

Does a Citizen's Assembly on Water make sense?

We recently received the following question (shortened for brevity):

The XR advocacy of Citizens' Assemblies baffles me. There was one on Climate Change in 2019 and others on Adult Social Care, Future of Scotland, National Assembly for Wales, Congestion & Air Quality, and Town Centres. They produced some interesting ideas but had fairly low impact as they are not near the centres of power and money. Ireland had an interesting CA on Abortion and voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment. The Dail took this up in the 36th amendment bill of 2018. This CA was fairly influential, on a topic which is ethically divisive.

Dirty Water is very topical but money is the big issue. We need more plant and rainwater cisterns, The water companies want big price increases, OFWAT is allowing smaller ones, but it's still "price increase". Nationalisation has been suggested by the Greens, but full compensation for shareholders would add to the national debt – a mere £2.7 trillion. The creation of a Climate Civil Defence Force with water engineering as its main skill is another possibility. [...]

Here are our thoughts on this:

The advocacy of a Citizens' Assembly has always been one of the three demands of XR. It is recognised that achieving this with everything lined up, in terms of mass public support, mainstream media attention, government sponsorship (but not interference), and government commitment to respond/act on the citizens' conclusions is a difficult set of circumstances to bring about. The UK Assemblies have never had all of these aspects addressed in advance. Their running into the sand was inevitable.

Several people in government (this and the previous one), as well as senior civil servants, understand how Citizens' Assemblies work, but there isn't a widespread public appreciation. To that end, XR has expanded its advocacy of deliberative democratic process to include Community and Peoples' Assemblies.

Dirty Water is proposing that we don't wait for government action, but take the other elements of a successful Assembly head on. We want to create a campaigning alliance which can deliver mass public attention, sustained media interest, funding and hence popular leverage on a powerful governing party. This government still needs wider public endorsement. It can win a significant part of that by committing to act on the public's request on the issue that attracts almost unanimous concern. And if it works for Water, the precedent will have been set for the Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice.

Money is the issue, or at least a procrastinating government can say so. But that really is a question of political choices? There is money if there is an appetite for taxing land, other assets, even share transactions, in proportion to the existing taxes on income. If water conservation, supply and treatment are not fixed, our national infrastructure fails. Without that, growth or any other aspirations of government will not be possible. It is important that the participants in the Citizens' Assembly on Water are not constrained in their thinking by having to anticipate limits on spending.

It's not a question of saying we can't afford to fix our water provision. We can't afford not to.

The actions proposed by the Dirty Water team are steps towards engagement with the public in local communities. These escalate from initial claims on people's attention to bringing them into participation in ceremony and an invitation to press on, to gather in a Community Assembly. Those who participate will be left in no doubt that our demand is the Citizens' Assembly on Water, and they'll be asked to develop recommendations and demands of that body. So no, no random scattergun hoping on happenstance. Just a coherent progression towards a complete statement, with maximum public support, of what we want from water provision and our legislators.

Oh, a bit more - the Citizens' Assembly on Water needs to make the recommendation officially, but there really should be no compensation for the water companies or their shareholders. They have robbed the bill-payers blind for 35 years and deserve nothing. If anything, they should be prosecuted for the failure to meet their contractual obligations (defined or implicit) and made to return undeserved dividends, bonuses, and inflated loans repayments.

Do you have a question or want to get in touch? [Drop Us a Line](#)
