



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission**

### **Summary Note from the meeting held on 12 October 2016**

#### Present:

Dr Andy Mycock  
Cllr Andrew Marchington;  
Cllr Gemma Wilson

#### In Attendance:

Carl Whistlecraft, Louis Webster, Diane Sims and Spencer Wilson

#### Witness:

Professor Christina Leston-Bandeira works in the area of parliament and public engagement and joined POLIS in 2015, having previously been Professor at the University of Hull. She has worked on parliaments for over 20 years and is currently Co-Convenor of the PSA specialist group on Parliaments and Legislatures, as well as Deputy Editor of The Journal of Legislative Studies and a Constitution Unit Fellow.

Her research focuses on the relationship between parliament and citizens, particularly public and digital engagement. She is interested in understanding the methods parliaments have developed to engage with the public.

She is currently co-lead of a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust grant on how the UK Parliament has engaged the public in the legislative process and led an ESRC study on how parliaments manage their image and public engagement.

She also regularly gives evidence to parliaments in the area of public engagement, having been one of eight Commissioners of the Digital Democracy Commission, set up by the Speaker of the House of Commons.

### Summary of Discussion

#### **Digital Democracy Commission**

Christina provided the Commission with details of her involvement in the work of the Digital Democracy Commission. She explained that she is not an expert on local democracy and government, her work has been largely in relation to national parliaments, although they are closely related. The Digital Democracy Commission was set up by the Speaker of the House of Commons and its work involved working with and consulting a wide public audience as part of its inquiries. Although the

Commission produced 34 recommendations in its [final report](#), Christina confirmed that there are three clear messages coming out of the research:

- **Digital does not sort processes' by itself**, particularly if the process does not work. For instance, the research has explored processes behind e-petitions, which frequently raise people's expectations, but often with no positive outcome. Digital technologies are valuable for democracy (i.e. access to data and information, to enable accessibility and participation/decision-making), but it is only a tool and it is not sufficient by itself;
- **People engage in politics through issues not through politics alone.** Political engagement is not a rational process and there is an emotional / identity aspect which really matters to people;
- **'Go where the people are'**. In the UK, the political culture is based in Westminster and it's difficult to counter that. There is a "bubble effect" and Westminster seems remote to a lot of people. Digital can help to facilitate this process by improving engagement. By way of an example Christina explained that the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies' e-Democracia project uses new social media tools to engage people in the legislative process and allows them to comment on draft laws, although the number of respondents and users is currently quite low. Furthermore, Westminster has recently rolled out an Outreach Programme, which has included involvement by regional officers, and local workshops / seminars. In Scotland, they have Parliament Day, whereby Scottish Parliament is taken out of Edinburgh and into communities throughout Scotland.

## **Synchronising Digital and Traditional Forms of Engagement**

When looking at how digital and traditional forms of engagement could be synchronised Christina explained that there is a need to consider how we can integrate participatory democracy into representative elected democracy. It is problematic, as many political processes and institutions were developed in the twentieth century, but need to adapt to the present.

The Commission noted that there are many examples of participatory democracy which work well at local level – i.e. participatory budgets, mini public consultations. They work well because they are issue based and are at the **early stages** of the decision making process. This is when it matters most to local people and provides rich dialogue which informs policy. The complexity of legislation is not what people are interested in - they are bothered about the issues.

Christina acknowledged that participatory budgeting can set people up for disappointment if there is no outcome or response to their contribution. There is always a risk of disappointing the public in situations where the majority decide on issues in such a way. Feedback to people is really important as people want to be informed and feel that they are being listened to as part of such processes. Then they are more likely to trust them.

## Engagement in Decision Making

The Commission explored why citizens feel a sense of dislocation in the decision-making process. Christina explained that in the UK, people tend to think of formal politics as Westminster politics and voting in general elections, despite the rising number of local and regional elections.

Christina observed that the UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is very different from when political processes and institutions were originally established. Furthermore, there is now a higher public expectation for people to have a say. This should be considered alongside the fact that citizens now have greater access to more information. By way of further contextual consideration Christina made reference to the growth of 'Dissatisfied Democrats' (i.e. those who engage in participatory democracy but discredit politicians) and the 'Stealth Democrats' (those who don't want to be involved in politics at all). The growth of both groups provides wider explanation of the decrease in citizen involvement in traditional models of decision making.

Having considered the drivers Christina concluded that there are no easy solutions, although it is important to create channels and opportunities for different types of audiences – i.e. engaging differently with a young audience or an audience who have never previously engaged in politics. The Commission noted that there are many initiatives to engage people in politics (i.e. participatory budgeting) and a piloting approach is a good way to test different models out. At a much wider level Christina explained that it is important that young people grow up being familiar with the process of making decisions. This should be borne in mind in the context of citizenship.

With regards to digital Christina explained that the Digital Democracy Commission's research shows that there are many people who are not digitally included, or are digitally literate. There are also issues of accessibility in rural areas which need to be recognised. The Commission's report acknowledges this and recognises a need to 'go out' to different communities in a way that does not over-rely on digital. It is also important to develop materials and resources which fit different audiences. There is no 'one size fits all' approach in this, as there are different groups in society.

In the context of accessibility Christina explained that it is important for politicians to consider their language (including use of acronyms and jargon), as this can create a barrier to engagement with the public. Thinking about how you translate for different audiences is fundamental. This should have regard to local circumstance and in particular how political discussions operate locally. Rituals and context are really important as there has to be legitimacy specific to that context. All professions and organisations use jargon, however it is important to translate it for a wider audience and educate people to allow them to understand the jargon. The Digital Democracy Commission has explored Westminster language issues as part of its work and is now developing an online Jargon Buster.

In terms of public scrutiny of decision making Christina explained that an important first step is to open up access to information i.e. web streaming meetings, publishing relevant documentation. The Digital Democracy Commission found that it is important to provide information in different formats to suit the audience. Open data

also needs to be available in a format and platform that other partner organisations can come and present in which means that there is a wider responsibility beyond the council to address these issues. An important consideration for all organisations in respect of digital and decision making is the importance of raising digital skills within the organisation and amongst citizens. This has time and resource implications.

## **Digital Democracy**

Christina advocated that it is important to recognise that a lot of people do not use digital or mobile technologies. It can be about personal choice and is not always about digital exclusion. Simple tools can be used, such as #tags for political discussions e.g. the House of Commons is now holding digital debates, using hashtags around specific issues and allowing the public to ask questions to politicians. Where such an approach is used to inform the debate it is important that officials look at the comments and summarise them into an evidence pack to be considered as part of the wider decision / policy making process. Through mobile technology, there are apps that can inform people, particularly young people. The European Parliament uses webchat, which includes web streaming. This is done in real time and people can ask questions to MEPs. There could be a PMQ #tag questions set up in the future.

The Commission noted that digital and mobile technologies can bring the younger generation into the process of local democracy and decision-making. In enabling this, she said that there's a need to develop good tools, as young people expect an instantly understandable system. It is therefore important to engage people in designing the tools, perhaps by creating a competition.

Christina further explained that Parliaments have organised hackathons in the past. These have become popular and there is a focus on developing computer and digital skills as part of such approaches. Hackathons are based around people coming together in a room and given data (i.e. access to information on PMQs). The participants create tools, share and develop ideas and develop software programmes. Judges can be appointed to identify which tools could be implemented. The Commission noted that in the Brazilian parliament, there's a full-time hackathon lab where people develop such software tools.

## **Elections and Voter turnout**

Online and digital provide us with another tool to encourage the electoral process and potentially increase voter turnout, although Christina suggested that we haven't come to the stage where it is a solution. Context is important. It's about engaging schools, colleges, youth and community groups and involving them with young people, to explain why it matters for young people to be interested in politics and voting.

Christina observed that we are not at the stage where voting can be done online. There needs to be absolute trust in the system before we can make such a move.

Christina explained that one way of improving voter turnout would be to move elections to Sundays. In doing so, she argued that it can become more of a family and special day. This has been the voting day for many years in some countries. Public places can be used as voting stations— i.e. schools, so there doesn't have to be a potential clash in the use of church buildings if polling were to be on a Sunday.