



Doing politics differently post-Brexit

Adults do not want to be treated like children to be nannied by the state, says **Claire Fox** – but she is not convinced that citizens’ assemblies are the right way forward

Phew. I’m glad that is over. I am no longer an MEP. Returning from Brussels post-Brexit is a joy. After all, the only reason I stood as an elected politician was to get sacked. But I have one more task in my official capacity: I am organising a conference with my MEP colleague Henrik Overgaard Nielsen in Stockport on 29 February.

I promised when elected back in May that a month after we left the EU I would facilitate a get-together in the North West region to ask What Next?, kick-starting an open exchange of views on how we can ‘change politics for good’. The agenda concentrates on what Brexit might mean for communities moving forward: on local issues, on the future for towns, coastal areas, the regions. But more than that, it tries to exemplify the way we might ‘do’ politics differently post Brexit. That is, can we use this radical change to reimagine democratic life beyond the Westminster bubble?

I know that some local politicians are still in denial. Hounslow LBC has announced it will carry on flying the EU flag. Meanwhile, Manchester City Council’s leader Sir Richard Leese tweeted at 10.30pm on 31 January: ‘To be absolutely clear, Manchester is not leaving Europe ever, never mind in half an hour’ – but sour grapes aside, I hope that councils won’t waste the opportunity afforded by the fact that whatever one’s position on Brexit, the EU referendum and its messy aftermath has engaged a large number of people in politics after a period in which many of us worried about apathy.

A lesson I have learned since 2016, and more intensely brought home to me in the last seven months: the slogan ‘Take Back Control’ captured an aspiration for agency amongst millions of voters. People want their voices heard; they want to be treated as equals in any conversations about the future of society. While local government may provide services for local people, they too frequently do so in a way which treats people as passive recipients of state largesse, rather than partners in deciding on the future direction of

society. Adults want to be treated as citizens, rather than like children to be nannied by the state. Councils should take note.

Brexit can be a democratic windfall for everyone if we allow people the freedom to experiment in new forms of engagement. One problem is that the informal public sphere is shrinking, and too often it is councils who over-zealously police everything from pubs and clubs to parks and community gatherings, depriving people of invaluable public spaces to engage with each other.

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When it comes to new democratic ‘innovation’, some are putting their faith in official Citizens’ Assemblies, fashionable in academic and policy circles. However, I am sceptical. These top-down initiatives consist of carefully selected ‘ordinary people’ who are gathered to listen to presentations from academics and interest groups over the course of several weekends before making legislative recommendations.

As we speak, a new climate change Citizens’ Assembly is making headlines, commissioned by six parliamentary cross-party committees including the Treasury and the Department for Transport. This new forum, organised by charity Involve and costing £520,000 (of which £120,000 will be paid by the parliamentary committees and the rest by the European Climate Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation) will provide guidance to government on who should bear the costs of climate change and tackle how we should reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. But

can the 110 citizens selected as representative of people from all walks of life really represent the views of approximately 50 million voters in Britain? Are they a more reliable guide to action than, for example, local elections? Partly, it seems, enthusiasm for Citizens’ Assemblies is due to a lack of trust in voters to make their own minds up independently at the ballot box.

Advocates of Citizens’ Assemblies seem most enthusiastic about the panels of experts used to inform decision-making. The climate assembly has heard from the likes of Tony Juniper, the head of Natural England, Chris Stark, the chief executive of the government advisory body the Committee on Climate Change, and Sir David Attenborough. These expert interventions, we are told, will ensure that discussions will be properly informed. But will this leave little room for dissidents or challenging orthodoxies?

And in the context of a widely held prejudice amongst many in policy circles that the only reason people voted Brexit is because they were misinformed and ignorant, I worry that these forums are set up to ensure citizens come to the ‘correct’ conclusions as determined by experts. We must at least be wary of officialdom attempting to give a democratic veneer to forums striving to arrive at pre-determined outcomes.

Whatever, Henrik and I hope our Stockport gathering can be a less bureaucratic and more authentic assembly of citizens’ councils. Perhaps councils might also be inspired to initiate other such town-hall gatherings to enliven local democracy. Whether people voted Leave or Remain, a vibrant public sphere should be a Brexit dividend that everyone can benefit from. ■

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