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Democratic innovations in parliamentary public engagement

1) *Context for parliamentary innovation: A global democratic recession?*

- Democratic deficits can undermine institutions: growing gap between citizens' aspirations and satisfaction with democracy. The academic literature offers two narratives about the evolving role of citizens in Western liberal democracies:
 - **Stories of decline:**
 - Voter turnout in elections
 - Trust in & legitimacy of traditional institutions of public life (e.g. government, media, parties, unions, community associations, etc)
 - Social capital: community ethos & networks
 - **Stories of progress:**
 - Citizens are becoming
 - better educated, more knowledgeable and critical;
 - less deferential to traditional authority and elite-driven / hierarchical forms of governance;
 - dismissive of conventional channels and engaged in alternative mechanisms of political expression.
 - Myth of public apathy
- So there are **democratic arguments** to make the case for widening and deepening public participation in parliamentary business (e.g. developing institutions that respond to civic aspiration and improve transparency, scrutiny, deliberation, trust and legitimacy)
- There are also **pragmatic arguments** for democratic innovation, in particular around the need to improve policy and decision making on complex issues (e.g. citizens can bring different perspectives, knowledge and skills; participation may generate broader consensus on difficult decisions)

2) *What are 'democratic innovations'?*

In political studies, democratic innovations are "institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process" (Smith 2009, p.1).

Five types of democratic innovations have become prominent around the world:

- Mini-publics (e.g. citizens' juries, deliberative polls, consensus conferences, planning cells, citizens' assemblies, citizen councils)
- Participatory Budgeting
- Citizens' initiatives, ballots and referenda
- Collaborative governance (e.g. stakeholder partnerships)
- Digital participation (e.g. crowdsourcing, e-petitions)

Examples of parliamentary innovations: Canadian Citizens' Assemblies, Irish Constitutional Convention, Danish Board of Technology, Open Ministry Finland, Oregon's Citizen Initiative Review, Australian's Citizens' Parliament, Icelandic National Forum and Constitutional Council, Estonian People's Assembly, Citizens' Hall Mongolia, National Public Policy Conferences Brazil, etc. See: <http://participedia.net/en>

3) Widening & deepening participation in parliamentary business—key issues

Figure 1. Challenges in organising public participation



Figure 2. 'What works' in public participation



When undertaking parliamentary reform, **democratic innovators should ask:**

- Are we creating opportunities that accommodate the variety of ways in which people may want to participate?
- Are we harnessing the power of combining online and face-to-face platforms for public participation?
- Are we creating inclusive processes where everyone has an equal chance to participate and influence?
- Are we creating deliberative spaces where participants can learn, hear different views, and engage in dialogue to offer informed opinions and considered judgements?
- Are we fostering empowered processes, where people know that their participation can make a difference?

Other **key considerations** in institutional design:

- Access:
 - Recruiting participants: self-selection vs. targeted selection vs. random selection (sortition)
 - Lowering barriers to participation –tackling inequalities
- Deliberative quality –now just ‘widening’ but also ‘deepening’ public participation (e.g. what kind of citizen are citizens invited to be?)
- Capacity – infrastructure / staff / resources
- Systemic thinking – coherent system rather than ‘add-ons’; transparent division of labour; maximising the democratic goods realised by different components in the parliamentary system.

References

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- Norris, P. (2011) *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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The innovations [discussed at the Commission’s meeting on 25 November 2016] have been used for both policy formation and scrutiny. For example, the Danish Board of Technology used consensus conferences to provide public input into science and technology issues –sometimes ahead of policy development and sometimes to examine legislative proposals.

None of these innovations are intrinsically designed for either function, they can be adapted, and indeed they must be adapted to the institutional context and purpose. It is not a matter of adopting off-the-shelf formats, but rather adapting their principles – i.e. deliberative quality, centrality of evidence, inclusiveness of participant recruitment.

Cristina [Professor Leston-Bandeira] offers excellent examples of effective modes of stakeholder and sectorial consultation –when specific groups are targeted as they are most directly affected. I think there needs to be also a mechanism for involving a cross-section of citizens when the issues affect the population more broadly. So I think the sensible thing is to have a toolbox that accommodates different types of engagement approaches depending what kind of input will be most useful to MSPs in different processes.

As an example, we have recently conducted 3 mini-publics (Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow) where citizens were asked to assess the merits of alternative policy proposals to tackle health inequalities. We’re still analysing the results, but some info is available here: <http://www.healthinequalities.net>

An example of scrutiny built into a legislative process is Oregon's Citizen Review, where a deliberative mini-public gathers evidence on a ballot initiative to present a balanced assessment of the proposal.

Again, as noted above, the key here is purposeful/contextualised design that helps MSPs to do their work –this Commission seems a unique opportunity for informed institutional innovation, combining both digital and face-to-face platforms.