

The Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy – written evidence (FGU0004)

House of Lords Constitution Committee

Inquiry into the Future governance of the UK

Summary

1. First, many congratulations to the Lords Constitution Committee on setting up the inquiry to examine the Future Governance of the UK. It is much needed.
2. UK citizens are losing faith in democracy. To review our Governance without listening to our citizens is unthinkable. Giving them a meaningful say in its future is the only guarantee of its continuance. Our note shows how this can be done.
3. 2. Right at the outset we hope that the Committee will frame a road map which citizens and then HMG can consider and act upon. Above all, this requires a clear focus on HOW these issues are taken forward rather than an extended and divisive debate on WHAT should be taken forward in yet another wish-list of reforms with no political end game. Debates on our democracy do not lack bright ideas for reform, but hitherto they have lacked the vehicle or process by which broadly-supported decisions can be achieved.
4. 3. Hence, our evidence offers the keys to a PROCESS rather than pre-determining what the POLICY outcomes ought to be. The main process uses Deliberative Democracy and especially how we can *meaningfully engage citizens in this project by the use of independent Citizens' Assemblies*. This is our field of expertise. Our evidence is limited to exploring that.
5. In addition to links to more detail in the text www.ccukdemocracy.org, we would appreciate the possibility of explaining in oral evidence to you the concepts of this approach.
6. 4. We hope you will consider setting out at the outset three clear landmarks along the following lines:

*(1). The Committee declares a statement of principle that as part of the Committee's work, it believes **ordinary UK citizens should be enabled to engage with policy proposals on future governance**, which is best done by the creation of a non-partisan Citizens' Assembly of independently selected people - a microcosm of the United Kingdom. In addition, that the Assembly shall deliberate on a remit drafted by the Lords Committee, agreed and amended after discussion with HMG and with commitment from both that the work produced by citizens will be seriously and respectfully considered. This would add a solid and legitimising input of citizens' views to the foundation of the Committee's work.*

*(2). The Committee's heaviest logistical burden will be on content. It will no doubt have a lengthy list of policy proposals that emerge from the consideration of its extensive terms of reference. Where the Committee feel it is appropriate, some proposals may then be flagged up for consideration by the Assembly or HMG. Each policy proposal should receive an initial annotated response from HMG. **We suggest this is then***

published as the Lords Interim Report. *As an independent and impartial body concerned with process, the CCUKD will not be giving any evidence or views on any policy questions.*

(3). *The Committee should state that **the Committee shall convene a Citizens' Assembly on completion of the Lords Interim Report.** The Assembly will receive the Interim Report as annotated by HMG and consider it. Consideration would take place within an agreed period [perhaps 8-12 weeks] using a blend of online and traditional deliberative forms and then produce a series of recommendations. **The citizens' recommendations shall then be returned to both the Lords Committee and HMG for consideration, then acceptance, rejection or amendment in the normal way.***

7. These three statements will publicly set out *the means* to realise a process which includes Parliament, Government and Citizens. Constructed in this way, it will be able to heal our democracy, arrive at thoughtful, practical and consensual proposals with each key partner respectfully engaged, yet maintain and strengthen the rightful electoral legitimacy of HMG and Parliament to make the final decisions.
8. 5.As we evidence later, Citizens' Assemblies are increasingly commonplace across the globe and have delivered common sense ways forward on some of the most difficult issues faced by policy makers who, acting alone, are increasingly hamstrung by polarisation and division. The recent Irish Assembly's resolution of the abortion issue (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjpuDk9_BWI) is just one of many examples.
9. 6.*The Lords already enjoys a reputation for a greater degree of independent thought and record of innovation than does the Commons. This would be strengthened further by the inclusion and legitimacy of citizens engagement in this process.* The very act of a Lords Committee commissioning a Citizens' Assembly to appropriately assist in its work would itself symbolise an evolution in our democracy and the renewal of the partnership between citizens and Parliament.

Practicalities

10. 7. On announcement of your inquiry, we offered to help begin your process with a Citizens' Assembly. Now your work is underway, we renew that offer to take effect immediately upon completion of your interim report. We have the network to design and manage this process in whatever way you wish. We- or whoever is asked to complete this work- should seek to engage the committed and knowledgeable national and global expertise in the field. You will have seen how six select committees in the Commons came together to fund and produce a report on climate change. A similar but more nimble process might be of value to you here. The objective is to offer the independent and impartial expertise to design and deliver the mechanism of a Citizens' Assembly to report to you. Were it to be helpful, we would also be open to discussions on how to secure additional funding to undertake such an exercise should it be needed.

Background

11. 8.Your call to examine the Future of Governance of the UK has chimed not only with your colleagues in the Lords but fellow believers in democracy across the UK. From London to Washington and everywhere in the world family of

democracies, legislatures need to show leadership and clarity on how we make our democratic systems ready for a sustainable future; to do that without our citizens would be a fatal flaw. We focus our evidence exclusively on what we feel is the most practical way to help achieve that.

12. Democracy is about the reconciliation of views. The deliberate separation of powers and of parties rightly formalises and sets up a permanent structure of conflict. This tension is then constantly reconciled through humane political processes. However, in recent years we have begun to take that process for granted and failed to evolve it to be fit for the modern age. Your Inquiry offers a chance to exemplify how we can start to put that right.
13. All too often, oppositionism has been the default position of traditional politics when difficult problems have arisen. It is so much easier to dig into your comfort zone and say "No" rather than to engage with political opponents. However, there is a way forward. That is, to upgrade our sometimes threadbare methods by putting to work a new, innovative kid on the democratic block - Deliberative Democracy.
14. Ahead of any immutable political postures being struck, we can meaningfully engage citizens themselves using Deliberative Democracy to express thoughtful, practical answers and recommendations in whatever areas you and HMG feel appropriate. We seem often to be rich with brilliant policy solutions but paupers in having effective processes to move them forward. Our citizens have one great quality that legislators can never have: their views would not be forged in the distorting heat of the daily political and media inferno. Legislators are the quickest to acknowledge this. They understand it is much easier for each party to accept as the basis for debate and legislative action the considered views gifted willingly by thoughtful citizens rather than "give in" to the views of their political opponents.
15. Deliberative Democracy is where a microcosm of a nation - impartially and scientifically selected - request views from experts and are facilitated by independent professionals to conduct mature, respectful democracy. There is now a vast amount of global experience and strong evidence on what works to do this well and in so doing, successfully resolve some of the most difficult issues in politics. The most competent and distinguished practitioners of Deliberative Democracy in the UK and across the planet would happily assist in this work at your request. The UK and its Mother of Parliaments can once again lead global democracy not rhetorically but with relevant practise. This time, the prize is to take democracy forward to its next evolution: the meaningful engagement of citizens in support of their elected representatives.
16. Winston Churchill once said "Democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". Even before the polarisation of Brexit, the US' Capitol Insurrection, the growth of autocracy and the coarsening of political discourse, those of us who regardless of political affiliation call ourselves democrats worried about keeping that system viable - the least "worst" it can be. Now our global democracy feels fragile and poorly maintained. If it is to have a strong long-term future, it now needs some serious love and attention. My Lords, your promise to examine the future governance of the UK presents the perfect opportunity to do just that and not only produce another report but negotiate and deliver a serious practical outcome.
17. If we want to renew democracy, then people of good will from all political backgrounds have to work up some persuasive ideas and arguments. Above all, we must remake anew an effective partnership between a disenchanting public

and a political class that often struggles to connect with them. In a sometimes depressing picture of national and international democracy, Deliberative Democracy is a growing glimmer of hope and oddly it has a pedigree going back to ancient Greece.

18. The optimism here for democrats of all persuasions is based upon the recognition that elections alone are no longer enough and like the ancient Greeks, using Deliberative Democracy to re-engage citizens thoughtfully with their politics is an important way to restore trust and participation. This would not only halt the decline of faith in democracy but also take it to its next evolution, a cultural development as significant and socially-uniting as was "Votes for All", the last great democratic leap forward.
19. It is time to renew our democracy on a sustainable basis led by your example, engaging with Parliamentarians and making it strong enough to transcend the complacency, elitism and populism that still threatens its very existence. The Executive and Legislature can and must feel supported and refreshed by the change, not frightened or undermined by it. By agreeing in advance each step of the process as we propose, existing institutions can be completely confident that deliberation is a welcome improvement to our democracy, not a threatening alternative to it. Citizens and Parliamentarians can then work together to play our parts as sensible and constructive partners. Surely the moment has come. As Hillel is reputed to have said "If not now, when? If not me, who?".
20. Deliberative Democracy is tasty and nourishing slow-cooked politics, the antithesis of our present fast food McPolitics. Deliberation by a microcosm of the nation, region or locality can propose recommendations for consideration by legislatures. In essence, a group of perhaps 80 or so citizens, transparently and scientifically selected, come together to conduct - in the words of Deliberative Democracy guru James Fishkin - "democracy in good conditions". They are properly looked after, travel costs paid, even a small honorarium of thanks and a decent hotel for however many weekend days this civic duty takes them. Perhaps most importantly, citizens don't bring the baggage and prejudices of political parties with them. A point is made to discuss issues respectfully and with good manners with the 7 or 8 people on your table, a mind-opening counterpoint to the bad manners and febrile distortion of frustrated politicians and media pundits.
21. Deliberative Democracy is not a theory: it is actually working, producing outcomes and gaining traction in the UK and across the globe. It is being done to the highest standards as the OECD's "[Catching the Deliberative Wave](#)" highlights. The citizen deliberators - "everyday people" like us - are with balanced briefing and professional facilitation perfectly able to take forward issues found to be intractable to usual political processes. "Give us your toughest problem" is the challenge from deliberators. There is now a global critical mass of evidence to reference and to use (and perhaps one day soon, to consolidate globally into a UK style *What Works* organisation).
22. Hundreds of democratic deliberations are now underway or successfully completed on the most "unresolvable" issues. For example, on abortion in Ireland, nuclear power in South Korea, energy policy in Texas, social care in Northern Ireland, waste recycling in South Australia, the Grand Debate in France and the UK Parliament's Climate Change Assembly. Finally deliberators hand their finished gift to their legislators to do their part: consideration, amendment and decision. Hitherto, these elected or appointed representatives have felt trapped by whips, tribal party loyalties, electoral short-termism, the media frenzy, lobbyists and campaign money to the extent that they are often unable to progress issues. Hence, far from feeling squeezed out or undermined, legislators

actually welcome the new democratic deep-clean of deliberation to unblock our often sclerotic political processes and co-exist on *citizen-created common ground*. They see that renewing a mutually respectful pre-legislative partnership with citizens strengthens them to get the job done that we expect them to do. Perhaps one day - citing this pioneering work of the Lord Constitution Committee - every Bill going through Parliament will have first been informed by thoughtful citizens' engagement.

23. Using traditional face to face methods and the latest online techniques such as automated Artificial Intelligence facilitation, we can back up our groups of 80 citizens by engaging with countless numbers of "everyday people", founding mothers and fathers in a national conversation on the key issues put before them. Recently we put a Proposal for a process like this to the UK Prime Minister, www.ccukdemocracy.org. We and colleagues in the field would be honoured to adapt it for use as the Citizens' Assembly for the Lords Committee as part of the underpinning of the democratic evolution of the UK.
24. This independent process means that the initial recommendations will be citizens' proposals, not ours - or with respect - even yours, let alone those of our favourite pressure group or most generous vested interest. They will ultimately be formally handed to the Lords Committee, our Parliament and Government for the final consideration and decision that their and your mandate deserves. Through this process, every citizen can feel ownership and involvement in their democracy between elections, just as they feel supportive of our existing Jury system even if they personally have yet to serve. Over 2,000 years ago, one of the founders of the first wave of democracy, Pericles, remarked "We are unique in considering the man who takes no part in public affairs not to be apolitical, but useless". It is now time for us to take up and use the means by which we grow from being a useless spectator to each of us taking our part as a player on the democratic field.
25. 9. We are right to test and question this new-fangled Deliberative Democracy, but you will be pleased to discover that much like elections, its rediscovered twin - deliberation - is a process with deep roots back to the ancient Greeks. It is not politics like we used to do, it is politics better than we have been doing and to which every democratic society worthy of the name should aspire.
26. 10. We look forward to speaking with you if you feel able to invite us in.

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