Transcript

Episode 2: Live from Montreal: Innovations in Democracy

[00:00:00] **Sabreena Delhon:** Sarah, when I say democracy, you say...

[00:00:03] **Sarah Yaffe:** I mean, the first thing that comes to mind is voting, but that's the last thing I wanna talk about when it comes to democracy. The core of democracy is people, is all of us, and is about looking to work together to come to some common public good.

[00:00:19] **Sabreena Delhon:** Malorie, how about you? When I say democracy, you say...

[00:00:24] **Malorie Flon:** Needs love, creativity, dialogue, all of these enters because democracy is a system and it needs care at this time, and creativity.

[00:00:35] **Sabreena Delhon:** Bianca?

[00:00:37] **Bianca Wylie:** I'm currently grappling with cynicism and nihilism, being the two words that come to mind.

[00:00:44] **Sabreena Delhon:** Hi, I'm Sabreena Delhon. Welcome to Group Chat, where we make sense of what's happening in our democracy with a few friends.

[00:00:52] Back in the fall, the Samara Centre for Democracy hosted a live event in Montreal. We called it “Democratic Innovation: What's Working, What's Not Necessary, and What's Next?” We all know democracy is in trouble, in crisis even. But during this event, I wanted to focus on creativity and innovation because that's happening too.

[00:01:21] But it wasn't easy. It's like when you get together with friends and you don't necessarily bring up the good things happening in your life. So, you focus on the stuff you're having trouble with too much. The same thing happened in Montreal, and I get it. We're all scared of the democratic backsliding we're seeing around the world. But it's also important, maybe even more so now, to spotlight innovation.

[00:01:46] Malorie Flon is the Executive Director of the Institut du Nouveau Monde (INM), a nonpartisan organization that promotes citizen participation. Bianca Wiley is a partner at Digital Public, a digital rights agency. And Sarah Yaffe is a director with Mass LBP, where she bridges the gap between citizens and governments.

[00:02:08] Here's our live conversation at the Institute for Research on Public Policy in Montreal. It was recorded in October 2024. I tried to set the mood with the first question and asked each panelist to share a democratic innovation they're excited about.

[00:02:29] Malorie, what's inspiring you and why?

[00:02:32] **Malorie Flon:** So, one democratic innovation that I'm very excited about these days and that I think we should look at and follow in upcoming years, is the Bürgerdialog in the German-speaking community of East Belgium. So, I don't know if you guys have heard of it, but it's the first permanent, deliberative mechanism that's formally connected to the institutional framework of a parliament. So, it's a citizens' assembly connected to an institutional parliament, so it's very interesting.

[00:03:08] **Sabreena Delhon:** Bianca, what about you? Counter the nihilism, please.

[00:03:12] **Bianca Wylie:** Yeah, I got something for you. Accountability is a big word that comes to mind for that. But I was asked to sign my name to the umbrella I borrowed from a hotel today, which has never happened to me before. I'm saying this to everybody 'cause if someone could yell, "umbrella", maybe when we're done, I won't leave it there 'cause I feel like I'm going to be on the hook for it. I say this genuinely because holding each other accountable and holding shared responsibility is an opportunity that I always see when I look at democracy. I live in the city of Toronto and the innovation that was, you know, born of the necessity through COVID was remote deputations for city council meetings. So, before COVID started, you could only show up and make a deputation in person or in writing, and then what happened, as a necessary way to keep business going, and to keep people's voices at City Hall, was that we were able to now do it by video or by calling in, and that's maintained itself. Access to everything and everything in our democracy, in our workplaces and in our political systems. So that's a very hopeful thing for me that I hope we can maintain.

[00:04:19] **Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah. Sarah, you just hosted an international conversation all about the topic of democracy and public participation. What came out of that program that excited you?

[00:04:31] **Sarah Yaffe:** So many things. You said earlier that this was gonna be a conversation that was fun and for me, democracy needs to be fun, and it needs to be something that is active and that we do and that we practice. So, one of the innovations from that conference that I'm super excited about is a program called Democracy Fitness, and it's from friends in Denmark. We Do Democracy is the [name of the] organization, and it's about building skills in people to be able to participate and feel comfortable practicing democracy every day. So, it's short, fun, active trainings around things like courage or compromise or disagreement. Things that are essential components of democracy, but also our everyday lives

and our conversations with our partners and our children, and our colleagues. I think those are the pieces that are part of democracy that we don't tend to think about as much but are really essential.

[00:05:36] Sabreena Delhon: After our warmup question on democratic innovations, we dove into a term we hear a lot these days – deliberative democracy. Our panel got into what it is and why we need it. Here's Malorie.

[00:05:49] **Malorie Flon:** It's a difficult life. There are all kinds of problems we need to solve, and no one can solve them alone. So, we need to put ourselves together and find solutions and just take information and talking and looking at different options together to find the best one. And that's really what deliberative democracy is, I think. How do we live together, really? And how do we solve our problems together?

[00:06:16] **Bianca Wylie:** It's, it's a practice of speaking to someone and probably a group of people about something that you need to share your views on to make a decision about. But I would really stress the importance of the conversation because the relationships stay forever. Because when the decision's made, y'all still gotta live together. And that's the crux of a healthy democracy and a healthy collective society.

[00:06:40] **Sabreena Delhon:** Sarah?

[00:06:42] **Sarah Yaffe:** I mean, the only thing I would add there is the idea of like a temporal element that there is time built into it so that we don't have to, you know, it's not just making an, an immediate decision, it's actually having thoughtful conversations and being able to actually then reflect on those conversations and maybe even change your mind a little bit and think about what somebody else said, and then come together to produce something that works for everyone.

[00:07:07] **Sabreena Delhon:** Mm-hmm. Malorie, what makes deliberative democracy different from how we normally do democracy?

[00:07:15] **Malorie Flon:** Maybe normal democracy in most people's minds is representative democracy. So, it’s we vote for people who represent us, so they make the decisions, you know, and govern. The way we talk about deliberative democracy is adding a component to make sure that the population that these people represent can actually also be part of the solution and influence decision making. People coming together and actually exchanging opinions and perspectives and trying to find those solutions together.

[00:07:55] **Sabreena Delhon:** Bianca, I wanna pick up on something that Malorie said about representative democracy and do you think it's run its course? What does deliberative democracy tell us about where we're at right now?

[00:08:06] **Bianca Wylie:** Yeah, representative democracy is – it would be ahistorical to say it's gonna work now. Like, I think we have to be very pragmatic in the moment and say like, what parts of it can be salvaged? It will probably always be a part of it, but what else do we bring into what democracy is, functionally? For me personally, I just, there is no ideology, there is no party, there is no leader that will ever take power and then it's hands off. It's not gonna happen. It doesn't matter which of any of those things it is, the more people are involved, the better the shot at shared power. That's it. So, there's no out here.

[00:08:45] And I also think that I've been very interested in, I don't know if people here are familiar with Elinor Ostrom's work, she won a Nobel Prize for her work on the commons, which was about sharing resources, primarily agricultural. So, you hear more about self-governance, you hear about like, maybe we can do it ourselves, land trusts. There's some mechanisms that are really showing signs of self-governance.

[00:09:10] But we have to be real and pragmatic. Do people want to spend hours a week in community meetings? No. Do people have the time to do that? No. Is there money transferred to that? No. And is anyone transferring power from a federal, provincial, regional, or municipal level to the people? No. So we are in a bit of a bind here in terms of like, has it run its course? Definitely. So, we're gonna have to figure out how we deal with decades of shifting power, I think, as like a big part of what democracy and its evolution looks like.

[00:09:42] **Sabreena Delhon:** Right. And Sarah, that's a big part of your work, which connects to citizens' assemblies, which are a form of deliberative democracy, which is something we increasingly hear about now, especially how they're working out in Europe, so you use this practice quite a bit. Can you walk us through how citizens' assemblies actually work and give us a real-world example?

[00:10:05] **Sarah Yaffe:** Sure. I mean, essentially citizens' assemblies are opportunities for public problem-solving processes, and they bring together everyday people to learn about a specific issue, to enter into conversation with each other and with experts, and then to issue a set of consensus recommendations to policy makers.

[00:10:27] And that involves, you know, several important steps along the way. But most important is the learning part and the conversation part. You know, MASS has run over 50 processes over the last 15 years. We are currently working in the city of Victoria and Saanich in British Columbia to run a process with a group of 48 citizens there to determine

whether or not those two municipalities should amalgamate. And it's a question that, you know, has been under consideration for a long time, and policymakers are looking for a sense of what the community, as a consensus recommendation, wants to share.

[00:11:06] **Sabreena Delhon:** Can you break down what does that – how many people are involved, are they all together in a room? Like really paint the picture for us.

[00:11:11] **Sarah Yaffe:** Yeah.

[00:11:12] **Sabreena Delhon:** And the amount of time as well 'cause I don't think it's a one-day thing.

[00:11:16] **Sarah Yaffe:** No. So, it depends on the process. It's never one day. Um, assemblies can be at, you know, anywhere from sort of 36 to 150 people. The process in, in Victoria is 48 people. They are randomly selected. That part is essential. They are a group of people who have entered, who have received a letter in the mail and entered into a lottery. And then said, "yes, I wanna volunteer to do this". And then they are selected through a civic lottery practice that makes sure that the people in the room are broadly representative of the diversity of that community. And what we do to make sure, you know, to your point, does anyone have time? Does anyone have the ability to do that? What we do is make sure that we remove every possible barrier for people to participate. So, if you get that letter, if you want to participate, if you get selected in the lottery, we will, you know, cover your travel. We will make sure that you're fed, we will cover childcare. If you have to miss work to attend a meeting, then we will make sure that you're compensated for lost wages. So, we really wanna make sure people have every opportunity to participate in those conversations. In this case they'll come together and, you know, to the point earlier around needing a lot of time, this will be over eight months. So, it's one Saturday a month for eight months. Sometimes they, the processes are, you know, more condensed. But there really does need to be time for people to learn and to reflect and to consider, and then to work together, and to Bianca's point, to develop relationships and understand where other people are coming from because the idea is that that group is really representative, that they can look out and say, you know, "this is our community in a room".

[00:13:02] **Sabreena Delhon:** So, I've heard people sometimes describe being part of a citizens' assembly, like jury duty. Do you think that's a helpful comparator?

[00:13:13] **Malorie Flon:** Yes, I think so. And also sometimes we talk of citizens' assemblies, but there's been citizen juries as such. In fact, us at INM, we do this methodology for citizen participations. We've been doing it for 15, 20 years as well. And most often we called it citizen juries or citizen panels sometimes. And the idea is the same. It's that we allow a sample of people to participate to a process. These people are randomly selected, so it's a very diverse group in the end.

It's an opportunity to serve, really, and to contribute to a reflection on, it can be a public policy issue, an ethical choice, that a public institution has to make on some topic. So, I think it's actually a very similar thing to jury duty because people can, they can say no, but they can also come and they go through a process of information and deliberation with their peers in order to come up with sort of a verdict. It's not exactly a verdict, but it's a statement. It's argumented and it's a way forward and usually also, their work is driven by a question that is asked to them, and they have to examine this question and answer it and justify their response. So, it's actually a good metaphor to understand the process.

[00:14:52] **Sabreena Delhon:** I wanna go a bit deeper on some of the challenges. So, Bianca, when we were preparing for this event, you said something that really struck me, which was "we aren't facing a knowledge problem, but an incentives problem". Can you explain what you mean by that?

[00:15:08] **Bianca Wylie:** Sure thing. There's a book that was written, I think in 1992, by John Ralston Saul, and it's called Voltaire's Bastards. It's about this thick – it's got a lot of military history in it, but his thesis is that we went from being, in western culture, dominated by religion to now basically knowledge has become religion. And so when I say knowledge, you know, and my business partner Sean likes to say, "don't bring knowledge to an incentive fight". And I see that as when people think if you just show up and keep saying the thing and you're right, and you just say it over and over and over, that somehow the person you're talking to or the institution you're talking to, is gonna change their mind. They might even agree with you, but they're not incentivized to agree with you. They're incentivized to do something else. So that's what I mean, it's like everything is incentivized by a capital structure, but we've got a lot of problems that would require inefficient, costly, moral choices. But that's not how anyone's job or institution is set up right now, for the most part.

[00:16:16] **Sabreena Delhon:** Right.

[00:16:17] **Bianca Wylie:** So that's a problem because I also think when we talk about communities coming together, I will tell you, as someone who has worked with people, I've got reports on my shelves from the seventies, eighties, nineties, the community has told the government numerous times what the problems are. So, it's even a little bit frustrating to be called together again. I just, I don't think we're missing knowledge. I'm not even sure that we're missing solutions. What we're missing is the incentive structure to operate differently. That's missing. And that's a big question. I'm not saying there's an easy democratic solution to that, but you can't pretend that we have knowledge problems. Like, I just don't think that's the problem.

[00:17:01] **Sabreena Delhon:** Sarah, Malorie, jump in. What do you think?

[00:17:03] **Sarah Yaffe:** Yeah, I mean, I think one of the things that's sort of interesting about that and that did come up a lot in the conference that you mentioned, is the idea of, you know, needing to think in a much more long-term way than our current structures allow. And the idea of, you know, election cycles and politics and power doesn't incentivize us to think in the way of what our planet needs, and what people need, and what future generations need, and what non-humans need. So, there are a lot of considerations that aren't getting into play in the current systems and structures that we have.

[00:17:43] It is something that assemblies can do quite well because everyday people aren't thinking about needing to get re-elected. They're thinking about what they want for their families and for their grandchildren. And, you know, that is a way of bringing those kinds of perspectives to policymakers in a real, you know, informed way that ideally, they can take up and implement.

[00:18:07] **Malorie Flon:** But most of these citizens' assemblies and juries and panels that we saw in recent years, they were one-off things on one particular topic. So, I'm coming back to my innovative thing of East Belgium that I mentioned earlier. What I find very interesting in that model, it's that the way it's built in the institution, there's a citizens' council that helps decide and frame the mandate of citizens' assemblies that will be called upon. But the citizens' council, which is like the permanent body of the system, also has the mandate to follow up the progression of the citizens' recommendations within political institutions. So, it becomes possible to actually see how citizens' recommendations through time make their way through the society and how politicians and parliamentarians do things with those recommendations. So that's like the benefit of thinking about these mechanisms in terms of bringing them a step further, in terms of impact and try to see, how can they be – Yes, they will always be, well, maybe not, but for a time they will be consultative and elected officials will make decisions informed by these recommendations. But we do need to see on a longer term and how to build these mechanisms into our political institutions and democratic institutions in a way that actually changes things. That's interesting. That's what we need to do.

[00:19:55] **Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah. It sounds like what you're explaining is that the incentive aspect comes from respect and responsiveness, and I wonder if you can relate this to a moment where public trust in democratic institutions is low. Is this maybe an opportunity to be leveraged through these deliberative processes? [00:20:18] Malorie Flon: I think so. I think so because if we better align citizens' preoccupations with elected officials' preoccupations and the work that is done through those institutions at the heart of our democracy, and I think that's what citizens' assemblies have the potential to do, to find that better alignment.

[00:20:44] If we better align, then we will strengthen trust in those institutions because people will see how they align,

will see more impact. They will not be reconvened five years after having been consulted on an issue to say what the solutions are again. There will be a better alignment, more efficiency, and impact to those public decisions that we need to make. Well, that's the bet.

[00:21:13] **Sarah Yaffe:** I also think that these processes, deliberative processes, can and have been used in an embedded way in non-government examples. So, I think it's in Nottingham, there's a museum that has incorporated deliberative processes into their strategy and their ongoing planning. In setting those examples of how to involve people, in setting strategy and thinking to the future of major institutions that are non-governmental, it does show what is possible. And the more that happens in cultural institutions, in the health sector, in education, people then have more opportunities to serve, have more opportunities to see what these kinds of processes can do. And then hopefully, share that with representatives, and then build that kind of democratic activation through all of society.

[00:22:14] **Bianca Wylie:** I think I have a different frame on this because I don't think you're supposed to trust the government. I think the state only functions when it is understood it needs agitation, it needs to be held accountable. That is not once in a while, that is always because we are still only trending toward any version of social justice. We are not there. We have never been there. The state is a necessary machine. I think of it as a sharing machine. We can do mutual aid, we can help each other on the block. We can help each other in community. But you can't scale that across the country. You can't mutual aid an MRI. You can't mutual aid a highway system. So, we need that state infrastructure. But to get it to function for us in good state, like, that's always gonna need agitation. Much like the legal system requires that cases are brought, you have to bring the case to adapt the courts. So, you have to reorganize your mind to understand you have to stay holding the state accountable. But it's a necessary thing. It's a necessary thing, and democracy is the way in which we do it. I love it when people come at me and critique me and hold me accountable.

[00:23:26] That to me is part of living in democracy together. And I also wanna come back to the word consensus because what I learned running a public meeting, if we were doing a public meeting tonight when I used to run a public meeting, consensus is a myth as far as I'm concerned. A very successful public meeting is everyone getting up and going, “I guess I can live with it”. Like God, I get like, “okay that's good, yeah, that's what good looks like”. So, like some of these things, you need to understand that, like those are things that look good. Adversarial state engagement is good and being like, “ah, I don't love it, but it's all right”, that's actually gold standard. If everyone in the room can leave with that kind of a mood, that's fantastic.

[00:24:06] **Sabreena Delhon:** I wanna pick up on the point you made about scale in there, and Malorie turn to you. You get to work a lot with the public, including youth, getting them more engaged. How can we make these participatory

practices scale and have a larger impact? And you know, maybe address some of the aspects of the relationship that Bianca just noted there. But talk to us about scaling deliberative practices, is that possible?

[00:24:34] **Malorie Flon:** Well, it goes back to trust a bit too. So yeah, I'll connect to what you were saying, Bianca. I do think that we, in order for youth and young people to be engaged and participate in this society, be it to make sure the government is accountable and be vigilant, or be it to do other things, they need to trust that their work, their action, will have an impact. And so I would like to bring maybe a distinction with trust in the government and trust in public institutions and democratic institutions. I think it's very different. The government, as the public, we can say, “we don't agree with this, we want to hold them accountable and eventually not re-elect them”.

[00:25:30] The democratic institutions at the heart of our democracy, like the National Assembly here, it's the space where conflicts can be expressed. Again, it's a deliberative space. The people aren't in that space. It's elected officials and we're talking about citizens’ assemblies as a way sometimes to maybe help the people participate in these deliberations, but as an institution, I think it's important we build that trust and I think that it's important for young people and the population at large to actually trust this institution to be active in their community and to participate in making this community stronger, better, more resilient, more equalitarian, for instance. So scaling is a real question. Like I don't have the recipe, but I think that trust is an ingredient for scaling it. And, because eventually, if we lose trust in these institutions, people stop voting. These institutions are even less legitimate because fewer and fewer people have actually elected these people. So, it's like, it's something that I think we need to care about.

[00:26:45] **Sabreena Delhon:** Sarah, talk to us about scale and trust.

[00:26:47] **Sarah Yaffe:** I think scale is really hard with this. People think scale, they think tech, you know, we'll go online, we'll get lots of people involved. I think that, in these cases, doesn't really work. You lose the representative part. You lose the deliberative part. For me, I think scale goes back to democracy fitness and goes to a grassroots level of everyone gaining more skills in the pieces of being able to actively participate in society and in democratic processes, wherever they may be. Maybe that's joining a board, maybe that's volunteering somewhere. Maybe that's just getting more actively involved in your community and having a better understanding and a better ability to participate actively. That's my hope for scale.

[00:27:34] **Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah. Well, Bianca, technology is often presented as the scaling solution. Talk to us about that please.

[00:27:44] **Bianca Wylie:** Yeah, it's a disaster show. And for democracy, for sure, for relationships. To me, relationships are highly inefficient. Good relationships require so much back and forth and so much presence, and so much patience, and none of that is incentivized online.

[00:27:59] So I think the answers to scale are to leverage pre-existing functional scale, which is to protect the labor that does what happens in the public service. And that's critical. Because where I get scared is that technology is gonna start eating the public service in a way that you would need a surgeon to really carefully apply technology to the public service 'cause it's both not defensible in the way it's operating, and if you were to automate it, it would be terrible. But I just go back to scale, disaster, and good to go to where people are already and all these institutions and all the places both of you name. That's how you leverage preexisting places where you can – you don't want new anything. You don't want novelty, we don't need new stuff. You know, culturally, we gotta stop doing that. We have institutional scaffolding to pull and to use.

[00:28:49] **Sabreena Delhon:** Well, I'm gonna move onto what's next and where we should be putting our energy. So, I know this is supposed to be more of a positive conversation, but I also wanna set the stakes, right? So, Malorie, if we don't get this right, what are the consequences? Where might democracy be headed?

[00:29:06] **Malorie Flon:** Well, people will lose interest, it can lead to living in authoritarian regimes, really. That's what's happening in other countries as well. We've seen throughout the world in the last 40 years that democracies have been declining and there are societies that live with less and less civil liberties. I talked a lot about the parliament, but there's this distinction with the judicial system, the executive system, the role of the public services. So, all of this regime that we live in, we need to strengthen it and make it more relevant. Then people will invest in these institutions and make sure they adapt to our needs and the trust will remain.

[00:30:00] **Sarah Yaffe:** I fully agree with all of that. I also think it's so essential that we protect high quality information and journalism, and that our media system is falling apart. Technology has played a big role in that. Social media has played a big role in that. We have elevated non-experts to roles of experts, and we've lost a sense of, you know, what is good, high-quality information. And that is the fundamental piece of a functional democracy. And I think, you know, we have to be really, really careful about that.

[00:30:35] **Sabreena Delhon:** Bianca, what's at stake?

[00:30:37] **Bianca Wylie:** Probably the most dangerous thing right now, it's why I said nihilism and cynicism. We are so hyper individual at this point now, and I don't know if anyone understands it, like that's not, that's not it. Like we can't do

that. And every place you turn, you're being told, “be collective”, but nothing in the structures that is supposed to be supporting collective life is there anymore. Not that it always was. But we're really down a path right now where the idea that you can individually pull off a lot of what has to happen now, it's not true.

[00:31:11] I know I'm always sounding like, “ugh”, like this. But the thing is like, I'm fun too. No, but really, we have to be able to talk about these things and not think that – The only way we can get through 'em is to talk about 'em a lot. Like we have to be able to look at each other. You're gonna get into something hard. You're gonna say something wrong, and then you gotta be like, “yeah, I stepped in it. Sorry. Next”. And that we don't throw each other away. And that's really critical in our democratic cultural moment too. And that's something I think is like really beautiful in abolitionist circles is like, it doesn't matter what you did, you're still allowed to be here. You know, like we still gotta live together. And I think that's beautiful. So, like the heavy stuff, we have to be able to talk about it a lot and know that that's okay too, you know, and be able to laugh at the same time. And so, I think we also need to address that.

[00:31:57] **Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah. Sarah?

[00:31:58] **Sarah Yaffe:** I was just gonna say, like, my response to all of that, which is all really valid, and to the nihilism and cynicism is like, just do something. Do something. Do anything. Do a thing that you think might be helpful in your community, just do it. And you know, don't be afraid of maybe getting it wrong. Like I think we are always afraid of not doing the perfect thing and we just have to do something.

[00:32:27] **Sabreena Delhon:** Thanks to Malorie, Bianca, and Sarah. Thanks to our live audience and to the Institute for Research on Public Policy for hosting us in their space. And thank you for listening to Group Chat. I'm Sabreena Delhon, CEO of the Samara Centre for Democracy. Group Chat is executive produced by Debbie Pacheco. The Group Chat team also includes Farha Akhtar, Andrea Mariko Grant, and Beatrice Wayne. Theme music is by Projectwhatever. The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity that produces groundbreaking research, dynamic events, and educational resources that advance a vibrant culture of civic engagement across Canada. Donate to support our work and check out our other podcasts @samaracentre.ca. If you like us, help spread the word about our show. Subscribe, rate, and review this podcast. If you teach, share it with your class. A special thanks to the Flanagan Foundation and the Rideau Hall Foundation for their support.