

Hitting climate change head-on

JOANNA SANTA BARBARA

Are our current democratic processes, with partisan divisions, the very best form to steer us through the most pressing, difficult and controversial issues? What about those issues, such as climate change, in which parliamentarians are particularly vulnerable to lobbying by corporate oil, gas, coal and other interests? Are there any alternatives?

Several interested folk from the top of the south travelled to Wellington recently for a one-day conference which addressed these questions - Rachel Sanson, new councillor with Nelson City Council, Chris Cameron, soon to be Nelson's Climate Champion, Joanna and Jack Santa Barbara, members of Zero Carbon Nelson Tasman. They learned that the Citizens' Assembly process can be applied to any controversial issue, such as abortion or assisted suicide, and it is particularly suitable for the value conflicts that arise over taking action on climate breakdown. Ireland has held a Citizens' Assembly on this topic, with constructive results. The UK and France have begun such a process.

The Citizens' Assembly is designed to work towards consensus in a randomly selected group of ordinary citizens, after they have had some opportunity to understand an issue, and have deliberated on many aspects of it.



Jack and Joanna Santa Barbara, Rachel Sanson and Climate Champion Chris Cameron at the Wellington conference on forming a citizens' assembly.

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Here is how it works in Ireland. The random selection of say, 100 citizens, ensures adequate representation by age, geography, gender, ethnicity and any other dimensions thought to be relevant. The Assembly meets over a series of weekends. Initially there is carefully pre-

pared input, focusing on scientific evidence. (The independent Climate Change Commission in New Zealand could be a suitable body to ensure unbiased information.) The citizens may also request expert input of their own choosing. The citizens then have an opportunity to deliberate, toss

opinions back and forth and listen carefully to other points of view. These sessions are professionally facilitated to ensure everyone's voice is heard. Observers say that, having understood many points of view, the groups tend to converge in their final positions. Finally,

there is a vote on detailed aspects of the question.

The outcome is received by a multi-party parliamentary committee, who work through it and report to parliament, which then votes on the issue. In applications in other countries, a referendum of the population may also be involved in the process.

The attendees at the Wellington conference ended the day of exploration by favouring such a process on the issue of climate action. They felt strongly that Maori representation was important, and incorporation of Maori values into the process was essential. Many wanted the inclusion of young people over 16 in the population for random selection.

The outcome in Ireland produced a series of strong recommendations for energetic climate action by the government. While it cannot be assumed ahead what the outcome of a NZ Citizens' Assembly on climate action would be, it is thought likely that it might give risk-averse politicians a clear mandate for the urgent action required on the issue. One of the big challenges with dealing with climate breakdown is that some of the changes required will be difficult. A Citizens' Assembly is a way for parliamentarians to understand the citizen support available for the hard but necessary choices, and to move beyond partisan positions in determining our climate future.

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