

## The Brussels Deliberative Committees Model

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# The Brussels Deliberative Committees Model

## ***What is the question?***

*Deliberative Parliamentary Committees* feature Members of Parliament (MPs) and a random sample of everyday people working in collaboration like an ordinary parliamentary committee. This new mixed member model is taking over Belgium. How has the Brussels Parliament developed an in-house model for blended citizen and MP deliberation, and what lessons have they learned in the process?

## ***What is the usual answer, and why is it inadequate?***

In Australia, Parliamentary Committees take different forms (See, [Parliament of Australia, Committees](#)). The New South Wales Parliament, for example, has *Standing committees* that are created for the life of a Parliament and are typically re-established in successive Parliaments, and *Select committees* that are created as the need arises, for a specific purpose, and thus have a more limited life (See, [New South Wales Parliament, Committees](#)). *Joint committees* draw their membership from, and report to, both Houses of Parliament, enabling Members and Senators to work together. Joint committees may be standing or select and may be statutory committees. *Statutory committees* are those established by an Act of Parliament.

Parliamentary Committees themselves usually don't do their own community engagement or public consultation. While government departments may be obligated to perform community engagement, committees regularly only hear from the most active interests through open-to-all public submissions processes (though submission forms are usually generic and have no meaningful pathway to the decision). This can leave committee members wondering what the wider community might think if given the time and incentives to contribute.

This also limits the community's connection to decision makers, leaving them disengaged and frustrated but also undermining public support for the recommendations that eventuate. This can make advice easy to sideline, sometimes reducing committees to procedural and predictable processes.

## ***What is the Brussels model?***

Like the New South Wales Parliament, The Brussels Regional Parliament and the French-speaking Brussels Parliament (FBR) have several parliamentary committees. They cover the topics under its jurisdiction which include Urban development and housing, Environment, Economy and employment, public transport, sport, education, work, and Local government. These committees are intended to be deliberative in nature. MPs spend time hearing submissions from experts and interest groups, they consider the balance of evidence and return reports to the parliament that demonstrate the agreement they could find. However, these committees often fall along party lines without incentives to find agreement. This, paired with the limited way they involve the public in their considerations, means that they actually are not very deliberative at all.

To address this limitation, Brussels now also has new **deliberative committees** made up of 45 citizens (via democratic lottery) and 15 Members of Parliament (MPs) (See, [Democratie Brussels](#)). They're based on the growing international practice of citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies and minipublics (See, [Forms of Minipublics](#) and [OECD Deliberative Wave](#)).

The original design for institutionalising these committees was written by Magali Plovie when she was an MP for the Green Party. In 2019, she became President of the FBR and immediately moved to table a motion that would change both Parliaments regulations to include a mixed parliamentary committee deliberative model (the MPs of the FBR are the French speaking MPs of the Brussels Regional Parliament, which means that Plovie, as President of the FBR, is also an MP at the Region's Parliament). The regulations that institutionalised the deliberative committees were voted in December 2019 following which, surrounded by expertise from across the globe, the guidelines were written, which specified the practical details of the committees. The two most influential examples from which Plovie and her team in Brussels drew inspiration were the ICC (in Ireland) and the Ostbelgien model in the Belgian German Community (See, [Ireland](#) and [Ostbelgien](#)).

In Brussels, both MPs and citizens contribute to agenda suggestions for up to three deliberative committees each year, but a political body called the Extended Bureau (the ones who elect experts to the Support Committee) decides on the three committee topics. While MPs nominated the topic for the first committee on 5G telecommunications (due to commence in April and conclude in June) a committee can arise from citizens who are able to gather 1,000 signatures on a proposed issue, such as housing and homelessness (the next committee [due to commence in June](#)). Topics have three conditions: (1) the question for the proposed committee cannot ask for a "yes/no" response, (2) it cannot violate human rights, and (3) it must be a topic that is within Parliament's jurisdictional responsibilities.

The committee has a support body that has oversight of the process. This support body is made up of two experts on the discussed topic, two administrative staff from Parliament, four experts/academics experienced with the process of public deliberation. They oversee the process, from start through to the follow-up of recommendations.

In order to secure a miniature population (the 45 citizen members of the deliberative committee), 10,000 invitations are sent to randomised residents. After acceptances are received, a second stratified random draw ensures that relevant demographics are represented in the group. The only requirement for committee members is age (16+ years) and being a resident of Brussels (though residency can be very recent). An honorarium is paid to participants and childcare is offered for those who need it to ensure many people are able to take the time to participate.

A question that is relevant to the topic at hand may be added to the initial invitation. The first deliberative committee, for example, asked: "Do you have a smart phone with 4G?" in order to be eligible to stratify participants by the technology usage. This will happen for future committees—i.e. a question is included in the invitation that matches the needs of the particular topic to ensure a diversity of views.

The deliberative committee meets for approximately five days (over approximately two months) starting with a preparatory session for those who are likely to require familiarisation with the process and a building of confidence to deliberate—for example, young people, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those with disability. A day is dedicated to information offered by experts with opportunities for questions and answers. Then a few days of discussion and deliberation and the development of recommendations. Finally, the committee delivers its report back to the parliament. A six-month deadline is set, from the conclusion of deliberation until a report comes back to the original group, addressing each recommendation and explain why they were accepted or rejected.

### ***What are the benefits?***

#### *Democratic lotteries lead to diverse groups of participants*

The Brussels Parliaments are conducting a democratic lottery that will produce randomly selected and stratified samples of the public that are descriptively representative of the population. This process draws on learnings from The newDemocracy Foundation's approach to participant recruitment and is the current international standard (See, [OECD](#)). These methods reach beyond the usual suspects of community engagement and hear from a wider, representative range of people.

#### *Access to high quality and diverse information*

A key aspect of deliberative engagement is providing an opportunity to learn in-depth about the issue at hand and having access to experts and a range of perspectives to help participants make informed decisions. The Committee system already produces a lot of information and materials on any given topic – processes like this give a mix of people the right incentives to consider these sources before giving their views.

The support body for the process ensures that people with specialist knowledge were able to work with the committee and ensure the deliberative engagement is of high quality and participants have access to relevant and varied expertise and perspectives.

#### *The opportunity for citizens to become directly involved in parliamentary process*

Both the topic nomination process and the opportunity to be randomly chosen to participate offer members of the Brussels community a direct and meaningful role in parliamentary conduct and the consideration of public decisions. We know that when members of the public and MPs are given opportunities to work together it builds trust between the two groups, helping to tackle a wider global trend of growing mistrust between people and politicians.

### ***What are the weaknesses?***

The deliberative committees in Brussels are major innovations in the role minipublics and citizen deliberation can play inside parliamentary process, but they still have some limitations that are worth exploring.

The current financial restriction on the number of committees per year impacts the role the wider public can play in deciding what issues are placed on the agenda. Already MPs have chosen the first topic and citizens have nominated the second, but there is no commitment to reserving a deciding role for the public in future committees. Currently, there is a large campaign underway to raise public awareness of the opportunity to decide on the committee agenda. This may lead to citizens an emphasised role in agenda setting.

Another issue, one that we see here in Australia as well as abroad, is the lack of skilled facilitation to convene and run deliberative processes. As minipublics become more common and governments around the world opt into the benefits they provide, there is growing demand for skilled facilitation. Where this demand cannot be met, facilitators who are not experienced in the field run the risk of hindering well-intentioned and otherwise quality processes. It's important that the Brussels Parliaments are aware of this and works proactively to either upskill their own internal staff or encourage growth in the local

facilitation ecosystem through educational tools. (See, UTS Courses, [Doing Deliberative Democracy](#) and [Leading Deliberative Democracy](#)).

### ***What might change in the future?***

Deliberative committees are sweeping across Belgium. The Federal Parliament is considering replicating the Brussels model in its entirety. As more and more committees are created and completed, their success might lead to a strengthening of the commitments made to their resourcing and authority. We might see more committees per year, and we might even see an agenda setting committee that contributes to the list of issues set to be addressed.

The committees themselves might evolve. We know that positive experiences with citizen deliberation leads to growing trust in the process among MPs. This could lead to a separation between mixed deliberative committees and wholly citizen-led deliberative committees (there are only so many committees MPs can be a part of).

### ***What might this look like in Australia?***

Australia has parliamentary committees similar to those in Belgium. A small first step may be for Committee Chairs to meet to understand if this could be useful for them to trial. A bigger step would be taking a leaf from the Belgian Parliament and adopting the Brussels model. Or we could experiment on our own innovation – here are two suggestions:

#### **1. A mixed deliberative committee on an issue.**

At the Federal or State level, we should experiment with the Brussels model and implement a form of mixed deliberative committee that allows MPs and citizens to work together and address a topic handed to them by the parliament.

#### **2. A mixed deliberative joint standing committee on democracy.**

Currently, the review and consideration of our democratic processes is left to each parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM). These JSCEMs have membership limited to MPs and so restrict public participation in the setting of the rules relating to our democracy to the usual underwhelming public submissions processes. We should democratise the governance of our democracy and create a mixed joint standing committee on democracy that brings together MPs and citizens to make recommendations to parliament.

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