Chapter Fifteen: Elites and Populists: Upending the top-down approach

As 'a tale of two unions' this book argues that some of the forms of government which the UK became part of when it joined the European Economic Community, and which it later sought to escape, may have to return if it is to succeed in maintaining its own four-nation (or conceivably three-nation) union. The book will later offer suggestions about such a union. But before it does so, we need to consider various movements that are too easily ignored when books attempt to get down to the constitutional nitty-gritty, namely movements 'from below' representing various forms of direct democracy, and which are obviously encouraged by the existence of social media.

This is not a book considering the complicated issues around the rise of 'populism' and the extent to which it is dangerous or encouraging (or both). Nevertheless, it is important to take seriously the rise of movements which are dubbed 'populist'. Are they simply seeking a more effective way of making public opinion known than that afforded by representative democracy? This is important, since any 'Constitution of the UK' with a hope of succeeding must have the sort of popular backing that was so clearly lacking in the case of the reforms pushed through by Jean Monnet. The same can be said about structural reforms of the EU that might overcome its own 'democratic deficit'. This book will argue that some form of direct democracy needs to be built into whatever constitutional arrangements are likely to succeed.

Jean Rey, a Belgian, succeeded Walter Hallstein in 1967 to become the second President of the European Commission from 1967 to 1970. He then continued to be active in politics at national level and was elected to the European Parliament in 1979, the first year in which there were direct elections to that body. In 1974 he learned of the UK's decision to hold a referendum on whether to stay inside the European Economic Community. He remarked as follows during a visit to London:

> A referendum on this matter consists of consulting people who don't know the problems instead of consulting people who know them. I would deplore a situation in which the policy of this great country should be left to housewives. It should be decided instead by trained and informed people.[1]

Half a century later such a comment appears to come from another age. Apart from the suggestion that 'housewives' were the last people one would leave decisions to (Belgium was one of the last European countries to give full voting rights to women – in 1948 – but Rey had had a generation to get used to this) the notion that consultation should only be with those who 'knew the problem' and who were 'trained and informed' (rather than consulting the people – as in a referendum) suggests the sort of elitist mentality that infuriates so many people today.

It is difficult to avoid feeling that anyone who even fifty years ago could make such a comment after being President of the Commission and then an elected member of the European Parliament shows that there is something wrong with the institutional arrangements in the EU and the mentality of some of those working in them. This chapter will try to be more precise about what that means.

Change from above to below

The great merit of the EU system lies in the way that a sovereignty-sharing system brings nations together, as a diplomat once remarked of France and Germany's involvement in the Coal and Steel Community, in an embrace so close that neither could draw back far enough to hit the other.[2]

This image is a powerful one. It is arguably the genius of Jean Monnet, born of long experience with other systems that failed, to have insisted upon the need for nations jointly to create bodies whose decisions they would regard as binding, thereby voluntarily making themselves bound to comply with European Law.

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1 See Bogdanor, Vernon. *Beyond Brexit: Towards a British Constitution*, p. 92.

2 See the second of Vernon Bogdanor's six lectures on Britain and Europe given to Gresham College in 2014, 'From the European Coal and Steel community to the common Market' which can be heard on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cETz_eOYBjo

But this was a system that came 'from above' rather than as an expression of popular demands 'from below'. Monnet took this weakness in the system he proposed with insufficient seriousness, as did Robert Schuman, the French foreign minister who adopted the plan. The result of this, often discussed in terms of a so-called 'democratic deficit,' is that there has always been a question about how far the gradual evolution from European Economic Community through Economic Community to European Union, from many currencies to (for 20 countries from January 2023) one, through seven different treaties and through the creation (and re-creation) of several different EU institutions has really represented the will of the people or simply a degree of jockeying for power and divvying up of benefits on the part of Europe's elite.

Yanis Varoufakis was the Greek finance minister during the fraught negotiations between the so-called Troika (International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank) and the left-wing Syriza government in Greece over the country's debt crisis in 2015. He eventually resigned rather than comply with what he saw as an effective capitulation to the Troika's demands over the terms of a loan. He has written many books linked to the financial crisis and the eurozone debt crisis. He is not opposed to the European Union in principle and campaigned for the UK to remain a member of it in 2016. However, as a founder of DIEM25 (Democracy in Europe Movement 2025) he remains a consistent critic, not of the EU itself, but of what he considers to be its present, essentially undemocratic, make-up.

This is not a minor criticism. It changes the whole way in which the European project is perceived. Thus, Varoufakis is able to present the first example of sovereignty-sharing, the European Coal and Steel Community, which Schuman rightly recognised as being a ground-breaking development, in a very different light to that offered by its supporters. They had celebrated the way in which the industries which fuelled war between European nations a few years earlier were now becoming the instruments of peaceful cooperation, as if swords were finally being beaten into ploughshares. But Varoufakis has a different take upon what was happening:

> …the European Union began life as a cartel of coal and steel producers which, openly and legally, controlled prices and output by means of a multinational

> bureaucracy vested with legal and political powers superseding national parliaments and democratic processes.[3]

This is the picture Varoufakis paints of the unique sovereignty-sharing body created by the Treaty of Paris in 1951. And in his view, this is essentially how it remains. The 'multinational bureaucracy', initially a High Authority and then later the European Commission, becomes the instrument of serving an elite, initially a cartel of rich industrialists and later a wider range of beneficiaries from the single market. As he argued in *Adults in the Room*, sub-titled *My Battle with Europe's Deep Establishment*, this 'deep establishment' puts a question mark against the claims of the European Union to express the will of the people.[4]

It might be argued that Varoufakis represents a particular political viewpoint. But it is a position echoed on the other side of the political spectrum to his own. There are distinct similarities to the kind of Eurosceptic approach that tends to come from a right-wing perspective. *The Great European Rip-off*, a book written as the debate about MPs expenses was raging in the UK a decade ago, turned its attention to MEPs' (Members of the European Parliament) expenses and the costs of maintaining a European Parliament which met in two different places. Section headings and chapter titles like 'la dolce vita', 'drowning in money', 'time for a jolly' and 'sharing the trough' make the point clearly enough, while various perks are stressed, including special European schools which enable 'the children of eurocrats to spend their childhood almost completely isolated from the uncouth progeny of the country where their parents work.'[5] No mention was made of the fact that the last UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, attended one of these schools (as well as Eton, which also might be thought a somewhat insular institution).

The Great European Rip-off is hardly more than a continued rant rather than the sustained argument offered by Varoufakis. But it's an argument in a similar vein. Craig and Elliott talk about 'a self-perpetuating elite that becomes ever more remote from – and uninterested in – the lives of those whose taxes so

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3 Varoufakis, Yanis *And the Weak suffer what they must? Europe, Austerity and the Threat to Global Stability* p. 59.

4 Despite his experiences during the eurozone crisis, Varoufakis was a supporter of the Remain vote in the UK referendum. He helped to inaugurate the DiEM25 (Democracy in Europe) movement whose purpose, he writes, is 'constructive disobedience within the EU, of being both in and against this illiberal and anti-democratic Europe.' See Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*, p. 485.

5 Craig and Elliott, *The Great European Rip-off*, p. 38.

philanthropically support it.'[6] Varoufakis compares the members of this elite to medieval lords who exchanged pleasantries together while their feudal levies did the fighting on their behalf. In both cases the fact that people from twenty-seven different countries are working together without enmity in order to try to find European solutions to problems that cut across their national boundaries is reduced to the self-protecting bubble of a pampered elite who protect nothing but their own interests.

This is not to suggest that either Varoufakis or Craig and Elliott provide a fair assessment. But it seems clear that there is a reason why tirades against the 'Brussels bubble' carry more weight than criticisms of the 'Westminster bubble,' even when written during the expenses scandal. Even sharp critics of 'time for a jolly' in Westminster have a sense that MPs can be brought to account by the people. An MP, after all, has clear accountability to an electorate. They have to work in their constituencies. They travel every week between their constituencies and the Commons. They attend meetings and hold 'surgeries' (a word suggesting doctors giving time to their patients) every weekend in the places they represent. Many of them take risks because of the exposure that comes from being a public figure. One of them, Jo Cox, was stabbed and shot to death by a right-wing nationalist shouting 'Britain First' five years ago, outside a library where she was due to hold a surgery. The only person with her was a 77-year-old man who received multiple stab wounds for his efforts to save her. Another MP, a Conservative this time, was killed holding a surgery in 2021, the police arriving just in time to (very questionably) prevent the local parish priest from administering the last rites to him. Most people in the UK recognise that their MPs, whatever the bad behaviour of some, put in a lot of time and run a lot of risks representing their constituents. Under the 'first past the post system,' whatever its faults, each MP has his or her 'patch' whose interests they seek to uphold. Even those in safe seats know they must stay in touch with the electors. MPs do, of course, have to spend time considering government legislation at the national level. But with the exception of cabinet ministers (and perhaps not even in their case), they also spend time working with councillors in their communities, visiting schools and hospitals, trying to improve local transport facilities and so on. They remain grounded in the concerns of their localities.

This does not apply to officials who work for the Commission, whose jobs make them effectively civil servants with a job for life, together with some of the perks accorded to diplomats who work away from their country of origin.

6 Craig and Elliott, *The Great European Rip-off*, p. 38.

It is even doubtful whether it is true in quite the same way of MEPs, elected members of the European Parliament. The argument is therefore not that MPs are less corrupt than MEPs or those who work for the other institutions of the European Union. It is that there is a clear form of accountability for MPs – the people put them in and the people can throw them out. Such accountability is not so evident in the case of the European Union, even in the case of its directly elected Parliament. Euro-constituencies tend to be huge, and it's very doubtful whether most people even know the name of their MEP. At the same time, most of the MEPs are chosen under a list system, which means that national parties effectively decide who is most likely to be elected. In the case of MPs, the idea that they've been 'getting away with murder' is tempered by the sense that they can be held to account. In the case of the EU the same idea is made much stronger by the feeling that there's no way of stopping them continuing to get away with behaving improperly.

The principle of nations agreeing to create a body empowered to make decisions that are accepted as binding upon them is the essence of sovereignty-sharing. The main argument of this book is that sovereignty-sharing was the principle on which what became the EU was held together and that something similar might be able to hold a UK Union together outside the EU. Yet if such a development represents a decision made by political and administrative leaders alone and is in no sense an expression of the popular will, it will not win respect. Sovereignty-sharing will be seen as a programme for the few rather than the many. It will be viewed as leading only to a transnational elite gathering, whether in Brussels or in London, and enjoying the privileges that go with the job.

Selling Europe to Europeans

How can the EU (or the UK) be turned from a decision made by political leaders into an expression of the popular will? Earlier chapters recounted a famous saying attributed to Massimo d'Azeglio, a pioneer of Italian unification, that 'we have made Italy; now we must make Italians.' D'Azeglio's remark came less than 15 years after Metternich had dismissed Italy as a 'geographical expres-

sion'.[7] The same dismissive remark has been made about Europe – and as with Italy, there have been and are many arguments about what the exact geographical contours of Europe are. As we saw in the chapter on Europe's narrative arc, there is a question about what sort of Europe is being considered. The conclusion of that chapter was that to turn a 'geographical expression' into a real source of identity, it was necessary to strengthen the structural reforms which have produced a unique form of governance inside what has become the European Union. That strengthening involves finding a way in which these reforms can be seen as an expression of the popular will rather than a clever idea on the part of an official (Monnet) which was then smuggled into existence by a politician (Schuman) who felt himself to be cornered (by the need to allow for German economic revival). But how exactly can Europe be 'sold' to Europeans?

One way of doing so fails to move away from the top-down approach described in the last section. It is to employ the techniques of advertising and sell Europe like soap powder. One example of this can be seen from the de Clercq report. Willie de Clercq was a Belgian MEP who was invited by the European Commission in 1993 to produce a report on how to rescue the EU's flagging image (it had flagged to the point where France came within a whisker of rejecting the Maastricht Treaty). Working with a team of communications 'experts' and Commission staff, (the group was called the *Comité des sages* – Committee of The Wise) the report recognised the problem – that Europe was 'a concept based far more on the will of statesmen than on the will of the people'. But its proposed solution was that Europe needed to be 'engrained on people's minds' and to do so it turned to communications experts who had recently moved from 'manufacturing consent' in the commercial sphere (by selling cars and soap powder) to manufacturing consent in the political sphere (by publicising the sort of 'Third Way' politics represented by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the 1990s). They would therefore find a way of manufacturing consent to Europe, an exercise which, among other things, included producing birth certificates granting 'European citizenship,' a European 'order of merit' which would outrank all national honours, a European library and museum, a European dimension to school syllabi and a series of television appeals by the Commission President to the 'women and youth of Europe'[8] It was a case of forget explaining complex

7 See Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*, p. 110. He agrees with Metternich, saying that 'there was no historical precedent later than Ancient Rome for a single administration of the entire area from the Alps to Sicily.'

8 Shore, Cris *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* p. 55.

treaties and start selling the EU product in direct and simple terms as if it was soap powder.

The EU became a wonderful new product which the punters didn't yet want to buy, but which with deft rebranding could be made popular in the way so many other things that people took for granted in their lives had been made popular – televisions, mobile phones, computers, cars. What the de Clercq approach did not appreciate in the early 1990s was that popularising the European Union was not a question of finding a better way of 'selling' it to the people, presented as passive consumers waiting for the right form of manipulation to make them love the EU. It failed to grasp that it should be the people themselves selling the European Union.

Working for the top-downers

For a decade between 2010 and 2020 I was part of a team of freelance 'conférenciers' or visiting speakers employed by the European Commission to speak to groups of visitors at its headquarters in Brussels – students, civil society representatives, diplomats and others – about the nature and role of the Commission as the 'executive' of the European Union. Many of these visitors filed into the Charlemagne and Berlaymont Buildings during the years of the eurozone crisis.

As freelancers we were kept under a tight leash, presented with fixed powerpoint slides which we had to explain and provided with briefings on the issue from officials. Such was the atmosphere of deference among EU officials to their heads of units and (further up) directors that it was clear on the inside that the whole organisation was a form of managerial totalitarianism. The outside world might marvel at the imitation of 'business practices' like team building and awaydays bonding in country houses. The inside world revealed that this is light years away from the sort of encouragement given to thinking outside the box by staff in the most successful companies. The Commission on the outside might be all about collaborative working. On the inside it is more like an army on the march, its commanders unsure of where exactly they are going.

We could tell that our presence was not something the officials themselves liked. In the end, three years into a four-year contract, they got rid of us (we were effectively in the situation of those on zero-hours contracts, to be used when and if the Commission wanted to use us) and replaced us with volunteers from their own ranks, many of whom rather relished the prospect of talking

about what they did rather than doing it. Ironically (I was invited to sit in on some of their presentations) the officials themselves were far freer with their criticisms of the Commission than we had ever been. The 'volunteers' tended to come from the ranks of the disaffected, who welcomed the opportunity to sound off.

A powerpoint presentation on social media prepared for us in early 2018 had only one overall approach – to emphasise that social media provided new opportunities for the Commission to get its message across. *We are living in the era of the digital citizen…And there is no turning back*, declared the notes added to the first slide. *What's different—and compelling—about digital citizens is how they can initiate and dictate the dynamics of the citizen-to-institution relationship like never before.* So far, so good. The Commission appeared to be waking up to a groundswell of grassroots initiatives. *The central question for us then becomes: How must we change to better relate to digital citizens?*

The next slides began to explain what changes the Commission had in mind. 'Different platforms, different audiences', one of them began. All at once the language had changed. The digital citizens with the capacity to initiate had turned into 'audiences.' Hadn't they become rather passive all of a sudden? Another slide was entitled 'planning and management' – and by now we understood that it was all about how to get the Commission's 'message' across in a better way. It's not 'we want to hear from you'; it's 'we want to make sure that you hear from us.' 'Not all channels are relevant for all your target audiences', ran a further slide. Not even an audience now, but a 'target audience'. People to get through to, not people to hear from.

There followed a list of clichés it is hardly necessary to repeat, but once again they were all about getting 'our message' through to 'them'. Optimise your communication – understand your impact – be an influencer, a 'brand ambassador', a 'multiplicator'. 'Prepare early for points of criticism or engagement opportunities' – in other words get your defensive positions ready to ward off attacks – but don't think about how some of what 'they' say to 'you' might be something which changes your own policy positions. Though there is a mention of 'feedback', one suspects that it can only be about how effectively you got your ideas through to them – not about how they might get their ideas through to you.

The 'top-down' approach is, of course, related to the Commission's own hierarchy. But that only reflects the fact that the Commission's relationship to the world outside is similar to the relations between the higher and lower levels of the Commission. The leadership has a line to give and the various de-

partments (or directorates and units) of each department or DG (Directorate-General) receive it. The policies trickle down from top to bottom and then they trickle down again, like water falling over the edge of a step, to the people outside. But nothing ever flows in the other direction. Gravity wouldn't allow it.

The EU defends itself against this view by talking about extensive consultations with civil society organisations, but Youngs (in a book called *Europe Reset*) argues that these tend to be 'insider' organisations:

> EU institutions today roll out many initiatives that ostensibly consult civil society about reforming integration, but they still engage overwhelmingly with insider groups that are part of what outsiders believe is a self-serving network.[9]

Hence the EU is not talking to 'outsiders', even when it is supposedly consulting civil society. Instead, civil society organisations (some of them receiving grants from the EU) are made to take part in 'very focused consultations', presumably meaning that they are limited as to what they can discuss. It is reminiscent of the practices that used to be familiar to democratic centralism in the former communist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Were there elections in which the people voted? Of course. You never had an election without an opposition candidate, but it was never a 'real' opposition candidate since those wouldn't have been allowed to stand. But the puppets that remained in the field to 'challenge' the President were important because they allowed the country to offer the image of a democracy. Under the communist system there was never any shortage of emphasis upon the people – what could be a better rallying-cry for the grassroots empowerment championed by Youngs and others than the call: 'All power to the soviets', essentially the village councils that ignited the communist revolution of 1917? Yet it did not take long for this principle to be buried in the power of the party as the vanguard of the proletariat.[10]

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9 Youngs, *Europe Reset*, p. 108.

10 One can see the difficulties this created by reading comments by the future Czech President Václav Havel in the months during which the fateful Prague Spring sought to introduce democracy without provoking an invasion by the Warsaw Pact (which happened in 1968). Havel understands that 'internal democratisation of the Communist Party' would not 'provide a sufficient guarantee of democracy', but he is also unsure about reviving the existing non-communist parties which he believes have compromised themselves too much over the years. Democracy requires 'two comparable alternatives', but an effective alternative to the Communist Party simply wasn't there.

The question is how far this model might be applied to the European Union hierarchy, its Commission officials a well-rewarded *nomenklatura* and the huge banner draped from the Berlaymont building in Brussels during the last presidency proclaiming 'Team Juncker,' as if a new politburo was setting out its five-year plan for the next Commission. Many officials from former Communist countries who joined the Commission after the enlargement of 2004 were struck by attitudes that they had last encountered before the revolutions in their own countries.

Youngs' conclusion in this part of *Europe Reset* was that:

> Existing participative consultations are about communicating formal EU narratives downwards to citizens more than conveying popular demands upwards to decision-makers.[11]

He has recently developed his arguments in *Rebuilding European Democracy: Resistance and Renewal in an Illiberal Age*. The key point being made is that although there are numerous initiatives to consult with/involve/empower/listen to the voice of the citizens at grassroots level, these are all organised and even orchestrated 'from above'. What actually happens at the grassroots level is ignored altogether, or else it is seen as an enemy attempting to stoke the forces of populism. 'Attend events like the Global forum on Modern Direct Democracy', writes Youngs, and one finds that EU experts 'are completely absent from these forums.' The argument is that 'intense civic empowerment at the local level' gets 'no look in when leaders gather to discuss "the future of the EU"'. What should be aimed at instead is for 'nascent local-led initiatives' to be 'harnessed to cascade upwards into a revitalised debate about the EU's future.'[12] Gravity, in other words, needs to be defied.

Deliberative Democracy

On 25 February 2019, the parliament of the German-speaking community of Belgium, a relatively small population of about 77,000 people, adopted a Citizens' Council made up of 25 randomly selected citizens who were to decide

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This was a problem right up to – and perhaps after – the moment that communism fell in 1989. See Fowkes, *Eastern Europe 1945–1969*, pp. 122–123.

11 Youngs, *Europe Reset*, p. 112.

12 Youngs, *Europe Reset*, p. 94.

on topics for consideration by separate citizens assemblies. There would be between one to three assemblies per year, each consisting of between 25–50 people, meeting across several days on a single topic proposed by the Council. Recommendations from the Assembly would then be considered by the elected Parliament.

Later, the Brussels Region of Belgium, a larger community of over one million inhabitants, decided to follow suit in establishing a permanent procedure to engage randomly selected citizens in policymaking alongside parliamentarians. Recommendations from the Citizens' Assemblies were not binding upon the Parliament. They were to be presented and debated in an open committee session and then the relevant parliamentary committee and minister would prepare a response.[13] At the federal level in Belgium, some have called for a similar transformation of the upper chamber, the Senate, into a chamber for citizen participation.

Similar proposals have been made in other countries, including the idea of turning one of the chambers in bi-cameral constitutions – for instance the House of Lords in the UK or the Senate in the USA – into a chamber whose membership is determined by what is sometimes called 'sortition', essentially the random selection of citizens such as that which produces juries in many countries. In his 2017 presidential election platform, the left-wing French politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon proposed a constitution for a projected sixth republic in France, whose upper house would be made up of randomly selected citizens.[14]

Some of the most interesting developments have taken place in Ireland. For the last decade Citizens' Assemblies have been formed to consider a range of issues. It is true that they did not themselves choose the issues, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that many of the topics reflected the core interests of the citizens and would have been chosen by them anyway. One, for instance, concerned how to make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change. Another concerned how to respond to the challenges of an ageing population. The one

13 See https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe/shortcut-archive/shortcut-9-deliberative-committees-a-new-approach-to-deliberation-between-citizens-and-politicians-in-brussels

14 In 2022 there was similar pressure for a Sixth Republic, with Mélenchon promising to convene a constituent assembly whose members would be either elected or drawn by lots. Their draft constitution would then be submitted to the people via referendum.

that drew most attention was on the issue of abortion, where the Citizens' Assembly recommended liberalisation, and changes were later confirmed by a referendum. The latest report by the assembly was on gender equality, its findings delivered to the Houses of the Oireachtas, the parliament of the Republic of Ireland, in June 2021.[15]

Thus, although it could be argued that the Irish Citizens' Assembly is organised to consider one-off issues (it is described as having 'a mandate to look at a number of key issues over an extended time period') rather than having a permanent character and a right to determine its own agenda, the fact that it has considered controversial and wide-ranging topics suggests that it would not be difficult to make it a permanent feature of the constitution. Indeed, most recently there have been calls from prominent politicians for a new citizens' assembly on the topic of a possible border poll on a united Ireland.[16] One can hardly accuse those who set the agenda of the Citizens' Assemblies of shying away from controversial issues!

Citizens' Assemblies (sometimes referred to as DMPs or 'deliberative mini-publics') are increasing in importance but they have limited powers. One limitation is that they do not always have the power to set the agenda. Another is that they may be only temporary, convened for a matter of months or years to consider a particular issue. A third is that whilst they may be able to make recommendations, their recommendations are not binding, so that even when, as in the Brussels parliamentary committee, parliamentarians and citizens sit together, they take separate votes and even vote in different ways, with that of the citizens being a secret ballot.

Will these limitations be overcome – and should they be? It needs to be borne in mind that Citizens' Assemblies are not themselves without criticism. There is a question of how enthusiastic people will be to engage in politics when they are randomly selected. It is for this reason that there is usually an initial invitation based on random selection to allow people who aren't interested to refuse. Unlike jury service, it cannot be construed as a public duty to attend.

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15 See https://citizensassembly.ie/overview-previous-assemblies/ for an account of previous citizens' assemblies. There is one ongoing in 2023 on drug use.

16 Though in reality it is up to the government what the citizens get to discuss. The Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney was quick to say in May 2022, after Sinn Fein came out top in elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, that convening a citizens' assembly on having a border poll was not even 'on the radar,' reported the *Irish Examiner*. https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/politics/arid-40868039.html

Secondly, a fair representation of the public has not only to consider matters of age, race, class, gender, location and so on, but make sure that those who are less well-off are not simply unable to afford the time to participate. It needs to be made clear that no one will be put out of pocket by participating.

A third and more difficult point worthy of consideration is that elected representatives receive feedback, are voted in and can be voted out. The Citizens' Assembly sounds like an eminently democratic arrangement, but the chosen few (by lottery) do not have to account for themselves to an electorate. People who try to make a career out of politics have to persuade people in order to stand for a parliament and in order to be elected to it and to stay in power. The image that supporters of direct democracy have is of 'ordinary' people, too modest to put themselves forward but nevertheless founts of wisdom and brimming with common sense, who are given the opportunity to make their voice heard. But another view would be that this gives an assortment of randomly chosen people the chance to sound off in a completely unaccountable manner. To be fair, that is not at all the experience of those who have organised such Citizens' Assemblies, but it is obviously a possible criticism (even though 'sounding off in a completely unaccountable manner' might be a fair description of many an elected politician!)

The case for making Citizens' Assemblies an established part of the constitution rather than, like referenda, a one-off response to a particular issue, appears compelling. It also seems reasonable to insist that no one is made poorer by participating – this may be less an issue of financial compensation than an acceptance on the part of employers that taking part in a Citizens' Assembly, like jury service or maternity leave, must be accepted as a valid reason for missing work. More than that, since the work of the assembly will probably involve considering reports by an expert advisory group of some kind, participating will not only involve attending meetings but also reading and considering reports. It will take time. There is also a case for citizens having the right to set the agenda and not simply respond to one that has been handed down to them.

A key issue is one of size. Direct democracy is appealing in smaller communities – clubs, schools, localities. The great cry of the Bolshevik Revolution, 'All power to the soviets', essentially referred to village councils. The Athenian democracy in which 'everyone had the vote' (excepting slaves) might have led to the participation of a few thousand people at a meeting. The relatively small size of the German speaking region in Belgium (at 77,000, hardly more than the population of a town) meant that the judgements of the Citizens' Council and Assemblies would be widely disseminated, making any refusal to im-

plement recommendations difficult. People would encounter each other in the community, strengthening the sense of accountability.

But it is not clear that the same thing applies in larger communities. The Irish form of direct democracy means an assembly of 100 citizens meeting to discuss a particular issue – but that is about 1 person in every 50,000. Much may be made of its representative nature, and it's perfectly true that you can get a fairly accurate view of political opinion by taking a carefully adjusted representative sample just as a polling organisation does. But this still represents a very limited degree of involvement, unlike the village councils in the USSR or the meetings in ancient Athens, where almost everyone could participate. It is essentially representative democracy rather than participatory, with people 'represented' not by those whom they elect but by whoever is identified as coming from their region, belonging to their class, or having their gender. This could even feel rather disempowering for people. Instead of being able to listen to someone's views and support those they liked, they would simply have to hope that the hundred people chosen by lottery with quotas for particular groups would be able to reflect their views.

No one who examines in detail the Citizens' Assembly in Ireland called to examine climate change, for instance, whether it be the individual submissions, the presentations or the eventual proposals on which a vote was taken could fail to be impressed.[17] But it was impressive in the way a conference might be impressive, both for those who took part and those who were able to read the minutes later. That implies some limitations. Everything was packed into two weekends – four days of presentations and discussions – though there was an opportunity to work on the issue outside meetings. The Assembly on climate change was focused on the issue: 'how the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change', which rather steered the subject away from what individuals might do.

The Assembly announced that *'an Expert Advisory Group will be established to assist the work of the Assembly in terms of preparing information and advice.'* This raises another important point, since selecting the specialists from various organisations and advocacy groups who were to appear before each assembly would affect the nature of the discussion. Several high-ranking members or former members of the European Commission delivered keynote presentations, including Connie Hedegaard, a former Danish Minister for Climate

17 https://2016-2018.citizensassembly.ie/en/How-the-State-can-make-Ireland-a-leader-in-tackling-climate-change/

and Energy and European Commissioner for Climate Action. But people with a more critical attitude towards the EU's actions to counter climate change might also have been selected as 'keynote speakers.'

There is no doubt that the findings of the Citizens' Assembly on climate change in Ireland did lead to a government response. A special parliamentary committee was established to take forward the assembly's recommendations. Its report shaped to a significant degree Ireland's Climate Action Plan which was published in the following year (2019) and included measures for phasing out coal and peat-fired power generation and making car and van sales 100% electric by 2030.[18] Yet there remains more to be done in order to manage Youngs' 'upward cascade.'[19] A permanent forum in which a Citizens Assembly can develop new initiatives of its own would be a more effective expression of grassroots involvement.

Conclusion

The first part of this chapter reiterated the basic principle of sovereignty-sharing, namely that nations agree to create a body empowered to make decisions that are accepted as binding upon them. This is the principle on which what became the EU was held together and something similar might be able to hold a UK Union together outside the EU. Yet this will only be the case if those who work for both are clearly held to account. If the structures that emerge are vehicles for enhancing the careers of political and administrative leaders and are not expression of the popular will, the institutions will not win respect. Sovereignty-sharing will be seen as a programme for the few rather than the many. It will be viewed as leading only to a transnational elite gathering, whether in Brussels or in London, and enjoying the privileges that go with the job.

The chapter therefore examined ways in which citizens might have more influence upon government policies, focusing on the EU in particular. It was critical of initiatives that merely regard citizens as a target audience to whom

18 See the Irish Government website which also includes an update for 2023. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ccb2e0-the-climate-action-plan-2019/#

19 His favourite phrase, but a useful one. See for instance pp. 96–97 of *Europe Reset*: 'Nascent local initiatives must be harnessed to cascade upwards into a revitalised debate about the EU's future.'

everything organised at the top has to be explained, rather than examining how initiatives might proceed from below and then, in Youngs' words, 'cascade upwards'. From the examination of various attempts to provide effective bottom-up initiatives in this chapter, three conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, Citizens' Assemblies should be established as permanent entities rather than simply hired and fired to consider particular issues. A Citizens' Assembly should be part of the constitution rather than something summoned occasionally for particular purposes.

Secondly, whilst it is reasonable to say that Citizens' Assemblies should not be forced to abide by a prearranged agenda as if they were nothing more than focus groups, it is perfectly reasonable to say that legislation should only be passed by elected bodies, so that the role of Citizens' Assemblies should be to propose rather than pass laws. A group of citizens elected by lottery, however representative they may be of different social categories, does not have the authority of those who have put their ideas forward in public debate and have received endorsement from voters. They should have a right of initiative in precisely the way that the European Commission has a right of initiative in the EU.

Thirdly, Citizens' Assemblies are much more effective than a simple attempt to throw out additional participation channels. It sounds desirable to talk of providing citizens with a 'European public space,' but there are dangers involved. Such fora can be hijacked by governments which use private citizens and NGOs to push through their own agendas, an exercise in laundering policy priorities. The fora become colonised from above by governments and other organisations with their own agendas. These organisations are happy to be presented with a way of repackaging their agendas as a bottom-up initiative from the grassroots. Once again top-down policies are enabled to masquerade as bottom-up ones. Citizens' Assemblies, on the other hand, are made up of people who are randomly selected. They therefore cannot be hijacked in this way. Though the chapter has pointed to a certain disadvantage in that members of such assemblies don't have to appeal for support and justify their political position, this does at least prevent them from being a conduit for powerful interest groups seeking to present their policies as the outcome of grassroots initiatives.

How, then, might institutional arrangements both at the EU and the UK level develop in a way that does justice to this bottom-up approach and facilitates a true 'upwards cascade' of policy ideas?