



Citizens' Assembly
of Scotland
Seanadh nan
Saoranach de dh'Alba

Kate Wimpres
Convener

Email: [Redacted S.38(i)(b)]

Michael Russell MSP
Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs
Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
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14th May 2020

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

The Citizens' Assembly of Scotland; a response in light of Covid 19

I hope that you and your family are keeping safe and well during these testing times.

I am aware that, in the present crisis, you will have many urgent considerations in your Cabinet Secretary role on the best use of the Scottish Government's resources in facing the current and future challenges.

I am contacting you in my role as Convener of the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland. It seems to me that we are at an important juncture in our journey as an Assembly. I would like to propose some changes in our remit and governance, both of which I think will make the Assembly more relevant to the very difficult decisions that your government has to make.

As you know, the two concluding weekends of the Assembly were postponed to ensure compliance with the necessary distancing measures. This was a difficult decision to take given the commitment shown by the Assembly Members thus far, more than matched by the depth and quality of the work they had undertaken since first meeting in October 2019. It is my sense that your words at the Castle, at that time, were embraced across the Assembly, so it was with great sadness that I had to pause their deliberations, curtailing the continued enthusiasm for the tasks in hand.

As you will be aware, more than most, things are moving fast. Just a few short days ago I had a hope, fading as it was, that the Assembly could reconvene at the Golden Jubilee Conference Centre in the autumn to proceed with our work. It is becoming clearer that a meeting in person for a group as large as the Assembly will no longer be possible until well beyond the timeframe that we could reasonably expect our Members to stay engaged.

However, with all challenges come opportunities and I have been watching with interest how the work of both the Climate Assembly UK and Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat has moved online, using the latest technologies to assemble, deliberate and conclude. I am very excited about the possibilities an online Assembly could afford

Scotland, particularly one that is able to build on the existing work, experience, and relationships built up by the participants across the four weekends staged thus far.

Furthermore, unlike the two online assemblies cited above, the remit of the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland provides a unique opportunity for deliberation around the post Covid-19 renewal we will undertake as a nation. Our Assembly members have already considered:

- What kind of country are we seeking to build?
- How best can we overcome the challenges Scotland and the world face in the 21st century, including those arising from Brexit?
- What further work should be carried out to give us the information we need to make informed choices about the future of the country?

This would make the work of the Assembly even more relevant than it was previously. Creating the ideal starting point for the 'adult conversation' that the First Minister set out in her decision making framework as we embark on our 'new normal'. It goes without saying that all things are different now, but it feels like an opportunity is emerging from adversity. We were thinking about the country we wanted to get to from where we were, now we need to think about how we get there from where we are now.

I have been in touch with many of the Assembly members since the decision to postpone, and their enthusiasm appears undimmed. 94% of those responding to our keeping in touch questionnaire wanted to keep engaged, with the most prevalent issue raised being the importance of considering the Assembly in light of Covid-19.

What I would like to propose is that the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland moves online, to conclude our deliberations around the kind of country we are seeking to build; in light of Covid-19. Our Assembly members have engaged in four weekends of deliberation, are the ideal citizens to lead on the adult conversation required, and can work with us to innovate online, with the inevitable challenges cast up by technology grounded by their existing real life connections. The deliberations could build on contributions to the online Citizen Space, within the Coronavirus (Covid 19): framework for decision making.

The last few weeks have illustrated that change can happen with incredible haste; the huge switch to digital, home working, less travel, hyper localism, support for front line staff. I feel the work of the Assembly could reflect upon and build consensus in these times of rapid change, purposefully and in a ground-breaking fashion. This proposal would mean the Assembly could begin work again relatively soon. Whilst it will require more frequent online sessions across a longer timeframe, the savings on accommodation and catering could provide a cost effective way for Scotland to be the first country to employ the minds of a randomly selected group of citizens to shaping their future.

As I mentioned this will, of course, require a fresh look at the governance, delivery and resourcing of the Assembly. I will commence this with input from the existing Secretariat and Stewarding Group, if you agree there is merit in this proposal to shift the process and the focus of the Assembly.

I would be very happy to discuss my thoughts and look forward to hearing how you feel this can best move forwards.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted S.38(i)(b)]

Kate Wimpress