



# How to Improve Our Decision-Making

Páll Skúlason

June 11, 2012



# Overview



Introductory remarks on the Icelandic roads and the significance of roads in general

I. The Main Principles of Decision-Making and the Present Day Crisis

II. Principal Players in Public Decision-Making and Difficulties in their Interplay

III. The Way Forward: Professionalism, Public Utilities, and Trust

# The Icelandic Roads



- An efficient and well-made road system was constructed in the last century
- The road system was, and is, one of the most important elements of infrastructure in the country
- Question: *How did Icelanders succeed in constructing this system?*

# The Significance of Roads



- For our spiritual life (discovery, contacts...)
- For our political life (organisational, military...)
- For our economic life (exchange...)



## Part I

# The Main Principles of Decision-Making and the Present Day Crisis

# Principles of Decision



- The principles of knowledge:  
truth – coherence – understanding
- The principles of politics and law:  
solidarity – democracy – freedom
- The principles of economics and technology:  
effectiveness – efficiency – reliability



# Who are we, human beings?

- We are thinking, self-conscious beings trying to understand reality
- We are Icelandic, Chinese, Canadian ... who have to live together
- We are members of the human species, fighting for survival

# Different Areas of Decision



- For living as self-conscious beings: *What is true and right, good and beautiful?*
- For organizing our life in common: *What should we do (or not do) together?*
- For economic tasks: *What is possible?*



# Understanding our Co-existence



- Spiritual and private life
- Public and political life
- Social and economic life

# Kinds of Social Goods



- The common good: our co-existence
- Collective goods:
  - Natural (e.g. sun, water)
  - Man-made (e.g. schools, roads)
- Commercial or exchangeable goods

# The Course of Social Development



- At the beginning of 20th century: focus on the construction of public utilities
- At the beginning of 21st century: focus on commercial goods
- An example from Iceland about changes in attitude concerning road-construction

# Postulates of Contemporary Business Ideology



- Most human relations are, at bottom, business relations
- Earning money is the most important thing in life
- Private enterprise is always more efficient than public institutions
- Competition is always good

# The Present-day Crisis



A Crisis in thinking and decision-making

- Moral (spiritual): religions, arts and sciences
- Political (public): the common good, public utilities
- Financial (economic): the banking system



## Part II

# Principal Players in Public Decision-Making and Difficulties in their Interplay



# At a Crossroad

How are we to organize and operate our public utilities?

- By private enterprise?
- By public service?

# The Principal Players



- The Professionals
- The Politicians
- The People (or general public)



# The Vices of The Professionals:



- Do not listen
- Always know better
- May “sell out” to politicians or special interests

# The Vices of the Politicians



- Thinking about their own power
- Listening too much to special interest groups
- Not taking a long-term perspective

# The Vices of Ordinary People:



- Are too preoccupied with their private lives
- Constantly compare themselves to other people
- Neglect spiritual values

# A False Dichotomy:



- “Leave it to the professionals”
- “The professionals have nothing to say, the issue is political!”

# Lack of Trust as a Hindrance



- Ordinary people do not trust professionals or politicians
- Politicians do not trust professionals or ordinary people
- Professionals do not trust politicians nor ordinary people

25.6.2012

21



## Part III

# The Way Forward: Professionalism, Public Utilities, and Trust

# How can we build Trust?



Consensus is needed:

- Common Understanding of our concrete situation and public utilities
- Common Goals for the common good
- Common Means for attaining our goals

# The Virtues of the Professionals:



- Impartiality
- Understanding
- Effectiveness



# Three Types of Professional Knowledge



- Spiritual – moral – scientific:  
truth, coherence, understanding
- Political – legal:  
solidarity, equality, freedom
- Technical – economic:  
efficiency, reliability, effectiveness

*These need to be understood separately  
but must be integrated in reality*

# Professional Application of the Three Principles



- Education for a public, rational and informed debate on our concrete situation
- Reflective training for a constant quality assurance, self-assessment and external evaluation
- Acquiring know-how for conducting effective meetings

# How Icelanders Succeeded



- A clear understanding of the importance of a road system for the future of Iceland
- A wide consensus on the main goals and projects
- Trust among professionals, politicians and the population

# Improving Decision-Making



- A clear conceptual framework
- A transparent value scale
- A set of efficient rules for reaching agreement over matters in dispute

# The Road to Understanding



- The road is not only what makes it possible to go from one place to the next
- The road is the symbol of orientation: It takes you to a place whether you know that place or not
- If you lose the road you are lost or “disoriented”: inter vias, not knowing where you are going



Thank you  
for your attention!