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The Citizens' Convention on Climate: how to make the most of the opportunity?

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After nine months of work, the 150 members of the Citizens' Convention on Climate have submitted their proposals to the government, to enable France to achieve a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 in the spirit of social justice. This unprecedented experiment has shown that it is possible to enable citizens to take ownership of the technical complexity of the issues and to understand underlying political controversies prior to expressing their views. Their mobilization and investment over the entire duration of the process, that was however marked by many unexpected obstacles (strikes, Covid-19 crisis, etc.), show that this type of highly demanding participatory exercise can work. The quality of listening and debate within the Convention also showed the capacity of citizens to fulfil the expectations placed on their collective

deliberation. Finally, the work and results produced show that once educated and informed on climate challenges, a diverse group of citizens can produce proposals that are up to the task.

An exercise that is fulfilling its promise

And yet their assignment was challenging. They were given a broad and ambitious mandate to explore the scenario of a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, and they did address the issue while staying within the framework. We can thus see that, due to a need for overall coherence, they have integrated an international dimension into their thinking, which provides context to French action, as well as non-climatic subjects such as biodiversity.

The quality of the work carried out therefore justifies a very serious examination of the opportunities opened up in terms of consolidating and enriching our democratic systems with a more participatory component, opportunities that seem full of potential to some, but are daunting and even worrying to others.

A coherent and ambitious package of transition measures

The Convention has been criticized for not producing anything new. The main challenge, however, was not to invent new solutions. Citizens started by listening to stakeholders and experts, to identify and understand the measures that were already being debated in the different sectors. During this work, they often asked why the most ambitious and necessary measures were not being implemented, which was slowing down the progress of France in meeting its reduction targets. On this basis, their work has logically focused on the means to implement this ambition: what elements are missing and what conditions are necessary? How can they be combined?

The value of their work therefore lies in areas other than in the search for innovation. Firstly, they underlined that accelerating the low-carbon transition goes beyond energy-climate policy alone, and requires deep transformations at the societal scale. The citizens demonstrated their awareness of “the urgent need for a profound change in the organization of our society and ways of living”¹ to address the climate crisis (as part of their reflection on the issues of work, economic and consumption models, food, lifestyles...). Secondly, this experimental approach has led to ambitious measures and major trade-offs, the importance of which should be emphasized, that go beyond recent political trade-offs to accelerate the ecological transition, thus fulfilling one of the expectations placed on them. The criticisms and sometimes fierce reactions clearly show that citizens have succeeded in going beyond a weak consensus, which is a risk associated with this type of exercise.

The frequent use of the legislation register has already given rise to a debate on the approach favoured by citizens and it is therefore important to examine the way in which this instrument is mobilised. In the building sector, citizens first of all propose a systemic approach that combines the reinforcement of training for professionals in the sector, information provided by the deployment of a harmonized network of one-stop shops, and progressive financial support with reduced amounts to be paid by the poorest households, well before the application of the obligation to renovate in the long term. This obligation is above all a time horizon, which can provide an impetus to actors, while proposing measures to give them leeway and the means for action. Similarly, citizens have used the debates related to the “*Etats généraux de l'alimentation*” (French national food conference) and to the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy as a starting point to indicate all measures that must be taken with regard to consumer information, public procurement, negotiations in the sectors or the construction of sectors such as protein crops, and policies directly aimed at accompanying farmers in carrying out change.

This need for a systemic response explains why the number of measures proposed is so large, which is the only way, according to citizens, to reconcile the ambition of their mandate with the need to find practical implementation means, while stating an intention, a direction. How can we ensure that these practical means do not get lost in the transition to political follow-up?

What action should follow up the citizens' proposals?

To make best use of these proposals and to prevent some of the more fiercely debated flagship measures from attracting all of the attention, running the risk of obscuring the full diversity of the work, it is essential to organize the post-Convention period in such a way as to trigger the regulatory, legislative or constitutional changes proposed by the Convention, and this necessarily involves Government, Parliament and civil society.

Regarding the procedure, the Convention recommends complementary follow-up action. The issue that captures the attention is of course the referendum: citizens have opted for a

limited referendum that can serve to mobilize the whole of society and initiate a symbolic debate on the modification of the Constitution and the introduction of the crime of ecocide. The choice of a limited referendum gave rise to a very interesting debate among the citizens at the time of the vote and can be interpreted as a level of cautiousness, and a will to avoid the pitfalls that a broader referendum could cause. If the citizens had instead selected the most controversial ideas to be put to the referendum (such as compulsory retrofitting or the regulation of advertising), the overall coherence would have been lost and society would have been deprived of a more nuanced debate on the work as a whole. Moreover, the questions raised by the referendum could have been distorted by the political context or by the inevitable simplification of the debate, even though the citizens had come to terms with the complexity of the issues at stake.

Accordingly, the Convention leaves a large space for Government and Parliament to initiate legislative work and respond to their recommendations. It would be logical that a significant proportion of the measures are submitted to Parliament. It is a necessary step for structuring measures that have an impact on existing law, such as the obligation to retrofit, or to clarify the implementation of certain avenues whose intention is clearly stated but which sometimes requires clarification. It also responds to a desire expressed several times in the citizens' debates to show that the Convention is a complementary initiative to existing democratic processes and that it is not intended to replace them. Passing measures to parliamentarians is also a way of passing the baton to citizens for wider debate. Many actors are already calling for a national debate, based on the citizens' work, in parallel with the examination of their proposals by the legislator. This is the wish of the 150 citizens themselves, who have formed an [association](#) to continue to advance their proposals. This follow-up work could be continued by mobilizing recently established institutions, first of all through regular reviews by the Ecological Defence Council (*Conseil de défense écologique*), so that the transition is supported by the level of ambition proposed by the citizens. As for the High Council on Climate (*Haut Conseil pour le Climat*), it remains to be seen how it will seize it, but it is clear that this expert body cannot ignore the work of the Convention. It could, for example, along with other bodies or civil society, take up the issues of environmental and economic assessment of these measures.

Finally, it will also be necessary for the political and economical spheres and civil society to appropriate and to spread the message throughout the whole of society. By proposing strong choices, the Convention has succeeded in relaunching a necessary social debate on the ecological transition, right at the heart of the recovery plans and the crisis exit. In this respect, the Citizens' Convention also fulfils part of its objectives.

¹ See the introduction to the final report <https://propositions.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/pdf/ccr-rapport-final.pdf>

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