

The Brex Factor: how a citizens' assembly on Brexit could learn from reality TV

Some politicians and political scientists have suggested that a citizens' assembly would be the best way to build public consent for any Brexit solution. For this to work, argues **Conor Farrington**, any initiative would need to innovate to engage the public, and in this it could learn from mass television entertainment.



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It's a familiar scene: TV presenter Dermot O'Leary walks towards the camera in a three-piece suit, dramatic music playing in the background and nervous looks on the faces of the contestants on stage. But the setting is subtly different from his usual appearances on *The X Factor*.

'It's been a hell of a week,' he booms, his words echoing around the packed stands of Wembley Arena. 'Ten million viewers every night, live performances by Katy Perry and Ed Sheeran, and interviews with the Prime Minister, MPs, peers and all the experts the country could provide. We've had competitions, we've had phone votes, we've had celebrity pitches. And as for our jury of ONE HUNDRED ordinary people – well, they've cogitated and speculated and deliberated. Heck, they've probably somnambulated, too.' (*Hesitant laughter.*)

'But now that's all over, and it's time to announce the winner.' He turns to the hopefuls standing beside him. 'Good luck to all of you.'

Long pause.

'And now – I can announce that the winner of *The Brex Factor* 2019 is...'

Second long pause.

'REMAIN!' The crowd erupts in frenzied applause as blue and gold fireworks dance across the huge screens behind the stage. The new Prime Minister, standing prominently in the audience, also applauds for a few minutes before hurrying away surrounded by aides.

Farcical? Perhaps. Absurd? Undoubtedly. But embracing mass entertainment is one way in which a citizens' assembly on Brexit, [recently talked up](#) by Conservative leadership contender Rory Stewart and others, could be made to work. Against the backdrop of contemporary British politics, indeed, it might be the *only* way. This is because the incentives that have encouraged high levels of public and government engagement with assemblies elsewhere – such as the recent Irish assembly on constitutional changes regarding the availability of abortion – do not obtain in the Brexit context. In Ireland, several factors combined to heighten public and political engagement with the assembly's deliberations, undertaken by 99 citizens chosen to be representative of the populace, and informed by expert advice and public submissions. The Irish citizens' assembly took place before a major referendum, so that its conclusions could help shape public opinion. It was established to debate a well-defined, clear and pressing constitutional question, and with a draft reform bill to pick over during discussion. Furthermore, the Irish government was committed to the process, and indeed largely adopted its recommendations.

In an ideal world, as Fintan O'Toole [suggests](#), Brexit would have been run more like the Irish constitutional reforms. But of course Britain has already had its referendum, called for political reasons by a Conservative party leader running scared of Nigel Farage (plus ça change), and preceded by a chaotic deluge of (mis)information rather than a carefully constructed process of public engagement. Now, partly because the ill-defined options on the ballot for that referendum, and partly because of a catastrophic lack of political leadership on both front benches, Britain is drifting towards the October 31st deadline like a rudderless ship towards an iceberg. The vast majority of the voting public don't have a say in who the new Prime Minister will be; and since all the serious contenders are pro-Leave, any government-sponsored citizens' assembly would have little room for manoeuvre. Rory Stewart himself has [explicitly stated](#) that if his citizens' assembly recommended Remain it would be ignored, since it 'would only be advisory'. (The same constraint applied, legally, to the referendum result, but that of course is different.) But holding an assembly without keeping all the options open smacks of rubber-stamping, and drastically lowers the incentives to take it seriously.

Looking beyond a rubber-stamping function, presumably intended to secure public approval for some version of Brexit without the potential divisiveness of a second referendum, two further purposes could be envisaged for a more independent citizens' assembly: (a) generating significant (if belated) levels of public engagement with the complexities of Brexit; and (b) putting pressure on the government to respond to assembly conclusions. The first is a precondition of the second, since the government will only be forced to take the assembly seriously if it's clear that the assembly's deliberations echo public opinion more widely.

A [previous citizens' assembly](#) on Brexit (run by UCL's Constitution Unit in 2017) was largely ignored by politicians, partly because its recommendation to stay in the single market and customs unit was uncongenial to hard-line Brexiters, but also because it sadly attracted very little public attention. One attraction of assemblies is that the combination of expert advice and ample time for discussion tends to produce less partisan outcomes than conventional political debate. But that can also makes assemblies look dull and dorky to those outside the process. Madeline Grant, [writing in *The Daily Telegraph*](#), accordingly dismisses citizens' assemblies as a 'wonkish gimmick' and 'an idea so stupid only a clever person could dream it up.' And the public is already [fed-up with Brexit](#) and its endless round of parliamentary debates and government proposals. Ennui with politics may have [played a role](#) in the original vote to leave, but by now Brexit is a revolution that bores its children. It's hard to see how more of the same could really get the pulses racing.

Is there a way to make citizens' assemblies less wonkish, and at the same time more independent of government? One solution could be to retain the basic idea of a citizens' assembly while incorporating it within a much more public setting. And there are few more public settings than mass television entertainment. In 2018, the audience for *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* peaked at 11.6 million, while *The X Factor* averaged 6.7 million viewers per episode in 2018. This year, *Britain's Got Talent* reached 9.7 million viewers upon its return. Simon Cowell and other presenters often mention the power of entertainment to bring the country together in divisive times – so why not piggyback on this unifying force to create a new kind of televised citizens' assembly, sponsored by Parliament or some independent body, and tasked with exploring the issues surrounding Brexit in an engaging and entertaining manner? The centre of such a process would still be a representative group of citizens engaging in reasoned deliberation to make recommendations on the basis of expert advice, but the process could be made vastly more appealing by nightly televised episodes over a week or more, with celebrity presenters and performances, themed episodes with telephone votes on key topics (e.g. trade, immigration, climate change, security, sovereignty), competitions (holidays to Europe?), and punchy interviews with leading experts, politicians, and EU representatives.

During the day, engagement could continue via social media and public events. Participants would mark their preferences at the start of the process, and update them throughout; the grand finale would naturally be the 'Big Reveal' of the overall change in their preferences as a result of their deliberations, accompanied by their recommendations to government, to Parliament, and, in the event of either a second referendum or a general election fought on the issue, to the country also. Telephone votes and app feedback could help compare these outcomes with wider public opinion. As such, whatever the concrete outcomes of the process, *The Brex Factor* (or possibly *I'm British – Get Me Out of Here?*) would certainly augment the quality of public debate and knowledge regarding Brexit's infinite complexities.

If nothing else, it would reveal to the public just how complicated the issues at stake really are, serving as a safety valve to release some of the immense pressure placed on Westminster at present, and undermining simplistic 'solutions' presented by Nigel Farage and the Brexit Party. It might even reveal enough complexity to impel a reinvigoration of small-c conservatism in both public and politics, the preference, as [Michael Oakeshott put it](#), for the familiar rather than the unknown, the tried rather than the untried, present laughter rather than utopian bliss. Or as Churchill put it, rather more succinctly: 'in politics when you are in doubt what to do, do nothing' – and doing nothing, in this context, means staying in the EU rather than having to tear up fifty years of legislative and organisational entanglement. A glimmer of hope for such an outcome comes from [a recent YouGov survey](#), which shows that Leave voters are actually less attached to leaving than Remain voters to remaining, and from the low turnout in the European elections (which somewhat undermined the view that Brexit and Europe are all-consuming priorities for the public). Consequently, 'getting on with Brexit' might do more long-term political damage than hard-nosed Brexiters suspect.

The risk, of course, is that preferences don't change; that unpicking arguments for and against the EU solidifies, rather than dissolves, prejudice; that deliberation drives wedges between warring factions rather than binding them together, as Chaminda Jayanetti [recently argued](#) in *Prospect*. Organising and televising such an elaborate and large-scale event in the short timeframe necessitated by the October 31st deadline would be very costly, and would require the participation of many citizens and public figures. There would be no guarantee of its impact on political events, especially in the absence of a general election or second referendum, and especially in the presence of a hard-line, pro-Brexit, pro-No Deal Prime Minister. But then the stakes are extremely high: British politics now faces the greatest crisis since Suez. In such a setting, even high-cost, high-risk projects might be considered worthwhile if there is a chance of overcoming the polarisation and paralysis that characterises British politics. High-profile political and parliamentary involvement in this unprecedented form of televised politics might finally restore some trust in the political process and politicians themselves, [who languish](#) beneath professional footballers and estate agents at the bottom of trust tables. Mass media, and the cynical simplifications in which it trades, bear a considerable measure of responsibility for our current travails, so it seems only fair that it should help to repair the damage now. And who knows? It might even make politics fun, too.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit.

About the author



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