of the government has somehow authorized the affected citizens on crisis resolutions, which not many of world leaders are capable of doing the same. Though such public empowerment does not guarantee absolute consideration by the government, minimally Adern opens the room of authorization to communicate and express views and concerns from the ground.

Public Engagement and New Zealand Government's Nation Building Strategies

1. Ending Social Media Use for Terrorism Content

In March, 2019, Adern announced that she her counterpart, French President Emmanuel Macron would co-chair a meeting in Paris aimed at stopping social media being used for extremist content.

Attending leaders and technology company chief executives will agree to taking action with a pledge called the Christchurch Call - which comes after the March 15 Christchurch attacks were livestreamed on Facebook.

"We all need to act, and that includes social media providers taking more responsibility for the content that is on their platforms, and taking action so that violent extremist content cannot be published and shared," Adern said.

"It is critical that Adern and her advisors look beyond immediate concerns about violent extremism and content moderation, to consider the wider context in which digital media is having a growing, and increasingly negative, impact on our democracy," said lead researcher Marianne Elliot.

The report said social media has positive features such as allowing direct access to people around the globe and providing a voice to the voiceless, but also allowed the spread of fake news, populism and hate speech. "Opaque" algorithm engines which control what content we see and the business incentives to get content to the masses were also deemed concerning.

The researchers proposed work should be done to get technology workers and digital media users to use "their leverage to demand ethical product design" and counter fake news by "investing more in public interest media and alternative platforms, leading to a more democratic internet".

1. The Banning of Gun/Firearm

New Zealand's parliament has voted overwhelmingly in favour of legislation to ban semi-automatic and military-style weapons, almost unanimously in favor of changing the country's gun laws, less than a month after a mass shooting left 50 people dead. Members of parliament voted 119 to 1 in favor of the ban on military-style semi-automatic weapons Wednesday, as Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told lawmakers they were giving "a voice" to those killed in the Christchurch massacre.

The changes were first proposed by Ardern just days after a gunman carried out an indiscriminate shooting spree in two Christchurch mosques, killing 50 Muslims. "We are here because of them, and I believe they are here with us, supporting what we are doing here because these weapons were designed to kill, and they were designed to injure and that is what they did on the 15th of March," Ardern told parliament on Wednesday, March 20th, 2019.

New Zealand's government has introduced legislation that would ban most semi-automatic firearms, including the types of weapons used in shootings last month at two Christchurch mosques that killed 50 people. The bill's introduction on Monday, March 18th, 2019 marks the next step in passing gun control reform following the March 15 attacks. Days after the shooting, Ardern vowed that "every semi-automatic weapon used in the terrorist attack last Friday" would be banned.

New Zealand immediately imposed some gun control measures on March 21. Police Minister Stuart Nash says the bill under consideration now, which is a broader ban, would go into effect on April 12 if it passes. That legislation reportedly has support across party lines. "This will mean that within four weeks of the Christchurch terrorist attack, New Zealand will have passed legislation banning all military-style semi-automatic weapons and assault rifles," deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters told reporters on Monday.

2. Cost coverage on funeral

At least fifty people were killed and 50 others were wounded in shootings at two mosques attacks. Ardern secured that the families of the fallen will not have to worry about the full cost of funeral expenses while mourning their loved ones, regardless of their immigration status.

The Accident Compensation Corporation, (ACC), is the country's organization that covers all of its citizens and visitors under a no-fault scheme if they are injured in an accident, according to its website. ACC provides financial compensation to help with the cost of recovering from an accident, including "payment towards treatment, help at home and work and help with your income." Ardern further emphasizes saying that regardless of immigration status, in an event such as this — murder or manslaughter, every family is eligible for a funeral grant of around \$10,000.

CONCLUSION

In the last two decades, governments have been under increasing pressure to change the way they interact with citizens, open up and increase access to services provided - they are expected to stay open, dialogic, and transparent. This is something to expect in modern democracies taking into account the downward trend in voter turnout in the last 50 years.

This could be interpreted as a gap between decision makers' policies and citizens' real needs, resulting in loss of *legitimacy* and *accountability* regarding the governing process. In order to reduce this distance, governments have implemented different strategies and plans to open up to the public. An open government is increasingly recognized as an essential ingredient for democratic governance, social stability and economic development. In the context of this study, the government of New Zealand presents itself as having the ability to know, understand and respond to the principles of public engagement as proposed by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2), where the compliance to all five levels is noticeable through words, and practical measures. The government of New Zealand has too proven their capability at enhancing government relations through public engagement in the time of difficulties, while the citizens are given with room of involvement in a meaningful way in making decisions that will affect them, or in which they have an interest. Adern may consider this tragedy as a blessing in disguise to her political endeavour - on one side challenge her national territorial security, on the other hand proven her effective leadership by listening, informing, consulting, involving citizens' urgent needs into immediate account of action, and fairly empowered her Muslim community to voice out their concern and work closely with the State.

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