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Think Piece

Participatory Politics and the Climate Emergency

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Our democratic processes are remarkably durable, but they are also remarkably static. The process of the 2019 election would be largely comprehensible to someone who voted in the 1918 election. While there have been some changes to the structure of our politics - most notably the creation of devolved administrations - much of how we do politics has remained largely unchanged. This is particularly the case when it comes to the involvement of citizens in decision making. While there has been a substantial expansion in consultation over the past 40 years, there is little democratic innovation to match the exceptional increase in choice for consumers or indeed the extensive choice available to us in other areas of our lives. Someone transported from 1918 would have little trouble understanding the democratic process. They would more likely be baffled by the sheer range of consumer and technological choice that characterises modern society.

Participatory approaches to democracy have emerged as a way to deepen citizen engagement in decision making, and have delivered some notable successes which we discuss later. Where most voters in 1918 would have left school by the age of 14, with only basic skills, we now have mass education in colleges and universities. With a much more educated population, which has also become more critical and less deferential to traditional authority, the need to involve citizens in decision making - especially on issues that affect their daily lives - grows, as does the opportunity to create new and better solutions to complex social and environmental problems. In other words, participatory approaches are important to both increasing citizen involvement as well as arriving at better decisions. A less removed form of politics - one which

invites people to join the decision making process rather than keeping them at arm's length - is likely to be more successful than the current status quo. Developing new processes and institutions for citizen participation (also called 'democratic innovations') has become central in generating both legitimacy and capacity to act collectively and effectively on complex issues. Scotland has experimented with these democratic innovations as part of its response to the climate emergency as we discuss later.

In this context it makes a great deal of sense that people have turned to participatory approaches to help solve the great challenges of our era. And no challenge is greater than that of finding solutions to the climate emergency.

The declaration of a climate emergency by both UK and Scottish Governments recognised the importance of this issue both in policy and electoral terms. This change came on the back of widespread protest and civil disobedience from groups including Fridays for the Future and Extinction Rebellion.

The last half-decade has seen a substantial increase in public interest in climate issues, with Ipsos MORI recording an increase from a low of 63% of UK citizens saying climate change was a concern in 2011 to 85% in 2019. It has also seen the growth in participatory approaches to politics. This think-piece considers the way in which these phenomena have interacted with, varied from and contested previous approaches to the climate change agenda.

We critically address the adoption of citizens' assembly approaches by Extinction Rebellion below, having set the scene by explaining some of the factors that prompted the move to developing institutions like citizens'

assemblies. These processes belong to a wider family of democratic innovations called 'mini-publics' which aim to mirror the population (or at least gather a diverse cross-section of the population), randomly selecting citizens through lottery (so that everyone may have a chance of being selected) and according to demographic and attitudinal criteria. This allows the process to be more inclusive and representative than a standard self-selected public forum. They range from 50 to 1000 participants, although recent climate assemblies at national level have usually included between 100 and 150 people. The process focuses on a question or task, and the assembly is carefully designed and guided by impartial facilitators who seek to create an egalitarian space for dialogue and deliberation - in contrast to the often shallow and exclusionary forms of public debate that dominate so much of mainstream political life. Assembly members take evidence and advice from a range of specialist viewpoints - often experts or those with lived experience. The conclusions are often made as a policy report for action by the relevant institutions, albeit they can also feed into legislative processes or provide the groundwork for broader citizen participation - for example, via referendums.

The last century's transformation of the nature of our society - where citizens enjoy much greater choice as consumers, and expect to be involved in decisions that affect their lives - points to the need for much greater public involvement in formal politics. Participatory approaches attempt to find ways to structure that increased involvement - to provide a bridge between the streets and the institutions, so to speak. They also offer ways to answer questions that our current structures struggle to

address by bringing in a variety of voices, allowing for innovation and reducing the perception that decision making is limited by the interests of decision makers. This is particularly important in light of the short-termism baked into the architecture of party politics and electoral democracy (what Graham Smith calls 'democratic myopia'), which makes it difficult to act urgently and effectively on issues like climate change, pensions, health and social care, or the governance of technology.

Ireland has witnessed the ability of democratic innovation to solve issues that seemed too difficult for traditional political dispute resolution. Dealing with the climate crisis has often been regarded as an unwinnable battle - one which is too divisive for traditional politics to solve - so the success of the Irish referendums on equal marriage and abortion attracted considerable attention in recent years from those seeking solutions to the climate emergency. Both issues had been deep-rooted and contested issues in Irish politics. In the case of abortion, the UN Human Rights Committee had ruled that Ireland's abortion law breached the human rights of women. This created momentum to change the law (which required constitutional referendums), but little desire from any individual politician to take the risk of leading that change. The particularly attractive quality of these referendums was that they were preceded by citizens' assemblies to take evidence, deliberate and recommend changes to the Irish constitution that solved long-standing problems that politicians struggled to address and did so in a way that was remarkably resilient and solidaristic in the face of the cynical, bad-actor infused politics of the Trump era.

The opportunity to address difficult questions in the face of anti-democratic actors and overdue changes is one that many will jump at in order to transform our politics from despair to positive action. As a result, there has been a proliferation of citizens' assemblies and other democratic innovations (e.g. participatory budgeting, digital crowdsourcing). If you ask policymakers what the most intractable questions facing our democracy are, you will get a list that includes social care for older people, Scotland's constitutional future and the climate emergency. This list of issues looks like a checklist of the difficult issues of our day. And, tellingly, all have had citizens' assemblies commissioned to tackle them.

Participatory processes offer at least three claimed benefits. The first is providing a better, more inclusive way of making decisions. The second claim is that participatory processes offer a way of building support for complex policy positions and issues where entrenched positions make the debate fraught. The third benefit involves bringing collective creativity to bear on the problem at hand.

These three benefits may, in some situations, be at odds with one another. Some solutions developed by participatory processes may not enjoy the expected support. It is possible to imagine that recommendations such as that of the UK Climate Assembly to ban SUV vehicles or tax frequent flyers may prove sufficiently unpopular with drivers and flyers that they question, or even undermine, the process by which the recommendation was made - a frequent tactic with more traditional consultation techniques. This has yet to work itself out in the current range of participatory approaches that exist. It is worth noting that the successful

Irish citizens' assemblies were part of a direct pathway to change. They were convened to put proposals to a referendum, which would then decide whether the proposals were adopted. Subsequent initiatives have enjoyed much less clear pathways to change.

Climate change fits the criteria for all three benefits of a participatory approach. Despite the seriousness of the crisis, the solutions that have been brought forward to date have been highly politically contested, often being seen as unpalatable by both politicians and the electorate. The first Number 10 Petition to reach a million signatures, for instance, was in opposition to congestion charging. The Gillet Jaune protests in France were a response to increased fuel taxes. This illustrates the need to create an effective public sphere for decision making that allows full consideration of the needs and aspirations of different groups across society from the outset.

Professor Graham Smith articulates this well when he says, of the UK Climate Convention: "amid often polarised political debate, ordinary people were able to judge evidence and ideas against their own experiences. They arrived at judgements that balanced competing values, such as freedom of choice and fairness to different social groups."

There is an important question about who commissions the citizens' assembly or other participatory processes. This gives the power of definition and constitution to the commissioning body (at least until they become more permanent institutions rather than ad hoc processes). Often this has been an executive function, as with the Irish examples; sometimes it has been legislative, as with the UK Parliament inquiry into social care.

The lessons from the use of participatory processes in addressing the climate crisis will be important in prefiguring how we address other complex issues. This is especially the case given the centrality of the market economy to our collective decision making, and its failure to protect society from the negative externalities of climate changing emissions. The processes that successfully address the climate crisis could foreshadow the political processes used to resolve other market failures and rewire our economies to sustain - rather than hinder - life on Earth.

Facing Up to Climate Change: Addressing the Barriers to a Low-Carbon Scotland - RSE's 2011 report

In 2009-11, the RSE prepared a report on "*Facing Up to Climate Change: Addressing the Barriers to a Low-Carbon Scotland.*" The report makes a number of important suggestions, many of which have been enacted in the interim - and some of which have not. Specifically, there were ten headline recommendations, the last of these being: "Closer engagement is needed between people, civil society, market and state in the pursuit of Scotland's low-carbon vision." In the report's introduction, the then-President of the RSE comments that, "it is only through real public engagement and the involvement of all sectors of society that we will be able to make the step change needed to reap the benefits of a low-carbon society."

The report found that the ambition to change among the public was substantial, but that there were barriers to action. The report itself was developed through engagement across society, drawing upon a mix of public events, schools engagement and direct stakeholder participation.

The explanatory text for Recommendation 10 states:

"One important step forward will be achieved when business, NGOs, faith groups, other voluntary bodies and public bodies, are all focused on the central issue of how best to change society to achieve sustainable wellbeing for all. A priority would seem to be an open and mature debate to build support for joined-up policies, openly grasping such awkward nettles as the balance between economic growth, wellbeing and the environment, and how best to ensure that travel needs of people and communities are met effectively and efficiently. Progress would be aided by building community partnerships, access to predictable, efficient finance, and strong political leadership."

This think-piece takes this recommendation and seeks to analyse how institutions can indeed be focused on sustainable wellbeing for all and the ways in which participatory approaches have been deployed to achieve this. It goes on to consider a way in which politics more generally can be strengthened by integrating participatory processes within decision making.

Participatory and formal political structures

As mentioned, the question of who commissions a participatory process is important, and the UK Climate Assembly offers a useful case study here. In recognition of the cross-cutting nature of the climate emergency, the Assembly was commissioned by six House of Commons Select Committees: those covering Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; [Environmental Audit](#); [Housing, Communities and Local Government](#); [Science and Technology](#); [Transport](#); and the [Treasury](#). The Assembly met over six weekends, taking evidence from experts and coming up with proposed ways to mitigate climate change such as eating less meat and restricting flying. This was commissioned by MPs acting as legislators through their Parliamentary Committees. These Committees often commission reports to inform the policy process and assist with the scrutiny of the executive and of legislation, but they rarely sponsor legislation themselves.

A wide range of local authorities have also commissioned participatory processes, often citizens' assemblies that have addressed the issue of climate change and the immediate response to the climate crisis. Many of these came as a result of those councils declaring a climate emergency. Most are still to report.

The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government are also patrons to a Climate Assembly, which has recently reported back to both institutions. The Assembly was the product of a Scottish Green Party

amendment to the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019. The Scottish Government set up the Assembly, with an 'arms length' secretariat including government officials and civil society organisations like Involve and the Democratic Society. The Scottish Government's official response to the wide-ranging, ambitious proposals is expected this autumn in the run-up to COP26. While the process enjoyed widespread support, Extinction Rebellion did not believe the urgency of the climate crisis was being properly prioritised and withdrew midway through the process, expressing concerns at the way the process was being influenced by the Scottish Government. Extinction Rebellion Scotland said that the Assembly was becoming "increasingly controlled" by civil servants, and left the accompanying Stewarding Group because the Assembly was "no longer a good enough response to the climate emergency."

The Scottish Government, the Assembly organisers and the Stewarding Group (including civil society groups, activists, experts, representatives of all parliamentary parties, industry, etc) rejected these criticisms, which were made before the Assembly started its work. However, these concerns are worth exploring because they help us to understand how participatory approaches can be made more effective. Some of the most significant elements of dispute were about the shaping of the agenda, specifically the selection of experts to inform the Assembly. This suggests that the site of conflict in these participatory processes shifts from those making the recommendations to those informing the process. The UK Parliament Assembly was similarly criticised by Extinction Rebellion, who again lamented the lack of urgency and agency.

The above represents two approaches: a Scottish process commissioned by the executive, and the Westminster process commissioned by legislators. Yet neither has enjoyed the wholehearted support some of the civil society groups who are most interested in climate change as an issue. Some of this reflects the relative novelty of the process and the expectations of participants and stakeholders. It also points to the need to have a shared understanding at the start of the process of how the Assembly's outputs will be transformed into action. Another key consideration is that these democratic innovations are little known by the general public. This highlights the challenge of connecting deliberations within the Assembly with broader public deliberation across Scotland - or what academics call the relationship between the mini-public and the maxi-public. The role of the media is crucial in mediating that relationship, but this is not always easy in a crowded media environment that tends to focus on the fast food politics of partisanship and struggles to develop new narratives to report on democratic innovations.

There has been a similar process in France, the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat. This was sponsored by Emmanuel Macron as part of his response to the *Gilet Jaune* protests against rises in fuel duty. This initiative is much more explicitly linked to executive power than the UK Citizens' Assembly, with the clear intention of prompting legislation, executive orders and national referendums. Perhaps because of the circumstances of its foundation, this has commanded a much higher public profile. Carnegie Europe has an excellent analysis of the difference between the French and UK Citizens' Assemblies here.

One key difference in the French process was that, where the UK Climate Assembly was set by parliamentary committees, the French approach (like the Scottish) was to allow civil society organisations a much greater role in shaping the question and the agenda. Another difference is in the level of public interest generated, with an estimated 70% of the French population being aware of the work of the Convention. This disparity points to the need for greater publicity through broadcast and print media.

The Irish Citizens' Assemblies also enjoyed high levels of public attention. The final recommendation that went to referendum was that abortion be legalised up to the twelfth week of pregnancy. The campaign to retain a ban on abortion claimed that this meant 6 months, but, because of the high level of attention paid to the Citizens' Assembly and its recommendations, this bad faith campaigning failed. Therefore, we can see that public engagement in citizens' assemblies can contribute to developing a more resilient public sphere capable of tackling disinformation.

Participation beyond formal political structures

The concern of civil society actors over the role of formal political patronage for participatory processes means there is a movement to create independent participatory structures that can help guide the political process.

Where the issues with participation instigated by formal political actors seem to relate to the way in which the process is designed, the problems with participatory processes outside the political system come with two characteristics. The first relates to their independence from the groups setting them up. The second relates to what might happen with the conclusions. It stands to reason that a participatory process run outside the political and administrative system is less likely to have its findings implemented.

Extinction Rebellion lists three demands. These are, firstly, to 'Tell the Truth'; secondly, to 'Act Now'; and thirdly to 'Go Beyond Politics'. Tell the Truth requires that government explain the full extent of the climate crisis, and declare a climate emergency. Many governments and other bodies have done this. The second demand requires governments to take immediate action to reduce climate change emissions. The third demand is the one that is most relevant to the subject of this piece. It is that we 'go beyond politics' by creating climate assemblies that outline the ways in which governments should act now.

This final demand stems from exasperation with the slowness of climate action by conventional political systems. The sooner climate emissions are reduced, the less severe the impact of climate change. The more time that is spent discussing whether or not climate change is real - or reductions targets for the 2040s - is time wasted in actually dealing with the problem.

Interestingly, Extinction Rebellion seeks to go 'Beyond Politics' but makes its demands of the government. This is an example of extra-parliamentary pressure for a change to the democratic process. This may be for convenience - after all, time is short to reimagine politics and deliver the policies that will address the climate crisis - or it may be because, for all their critique of government and politics, it is difficult to create political change without politics. But of course, politics can be more or less elite-driven, more or less participatory, more or less democratic.

The findings of the Scotland's Climate Assembly are detailed and interesting and reflect the willingness of members of the public to accept major changes in order to meet our climate obligations. They range from transforming public transport to retrofitting all existing homes by 2030 to increase energy efficiency. The process included a parallel set of recommendations from the Children's Parliament as a way to make the process more fully intergenerational.

Another effort to take a participatory approach to the climate issue is the IPPR's Environmental Justice Commission. This applied citizens' jury approaches (another type of 'mini-public') to some of the major issues around climate change, including the energy transition for North Sea oil and gas, farming and the future of work. The Commission produced a set of recommendations that are policy-ready. But while the Commission has Hilary Benn and Caroline Lucas - both high profile MPs - as members, there is no clear route to policy change, beyond influencing debate. This is interesting in that it coalesces traditional think tank work - producing ideas for decision makers - with public participation and deliberation. This is perhaps an acknowledgement of the public scepticism about the existing structures for idea generation, which has spread to decision makers themselves. The participants in the citizens' juries have become enthusiastic advocates for the change they propose, which supports the notion that participation is likely to spur action. It is important, though, to extend this enthusiasm beyond the participants themselves. Participatory mechanisms should aim to change policy and advance broader collective action.

Participation as a part of national missions

The Scottish Government's Just Transition Commission report from March 2021 sets out an approach to addressing the climate crisis through developing a national mission. The mission would aim to replace jobs in fossil fuel extraction as part of the move to zero-carbon. This, they suggest, should be based on 'collective endeavour' and should aim to address inequalities. The Commission supports participation and includes recommendations as to how this participation should be integrated into the process.

The climate crisis is the most significant challenge facing humanity. As governments have come to recognise this significance, there have been moves to make the policy process more participatory. But the tools available to government and the ability of government alone to deliver this aspiration means that there needs to be either a move towards substantially greater government intervention in the economy or greater alignment around agreed goals in order for the policies needed to address the climate crisis to be successfully implemented.

Sometimes participation is seen as a concession to popular concerns, a way to accommodate citizens who cannot otherwise participate in the democratic system, or as a response to protests. While the *Gillet Jaune* and Extinction Rebellion were very different in character, they both prompted citizens' assemblies. However, only using participatory methods when there are protests underplays the potential value of participation.

An answer to the question of how to create a link between participation and political change may be to build them into the definition of national missions.

In order to halt the climate crisis, we must shift investment toward decarbonisation. For this, we need to take a whole-society approach, starting with the things that will cut carbon most and save money then using those savings to invest in the harder-to-achieve savings. It seems odd to many in climate policy that the most effective and money-saving measures we have at our disposal - like better insulation of homes and buildings - can be so difficult to achieve in practice. Part of the answer may be in creating a popular movement to bring together individuals and communities with investment and innovation to rapidly decarbonise our activities. By its nature, the steps needed to address the climate crisis will require different scales. The RSE's Facing Up to Climate Change report cites the need for citizens, businesses, institutions and finance to be mobilised to address climate change. But this mobilisation must put the principles of social equality and participation at its heart, ensuring we have a socially just transition. Scotland's Climate Assembly considered this and used an impartially facilitated deliberative process to pose the question: "How should Scotland change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way?" This is a good starting point for making the just transition to a zero-carbon Scotland "a collective endeavour."

This suggestion clearly draws on Mariana Mazzucato's work on (supra) national missions. By setting out shared missions, we can move beyond the silos of government policy which the RSE's 2011 report accurately identifies. More than that, we can

mobilise the individual and collective citizen action needed to realise the radical changes required. The Apollo Programme put humans on the moon. By borrowing from the 'moonshot' as a blueprint for tackling issues like climate change, but including citizen participation, Mazzucato argues it may be possible to deliver the radical change we need.

In Mazzucato's method, the missions are supplemented by a series of projects, constituted as challenges. For climate change, these might be things like decarbonising heating and hot water in buildings and industry, or tackling emissions from agriculture. These challenges seek solutions that bring together technology and social insights addressing problems that build towards meeting the national mission. By combining social, financial and technological approaches we stand a much greater chance of creating lasting change. This goes well beyond marketing approaches to behaviour change and opens up possibilities for democratic collective action.

Conclusions

The challenges posed by climate change require unprecedented changes in our society and economy. This will necessarily require higher levels of social consent than are available in the current context. We welcome the work we describe above by Scottish Government, civil society and others to increase participation in decision making around climate change in both national and local contexts through citizens' assemblies and other participatory approaches. Civil society-led initiatives like the IPPR Environmental Justice Commission are also helpful.

We believe that the more we work at creating participatory approaches, the more effective we will become at ensuring their integrity and impacts. Practice may not make perfect, but the more we understand these processes, the better we will become at developing them. To be sure, mini-publics like assemblies and juries are only one type of democratic innovation, and we need a wide range of participatory approaches - from the local to the national and transnational). Here we have focussed on mini-publics because they illustrate the potential for developing new civic and political institutions. But no single process or institution can carry the full burden of the challenges ahead - we must think in systemic terms about the contribution of both legacy institutions and democratic innovations, seeking to overcome their frictions and enable synergies.

The main opportunities for change lie in the way we constitute participatory processes and in the way their recommendations are taken up. In both cases, there needs to be more participation. We need a recognised approach to agreeing on the agenda to be addressed by the participatory process. We also need a clear pipeline to change. In both cases, more coverage and profile may be helpful, particularly given the aim of gaining public insights and consent for more radical change. But the task is further complicated by the nature of our traditional or 'legacy' institutions, which were built on the premise of elite-driven democracy. Substantial democratic renewal and reform will require institutional and civic entrepreneurs prepared to spend political capital in carving up space for participatory democracy. History has taught us that we cannot separate means and ends - the means must reflect the principles and practices of the desirable futures we are trying to build.

The creation of national missions must have citizen participation and deliberation at its heart. At the same time, the missions must match the scale of the climate emergency. This creates the opportunity to create space for participatory processes which can meet public aspirations for change and address both policy and market failures. If we can match this with effective funding and delivery mechanisms, then we may be able to generate the momentum for the radical action that is much needed.

The RSE's 2011 report on Facing Up to Climate Change made a range of excellent suggestions. The Just Transition Commission and the report from Scotland's Climate Assembly build on this work. The question, now, is how citizens can contribute to develop those solutions and catalyse the necessary action across businesses, communities and institutions. Part of the answer lies in deeper public deliberation about what change is needed and how that can be delivered. We think that the more attention a citizens' assembly receives, the more chances there are that legacy institutions will take its recommendations seriously.

We know that we need profound change. Our democratic system needs to be both at the heart of that change and to embody the spirit of that change. The question is how we can make sure that participation is designed as effectively and inclusively as possible and that it drives the creation of a national mission on climate change as part of a global drive to zero-carbon. Working towards this aim with urgency, fairness and imagination can help to meet that most elusive of challenges for our current political institutions: short-term decision making based on long-term thinking. We believe that expanding the bandwidth of democratic life is crucial to develop and sustain the systemic changes needed to address the climate emergency.

These think pieces are the personal views of the contributory authors. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the RSE but are intended to offer different perspectives on current issues.



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