Tyrannies in participatory governance

or...

what might we get wrong despite the best intentions?
What’s “participatory governance”? 

- The ways in which citizens can take a more direct role in the decisions, processes and structures that affect them.

Examples include:

- Participatory Budgeting
- Citizen’s Assemblies and Citizen’s Juries
- Co-produced decision making approaches

Examples can be “top down” deliberative exercises, proposed by Government bodies, or “bottom up” initiatives led by communities... or a mix of the two,
Why are we talking about participatory governance?

• We like it – it’s helping to revive democracy, improve decision making, strengthen legitimacy and help people feel that their voice ‘matters’.

• We see more and more examples across the world of cities and towns using these approaches.

• Public sector leaders, think tanks, and citizen-led groups see this way of working as the future.
A way of thinking that develops in response to an identified issue, but which fails to live up to its original promise. Despite this, the way of thinking continues to hold sway.

- Each generation works in the shadows cast by the dominant ideas of the day, which are themselves responses to previous understandings. Solutions designed in response to problems become rigid and over-extended, turning into new problems to be solved.
- What makes the solutions tyrannical is that the space has not been created to fully acknowledge the limits of the idea.

We can spot the signals that a tyranny might be present when we see sage nods of agreement in discussion in the room, but whispers of contradiction outside...
THREE TYRANNIES

1. The quest for authenticity
2. Assumptions about leadership
3. “Bottom up” over “top down”
1. The quest for authenticity

TYRANNY? “Participatory governance engages citizens outside the ballot box, offering a way to more fully connect lived experience with decision making. The quality of representation rest not only on a democratic mandate but on the claim to “authenticity”. Participants, unlike elected representatives, become seen as “the real thing”.

• But non-elected representatives might represent narrow interest groups. Representatives who claim to represent “wider” groups might be prioritised.

• “Authenticity” might be used to devalue rather than acknowledge the contributions that can be made.

• Participants may feel pressured to justify their authenticity if there is an implied “ordering”, with some “more authentic” than others.

• There may be a relentless search for “real people” suggesting other people are “less real” or “unreal”.

• The “usual suspects” becomes used as a negative and suspicious term.
2. Assumptions about leadership

TYRANNY? Participatory governance is assumed to align with distributed and shared leadership. Participatory processes value diverse voices being heard and collective expertise being pooled.

• But, leadership styles that value emergence, openness and distribution might hide underlying dynamics.

• Conflating adaptive leadership styles and participatory governance might conceal inequalities that arise due to power of participants, formal roles, or current and historical relationships.

• Adaptive leadership might overemphasis transparency, ensuring every voice is heard, and ensuring every participant is aware of and satisfied with the process. There will be trade offs, with the risk of “an interminable process, seemingly an end in its own right, with a frustrating lack of focus on action”.

3. “Bottom up” over “top down”

TYRANNY? Both are generalised and “Bottom up is best” is contrasted to the perceived failure of “top down” governance.

• Can lead to a gap in understanding how to address wicked governance dilemmas.

• Existing governance forms are dismissed as “part of the problem”.

• Creates an unhelpful binary between professional, trained, technocratic elites and fetishizes an innovative, creative, experientially driven “bottom-up”.

• Ignores the risk of participation being captured by sectional interests.
CONCLUSIONS

Why might this matter?
• To avoid participatory governance from becoming a tainted policy fad
• To avoid “participation” used as a cloak of words to disguise business as usual: to hide power inequalities and enable elites to purse their own agendas

SUGGESTIONS...
TYRANNY 1. To think about recruitment and to have a conversation about the value of lived experience in its own right, and to consider how to judge contributions on their own merits.
TYRANNY 2. To not assume which models of leadership are most suited to the task in hand, and explicitly recognise the trade-offs.
TYRANNY 3. To investigate “top down” or “bottom up” based on the outcomes that they produce; and to avoid essentialising either.

FINALLY...
“Participation is not a cookbook”
“Incompleteness is a virtue”
“The ability of people to adapt and be self-aware and self-conscious is one of the conditions for democratic governance”.