

The Citizens' Convention
on UK Democracy



Citizens' Assemblies: Rebuilding Trust & Engaging Citizens in Democracy in 2024

EVENT NOTE - without confidential information

Monday 25 September 2023



Summary

Recent years have seen increasing use globally of citizens' assemblies - [the OECD has counted almost 600 in recent years](#). If done right, these processes can make significant contributions to policymaking and to a more vibrant and thriving democracy. When given the authority, evidence and time, everyday people can help take on difficult questions, side-step political divides, and deliver sensible answers to the big challenges we face. With preparations for a General Election underway, we looked at how Parliament, Whitehall, and the wider political system can work with engaged citizens to help tackle some of our hardest problems.

This invite-only event was run under Chatham House rules. It was a unique opportunity to learn from global leading lights on how to use citizens' assemblies and other forms of public engagement effectively. Key speakers were:

- **Art O'Leary, Electoral Commissioner of Ireland**
- **Ian Walker, Executive Director of the newDemocracy Foundation in Australia**

Both speakers have led groundbreaking programmes to embed citizens' assemblies in democracies in Ireland and Australia respectively.

Background

The event is a collaboration between the [Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy \(CCUKD\)](#) and [Involve](#), and key contacts are:

Graham Allen, Convenor of CCUKD

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About Involve

Involve is the UK's leading public participation organisation. We are an independent charity that works to make public participation and deliberation an everyday part of democracy, to help meet the challenges of the 21st century. Our vision is of a vibrant democracy where everyone can shape a society that works for us all.

Since our foundation in 2003, we have worked with governments, parliaments, civil society organisations, businesses, academics and the public across the UK, and internationally, to put people at the heart of decision-making. We have offices in Belfast, Edinburgh and London. Find out more [here](#).

About Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy

Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy (CCUKD) is a project to engage citizens through a Citizens' Convention, in partnership with Government and elected representatives, to help evolve our democracy.

All the main UK parties represented in Parliament committed in their respective election manifestos (2019) to some sort of review of our democracy. CCUKD's intention is to give life to that commitment by engaging citizens in this process. Find out more [here](#).

This report is a light-touch summary of what happened on the day, while keeping particular details discussed confidential. It summarises the key messages of the day and the action recommended by the participants for next steps.

Purpose of event

Both Involve and CCUKD wanted to ensure our time together had a clear purpose, to make the most of the opportunity. This was:

1. To increase understanding of and build enthusiasm for citizens' assemblies, and other ways to include the public in decision making.
2. To encourage networking and cross pollination of ideas on the practical application of these processes in key political institutions, and wider political environment.
3. To identify practical next steps to continue working together.

We are confident that the event delivered its purpose:

- A high calibre of delegates attended and took advantage of opportunities to connect
- Tangible next steps have been produced
- Feedback from delegates has been positive.

This event was designed to be catalytic, and so ultimate success is dependent on next steps being realised. In the long-term, this would mean citizens' assemblies and similar processes being an everyday part of our politics.

Key Speakers

Art O'Leary is Chief Executive at An Coimisiún Toghcháin, The Electoral Commission, a new management and oversight organisation for electoral and wider democracy matters.

In 2021 he was Secretary to two national citizens' assemblies - deliberative democracy initiatives set up to advise the government on the crisis on Biodiversity Loss and local government structures in Ireland's capital city. Art also designed and ran Ireland's first Citizens' Assembly in 2012, the recommendations from which resulted in a number of successful constitutional referendums.

From 2014 - 2021, Art was Secretary General to the President of Ireland, acting as Chief of Staff and Chief Adviser to President Michael D. Higgins. Prior to that, Art also worked in the Irish Parliament for over 20 years, primarily as a member of the senior management team as Director of Parliamentary Committees, Information & Communications, Human Resources and as head of a number of parliamentary functions.

He is an Adjunct Professor at the School of Politics and Government at University College Cork and has an MBA from Henley Business School.



Iain Walker is Executive Director of the [newDemocracy Foundation \(nDF\)](#) in Australia, a role he has held since 2011.

The work of the Foundation is to find ways to do democracy better. While many complain about problems with the system, nDF aims to research, trial and implement processes which will result in trusted public decisions.

The methods used focus on a complementary role for randomly-selected everyday people (much like a criminal jury) alongside elected representatives. nDF's processes involve giving citizens the time and information needed to find common ground.

Iain has led over 30 trial projects at local government and state government level including projects for State Premiers on both sides of politics. The topics have ranged from long-term budgeting for the \$4bn City of Melbourne Financial Plan to the potential for a high-level nuclear waste storage facility in South Australia. newDemocracy's work in regulated utilities (water and energy) has been publicly judged by regulators to be the standard others in the industry must now emulate.

Internationally, newDemocracy was retained by the UN Democracy Fund to produce handbooks and pilot projects in the field of Citizens Assemblies, and we were also invited by the OECD to participate in their 'Deliberative Wave' working group which established standards in the sector. newDemocracy is a founding participant in the global Democracy R&D (<https://democracyrd.org/>) which works with other practitioners to explore the merits of similar trials being conducted around the world.

