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

R. Kenneth Carty
The University of British Columbia

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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.”

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
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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
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Citizens Assembling

in **British Columbia**



the **Netherlands**



& **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 Hague



Toronto

The Ingredients for Success

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