Are Citizens Up to Making Policy: 
Lessons from the Citizen’s Assemblies

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Traditional Citizen Engagement Processes

Consultation – not participation

Expert Commissions & Public Hearings

- Fail to engage general public
- Dominated by ‘interested’ publics
- Don’t provide for clear link between public opinion and government action

Is there an alternative?
The Heart of the Issue . . .

no Mutual Trust or Confidence

“We have concluded that the public has little confidence in politicians.”

“However, the reverse is also the case: politicians have little confidence in citizens.”

“This mutual lack of confidence goes to the roots of our democracy.”

Burgerforum - Final Report
Is this Who Should be Making Public Policy?
Can Citizens Make Policy?

Can a representative group be assembled?

Do citizens know enough?

Will ordinary folk do the necessary hard work?

Can ordinary citizens balance:
  - public & private interests
  - short and long-term considerations
  - tangible & intangible impacts
  - personal & collective concerns
  - principles & practice

And then make decisions that require trade-offs?
3 Citizens’ Assemblies on Electoral Reform

- Exercises in *citizen* decision-making
- A leap in the dark
- Politicians and citizens decide to trust each other
- Citizens are assembled to assess and decide on Electoral System – a complex policy area
- 3 Assemblies (*BC* – *ONT* – *Netherlands*) produce 3 different policies
The Assemblies’ Membership

- Citizens drawn at random from the electorate
- Gender and age balanced
- Participating as individual citizens
- Few knew much about the complex subject (when they started!)
- Responded to the invitation to do something for their community
Citizens Assembling in British Columbia & Ontario
The Assemblies’ Process

1. Learn about the substance of the policy area
2. Listen to the Public
3. Deliberate & Decide recommendation

The Assemblies all managed to come to a broad consensus decision:

- **British Columbia** recommended fundamentally different system
- **Netherlands** reaffirmed the country’s existing system
- **Ontario** recommended a hybrid system
Why did they work?

✓ Members invested Time and Effort

✓ Members learned – transformed from passive voters to engaged citizens

✓ Members focused discussions around values
  
  process values  decision criteria values

✓ Created a collaborative, not adversarial, process

✓ Members sought to build consensus on principles
The Ingredients for Success

- Important Task
- Significant Power
- Independence from Government
- Random selection of members
- Gender Balance
- Impartial Leadership
Some Important Lessons

- Citizens want to contribute to making important decisions
- Ordinary citizens can master complex materials
- Deliberative decision-making can work
- Diverse multi-cultural groups can make principled, value-based decisions
- Assemblies won’t inevitably recommend change
- Citizens will define problems, and solutions, differently than established elites
A future for Citizens’ Assemblies?

- Not a substitute for normal representative politics but . . . . *How can they be linked?*
  
- Institutional questions of *general* (not sectional) interest where political elites are divided
  
- *Focused* issues which involve fundamental choice appropriate to *majoritarian* decision
  
- *Important, political* (not technical) issues where *values* can be recognized