



By: **Harvey Morris**

Could a lottery-based people's assembly replace UK's House of Lords?



As the British public's faith in its politicians teeters around all-time opinion poll lows, the once fringe concept of sortition – government by randomly selected forums of ordinary citizens – is increasingly entering the mainstream.

Sortition's partisans believe that a system based on the wisdom of the common man and woman would provide a more effective expression of democracy than one dominated by self-serving politicians.

Those same politicians might be expected to oppose a concept that threatens to make them redundant. And yet, in recent years, "the UK parliament has supported the establishment of sortition-based citizens" assemblies to deliberate and make recommendations on policy issues such as climate change and social care.

Sortition already operates uncontroversially in the law courts, where randomly selected juries drawn from all sections of society determine the guilt or innocence of defendants.

Transferred to the realm of politics, the system would theoretically turn governance into a social chore in which all citizens would be obliged to participate without any expectation of reward or preferment.

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Assemblies of a few hundred disinterested citizens, representing the shades of opinion of society as a whole, would surely come up with more rational and consensual answers to problems than party-aligned politicians. Or so the theory goes.

It is an idea that has gained traction only in the last 20 years as political theorists – and voters – have increasingly begun to question the effectiveness of party politics.

The theory was laid out several decades earlier by the late Oxford classicist Maurice Pope, who described the ancient Greek origins of government by lottery in his book *The Keys to Democracy*.

In the 1980s, however, his novel arguments in favour of sortition failed to find a publisher in the face of the received wisdom of the day that conventional party-based elections were the only means of delivering democracy.

The book was finally published this year, by which time a new generation of theorists and commentators had begun to examine the options it first explored.

In his 2023 book *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, the economist and Financial Times columnist Martin Wolf laid out the possible advantages of sortition within the existing political system.

"One would be to create deliberative assemblies to investigate specific contentious issues", Wolf writes.

"These citizen juries would exist for a time-limited period. They would be advised by officials, as juries are by judges, and be allowed to call witnesses. They would seek to reach an agreed position, or at least one backed by a strong majority of participants".

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Another supporter of randomly selected citizens assemblies is the one-time Conservative prime ministerial hopeful Rory Stewart. He unsuccessfully argued in 2019 that such a people's jury could have resolved the UK's post-Brexit political deadlock.

He has since challenged the belief that elected politicians are more competent than the general public when it comes to making policy decisions. During his time in government, "I

had discovered how grotesquely unqualified so many of us, including myself, were for the offices we were given".

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With governments determining the topics for debate and retaining the right to adopt or reject the advice offered, such forums would be little more than glorified focus groups.

Deprived of any legislative clout, they might merely serve to help elected politicians restore their credibility with the public.

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In 2004 a panel of 160 randomly selected residents of the Canadian province of British Columbia were mandated to make recommendations on electoral reform.

More recently, a small German-speaking region of Belgium and the capital city Brussels have come up with versions of sortition-based governance. And, in the interim, countries as far apart as Mexico and Mongolia adopted sortition-based reforms.

In Ireland, citizen assemblies opened the way for referenda that liberalised the law on abortion and same-sex marriage.

Britain may be a latecomer but, in the view of the sortitionists, it has one unique institution that is ripe for sortition-based reform - the unelected House of Lords.

Despite the necessary role it plays in scrutinising government legislation, the bloated upper house has seen its reputation tarnished by the unmerited elevation of party

funders and political cronies.

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The not-for-profit Sortition Foundation is among those who are now calling for the abolition of the Lords and its replacement by a citizens-based assembly.

A YouGov poll, commissioned this year by the foundation, found that this was the single most popular reform option, favoured by 23 per cent of respondents.

The foundation, which was recruited to help establish a government authorised citizen assembly on the climate, says a House of Citizens would be representative of the whole UK.

"Our friends, family, shopkeepers, teachers, doctors and nurses would make the key decisions about how we live together, and they would hold our politicians to account", its campaign literature declares.

Bringing ancient Athenian-style democracy to the corridors of Westminster may seem like an outlandish sortitionist dream. There are many solid arguments against the vision as there are in its favour.

But a more modest extension of citizen participation in decision-making could turn out to be the best way to reverse growing disillusionment with the current democratic system.

In that context, the sacrifice of the House of Lords could be a small price to pay and a good place to start.