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# Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



**Feature Choice** by Rolf Sterk  
Changing Through Dialogue,  
Rather Than Diagnosis

## Appreciating Politics

Edited by

**Suzanne Hoogland, Fleur Renirie and Floor ten Holder**

Co-publishers

**Instituut voor Interventiekunde and the  
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## Appreciating Politics

### Welcome to August 2017 issue of *AI Practitioner*

“Appreciating politics” as the theme for an issue of our *Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner* may sound a bit awkward these days. It’s difficult to be curious, let alone appreciative in a world where Brexeteers, Trump, Putin, Orban, Erdogan and so on win more-or-less democratic elections. And yet, it may be more necessary now than ever to come up with a counter-narrative, with different social constructions, and with a different perspective when we look at politics and politicians.

We can assume that many politicians have become politicians to do good in the world: to make a difference in health care, in education, in human

wellbeing in their communities and countries. We can also assume that the nastiness that seems to come with politics, the Macchiavellian discourse that seems to entrap us, is nothing more than a social construction. Social constructions can be deconstructed and replaced by different “realities”.

This was the challenge for the three guest editors of this issue, Floor ten Holder, Suzanne Hoogland, and Fleur Renirie: to find stories that shed a different light on politics. To go and look for people who are trying to change the world, in the political arena, as teachers of politicians, or as citizens. To act on their desire to make this world a better place.

In this issue you can read about who and what they found: a Swedish school that educates a new, non-partisan generation of politicians; stories about Costa Rica and South Africa; an essay by Niels Springveld, urging for utopian thinking; and one by Lotte Muilwijk, asking politicians to concentrate on individual and collective wellbeing; people “knocking on Washington’s door”, trying to bring AI into the Trump administration; and interviews with two young women, Chaeli Mycroft, winner of the International Children’s Peace Prize, and Yasmina el Ouardani, winner of the first *AI Practitioner* Award, who want to make a difference in other young people’s lives. And on top of all this, there’s an interesting case study by Rolf Sterk as the Feature Choice.

In the late nineteen-thirties Kurt Lewin and some of his students researched the nature of democratic leadership (Lewin, Lippitt and White, 1939; White and Lippitt, 1960). One of their conclusions is that authoritarian and *laissez faire* leadership are our default modes, and that every generation has to learn anew how to think and act democratically. The contributors of this issue are practitioners who are all making conscious efforts to enhance the productive and positive democratic forces in politics and in society.

I want to thank Keith Storace for his ongoing contribution to *AI Practitioner*. Not only has he been bringing in

“voices from the field”, for the last two years (this time it’s the voice of Nelly Nduta Ndirangu from Kenya), he also has written a thoughtful article on the effects of appreciative dialogue for this issue.

So, thank you Floor ten Holder, Suzanne Hoogland and Fleur Renirie, for bringing together these different contributions, and for your own wonderful introduction to this issue. And thank you, Shelagh Aitken for editing *AI Practitioner*.



Wick van der Vaart  
Co-publisher and  
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# Appreciating Politics

## How Can We Appreciate Politics in Society? A Platform to Bring Together Differences

**This issue of *AI Practitioner* includes examples of new perspectives on ways to (re-)appreciate the current state of politics. What does appreciating politics mean? What happens if we regard politics through an appreciative lens?**

Originally, ‘politics’ was a means of resolving conflicts through conversation and negotiation, with the goal of finding common ground where it was possible for a diversity of perspectives to exist. In the current polarised setting, the definition of politics seems to be shifting from a place where we are looking for ways to integrate different perspectives to a place where we are not receptive to views that differ from ours. At the same time, people – inside and outside politics – try to reconcile those different views.

Within the current political discourse we need more visibility and a re-appreciation of existing practices to facilitate constructive dialogues between different groups. Each contribution in this issue applies the principles of Appreciative Inquiry to politics in their own way. We introduce you to the authors and their articles with pleasure, by connecting the principles of AI to their contributions.

### Social Constructionist principle

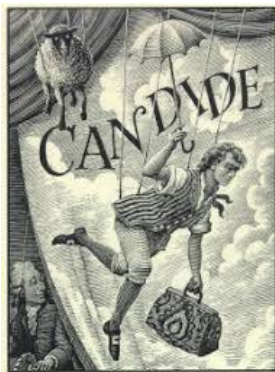
The Constructionist principle states that what we believe to be real is created through our social interactions (Watkins, Mohr & Kelly, 2011). Reality is

socially created through language, experiences and conversations which lead to agreements about how we interpret the world surrounding us. This subjective – rather objective, “there is just one” – state of reality can change during conversations, constructing a new reality. Politicians, for example, try to formulate questions to investigate social issues, exchanging their perspectives during debate. If we interpret this as doing research, politicians are trying to gather valid information to make decisions to vote for or against a proposal. But they also construct a reality around important social issues.

“Lotte Muilwijk” writes about how our political choices and the choices of politicians are shaped by more than just rational decisions [“Appreciating Politics” on page 36]. She argues for the importance of the impact of our emotions, attitudes and circumstances. There is no single correct way to practise politics. As Lotte states: “just because humans beings are flawed, it does not mean that we cannot strive towards shared ideals to create our society” [page 36]. On the contrary: by being human – and not limited to being rational only – humans create the society that fits their perception of reality.

### Principle of Simultaneity

The principle of Simultaneity proposes that the moment of change starts when asking questions. Often, questions are fate-full, and asking questions in political debate frequently leads to polarisation. As Anastasia Bukashe argues in her article [“The Politics of Appreciation” on page 15], it is not only politicians, but us as well, in our ordinary lives who could use the politics of appreciation, where we appreciate each other in our different views, choices and beliefs, and where we create space to find one another. If we are stressed about the polarised political debate, why are we not asking the question: could we – as citizens – turn the political debate around to use the politics of appreciation ourselves? And could we ask the same of politicians – who are, in any case, our representatives – so that the political debate could be in our own hands?



Read more about Niels Springveld's view of utopianism and egalitarianism on page 18

### Anticipatory principle

The Anticipatory principle states that human systems move in the direction of their image of the future: “image inspires action” (Sensing, 2011) and “positive images create positive futures” (Kelm, 2005). Politicians, especially during elections, outline a positive future and create positive images within their political perspectives. Voters, driven by this image, have hope for a better future. In the end, politics and policy are about making compromises: what then is left of the politicians’ utopian visions? As Niels Springveld argues [“Egalitarianism and Utopianism in the Age of Anger” on page 18], Utopianism is an experimental, playful and energising emancipatory narrative designed to better everyone’s condition. Our way to a better future is a bumpy ride, but we need





In his cartoon, Sameer Khalili shows how an appreciative politics is necessary in our small world

scientists, politicians and civilians with a Utopian perspective to create a positive and hopeful image of the future, so we can use it to shape our present-day actions.

### Poetic principle

Malcolm Odell, a consultant to many organisations who has contributed a number of articles to *AI Practitioner*, has stated: “If you focus on problems, you find more problems. If you focus on successes, you find more successes.” The Poetic principle agrees with this statement. It acknowledges that all stories – about people, organisations, society – can be interpreted in multiple ways, and that we can choose our own reality by focusing on specific aspects of those stories (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). By re-telling stories – by changing the focus – we are able to change their meaning and impact. The attention we give to stories, people and experiences influences our perspective of reality, and our perspective influences the way we interpret reality. Starting on page 31, Gerardo Contreras and Piarella Peralta de Wesseling help shift attention from stories about societal problems and challenges in Central America to stories of inspiration and success, by (re-)telling their history of Costa Rican practices. By looking back on the history of their country, they show the importance of constantly making a conscious effort to look at the (difficult) reality, and try to make the most of it. That made Costa Rica what it is now: “a beautiful country, with a lack of an army and high scores on the Happy Planet Index” [page 31].

### Positive principle

The Positive principle is probably one of AI’s best-known principles. As Cooperrider (1990) describes, creating positive images together can generate and direct positive action. Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the qualities and possibilities of a group of people. By shifting attention from problems to opportunities, a new reality can come into existence. In current politics, creating positive images of a desired future together, or asking the question “What do we want more of?” instead of running away from difficult topics is not common practice. Certainly not at this point in time, when Trump, with a reckless agenda and a divisive message, has been elected president of the United States. However, his election has also generated widespread, powerful and positive movements by civilians, such as Yasmina el Ouardani, wanting to make a real change. Margie Stern is also one of them. In her contribution, she describes how she is working toward introducing AI into the federal government of the USA by knocking on Washington’s door. Read more on page 41.



[Click to go to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk](#)

## Wholeness principle

As writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) articulated in her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story”, when one perspective dominates an issue, the ambiguity and plurality of social realities are reduced to a single, stereotyping narrative. In reality, each situation, person or group contains a compilation of stories that need to be heard within processes of inquiry and decision-making. The AI principle of Wholeness directs us to invite “the whole system in the room”. It enables more sustainable and effective outcomes when all stakeholders and aspects of the issue are taken into account. This is not just an inclusive practice: bringing together differences stimulates creativity, leads to a more complete interpretation of the issue and unfolds a richer palette of possible solutions.

Politics, in theory the platform that brings together different voices, often seem to fail to represent the wide variety of perspectives within society. Fortunately, there are people in the field who are changing this situation. Erik Amnå and Daniel Sachs of the Høj Røsten school in Sweden, a non-partisan school for becoming a politician, and International Children’s Peace Prize winner Chaeli Mycroft from South Africa have contributed their points of view on including all voices, especially those often excluded from the dialogue.

In their article on page 10, Amnå and Sachs describe how they work to engage “stand-by” youths to participate in politics in Sweden. In the interview on page 24, 22-year-old Chaeli Mycroft talks about her mission to make sure that children, and more specifically children with disabilities, are being heard when political decisions on local or global levels are being made.



[The interview with International Children’s Peace Prize winner Chaeli Mycroft begins on page 24](#)

We enjoyed editing and reading the articles of the authors and the process of creating this issue of *AI Practitioner*. We hope you enjoy reading!

**Fleur Renirie, Floor van ten Holder and Suzanne Hoogland**  
**August 2017**

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