

**Alfred Moore.** *Critical Elitism: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Problem of Expertise.* Cambridge University Press 2017. 213 pp. \$99.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107194526).

The 2007 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) contained two errors: it predicted that Himalayan glaciers would melt by 2035 (instead of the intended 2350); and it said that 55% of the Netherlands would lie below sea level (rather than, as intended, that 55% of the territory was at risk of flooding). The ensuing controversy threatened to erode the IPCC's authority as an institution at the boundary between science and politics, guiding government policy based on the findings of experts. The head of the agency responsible for the Dutch-territory passage saw the potential within the crisis, and understood that the IPCC must build its authority through its strategies of dealing deliberatively with crises and communicating those deliberations to the wider public. The agency set up a website to invite the public to identify other errors, and used a blog to create a continuous engagement between agency scientists and climate-change sceptics. It thus invited critical public engagement, but framed in a more productive way than the common media treatment of the castigating of errors. The effect was to communicate that the IPCC was reflective and self-critical, but also substantively engaged with critics.

This story is told by Alfred Moore toward the end of his book, and is essentially the upshot of his study, that expert elites really do offer valuable policy input to democratic systems, but they must hold themselves and their methods openly accountable to the public, because this transparency in their problem-framing procedures and decision-making is what will ultimately win them the authority they need in order to be of value. Public judgement and even public criticism and contestation thus become constitutive of expert authority. This is the 'critical elitism' of the book's title.

None of us has time to be knowledgeable on every technical area of modern governance; we need expert groups who can weigh the evidence and inform our decisions. These 'elites' can be scientists chosen for their previous work, or they can be 'minipublics' of citizens, whether they are selected at random, as a statistical sample of the population as a whole, as recognized stakeholders in an issue, or as partisans with existing positions on the issue. Or they can be various sorts of hybrids. They may aim to directly advise government on policy, to suggest a position to the public on an issue, or only to outline the issues more clearly to the public. The role of these groups, and their interaction with 'those on the outside,' is of unquestionable current importance.

Moore's book is ultimately a reflection, not so much on the value of the groups in informing the public and informing policy, which he tends to take as read, but on the value to these groups and to their authority of the very contestation which might seem to undermine them. There is the fear that such elite advice will pre-empt the debate which properly takes place in a polity, or that it may even see the elimination of that debate entirely were it empowered to do so. Hence these groups, very rightly, come under enormous public scrutiny, even though not all of this scrutiny is *bona fide*. This is why Moore envisages for these groups the relatively modest role as supplement to public deliberation, a role which Moore argues can in fact be enhanced by the very scrutiny they face. Moore wants processes that will achieve binding collective decisions, so he seeks expertise that is robust and trustworthy. But he argues that a systemic approach will let us see how contestation and critique (and even biased resistance from obsessive critics), rather than weakening this democratic capacity, can actually enhance it: the critique motivates the elite group in question to repeatedly justify its position, and so enhances its standing among 'those on the outside.' Even if that expert position is massively majoritarian in the society, the respect thus paid to minority opinion, even

when unreasonable, continually reactivates the validation of the majority opinion and discourages lazy consensus.

The role and nature of consensus are key for Moore, both in the population as a whole and within the elite groups. If there's one thing everyone agrees on, it's that consensus is hard to achieve in any group, or at least consensus understood as true convergence of opinion. Thus Moore proposes 'deliberative consensus' as the goal for society and any working group, whereby the members, even if they harbour doubts about a given position, let the position stand for now as that of the group, based on the quality of their deliberation. If all sides agree that diverse arguments have been fully explored, then even those who remain unconvinced by the majority position can accept it as a premise for action.

This deliberative acceptance should be used within the expert groups, but just as importantly, the process should be communicated to those outside in order to give them confidence in the decisions of the group. But also this kind of deliberative acceptance can be the basis of our understanding of what happens when the population at large defers to such an expert group. Rather than authority residing in the unquestioning obeying of orders, it is based in ongoing approval, which has as a necessary condition the possibility of disapproval.

What's more, an expert group's misguided sense that it needs to communicate a complete unity of opinion as a group on any given topic can in fact be used against it. For once critics discover, as they eventually must, that the convergence of opinion within the group is not so total as had been communicated, they will use this to attack the group's validity as a source of advice going forward. So it is that such groups should instead aim at internal *deliberative consensus* and should be entirely transparent about any lack of substantive convergence in opinions. The book does end up as something of a 'guide for elite groups', and I admit to wondering at moments where I came into all this, as a citizen who is not in any elite groups, except perhaps to be suitably impressed and influenced by these groups' eventual transparency and open response to critique.

The book is a very intelligent engagement with the current literature, but it is not an easy or quick read, since Moore takes care to build a picture of the problems facing these elite groups in their public interactions, and to build a taxonomy of methods of deliberation, forms of authority and means of judging and contesting, then brings these together in a systemic vision of how contestation can enhance authority by allowing those 'on the outside' to better judge the quality of deliberation 'on the inside'.

It is always unfair to criticize a book for what it does not do, but given that this is explicitly a systemic approach, looking at how institutions and public spheres interact, I would have liked more on the respective roles and interactions of government, electors and elites. Elected government is, or at least *still* is, the fulcrum around which revolves this constellation of expert groups, minipublics and real publics, and discussion of its role in all this would flesh out a systemic account of the value of these elite groups. There are a few short case studies, of the IPCC or of citizens' groups formed to advise governments and publics on various issues, but they are brief and there is little on the role of elected government or permanent bureaucracy in all of this instituting and operation of elite groups.

I would also have liked more on the structural means by which the contestation of elite groups is biased, for example, by the influence of money in politics and of media in public life. This goes hand in hand with the former desideratum of more discussion of government, for, aside entirely from the influence of big money on science in the framing of both problems and solutions, big money and big media seek ever more to influence government and public opinion, often via these 'elite groups', but often also in order to discredit them. Moore would defend himself by saying that he is well aware of this, and does refer to it at points, and that his is a theoretical study on how the

contestation manufactured by big money and media can be turned to general deliberative benefit. It's up to those elite groups now to act on this.

**Bartholomew Begley**, Dublin City University