HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies

Corrected oral evidence: Democracy and Digital Technologies

Tuesday 10 March 2020

10.35 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Puttnam (The Chair); Lord Black of Brentwood; Lord German; Lord Harris of Haringey; Lord Holmes of Richmond; Baroness Kidron; Lord Knight of Weymouth; Lord Lipsey; Lord Lucas; Baroness McGregor-Smith; Lord Mitchell; Baroness Morris of Yardley.

Evidence Session No. 20　　　　　Heard in Public　　　　　Questions 258 - 266

Witnesses

I: Peter Baeck, Co-Head, Centre for Collective Intelligence Design, Nesta; Dr Alan Renwick, Deputy Director, Constitution Unit, UCL; Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Professor of Politics, University of Leeds; Joe Mitchell, Democracy Club.

Examination of Witnesses

Peter Baeck, Dr Alan Renwick, Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Joe Mitchell.

Q258 **The Chair:** I am sorry we kept you waiting, but thank you very much for being with us. I have to read out the police caution and then ask you to introduce yourselves. As you know, this session is open to the public. A webcast of the session goes out live and subsequently is accessible via the parliamentary website. A verbatim transcript will be taken of your evidence and put on the parliamentary website. You will have the opportunity to make minor corrections for the purposes of clarification and accuracy. Would you introduce yourselves? Then we will plunge into the first question.

Peter Baeck: I work at Nesta, the UK's innovation foundation, where I lead on our work on collective intelligence design.

Dr Alan Renwick: I am from the Constitution Unit at University College London. I work on citizens' assemblies and improving processes for elections and referendums.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: I am a professor of politics at Leeds University, and I work on Parliament and public engagement.

Joe Mitchell: I am a director and co-founder of Democracy Club. We are a non-profit that tries to provide vital data on democracy.

The Chair: There are four of you and there are six questions. You could help each other by being relatively brief, because I am an appalling chairman and you are not going to get much help from me.

Q259 **Lord Mitchell:** As you know, this Select Committee is looking at democracy, the effect of the digital industries and, in some ways, our constitution. How can technology be used to facilitate democracy, and what examples do you have of best practice in the UK?

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: Technology does not solve anything on its own. It comes with processes and structures. There are several elements to facilitating democracy, such as disseminating information, education, letting people get involved and participation. Then there is another side to it, which is listening to that participation.

In terms of how effective UK institutions have been in doing that, there are lots of examples of good practice and innovation. As yet, there is not much integration of those in a systematic approach to the use of technology. Looking at Parliaments, which are the institutions I know best, I can give you lots of examples. The House of Commons, with its e-petitions, has lots of good things about it. Select Committees have used a variety of technologies, from deliberative platforms to social media, to good effect. There are lots of examples, including trying to set the agenda and reach out to less-engaged audiences. I can give you a list that long. But there is not necessarily a systematic, integrated approach

to the use of that technology, how it feeds into parliamentary business and the variety of audiences it reaches out to.

Joe Mitchell: I approach this by asking, "What is technology good for? What can it give us?" Technology allows us to experiment, often quite cheaply; throwing a website together is pretty straightforward. It allows us to scale projects very quickly and cheaply. From the Democracy Club point of view, there is a big gulf between where technology has taken us on things such as transport information, and where it has taken us on things such as democratic engagement. It is easy to grab a transport app on your phone and find out how to get from A to B. That is running behind the scenes on lots of cunning, open data, published by public bodies. There is no democracy app to help you engage in the right process or understand the process you are trying to learn about. Technology allows us to fix that gap in public information a little.

Dr Alan Renwick: As Cristina said, it is important to think about what it means to facilitate democracy. I would highlight four aspects of that. The first is encouraging greater participation: lots of people taking part in lots of different ways in democracy. The second is equality: ensuring people have equal access to participation and those who take part are representative of the whole population. The third is ensuring that people can be informed when engaging in democracy, which does not mean telling them what they need to know from the top down, but more from the bottom up, with people able to access the information they feel they need to engage in the democratic process. Fourthly, it is important that democracy is as thoughtful as possible and people can think openly, question their own assumptions, discuss and listen with others.

Digital technologies can contribute in each of these areas, alongside more traditional forms of democratic engagement. In relation to participation, Cristina talked about the role of petitions in ensuring people can engage in the democratic process, not just at election time. In terms of ensuring equal participation, there is online voter registration, encouraging people to vote and engage. Parts of the population, particularly younger voters, are harder to reach in traditional ways, but might be easier to reach through digital technologies. The work Joe does is important in opening up the information that is available.

You asked about practice in the UK. For me, one of the fantastic things is also a frustration. A huge amount of great, impartial information is created in this place, in the Libraries of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and by Select Committees. If more could be done to feed that into wider democratic processes, it would be great.

The hardest area of digital technologies is ensuring thoughtfulness in democratic engagement. We all know the problems of Twitter, but I have already talked too much. I am sure we will get to that later in the session.

Peter Baeck: I completely agree. The benefit of technology is its reach and scale, which you cannot get through offline engagement. We see

technology as just another tool in the democracy toolbox to get engagement, broaden participation and discuss issues. Based on our work in the UK and internationally, this succeeds when it works both online and offline. It fails when someone just applies technology for engagement without thinking about the offline engagement that needs to happen. The work on open budgeting in Paris — one of the largest examples in the world — Madrid and Taiwan combine offline and online engagement. Online technology is just another layer of the conversation to get broader engagement. It is really important to see technology like that, not as a tool for democracy that stands alone. That is my main point.

A lot of my work is looking internationally at trends in this space. It is frustrating to see the lack of uptake and drive in the UK compared to elsewhere. Four or five years ago, we ran a big, European-funded project called D-CENT, looking at democracy in cities across Europe. We did not really get any applications for funding from cities in the UK, whereas we got quite a lot from the usual suspects: Paris, Amsterdam and Reykjavik. That is an indicator of the lack of uptake in the UK.

Having said that, we are seeing more interest. The recent DCMS Innovation in Democracy Programme garnered lots of interest and aspiration. On Thursday, Nesta will announce 19 small grants for Innovation in Democracy pioneers. We had 290 applications for that programme, from both local government and NGOs across the UK, which want to showcase and demo innovations in democracy. It shows us that there is appetite for and interest in this, but who is going to meet that, fund it and support it? That is the big question.

Q260 **Baroness Morris of Yardley:** Peter has already begun to answer the second question, which was a parallel question about the international examples you could call on. To follow on and perhaps link them together, is there a difference between where technology can help us structure the system, such as online voting or petitions, and engagement, which is more difficult? Am I right in thinking that we do quite well on the first but not as well on the second, or the first is more developed than the second? I do not know, but there seem to be some easy wins in using digital technology to make structures and systems work more effectively, which might not need a lot of change from people. Could you perhaps reflect on that as well? The question is principally about international examples we might learn from.

Joe Mitchell: I will lead on the first half about the classic, procedural bits of democracy. We have a nice "register to vote" website. It works very well. Other countries think it is ludicrous that we have to register to vote. "Why are you not automatically registered to vote, as a citizen? As soon as you turn 16, you get your NI card. Your computer systems presumably talk to one another". I would not go so far as to say we are succeeding on the first elements.

Unlike many other countries across the Commonwealth, for example, we do not have a federal elections commission. Elections are run by the 394

councils in the UK, which is what gives us our job of collating all that information. When are elections happening, for what area and position? Who are the candidates? Where do you vote? These are really basic things, which typically have been solved overseas, and we have not done that.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: By changing the structure of the system.

Joe Mitchell: It is largely because of the way the system is structured. France is very centralised and has a good open addresses database. It is very easy to run.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: There is an argument for keeping it local, is there not?

Joe Mitchell: Absolutely, it makes it harder to defraud and all the expertise is at the local level. If we can get the local level to publish its data to certain standards, aggregation becomes easy and we can solve some of those first ones. I will not come to the deliberative stuff because there is probably more expertise.

Dr Alan Renwick: Perhaps I can build on what Joe said about ensuring the information that voters need is available. We did quite a lot of work over the last couple of years — I have a copy of our report on that here — looking at the different types of information that it is important voters have access to in order to participate fully in democracy. At the bottom of our ladder is really basic information about where to vote and who your candidates are. Even that kind of information has been very difficult to find, for voters in the UK. Joe and the Democracy Club have done a lot of work to promote that kind of information.

Moving up the ladder, in terms of the complexity and depth of information available to voters, other countries provide voter advice applications, for example. These are online tools — you have probably seen them; you were just not familiar with the label — where voters or citizens answer a series of questions about their policy preferences. Then the website indicates which parties or candidates are closer to or further from those positions. Germany is the primary example of that, where a public body provides a voter advice application. In recent elections, you saw about a third of voters engaging with that voting advice application and finding it a helpful way to understand better the choices available to them.

Similarly, New Zealand has used that technique in referendums. It had a referendum on the voting system in 2011, where voters could use an online tool to gain an understanding. If they had certain priorities for what the voting system should achieve, such as being proportional, ensuring representation of women, ensuring effective government, they could get guidance from the system as to which option on the ballot paper was closer to their preferences. Thinking creatively about using online space to provide that kind of information is important.

Peter Baeck: I want to mention the broadness of the remit. Democracy goes down to the very basics. Every time you have an issue or something to report to local or central government, how do you shorten the distance between you and the person who owns that issue, so you can communicate it and understand what is happening? How can you meet others with the same issue and create a joint cause to do something about it? That goes from potholes, parks and local housing association decisions through to same-sex marriage and changes in constitutions. These technologies can work across the full spectrum.

Coming back to the point earlier, it is about understanding the challenge we want to deal with here. There is a lot of good international practice, and some in the UK, on the easier stuff about reporting issues and understanding what is happening with them, but less appetite for devolving more complex, nitty-gritty issues to public deliberation. There is still a lot of opportunity. If you want, I can give you a thousand examples of what is happening across the world.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: I want to come back to what Parliaments are doing elsewhere, but also here in this country. Earlier, I said there were examples in our devolved legislatures. The Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have many good examples of how to use technology for engagement. We have talked a lot about how information is provided, which is important, but the more difficult issue is how it reaches audiences who want to engage in specific topics, do not know how to engage or do not even know about those topics. Those audiences are very difficult to reach.

I will give you an example of a very simple technology. It is a home example from the Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee, which used technology as simple as cameras to collect testimonies from women who were selling sex to make up the bills at the end of the month because of the impact of universal credit. Through simple technology and understanding the communities affected by the subject of the inquiry, they were able to collect the testimonies of these women, who probably did not even understand what Parliament was, in some cases, and would definitely never reply to an inquiry. It was about the team understanding the needs of that audience and which technologies to use, going there and bringing those testimonies to MPs and Ministers, who saw the impact that had. That then came out in the report. Giving information is really important. I do not devalue that in any way, but there is far more that technology can do. The other side is about officials using technology intelligently and sensitively, according to different audiences and the issues they want to look at.

Coming back to international examples, the Parliament that is often cited as a good example is the National Congress of Brazil. Would you say that Brazilian democracy is a good one? There are lots of question marks about it; we would be here for a long time. However, that institution is starting to use artificial intelligence in a very interesting way, to provide information to the public and aggregate it across parliamentary

business—Bills, Parliamentary Questions, you name it—based on themes. People engage through issues. They are using artificial intelligence to fit in all the complexity they have in there and present it to the outside. There are lots of problems with the system, which I can tell you about, but that is a good example.

Examples such as that are happening elsewhere and not necessarily happening here. In the UK Parliament, both the Lords and the Commons, there is a good example of the other side, engagement, but not necessarily provision of information, because of our centuries-old institutions and the problems with how information is stored.

Lord Lipsey: This may enrage my colleagues, but I would raise a question mark over the "wokeish" assumption that the more people participate in everything, the better it is. This is not something Edmund Burke would have readily recognised. The last thing I read before coming to this meeting was research by the Pew foundation about the American people, showing that a majority of the American people now do not trust the American people to make the right decisions. That is a complete reversal from 20 years ago. There is an element of that.

Every time I look at my wife's inbox, I see 17 petitions for her to sign on things that, unless I am mistaken, she does not know much about. I wonder whether we should be confident that everything coming under this head of increasing participation is right. Some things I strongly support, such as citizens' juries, but some things I am much more dubious about, such as those damn petitions.

The Chair: Have you any thoughts, other than the fact that Lord Lipsey will have to very carefully look at the transcript?

Lord Lipsey: I stand by what I say.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: I specifically mentioned petitions in the House of Commons, not petitions in general. I mentioned them not because they get thousands of signatures but because of the processes behind them and how they are dealt with. I agree; there are mechanisms out there that encourage a lot of participation or clicktivism, but with nothing behind it. I specifically mentioned that one because of the processes behind it. Again, I could say more about that.

Dr Alan Renwick: Other things being equal, greater participation is better than lesser participation. In a democracy, the vibrancy of participation and the engagement contribute, other things being equal, to the quality of democracy as a whole. The trouble is that increasing participation can harm some of the other desiderata of a democracy. Sometimes participatory processes are skewed towards people who like engaging in these sorts of things. Having an online platform that engages only a very unrepresentative subset of the population seems problematic to me. You can have engagement processes that are very unthoughtful, non-deliberative and uninformed; similarly, going in that direction is undesirable.

It is important to look at the health of the democratic system as a whole. No individual part of the system can contribute on all four aspects of democracy that I offered. Petitions are useful for bringing in voices in a way that other democratic tools are not, but if they do not feed into some kind of deliberative process in Parliament, they are not doing their job very effectively. It is about building up the elements.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: This is in the same vein as Lord Lipsey. There is a lot about how technology is informing, engaging and empowering citizens. But I am interested, at the representation end, in international examples of representation being redefined by technology and the way representatives work changing significantly as a result.

Peter Baeck: On the first question, I completely agree. I do not want a crowd to decide the Government's response to the coronavirus. There are experts who do this really well. It is about finding the right combination of expert knowledge and mass deliberation. I will publish a piece of work next month with GovLoop in New York specifically looking at this question. How do you create that interaction? There are lots of good examples: civil servants defining a policy issue and opening it up to the crowd, then the crowd debating it, making suggestions and it being brought it back to Parliament and civil servants. You create engagement between mass deliberation and expert knowledge over many steps. We have some good examples of that from across the world.

On the second question, the best example is probably from Spain. The CONSUL platform, until the recent change of Government, was experimenting with mass deliberation through digital democracy in Madrid. That grew out of the Indignados/Podemos movement, where hundreds of thousands of people in Spain, feeling left behind after the financial crisis in 2008, created a digital tool for deliberation and organised a political movement. Through a political party and in partnership with Manuela Castrillo, who became mayor of Madrid, this was the platform by which they engaged citizens in making decisions about spending money in Madrid and governing the city. It completely changed the way a large part of the city's operating system worked. It then failed because there was a recent change of government. It went from left to centre-right and, as part of that, the project fell apart, but it was a way of bringing into government a whole movement that had felt underrepresented.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Is that bypassing representation and going straight to the Executive through citizens' empowerment?

Peter Baeck: You might know more about the project in Madrid than I do, but there is a study on how they reorganised the administration in the city of Madrid. Some people from the Indignados movement who developed the technology behind the CONSUL platform were brought to work in the Government as tech advisers to the CTO and others.

There is an inspiring example from Sweden of a housing association. I interviewed them two weeks ago. They have many migrant women who

do not have a voice through the standard routes in how to spend money in the housing association. They used this platform to say, "This is another way for you to voice your ambitions for what the housing association should do with its budget". Those opinions are then introduced into the debate alongside more formal routes of participation. There are lots of examples like that.

Joe Mitchell: I have two small examples of how representative democracy can change, using tools that might not have been imagined in that way. One is crowdfunding. If access to finance was a barrier to people standing for election, they can now crowdfund, and we have seen this quite a lot. I think the Green Party has done it a fair amount, crowdfunding deposits for parliamentarians. That is quite interesting. The other thought is about transparency. Lord Knight, you are probably on Twitter.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I am.

Joe Mitchell: A lot of politicians have adopted these tools as a better, cheaper, quicker way of communicating what they are doing. That in itself is a boon for democracy.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: But it can overwhelm representatives.

Joe Mitchell: I appreciate that. This is what I find really interesting. I do not think the innovation happens on the level above that. Do you get together as representatives and say, "We have a bunch of user needs here; I am getting 17,000 requests"? Who is helping you to think about that sort of thing?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Could someone develop a tool to aggregate the sentiment you are getting back through all this noise? Those most likely to use that technology may not represent the people you represent as a whole. Some tools to give you a dashboard of all that would be really helpful.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: I have recently done a lot of work on identifying the voices among the noise. There is a lot of noise in social media and digital debates. For instance, one of my PhD students is developing an app with the House of Commons digital outreach team. Let us say that 3,000 comments are submitted in one day to an inquiry or a web form. How do you identify what is genuine and what can be used for parliamentary business? We are working to use the capacity of technology to analyse big data and identify trends and themes. Parliaments need to skill up on that, because the skills are not there. The technology is there not just to disseminate information; it can do the other side. We need more of that.

There are examples in this Parliament of digital debates, with a hashtag on Twitter or Facebook, which MPs then use in a debate. France now has online consultations with citizens on particular themes. There are a variety of tools that can be used for that. Brazil has loads in that area.

There are lots of examples of Members and representatives using those tools, but there is definitely a problem with big data and analysing it. It will not go away. It needs to be addressed and a lot of effort should go towards that.

Q261 **Baroness Morris of Yardley:** I do not use Twitter. Jim and I are typical of society; some do and some do not. I can accept that this might be an intermediary point while we move from one to the other, but what is the danger of people making assumptions? You said, "I assume, Lord Knight, you are on Twitter". There is often an assumption that that is the way we are going. You have sort of left behind those who are playing by the old system. I am not sure that our elected representatives can respond both ways.

I will be honest: if I wrote a letter to my MP, I would want a letter back. That is just the way I am. I would not write them an email unless they were a colleague. I do not think I am exceptional in that. I finished as an MP just before emails really took off. We were still answering by letter, with just a few emails. I do not know how I would have structured my office to do both, at the level they have reached. We are in an intermediary bit. You cannot say that, in a year, we will all be on Twitter, because I do not think it is going to be like that. What is the danger that we are trying to run parallel communication systems?

Is there a point, if we move further along that line, where we no longer have a representative democracy and we are ruled by referendum, in its many forms? As an MP, you put your message out to Twitter, you take the vote and someone says, "Be transparent; what did your feedback say on bringing back hanging?" — let us take the traditional one. You would say, "I did all that consultation; the vote came back for this, but I voted for that".

You can say it is a representative democracy, but if you deliberately go to your constituents for a plebiscite and then do not take their view, you end up where we were with the referendum, with people trying to say, "We had the referendum on the EU but we do not want to accept the results". Look where that got us. That is a bit of a muddled thing, but it is about being in between systems. Are we thinking about the journey in between? Are we clear on where we are heading with all this technology and participatory democracy?

The Chair: How do we transition smoothly from one to the other?

Baroness Morris of Yardley: If we want to transition.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Should we redefine "representation"?

The Chair: That may be a bit big for today.

Dr Alan Renwick: Baroness Morris and Lord Knight are both getting at something really important. I do not think we should be redefining representation. Fundamentally, digital technologies should be tools to strengthen and enable representative democracy. Any kind of democratic process, no matter what kind of participatory stages you have in it, must

go through a genuinely representative filter at some stage in that process.

We have two mechanisms for getting representative groups of people. One is election and the other is random selection. Election is what we have been using for decades or centuries, depending on how you define it. Random selection is what we have started to use much more recently, particularly coming in recently with citizens' assemblies. I work a lot on citizens' assemblies, and they are fantastic for certain purposes. They cannot replace representative democracy. You cannot have a system in which ordinary voters are excluded from a process of decision-making. Theoretically, they could have been chosen for the citizens' assembly, but they were not, and therefore they were excluded.

Ordinary voters need to feel they have representatives whom they have chosen and whom they can hold to account, as the fundamental filter in the democratic process. I am sure others can say more about the technology aspect of your question, but it is a fundamental point that representative democracy is still at the core of the system and will remain so.

The Chair: Any transition we make has to have the process of representative democracy bolted in.

Dr Alan Renwick: Yes, absolutely.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: Absolutely. I explain to my students the change from the 19th century through the 20th century to the 21st century. We established representative democracy in the 20th century and we are still working out how to practise it now, in the 21st century, being that there is now a much higher demand for participation between elections. It is not just about technology. A lot is about technology, and there is no point in thinking, "We cannot do anything about it, because technology just develops on its own". It is also about structures and processes, and it is how we deal with it and integrate it with our business.

Q262 **Lord Mitchell:** To change it a bit, there is no more important aspect of democracy than voting itself. I wonder what your view is on online voting and whether there should be apps to do it. I feel that it is an inevitable direction we are going in. We had a representative here from Estonia who talked about the very interesting things they are doing there. I personally think it is important. If you want to get more young people involved in the democratic process, voting is not a bad way to do it, and they are all walking about looking at their screens. That is how they communicate.

Joe Mitchell: I take a bit of an issue with the assumption that people are not voting because it is not doable on an app. The Electoral Commission did research in 2017 on the local elections, and something like 50 per cent of those under 35 said they did not vote because they did not have enough information. We did a similar poll at the general election. Interestingly, women index higher: 62 per cent of women said they did

not have enough information on which to make their choice. How, then, do you test online voting in a safe environment, to test that assumption? Will it increase turnout? I do not think you should leap to introducing it nationally any time soon. I am no tech expert, but as I understand it, there is no such thing as a secure poll. Pen and paper is by far and away still our best technology for that.

Peter Baeck: I agree.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: I am going to agree.

The Chair: I am concerned that we have 20 minutes to get through four more questions.

Baroness Kidron: Everybody is talking as if technology is neutral. So much of the anxiety on both sides, for parliamentarians and users, is about the lack of neutrality. I have just come back from America, where all the anxiety is about government, and here all the anxiety is about platforms. Could you briefly say something about that, so we are not having this conversation as if, once we get technology functioning right, everything is great?

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: I do not think it is neutral at all. I am sorry if I gave that impression. Providing neutral information for Parliament as an institution is possible. That is what officials have always done; they just do it now on a digital platform. There are lots of ways for technology to be used. It can be used neutrally, but it can absolutely be used in a non-neutral way. That is not an assumption I would make.

The Chair: I may have misunderstood, Joe. In the US, I am very impressed by the notion that 16 year-olds can preregister. They can preregister to parties or on specific issues. If you remember, in the aftermath of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting, the survivors went out and preregistered 3 million 16 to 18 year-olds, based not on party affiliation but on a commitment to vote for gun control. Can we do something like that in this country? It seems utterly sensible to encourage 16 year-olds to look at themes and preregister their interest, and find a way of making sure they remain current with the thinking on those themes. I do not know how that system evolved in the United States, but to the best of my knowledge we do not have anything similar in the UK. Am I right, Joe, or did I misunderstand you?

Joe Mitchell: You get the invitation to register at 16, so you get on the system, but then you are sort of abandoned. That is quite interesting. When someone registers to vote, technology gives them the opportunity to tick a box and say, "Keep me updated. Let me know when the next election is. Let me know who my candidates are". We do not currently take advantage of that.

The Chair: We just leave people in a vacuum.

Joe Mitchell: Yes.

The Chair: That is interesting. It would seem to represent an opportunity to engage and remain engaged.

Peter Baeck: I agree that technology is not neutral. Coming back to your question, there is no silver-bullet tech solution for this, but it is about understanding that some use Twitter, some use Facebook, some use TikTok and some write letters. It is about how we bring in all these different tools to enable as much deliberation as possible on really important issues. The thinking about how we come up with that right combination is missing.

To your specific point, I can send details on an example from Taiwan. It is a platform designed to generate consensus. That is very different from how many social media platforms, such as Facebook, are run, where it is often about creating division or opposing views rather than getting consensus on a common issue. First, it is about which platforms you use and what kind of deliberation they are designed to achieve. We do not know nearly enough about how technology affects different types of conversation and discourse. That is what I want to understand from the research, because they are the tools we need to deploy in these settings.

Q263 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** I want to ask about deliberative democracy. Before I do, can I pick up one point from Dr Renwick and make sure I understand it? You talked about the German voter advice app. First, who controls that? We all know that you can ask a series of questions and produce an answer, and you can steer people in a particular direction. This becomes a very powerful tool if you can steer people along the lines of: "You might not realise this, but you are a supporter of this party as opposed to that party". How is that done? It seems to me to raise all the same issues we have talked about in other sessions, about the algorithms used by Google, Facebook and everybody else.

Dr Alan Renwick: In Germany, the system, which is called the Wahl-O-Mat, is run by a federal agency of the Government, but the decisions on what questions are included are made by the editorial committee, as I think they call it. That is essentially a representative group of young voters. The system was originally created to encourage engagement among young voters. Therefore, they bring together a representative sample of young voters to do that. If we were to do this in the UK, we would not want it just to be representing young voters. It is increasingly anomalous in Germany; lots of people are engaging with the Wahl-O-Mat now, not just young voters, but nevertheless the questions asked are skewed towards the interests of younger voters.

This is one way in which you can use deliberative democracy. You have a deliberative process, with some kind of citizens' panel or assembly that comes together to decide what important issues they want to have questions on within this. You ensure that, so far as possible, it is in the hands of citizens. You can then bolt on extra things. They can say they want information not just on party policies, which is the classic thing in a voting advice application, but on candidates to be Prime Minister, for example, given that we have, in practice, quite a Prime Minister-focused

electoral process. You are trying to empower the voters as far as possible.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Can you tell us how deliberative democracy platforms might work in a UK context? Would they be more effective at a local level or by forming part of a national policy-making process? Could I start with a cynical view? I used to be a council leader. When you discuss this with local councillors, they say, "Yes, but what are we for?" The 59 members in my locality are there to represent the public, so why are you asking another group of 100 people in a citizens' assembly to decide the things we should be deciding?

Dr Alan Renwick: If I can offer a general thought on why deliberative democracy and deliberative engagement are desirable, perhaps others can then pick up the technologies within that more specifically. I am a bit of a sceptic when it comes to online deliberation. To me, face-to-face deliberation is much more effective. Therefore, deliberation does not necessarily take place in a digital technologies space, but others can pick up on that.

First, in terms of the value of deliberative democracy in general, an important aspect is simply giving people a sense that they are engaged in democracy at more than just election time. We know that voters increasingly feel disengaged from this place. I regret that very much; lots of fantastic work is done here, but many voters do not see that. If Parliament can use deliberative processes as part of how it investigates issues, that could help bring people closer to Parliament and help them understand parliamentary processes more effectively.

Secondly, it can be difficult to engage in fully open-minded deliberation on difficult topics in a setting where party loyalties are quite important, you have been elected on a particular platform and you have to deliver on that platform. Having a setting where voters are entirely free of the constraints that elected politicians unavoidably face is a desirable addition to the process. Again, I see it as an addition, not an alternative, to the representative democratic process.

Thirdly, and more particularly, some topics are just really difficult to deal with as elected politicians. You know you need to act but it is difficult to see any path forward that does not bear political costs. Climate change is a classic example, where any radical action seems to impose major political costs for whoever implements it. Having a deliberative process where citizens say, "We recognise there are tough choice to be made here, we have really thought about those tough choices and we think this is the best way forward" can help elected representatives make those difficult choices.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Is that not abdicating it to somebody else?

Dr Alan Renwick: No, because elected politicians are still making the final decisions. It is a tool to assist in the overall process.

Lord Harris of Haringey: To come back to Baroness Morris's point, if your citizens' assembly or whatever process you use says, "Do X; having thought about it, we have decided on X", but as the politicians, who have a leadership role as well as simply a determinative role, you think Y is the answer, you have made it more difficult to take that decision than otherwise.

Dr Alan Renwick: A deliberative exercise would never just say, "Do X". Choosing quite a complex topic, a citizens' assembly is likely to say, "We think these are the sensible points to take forward for the following reasons". For example, in Ireland, the citizens' assembly on abortion made a range of recommendations. A parliamentary committee looked at those very seriously, thought about the evidence it got from the citizens' assembly, as well as other sources, and largely agreed with the direction the citizens' assembly had set out, but certainly made some changes. The members of that committee thought that the evidence they got from the citizens' assembly greatly helped them in coming to an informed conclusion that had genuinely been thought through — it had opened up space for them to think the unthinkable—and would carry public support.

Lord Harris of Haringey: I appreciate you are just the one answering questions; the other three may have strong views, so do come in. As I understand it, the idea of citizens' assemblies, for example, is that they are randomly chosen. What is the level of engagement? Is that class-based, for example, or do you find that the people who end up engaging with the process, turning up for the face-to-face bits because they have the time available, tend to be a rather small subclass of those who might otherwise be engaged? Those others might have complicated working patterns or caring responsibilities, or, because of their social class and education, might not be comfortable engaging with that sort of process.

Dr Alan Renwick: You have to do two very important things to avoid that possibility. First, you randomly select, but with stratification. You ensure you have equal numbers of men and women. You ensure you have appropriate representation of people from different class backgrounds. The evidence is that, on the whole, so-called ABC1s are slightly more likely to accept the invitation to participate in a citizens' assembly than C2DEs, although not by a huge amount, so you compensate for that. You stratify for those things that you think matter and might be problematic if you do not control for them.

Secondly, you design the assembly process to ensure it is maximally attractive to the broadest possible range of people. You pay them, which is really important for getting people on low incomes. You provide either on-site childcare or additional support for people with childcare needs. You engage in a range of activities such as that to ensure people can participate. I said in response to Lord Lipsey's question that the representativeness of these processes is really important. You cannot take it for granted. You have to work hard in these processes to ensure

they are properly representative. One of my concerns is that it is often a bit harder to do this kind of thing in an online deliberative setting.

The Chair: In the next session we are going to talk quite a lot about citizens' assemblies, so I am quite eager to move off that.

Q264 **Lord Lucas:** Are platforms such as Delib, and its Icelandic and Antipodean equivalents, a good way forward? If so, should the provision of them be restricted to public bodies or should they be more widely available? How can you reconcile Toby Harris's wish for the elected representatives, or more often the officers, to have control of everything with the considerable extra work that comes from a lot of engaged citizens?

Peter Baeck: There is a question on which technology product you pick for what you want to achieve. I interviewed the person who runs the Decidim project in Helsinki recently. They went with the Decidim platform over others because they felt it fitted best with what they were trying to do in Helsinki on climate change. That is just about getting the right tech for what you are trying to achieve.

The next challenge is how you ensure you get broad participation in this. I am sorry to sound like a broken record, but some people will want to engage with you via this platform and lots will not. In Madrid, they set up 18 physical buildings across the city that worked alongside the online platform, where people could go in, talk about issues they had and vote on the issues they wanted money spent on. As you said earlier, some people just do not engage online and some do. It is thinking about what you want to achieve and then how to design and deploy a process that gets the right kind of participation.

Having tried to affect my local government, my question to councillors would be how they currently speak to people in the community. My local councillor uses either Facebook or meeting in a basement on Fridays. There must be another, more meaningful way for us to have this conversation with the public. It is about understanding which tools out there can help you achieve your purpose. Sorry, it is a simple answer to a simple question.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: To reinforce Peter's point, it is about what issue you want to address and the best platform or mechanism to address it. Coming back to the Brazilian parliament, one problem is that it tends to have a blanket approach for everything, which does not really work. For some issues, you may want to use Facebook because it reaches out to a lot of people, but for others you absolutely do not want to do that.

To the points Alan was making about deliberative democracy, you might not be doing a deliberative democracy exercise as such, but you might want to provide a safe, inclusive space online, which stimulates and gives space for deliberation. A good example of that was an inquiry in the Scottish Parliament on young people's mental health, which wanted to

address issues that are really difficult to talk about. Young people might not feel comfortable to talk about them face to face, but might feel comfortable to do it online. You can have different spaces for young people and for professionals who deal with them. The Dialogue platform by Delib, which has a lot of experience in that area, was the right choice in that case, because it provided the right mechanism to collect those ideas.

There are lots of good examples, at local, devolved and national level. It all depends on the issues, the mechanisms and the audiences you are trying to reach.

Q265 **Lord German:** Can I take you back to this hunt for politically unbiased and trusted information and where technology might help find it? I would cite Alan's ladder of information, going from the basic to the far more sophisticated, and Cristina's desire for a systematic approach in the United Kingdom. Given we have different regimes and parliamentary parts of the United Kingdom, including quite different petitions processes, what would a systematic approach to letting technology empower citizens in this manner look like?

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: When I said "systematic" and "integrated", I did not mean throughout the whole United Kingdom. It is thinking about how each institution has its own structures and processes. I was thinking specifically of the UK Parliament, being the Lords and the Commons. If you have inquiries and committees, and you want to do public engagement, that is fine, but how do you systematise those processes, so all committees know what is available, how to link to audiences, how to reach out to those different publics and how to use that information in an inquiry?

As a small example of what that might look like, committee inquiry reports could have a section saying specifically what they have done on public engagement, or, if they have not done anything on public engagement, because it might be something specific and technical, why they have not. When I say "systematic", it is about the structure and processes, so there is an understanding of reaching out and using technology for engagement.

The other side of it is integration. We are going out and collecting information. There is a lot of broadcasting, a lot of information going out and a lot of dissemination: "We do this; we do that". There is excellent work going on. Sometimes, there is less listening and using that information and evidence for inquiries or debates. Here, we are doing a formal evidence session. This sort of session tends to go into the reports, but sometimes committees do a hashtag exercise or something like that. You might think, "Where is that information going to go?" Integrating is basically about closing the feedback loop.

Lord German: Who deals with the process of getting the information on the ladder that Alan described? Who is going to run it and where is it going to come from? How is it going to arrive, so that you have all this

information available in a systematic way that builds audiences?

The Chair: If you could, write to us on this. It is quite a complicated issue and we are going to run out of time. If you have additional thoughts on this, could you drop us a note? Sorry to add to your workload, but it would help.

Q266 **Lord Black of Brentwood:** We all know that some institutions are better than others at dealing with technology, keeping it up to date, managing it, investing in it, protecting data and so forth. If a lot of the things we have talked about today are to happen, many institutions will have to take a step change in how they do that. How can technological development of that sort be embedded in the democratic institutions we are talking about here and all the other relevant bodies? Should some new organisation be given that role, or is there an existing institution that can take on that responsibility?

Peter Baeck: No, it is not for a new institution. Where we see it done well, it is embedded in existing institutions, as another tool for them to do their job well. It does not work where this is a new role sitting outside the existing system, because it is deliberation alongside what we do already. It has to be part of your core job. Of course, there are things about maintaining technology and updating software. Governments and public institutions have departments that do that really well, but it has to be institutionalised. It has to be the role of officials and civil servants to run and manage these services.

Some of these projects have failed when they have been too aligned with a political agenda, rather than a public service reform agenda. I mentioned earlier the example from Madrid. For many years we talked about it as the gold standard, but as soon as there was a change of government it fell apart. It is a real shame. A lot of citizens in Madrid across the political spectrum liked it as a service, but because it was associated with a particular movement it did not work. The first thing is to institutionalise it rather than making it a political project for a particular party. That is the main ask, for me.

Joe Mitchell: To give the history of digital transformation, which is the term that was used, the Government set up the Government Digital Service. Lord Maude was most involved in that; grab him and ask him that question. Parliament then set up the Parliamentary Digital Service. There has never been a democracy digital service. The Electoral Commission has no digital wing. While the Parliamentary Digital Service does great work and is now publishing *Hansard* in a very nice, user-friendly way, inspired by the work of my society a decade earlier, there is definitely a gap here. Democracy is not just what happens in Parliament. Asking local government to do good digital stuff on democracy is a bit of a stretch right now. Is there a way that we can provide some central resource to aid the other bits of democracy?

Lord Black of Brentwood: Is there an existing body that could do that?

Joe Mitchell: I look at the BBC a lot and I think, "There is a very well-funded public service organisation that really should have been moving with the times and has not".

Lord Black of Brentwood: It is perhaps not so well funded as it once was.

Joe Mitchell: In future it may not be, but otherwise we are lacking something like that. The Germans have the Federal Agency for Civic Education. Do we need something similar that can look at digital experimentation, analysis and production?

Dr Alan Renwick: This needs to be a broad democracy information hub, rather than something specifically in digital technology. Peter is absolutely right; if you have the digital people separate from the people thinking about the overall democratic process, you can have a beautifully designed petition system, but it does not feed into anything. It is really vital to connect all those parts.

The Chair: Would you go so far as to say there is no overall digital process in the UK? There is no one stepping back — theoretically, it is the Cabinet Office — and asking, "How can we improve the system we have?"

Dr Alan Renwick: No one is stepping back and thinking about how to ensure our democracy works really well, in terms of people discussing, being informed, engaging and that kind of thing. The Cabinet Office at the moment is thinking a lot about electoral integrity, which is very, very important. There are challenges on that front currently. There is far too little thought, either there or in the Electoral Commission. They have quite a narrow remit, so it is not their fault that they are not thinking about this.

The Chair: It is quite important for us. Would you all agree that there is a void at the top?

Dr Alan Renwick: Yes.

Joe Mitchell: Yes, very much so.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: Yes, if we put it in terms of democracy in general. I would not separate the digital from other aspects of democracy. Public institutions have a tendency not to be as developed in digital technology as the private sector, for lots of different reasons. There is a real issue of public institutions skilling up and being able to follow up on developments elsewhere, but that is not about having a separate institution. It is about each specific public institution, whether it is Governments, local councils, Parliaments, et cetera.

The Chair: As a simple last question, if Government or Parliament could do one thing to better use technology to support democracy, what should it be?

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira: I am going to say my second one, because I know other people are going to say my first one. There is a lot of focus on broadcasting, so I would focus instead on developing listening tools.

Joe Mitchell: It is the digital infrastructure layer. You can have the exciting apps and things, but only if you get the basic data right. Government and Parliament are in a position to make sure that that data is open, machine-readable and well-structured across votes, legislation, decisions and budgets.

Peter Baeck: It is always dangerous, as a researcher, to call for more research, but we need some sort of evidence centre or national body, possibly in a university, that captures the evidence and knowledge on what works in this space. I probably get approached once a week by a local government or a city asking me, "Who should I look to? Who is doing it best? What is the evidence of what works or not?" There is nowhere to signpost people to. There is no body that captures this evidence.

It is great that we are entering this space, but we are at the really early stage so there is little evidence. We cannot answer some of the questions you are asking us, because we do not know. We need to create a better body of knowledge, with experts, about what works and what does not. When do crowds work? When do they not work? Then we can create the best propositions. That body of knowledge is almost completely missing from the space, so we just have anecdotal stories and nice case studies. We need to move the agenda forward by creating better evidence on what works.

Dr Alan Renwick: Create the democracy hub that we have been discussing. Create something that gathers together the wonderful information that is already out there, particularly created by the Parliaments and so on. Fill those gaps, engage in deliberative activities to generate information that is not currently available, and ensure that is accessible by as broad a range of people across the country as possible.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I am sorry we overran by 10 minutes, but it has been very helpful.