

Report on International Conference of Deliberative Democracy

On August 30, the curtain of Taiwan's first International Conference on Deliberative Democracy fell amidst applause. Experts, scholars and government officials from Denmark, Swiss, Belgium, Japan, Korea, America, and Taiwan joined over 200 local participants, including policy makers, NGO members, professors, students and government employees came together and examine theories on deliberative democracy and exchange experiences in its best practice.

During this international conference we were honored to have two heavy-weight deliberative democracy experts as our keynote speakers. The first was Lars Klüver, director of Danish Board of Technology (DBT). Denmark was the first country in the world inventing and practicing deliberative democracy ever since 1987, for which DBT is the official agency in charge. Klüver gave detailed account of the political and economic background against which deliberative democracy evolved in Denmark and introduced 16 of the 20-plus deliberation models. He touched the fact that deliberative democracy is closely associated with the historical and cultural backdrops of a nation. Though all of the topics deliberative democracy deals with are highly controversial, the particular topics picked by a particular state/society reflect the main concerns of that society. The second keynote speaker was James Fishkin, chairman of International Propagation Janet M. Peck Lecture and director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy in Stanford University. He expounded on the globally unique prudent Deliberative Polling and listed eight public consultation models for discussion of the two core topics of deliberative democracy: "who deliberates" and "the quality of opinions generated."

As the attention was focused on the best practice of deliberative democracy in Asia, the first session began with an overview to various models of deliberative democracy in Taiwan, the host country. Taiwan is known for the fact that government agencies and non-profit organizations from national level to local level have all convened meetings in the format of deliberative democracy. Community universities

have gradually become the best platform for deliberative democracy's public forum. Reports of Japanese and Korean scholars highlighted promotion of deliberative democracy via non-profit organizations. This is different from the fact that in Europe deliberative democracy has been initiated by the legislative body. The topics chosen are also different from the East and the West. Taiwan has dealt with national health insurance, surrogate mothers, youth affairs issues, hot spring museum, multi-ported sky cab and tax reforms. Both Japan and South Korea touched nuclear power plant and genetic-modified food, and South Korea covered the problems of leftover food and student IDs. In Europe, deliberative democracy has been for quite some time, so it has handled numerous topics, like energy, agriculture, environment, media and etc. After the presentation by scholars from Asia and Europe, the ensuing session, "Dialogue between Asia and Europe" was focused on the cross-cultural comparison between Europe and Asia, and examine in concerning the condition of econ-political, social & cultural differences.

During the theoretic forum of the second day, Taiwanese scholars engaged in in-depth self-examination and comprehensive theoretic review of deliberative democracy of various forms practiced in recent years. Under the subject of "Who Deliberates" Professor Lin Kuo-ming had surveyed information pertinent to Taiwan's three consensus conferences and examined whether Taiwan's public deliberations had been dominated by the privileged segment of the society. Based on some empirical data, Professor Lin Tze-luen scrutinized the possibility of deliberative democracy as an option for discussing environmental issues. Under the title of "Deliberative Democracy, Social Movement and the Deepening of Democracy" Professor Chen Dong-sheng explored the appropriateness of the critics of different research literatures on constraints of deliberative democracy according to Taiwan's empirical data in consensus conferences. Professor Huang Tong-yi examined whether deliberative democracy can effectively manage political cleavage from the perspective of democratic reform.

Following two days of experiences exchanging between the East and the West, as

well as reflections and dialogues upon the theory and practice of deliberative democracy, we began to ask “what is the prospect of deliberative democracy?” and “how do we find the new drive to move on from reflection of the theories and practices?” This was the focus of the last session. Scholars exchanged marvelous opinions on the topics of “whether the outcome of deliberation should be based on consensus or majority vote” and “whether deliberative democracy requires consensus.” Professor Kim Hwan-suk of South Korea suggested if the outcome of deliberation is based on the majority vote, the majority won’t go through the trouble of persuading the others. On the other hand, Professor Jiang Yi-hua of Taiwan argued that in a democratic society the unanimous rule is against justice, because a single person of a group can overrule the decision of a whole population. Klüver suggested that when people are required to reach a consensus they will look for possibilities more diligently for common good. Professor Fishkin, in contrast, was of the opinion that consensus does not have to be a prerequisite. The key lies in whether people are able to make the optimal decision after considering all the proposals.

Comparing experiences and political cultures of the West with that of the East, Klüver used the expression “You’re good” to sum up Taiwan’s various models of deliberation in recent years. He was convinced that Taiwan’s operational elements and components can be adjusted in accordance with the needs of the topics. The continuity and legitimacy of deliberative democracy depends on whether it can be institutionalized. Klüver suggested that institutionalization should be one thing set into serious consideration in Asia. In agreement with Klüver’s views, Professor Rehg of the US pointed out that institutionalization can enhance the quality of deliberative democracy in different aspects.

Please contact Taiwan Foundation for Democracy for further information on the theories and practices of deliberative democracy.