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## EDITORIAL

### Conversation between equals

*It is the experience of dissensus, after all, that drives the different sides to identify common policy-making norms, as they try to make sense of their respective views to one another. And it is those norms that constrain the policies that they are willing to entertain and the processes of decision-making they are ready to employ.*

Philip Pettit, 2012<sup>1</sup>

Free and spontaneous access to the public space now seems to be confined to nothing more than moving around the city; any other activity is legally and bureaucratically regulated. Street vendors, buskers and human statues must all have due authorisation and are assigned specific spaces and times by the authorities. Alcohol can only be consumed on the terraces of private bars and restaurants in possession of valid permits. While the public space is used for all manner of activities, ultimately they are private business enterprises even though they may be the initiative of public institutions (for example, town councils), authorised under concession agreements: parks used as marketplaces, venues for concerts and shows, or sports activities. The extreme simplification of market relations reduced, in the end, to the bottom line that “for every winner there must be a loser” and vice versa, has usurped the space belonging to citizens’ relations.

We need to reconsider the ways the occupation and use of (real and virtual) public space in the city are acquired, based on an understanding of intervention in public life as participation: conversation among citizens about what problems are relevant to us so the conditions in which our lives develop can be modified and improved, by articulating opinions that influence the construction of truly political proposals. The need to participate in these conversations does not arise spontaneously, nor in a generalised way, in society, and depends on three basic factors: will, availability and preparation, which are not easily influenced in the short and medium term. The wreck of the enlightenment dream of thinking and hoping that universal education and access to information from scientific and technological advances reveals the profound deficiencies in the way proposals for political action are drawn up, disseminated and supported. One illustration of this is the proliferation of political movements grounded on extreme simplification, whose proposals lack any semblance of nuance; poor lines of argument riddled with every fallacy in the book; the inability to distinguish between facts and opinions, or between true or false proposals; the absence of intellectual rigour and honesty, etc.

Discussion of democracy tends to focus on the decisive moment of the vote, ignoring the stages of deliberation and the processes in which procedures, proposals, agreements and consensus are built, without which the vote is nothing but a snapshot of the quantitative finishing line based on fragmentary policies and with no integrated vision. We cannot simply vote in elections and then delegate all political activity to professionals who are disconnected from the electorate.

We must learn to converse and rekindle the participative will to generate policies to transmit to our representatives, and control the way they are implemented. In this line, the recent “Citizens’ Assembly” initiative in Ireland is a powerful experience with some very encouraging outcomes.

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1. Pettit, Philip (2012): *On The People’s Terms. A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*. Cambridge U.P. NY., p 268.



“The Citizens’ Assembly was an exercise in deliberative democracy, placing the citizen at the heart of important legal and policy issues facing Irish society. With the benefit of expert, impartial and factual advice the 100 citizen Members considered the topics below. [ The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution; Challenges and Opportunities of an ageing population; Making Ireland a leader in tackling climate change; Manner in which referenda are held; Fixed term Parliaments. ] Their conclusions formed the basis of a number of reports and recommendations that were submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas for further debate by our elected representatives.” <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/>

The Irish parliament approved the design and implementation of the assembly in 2016. A private company won the tender to randomly recruit a sample of the population that would faithfully represent all sections of Irish society, with particular attention to gender, age, regional distribution and class. Agreement was reached on the following points, among others:

1. Operating mechanisms based on the principles of openness, fairness, equality, efficiency, respect and collegiality.
2. Selection of an expert advisory group.
3. A five-stage format for the meetings: Chair’s introduction, expert presentations, question and answer session, roundtable group debate, and closing plenary session.
4. Screening of organisations authorised to make presentations to the assembly.

All documentation and proposals were made available to citizens on line. The sessions were live-streamed and 13000 proposals were submitted by the public. Meetings began in October 2016 and the proposal on the first of the topics –the Eighth Amendment– was presented to parliament in June 2017. The referendum on this amendment was held on 25 May, 2018, with a result of 66% votes in favour, 34% against, and a turnout of 64.1%.

Participation processes such as this one go some way to redressing the imbalances inherent in spontaneous or voluntary participation processes; they forge a new shared political vision, based on varied, disparate political wills, that can be accepted or supported by the majority of the population; they embrace the need to respect minorities by ensuring they are able to continue participating in political debate (in creating new visions, perspectives and proposals); and they tie in with institutional systems to guarantee equality for citizens in their political practice, their influence on parliament, and legislative transfer. We hope and trust that the widespread demands for a more profound development of democracy move forward in this direction.

Castelló, June 2018