DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POWER FROM THE PEOPLE?

Citizens' Assemblies in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

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→ Recent political turmoil has led to concerns about significant political divisions – between young and old, remainers and leavers, progressives and conservatives, and between the North and the South.

→ Into this breach has stepped the potent idea of the citizens' assembly – a form of decision-making characterised by collective reasoning, consideration of evidence, facilitated discussion and a series of proposals.

→ But if citizens' assemblies in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland are to fulfil their promise, they must enter into dialogue with our existing institutions and processes.

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Citizens' assemblies (CAs) and other deliberative processes have witnessed a renaissance – a ›deliberative turn‹ – in recent years in the UK and Ireland. There are the negative elements pushing towards greater deliberation, such as the decline in formal democratic participation – falling political party numbers, low turnout in elections and political disaffection. Add to this the various shocks to the political establishment – the MPs' expenses scandal in 2010, recurring accusations of lobbying and cronyism and the measurable decline of public trust in politicians.

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The real challenge for CAs is interaction with the existing representative system. It is a process akin to mixing two very different chemical solutions, delicately ensuring the final product is productive, not explosive. This alchemy is the job of the campaigners, designers and facilitators and it starts with some fundamental political education of the elected representatives. Very often the success of a CA process is predictable from the earliest interactions between the deliberative designers and the representatives.

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As for the longer view, CAs do not exist in a vacuum. Deliberative experts can spend years honing the perfect process and establishing the ideal space for the practice of political dialogue. But when the deliberative space meets its representative counterpart the two must intersect. So the very best deliberative democrats stay connected with and seek to influence the wider political environment whether that relates to political alienation, democratisation, economic inequality or public participation. CAs reside in the same landscape as the rest of politics and they are porous places, where factors beyond the Assembly's walls will always have an impact on what happens inside.

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INTRODUCTION:
THE AGE OF DELIBERATION

Experts on citizens' assemblies often joke about the old days. The days when seven policy nerds in a room constituted a meeting of the whole British deliberative sector, when they were the anoraks sitting in the quieter corners of policy, using their own language of words all ending in ›tion‹ – deliberation, sortition, recommendation. And how long ago the old days now seem.

Citizens' assemblies (CAs) – randomly selected individuals convened to tackle a political question and reach a set of recommendations – once seemed fanciful. Yet they and other deliberative processes have witnessed a renaissance – a ›deliberative turn‹ – in recent years, with the deliberative democracy organisation Involve's tracker counting at least 38 CAs across the UK since 2018. The reasons for this are subject to ongoing debate, but there are clues in the political backdrop. There are the negative factors pushing towards greater deliberation – the decline in formal democratic participation expressed in falling political party numbers, low turnout in elections and political disaffection. Add to this the various shocks to the political establishment – the MPs' expenses scandal in 2010, recurring accusations of lobbying and cronyism and the measurable decline of public trust in politicians. This has been stoked by some huge political upsets, most starkly Brexit, but also the election of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 as leader of the Labour party, and the surprise progressive upswing in 2017. The turmoil of these political events has led to concerns about significant political divisions – between young and old, remainers and leavers, progressives and conservatives, and geographically between the North and the South.

Into this breach has stepped the potent idea of the citizens' assembly. It is a form of deliberative democracy – decision-making characterised by collective reasoning, consideration of evidence, facilitated discussion and a series of proposals. Of the many forms of deliberative democracy perhaps the CA is the most well-known. A CA typically is comprised of many elements. Participants are selected at random, but they must be representative of the wider population in terms of key demographics. They are convened – usually but not always – by a political authority, to address a particular topic. The participants deliberate amongst themselves in a facilitated space and generate a series of proposed solutions. A CA must have clarity of process, a controlled environment, a clear input and promised outputs. It aspires to give individual citizens decision-making power within a representative system, and this is the reason CAs have been suggested as solutions for the most intractable political problem of the day, from Brexit to Scottish independence to climate action, abortion rights to equal marriage.

CAs have real democratic allure. They appear to offer so much that our everyday politics doesn't: they are participatory, nuanced, respectful and productive. Indeed, CAs are making waves precisely because they are counter-cultural,

a breath of fresh air in our current system of representation that is in dire need of an upgrade (Compass 2021).

But if CAs are to fulfil their promise, they must enter into dialogue with our existing institutions and processes. In this paper, I will examine the current state of CAs in the UK and, to a lesser extent, the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and address the crucial political questions they pose. What do CAs really have to offer? How can we maximise their benefits? And what do they tell us about the ways we may want our democracy to evolve? I hope to make clear that CAs can only become a powerful tool for renewing democracy when they interact with the tricky dynamics of political progress.

CAs AS POLITICAL MAGNETS

What is driving this sudden uptake in deliberative processes? Four or five years ago organisations involved in deliberative processes were few. When the idea of CAs began to gain traction in the media, organisations such as Involve, the Sortition Foundation, Democratic Society and Shared Future CIC were the first to spot the signs of a new deliberative wave. Enquiries about CAs came flooding in from officials, councillors and interested observers keen to know more about the most recent democratic innovation.

What drew them in? Against a background of political churn – the turmoil of Brexit and party instability across the spectrum – local councils in particular were looking for ways to reconnect with the public. They are after all supposed to be the first port of call for a concerned citizen. And the forces operating on these councils can be push factors or pull factors. In other words, there are both incentives and drivers for CAs.

DRIVERS

I. THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY –
AND GOOD VISUALS

There is a more pressing need than ever for political representatives and bodies to justify their power. For some local authorities this quest for legitimacy has led them to open up to their own electorate.

CAs and other forms of deliberative processes seem to offer concrete proof that councils are receptive. Bluntly, they provide good visuals: citizens are convened by the council, demographically aligned with the constituency, and asked to decide upon some of the most burning questions of the moment. This demonstrates councils' trust and transparency.

It is also an opportunity to garner some admiring attention from the public. In the early days of CAs, media interest in the newest political innovation led to some encouraging reports (Rice-Oxley, 2019), with much praise for those

council leaders who initiated the process. Georgia Gould, leader of Camden Council, one of the earliest councils to commission a CA, sounded decisive: »there has been a complete breakdown of trust in our political system«. In contrast, a CA could make a council seem innovative and responsive. The allure of the CA also lay in its apparent simplicity: convene a cross-section of the local electorate facilitated by an independent, external body and deliver their findings back to the council. What could go wrong?

II. RESCUING REPRESENTATION?

Some progressive leaders came to power already holding the view that institutional democracy had gone awry. One political advisor to a mayor who had commissioned a CA noted that the mayor's background in activism meant he was well-versed in participatory approaches. It was something he'd already trialled in his election campaign – engaging the public to help write his manifesto. Indeed, it was his sympathy with Extinction Rebellion that led him to the idea of CAs on climate and then to run his own.

Yet despite a few friendly politicians, the task of rescuing our representative democracy remains a tricky balance to strike. Campaigners must highlight the inadequacies of representation (and the benefits of deliberation) while keeping the representatives on side.

Some believe that campaigners for CAs haven't always got that right: one advocate I spoke to was very critical of the anti-politician rhetoric of some democracy campaigners, arguing that it annoyed and alienated politicians and even helped fuel populist arguments against democracy. And MPs often respond defensively, claiming that Parliament is itself a CA. Instead, his line was to suggest to politicians that most healthy democracies have many different sources of authority, and that CAs and Parliament have complementary ways of making decisions democratically. Representatives in parliament are indeed accountable to the electorate, but healthy deliberation is difficult, weighed down as they are by party affiliations and public opinion. Being open-minded is hard when you're tied to a manifesto. The best approach is to persuade politicians that CAs deepen the representative process and ultimately serve to reinstate existing structures.

III. THE TYRANNY OF THOSE WHO SHOW UP

There is another factor pushing councils towards this participatory approach. Many progressive council leaders are hyper-conscious of inequality, a problem they were supposedly elected to address. The data on the electoral turnout of certain social groups is damning of the current representative system, with voting markedly lower among the young, the working class and voters who have at some point been unemployed (British Election Study 2021; Ipsos Mori 2017; Azzolini 2021).

Sortition provides a neat and honourable answer: no decision-making process is possible without the involvement of a representative sample of the electorate. In past processes, there has been the fear of the ›tyranny of those who showed up‹ – typically those who could afford to, had the time or the confidence to participate. The effects of this are writ large across all areas of political decisions, from local to national. Certain groups' interests are over-represented in policy decisions.

Among those who have initiated CAs, there is pride that CAs proactively construct a balanced sample. In fact, since CAs are geared towards facilitating participation, particularly among those less likely to turn up, they are often over-subscribed. One respondent from Bristol told me they had far too many residents wanting to attend their CA, of whom a large number were people with disabilities and people of colour, who had historically been under-represented in local politics. To attract those for whom money is a barrier, ›participant gifts‹ are given (usually around £300), in accordance with good CA practice and to compensate members for their time. In the end, Bristol also boasted that 20% of the CA were aged between 16– 24, a group typically less active in formal politics. Designers work very hard to ensure the assembly is a mirror image of the community.

But what happens when specific policies affect some groups more than others? CAs can meet this challenge by weighting the assembly members to adjust for that, over-representing groups who are historically less likely to participate and/or most likely to be affected by the decisions of the assembly. On top of this, witnesses or experts invited to the assembly can help redress any imbalances; in Bristol the CA's Advisory Group, responsible for inviting the expert witnesses, was itself selected to represent the diversity of the city, with the hope that their choice of expert speakers would further reinforce that.

IV. NO MUD-SLINGING

It is not simply a problem of the same old faces and voices in the room. Even when new faces do show up, there is always the responsibility to ensure equal participation and a welcoming atmosphere. Most councillors and those involved in public life fear the ›Parks and Recreation‹ scenes of townhall hostility, the domination of debate by the disgruntled. But once again CAs have a clear response to this: facilitation. A trained and confident facilitation team, unconnected to the council, sets up and protects the space for accessible and high-quality discussion.

Whatever a focus group or civic hall debate is, that is what a CA is not. In particular, the educative, discursive culture of CAs is appealing to councillors. A CA is not just a response to the divide between political institutions and the public. It is also a proven way for the public to learn about the processes and practicalities of decision-making, during which local councillors can recognise citizens as thoughtful and engaged and citizens see the difficulties councillors face.

CAs also help dissolve barriers between citizens themselves and even between political institutions and civil society. In the best cases, this involves all actors so that citizens, civil society, business, and the council partake in a collective effort to tackle an issue. This ›eco-system‹ approach eases the pressure on the local institution to feel solely responsible for ›fixing‹ local issues. Once the North of Tyne CA on climate had concluded, the engagement with businesses and civil society that had been thread in from the start meant that they had a place in the CA, and the report explicitly highlights areas of work for schools, local businesses and local authorities.

V. WHOSE JOB IS THIS ANYWAY?

A final push factor relates to the question of authority. Councils in particular have been feeling increasing strain in recent decades, as successive governments' defunding have undermined their work across all areas – from waste management and housing to transport and education. This has led to mismanagement and outsourcing, further fuelling local frustrations.

Some council leaders have been creative in response. Donna Hall in Wigan triggered a radical shift in the way her council operated with the Wigan Deal, a partnership between the council and civil society that led to a culture of co-operation both between council departments and between the council and local businesses and institutions. And yet it still was not clear how individual citizens might play a part in this process. What was needed was a specific invitation to take part in a formal assembly where the input and time of the citizens was properly acknowledged and, in most cases, paid for and the outputs given proper consideration. The proponents of deliberation focus on the quality of the experience, not the quantity of participants and citizens' input would be requested, properly processed and valued.

From the perspective of the councillors around the country who have spearheaded this movement, a CA represents a legitimate and well-studied process that draws out citizens' views and delivers it up in a neat package. What is more, they are not responsible for designing it, so the independence of the process is guaranteed. Their role is to kickstart and fund the assembly process, commit to it and – this is often the hard bit – accept a minor loss of control. Once the process was in motion, they had to step back.

It is easy to imagine that this came as a relief to certain councillors. After all, the job of devising and enacting an action plan is no longer theirs – it's shared. When a political question is divisive or involves serious trade-offs, deliberative democracy is a process of navigation that helps chart a way forward. One Bristol councillor told me that their CA on climate action was essential for providing concrete proposals for action – and a political mandate. It is easy to say the city should be pedestrianised by 2030, but the CA comes into its own when you can use its proposals to justify specific measures, like closing off whole roads to traffic.

For those politicians with strong opinions on a particular issue, citizens' assemblies provide convenient political cover for contentious decisions. For others who are genuinely undecided or fear the public's reaction, CAs can help them make their minds up on the right course of action.

INCENTIVES

I. HELP MAKING DIFFICULT CHOICES

The pressure on politicians to make tough calls about budgeting makes citizens' assemblies more desirable. Here is a way in which difficult priorities can be pinned down through public participation. Indeed, citizens' assemblies, with ample time, good facilitation and a tight mandate, represent the kind of democracy we aspire to, as Iain Walker from newDemocracy Australia puts it ›the taking of public decisions that reflect the informed general will of the people‹ (Chalmers 2016).

Yet politicians must beware of saddling citizens with the dirty work of unpopular policies. For one thing, the assembly might back a solution that goes way beyond what politicians had envisaged, presenting them with the tricky problem of accepting recommendations with which they might profoundly disagree. Designers must also be wary about the ›political cover‹ question: CAs cannot be seen as political ›shortcuts‹ in which a political recommendation that would not get mass approval is passed by a tiny subsection of the electorate. This would represent a real breakdown in the process. The parameters of the assembly's power must be laid down in advance, along with any limitations on them. Further, when a CA proposes a measure that is clearly out of step with the broader public, it risks tainting the reputation of CAs. After all, only a very small slice of the population partakes in the process, meaning that a divide – what Professor Stuart White calls the ›deliberative gap‹ (White 2021) – can open up.

II. QUALITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Perhaps the biggest draw of CAs is the clarity of their conclusions. If processes have been well-resourced with sufficient time, content and a clear mandate, the final recommendations can be very specific. In Leeds, assembly members of the CA on climate were quite explicit about their intention to make private cars a »last resort« for citizens and to bring back buses within »public control«. This conclusion reflects weeks and sometimes months of learning and weighing up. Some assembly reports give a real sense of a community's priorities, especially when the assembly has tackled complex issues such as climate change or social care. For instance, transport and housing turned out to be priorities 1 and 2 in Leeds, with recycling much lower down the agenda. And often the results are more

radical than expected. Politicians and the media are often taken aback by what emerges, such as in the Irish CA on abortion, which went so much further than legislators anticipated, recommending not only that the Eighth amendment (which banned abortion in almost all circumstances), should be scrapped (87% agreement), but also that the Irish Parliament should be authorised to legislate on matters due to termination of pregnancy.

The ›crunch‹ test is therefore: do such proposals help navigate the compromises entailed in all public policy? At some point members of assemblies must make choices *between* things, and this should be factored in from the beginning by those who commission and facilitate CAs. In some cases, it is possible to identify these trade-offs well in advance, such as in the case of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods or abortion rights. Others might surface during the process, picked up by participants, through expert testimonials or by assembly members drawing on their own experience, something that is permitted when it informs collective reasoning. Indeed, it is these very trade-offs that give the assembly its purpose, for without them a decision would be simple.

This granularity can be hard work. But it this very practice that gives deliberation the reputation of producing good outcomes. It is when conflicting values are identified that things become political. But it is not inevitable that the process leads to a binary choice; sometimes a happy compromise is reached or there is a universally accepted solution. More often, however, it's difficult work to weigh up and balance competing goods and ills. One example is the Irish CA on climate change, in which the negative impact of a carbon tax on the agricultural sector had to be balanced against the net revenue obtained and the potential reduction of carbon emissions.

However, this doesn't mean that CAs are pre-ordained to arrive at a rather wet compromise, one of the accusations levelled against deliberation. Sometimes CAs reach a firm decision that clearly benefits one side and disadvantages another, such as in the Irish CA on equal marriage. Even when there's no such clear-cut decision, output need not be merely 'middle-ground'. In most UK climate change assemblies, priorities have represented a myriad of micro-choices, with some factors being weighted more heavily than others (The Involve Foundation 2019).

III. A DOSE OF IMAGINATION

Some of the most inspiring CA outputs are the surprising ones. These are recommendations that move beyond what the initiators of the CA had even considered, demonstrating the imaginative potential of CAs. Examples include the citizens of Bristol inventing the ›One Stop Shop‹ for sustainability improvements, through which citizens could visit both a website and a physical shop to get good ideas about reducing their personal footprint (Bristol City Council, Involve Foundation and Sortition Foundation 2021). Such creative thinking can be stimulated through play and hands-on work. In Newham assembly members were presented with paint and glitter to help build their ideal city. Stepping away from the status quo, which can be constraining and suppress new thinking, is always fruitful. Ideally, members spend time considering first what *could* be, before they arrive at what *should* be.

Imaginative interventions also underline another point. The formal business of politics, as conducted by a small, demographically narrow class, excludes much ordinary experience and therefore misses potential solutions to policy questions. This, after all, is what underpins the democratic instinct: that the people together know more than any one of us alone.

Imaginative extension may extend to a formal ›ideas-gathering‹ process as one step of the assembly, usually before the CA is brought together for the first meeting – as Camden Climate CA did before the CA was brought together (Involve Foundation 2019). Responses and ideas are invited from local businesses and clubs, from community organisations, schools and engaged members of the public, usually through an online open portal. In this way the educative benefits of the CA, as well as a collection of ideas and priorities, reach more members, thereby addressing that ›deliberative gap‹. Ideas are then collated and presented to participants in a digestible form, either for inspiration or, as in the case of Camden, as the focus of the process of creating proposals. This approach also allows ›wildcard‹ proposals a fair hearing.

IV. CO-OWNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP

Political representatives can also be drawn in by another challenge: agenda-setting. But here democrats confront a dilemma. In cases where CAs are commissioned by a political body, the agenda is set by members of that institution. They are seeking wider input on a specific question of policy, but the process still emanates from them. This has clear advantages: because the process is triggered by politicians, it is ›owned‹ by them making it less likely they will detach from it. The CA can be seen as a ›request‹ from the politicians to the public, an invitation into the political arena, where politicians do the work of hosting the space, usually by commissioning designers and bringing in facilitation teams. Any link to a political institution is not a cast-iron guarantor of the legitimacy of the process, but it does hold the promise that the time, energy and intellectual input of participants will not be wasted, but will feed back into existing institutions. Wrapping politicians into the process from the beginning gives them a role and provides a clear path to power for the CA's proposals.

Yet this approach has its disadvantages. Firstly, the power rests squarely with the politicians: the public are present at their behest and do not meaningfully ›own‹ the process. In addition, participants have less say than elected officials about what issues are included and excluded. This is questionable, since politicians might simply be asking the wrong

questions or failing to spot the overlaps between different issues –for example how transport and housing are interconnected.

The question of who sets the agenda is always a sticky one for deliberation. But it emphasises the need for participants to establish their power and, on an individual level, it brings the benefits of engagement in the form of a growth in confidence. CAs are the opposite of consultation in that participants construct and create, not just respond. As one respondent from the North of Tyne put it – the best bit of the whole CA experience were the individual stories that came out, such as the 80-year-old assembly member who used a computer for the first time as part of this process, which then helped him connect with friends and family during the Covid lockdown. There were others there who were staggered that someone wanted to know their views: »You want my opinion? No one has ever asked my opinion before«. The potentially transformative experience of individual assembly members should not be overlooked when making the argument for CAs.

The landmark referendums on reproductive rights and equal marriage, both preceded by CAs in Ireland, were widely seen as evidence of the shifts in social attitude over the past few decades. But those CAs also set the direction for further liberalisation of legislation and a more general questioning of tradition. The CA on the role of gender in Irish society followed closely on the heels of the first two cases, a vivid example of how we might rethink the concept of leadership in the light of deliberative processes. The best leaders understand and respond to, but also guide and shape the public's attitudes. In the cases of Ireland, we now understand that citizens can do this too.

V. A PROBLEM SHARED

The ideas gathering stage is crucial for one further factor that recommends CAs: the eco-system approach to policy making. The engagement of the wider community – schools, institutions, the private sector –makes visible the underlying logic of CAs: that collective, systemic responses should be the default approach to any public policy.

When CAs work at their best, all bodies involved feel a sense of responsibility to deliver the outcomes and understand their role in this delivery. The shift is away from the state as fixer and solver of problems towards the state as facilitator and host to the eco-system, responsible for convening and channelling resources towards the problem. ›Politics takes all of us‹ is the guiding motto of the CA.

SO WHAT'S THE CATCH?

If deliberative processes deliver such rich rewards, what are the costs? In any good deliberation acknowledging the trade-offs must be part of convincing politicians and the public that CAs are worth the investment.

Firstly the time and thus the financial investment is considerable. Deliberative processes are demanding for all involved. The initial preparation is extensive. Politicians and designers must together set reasonable expectations, frame a clear question, and imbue the process with serious political input. Early designers of CAs in the UK soon learned that speeding up the process only undermined its impact and eroded trust. Designers still have to work hard to reset politicians' expectations about how long good quality participation takes. In early experiments, initial processes were rushed, meaning that assembly members didn't have time to bed in and get to know one another. There was no proper evaluation to learn lessons for next time or to understand how to shepherd the proposals through, in order to guarantee they landed safely back with the political body.

Politicians can baulk when they realise the level of resources a citizens' assembly demands. One political advisor commented that, amongst CA sceptics in their local authority the costs of the CA was a key sticking point, the argument being that they already had consultations. This critic was also irritated by the remuneration offered to participants, arguing that he didn't get paid to come to cabinet meetings (which in any case was not strictly true). For her part, my respondent was impressed with the value for money of the CA – less then £100,000 for the entire process – which was dwarfed by the sums spent by the local authority for other policy priorities.

On this issue designers must speak clearly with one voice. Citizens' assemblies are high input, high return and cutting corners turns out to be false economy. The problem is that such investment can be prohibitive for local government which has been eroded over the past few decades through funding cuts and austerity. In addition, politicians who propose a CA might use up important political capital and they might well be anxious about whether their gamble will pay off. Unlike other processes, specific outcomes cannot be predicted.

Selling CAs to politicians is thus a delicate balance. On the one hand, representatives can be persuaded of the benefits – high quality participation, buy-in from the electorate, possible new solutions to intractable problems. On the other hand, deliberative democrats should not over-promise what can be achieved or guarantee any policy outcome.

It's not just money; effort is also costly. Designers must manage the expectations of both politicians and participants to ensure people are neither over-optimistic nor in the dark about what the CA demands. For their part, participants must learn to reason slowly, reflectively and collaboratively, feeling their way through the maze of policy and legislation, and this can be tedious and slow going – the famous »slow boring of hard boards« (Weber 2021).

Keeping momentum and energy up over several weeks is difficult, especially when the fruits of labour only appear at the end. Assembly members and politicians both must be convinced that their input is worthwhile. And elected offi-

cials need to be comfortable with letting go of the process and being ready to accept whatever comes out, even if it's not exactly what they were hoping for. One interviewee I spoke to had a clear response to a critical colleague, who was concerned when he received a long list of recommendations over which he felt he had no control: she pointed out that it was a prioritised list, specific enough to be meaningful, but abstract enough to be open to political interpretation.

All of this work, including all the potential costs associated with CAs, is directed towards bringing about a cultural shift in politics. Several interviewees from the CA design sector commented that ›running the CA is the easy part‹; the hardest task for them was the ›wrap-around‹ process – setting expectations, getting buy-in and delivering the recommendations at the end. One remarked »we know a lot about the technique and the technology; we now have to work on integrating with the political representatives and getting media attention so it reaches a wider audience«.

His final point is key: addressing the ›deliberative gap‹ is crucial if CAs are to achieve wider public and political acceptance and become normalised within our political process. One interviewee commented that it's about linkage: the links between representative and deliberative democracy and those between small-scale deliberation and mass democratic participation. The media's role in this is pivotal. The way such processes are presented to the broader public is crucial in determining their success or failure. But some of this work is down to campaigners and organisers too. Their role is to translate what happens in a CA to the political class and more widely, interpreting for those not in the room.

If proponents of deliberative processes are correct, that they are rewarding, impactful and necessary, it's not just a matter of explaining what they are. We need to do the difficult, nuanced and politically risky work of pointing to how they extend, improve, and even show up existing representative structures, which is precisely why we need them.

INTERACTION WITH REPRESENTATIVE SYSTEMS

The real challenge for CAs is interaction with the existing representative system. It's a process akin to mixing two very different chemical solutions, delicately ensuring the final product is productive, not explosive.

This alchemy is the job of the campaigners, designers and facilitators and it starts with some fundamental political education of the elected representatives. Several of my respondents noted that very often the success of a CA process was predictable from the earliest interactions between the deliberative designers and the representatives. How well did those designers understand the political context, manage the mood, set the parameters and handle the personalities? What was required was keen political acumen, and the work was sometimes best carried out by policy

leads or other councillors who could tailor their requests to the room. Trusted spokespeople can act as the carriers of the deliberative message in a way that outsiders cannot. And within local councils, these cross-party alliances matter. One councillor who helped kick-start the Bristol CA sought out a fellow convert who was a cabinet member from the opposite party, the one in power, and they successfully made a joint bid to the full council.

Expectation management has proven critical to the success of a CA. Among those interviewed, several points on this were made.

I. KNOW THE LANDSCAPE

Firstly, politicians must consider the whole landscape. Typically, the question selected for the CA will relate to a key issue for the authority, something that is locally controversial, timely, complex or politically divisive. This often provides the impetus for politicians who have identified a topic for citizen engagement. The designer's job is to pose questions about timing and buy in: is this the right moment in the political cycle to call a CA? How long will it take? Is a regime change expected in the months ahead? Is the issue salient enough to warrant immediate attention? Is the authority prepared for the cost and commitment a CA will demand, particularly with respect to following up on its recommendations?

II. BUST SOME MYTHS

If the elected representatives are willing to press ahead, the designer must then lay out what a CA is – and most crucially, what it isn't. Myths still circulate in the UK around CAs – that they're the highest form of democratic participation; that they can be run speedily at low cost; that they are guaranteed to deliver progressive outcomes. Such views should be challenged.

More significantly, a deliberative democracy enthusiast should explain that a CA is not the only deliberative tool in town. Smaller, more focused processes such as citizens' panels or juries normally composed of fewer than 20 people might do just as well, and save the council the extensive preparation, time and cost of a full-blown CA. Equally, a non-sortition based process, whereby citizens selected are not demographically representative of the wider area might be more fitting, for instance when a topic affects one group in particular, in a specific neighbourhood or street or those of a specific ethnicity or age category. Here it might be legitimate to select participants on different criteria. And recently a number of networks and institutions have worked hard to amass resources online that help distinguish between different types of deliberative democracy (Involve, no date).

Part of educating political representatives is helping them get to grips with their distinctive role in the CA process. So deliberative democracy advocates should avoid misrepre-

senting CAs as a parallel or even an alternative process. Rather, they should always be presented as a complement to the representative institutions, an adjunct, even an aid to politicians to help them reach difficult decisions on complex subjects.

Many politicians themselves are acutely aware of the limitations of representation. They already know how it can lack legitimacy, how it fails to engage citizens beyond the ballot, how they have multiple allegiances to electors, party and conscience which clash. They know only too well how they are tasked with solving difficult disputes even in areas beyond their expertise. A CA can offer answers to some of these problems, being a wholly constructive process that complements and extends representative systems rather than bypassing them. CAs should be seen as drawing on the best of historical democratic practice whilst innovating a process of decision-making for a more participatory era. Most of all, it should bolster, rather than supplant the role of the politician.

One long-time advocate of CAs commented that the challenge of seeding CAs had recently become harder thanks to their prominence. In the past, most politicians were coming at CAs afresh with the only worry being around a new idea. Now, thanks to their association with Brexit, Scottish independence and through Sinn Féin with Irish reunification, many politicians have negative reactions to the idea, even linking them to the so-called ›culture wars‹. This makes it urgent for campaigners to seed CAs in Conservative-led councils.

III. BE HONEST

What must politicians be prepared to give? Most importantly, their time and the promise to treat the process seriously, engage when required and consider the proposals. This level of commitment is central to the success of a CA but can only be achieved when politicians feel secure in their position within the process. Advocates who have won round these leaders favour encouraging the politicians, rather than putting pressure on them.

The first Irish Citizens' Assembly took a rather maverick approach to convincing politicians of the benefits of CAs. They invited them to be officially involved in the process, reserving 33 of the 99 delegate spots for elected politicians. One of the key architects behind the project – a civil society initiative aiming to win politicians round to deliberation – was initially sceptical about giving politicians a formal seat at the table, worried they would drown out the other citizens and exert their dominance. But he has since admitted to being pleasantly surprised. The politicians entered the CA with open minds, participated respectfully and emerged as converts, won over by their fellow participants and the quality of discussion. Other participants, for their part, lost some of their cynicism around politicians and learned significantly more about how political institutions operate and how politicians can be.

The experience showed that when you insert politicians into the deliberative space, they get what the fuss is all about. The same politicians have since gone on to be some of the loudest proponents of the deliberative process, commissioning three more CAs and ushering in the next era of Irish CAs. Does this suggest that including politicians in the process is preferable to a citizens-only assembly? Those I spoke to thought not: all considered, they believed it was still better to give citizens their own space. Yet giving politicians a real dose of deliberation seems to be what makes the difference in winning them over.

IV. LOOK BEYOND THE CHARACTERS

This slow work of education can be resource-intensive, especially as it normally entails working with individual politicians. But they themselves can pose a threat to the deliberative process. Several respondents believed that an over-reliance on political innovators, particularly those who were charismatic and persuasive, could prove counterproductive. CAs might become overly associated with such figures, who could be divisive, and thereby fail to attract wider appeal. In a couple of examples, the political prime mover – an enthusiastic council leader – had instituted a CA, but being overly dependent on individual champions it failed to achieve much impact.

It is also the case that CAs can be seen as politically partisan, a tool for political leaders to achieve their own ends. This erodes trust in them as non-partisan democratic processes. In some cases, forward-thinking leaders can indeed use them to force through modernisation and innovation and bring the council or local authority with them. But without consolidation and a focus on institutional cultural change, the gains are likely to be short-lived.

Relying on key individuals to drive the process also leaves CAs at risk of floundering if those people move on. The proposals from the UK Climate Assembly (UKCA), jointly commissioned by six parliamentary select committees, were distributed back to the committees at the end of the CA (Climate Assembly UK, no date). But where the committee chair had changed hands the feedback loop to the original commissioner was lost and the successors were less motivated to finish what they hadn't started.

Yet even here there were tangible benefits to distributing the UKCA's recommendations amongst many committees. With multiple committees engaged, lobbying on behalf of the CA became a many-pronged approach. One interviewee pointed out that a weakness of the UKCA was that it had no formal government buy-in, but the committees were successful in leveraging the recommendations from the CA to put pressure on government. In particular, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills picked up the proposals and deployed them to repeatedly question the government's climate policy. With more parties and politicians involved, there was more potential for effective

lobbying. Nonetheless, one Irish colleague pointed out that the Irish process – whereby one special all-party committee was created with the explicit task of considering and enacting the proposals– was still a better guarantee of implementation.

V. STAY FOR THE WRAP-UP

Lastly and arguably the most important lesson for CA advocates is that political liaison must include the post-CA period. What happens to the recommendations when the CA packs up and the participants head home? This part of the process is where politicians really come into their own. They must spend ample time digesting and discussing recommendations and respond with an action plan detailing how they will implement or address them.

Representatives need to be prepared for this process well in advance of the assembly. One interviewee from a Combined Authority who ran a CA on climate change reported on the difficulty of untangling and allocating responsibilities. Recommendations were addressed to different tiers of government, for example to constituent authorities such as public transport or waste disposal who had their own climate targets and approaches. It was a three-way triage involving constituent authority, mayoral office and national government. Perhaps this would best be done by the assembly members themselves. Yet without the knowledge of whose responsibility was whose, the sensitive political work of bringing those authorities – who had not commissioned the CA – on side was undertaken by the mayor's office, a time-consuming process that only resulted in assembly members' frustration at the delay.

Formalising this follow-up helps to accord it the time it needs. Marcin Gerwin, a deliberative designer working with mayors in Poland and across Europe, has a simple formula: the leaders who trigger a CA must sign up to reviewing every proposal that gains over 80% agreement amongst the assembly members. Here is where the role of the representative comes into sharp relief. The politician is not committed to enact every recommendation of the assembly, but rather to give each proper consideration and respond in detail, expressing where necessary why they will not be acting upon certain ideas, say for reasons political will, resources, legality or priority. This is difficult for representatives, many of whom are not used to having to justify their decisions in public. But without this, the CA's proposals disappear into the political ether, and the transparent ethos of the CA dissolves.

Some representatives go further. In the case of Bristol, who received 17 formal proposals from their CA on Covid recovery, one of the councillors described their approach as the ›assumption of approval‹. The council would be asked to look favourably upon each proposal and if they disagreed, to give clear reasons. This ›properly elliptical‹ process, as one councillor termed it, is a good example of how CAs can encourage political representatives to recognise

other sources of political authority and, when possible, to share power with citizens. This cultural shift is a less tangible but no less important by-product of CAs.

The question of a longer timeframe for delivery is also critical, particularly in those CAs that looked at slower burn issues such as Covid recovery and climate action. Here again, the Bristol councillors favoured formality, committing themselves to meet, review and give reports on progress after 6 months, 12 months and 18 months after the conclusion of the CA. This longer span maintains the relationship between politicians and participants and charts the impact of interventions over the short, medium and longer term, a healthy antidote to electoral-cycle short-termism. In some cases, such as the Camden Assembly on climate, all participants were invited to be part of the review group, which monitored movement on their proposals, keeping them connected to the process of delivery.

Monitoring progress requires determination. One interviewee from Ireland commented that this is particularly onerous when there are many recommendations. He advised against encouraging participants to produce a long shopping list of proposals, but rather to reduce and rank. This was firstly because not all of them will be achievable and having fewer recommendations makes charting those that are more straightforward. Secondly, a long list of recommendations enables politicians to pick and choose the ones they most agree with whilst dismissing others. Another respondent agreed, noting that most CAs in the UK had generated too many recommendations for politicians to handle. In the Irish CAs, proposals were narrower and usually anchored in the constitution. This made charting their implementation easier and more accessible to those without in-depth knowledge of political institutions. It is important assembly members themselves can do this not only to monitor implementation, but also to see the impact their contribution has made.

COMMUNICATION AND PR:
PICK YOUR MOMENT, PICK YOUR TOPIC

Despite the proliferation of CAs in the UK and RoI, there is still an obstacle to their widespread impact: communication and media. How can CAs enrich wider political culture? Without a feedback loop that encompasses the wider public, CAs risk entrenching and expanding the ›deliberative gap‹ between those in and outside the assembly, and the potential for a cultural shift is lost.

What's obviously needed is sympathetic media. In the case of the Irish Citizens' Assembly, journalists were welcomed into the room to report freely on events and get a taste of the assembly in action. Designers of the assembly identified known sceptics in the media, inviting them to come and see for themselves, which resulted in more than one convert. In the UK, local media who want to talk up their town can often be relied on to report favourably on a CA. And yet the very features that make CAs an effective anti-

dote to current political challenges are those that can turn off news editors: they're policy-heavy, lack drama and are not known for featuring celebrities.

There are a couple of solutions to this dilemma. The first is to try to sell CAs through the usual spokespeople – persuasive, well-known figures who can speak engagingly on the topic and bring it to life. These might be politicians such as MPs Clive Lewis, Stella Creasy and Lisa Nandy, Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees, Camden Council Leader Georgia Gould or former MP Graham Allen here in the UK. They can be public intellectuals such as David Farrell in Ireland, David Van Reybrouck in Belgium or Matthew Taylor in the UK. But it is also important to promote CAs with a persistent drip-drip of information in the media from colleagues in the deliberative sector – from campaigners to academics to barristers. These spokespeople will however tend to receive attention only from a particular subsection of the population – those who tend to be more educated, and more politically engaged. In terms of wider appeal, of course, some of the most effective spokespeople for the benefits of CAs are the assembly members themselves, which is why many organisations offer media training to assembly members before they speak to the press.

Professional storytellers have been more creative still. Patrick Chalmers' short film about the Irish CAs ›When Citizens Assemble‹ (Chalmers 2017) has been credited with popularising the story that lay behind those landmark referendums. Bastian Berbner's award-winning piece (2019) focusing on the unlikely friendship between two assembly members in Ireland's CA on equal marriage is a moving account of the opportunities for human connection that a CA offers.

Of course, the job of attracting media attention is easier when the issue is topical. The first national level CA in the UK Parliament in 2018 was on social care, at a time when the issue was subject to a high level of political scrutiny. One of the participants – and a prime mover behind it – said it was an issue the government knew needed attention but had not formulated a view on what should happen. Yet institutional blockers should never be underestimated. The government did not respond to this CA, something my interviewee put down to the defensiveness of politicians worried about not being seen to have their own ideas. They had no solution, but couldn't accept help either.

Similarly, the assembly in Bristol was the first of its kind emerging from the Covid crisis, offering an early glimpse into how the public's priorities had been shaped by the crisis. Sometimes the salience of a political issue leads to increased interest in the idea of CAs themselves. At the height of the parliamentary turmoil over Brexit negotiations in late 2019, a small groups of politicians and campaigners proposed a CA on Brexit (Brown 2019) following on from the pioneering ›Citizens' Assembly on Brexit‹ run by the Constitution Unit back in 2018 (University College London, no date). But the tensions and entrenched views around Brexit at the time made selling this CA a challenge. This was despite the fact that the Constitution Unit was not addressing whether or not Brexit should happen, but what *sort* of Brexit citizens wanted – an issue on which very few people had fixed views.

Campaigners are turning to CAs as neutral, democratic processes by which their own issues can be addressed. At the time of the first Extinction Rebellion action back in spring 2019, their demand for a CA on the climate crisis helped to push CAs up the public agenda, touted as a way of involving citizens in complex collective challenges.

This situation is a double-edged sword for proponents of deliberative democracy. On the one hand, any publicity for CAs as democratic innovation is welcome in a crowded and inhospitable media landscape. On the other, the fervent backing of CAs by interest groups makes some sceptical of the neutrality of the process or even turn some groups against them altogether. Campaigners who advocate for a CA on a particular theme must be honest with themselves and clear in their media appearances: CAs are not battering rams for a particular policy outcome but a way in which a specific topic can be investigated. Whilst it was encouraging to see CAs gain wider support, they did get caught up in the Brexit fault lines that cut through all aspects of UK politics between 2016 and 2019. This meant that for some politicians, particularly those from the Conservative Party, as well as some members of the public, CAs appeared as an attempt by Remain campaigners to overturn the referendum.

More generally, given that most CAs have been commissioned by left-leaning councils, they have acquired a reputation amongst some Conservatives as a tool for progressive outcomes. So it's important for deliberative democrats to encourage Conservative council leaders not only to initiate CAs (which has already happened in places like Warwick), but also to become spokespeople for CAs more generally. Whilst democratic processes – especially new and experimental ones – will often be accused of being rigged, actively seeking proponents from more conservative circles will be crucial if CAs are ever to be more widely accepted.

There are clearly dangers with throwing the political hot potatoes of the day to a CA. And yet a CA remains a way of gaining public attention and, according to our deliberative colleagues in Ireland, this issue is to some extent unavoidable. For politicians to establish the process, for citizens to invest their time, and for the media to report it, the issue at stake needs to have a certain level of heat. One interviewee went further, arguing that CAs are perhaps best when used, not for the minutiae of policy debates, but rather for the big ethical and constitutional questions of the day. These issues are often matters of conscience, questions on which most people have some opinion such as immigration, assisted dying, abortion. Here there is the risk that strong emotions will sway the outcome. Yet with the slow process of reasoned deliberation, CAs are arguably best equipped to help citizens process these highly emotive questions in a way that helps them understand their own emotions and reach reasoned judgements. Emotion is channelled into the delibera-

tions lending them significance but enabling citizens to collectively find a way through.

There's another reason why bigger political questions might be more appropriate terrain for CAs. Some politicians may feel, not unjustly, that the policy agenda is their domain, that they were voted in to decide on legislation. But with overarching questions of morality or issues that touch a large number if not the majority of citizens, the question of legitimacy becomes more acute. These are questions of a ›higher order‹ about our systems of governance, the rights of citizens or the foundations of democracy and it seems wrong that elected politicians should decide on these alone. Indeed, amongst countries that in the past few decades have undertaken constitutional modernisation, many have included citizen participation at some stage. Ireland is the most obvious case with their multiple CAs, but also Iceland, with its ›crowd-sourced constitution‹ and South Africa, where mass participation formed part of the negotiation of the final document.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE

Stepping back from the policy debate, we can see how the constitutional settlement shapes and determines the space for CAs. In the context of the UK, there is one obvious constitutional obstacle to CAs. The UK is one of the most centralised countries in Europe – arguably the most centralised. Out of the roughly 35 CAs that were commissioned by authorities between 2018 and 2021, only five of these were at a national level: two in the UK, two in Scotland and one in Wales. So the majority of CAs operated at the local level where their impact is undermined by the fiscal and political limitations of local government. This is difficult for the councillors who commission the process, tasked with managing the expectations of assembly members in advance. The complexities of local government arrangements, inconsistent across the UK, make these explanations especially challenging.

On the plus side, this process itself is one of political education – something which has never been formalised or included in the school curriculum in the UK. From my own experience as a facilitator, I know that when some assembly members discover the limitations placed on local government, they sometimes demand more structural reforms to empower their local councils to act on their proposals.

All of this points to the need for a Constitutional Convention in the UK to address the constitutional barriers to democratic innovation. A UK Constitutional Convention would be the most decisive moment yet for CAs, both to raise them to a level of prominence through its scope and scale that the idea of CAs cannot be ignored, and to unlock greater local democracy through its conclusions. Most interviewees I spoke to were pessimistic about the prospects for this anytime soon. As a colleague in Ireland commented, reflecting on both his home country and Iceland, ›hitting rock bottom‹ is what is needed to make politicians

reach for something more radical. Despite the tumult of Brexit, he believed ›the UK isn't there yet‹.

But the crisis route is not the only pathway. A slow and gradual upswell of public opinion can also make the difference. One respondent noted that the mood within political parties can nudge this in the right direction, particularly with opposition parties looking for a way to differentiate themselves from the party of government. Shortly before the 1997 election in the UK, Labour members were growing increasingly hungry for radical and structural reform, a seismic shift that the election would usher in. This also happened in Ireland in 2011, when several political parties who had inserted CAs into their manifestos, found themselves forming a government together.

A STANDING CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY?

So what might the future hold for CAs? Clues from the continent point us in one direction: writing CAs into systems of government. The process of institutionalisation is in its early stages, but it is already exciting deliberative enthusiasts looking to anchor CAs more permanently within representative systems. Rather than remain dependent on political will to commission a CA, a standing assembly would guarantee a place for randomly selected citizens as part of the formal process of government.

The most pioneering example is German-speaking East Belgium (Ostbelgien) (Politics Reinvented, no date), where a formal Citizens' Council has been set up to commission further CAs on topics of agreed political significance, whose recommendations will be brought before the Ostbelgien Parliament. This experiment is in its infancy, established only in September 2019 but the smallest region of Belgium has started a pan-European movement. As recently as October 2021, Paris became the first major city to follow their lead and institute a standing Citizens' Assembly, composed of 100 randomly selected citizens meeting on a monthly basis to decide on their topics. Brussels is considering mixing randomly selected citizens and councillors for its local authorities, and other regional parliaments will likely follow their lead.

In the UK, there is as yet no formal plans for standing CAs. The closest we've come would be Scotland, where a series of assemblies – on climate and the Future of Scotland – proved highly popular. Yet despite the sheer number of assemblies run at the local level, the question of standing CAs in the UK still seems politically out of reach. The only example bucking that trend is the East London borough of Newham where the mayor Rokhsana Fiaz, a strong advocate of CAs, has run a raft of assemblies over the past few months. She has recently announced her ambition to establish a standing assembly in Newham to prioritise the issues that should receive the CA treatment, taking its cue from the Ostbelgien model. This would represent a serious innovation and indeed challenge to existing models of local governance, but it remains a future ambition.

Nonetheless, there is clearly a disconnect between the number of UK CAs run at local council level and the relative lack of engagement at a national level. The few formal CAs that have been run UK wide – one on social care, one on climate – were not initiated by government but by select committees and therefore received scant attention. Deliberative designers I spoke to expressed hope that the high level of interest in – and indeed legislative success of – local level CAs would trigger a bubbling up, rather than trickling down effect where the national level is forced to respond to this cultural shift. The Scottish Government's bold approach to commissioning assemblies might also force Westminster's hand to respond – or be seen to respond – to the challenge from Holyrood.

Whilst much is riding on the changing political context, particularly regarding the question of the Union, Brexit and Covid economic recovery, deliberative democrats will continue to plough their furrow. And yet there is some disagreement amongst colleagues about how CAs should develop. Despite substantial agreement on several areas of development – seeding further CAs, more time for follow up and evaluation, more and better training for facilitators, the development of standards and guidelines for effective processes – the question of whether the deliberative sector should be pushing for more standing CAs yields different responses.

The question prompts reflections on the evolution of democracy as a system of government. For those wanting to institutionalise CAs, it represents the logical next step, a way to guarantee their permanent place in the architecture of government. Amongst the sceptics, institutionalisation seems to suggest that representative structures could eventually be replaced by deliberative, sortition-based institutions, an idea which they consider both unfeasible and undesirable – and one liable to scare off even the most supportive of politicians.

There is yet no definitive answer, but the stance of the deliberative sector on representation as a model of governance will increasingly come into question. It prompts a range of further questions: how wedded to representative democracy should we be? What is the role and legitimacy of the randomly selected person in a democracy? Should anything be off limits for a CA to decide? When should a representative bow to the judgement of a CA? Perhaps most fundamentally, is it even possible for these competing political systems and sources of legitimacy to co-operate within the confines of one system? If so, what compromises are needed for that co-existence to be harmonious and effective?

WHAT FUTURE FOR CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES?

The past few years have seen the rapid proliferation of CAs and this is ongoing. So how can deliberation be improved and deepened? There are two perspectives here: one focused on the CA process, and one on the longer view of the evolution of democracy.

For the former, political liaison is crucial: we need politically experienced operators doing the work, asking whether a CA is the correct tool, whether it is the right time, whether this is the right topic and doing this in the language that politicians understand. We need interpreters who are experts in deliberation and can translate it into something politicians feel invested in. The deliberative sector must get better at saying what CAs are, what they cost, what they can and can't do, and how to do them well. This is challenging for CA enthusiasts; if you've worked in the deliberative sector for too long, everything begins to look like a good subject for a CA. And the process should not be simply transplanted from elsewhere but must be adapted to fit the specificities of the political soil in which it is planted for it to take root. The political liaison officers must stick with the entire process, with especially serious engagement at the start and end.

As for the longer view, CAs do not exist in a vacuum. Deliberative experts can spend years honing the perfect process and establishing the ideal space for the practice of political dialogue. But when the deliberative space meets its representative counterpart the two must intersect. So the very best deliberative democrats stay connected with and seek to influence the wider political environment, whether that relates to political alienation, democratisation, economic inequality or public participation. CAs inhabit the same landscape as the rest of politics and they are porous places, where factors beyond the Assembly's walls will always have an impact on what happens inside.

It also means that deliberative democrats should be honest about the direction of travel. Do we want CAs to replace representative systems or simply improve them? Are we supplanting professional politicians or supporting them? If the ultimate impact of CAs is dependent on the political and constitutional context, do we need a Constitutional Convention to reset the scene? And might CAs themselves be used to campaign for a Constitutional Convention, as an X-ray reveals fractures in need of repair? It looks likely that CAs will continue to spring up all over the world, from the recent Global Assembly on climate to citizens' panels on the future of Europe. As they do so, we must keep asking what purpose they are serving – in whose interests and at what cost? If CAs hold any promise, it is that anybody can participate in meaningful decisions about the common good and that collectively citizens have the power to make it happen. It's a promise we must continue to honour.

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If you're interested in any of the issues, questions or themes raised in this report, do get in touch at frances@compassonline.org.uk.

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