



Making Participation Count

A vital aspect of democratic reform to unite divided communities¹

Participatory and deliberative forms of influence and decision-making need to be incorporated into all levels of governance in order to overcome the crisis in our democratic system.

Three major participatory methods are

- **community development**
- **community organising** and
- **deliberative approaches to decision-making.**

These kinds of practice improve people's lives and their ability to influence events and take control over their shared conditions. Communities in the UK do not need to be divided. These kinds of tools enable citizens to work together to create positive futures.

These mechanisms are complementary to existing systems of representative democracy. They create new public spaces where difficult issues can be explored through cooperative deliberation without political 'tribal' affiliations, working alongside and/or feeding into the decisions of elected democratic bodies.

Dialogue between citizens and government needs to be built into decision-making systems. Government should do all it can to ensure strong, resilient, resourceful, powerful and tolerant citizens, families, social networks and communities.

A flourishing democratic society needs a combination of good government, effective public services and a powerful role for citizens and communities – a positive triangle of reform. Residents are the primary players at community level, forming the basis for health, wellbeing, prosperity and harmony between different groups and cultures. But in many places people need skilled enablers to support them in building community organisations and networks.

It is vital that the next government spreads these approaches across the country and to people of all backgrounds, ensuring that the statutory sector and other bodies respect and respond to these participatory approaches.

Community Development

This is action to raise the long-term level of resilience, cohesion, health and wellbeing in a community, helping local people to strengthen their own action on things that are important to them. It can take the form of independent action by residents but in many places it needs to be supported by skilled community development workers. We would like to see:

- a unified and effective community development presence and strategy in every local authority, linked with housing associations and the NHS;
- support for community action in terms of workers, grants, spaces to meet, learning and policy;
- legislation that requires local authorities, the NHS and housing associations to respond to demands and recommendations from local communities.

¹ Issued by the Participatory Techniques Group, each in a personal capacity: Nick Beddow, Gabriel Chanan, Brian Fisher, Nick Gardham, Jez Hall, Helena Kettleborough, Colin Miller, Bob Rhodes, Matt Scott, Henry Tam, Diane Warburton. Nov 2019

Community Organising

For civil society to be able to counter-balance the excesses of the state and market it has to build its own form of power, be it by campaigning for affordable housing, cleaner air, better services, combating climate change or any number of concerns. This approach emphasises ‘power with’ rather than ‘power over’. Leadership is seen as distributed amongst people rather than over people. Relational power is built through multiple dialogues which identify common and divergent interests. Anger is understood to be an expression of grief, based on love for a world as it might be rather than as it currently is.

Deliberative Approaches

Deliberation involves bringing together groups of people who are representative of the demographics of the relevant population to deliberate on an issue over a sustained period of time. The process draws on the wisdom and knowledge of citizens to overcome conflict, identify consensus and differences and find ways forward. It can operate at local, national and international levels and range from consultation to joint decision-making. The best known forms of deliberation are citizens’ juries, citizens’ assemblies, participatory budgeting and community conferences. It has been used successfully on some highly complex and controversial issues including abortion and same sex marriage in Ireland, constitutional reform in Iceland and Canada and – in the UK – on nuclear power, Brexit and social care. At local level it has been used to create neighbourhood plans, resolve neighbourhood disputes and establish restorative justice.

We would like to see:

- the development of roles and relationships between elected representatives and other citizens at local and national levels, based on the use of deliberative methods to build new ways of working and deciding together;
- a national strategy to build citizen deliberation into all major constitutional and controversial policy design and decision-making;
- The provision of resources at local and national levels to support citizen deliberation to share learning, improve practice and increase visibility.

Ensuring a Positive Political Climate

Participatory democracy can be progressive or restrictive. It can be subverted. Demagogic propagandists (via social media, right-wing tabloids, and mass publicity campaigns funded by plutocrats) can goad people into backing their exploitative agenda and pushing forward their strategy for permanent insecurity. If citizens are to fulfil their democratic role in shaping and advancing the public interest, a robust system is needed, with statutory safeguards and support.

Government should:

- (i) ensure that all people affected by new legislation can have a meaningful say and that the results are seriously considered;
- (i) establish standards for the reporting and dissemination of information. There should be an independent mechanism to investigate and if necessary rule against claims that are harmfully misleading or unfairly presented, on both conventional and online media;
- (ii) set up an Office for Democratic Integrity to scrutinise public consultations, referenda and electoral practice, to ensure that they optimise the participation of all relevant groups and are prepared with sufficient fair information to enable people to come to meaningful conclusions.

Contact

Please get in touch if you wish to comment or help to take these ideas further. Contact Colin at colin.miller@me.com

These ideas are further explained and illustrated in a pamphlet to be published by Compass early in 2020: *Participation at 45°: techniques for citizen-led change*.