

A House of Citizens for the UK Parliament

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SORTITION
FOUNDATION

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The **Sortition Foundation** is a not-for-profit social enterprise whose mission is to promote and institute sortition in empowered assemblies. We envision a world free from partisan politicking, where representative samples of everyday people, selected by lottery, make decisions in informed, deliberative and fair environments.

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**It's time. Replace the
House of Lords...**

A snapshot of the past...



...with a House of Citizens

A snapshot of the future...

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Executive Summary

Most of us agree it is beyond time to do something about the anachronistic House of Lords. But of course the question is “What?”: a chamber of legislative review and scrutiny is obviously sorely needed but is another chamber of politicians really the answer to low public trust in politicians?

Fortunately the rediscovery of democratic lotteries and their use in citizens’ assemblies¹ has provided us with a clear, compelling answer: **we should replace the House of Lords with a House of Citizens**, selected by democratic lottery to be a microcosm of the UK.

Such a House of Citizens would place the UK at the forefront of democratic innovation and make it a global leader in citizen empowerment and engagement; we strongly recommend this proposal be adopted by all political parties to increase the level of trust in our political institutions and decision-making.

In this report we provide details and answer questions about the workings of such a chamber, and propose a demographically representative sample of 325 members of the public, selected by democratic lottery, to fulfil this role for one or two-year terms (with a proportion of them rotating out regularly). Regular independent citizens’ reviews are proposed which would outline changes to the powers of the House of Citizens, and suggest improvements to its structure and processes.

Replacing the House of Lords with a House of Citizens as the second chamber in the UK Parliament would increase public trust in parliament and boost the confidence of legislators that there is broad public backing for their decisions. Building on the recent wealth of experience from citizens’ assemblies, held in the UK and around the world, we know that a House of Citizens is both feasible and popular.

¹ See “Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave” <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

Why a “House of Citizens”?

Whether justified or not, [increasing numbers of people](#) no longer trust politicians and the political process; the feeling that politicians make short-term decisions based largely on political calculations – irrespective of citizens’ wishes – is undermining faith in democratic institutions.

Perhaps reflecting these feelings, the recent Citizens' Assembly of Scotland voted overwhelmingly (83.5% support) for “**a ‘house of citizens’ to scrutinise government proposals and give assent to parliamentary bills**”.²

Our recent [YouGov polling](#) demonstrates wide public support for replacing the House of Lords with a permanent House of Citizens. It is obviously an idea which is rapidly gaining popularity.

Below we outline how a permanent House of Citizens could be implemented that would not only bring the public’s voice into the legislative process, but bring citizens’ **considered and informed judgement** into policy making.

If a representative and informed sample of citizens, selected by democratic lottery, has the chance to deliberate on proposed legislation and decide together if they think it is in the best long-term interests of the UK, then we believe there would be several direct and observable benefits, including:

- A substantial increase in the public trust in legislative decisions;
- Increased confidence of members of parliament that they have broad public backing for their decisions;
- A convincing counter to critics (in the media and elsewhere) that claim there is little or no public support for proposed legislation;
- An immeasurable boost to a legislative proposal if the House of Citizens gave near unanimous support for it;
- A very public counterweight to the perceived capture of the political process by elites and other vested interests.

The overarching benefit of establishing a permanent House of Citizens in the UK Parliament would be **a profound increase in the legitimacy of UK laws** by providing solid evidence of the considered endorsement by a representative sample of deliberating UK citizens.

A House of Citizens for the UK Parliament

There are two key questions about a House of Citizens (HoC):

1. What powers would a House of Citizens have?
2. How would such a chamber be implemented?

We address these questions in turn below.

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<https://citizensassembly.theapsgroup.scot/summary/Citizens-Assembly-Summary-Report.pdf>

Powers of a House of Citizens

The precise powers of any HoC in the UK Parliamentary system will obviously be a very important decision.

The simple answer would be that it could have **exactly the same powers as the House of Lords does currently**.

This fundamental role of legislative revision and scrutiny could be complemented by:

1. The power to instigate autonomous citizens' assemblies on topics of urgent national interest.
2. An ability to instigate independent public inquiries into matters it considers of significant public importance.

Regular Review

We propose that initially a HoC have the same powers as the House of Lords and, after three years of operation, an independent citizens' review (a citizens' assembly) should be held into the HoC procedures, mechanisms and powers to recommend improvements and changes to the powers of the HoC. Any recommendations from this review with supermajority support should be tabled and debated in parliament.

This citizens' review should then become a regular occurrence, occurring every five-to-seven years. Several years of experience with the HoC would provide ample opportunity to refine the HoC processes and will mean the HoC will not only improve, but thrive.

Implementation of a House of Citizens

This section addresses some of the common questions of implementation, but is not intended to be an exhaustive list. It is important to note that all of these are subject to debate and modification, and all of them should be reviewed regularly.

How large would the House of Citizens be?

Our proposal is that **there should be 325 members of the HoC**, i.e one person from every two geographical constituencies of the UK Parliament, and that this number should change whenever the number of constituencies change.

A second chamber with 325 members would be large enough to be broadly representative of the UK population while being significantly smaller than the current House of Lords and as such should not cost more than the current House of Lords to run.

For how long would a person serve in the House of Citizens?

It is important to balance various aspects of this question: whilst HoC members must have the time necessary to learn their role, being selected for the HoC should not cause long-term disruption to the life of the HoC member, and we should be wary of the potential "institutionalisation" of

these members, whereby they become “players” in the “power game” of parliamentary party politics.

Therefore we propose that HoC members **serve for between one and two years**.

A staggered system of appointment would be used (e.g. a proportion of the HoC would be replaced every six or twelve months) so that the introduction of new members to the HoC would not cause unnecessary disruption and the assembly would contain significant elements of continuity. It is assumed that legislation establishing the HoC would need to include clauses such as those in Statutory Maternity/Paternity Leave legislation and/or those for jury service, whereby employers would guarantee HoC members an equivalent position and salary upon return to work after his or her term of office.

Further considerations should be given to students, the self-employed, small business owners and the like, where additional funds to compensate for an extended absence could be made available.

How often would they meet?

Initially the HoC should sit whenever the House of Lords currently sits, and engage in legislative scrutiny and revision during that time.

How much would a member of the HoC be paid? How much would a HoC cost?

A financial incentive to spend one or two years in the HoC would be essential. We propose that members of the HoC be paid a salary comparable to the base salary of MPs³.

At well over the UK average, this wage would be a substantial increase for most of the people participating in the HoC and would hopefully somewhat offset the disruption caused by a one- or two-year interruption to careers and family life.

Members of the HoC would also be entitled to claim all the expenses an MP is allowed to claim, including for staff, travel, living away from home, disability allowance, etc.

The cost of establishing a HoC may be significant, although we note that the House of Lords currently costs well over £100 million per year.⁴ The most significant cost increase will be salaries (as Lords are not paid a salary) but this will be somewhat offset by not paying Lords' allowances and the significant reduction in the size of this chamber, compared to the House of Lords. Of course the real question is: **“How much should democracy cost?”** – and we should keep in mind that the annual budget of the UK government is typically over £1,000 billion (i.e. over one trillion pounds).

³ which is approximately £84,000 at the time of writing.

⁴

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/parliamentary-monitor-2020/cost-administration>

How would the citizens be selected?

The citizens would be selected using a three-stage civic lottery process, held every two or three years:

1. Official invitations are sent to 30,000 citizens, selected by lottery, inviting people to register their interest in becoming an assembly member, and inviting them to a day of information and discussion about the HoC.
2. After the information day, those that accept the invitation are requested to provide some socio-economic and demographic details, such as:
 - a. Gender;
 - b. Age;
 - c. Constituency (geographical location);
 - d. Education level and/or average regular income;
 - e. Ethnicity;
 - f. Disability Status.
3. An independent body, such as the Electoral Commission, in collaboration with the Office of National Statistics, would then be responsible for guaranteeing the fair selection by lottery⁵ of the people from this group to rotate into the HoC over the coming years, such that the group continues to be a microcosm of UK society.

There are, of course, many other questions about how such a House of Citizens would work; we do not address them here in this brief outline paper.

We only note there that the HoC **should not be a debating chamber but a chamber of informed deliberation and therefore the importance of structure and process cannot be overemphasised**. The aim of the HoC would be to provide a deliberative space where its members come to a moral understanding of the likely effects of legislation and, as such, it should **not** be structured along the usual adversarial lines of parliamentary debating chambers.

Conclusion

The instigation of the world's first **House of Citizens** in a parliamentary setting would be a momentous decision and put the UK at the forefront of democratic innovation and citizen empowerment and engagement.

Such a House of Citizens is **feasible, popular, and indeed an urgent necessity**. It would increase public trust in legislative decisions and boost the confidence of MPs that their bills and laws have broad, well-justified public support.

It would counter the perceived capture of the political process by elites and other vested interests by putting everyday people's voices directly into the legislative process.

It would, indeed, be more than simply the inclusion of people's views into the legislative process. What these deliberating members of society will deliver is more than mere public opinion: they will increase the legitimacy of the UK Parliament by producing informed public judgements.

⁵ "Fair algorithms for selecting citizens' assemblies"

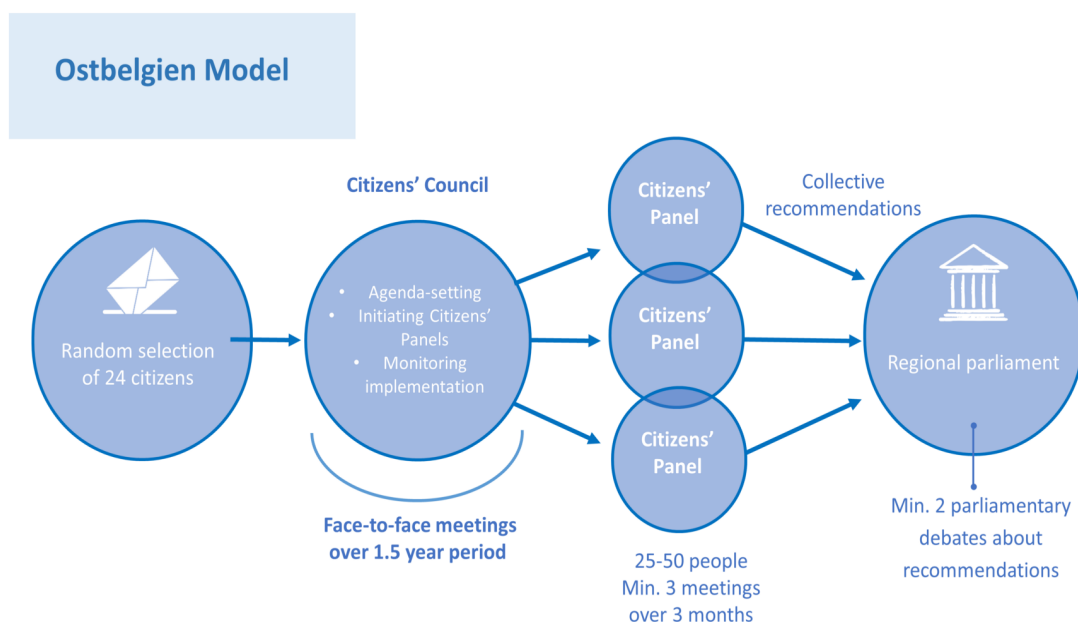
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03788-6>

Appendix: Case Study: A Second Chamber in the Ostbelgien (East Belgian) Parliament

In early 2019 the small Ostbelgien Parliament (in the German-speaking community of Belgium) voted to establish a permanent Citizens' Council of 24 people meeting for 1.5 year terms.⁶ This group can propose up to three topics for consideration by separate Citizens' Panels, whose recommendations are submitted to the elected parliament, which then must consider and publicly respond to them.

The first meeting of the Citizens' Council was in late 2019 and the body is successfully progressing its aims and mission.

In 2021 a similar permanent citizens' council was also established by the Paris City Council.⁷



⁶ Source: OECD: *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (OECD, 2020)

⁷

https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/paris_creates_permanent_citizens_council