

Hello

I am speaking as a member of the Bath Extinction Rebellion group. We recently worked with other groups to persuade BANES to declare a climate emergency.

Alongside the declaration of a climate emergency, setting up of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice is one of the three key demands of the Extinction Rebellion group. The purpose of this short talk is to briefly introduce some of the key aspects of Citizens' assemblies. There are links to further information on the electronic version of this talk.

1) What is a Citizens' Assembly?

A Citizens' Assembly is a form of deliberative democracy by which a panel of citizens consider a particular issue.

A detailed "sortition" process is used to impartially select a statistically representative panel of local people. Assemblies then typically meet over 2-4 full weekends, where the members of the panel hear balanced information from experts and stakeholders, deliberate in small groups, and draft and vote on recommendations. There are well developed procedures to ensure that assemblies are conducted in a non-partisan way with independent oversight.

2) Where have Citizens' assemblies been used?

The process of 'deliberative democracy' is already widely in the UK and elsewhere.

In the UK a Citizens' Assembly, facilitated by the well established charity INVOLVE, was recently used by two House of Commons Select Committees to look at long term funding of Adult Social Care.

Outside the UK, citizens' assemblies have been used in countries such as Ireland, Canada, Australia and Germany.

Closer to home, Oxford City Council announced last month that it is establishing a Citizens' Assembly on climate change which will meet in September.

3) We already have councillors elected to take decisions, why do we need another process?

Deliberative democracy is intended to augment, not replace representative democracy.

Citizens' assemblies can be used to address issues that are deemed too controversial and difficult for politicians to deal with successfully.

In recent years, Ireland has used citizens' assemblies to successfully break the deadlock on two controversial issues: legalising same-sex marriage and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment on abortion. Participants were fascinated by the way that the process allowed people to reconsider entrenched opinions and to empathise with people with opposing views. The recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly informed public debate and emboldened politicians to advocate for change regarding these issues.

To conclude, apologies for mentioning the "B" word, but I think that whatever side of the debate you are on, Brexit has clearly demonstrated the failings of both old fashioned referendums (which are not deliberative democracy) and our parliamentary systems to reach consensus. It is time to

try something different.

Links:

Oxford City Councils Citizens' assembly on climate emergency:

<https://www.oxford.gov.uk/news/article/1064/oxford-city-council-to-establish-uk-s-first-citizens-assembly-to-address-climate-emergency>

Involve – UK based charity that facilitates Citizens' assemblies:

<https://www.involve.org.uk/about>

<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/whats-plan-why-oxford-holding-citizens-assembly-climate-change>

Extinction rebellion podcast on Citizens' assemblies on climate emergency

<https://rebellion.earth/2019/04/29/extinction-rebellion-podcast-episode-3-citizens-assembly/>

Radio 4 analysis podcast on deliberative democracy

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002z9g>