

Professor Graham Smith – written evidence (FGU0024)

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

1. I am delighted that the Constitution Committee is undertaking an inquiry on future governance of the UK. UK governance is under strain. The Committee's call for evidence highlights a number of possible explanations about how balances of powers could be better shared and how challenges of governance might be addressed.
2. My concern is that the causes and possible solutions to the challenges of governance are only being considered from a particular set of perspectives: those of the political class and a limited set of observers and commentators from established institutions active in this field.
3. The perspectives that are missing from this inquiry are those of UK citizens. True, the inquiry is "open" in the sense that anyone can respond to the call for evidence, but it is well established that everyday citizens rarely respond and any response received fail to capture the diversity of the broader population.
4. The constitution and our governance arrangements are in place for the benefit of citizens. A real danger exists if decisions about these arrangements are made without the perspectives of citizens being front and centre in deliberations and decision making. Politicians and interest groups are deeply entrenched in the system and as such their interests and perspectives are very different from everyday citizens. Any redesign of powers and governance structures that does not directly involve citizens, is unlikely to fully reflect their interests and perspectives.
5. The challenge is how to involve citizens, in all their diversity, in the complex process of decision making on governance arrangements. Most citizens spend little time considering such issues.
6. The emerging practice of citizens' assemblies provides a potential answer. A citizens' assembly brings together a randomly selected group of everyday citizens to learn, deliberate and come to recommendations on public issues.
7. I have studied and organised citizens' assemblies and similar deliberative processes for over two decades and have been impressed by the way that everyday people have been willing and able to come to recommendations on highly complex and controversial political and social issues. The Irish use of citizens' assemblies is arguably the most well-known and celebrated case, but citizens' assemblies and similar processes have been used on a range of constitutional and governance issues across continents and at different levels of governance.
8. Any inquiry into our current constitutional and governance structures and practices needs to take into account the diverse perspectives of the citizens who are subject to these structures and practices. Citizens' assemblies offer an effective way of respecting that diversity and enabling citizens to shape decisions that will directly affect their lives.
9. I strongly recommend that the Committee considers how citizens' assemblies can be integrated into decision making on the constitutional and governance challenges facing the UK and how citizens' assemblies can become an established part of our constitutional and governance arrangements.
10. I would be delighted to provide further evidence – written or oral – to support the work of the Committee.

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