

RSA – written evidence (FGU0013)

House of Lords Constitution Committee Inquiry into the Future governance of the UK

1. The RSA welcomes the opportunity to respond to this timely and essential inquiry. We believe, following examples set elsewhere, including in Iceland, Estonia and Canada, deliberative methodologies can support and enhance processes of constitutional change. In what follows, we set out the proven benefits of citizens' assemblies in the hope that this will encourage the committee to find a place in their process to engage citizens through a citizens' assembly.

Background

2. 2019 RSA-Populus polling showed that less than a quarter of people felt the state of democracy in Britain was healthy and in Northern Ireland this figure fell to just over 10 percent. Democratic ideals still attract support, but democratic practice is regularly derided. As the public grows more disillusioned, it also becomes more disengaged: across Europe, fewer people vote, join or work for political parties, or participate in voluntary organisations than in previous decades. This disengagement should of great concern, especially considering recent RSA research which suggested a baseline of political trust has been an important determinant of social resilience and effective crisis response over the past year¹.
3. However, many proposed methods for democratic and constitutional renewal are technical and seemingly detached from people's day-to-day experiences. Reforming our electoral system would likely improve the functioning of our democracy in many regards but, as the 2011 UK referendum on the issue clearly demonstrated, it fails to animate the public at large. At the RSA, we believe that deliberative democracy provides a promising and realistic model for reforming our democracy in ways that can rebuild people's political confidence and trust. Deliberative methods of decision making also provide a 'gateway' through which other important democratic reforms – including electoral reforms - can be impartially and thoroughly debated.

Benefits of deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies

4. Deliberative democracy is intended to enrich representative democracy, not replace it. Deliberative democracy does not denote a "zero-sum" competition between static preferences. Rather, it is a theory of the processes through which people form and modify their opinions. Citizens' assemblies are designed to stimulate a high level of deliberation among a randomly-selected 'mini public'; a group of people 'mini' enough to deliberate effectively but still demographically and attitudinally reflective of the population at large.
5. An expanding body of theoretical and empirical analysis has established a growing body of evidence of the benefits of deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies. Broadly speaking, these fall into three categories:
 - 1) They create 'better decisions'

Citizens' assemblies offer an ideal setting for learning, deliberation and decision-making. Amidst a declining trust in experts in the UK, citizens' assemblies provide a bounded space within which citizens and experts can engage in an open and productive way. After hearing presentations from expert 'witnesses', assembly participants are able to question and challenge what they have heard. Through extended discussion with

¹ The RSA – Written Evidence (LBC0259), Covid19 House of Lords Committee 2020 - <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/10621/pdf/>

their peers they come to understand the complexity of the issue at hand and the trade-offs involved with any decision. The decisions that have come out of these processes in the past have been sensible and nuanced and constructive. They represent public judgement rather than mass opinion.

Citizens' assemblies cannot be dominated by powerful interest groups and they are not distorted by electoral pressures. Therefore, sound information, careful thought and constructive debate can take centre stage in these processes.

Citizens' assemblies create space within which politicians are able to act more effectively and with greater legitimacy (for instance, in policy areas stifled by intractable debate or powerful interest groups).

2) They create 'better citizens'

Evidence suggests that through participating in these processes, citizens can gain in knowledge, confidence, tolerance, social capital and public spirit. Participants develop their ability to form an argument, justify their positions and sift through complex information. Involvement has also been found to increase people's trust in the democratic system and their political representatives. Citizens' assemblies provide a gateway through which citizens might re-engage with politics and their communities more generally. Links have been made between structured deliberation and higher levels of voting and campaigning, and it has been demonstrated that deliberation leads to higher levels of community engagement and voluntary action. When properly publicised, citizens' assemblies can also positively impact the quality of public discussion and the behaviour of those not directly participating (see Citizens' Initiative Review example below). In a time of mass discontent and disengagement, citizens' assemblies are a tried and tested method of re-engaging people.

3) They can stimulate cultural and structural change within commissioning authorities

Citizens' assemblies can exemplify the value of citizen participation to the commissioning authority. Over time, it could provide the rationale for more comprehensive and participatory local engagement frameworks. By necessitating new approaches to public engagement and communication and encouraging more creative approaches to process design, citizens' assemblies can leave a long legacy in terms of organisational culture and skills, as suggested by the Innovation in Democracy Programme Case Studies². Some local and regional authorities outside of the UK have gone an extra step and successfully embedded public deliberation into their standard decision-making procedures. Recently, Newham London Borough Council became the first local council in the UK to pledge to creating a permanent citizens' assembly³.

Case studies

6. Below we briefly consider some examples that help to illustrate these aforementioned benefits. We have intentionally chosen lesser-known examples of

² Innovation in Democracy Programme case studies, 2020 - <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/IIDP-case-studies.pdf>

³ Citizens' Assemblies, Newham Borough Council website - <https://www.newham.gov.uk/council/citizens-assemblies>

deliberative democracy (at least in the UK context), to show the benefits of deliberation, it's past application to issues of constitutional reform and the importance of establishing a strong interface between deliberative forums and more established democratic procedures:

Case Study 1 - British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

7. In 2004, a randomly selected 160-person citizens' assembly was established by the British Columbian legislature. It was tasked with proposing a new electoral system for the province and had formal powers: whatever it recommended would be put to the province in a referendum vote. After meeting throughout the year, all but seven of the participants recommended replacing the province's existing First Past the Post system with a Single Transferable Vote system. The discussion was high quality and wide ranging and researchers Fournier et al. found that the participants became more interested and informed as a result of their involvement⁴. Even after the citizens' assembly, when they were no longer being paid, most members remained a part of the public debate. Nonetheless, the province as a whole voted narrowly against the recommendation.
8. Regardless of the outcome, this case powerfully demonstrated how citizens' assemblies can link up with the wider democratic process. A similar arrangement has since been used with great success in Ireland on the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion.

Case study 2 - Citizens' Initiative Review in Oregon

9. In the American state of Oregon, citizens' assemblies are used to inform debate and improve public information before referendums and elections. A small group of 24 people evaluate ballot measures and create a Citizens' Statement that is distributed to voters in the official Voters' Guide. The statement includes key information, considered recommendations, and arguments on both sides of the debate.
10. Participants have been found to gain confidence in themselves and the democratic system, to engage more with politics, and to develop a greater sense of 'Oregonian' identity as a result of the process. The Citizens' Initiative Review also benefits members of the voting public who, after reading the Voters' Guide, subsequently feel better-informed about the issue and report feeling politically empowered as a result. With better publicity, more Oregon citizens would enjoy these benefits.

Case study 3 - Icelandic Constitutional Convention, 2009-2011

11. Following the devastating impact of the 2008 financial crisis in Iceland, the Icelandic government supported a sequence of deliberative initiatives which culminated in a new draft of the constitution being presented to parliament on 29th July 2011. This included the 2009 National Assembly (a national brainstorming session for a recovery plan consisting of 1,500 participants mostly selected by lot), the 2010 National Forum (an assembly of 950 citizens which influenced a 700 page report written by the Icelandic Constitutional Committee) and the Constitutional Assembly (25 elected members of the public who produced a constitutional draft based on the Constitutional Committee's report and online feedback from the wider public). The constitutional proposal was approved by referendum in October 2012 by a margin of 2/3, but parliament failed to take the

⁴ When Citizens Decide: Lessons from Citizen Assemblies on Electoral Reform - Patrick Fournier, Henk van der Kolk, R. Kenneth Carty, André Blais, and Jonathan Rose (2011)

process further due to pressure from opposition parties. There have recently been renewed efforts to take this process forwards and there is now wider support for constitutional revision from across the party system⁵.

Conclusion

12. Based on the proven benefits of citizens' assemblies and the growing list of encouraging examples from around the world, the RSA supports the CCUK Democracy proposal for the Lords Committee to run a citizens' assembly, or a set of citizens' assemblies, to support its work. We would be very happy to speak with you or answer any questions about this submission should this support your inquiry.

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⁵ Iceland's crowd-sourced constitution: hope for disillusioned voters everywhere – The Conversation, 2016 - <https://theconversation.com/icelands-crowd-sourced-constitution-hope-for-disillusioned-voters-everywhere-67803>