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# Citizens' Assemblies and Democratic Renewal

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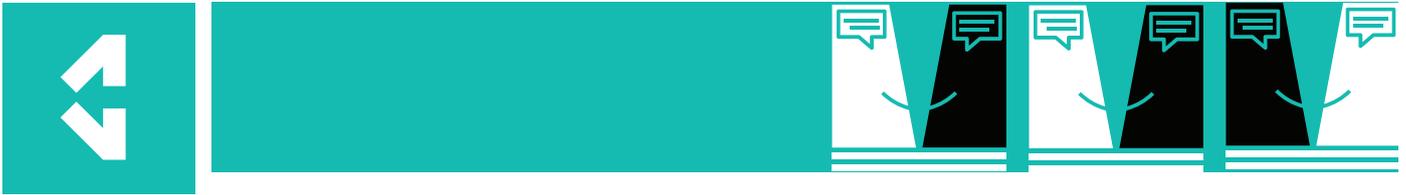
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## Introduction

Following an innovative experiment in British Columbia almost two decades ago, we have seen a growing use of Citizens' Assemblies (Lang 2006, Warren and Pearce, eds., 2008). Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) can be seen as reviving the practice of sortition that was central to ancient Athenian democracy and to some later city-state republics (James 1956, Goodwin 2005, Dowlen 2008). Some theorists have argued that CAs or other sortition-based assemblies offer a means for the renewal of democracy on republican and/or deliberative democratic terms (Smith 2009, Chawlisz 2014, Grant 2014, Guerrero 2014, White 2020, Landemore 2021). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has championed CAs as part of what it calls 'the deliberative wave' of democratic reform (OECD 2020). It has identified eight models from existing practice for policy-makers to consider (OECD 2021). At the same time the climate justice campaign, Extinction Rebellion (XR), has put forward as its 'Third Demand' that governments create and follow the lead of a CA on 'climate and ecological justice', and in the last few years there has been a number of CAs around the world on climate issues. So are CAs the way forward for democracy? Can they address problems that the usual processes of representative democracy seem unable to address (such as climate justice)?

After first clarifying what a CAs is, and the general considerations supporting CAs, in sections 1 and 2, this short paper looks in section 3 at three recent CAs on climate justice: the Citizens Convention for Climate in France, Climate Assembly UK, and Global Assembly. In section 4, I then draw out and consider two key issues emerging from these cases: the issue of the empowerment of the CA; and the issue of its connection to the wider public. Both the empowerment and connection issues currently limit the effectiveness of CAs. I discuss some of the ways we might address these two critically important issues. CAs of course are not 'the answer' to contemporary problems with democracy. But they can contribute to a renewal of democracy if we can find a way to address the two important issues of empowerment and connection. In addressing these issues it is vital that we stay open to new ideas and not assume that existing models (such as those currently identified by the OECD) are sufficient.

### 1. What are Citizens' Assemblies?

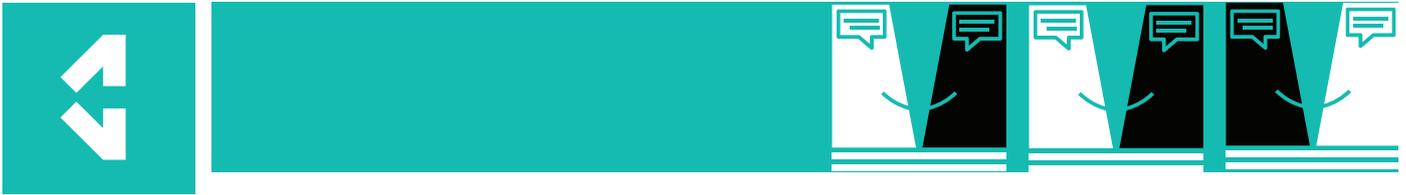
A Citizens' Assembly (CA) is a representative assembly. Typically, these will be adult citizens or residents in a territory (though in principle a CA can include people outside of the territory; see Owen 2015). Crucially, the representatives



are chosen on a near-random basis, but deliberately stratifying by characteristics such as race, gender and social class. The assembly is then given an issue or set of issues to consider, such as what system to use to elect representatives to the parliament or whether to make a specific amendment to the national constitution. In addressing the issue, the CA moves through three basic stages of discussion. First, there is an educational phase in which members are introduced to the topic, drawing on academic and other relevant expertise. Second, there is a testimony and evidence-gathering phase when assembly members hear different points of view from individuals and interest groups. Finally, the assembly deliberates its own position and votes on a proposal. Discussion is professionally facilitated throughout (Smith 2009, Chawlisz 2014).

CAs of this kind face a number of challenges. It will be more costly or difficult for some people to participate, e.g., due to low income or child-care responsibilities or disability, potentially skewing the assembly in ways that make it unrepresentative in some important ways. Inequalities of power and respect that are salient outside of the CA will not miraculously disappear within it, creating a challenge to ensure the equal participation of all members, irrespective of characteristics such as race, gender or social class and without placing undue burdens on citizens from disadvantaged racial or other groups (Lal 2020, Eseonu 2022). There is also an obvious power relationship between organisers/facilitators and assembly members at all stages of the CA's process. All of these challenges require more research and further development of deliberative practice. Nevertheless there are now many examples of reasonably successful CAs in which members deliberated their topic well and produced thoughtful proposals. In recent discussion, the use of CAs in the Republic of Ireland to address possible amendments to the constitution (e.g., on same sex marriage and reproductive rights) are frequently mentioned as examples of good practice and of the ability of this institution to help a polity make progress on difficult issues (Farrell 2013, Farrell, Suiter and Harris 2019).

The basic template of the CA can, of course, be modified in various ways. In the first CA in Ireland, for example, one third of the assembly consisted of elected representatives drawn from the Irish parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly. One can also imagine models in which members of the general public chosen on a near-random basis sit alongside representatives of civil society groups. Some demographic groups can be deliberately overrepresented, statistically speaking, in order to enhance their voice. John McCormick has proposed an assembly similar to a CA but which would exclude citizens in the top 10% of the wealth distribution so as to enhance the political voice of those outside of the wealthier sections of society (McCormick 2011). Such adjustments to the basic template will make sense depending on the function of the CA and how it fits into the wider political system.



## 2. Why Citizens' Assemblies?

But don't we already have representatives, chosen by election? Why are CAs valuable as an addition to elected representation? There are at least four sets of arguments for CAs.

One argument appeals to the importance of cognitive diversity (Landemore 2013, 2020). Elected representatives tend to come disproportionately from more privileged groups in society – they tend to be disproportionately men, white and middle-class, for example. The officials they work with in the public bureaucracy tend to be similarly narrow in their demographic base. This is a problem for political equality, which we will return to below, but it also means that decision-makers lack the insight that comes from having people from a wider range of social backgrounds. As Udit Bhatia argues, the issue is not just the inevitable ignorance that people from more privileged positions have about the situation of those less favoured, but that the more privileged will tend to practice 'epistemic avoidance': to an extent, they will tend to cultivate an ignorance about the situation of less favoured others because this helps stave off awkward feelings about being the beneficiary of inequality (Bhatia 2018). One argument for CAs is that by being much more representative of society in a statistical sense they will be better in terms of cognitive diversity. This, in turn, can be expected to make for better – fairer and more effective - policy.

A second argument appeals to a cluster of concerns about the relationship between elected politicians and governments and the general public which we might summarise in the word 'trust'. CAs are proposed as a way of bridging the trust gap between politicians and publics. If (and this might be a big if) the public trusts its representatives in the CA, and the politician follows the lead of the CA, then perhaps this helps to rebuild trust between citizens and politicians. This trust argument is often to the fore in what we might think of as more politically 'centrist' arguments for CAs.

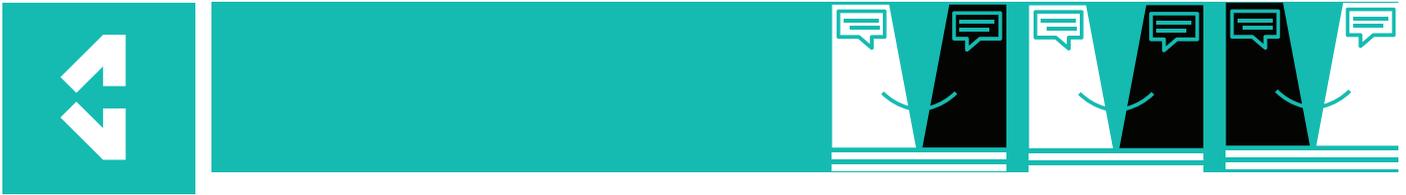
Third, as already implied, there is a set of arguments for CAs from political equality. In the first instance this is again about the greater demographic representativeness of CAs relative to elected representation. In itself this affirms the principle that all citizens are equals with an equal right to be involved in decision-making, regardless of characteristics such as race, gender or class. More specifically, CAs might also be seen as having a potentially anti-oligarchic quality to them. Critics of contemporary elected representation sometimes argue that elected politicians are too vulnerable to the power of 'money in politics' (e.g., because of reliance on the wealthy or business for campaign finance or



because of the lucrative jobs that business can offer former politicians). But, so the argument goes, members of a CA will not be as beholden as elected representatives to the interests of the wealthy.

The advocacy of a CA to address climate justice by XR can be seen in this light (<https://extinctionrebellion.uk/be-the-change/citizens-assembly/>). This points to the possibility of seeing CAs as potential ways by which progressive social movements might achieve more traction and influence. In 2011/12 the public spaces of many cities around the world filled with supporters of Occupy and related initiatives. But while Occupy raised questions about the adequacy of existing democracy, the very problems it identified meant that it lacked any ready way to access public policy-making. In this respect, one can see Occupy as raising a basic constitutional question about how to make existing democratic polities more accessible to popular influence. Can innovations such as CAs offer a new channel of influence for initiatives of this kind, making democracy more responsive (more genuinely democratic)?

This point also connects to the fourth general consideration favouring CAs, that they can help improve the quality of direct democracy. In some polities, such as in Switzerland and in some states in the USA, citizens have the power to initiate referendums on legislation independently of elected representatives. But there are concerns that the Citizens' Initiative power can produce majoritarian tyranny and/or be subject to undue influence by the wealthy who can more readily fund petition and referendum campaigns. One response to this is to retain the Citizens' Initiative power but to place a CA or similar assembly in the middle of the process. In particular, instead of having the power to initiate a direct vote on a proposal, citizens might have the power to initiate a CA on a given topic. This CA would then have the authority to decide what proposal, if any, is put to a referendum (Zurn 2007, Ferejohn 2008, White 2020). The recent OECD report on eight ways to institutionalise 'deliberative democracy' includes the idea of 'combining deliberative and direct democracy' as one of the eight ways it outlines (OECD 2021, 22-23). Mostly it discusses the Citizens' Initiative Review process used in some US states and elsewhere. In this case, a small CA-type body provides citizens with an evaluation of a proposal that is being put to a referendum. In contrast, the CA proposed here would control what proposal, if any, goes to referendum. The OECD report notes that there has been a suggestion in Belgium that a permanent CA-type body have the authority to decide this (OECD 2021, 23).



Giving a CA this power is not only a bulwark against misuse of Citizens' Initiative powers. It can also protect the polity from ill-conceived referendums prompted by elected politicians. The 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK is one example of the dangers with allowing elected politicians to call referendums purely at their initiative. The referendum was called by the then Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, as a result of a promise he made to prevent some of his own party's MPs defecting to the UK Independence Party. The referendum question and process was not well thought out, leading to a result that was in many ways hard to interpret and a bitter division in UK politics that continues to this day. A response is: 'No future referendum without a Citizens' Assembly.' If elected politicians wish to hold a referendum they should put the topic to a CA. The CA should then have the power to decide if there is a referendum, what the question will be, and what the overall process will look like (e.g., whether there should be a single vote or a sequence of votes).

### 3. Three Citizens' Assemblies on climate justice

As noted, XR has advanced a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice as its Third Demand and this is one topic where we have seen a particular growth of interest in CAs in the last few years. For many of their proponents, CAs offer a possible way forward on climate justice when governments otherwise seem unable to take urgent action. In this section we will look briefly at three recent CAs on climate policy. In the next section we will then consider what problems or issues they help us identify with CAs, issues that stand in the way of them doing the job that their proponents wish them to do.

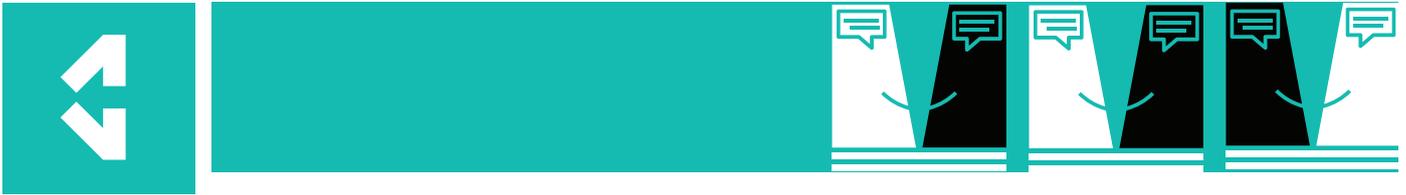
Our first case is the Citizens' Convention for Climate (CCC) in France which met in 2019/2020 (Giraudet, Apouey, Arab, Baeckelandt, Begout, et al, 2021). The origins of the CCC lie in the 'Gilets Jaunes' street rebellion that started in late 2018 in response to the French government's introduction of a new carbon tax. As the French government struggled to respond to this uprising (which drew support from across the political spectrum), it sought to channel the popular energy - and perhaps contain it - by organizing a 'Great National Debate'. This took the form of a number of local CA-type assemblies. Out of this experience the idea emerged of holding a national CA specifically on climate policy. In July 2019, the government therefore announced the CCC, charged with the task of making recommendations for how France could cut its carbon emissions by 40% relative to 1990 levels by 2030 in a socially just way.



The CCC met a number of times in 2019 and 2020, its work being somewhat disrupted by the Covid 19 pandemic. It came up with 149 proposed measures, including two proposed amendments to the French constitution. President Macron indicated in his initial response to the CCC that he accepted 146 of these 149 proposals. The CCC did have the power to propose that its recommendations go to a national referendum. However, members of the CCC themselves mostly opposed taking this route, preferring to refer them to the national parliament. However, nearly two years on from the CCC's report, there is concern at the French government lack of action on the proposals.

Our second case is Climate Assembly UK (CAUK). This was set up in mid-2019 at the initiative of six Select Committees of the House of Commons – in other words, at the initiative of the UK Parliament as distinct from the UK government. It can be seen as a response to the UK Parliament's declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019, which was itself arguably a response to the first mass protests organised by XR in London in the spring of 2019. The task of this CA was to consider what policies would enable the UK to meet the government's legally-binding target of achieving Net Zero in carbon emissions by 2050 (a target that many climate activists, such as those in XR, consider too conservative). It met in 2019/2020. Like the CCC, it was disrupted somewhat by the Covid 19 pandemic, with a switch in the later stages to online working. A recent report on the CA concludes that the Climate Assembly UK operated very well as a deliberative exercise (Elstub, Farrell, Carrick, and Mockler 2021). However, the report also notes the lack of wider public engagement with the CA's deliberations. In addition, one should note that, while the CA's report continues to inform the work of the Select Committees, the impact of the CA on government policy seems to have been rather limited. Here one should also note that there was a general election in December 2019, in the middle of the CA's work, which produced a new government with an ideological centre of gravity that is arguably at odds with serious action on climate justice.

Our third case is the Global Assembly. Unlike the CCC and CAUK this was not an initiative of a government or Parliament but an independent initiative from civil society. It had a Core Assembly of 100 people chosen on a basis that is proportional to the world's population. Global Assembly used a lottery process to identify places on the globe by population density and then reached out to find 'community host' institutions that could support and recruit individual participants in these places. From a pool of 675 people, Global Assembly then selected by a sortition 100 to create a CA 'proportionally representative of the

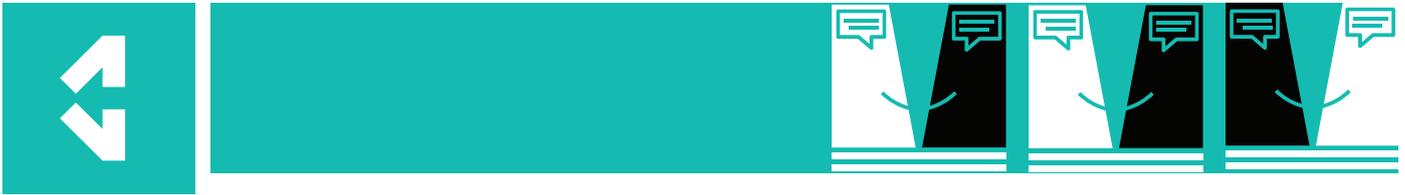


world's population by gender, age, geography, attitude toward climate change, and educational level' (<https://globalassembly.org/the-core-assembly>). The Core Assembly focused on the question: 'How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?' Initial educative 'blocks' of work were undertaken in October 2021. This was followed by sessions which developed principles for the COP26 conference in November 2021 and a submission to the conference. Global Assembly then reflected on its work and produced a final report in March 2022. An interesting feature of Global Assembly is that alongside the Core Assembly, it also encouraged people to run their own 'Community Assemblies' as part of the process. People could register to run a Community Assembly in their neighbourhood, workplace or faith group (any 'gathering of people who come together for a common purpose'), downloading a toolkit from the Global Assembly website to run the assembly ([https://globalassembly.org/resources/brand-imagery/GA\\_DIY-Toolkit\\_v5.1.pdf](https://globalassembly.org/resources/brand-imagery/GA_DIY-Toolkit_v5.1.pdf)). The website provided resources to guide recruitment and the running of an assembly and access to educational materials to brief participants. The results of the Community Assemblies also fed into the Global Assembly's final report. Although not a governmental initiative, Global Assembly was endorsed by many leading global politicians such as the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres.

A key output of Global Assembly is the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth (Global Assembly 2021). This calls for a reaffirmation of the Paris Agreement on climate change and specifically to the objective of keeping global temperature increase to a maximum of 1.5°C; for the equitable allocation of the burdens of climate transition; for the empowerment of 'groups from countries least historically responsible for and most affected by the climate crisis' in making climate policy; for the recognition of a right to 'a clean, healthy and sustainable environment' as a human right; and for full recognition of 'Nature' having 'intrinsic values and rights'. The contrast between the limited achievement of governments at COP26 and the vision contained in this independent statement by this CA of global citizens is striking.

#### **4. Two challenges: empowerment and connection**

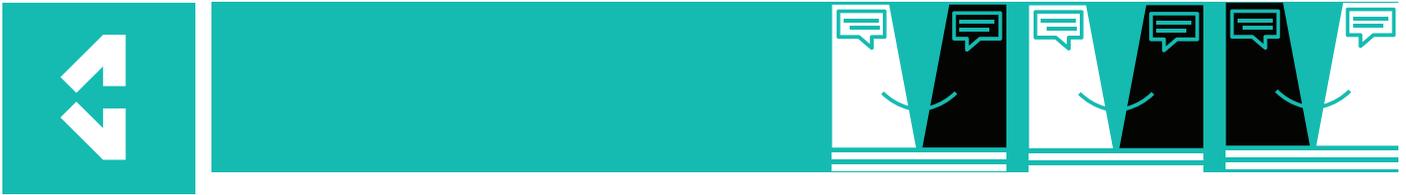
The three cases just set out all testify to the huge potential of CAs as a source of democratic renewal. Global Assembly is particularly inspiring as an exercise in global democratic deliberation and participation. But the three cases also point to some important issues and problems with CAs, two of which I will focus on here: empowerment and communication.



The first issue is that CAs are typically not very empowered to advance their recommendations. Global Assembly, for example, did make a submission to COP26, and its submission was bolstered by support from leading figures such as Guterres. But it had no formal role in the COP26 decision-making process. The decisions taken at COP26 cannot be said to reflect the principles endorsed by Global Assembly. CAUK issued a very lengthy and thoughtful report on how the UK could achieve Net Zero by 2050. But this seems to have had very limited impact on UK government policy. At time of writing, the very goal of Net Zero by 2050 is being questioned by powerful figures in the UK's governing party. Finally, as noted, the French government has not acted comprehensively on the recommendations of the CCC, despite President Macron's initial apparent indication that its proposals would be taken forward. The overall impression is that, within the existing political systems we have, CAs are very worthy talking shops but also have very little clout.

One challenge, then, is to consider how CAs can be more empowered to advance the results of their deliberations; or, to get at what is the more fundamental issue, how citizens can be empowered to better advance deliberative proposals through CAs. A first step in empowerment concerns the power to initiate a CA as part of the formal political process. For the most part, as things stand, a CA only gets this status if it is initiated by governments or elected politicians. This was the case with the CCC and CAUK. Global Assembly was initiated independently of any government or set of elected politicians, but also had no formal position in the intergovernmental COP26 process.

One possibility here, as suggested above, is to borrow from the idea of the Citizens' Initiative. Citizens can be given the right to petition for the establishment of a CA on a specific topic, with enough signatures requiring the parliament/government to set up a CA on this topic. Recent OECD reports include this suggestion, pointing to the use of this type of mechanism to establish small Citizens' Councils on land use issues in the Austrian state of Vorarlberg (OECD 2021, 27-28). Another possibility is to include a sortition-based assembly as a standing part of a parliament's second – or third - chamber (Barnett and Carty 2008, Zakaras 2010). This standing CA or CA-like body can have the power to initiate its own deliberations and make legislative proposals. As Graham Smith notes, this second model requires members of the public to serve as citizen legislators continuously for quite a long time (e.g., a period of three years) and so is likely more vulnerable to influence by vested interests than the temporary, topic-specific assemblies more typical of CAs (Smith 2021, chapter 4).



The issue of empowerment arises not only in relation to the setting up of CAs, however, but in relation to their recommendations. None of the CAs we have briefly considered have yet to make a significant impact on climate policy. In all cases, elected officials have been able to nod politely in the direction of the CA and then largely ignore its proposals.

One response to this is to try to build in more process at the end of the CA, or after it, so as to encourage elected politicians to engage more fully with the CA's work. For example, perhaps the CA might meet again one year after submitting its proposals and have the right to call on elected officials to give an account of what they have done and why. One issue with this model, however, is that it risks turning the participants in the CA into long-term issue-specific politicians with a responsibility to pressure government to adopt their recommendations. Some CA participants might be happy to do this. But not everyone will want to do this and it is not necessarily fair to expect it of any participant. Indeed, if it did become an expectation, it would surely compromise the attempt to make the CA diverse and inclusive and so compromise one of the main advantages of the CA.

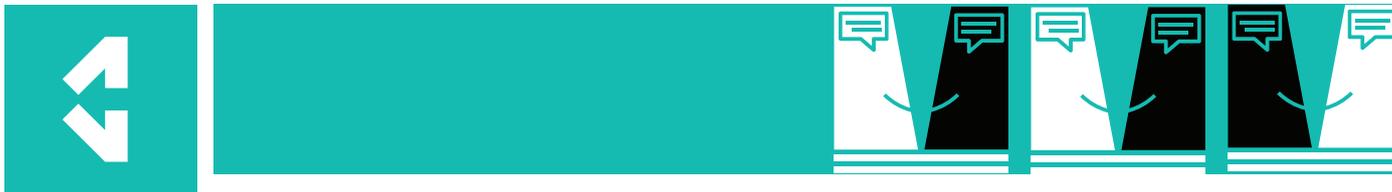
A more radical possibility is to give the CA the power to put its proposals to a referendum (Smith 2009, White 2020). In this case, the elected politicians lose their power effectively to veto any proposal they don't like. Combined with the power to initiate CAs, this would amount to a citizen power to legislate independent of the parliament or government (White 2020). But in contrast to the standard power to initiate direct legislation of the kind we see in Switzerland and some states of the USA, this power would take a strongly deliberative form because of the central role of the CA in developing the legislative proposal and deciding whether it should go to a referendum.

This suggestion immediately points, however, to another issue, or set of issues, that we must consider regarding CAs. As noted, the CCC in France did have the power to send its proposals to a referendum or to referendums. Even if these had not been binding, positive votes would have put more pressure on the French government to enact the CCC's recommendations. The CCC made the decision, though, not to put its recommendations to a referendum or referendums, preferring to refer them to the parliament. The CCC did this because it was not confident that its recommendations would win in a referendum. It is possible that the CCC was too pessimistic in this regard, but the anxiety points to a problem that might well arise in many contexts: the problem of what we might call the deliberative gap between the CA and the wider public. Even if the CA itself undertakes quality deliberation to reach its recommendations, the wider public does not necessarily go on the same deliberative journey as members of the CA and so might not appreciate the CA's recommendations. Let's call this the problem of connection.



The problem points to the need for publicity in the work of the CA. The CA needs to be seen not only or primarily as a means of advising officials and politicians but as a way of stimulating and carrying a national (or transnational) debate. The second phase of the CA's work, which involves taking testimony and evidence and ideas, is perhaps very important here as an opportunity to encourage input from the wider public. As the CA moves into its final phase, it can also offer initial ideas for public feedback before making its recommendations. The Constitutional Council which designed a proposed new constitution for Iceland was not a CA (it was elected), but it operated in a way that engaged the wider public in this way (Landemore 2015, 2020, chapter 7). There is perhaps also a role for public broadcasting in supporting the work of a CA, for example by holding periodic programmes on the CA's work as was the case with the constitutional assembly during South Africa's constitution-making exercise in the 1990s (Chambers 2001). The South African constitution-making process also involved public meetings and we might also think about how the work of a CA could be complemented by local assemblies and meetings. Global Assembly attempts to do this through the use of Community Assemblies. As we noted above, the Global Assembly website provides resources for people anywhere in the world to run a Community Assembly and feed its results into the overall deliberative process. This of course introduces an element of self-selection into the overall process which could compromise the aim of representative deliberation. But the risk is arguably worth it to help involve the wider public in the deliberation around the CA.

At the end of the day, however, the connection problem cannot be separated from larger questions about the associational environment of society and how this shapes the way people engage with a CA. 'Associative democrats' argue that the health of a democracy depends in part on the level and pattern of association in society (Cohen and Rogers 1995, O'Neill and White 2018). For example, a society with encompassing and coordinated trade unions is likely to have a different politics, and different policies, to one in which workers are unorganised. This is because strong unions can help to mobilise voters and can both constrain and support democratic governments in ways that affect what policies are feasible. Associative democrats also point out that the level and pattern of associational life is not completely given but is itself affected by public policy. The democratic state can, to some degree, enact policies that encourage different levels and patterns of association so as to enhance its own capabilities. This is highly relevant here because associations such as labour unions, faith groups, employers' organisations and many other kinds of group can potentially act as important mediators between CAs and members of the public, giving input to CAs and helping members keep informed about what CAs are doing. Proponents of CAs need to consider what kind of associational politics would provide a supportive context for CAs to work and how to promote this supportive environment.



The above discussion of empowerment and connection largely assumes a nation-state context. But Global Assembly points to the potential for CAs to help address climate justice at the global level. Therefore we need also to think about how empowerment and connection issues can be addressed at this level. I will only touch the surface of this here, but one key requirement must be to get CAs built into the institutional architecture of transnational organisations such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO – and also, of course, into the intergovernmental processes like that of COP (Frey and Stutzer 2006). In the meantime, there is perhaps also a role for social movements, such as XR, to platform initiatives like Global Assembly, taking the People’s Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth as a basis for action, appealing to the Declaration in public justification of protest and civil disobedience.

## 5. Conclusion

Although there is much still to learn about how to run CAs, there are now many examples of relatively successful CAs in terms of their quality of deliberation. For CAs to realise their potential as part of a renewed model of democracy, however, there are at least two significant further problems that need to be addressed: first, how to ensure that they are appropriately empowered; and second, how to ensure that they work in a way that connects with a wider public. Empowerment calls for reforms to the political system that give citizens rights to initiate CAs; and, perhaps, powers to CAs to hold elected officials to account for their responses to CA proposals and/or to put these proposals to referendums. Connection to the wider public calls for publicity and concerted efforts to make the CA the focus of a public debate rather than functioning in isolation. The connection issue also highlights the importance of the associational environment in which CAs work as associations can play an important role in mediating between a CA and the wider public.

We need to address these challenges around empowerment and connection not only at the nation state level, moreover, but globally. Global Assembly is a pioneering initiative and there is an urgent research agenda about how our structures and processes of global governance can give a more empowered place to CAs on this global scale - and operate in a way that connects effectively with a global public. In the meantime, climate justice activism can perhaps help to platform the People’s Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth and thereby help stake the claim of Global Assembly and its successors to become part of the structure of global governance. This points again to the complementarity of CAs and progressive social movements: each has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of the other, and it is in this interaction that some of the democratising potential of CAs arguably lies.



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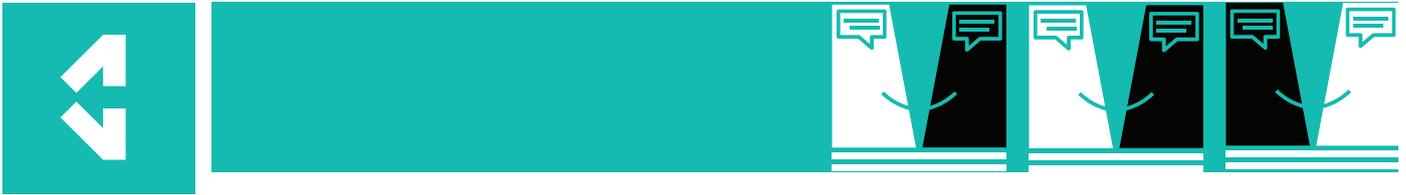
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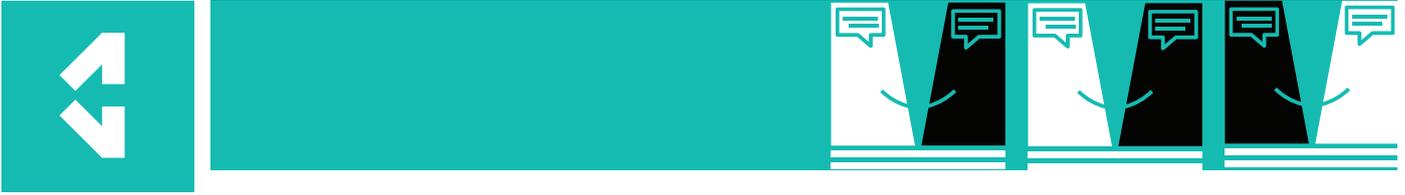
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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This is speculative on my part, but the timeline runs suggestively as follows: XR's occupation of public spaces and civil disobedience actions in London began on April 15 2019, running for about two weeks and gaining a lot of public sympathy; the UK parliament declared a climate emergency on May 1 2019; the decision by six Select Committees of the UK House of Commons to convene what became CAUK was made in June 2019.

<sup>2</sup> I owe this point to Ian O'Flynn.



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