

Citizens' assemblies provide an institutional foothold for republican political practices

By Democratic Audit UK

*Calls for a UK citizens convention to assess and rethink our current political and democratic arrangements have been frequently heard in the wake of the referendum on Scottish independence, held last autumn. **John Grant** argues that these conventions can be useful in providing an institutional foothold for republican ideas, which have struggled to find a policy outlet despite an intellectual renaissance over the last 30 years or so.*



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A republican revival in political theory has been underway for three decades, but arguably has produced no institutional change for its efforts. Even today when governments everywhere talk about engaging with the public, such exercises often amount to nothing but pseudo-listening events that have no chance of affecting policy. In this light, the invention of “citizens’ assemblies” (CAs) stands out as a development in deliberative democracy worth discussing. Different versions of citizens’ assemblies have been used at the provincial level in Canada ([British Columbia](#) in 2004 and [Ontario](#) in 2006-07), the Netherlands (2006), [Australia](#) (2009), [Iceland](#) (2010), and, and in some [American](#) states. Because these are liberal democratic countries, we should expect CAs to be thoroughly liberal themselves. Instead, CAs look decidedly republican in character in terms of their consequences for political representation, liberty and citizenship. If republicans show that CA practices embody many of their theoretical positions, then the CA model can stand as a ready-made institution ready to challenge liberal orthodoxies.

A citizens’ assembly is an independent and nearly-random body of citizens that are brought together to deliberate about an issue of significant public importance (in Canada, CAs were used to recommend new electoral systems). CAs engage in an extensive learning phase, followed by public consultation on the part of CA members, leading to a final recommendation. All told, the Canadian CAs met roughly even second week for the better part of one year before producing their recommendations that were decided on by referenda.

These features of CAs are supported by some assumptions that deserve mentioning. The lottery system starts by sending invitations to random members of the public; those who wish to participate opt into a lottery process involving various control criteria (age, sex, language, electoral riding, etc.). The lottery system was used in republics like ancient Athens and Italian city-states, and it survives in today’s jury systems. Lottery does away with the ability of power cliques to determine outcomes, while certain selection controls mean that the composition of

CAs is more egalitarian and inclusive than our elected bodies. Importantly, CAs presume that citizens are capable of grasping complex issues so long as they are provided with the necessary time and information to do so.

Obviously representative democracies depend heavily on successful systems of representation. The liberal ideal is that electoral representation achieves two aims: it connects the public to government, and the threat of electoral defeat keeps representatives true to the interests of their constituents. This is “responsive representation.” In reality, election cycles distort commitments to judicious, long-term decision-making, while representatives are increasingly beholden to the interests of the powerful (lobbyists, corporate business, the banking industry, and the wealthy in general).

An important republican feature of citizens’ assemblies emerges here. Contrary to liberal legislatures, a CA’s status as a citizen body capable of contributing to the common good depends on being *free from* electoral representation. If our usual systems of representation have been compromised – and embarrassingly low levels of trust in elected officials indicate this has occurred – then sidelining political parties and powerful interests from certain policy issues seems appropriate (think of financial industry regulations or MP’s spending, for example). CAs offer a kind of “indicative representation,” where the status of its members means that you and I, as part of the mass public, can more readily expect that we share in the mindset of the CA. For republican theory, indicative representation engages in a process of democratic will formation that is superior to the assumption of liberal responsive representation that such a will somehow already exists.

The question of how CAs contribute to a country’s overall system of liberty involves an extended investigation into various ways that liberty is achieved. The most straightforward summary involves the following comparisons between three kinds of liberty. “Negative liberty” is a favourite of liberals such as Isaiah Berlin. Here liberty means an absence of interference; the fewer impediments I face – especially from the state – the more freedom I enjoy. Proponents of “positive liberty,” such as Charles Taylor, argue that freedom requires more than non-interference; it requires that we have actual capacities to pursue meaningful ends that make life worth living (and the state may well need to help people toward such goals). Advocates of republican liberty, such as Phillip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, do not share uniform views, but a general republican position is this: freedom cannot be based on dependence. If you depend on the state not to interfere with you (negative liberty) or to guide your life appropriately (positive liberty) then your liberty has been left to the arbitrary whims of a far greater power.

If used appropriately, CAs can contribute to a republican system of liberty by acting as a countervailing power at a systems level. The liberty of average citizens depends far too much on organizations and interests that are beyond their control. This is reflected in long-standing discussions about centralised and decentralised authority that only think about the vertical alignment of politics. CAs promote an axial turn to horizontal politics that aims to recast the relationship of political power between government and citizens.

What countervailing powers could CAs hold beyond the recommendation functions they have performed to date? Various suggestions include a review function of court decisions, or the ability to return laws to lawmakers for reform; an agenda-setting power for future CA topics or for national referenda; and a commitment to making CAs truly of the people by controlling participant membership by socio-economic class.

Perhaps the most audacious suggestions have to do with the persistence of government institutions that still depend on cronyism and hereditary membership. From the republican perspective, democratic freedom would be enhanced dramatically by transforming the British House of Lords and the Canadian Senate into citizens’ assemblies.

Finally, liberal and republican theorists tend to have competing notions of citizenship. In short, liberals see citizenship as conferring status while demanding little in return other than lawful behaviour and the willingness to serve on juries. There is no conspicuous burden on individuals. Republican theorists like Skinner recast citizenship as a practice rather than a status. While liberals pay lip-service to participatory self-rule, it is republicans who demand that individuals be politically active, with social duty trumping the right to opt out and stay at home. When this activity does not take place, the republican view is that we cease to be citizens and instead become subjects with laws that are imposed upon us.

The operational success of CAs requires that its members assume a republican approach to citizenship. CAs

provide a new kind of public space for people to engage in collective governance. The thousands of people who put their names forth for the Canadian electoral CAs show that political apathy is not a natural condition. But this also indicates that opportunities for active citizenship must be provided; people will meet a heavier burden – if they are called forth directly to do so.

It seems, then, that the practices of citizens' assemblies have a strong republican provenance, especially when compared to liberal theory. The revival of republican theory is in need of institutional innovations to support its agenda, and CAs seem ready-made to attract republican support.

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*Note: this post is based on the author's article "[Canada's Republican Invention? On the Political Theory and Practice of Citizens' Assemblies](#)," published in *Political Studies*, Vol. 62 (3) 2014: 539-555. this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit, the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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John Grant is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at King's University College, Western University, in London, Canada.

