Green Alliance policy insight
July 2019

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Power to the people

Shaping UK climate policy through deliberative democracy

Foreword



Rory Stewart
Secretary of state for international development
MP for Penrith and The Border

Citizens' assemblies work because they take politicians and the public out of pre-set, entrenched positions. They take people away from party allegiances, allowing citizens and experts to meet on equal terms and find solutions to big problems.

By listening to evidence and each other, as well as being ready to educate ourselves, they often result in people coming together. New, sensible paths forward emerge, as extreme positions recede.

This is what I learnt by being part of Green Alliance's citizens' jury on climate change in my constituency. Far from bored by it, people were stimulated by the task at hand. They considered a wide body of evidence, and made tough decisions and trade-offs to come to a positive outcome.

Green Alliance's project has generated much discussion and consensus. As we seek to unite people behind the goal of tackling the climate crisis, I am hugely excited about what might happen when we do this on a bigger, national scale.



Jo Stevens
MP for Cardiff Central

Climate change is the biggest challenge humanity will face. Whoever you are, wherever you live, whatever you do, something and someone you care about will be affected by it.

The transition to a net zero UK will not be easy, and the changes we need to make will have an impact on all of us. This is why it is so important that all citizens' voices across all communities are heard, not only in identifying the challenges we face due to climate change but also how we change our behaviour to ensure we are all part of the solution.

We've already seen the effect that people power can have. Recent climate protests around the world have made an immense contribution to raising public awareness and have brought the issue right onto the agenda as an urgent priority.

Whilst governments and big business talk and strategise, no-one should feel that their contributions fail to make a difference. Community conversations enable citizens to feel, and be part of, the solution.

We know that preserving our planet for future generations will involve big changes for all of us, and deliberative democracy will play a key part in ensuring we all contribute to creating and achieving them.

Summary

"Our country cannot sustain its current patterns of consumption which are impacting negatively on the planet."
Penrith participant

Deliberative democracy, where representative groups of citizens work with experts to develop proposals for tackling complex problems, is increasingly hailed as a potential tool to help develop the solutions to climate change.

In this report, we describe the outcome of our work with Britain Thinks on two pilot citizens' juries, held in the spring of 2019, through which we explored the public mandate for action on climate change.

Our findings show there is a strong public desire for the government to do more. However, this comes with caveats, including the need for assurances around the impact on individuals and the effective implementation of policy.

These are the main insights we gained from this project:

Stronger national leadership and a clear strategy are needed from government and businesses.

People are willing to act and want more power, but they must be supported by leadership at the national level.

Policy must be consistently implemented across all government departments and take into account the impacts on citizens, jobs and communities.

At the end of this report, we list our recommendations to those running the proposed national citizens' assembly on climate change and net zero, based on our experience. Among these, we highlight the need to give the process adequate time, allow participants to hear a range of perspectives and to commit to using the insights gained in setting future policy.

Introduction

We are at a critical point. Climate change is already having devastating impacts on communities and nature across the world.[1,2] The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that global warming must be kept to a maximum of 1.5°C increase, beyond which even half a degree more will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people worldwide.[3]

To end its contribution to climate change, the UK government recently set a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.[4] This target requires all sectors of the economy, not just power, but housing, industry, land use and transport to dramatically reduce their emissions by 2050.

This move has coincided with a growing protest movement, including the school strikes for climate and demonstrations by Extinction Rebellion, demanding much more ambitious targets.[5] However, whilst policy makers know what protesters think, research shows that MPs are unsure what mandate for climate action they have from the wider electorate.[6]

Until now, carbon reduction has been driven by changes to the industrial base, and a switch away from coal in power generation. As the Committee on Climate Change has noted, "To date, much of the success in reducing UK emissions has been invisible to the public… reaching net-zero emissions will require more involvement from people."[7]

The next phase of decarbonisation will impact directly on people's lives. As consumers, they will need to adopt new technologies and behaviours; as citizens, they will be asked to consent to changes to infrastructure, and to support more ambitious policy on climate.[8] It is now necessary to build public support for these changes, and to determine the best approach.

Using deliberative democracy

Previously, Green Alliance has suggested that politicians could explore the public mandate for action and develop workable policy solutions through greater use of deliberative processes, such as citizens' assemblies.[9] These provide an opportunity to understand how people respond when given the time, space and information to consider an issue in depth.

Deliberative democracy differs from polls or focus groups in that, rather than eliciting a spontaneous reaction, they aim for an informed participant view, where people hear all the options and can come to a consensual decision. Deliberative processes vary in terms of the number of citizens involved, the process and the time taken. Generally, a citizens' assembly brings around 50-150 people together, while citizens' juries are smaller, involving 15-30 people.

There are some basic principles that these process should follow:[10]

Participants should be randomly selected and reflect the local population (as opposed to so-called 'people's assemblies' which are less structured and open to anyone to attend).

There should be a clear question to answer, such as "how should area X respond to climate change?"

Participants should be paid to attend and compensated for any expenses incurred, including caring commitments.

The process should allow enough time to explore the complexity of the issue.

Experts should be involved in deliberation, with time for dialogue between citizen participants and experts.

It should be facilitated by professionals who can ensure that everyone has a fair say.

An advisory group or panel should provide oversight.

The value of the process

Other countries like Canada, Belgium, India and Austria are already using deliberative processes in their policy making.[11] The Citizens' Assembly of Ireland in 2016-18 had 100 people considering five topics, including legalising abortion and climate change. Their conclusions formed the basis of a number of reports and recommendations which were debated by politicians and resulted in significant policy changes.[12]

In 2018, the Health and Social Care and Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committees set up a citizens' assembly on adult social care, chaired by Clive Betts MP and Dr Sarah Wollaston MP, they concluded that:

"The Citizens' Assembly process has been invaluable and could mark a new way of involving the public in how we make decisions in the future. Assembly members have shown that, through dialogue, considered thinking and debate it is possible to achieve consensus on solutions for seemingly intractable problems."

Deliberative democracy and climate change

The Committee on Climate Change has recommended to the government that citizens' assemblies should be a priority, to put people at the heart of climate policy design.[13] They note that over half the emissions cuts needed to reach net zero emissions will require people to do things differently. As a result, six parliamentary select committees, on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Environmental Audit, Housing, Communities and Local Government, Science and Technology, Transport and HM Treasury, have announced that, in autumn 2019, they will hold a citizens' assembly on combating climate change and achieving the pathway to net zero carbon emissions.

Deliberative democracy can also be used at a local level. Over a 100 councils have passed motions declaring a climate emergency, many of which have committed to some form of deliberative democracy to understand how residents want them to help tackle climate change.[14]

It could also be used in some of the more complex areas of climate action. Some people will be disproportionately affected by climate impacts, such as those living in coastal areas and locations prone to flooding. It was recently announced that the village of Fairbourne in Wales will become the first community in the UK to retreat as a result of climate change and, as other examples of direct impacts come to light, carefully managed dialogue about the response will be needed between citizens, local authorities and the government.

Deliberative democracy could also help to ensure that the transition to net zero is fair across society. It could bring together communities or workplaces where the economy is based around high carbon activity, such as fossil fuel extraction or the manufacture of petrol and diesel fuelled vehicles, to find solutions that the community, businesses and local and national government can all agree on.

Our citizens' juries on climate change

Between May and March 2019, we commissioned Britain Thinks to design and run two citizens' juries, one in an urban location and one in a rural location. Their aim was to assess attitudes to climate change and action to address it, and to test this method of public engagement.

The juries, which were held in Cardiff and Penrith, consisted of 15 and 17 participants respectively. They were selected by professional recruiters and represented a cross section of the local community, in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic background and how they voted in the 2017 general election. None of our participants had previous close engagement with climate issues, either as climate activists or deniers.

The juries each took place over seven hours and participants were financially compensated for their time.

Both juries followed the same agenda and discussed the same policy options. They were facilitated by Britain Thinks staff, including a lead moderator who led presentations, and two table moderators who led discussions in groups.

When participants arrived, they were given a questionnaire to assess their views at the outset, asking questions like "What words or phrases do you associate with 'climate change'?" In the first half of the day, participants discussed information provided on climate change and action to address it. During table discussions participants addressed wider questions, such as "How do you feel about climate change? Why?" and "What (if anything) have you heard the government say or do on the topic?"

Participants were then briefed by the lead moderator on the role of carbon emissions and human activity on climate, the legally binding agreements the UK has signed up to and the need for the government to enact policies to ensure targets are met. They were asked questions about their reactions, including, "What do you think of what you just heard?", "How does it make you feel?", "Do you have any questions about any of it?" and "What, if anything, was surprising or interesting to you?" Facilitation tools, including a quiz, were used to gauge understanding of what had been learned and the government's commitments, and to be certain that all voices and opinions had been heard fairly.

The policies considered

Participants were presented with the following policy options to consider:

- Make all new car and van sales electric or plug-in hybrid by 2030
- Make industry more energy efficient
- Make all homes at least EPC-C rated for energy efficiency by 2035
- Start a programme of nationwide tree planting and habitat restoration
- Introduce a frequent flyer levy
- Increase the use of solar and onshore wind power
- Make recycling the same for every household and mandate food waste collections in England.

These were chosen as policies which would tackle a broad range of sectors and help the UK meet its climate targets, including the goal of net zero by 2050. Each policy was ranked 'low', 'medium' or 'high' for its impact on reducing carbon emissions. Participants were briefed on what the policies would imply in terms of behaviour change, as well as other potential benefits or drawbacks, from an individual's point of view.

"We should all be doing more to stop climate change and the government must lead."
Penrith participant

The juries concluded with a plenary where participants presented their findings and wrote postcards to the prime minister to say where they wanted to see action. At the Penrith jury, the participants presented their findings to their MP, Rory Stewart. Although she was due to attend, the local MP in Cardiff, Jo Stevens, had to cancel due to a crucial Brexit vote.

Participants' views

Some policies had unequivocal support from participants. For others, support was conditional on more leadership from government. One policy had very limited support.

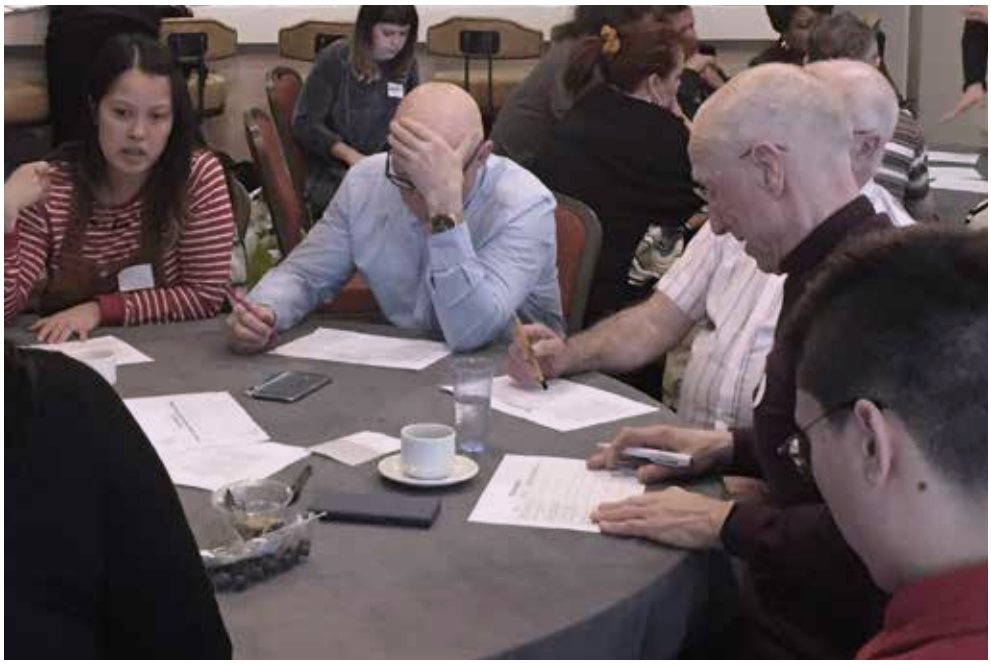
Policy with unequivocal support

- Start a programme of nationwide tree planting and habitat restoration
- Make recycling the same for every household and mandate food waste collections in England.

Participants found the environmental and personal benefits associated with these policies easy to understand. They spoke about the wider benefits to society that tree planting and habitat restoration could have, and some noted the associated advantages for mental health.

Discussions about recycling sparked detailed conversations about society's attitudes to waste. Many considered it a major issue where they could see the value of the part they could play in a nationwide strategy. Food waste collections are already mandatory in Wales, of which the Cardiff jurors were very proud. They suggested that, if Wales could do it, England should follow.[15]

However, some participants noted that the effects of this policy would not be enough to significantly reduce national carbon emissions on their own. They said they wanted to see the government and businesses doing more in other areas at the same time.



"It would be great to create a great green industry for south Wales that has a long term future, unlike coal, as that can all run out."
Cardiff participant

"The number one thing is reducing air pollution...I have asthma and this [electric vehicles] would definitely improve that..."
Cardiff participant

"We currently see the government so focused on Brexit that they're unwilling to do anything about the issues affecting us such as climate change. I'm so sick and tired of both sides when we really want action on this."
Penrith participant

Policy that needs clearer government leadership

- Make all new car and van sales electric or plug-in hybrid by 2030
- Make industry more energy efficient
- Make all homes at least EPC-C rated for energy efficiency by 2035
- Increase the use of solar and onshore wind power

Participants agreed that many of these policies would have other benefits, particularly providing new local employment opportunities. They were also supportive of the positive effect that making homes more energy efficient would have on health and energy bills. One participant in Penrith was concerned about the impact on jobs in the fossil fuel sector. Views were most polarised around increasing onshore wind, although most saw its benefits, a vocal minority opposed it.

There were big concerns about implementation. For example, on the policy to make all new car and van sales electric or plug-in hybrid by 2030, all were worried about charging infrastructure. Some participants had not seen any charging points in their local area, so they thought it would not be achievable and was an unknown technology.

Another concern was around the government's ability to install necessary infrastructure and adequately fund it. Many participants thought that UK politicians were too preoccupied by Brexit to successfully implement climate policies. As a result, they did not believe in the viability of some policy options, such as greater energy efficiency for homes and industry.

Although participants wanted to feel part of something bigger and help where they could, they worried that policies might not be applied fairly, and that no one should be asked to make a change that others could avoid. This is backed up by studies showing that people lose motivation when they think others are not pulling their weight.[16]



"I don't see this as an effective way of reducing the number of flights taking place."
Cardiff participant

Policy with limited support

A frequent flyer levy

This policy was roundly rejected by most participants due to the perception that it would be unfair, particularly for those with family abroad, and that it would require changes that people were not willing to make. There was a belief that it could make people less positive about climate action in general, and cause backlash against other climate policies.

This echoes the results of research which has found that people are uncomfortable with the idea that they should fly less.[17] Notably, this was the only policy tested that involved significant personal changes, and participants thought their own actions to reduce flying would be pointless in the face of government plans to expand Heathrow airport.

Jury conclusions

There was a strong mandate for leadership and action from government.
Having listened to and discussed information about climate change, all participants wanted to see decisive action across all the sectors. Having considered the evidence, many thought that the issue was urgent and action should not be delayed. Many expressed amazement that the government was not taking more significant action already and some participants believed that, if the government did not act now, it would have to confront larger problems down the line.

"Attitudes about climate change need to be updated. If everyone does their bit, it won't be as much of a struggle. The more we do now, the less we'll have to do later."
Cardiff participant



Insights for policy makers

Three common themes arose from participants' responses:

Impact on individuals

They wanted to see more tangible benefits for citizens. For example, the reduced heating costs and improved health which would be associated with improving home heating efficiency. They wanted to see climate policies applied fairly, without loopholes that could be exploited by some in society. They also said that action expected at the individual level should be convenient, should not result in a significant rise in the cost of living and should not leave those on low incomes behind.

Impact on the UK

They said that climate policies should benefit the UK economy and make the country more self-sufficient. They also wanted to know that strategic action was being taken in the short term to cut carbon emissions significantly.

Implementation

They wanted all the implications of climate policy to be thoroughly considered, for instance in terms of commitment to sufficient levels of infrastructure investment. They suggested new ideas, such as net zero pilot towns for electric vehicles, which could help to identify challenges before national roll-out and reassure people that effective action was possible.

The main insights for policy makers from our pilot project are:

Stronger national leadership and a clear strategy are needed from government and businesses.

People are willing and want more power to act, but they must be supported by leadership at the national level.

Policy must be consistently implemented across all government departments and take into account the impacts on citizens, jobs and communities.

For more details, see the full report of this research from Britain Thinks at www.green-alliance.org.uk/resources/understanding_the_public_mandate_for_climate_action

Recommendations for the national citizens' assembly on climate change

Following our pilot project, and considering the findings of wider research into deliberative processes, we recommend the following to those running the national citizens' assembly on climate change and net zero, which is due to take place in the autumn of 2019:

Give it enough time

Before deliberation can take place, sufficient time is needed to consider the scientific evidence, climate change impacts, the vested interests in maintaining the status quo, and international and national commitments. Our participants were keen to learn the details and contribute. We could have convened our groups over a much longer period.

Provide a range of expert input

This is a common feature of deliberative processes, and helps participants to question and deepen their knowledge. As well as climate scientists, participants should hear from other relevant stakeholders, for example doctors and farmers. Our participants interrogated the evidence closely. It could be valuable for them to hear directly from a community experiencing climate change impacts.

Set specific questions

It would be worthwhile testing viewpoints on policies for different reduction scenarios. In our process, we wanted to discuss the UK's response to climate change in the context of an overall strategy. As a result, our discussions were very broad. A larger exercise could have a plenary session covering the overall context and strategy, with subgroups investigating different policies or sectors of the economy. At the end of the process, findings across the different groups could be compared, to ensure that recommendations are coherent.

Explore both individual and national action

Our participants were sceptical about making lifestyle changes if they were not supported by national action by government; this suggests that, conversely, bold and consistent action by government could result in much greater engagement from individuals. The assembly should be used as an opportunity to test these interactions between the individual and national levels, rather than just considering aspects of individual behaviour change.

Ensure a formal response

The assembly conclusions should receive a formal response from each of the six select committees involved and a full parliamentary debate. The citizens' assembly will only be successful if participants believe their conclusions will be listened to. A commitment should be made to using the insights gained in setting future policy.

Involve politicians

Our exercise included the involvement of a local MP and showed how valuable it is for politicians to join debates as they unfold. Some have suggested that the national assembly's recommendations should be legally binding, but we believe this could limit the scope of discussion and the potential for effective deliberation.

Endnotes

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Images courtesy of Britain Thinks.

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The Green Alliance Trust
Registered charity no. 1045395
Company limited by guarantee
(England and Wales) no. 3037633
Registered at the above address

Power to the people: shaping UK climate policy through deliberative democracy

ISBN: 978-1-912393-34-3

Acknowledgements
Thanks to Rebecca Willis, Paul McNamee, Gianluca Cavallaro-Ng, Melissa Petersen and Belinda Gordon for their assistance.

Thanks also to the staff at Britain Thinks: Lucy Bush, Charlotte Malton and Rowan Douglas, for the design and facilitation of the citizens' juries.

We are grateful to the Network for Social Change and the Samworth Foundation for their support of this work.

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Green Alliance
Green Alliance is a charity and independent think tank focused on ambitious leadership for the environment. Since 1979, we have been working with the most influential leaders in business, NGOs and politics to accelerate political action and create transformative policy for a green and prosperous UK.

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