

By us and for us: How local democracy can build and strengthen community

May 2022

¹ <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/campaigns/democratic-innovations/scottish-devolution/>

Over a period of 18 months from 2013 to 2014, Electoral Reform Society Scotland carried out an in-depth investigation into the state of Scottish democracy. It involved a gathering of citizens from across Scotland, a series of expert round tables and a number of public meetings in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling. It culminated in the publication of a detailed report called *Democracy Max A Vision for a Good Scottish Democracy*.¹ This investigation highlighted a number of things; it pointed to the compromising of democracy, the danger of a rise in populism, the risks of misinformation and polarization posed by social media and suggested that authoritarianism could well be a response to these conditions. While we may have avoided the worst of this in Scotland for now, it seems vital that we respond to these conditions in a positive and creative way to show that democracy is more important than ever and that it is possible to move on to another stage in its development. We concluded that if Scotland was to create a vibrant and resilient nation, it required a vibrant and resilient democracy – that is best built from the ground up through the re-imagining of local democracy.

Since that time ERS and others who came together in the ‘Our Democracy’ coalition have been encouraging thinking and discussion about what that re-imagining might be and how it might operate in practice. After another series of events and discussions, largely with Scotland’s third sector, we held a public conference in Glasgow in 2018 called ‘Democracy 21’. Here, interested citizens discussed how Scotland’s local democracy could meet that challenge. Over 600 people paid to come to an event on a sunny Saturday and together agreed a declaration on local democracy laid out below. This pamphlet looks at each section of that declaration and explains further why these principles are important and offers some ideas on how we could move closer to them.

There have been manifesto commitments to refresh Scottish local democracy in SNP manifestos going in to the last two Parliaments. Good work has been carried out by civil servants in partnership with Scottish civil society in preparation for reform, most notably ‘The Democracy Matters’ programme as a local governance review. Unfortunately progress of reform using the findings of that review seems to have stalled.²

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-governance-review-democracy-matters-phase-2>

Declaration on Local Democracy

Democracy is the right for people to decide how the place where they live is run. For a hundred years this right has built our communities, our society and our sense of justice. But too few people now believe that this right is being honoured, too few believe that they decide and too many believe they are powerless and voiceless. So, we call for a new democracy which is ready to help us build for a hundred years to come.

First, decisions must be made for each place, in that place by the people who live there. Our towns and villages must decide for themselves just as our nation must decide for itself. Power must exist at the scale of the community which is affected. We need our democracy much closer.

Second, the right to decide should not disappear each time the brief flicker of an election is over. Delegating our right to decide is not, in itself, enough. We must create a democracy that involves us all the time, where citizens do not just choose rulers but shape the rules.

Third, democracy must be powerful. The right to choose must be matched by the power to do – and the power to do must be matched with the resource to do it. Democracy is not gifted from above but from below, so power and resource must rest in the places where people live.

This is our simple vision for our future, a truly local democracy, a truly participatory democracy and a truly powerful democracy.

We have learned the lesson of our last hundred years; it is not enough that the future is built, it must be built for us. We must now learn a lesson for our next hundred years; it is not enough that the future is built for us, it must be built by us.

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The Risky Status Quo

Like fish in water, we have taken democracy for granted. Perhaps this is because we look at places like Putin's Russia and think - all is well here. There is evidence that authoritarian regimes like Russia hope to undermine democracy everywhere in the world, including Scotland. Third party online campaigns aimed at heightening conflict around 'culture war' issues such as identity and gender and probably Scottish independence funded by overseas government are likely to be a real threat as is funding given to political parties and other organisations.

These activities are only part of a series of conditions that undermine the security and safety of our system of government and have the possibility to erode our freedoms. At this time, in this world 'no change' holds many more risks than even big change. The status quo in its weak condition offers scant protection from the many threats but more depressingly holds us back from getting close to the sunlit uplands of good lives in a fair and safe society that an evolved future democracy has to offer us. The dangers are real and the opportunity costs tragic if incurred. We need space to think and act constructively, get on the front-foot and avoid constantly being in a defensive mode protecting what we have gained from past struggles.

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) working with the Electoral Reform Society recently published a report *The Road to Renewal* including extensive measurement of public opinion on how people feel about the state of democracy carried out in Dec 21.³ These numbers have only previously been published at a UK level but breaking out the Scotland only sample, on an admittedly small Scottish sample, it told us that:

- 22% of Scots think party donors have the most influence on over the public policy decisions the govt makes.
- 19% think businesses and corporations have the most influence
- 7% think voters have the most influence.⁴

³ <https://www.ippr.org/files/2022-04/road-to-renewal-april22.pdf>

⁴ Scotland findings from ERS/IPPR research- Scotland sample (296 adults), YouGov survey, fieldwork 21-22nd Dec2021, total sample 3442.

Democracy is a system based on trust and legitimacy. People have to believe that the processes and system of government legitimately serve their interests. In theory decisions should be arrived at in ways that are known to offer transparency, accountability and that those affected have their voices heard in the process of deliberation and decision-making.⁵

To break down the famous Abraham Lincoln quote 'government of the people, by the people for the people' we have to trust that we are being governed by people like us, not only those educated at public school at Westminster, or corporate lobby led Government commissions here in Scotland.

If these groups are felt to have the greatest say in government then it is hard for people to believe that they are being governed for the people, and not for the party donors or the wealthy and powerful paymasters of lobbyists. It has long been acknowledged that a system heavily dependent on lobbyists creates an imbalanced democracy, a semi-sovereign people in which wealth gives some an advantage. While representative democracy with votes for all is an antidote, we now see that it has limitations and these need to be addressed. Organised interests tend to tip in favour of the better off even when there are active alternative groups giving voice to the less well off.

This is evident in many ways: The balance between income tax or business taxes and wealth taxes to pay for services? Balance between planning for economic development and value taking or should it be pro-social and fulfil the needs and wants of communities? Are employers or Trade Unions more or less controlled by regulation? How much is an acceptable/harmful level of pollution and/or carbon emissions?

Lack of political power and influence hurts people

We only have to look at the stubborn levels of inequality and poverty in Scotland to judge that something is not right. We either believe these outcomes are inevitable or we believe that resources are being ineffectively, and unfairly distributed and political power is insufficient or insufficiently applied to counter forces that seem to concentrate wealth and power away from those in need.

Government statistics published in February 2022 for the pre-pandemic period showed that wealth inequality was more severe than income inequality: the 2% of households with the highest incomes had 9% of all income, while the wealthiest 2% of households had 18% of all wealth. Wealth inequality in Scotland has not changed since data was first collected in 2006. It is widely acknowledged that the gap has grown significantly during the pandemic.

Three out of ten households had insufficient savings to keep them above the poverty line for a month should they lose their income. Four per cent of households were in unmanageable debt. A third of households did not own any property, and a third of adults had no private pension savings.⁶

The widening gap not only includes wealth and income but also opportunities and attainment prospects. The most vulnerable have paid the highest price during the pandemic but without radical changes will pay the largest penalties in the wake of the pandemic.

In 2015 to 2018, the last period when full data is available, an estimated 240,000 children in Scotland are recorded as living in relative poverty after housing costs - up by around 10,000 on the previous period to 2017. The Scottish government has a helpful strategy on child poverty but unless the fundamentals of power inequality are addressed it is sailing into a gale-force head wind. Analysis by the Resolution Foundation suggests the Scottish child poverty rate will be 29% or over 340,000 children by 2023-24 - the highest rate in over twenty years.⁷

6 https://data.gov.scot/wealth/#Wealth_inequality

7 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/wrong-direction-can-scotland-hit-its-child-poverty-targets>

The Certainty of Change

Technology shapes our society and how we organise it. From the pulling of the plough, to the steam of a locomotive, when humans create revolutions in technology big changes happen. This is no less true when it concerns a revolution in how we make and share our understanding of the world, the revolution in information and understanding. This is so fundamental the only thing that is guaranteed is that change is and will continue to be fast and constant. If not managed and governed well, such uncertainty and insecurity is unsustainable. The impact it has on our culture, our community and our mental well-being will be largely destructive.

This is why systems and processes of government put into place before anyone had a smart phone will at best be deeply sub-optimal, and at worst continue to fail many amongst us, in particular what is heading towards a third of Scotland's children.

It is not easy to remake democracy. There are many sunk costs and vested interests who will fight hard for the status quo even if against the interests of such groups in the long run. The previous work and research carried out by ERS Scotland concluded that it is necessary to begin where people live their lives. In the cities, towns and villages and it was necessary to go beyond elections and representation, vital as they are, to create a foundational democracy where citizens have an ongoing say so that they are able to deal with these new and uncertain times.⁸

People flourish when they feel they have some control over their lives. This is not to abandon citizens as atomised individuals, left to deal with life on their own but to facilitate and encourage greater feelings of agency within and as part of a community.

First, decisions must be made for each place, in that place by the people who live there. Our towns and villages must decide for themselves just as our nation must decide for itself. Power must exist at the scale of the community which is affected. We need our democracy much closer.

The Impact of Remoteness

Before the Scottish Parliament Elections in 2021, ERS Commissioned public opinion polling on where Scots felt they had influence.⁹

- Two thirds of people surveyed (67%) feel they have little or no influence over decisions that affect their local community.
- Only five percent of respondents felt they have a lot of influence, and around a fifth (18%) said they had some influence.
- 45% of people would like to have more influence over the decisions that affect their communities.

We have known for a long time in Scotland that our local administrative units are unusual compared with all of our European neighbours. Ours is a system that combines unitary and symmetrical authorities that seeks to treat everywhere the same whereas the diverse experience from across Europe suggests that it is possible to have more decentralisation to local communities, as well as authorities large enough for functions that require larger areas and indeed that might assume competences currently held by Scottish central government. This is not a debate between smaller or larger units at sub-central government level in Scotland. Scotland needs both.¹⁰

Despite the best efforts of the founders of the parliament, Scotland inherited much genetic constitutional code from the United Kingdom. We are largely a centralised state run from the top down. We suggest that the more centralised and hierarchical things are the more dis-empowered people and communities are. Those that support limited or no change should be challenged to present arguments as to why this is not true or else why dis-empowerment of communities is a price worth paying for other benefits.

8 <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/campaigns/democratic-innovations/scottish-devolution>

9 Polling by Savanta ComRes: 1,009 Scottish adults online from the 5 to 10 March 2021. Data weighted to be demographically representative

10 <https://reidfoundation.scot/portfolio-2/the-silent-crisis-failure-and-revival-in-local-democracy-in-scotland/>

Cities, towns and villages were for the most part created by their inhabitants, later supported by a central state, but they were made locally. In one of his last posts, the late David Donnison, one of the leading activist scholars in this area, noted that ‘most important policy innovations of the past – the building of the first district general hospitals and subsidised housing, the creation of comprehensive schools, the invention of foster care for children previously consigned to institutions of various kinds – all began in local government, usually in the teeth of opposition from central authorities’. Living as community and in a place is a very natural thing for humans to do. The question for the Scottish Government, COSLA and the parliament should be - does the way we currently organise our local government maximise our ability to support healthy, open and inclusive communities to grow and in what ways is it antagonistic towards that aim?

Citizen-led organising and responses to Covid and the lockdowns have been noted and applauded by many in government. There was a fantastic citizen-led response in food deliveries and other forms of mutual aid. In meetings with some of the organisers of foodbanks and community kitchens that came about in response to the pandemic, it was clear that some of this was done largely unsupported by local authorities, but much was done collaboratively.

Further information from our polling suggested that this energy of community activity is a very large potential resource.

- Over four in ten respondents (44%) said they would be willing to give up their free time to help their local council make decisions on issues that affect their community.
- Only a third of respondents (33%) said they would not, while around a fifth (23%) were unsure.
- Nine in 10 (91%) of those who would be willing to get involved, said they’d be willing to give up two or more days per month to help their local council make decisions on local services. Three in five (58%) would be willing to help out for three or more days. The average number of days respondents were willing to give up to help their local community was 3.4 days. 43% of people would be willing to give up four or more days per month.

This suggests that there may be more willingness to engage than is often suggested. People do want the council to empty bins, keep the streets clean and much else without too much hassle but they also want to be involved in planning and shaping the future of the place they live and they also want to be involved when these things aren’t working well (which is not infrequent) and to help find ways to make them work better. At the very least, people ought to have the opportunity to engage in this way. Many more people are very interested and invested in their local place and would like to find ways to engage with its governance than our institutions currently allow.

It is by allowing people the means to run the places where they live that we create and support community. Community is a product of shared interest, talking and shared thinking about what to do and collective action in doing it. It is mutual giving and receiving, the basis for trust and could be the basis for the best of lives and the best of states.

Human connection allowed by good community is essential in helping to make the conditions that lead to healthy and happy lives.¹¹ There is little doubt that the creation of a modern Scotland capable of being foundational to many better lives depends on the ability to create a system of government that prioritises human connection and community. This must start with the most local structures of the state. Just as the healthy fish swim in the best of water, human beings thrive in the best of democracy.

11 <https://www.science.org/doi/abs/10.1126/science.3399889>

Local government is a large and complex organism, some parts of it work very hard to support communities but it sometimes works against itself. The structures and systems of accountability and representation and overall organisation can end up serving the organisation or others more than the community.

Too far away

Proximity builds trust and legitimacy. Moving power and representation closer to where most people live their lives can be used as a way to increase transparency as long as there are rights to information and proper systems of scrutiny. We should aim to create a whole system of government where openness and transparency are lived values.

More local power does allow people to feel more connected with it. The more people went to school with their representatives, work beside them or their family and know people that know them, and if citizens assemblies and other mini publics are built into the system, the more people see people like them involved in making the decisions for the places where they live. If representatives are close to people is also easier to spot when things go wrong. It makes accountability much easier and can use the constraints and incentives of being part of that local community to ensure people act as their best selves.

Many would say this is true of local councillors right now and it certainly is in some cases, although the size of current wards hardly encourages proximity. There is something in the nature of joining a party and seeking an election that also makes you different. We should aim to make it a much more normal thing to be a community representative. In some countries it is seen as a community duty, something that many people take a turn at. This might be helped by smaller units and wards creating less onerous levels of representation. Representing a few hundred people is easier than being a councillor for four thousand.

The way that party politics has developed and changed in the modern era has separated citizens from their representatives. A key problem has been the 'nationalization' of local politics, with national local government manifestos – the very idea of a national local manifesto is an oxymoron. We need more autonomous local parties that are not subservient in all things to the national leadership but able to decide local priorities and preferences in conjunction with their local communities.

Second, the right to decide should not disappear each time the brief flicker of an election is over. Delegating our right to decide is not, in itself, enough. We must create a democracy that involves us all the time, where citizens do not just choose rulers but shape the rules.

The electoral ideal and the reality

There is a lot to be said for a well-functioning representative system of democracy. It is the essence of our democratic system here in Scotland and it should continue to be the core of how we are governed. It is helpful to remind ourselves that elections in themselves are not democracy, democracy is probably best summarised in the phrase from Lincoln's Gettysberg address 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. Elections are a tried and tested mechanism that aim to achieve this task, that is a lot easier said than done. But democracy is an ideal and no institutional arrangement should be confused with it. It is an ideal which we should constantly strive towards, taking account of new contexts, challenges and opportunities.

While elections have been around for a long time, our system of democracy is fairly young and still developing. There are women alive today, born into a Scotland where most women would not have been allowed to vote. We should not be complacent that we have some sort of finished product in Scotland's democracy.

There would be something wrong if we were not continually seeking to build upon and improve the techniques and mechanisms aimed towards the ideal of democracy. Bringing power closer to people as we did with the creation of the Scottish parliament was an important but only one step. Improving elections as we did in the introduction of a more proportional voting system, widening the franchise as we have with votes at 16 and broadening representation with initiatives to have more diversity in our council chambers are also important steps. But there are also inherent weaknesses in the electoral and representative system that go beyond the rules of the election and if addressed could take us on the road towards more democratic, self-confident and self-governing communities.

The purist democratic theory goes like this: We elect representatives to serve our interests every electoral cycle. They are gifted power throughout that period to exercise on our behalf. They can represent us in two ways, that they are advocates on our behalf but also, they can be like us, they understand what it is to live our lives. This should also instil trust in two ways; we have confidence in their competence to advocate and make decisions on our behalf and that their interests are the same as ours. They are accountable to us because we have local information about their performance, and we will judge them at the next election and decide how well they have represented us. The good ones will get elected and the bad ones don't.

There are of course in reality all sorts of complications and crosscurrents to the free-flowing operation of this theory. Here are just a few:

- The inevitable and sometimes helpful presence of parties can mean local council elections can come to be about sending a message to Boris Johnson or Nicola Sturgeon rather than about local issues, though of course national politics do impact on local conditions.
- The quality of information, decline in local media and the dense and difficult reporting and recording styles of local authorities.
- Elections are necessarily far apart so it relies on people being willing to remember and balance up knowledge over four years and then to be able and willing to decide on one moment in one day of that period. Voting is often habitual, based more on impressions and recent developments, hardly a nuanced or particularly sophisticated expression of political will.
- The lack of public interest and engagement to take time to know or even to take time to vote. People often feel it won't make any difference and/or that nothing changes.

Conflict or Collective?

We know that council chambers and party led elections are already divisive. It is part of democracy that ideas are contested, and that division does not exist outside of a social and technological context. Online platforms and apps, social media and screens are such a massive part of our lives they we must factor in the relationship between the way representative democracy is conducted and the business model of big tech. The model that is built on capturing and selling data about us might be turned to our advantage not just for commercial gain. It may be possible to harness our time on screen and exploit the evidence that conflict gets attention to more productive and communitarian ends.

All of this argues again for much more localised decision-making and power where people can relate to each other in real spaces. Representative bodies that are too big or too remote with too few representatives make it much more difficult to engage with citizens on a day-to-day basis – though modern technology can assist in better communication, and not just communication of politicians to constituents, but vice versa. IT may make it less likely that local communities will gather face to face to discuss how to improve their place, but can also be used to facilitate local

communication. Account needs to be taken of the danger that the communication revolution might further erode local community cohesion and increase atomisation. Each previous major upheaval or revolution – the industrial revolution and urbanisation; communication revolution involving electrification and automation; and the digital and information technology revolutions – presented both opportunities and challenges. The challenge now is to ensure that citizens and communities are aligned with the latest ongoing and very fast-moving changes in economy and society. This requires person and community-centred responses.

Proper Local Accountability

Professionalising representation takes councillors out of workplaces and communities and gives them different lives than those they seek to represent. It may make them better advocates, but the power of authentic experience must also be valued and find space. This has been acknowledged as an issue throughout the era of the advanced liberal democratic state, but we have not been very successful in finding means of putting it into effect. The Wheatley Royal Commission on Local Government in the 1960s grappled with this and proposed community councils. But community councils have had a very patchy existence and variable experience since establishment.

We suggest a framework that allows communities to set up and elect a representative body of paid volunteers to oversee the running and development of their town or village or city neighbourhood. These may fill gaps where community councils do not exist, operate in conjunction with community councils or replace them – matters best left to each community. Because of the community level scale of this representation, they are likely to represent a few hundred people but again no one size will fit all, and a degree of flexibility is essential otherwise we would undermine the very essence of community as bottom-up and collectively self-defined. This would not be onerous in terms of time but should be paid to ensure access for excluded groups.

While necessarily being very local and being able to operate in isolation, they could form part of a wider network of similar councils where power is pooled when required and structures are created in order to exercise this. Such networks would allow for cooperation where appropriate and desired. Organisations that are structured in this way are an ongoing response to the way that technology is changing our lives.¹²

Such bodies would identify the priorities, preferences, and objectives of its community. The focus of such could be defined by the community, not confined by statute, and allow the authoritative voice of the community to be uninhibited in what it might advocate. There may additionally be functions that are devolved to such organisations, but this would only be meaningful if resourced properly. Offering small pots of money for groups of citizens in communities to fight over can be counter-productive in community development, though can also allow for experimentation and limited but important initiatives. A crucial role that could be incorporated would be meaningful consultation over planning decisions affecting the local area requiring reform of planning legislation, but this would need to prevent the dangers of NIMBY-type behaviours.

The existing or some reformed council structures could remain as a more strategic tier with a purpose defined as a statutory duty to create this network of community democracy. Different council areas would grow honeycombs of democratic spaces unique to their area, this could be done over many years organically rather than in any sort of big bang. With the eventual goal of the larger geographic tier authority to be governed by a confederal body of all the community units and delegate representation from each one, thus ensuring that power is pooled upwards rather than exercised downwards.

¹² [https://hbr.org/2015/06/
what-makes-an-](https://hbr.org/2015/06/what-makes-an-)

Third, democracy must be powerful. The right to choose must be matched by the power to do – and the power to do must be matched with the resource to do it. Democracy is not gifted from above but from below, so power and resource must rest in the places where people live.

Economy of Scale Vs. Community Wealth

The recent history of Scottish local government is a history of centralisation – of fewer people having more say and of bigger areas and bigger populations. The application of thinking such as ‘economy of scales’ and of ‘efficiency’ seem to have taken value from local places and sucked it up into large companies who are in turn owned by institutional shareholders. This is an active removal of wealth from our local communities and into the hands of those who need it least.

There are good Scottish Government initiatives to counter the problems of too much privatisation and centralisation that the local authority policy of 80s and 90s brought about. They are largely around a set of ideas known as Community Wealth Building. The need to keep locally created value circulating in the local communities and to avoid the ‘sucking out’ effects.¹³ Again these battle against an existing structure and narrative that encourages increases in scale and centralisation.

¹³ <https://www.gov.scot/policies/cities-regions/community-wealth-building>

Past emphasis in reforms has been on economies of scale, efficiency in reorganisation of local government and while these are legitimate objectives they have not been balanced with a need for more local, community and participatory needs. A key problem that was encountered in the past was seeing economies of scale and communitarian interests as in conflict rather than seeking to find means of achieving both. Current or reformed council structures, including larger council areas, are not incompatible with more community empowerment.

Communities need to have the power to create local places and economies that defend the local society and economy, and can build security and resilience at that level alongside, and taking advantage of, economies of scale provided by existing or reformed councils. This means a devolution of power out of Edinburgh, with ministers and national politicians having the ethics and the courage to give power back to where it comes from. Actively fighting against the hoarding tendency of national government and officials, and councillors to do that same in large local authorities, to be constantly vigilant against the creation or shoring up of mini-oligarchies.

Naming Oligarchy and the Democratic response

There are well researched case studies that suggest that despite the best of democratic intentions, all organisations have internal dynamics that if left unchecked will lead to concentration of power into small cliques – ‘Who says organization, says oligarchy’.¹⁴ The democratic response to this is to actively acknowledge that this is inevitable and to put in place ways of challenging, checking and countering the ever present forces that create oligarchy. To pretend to be more democratic than we are, to assume a ‘finished product’ idea of democracy, is to fail to guard against this tendency and to let democracy slowly drain away like the sand in an egg timer. While community development workers are often trained to understand these problems, it might useful to offer opportunities to train other senior people involved in local democracy about the problems of power and its concentration away from those who most need it. This suggests cultural reform and for local authorities to become truly value led organisations. What the people working in local democracy think and feel about their organisation is going to support or undermine democratic renewal much more than any structural changes, ideally the two can be used to mutually reinforce each other, structural change powered by commitment to improvement. This objective can be a key part of and implementation plan and strategic approach to reform.

¹⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/oligarchy>

Using networked and federalised structures as suggested in the last section is one of the safeguards against anti-democratic habits, but culture shift and giving real power to citizens is a way of reinforcing that defence and is more likely to achieve outcomes that the communities want.

Allowing a citizens' assembly to produce a 4-year plan for the local community prior to elections of any local community level council so that the councillors are elected on the basis of how well they can convince voters that they will support and implement the plan is a way of significantly empowering communities and enhancing elections to make sure they are about understanding of local issues and local commitment.

Our polling shows that the public like this idea when asked simple questions with a basic explanation. We of course acknowledge that given costs and or alternatives support might change.

- A majority of people (54%) think that citizens' assemblies would be somewhat or much more effective than local councils in deciding on community priorities.
- 7% think citizens' assemblies would be as effective as local councils in deciding on community priorities.
- That's a total of 81% who think that citizens' assemblies could be effective in deciding on local community priorities.

The citizens assembly would be a highly representative group of the local community, scientifically selected using sortition so that all relevant groups are represented. They would be paid and facilitated to ensure that people from largely excluded backgrounds could take part. They are asked to use their experience of living and knowing the local place to consider evidence and learning and to decide together what is desirable and possible for that place.

These are not a brief committee meeting, but in-depth discussions held over perhaps several blocks of two-day sessions. They allow people to understand each other, while not always agreeing, and effectively counter the divisive nature of party and council chamber politics and the impact of social media polarisation. They tend to produce a set of proposals that citizens feel they own and are proud of, and the assembly see themselves as champions of.

The assembly could be reconvened at annual intervals to assess the councils progress and to provide a public report for the voters. The members would have no party axe to grind and would largely see themselves as the champions of the community. They would not be seeking re-election as each assembly would be randomly reselected with a new group at the end of each term using tried and tested processes to ensure community representation that also gives them democratic legitimacy. More information on selection can be found on the website referenced below.

We have a growing expertise and experience of designing and running these democratic innovations in Scotland, having held very successful and highly researched citizens assemblies at national level which can be readily scaled up in numbers and applied as the demand for more democracy of this kind grows.¹⁵

¹⁵ <https://www.climateassembly.scot/how-it-works/how-are-members-selected>

<http://localtaxcommission.scot/download-our-final-report>

Taxation

While ERS Scotland does not have policy suggestions on tax, we acknowledge that it is a vital consideration when discussing Scottish local government and how it might be improved. We highlight some ideas and factors that might be important to this discussion. The resources that local authorities direct to fulfil the plans of their community is of course a point of big debate and political contest.

16 <https://cles.org.uk/community-wealth-building/how-to-build-community-wealth/>

Local government finance and the tax system to meet it has become highly complicated and politically loaded, with a history that includes the poll tax and continually avoided valuation of properties for rates purposes. There have been ongoing attempts to address this crucial topic with a government consultation in the late 2000s and the establishment of ‘The Commission on Local Tax Reform’ which reported in 2015.¹⁶ Co-chaired by then SNP Government Minister Marco Biageo and David O’Neill, COSLA President, the commission proposed broadening the tax base to include income. It proposed three alternatives that might raise similar amounts of revenue: a reformed property tax based on land and building value; a land value tax based solely on value of land; and a local income.

But the debate stalled and has not been taken forward, not least as politicians are fearful of the electoral fallout of changes in taxation which will inevitably result in losers as well as winners, plus inevitable unforeseen consequences. This is the sort of ‘kicking the can down the road’ politics that poses real threats to us being able to respond properly to a rapidly changing world and to address problems such as child poverty and democratic ambivalence. After various enquiries and reports dating back many years, the issue is not one of finding an alternative but finding the political will and courage to commit to and implement an alternative. We suggest the work of this commission is reactivated in the context of an ambitious programme of local democratic community building. This means that the way that local finance is raised, and decisions made on how it is spent, should have a goal of actively building human connection and shared interest in the community. Instead of democracy being a point of division, we should think about ways that it helps people work together to solve local problems and fulfil local ambitions.

17 https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/kmd/komm/veiledninger_og_brosjyrer/local-government_in_norway_h-2313e.pdf

It must be noted that in highly successful European states such as Norway, all taxes are collected by the local authorities and a proportion of that then paid up into central government rather than funding being gifted downwards from a powerful centre.¹⁷ This seems to have an important democratic element to it in, that just as power is gifted from where people are to the government to exercise on their behalf, so tax revenues should be also. But just as an individual voting alone has an insignificant amount of power, collectively as a community they have much more and collectively as a tax collecting then remitting unit the community feels much more powerful. This is a large change to Scotland’s (and the UK’s) traditional tax model, but there have been several examinations of that tax system and most have declared it ‘unfit’ for purpose. One led by Nobel prize winning economist James Mirrlees,¹⁸ like so many others, attracted much praise but politicians were wary of implementation. The power of the status quo prevails. Those that benefit from the current system are not willing to share more, it seems they are unwilling to share with the 29% of Scottish children who may live their lives in poverty. This principle of communities collecting taxes and remitting it centrally is an important one to bear in mind if we find the political courage to revisit local taxation, but it is almost impossible to remake local democracy without doing so.

18 <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/mirrleesreview>

This is our simple vision for our future, a truly local democracy, a truly participatory democracy and a truly powerful democracy.

We have learned the lesson of our last hundred years; it is not enough that the future is built, it must be built for us. We must now learn a lesson for our next hundred years; it is not enough that the future is built for us, it must be built by us.

These are fairly specific and detailed proposals. We do not want them to be a blueprint or to come as ‘the man with a plan’ although we would dearly wish them to be a basis for change. They are a provocation and a counterpoint to the status quo. The huge power of the status quo resides in the fact that it is what people know and understand and that the security of that trumps the gains of change. As stated at the beginning the threats and costs of no change far outweigh the risks of reform. It requires creativity and imagination to think that something different might be possible. We offer this pamphlet as stimulation for those activities.

We also counsel against the big bang reforms such as the 1990s local government changes when the two-tier system of regional and district councils were abolished and replaced with Scotland’s 32 unitary councils. To make the sort of changes required needs a solid but flexible timetable from the start, phased implementation and strong directive legislation, instilling duties and responsibilities on the relevant parts of the system to deliver the changes but this should be done over many years not only a couple. The whole process may take a decade with different places going at different speeds and creating different models. Government is seldom good at taking such a strategic approach to its workings but if you do the same things the same things happen, and while that might be OK for many of us, it’s not OK for enough of us.

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