

**King's College London, Department of Political Economy and King's Policy Institute– written evidence (FGU0019)**

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

**Executive summary and recommendations**

1. The submission focuses on the potential of deliberative democracy to contribute to the reform of governance in the UK, highlighting a number of benefits associated with the idea. The submission draws on expertise and research evidence produced by researchers at King's College, London to make recommendations in the form of practical proposals for reform that will address some of the immediate, and future, governance challenges faced by the UK.
2. The evidence presented here suggests that:
  - Governance in the UK faces a number of challenges, including questions over the relationship between various levels of government and other actors drawn from civil society and the private sector, increasing political polarisation and growing inequality in political participation.
  - These challenges should not be considered solely in terms of their effects on governance. The evidence suggests they have a wide range of negative impacts on society and the economy, affecting individuals and communities as well as the quality of government.
  - Deliberative democratic innovations, institutional reforms that include deliberative democracy as part of public decision-making, have been proven to be successful as part of a range of measures to tackle these issues and can work alongside, rather than replace, more traditional forms of governance.
  - There is a clear potential for deliberative democratic innovations to improve the quality of governance in a wide range of areas. A large body of research has identified benefits including the inclusion of a greater number of views in public decisions, higher levels of participation amongst marginalised groups and increased perceptions of the legitimacy of public decisions.

We make the following recommendations:

- A nation-wide citizens' convention should be held on the Future Governance of the UK.
- The establishment of a capacity-building programme to allow the development of existing governance structures to include deliberative democratic innovations.
- The creation of a 'What Works' centre and programme of training designed to support the development and evaluation of deliberative democratic innovations.

- Targeting resources and democratic innovations on deprived neighbourhoods in order to address inequalities in participation.

## **1. Context: Is there a governance 'crisis' in the UK?**

- 1.1 Governance in the UK takes the form of a complex web of accountability and decision-making at a wide range of levels and involves actors drawn from different sectors, including the public and private sectors as well as civil society. Recent years have seen the introduction of a number of reforms to a previously-centralised system, including the introduction of devolved forms of government at the national and regional level and the introduction of directly-elected mayors.
- 1.2 Despite this, the fundamental processes of public decision-making in the UK have remained largely unchanged for more than a century. Questions exist over how far these existing procedures are suited to the complexities of modern governance and the changing demands of public institutions made by citizens. Specifically, recent research has raised concerns over the following:
  - 1.3 The high levels of political polarisation that exist over issues of public concern. These are exacerbated by governance mechanisms based on 'winner-takes-all' decision-making structures, rather than consensus and compromise.
  - 1.4 Existing governance structures have not addressed the persistent inequalities that exist in citizen participation. In particular, the clearest finding of decades of research in this area is that participation is strongly skewed in favour of the most affluent social groups, with socio-economic status one of the strongest predictors of the likelihood of political participation<sup>1</sup>.
  - 1.5 The absence of a diversity of views in decision-making processes, such as previously-marginalised groups as well as expert voices, can hinder the effectiveness of policy outcomes, with decisions being made without consideration for the range of perspectives that might exist on a particular issue.
  - 1.6 A perceived 'legitimacy gap' exists amongst the public at large. The existing empirical work suggests that many citizens lack confidence in the processes of modern politics and that this trend is most prominent amongst the most disadvantaged groups in society. This finding is consistent across different nations and can be identified at the local, as well as national level.
  - 1.7 The cumulative effects of these issues have led some commentators to suggest that governance is in 'crisis' and to highlight the need for reform. Importantly, these effects are not solely felt in the structures of governance themselves but have a wider impact on society. The evidence suggests that more inclusive forms of governance can not only lead to better decision-making but can develop beneficial norms amongst those involved and a more positive social orientation across society.

## **2. What is deliberative democracy? And why is it valued?**

- 2.1 We propose that one element of a response to this issue should be the introduction of governance reforms which draw on deliberative democracy. This

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<sup>1</sup> Dacombe (2018)

idea is now well-established in practice and a solid evidence base has demonstrated that it can provide an alternative means of citizen engagement and decision-making that works alongside more established forms of governance<sup>2</sup>.

- 2.2 Deliberative democracy is the idea that good governance should be rooted in the participation of those involved in processes of public deliberation. Institutions structured along these lines aim to contribute to improvements in governance by engaging citizens, expert voices and public officials in decision-making rooted in discussion and structured argumentation.
- 2.3 As a template for reform, this requires a particular view of the way opinions over public issues are held. Deliberative democracy does not see decision-making as a competition between pre-determined views but as a means of including a plurality of perspectives in policy outcomes, as well as weighing the merits of different alternatives.
- 2.4 The distinctive feature of deliberative democracy is that it shifts the focus of governance away from the point of decision to the processes of discussion and communication which occur earlier. Deliberation is structured to ensure that it promotes open participation, relies on the use of appropriate evidence, and allows the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives.
- 2.5 Reforms based on deliberative democracy are non-political, focused on the development of policy rather than politics. Participants are either selected randomly, or specific groups targeted (perhaps a previously under-represented group or those with relevant expertise). In every case the design aims engage participants in a process of facilitated discussion on a particular issue (perhaps a policy problem, or a particular proposal) in order to identify specific solutions. This can result in a binding decision, or recommendations made to a decision-making body such as a parliament.
- 2.6 Work on deliberative democracy has identified a number of benefits that it can bring to the workings of governance and public decision-making. Some of these are intrinsic, and result in direct gains to the quality of governance. For instance, it has long been understood that opening up democracy to a plurality of voices leads to tangible benefits in the quality of democratic decision-making<sup>3</sup>. Particularly, rather than shape public decisions according to the voices of the most powerful, or traditionally-present groups, new perspectives on the nature of policy problems, and the potential for their resolution, can be identified.
- 2.7 There are also legitimacy gains that result from deliberative democracy. By requiring participants to explain the reasons for their opinions, and to support their claims with evidence, decisions are made in a more transparent fashion, and can be revisited. This means that the outcomes of policy decisions can be examined and lessons learned in a non-confrontational way. Importantly, the underlying evidence and reasoning behind policy proposals can also be fully explained.
- 2.8 These processes can also result in a range of broader benefits felt both by those who participate, in terms of increased knowledge of public issues and tolerance of opposing views, and in society as a whole, with positive externalities accrued in the form of a more active citizenry with a greater level of confidence in public institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> For an example, see the Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy (2020)

<sup>3</sup> See Carugati (2020)

### **3. Deliberative democratic innovations**

- 3.1 In recent years, deliberative democracy has become increasingly popular as the basis for the reform of public institutions and governance processes, and has led to a number of successful experiments across the world, including in the UK. These deliberative democratic innovations take the principles of deliberative democracy and apply them to specific policy problems.
- 3.2 Deliberative democratic innovations can take a number of different forms. Indeed, the breadth of different kinds of innovations that might be employed is a strength of the idea and allows adaptation to a wide range of different contexts. Types of democratic innovations might include (but are not limited to) participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, deliberative polls, e-forums, or the collaborative design of public services. The fundamental point is that deliberative democratic innovations are practical proposals for reform that have been successfully employed in numerous contexts<sup>4</sup>.
- 3.3 The following examples illustrate the possibilities of reform:
- 3.4 Deliberative democratic innovations have become part of the mainstream approach to governance in some nations. For instance, the Citizens' Council, a permanent citizens' assembly that has been established in East Belgium runs as a perpetual part of the governance structures in the region. This selects citizens by lot to take part in deliberation over significant public issues. Recommendations are then made to a joint committee formed by representatives of the assembly and elected representatives to develop parliamentary or governmental measures in response.
- 3.5 Beyond this, some of the most high profile examples of concrete governance reform along these lines to emerge in recent years are participatory budgeting initiatives. Popularised in Porto Alegre, Brazil, during the 1990s, participatory budgeting has now become commonplace across the world, including in the UK. Participatory budgeting institutions are designed to allow citizens responsibility for determining how public money is spent. They can take a wide variety of different forms but in every case, citizens are asked to engage in deliberation over the merits of various funding priorities, and some degree of decision-making power over spending is devolved to citizens. The role played by participatory budgeting initiatives does not end with the allocation of funds - many schemes of this kind place an emphasis on the ways in which budget spending is subsequently monitored and held up to scrutiny.
- 3.6 A more recent example is the Citizens' Assembly in Ireland, which was established in 2016 and finished its work in April 2018. Membership included a Chairperson nominated by the government, 33 representatives chosen by political parties and 66 randomly-selected citizens. It involved facilitated discussions on sometimes controversial issues, including hearing expert evidence, question and answer sessions and roundtable debates. Proceedings were livestreamed to allow for a wider level of engagement in its work. The Assembly made a number of recommendations for constitutional amendments and legislation including a proposal for a constitutional change removing the ban on abortions, which was accepted after a national referendum.

### **4. Recommendations**

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<sup>4</sup> Wojciechowska (2019)

- 4.1 Deliberative democratic innovations are not a marginal concern and have become an integral part of governance in many contexts across the world. We believe that a greater engagement with these reforms can form an important part of a response to the challenges faced by governance in the UK. We do not believe that the value of these reforms lies in their ability to replace existing governance structures. Rather, we believe that they can enhance existing capacity.
- 4.2 Consequently, we make the following recommendations:
- 4.3 A nation-wide citizens' convention should be held on the Future Governance of the UK. The scope of any inquiry into governance in the UK is broad-ranging and requires difficult choices to be made over focus and effort. Similarly, by its nature it will address issues which are both complex and at times controversial. Employing a deliberative democratic innovation, in the form of a citizens' convention, to address these issues would be an ideal way of demonstrating the potential value of this kind of reform.
- 4.4 The development of a capacity-building programme to allow the development of existing governance structures to include deliberative democratic innovations. Currently, the use of deliberative democratic innovations in UK governance happens piecemeal and there is little consistent practice across the UK. Enabling the introduction of pilot schemes as part of a capacity-building programme would allow the extension of the use of governance innovations like this, as well as good practice lessons to be shared. Such a move would not be unprecedented – in 2018 three pilot innovations were funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as part of its Innovation in Democracy Programme.
- 4.5 The creation of a 'What Works' centre and programme of training designed to support the development and evaluation of deliberative democratic innovations. As recent research has shown, knowledge of deliberative democratic innovations is not yet widespread<sup>5</sup>. In order to aid the broader adoption of deliberative democratic innovations, we recommend that public agencies work with partners drawn from both academia and the world of practice in order to harness existing expertise to support this programme.
- 4.6 Targeting resources and democratic innovations on deprived neighbourhoods in order to address inequalities in participation. Given the strong evidence indicating a lower engagement of people drawn from lower socio-economic groups, we recommend dedicating part of these efforts on more deprived areas.

## **5. Contributors**

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<sup>5</sup> Pilet, Bol et al (2021)

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## **Appendix 1: List of sources**

Pilet, J-B., Bol, D. et al (2021) Public Support for Citizens' Assemblies Selected through Sortition: Survey and Experimental Evidence from 15 Countries  
Working paper available at: <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/dmv7x>

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Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy: Final report  
Available at: <https://www.ccukdemocracy.org/>

Dacombe, R. (2018) *Rethinking Civic Participation in Theory and Practice*  
London: Palgrave Macmillan

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