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The Citizens' Climate Convention: what for?

Auteur

Sébastien Treyer
Executive Director

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The Citizens' Climate Convention, which is slated to begin its deliberations on October, 4th is in line with the growth of citizens' movements on climate change and undoubtedly represents a positive step forward. The convention will also allow France to follow in the footsteps of other countries who have made similar experiments¹ in participatory democracy. What can we expect from this step? What is the unique role of a citizen's assembly—different from that played by experts and policy makers—in addressing an issue as vast and urgent as the ecological transition?

It is clear that the ecological transition is not progressing or transforming the society as rapidly as needed, a fact we demonstrated in a study published towards the end of 2018. Topics such as the electricity mix and the carbon tax have drawn considerable attention and controversy. Experts and academics have identified the level of change necessary, the levers of action as well as the constraints we are faced with in effecting the transition. Helping citizens understand the solutions set forth by experts is only the starting point of participatory mechanisms such as

this convention. The real value of convening this assembly is to have citizens formulate the key social choices which they consider to be important and which underlie the identified bottlenecks. With these big choices formulated, the convention can formally consider these issues and express the verdict of the majority of its 150 members. The resulting report containing its proposals will then be submitted to the Parliament or put to a referendum by the government.

What can we expect from such a convention?

The convention can be called a success if it enables us, on at least one important aspect of the transition, to take a step forward; offers a solution to an existing bottleneck, or provides direction to policy makers and the French public alike on some form of acceptable response.

As such, a comprehensive review of all aspects of the transition is not a pre-requisite. In fact, given the limited time allocated to this exercise, such an approach would rather increase the chances of the final report containing a superficial analysis or merely presenting a diluted summary of the current limits of the transition. A careful consideration of a few, targeted questions would better help test out the approach and reap its benefits.

This selection can be carried out by the government, which could justifiably wish to stress on certain questions over others; or the citizens themselves, who can also rightfully put forth their concerns, with the support of experts to help them formulate and assess the feasibility of their proposals.

A citizen's assembly on an issue as vast as the ecological transition has not, to our knowledge, ever been conducted by any other State. As such, this convention would be the first experiment of its kind. If the outcome of this process allows us to make a step forward, then it could be replicated to consider other issues related to the transition, and potentially even go on to become a permanent mechanism of our democracy.

What role can be played by the citizens participating in this convention?

In our view, the citizens gathered as part of this assembly can be expected to assess the compromises and difficult choices that have been challenging to make for both experts and policy makers.

In academic circles, this inconclusiveness can be attributed to the fact there are multiple possible solutions, each with its own economic or technical features. This often leads to debates on both the vision of a low-carbon society as well as the policy changes needed for the transition i.e. the different ways in which we can enable the transition and the various regressive, redistributive, or disruptive effects on existing institutions and organisations that each of these paths would create.

The transition also involves effecting changes of such magnitude that they will necessarily impact some key actors in the economy. This means policy makers are prone to making natural political compromises which often tend to maintain the status quo.

Following this line of thought, the convention must primarily work on presenting these choices and assessments of existing bottlenecks directly to the people concerned by them. The ecological transition is an extremely complex issue: the current analysis outlining its challenges and possible solutions builds on decades of scientific and specialised work in many fields (energy production, energy consumption, transport, agriculture, fiscal policy, etc.). No single expert has a comprehensive understanding of all these sectors. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect

citizens participating in the convention to gain expert understanding in just a few sessions. In any case, we do not see this as the purpose of such a convention. Citizens should rather approach these questions as laymen: they must formulate their concerns, seek out the right experts to understand specific bottlenecks and the nature of the trade-offs that remain to be made, so that they may deliberate on these issues and present their unique view.

What type of questions could be discussed?

Based on our experience with ecological transition policies, these questions should ideally concern the people's understanding of what constitutes a just ecological transition (or, inversely, what would be an unjust transition: for whom, at what point, in which circumstances). They must also touch upon the necessary conditions for this shift to take place (under what conditions will we accept behavioural change with respect to our eating habits, choice of transport, etc?).

These questions may seem conceptually abstract; far from reality and the short-term decisions before us. In fact, they are at the heart of very practical choices which need to be made in order to initiate the transition at the earliest.

As an example, we can take the problem of alternatives to individual vehicles, which are unequally distributed between citizens and regions. Should we mainly act through the price signal (levying a carbon tax); through behavioural change (eco sticker, bonus-malus, speed limits, etc.); or through the transformation of supply (acceleration of the evolution of the drive-train and weight of vehicles, introduction of shared or collective mobility services, development in rail and road infrastructure, etc.) to solve this problem?

Further, for each of these options, where should we strike a balance in terms of social justice? For instance, experts have called for automobile manufacturers to lower the emission levels on their newer models. Many of these manufacturers have counter-argued that such a move could risk impacting employment. This is a legitimate concern. How then can this social choice be made? Should an industry be supported through such a big transition, or not? Should one look for a social justice equilibrium within an economic sector or look to strike a balance across sectors?

Let's take the carbon tax. Should the vast majority of the revenues from such a tax be redistributed back to the taxpayers? Should only some share of it be redistributed back among low-income groups, with the rest used to finance measures to stimulate employment? Or should a major share of these revenues be used to fund investment in the transition itself? Each of these options will lead to a certain form of social justice. The question is to find out which of these forms carries the most weight in the eyes of the public.

Moreover, there are choices to be made between different visions of a low carbon society. On the one hand, we could have a globalised agricultural and food system able to supply food at low cost, but for which the environmental impacts may be uncertain or difficult to control. On the other hand, we could favour a more localised food production system, better able to provide rural employment and environmental benefits, but with an uncertain capacity to ensure its own economic viability and potential for development. Which do we choose, and what kind of preferred diets would then be associated with each of these systems?

Through these examples, we can see that the core question is neither technological (e.g. for or against electric vehicles) nor purely instrumental in nature (e.g. for or against the carbon tax). The best way for the citizen's convention to help advance the ecological transition lies rather in understanding, reformulating and, where possible, coming up with a response to key social choices. These choices will reflect the will of the people and express their values. In essence, this is the true role of citizens in a democracy and one that the randomly selected participants will get to play.

It is important to ensure that the discussions within the convention, and more broadly, in society, are of the highest quality. This will further help secure the strong mobilisation of all the actors needed to implement the transition.

The citizen's convention may appear to be a challenging exercise with an uncertain outcome. But this is only because it reflects the inherent uncertainties in the transition goals set by our society in the face of environmental crises. The ecological transition poses a democratic challenge. This first experiment may be an imperfect exercise, but it will have been a success if it helps lay the cornerstones of increased democratic participation on this issue.

¹ <https://www.deciderensemble.com/articles/38515-les-assemblees-citoyennes-en-irlande>

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