Chapter three

Tensions and New Connections between Participatory and Representative Democracy in Local Governance

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, local authorities in many European countries have introduced new participatory forms of policy-making in an attempt to reverse perceived downward trends in political participation (Daemen and Schaap 2000; Akkerman, Hajer and Grin 2004; Zittel and Fuchs 2007). Such initiatives are marked by inherent tensions. The new arrangements should be set-up in such a way that they can address the alleged crisis of legitimacy in local democracy. This implies that they should provide citizens with enough scope for effective participation. On the other hand, it would be unusual for political elites to endorse reform strategies that they perceive as threatening their own ‘political primacy’. For example, experiences with ‘interactive governance’ in the Netherlands indicate that politicians find it difficult to adapt to this type of participatory arrangement and to invent new constructive political roles (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Edelenbos 2005). This chapter addresses one of the ‘puzzles’ of local democratic reform: tensions between representative and participatory democracy (see Chapter 1 of this volume). The purpose of this chapter is to explore these tensions within different national institutional contexts and to ascertain how a new balance can be found between these two ideals and forms of democracy.

No enquiry into these tensions can be carried out without considering other reforms in local democracy. In several countries, including the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, major institutional changes have been introduced with regard to the relationship between the council and the executive. These reforms are intended to revitalise the functioning of representative democracy, particularly by addressing problems of transparency and accountability in municipal decision-making. One key
element in these reforms is a separation of powers, whereby decision-making and administration are concentrated in the hands of the executive and councillors’ roles are focused on representation, scrutiny and the formulation of broad policy frames (Goss 2001; Elzinga 2002; Copus 2006). In addition, these reforms take place against the backdrop of a process of de-centring collective decision-making and the emergence of forms of governance that challenge the traditional practices of state-centred policy development and implementation. A growing strand of literature discusses the problem of the democratic deficit that is apparently posed by such governance practices (e.g. Benz and Papadopoulos 2006; Bekkers et al. 2007). Democratization strategies for these governance practices can be based on a conception of democracy that extends beyond the traditional representative model. It is unclear, however, whether governance practices have already yielded full-fledged substitutes for or additions to democratic representation and accountability through representative institutions.

All of these reforms and developments have important consequences for the roles of councillors (Derksen 2000; Hansen 2001; Wilson 2002). Taken together, the separation of powers between the council and the executive, the emergence of governance practices and the introduction of various forms of participatory democracy may result in the marginalisation of the councillors from the local decision-making arenas. An institutional context may emerge that induces local stakeholders and citizens to bypass the councillors and to bargain with civil servants and the executive, and which induces the executive to take the lead in engaging stakeholders and citizens in policy processes without involving the council. In such a context, the potential contributions of councillors to the legitimacy of local political decision-making can become unclear. This raises the question of which strategies councillors should pursue in order to cope with these ‘border conflicts’, and whether these strategies have the potential to establish new connections between local political decision-making and the lifeworlds of the citizens.

In summary, the following questions are addressed in this chapter:

1. Which opportunities are citizens offered to participate in local policy processes, and how are councillors involved in these opportunities?
2. Which tensions occur between participatory and representative democracy, and how are these tensions related to the institutional contexts in which local authorities function?