



Briefing on House of Citizens campaign by ERS Scotland and Sortition Foundation

A lasting legacy for the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland
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In 2019, over 100 people from across Scotland were brought together to create a vision for Scotland's future as Scotland's Citizens' Assembly. The Citizens' Assembly had cross-party backing from the Scottish Parliament, as well as the Electoral Reform Society. A key recommendation from members when they concluded their findings earlier this year was to *do democracy differently* and create a House of Citizens for Scotland.

This received the overwhelming endorsement of the Citizens Assembly, with 84% of members agreeing that the "*Scottish Government and Parliament should: set up a 'House of Citizens' to scrutinise government proposals and give assent to parliamentary bills*".¹

Support for a House of Citizens - a permanent revising chamber made up of ordinary people - goes well beyond the Citizens' Assembly, with YouGov polling demonstrating that support for the idea outstrips opposition by three to one, with backing across all political parties.² Over 2000 people have now signed the petition to see a House of Citizens in Scotland,³ and there has been national interest in this, with coverage of the campaign across Scottish media, including The Scotsman, The Daily Record, The Herald and The National.

What is a House of Citizens?

A House of Citizens would be a second chamber for Scotland's Parliament, that would work in a similar way to a Citizens' Assembly. A Citizens' Assembly consists of people from all walks of life, representing the diversity of Scotland including age, gender and geographical location. In Scotland, we have had two national citizens' assemblies, one on the future of Scotland and one to tackle the climate emergency, bringing people across the spectrum together to deliberate on pressing national issues.

You can think of a House of Citizens like a jury, where ordinary citizens would provide essential functions including, accountability, legislative scrutiny and deliberation on key issues. Citizens from across the country would serve 1-2 year terms, and be empowered to make a significant contribution to Scotland's democracy.

The Sortition Foundation, ERS Scotland, Common Weal and the RSA have put together a report on how a House of Citizens might work in Holyrood: available here. The House of Citizens report suggests an assembly of 73 members, with one per constituency.

It draws on the success of regions like East Belgium, where a permanent Citizens' Assembly has powers to help set the political agenda. Citizens' Assemblies are becoming more common across the world, as a vital tool in deciding on complex issues and holding power to account.

1 <https://citizensassembly.theapsgroup.scot/report/13/>

2 https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CqPWiiUqEMUoc_ucR-3WYiH_A6wepN2z/view

3 <https://ers.tools/house-of-citizens>

Why a House of Citizens?

Scotland is unusual in only having one chamber for producing and scrutinising legislation.

4 https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CqpWiiUqEMUoc_ucR-3WYiHA6wepN2z/view?usp=sharing

Polling released last year found widespread support for institutionalising Citizen's Assemblies, at a rate higher in Scotland than the rest of GB.⁴ A majority of Scots support establishing Citizens' Assemblies to inform the decisions of local councils, and even replacing the House of Lords with a rotating Citizens' Assembly.

5 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-2019-attitudes-government-political-engagement/pages/4/#Tab2.2>

The Scottish Social Attitude survey has found that only 4% of people trust the institutions of Scottish Government 'a great deal' to make fair decisions.⁵ While trust is higher than in Westminster, the stark figures show that there is considerable work to be done to ensure citizens feel closer to power. As we recover from the pandemic, there is the potential to take forward a positive legacy - recognising the people who got us through with a guaranteed voice, outside of election time. The SSA also looked at opinion on how well the Scottish Government listens to people before taking decisions. Just 7% thought this was 'very good'. A new chamber 'of the people' could go a long way to tackling this perception.

The recent change to a five year term in Holyrood also makes the need for more points of popular engagement with legislation even more important. Scotland can show - as the standalone citizens' assemblies have demonstrated - that democracy is about more than just one vote every five years.

Having citizens at the heart of decision-making - through revising legislation - could transform this, letting people see 'people like me' helping to make decisions.

6 <https://www.ft.com/content/5a456127-6f9a-4f87-aacc-5a54d8da8da7>

It would be a powerful contrast to the House of Lords in Westminster. Financial Times analysis in 2020 found that at least 22 former donors to political parties have been given peerages in the past 13 years.⁶ The paper found that those individuals had given £50.4m to the main three parties — either personally or through related companies.

In contrast, a House of Citizens would be a shining example of transparency and accountability, helping to decentralise power.

All parties pledged to boost scrutiny and democracy in Scotland in May, and we are urging parties to take forward the findings of the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland.

Members of the government-backed Citizens' Assembly said in their report:

"The recommendations...are to be commenced after the election of the next parliament in May 2021.

"We believe our vision and recommendations represent all of the people of Scotland. We ask the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government to consider our words as they plan and decide our future, and to listen closely to what we have said."

We are calling for parties to begin translating these calls into legislative action, to ensure Scotland has a people-powered recovery.

Deliberative democracy - and pledges to implement the policies of the House of Citizens - received widespread cross-party support in the 2021 election manifestos. The Scottish Greens pledged to 'formalise citizens' assemblies...locally and nationally'. The Scottish Lib Dems said: "We have championed the concept of citizens' assemblies... We will take forward the work of Scotland's Climate Assembly and the Citizens' Assembly." The SNP pledged to "Run Citizens' Assemblies annually to look at some of the more

complex issues we face as a country” and backed “annual Citizens Assemblies”. Scottish Labour backed “measures to revitalise local democracy”, “develop[ing] methods of amplifying and embracing [marginalised] voices in policy” and a “people’s parliament”. Scottish Conservatives pledged to boost scrutiny at Holyrood and “strengthen Scottish democracy.”

What next

In September, we will be launching an email campaign urging MSPs to take forward the popular calls for a House of Citizens.

We would welcome meetings with you and/or your staff to discuss the campaign, and how a citizen-led second chamber can work for Scotland.

To arrange a meeting, or discuss the campaign please email Will Stringer will@sortitionfoundation.org

The House of Citizens campaign is supported by ERS Scotland, Sortition Foundation, RSA and Common Weal.

About the Sortition Foundation

The Sortition Foundation campaigns for a different way of doing democracy. We want sortition, where groups of everyday people, selected by democratic lottery, make the decisions.

About Electoral Reform Society Scotland

Electoral Reform Society Scotland is the country’s leading voice for democratic reform. We work with everyone – from political parties, civil society groups and academics to our own members and supporters and the wider public – to campaign for a better democracy.

Our vision is of a democracy fit for the 21st century, where every voice is heard, every vote is valued equally, and every citizen is empowered to take part. We make the case for lasting political reforms, we seek to embed democracy into the heart of public debate, and we foster the democratic spaces which encourage active citizenship.