

Transcript



Group
Chat

Beyond Elections: Mini Publics as a Tool of Democratic Renewal with Dr. Seána Glennon

[00:00:00] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Ireland has sort of a referendum culture, so we seem to be constantly having referendums. You have to have a referendum if you want to change the constitution. And there was no divorce in Ireland up until the '90s. And I think I was about eight when the divorce referendum happened, and the no campaign, so the no divorce side of the debate, had this really memorable poster, and the slogan was, "Hello, divorce. Bye-bye, Daddy."

[00:00:25] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** And I remember, like, I find this really alarming. I ran out to my dad who was picking me up from school, and I said, "Dad, are you going to vote for divorce?" And he said, "No, no. Of course not." So my mom got home from work, and I ran out to the car and I was like, "Mom, are you gonna vote for divorce?" And she was like, "Oh, yeah. Absolutely I'm voting for divorce." So I think this was the first memory I have of a crisis of democracy in my own house.

[00:00:59] **Sabreena Delhon:** Welcome to Group Chat. I'm Sabreena Delhon. That was Seána Glennon, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Law. I spoke with Seána at a live event we hosted at the Samara Centre for Democracy, and I asked about her first memory of democratic participation. Seána researches how democracy in Canada can benefit from citizen-centered innovations, what happens in-between elections when people come together to find solutions to challenging problems.

[00:01:31] This is something we've talked about before on Group Chat during our live show in Montreal. While citizen-centered processes, like mini-publics and citizens' assemblies, are often described as new innovations, Indigenous communities have practiced forms of consensus-based and collective deliberation for generations. We've included some resources about that in our show notes.

[00:01:56] Today, we're diving into more detail about meaningful citizen input in public decision-making. First, you'll hear Seána set the stage on the crucial role a citizens' assembly played during Ireland's deeply contentious abortion referendum, and then Seána and I have a chat about what's happening in Canada. But first, in case you were worried for eight-year-old Seána and her parents...

[00:02:21] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** They didn't get divorced, but it's always nice to have the option. So luckily the referendum did pass, so we're all free to say bye to our dads in Ireland now.

[00:02:32] **Sabreena Delhon:** Here's Seána Glennon.

[00:02:38] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Evening everyone. Thank you so much Sabreena for the warm welcome, and to the Samara Centre team for inviting me here. Thank you all for coming along on a lovely sunny Thursday evening to talk about democracy. We know that democracies around the world are experiencing serious challenges at the moment.

[00:02:57] Now, we see a global rise in authoritarianism and authoritarian-style leaders, but we also see a more subtle trend, even in very well-established, steady democracies like Canada, and that is a trend of disengagement. A sense on the part of citizens that we feel increasingly distant from our institutions and from public decision-making.

[00:03:24] And when we think about what a democracy is, we often instinctively think about voting, don't we? We think about citizens going along, casting their ballot once every few years. What about the space in between elections? What about the role for citizens in that space? And I think one of the biggest challenges for democracy now is not simply getting citizens to vote, it's creating opportunities to be involved, to have their voices heard, and to participate beyond only that occasional moment of voting.

[00:04:01] And the good news, the optimistic part, is that democracies around the world have not been standing still in the face of these challenges. Around the world, governments have been experimenting with new ways of involving citizens much more directly in making difficult legal reform and policy decisions.

[00:04:24] And one very exciting development in this space is the rise of deliberative mini publics. Now, what is a deliberative mini public? It sounds very theoretical, but what we're talking about here are representative groups of ordinary citizens, regular citizens like you and I, not experts, chosen by lot, who deliberate together and make proposals for legal and policy reform.

[00:04:50] You can think of them a little bit like a jury for public policy matters. And this is all part of an effort to make democracy more deliberative, and there's a whole big stack of scholarly literature on what deliberative democracy is. But really what we're talking about is the idea that decisions are more legitimate when the people that are affected by them, you and I, have meaningful opportunities to participate in making those decisions and in having reasoned discussions around them. And all around the world, we are seeing many, many of these kinds of deliberative citizen-centered processes.

[00:05:27] There has been a significant uptick in the use of these all around the world, especially in the past 10 years or so. The OECD has documented over 700 deliberative assemblies in different countries around the world, which have tackled a whole range of issues, and the OECD has called this a deliberative wave.

[00:05:45] We've seen citizen assemblies and citizen conventions tackling things like constitution-making in countries like Iceland and Chile. We've seen citizens assemblies tackling climate change in a range of countries, in Scotland, France, Germany, Finland, Ireland. We've even seen permanent citizen institutions installed in Belgium.

[00:06:08] One of the earliest examples of using a citizens assembly in the democratic process was, of course, right here in Canada. But Ireland later became a very influential example here because it used deliberative mini-publics beginning in about 2012 to look at a range of issues, some of them highly polarizing constitutional issues.

[00:06:31] None so polarizing, I would say, as on the reform of the law on abortion, Ireland's democratic experiment. So all of this is all very well, representative samples, and there's a lot of jargon around this. Let's make it a little bit more concrete by telling the story of a real citizens assembly and how it actually worked. Now, to understand why Ireland turned to a citizens assembly on the subject of abortion, we have to know a little bit of context.

[00:06:59] So this picture here of the blue book, that's a copy of Bunreacht na hÉireann. That's the Constitution of Ireland. And in the early 1980s, Ireland became the first country in the world to vote by referendum to insert into its constitution a right to life for the unborn. Now, it's worth saying, just as an aside, several other countries followed suit in inserting constitutional protection for the unborn after that, but Ireland was the OG in this regard.

[00:07:28] And for decades after that, abortion became a very contentious politically and constitutionally deadlocked issue. The insertion of this right to life of the unborn, which we kind of colloquially call the Eighth Amendment, had repercussions over decades. Tens of thousands of women traveled abroad, usually to the UK, to obtain abortion services there, and in later years, women resorted to importing unregulated and illegal abortion pills in the post and taking them without medical supervision.

[00:08:01] And, and this was in circumstances where the Supreme Court had interpreted this constitutional provision as meaning that abortion would only be available in the case of a real and substantial threat to the life of the pregnant woman. So only in extreme circumstances. Now, it was the death of a young pregnant woman in 2012 named Savita Halappanavar that really ignited a movement for change.

[00:08:22] Her death was really widely blamed on the chilling effect of the Eighth Amendment on medical practitioners. And so we got to a point where the government had to do something. It had to instigate a process of reform, but it was faced with a difficult question: How do you move forward on an issue that has become politically, morally, and constitutionally divisive?

[00:08:47] And the Irish government took a novel response. It handed the question to ordinary citizens. Here we come to the citizens assembly that was established in 2016, and the first topic it considered was abortion reform. So here's where we can get a little bit more concrete about what we mean by a deliberative mini public.

[00:09:08] 99 citizens were selected to broadly reflect Irish society, so they were intended to be representative in terms of gender, age, geographical region, and educational background. The process was chaired by a retired Supreme Court justice. She had an expert advisory group to support the process and a secretariat that was staffed from the Department of the Taoiseach, the Prime Minister's office.

[00:09:35] And the citizens sat in round tables of about eight or 10 citizens per table. They had professional facilitators and note-takers, and they heard from experts, legal, medical, ethical experts that gave them information on the state of the law, how it was applied. They also heard from advocacy groups on both sides of the debate.

[00:10:00] But importantly, the citizens in this process also had an opportunity to shape the process. So the citizens said at one point, "It's fantastic that we're hearing from these experts, but actually we want to hear from women who have experience of the law. We want to hear from women who actually experienced a crisis pregnancy and either traveled abroad or didn't travel or imported abortion pills."

[00:10:20] So that testimony, the lived experience part, was brought in response to the citizens. And at the end of the process, the assembly voted on their recommendations, and they produced recommendations that went substantially further than political actors had anticipated. So what really happened in this process?

[00:10:41] Well, ordinary citizens were handed constitutional complexity, and they really rose to the challenge. Now, it's important to say that the assembly in this case did not replace representative democracy. And one of the most interesting parts of this whole process was the institutional design. The recommendations of the citizens assembly moved into the ordinary political process through the vehicle of a parliamentary committee that was formed to deliberate on and discuss and debate the citizens' recommendations.

[00:11:17] And so this is important because deliberative mini-publics, at least in the mainstream way that they're understood, are not intended to replace elected decision-makers. They're intended to compliment them. And the process in this case, really created a bridge between the citizen deliberation piece and the political decision-making piece.

[00:11:38] And then as the capstone of this endeavor, we go from mini-public to maxi-public. The abortion referendum was held in Ireland in 2018. It passed by a two-thirds majority. It was a watershed moment for the country. It made headlines all around the world. And this was really an example of a highly impactful citizen process. Here we had a deeply polarized issue deliberated on by a group of ordinary citizens who produced a very detailed set of recommendations for reform that was largely actioned by the political class and ultimately enacted into law.

[00:12:20] So what did the citizens assembly do in this case? Well, it created a space for informed discussion. It proved to be a trusted information source for the broader public, and there was polling done right after the referendum, which showed quite a high level of awareness of and trust of the citizens assembly on the part of the broader public.

[00:12:43] It helped break the political paralysis that had surrounded this topic for a very long time, and perhaps most importantly, it provided a very clear pathway towards reform. And I think it showed that even deeply polarized issues can be approached in a fresh way if citizens are given the time, the information, and the responsibility to do so.

[00:13:07] And so having briefly considered that example from Ireland, let's come back here to Canada and consider deliberation here. Canada was a pioneer in this field. We had citizens assemblies that took place in the early 2000s in British Columbia and Ontario at provincial level, which looked at the issue of electoral reform, and that helped establish the model many later processes around the world have since followed, including Ireland.

[00:13:37] Now, since that time, efforts have continued, and there has been important and substantial work done on deliberative processes in Canada since then. They've been used in areas like planning, health, local governance. But I would say I think they've been slightly less visible. They haven't become embedded in the democratic process perhaps in the same way that they have in other countries.

[00:14:00] They're often tackling issues at a slightly more local level, often away from the centre of national political debate. So we're not necessarily seeing, you know, scholarly articles on all of these individual processes that are going on. They're not necessarily on topics that are on the front page of The Globe and Mail, but they're really important, and they're showing progress nonetheless.

[00:14:21] I think the question for Canada is not whether deliberative democracy belongs here or whether it works here because we know that it does, and in many ways it originated here, and it inspired this deliberative wave that I mentioned earlier. I think the question is whether we're willing to think a little bit more ambitiously about the role that citizens might play in Canada's democratic future.

[00:14:43] And so one of the most striking lessons, I think, from deliberative mini-publics is that when ordinary citizens are given the opportunity, they can often engage with complexity a lot more thoughtfully than our public discourse might suggest. The question, I think, is not whether citizens are capable of handling difficult constitutional, legal, democratic decisions, because I think the experience shows that they are.

[00:15:11] I think the real question is whether our institutions are designed to bring out the best in them. So I think I have talked at you all for long enough. So, maybe I'll invite Sabreena back up, and we can have a little bit more of a chat.

[00:15:35] **Sabreena Delhon:** Seána, thank you. It's always so helpful to have a case study to learn from. I want to dig into what's happening with citizen participation and democratic renewal in Canada. So, in your talk you mentioned that Canada has been a pioneer in the practice of deliberative democracy. We've made significant contributions to the practice that have shaped policies and also inspired other countries. But a lot of people don't know about this. What's going on? How come this isn't better understood and celebrated?

[00:16:09] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Yes, I mean the citizens assemblies...and just for anyone who doesn't know, this was really a world first. In the early 2000s, in 2004 in BC, there was a citizens assembly that took place on the topic of electoral reform, and then two years later a citizens assembly here in Ontario that took place on the same topic.

[00:16:30] And this was hugely influential worldwide. And it wasn't just the topic that those citizens assemblies considered, electoral reform, which is still topical now, but it was actually the, the blueprint, the actual idea of

integrating a citizens assembly into the democratic process and sort of showcasing how it could be done, and in particular in those cases, how it could be combined with the referendum as a way of making a decision.

[00:16:55] And I think sometimes there is a tendency to write those processes off as a failure because they didn't result in reform. The referendums didn't pass, the electoral reform didn't happen on foot of those. But I think that's a slightly too narrow perspective to take because I think we can look at what success means a little bit more broadly.

[00:17:18] Electoral reform is such a complicated topic. And we were able, in those cases, to take a group of citizens from all different walks of life who, you know, didn't have expertise in this topic, to be able to get to grips with what kind of electoral systems there are and to put together a very competent set of recommendations to respond to people's issues, you know, with the first-past-the-post type system. And then go to referendum.

[00:17:44] And so I think there are very valuable lessons that came out of those early experiments. I also think that it's important to remember that deliberative efforts have continued, and some of the subsequent deliberations that have happened in Canada might have been at quite a local level, not necessarily of interest to the whole country.

[00:18:03] But I think the experience Canada has had, and the fact that it hasn't become maybe more pervasive and more widespread, is something of a missed opportunity, because I think there are certainly no shortage of issues and topics, both at local level and a little bit further afield that could benefit from a citizen deliberative process.

[00:18:24] **Sabreena Delhon:** So given that so much of this is locally based, I can't help but think about the demise of local journalism in the last few years, last few decades. Do you think that these good news stories about our democracy, the local, make this real for me, it's the thing I actually care about. Do you think those stories would be better known and understood if local journalism was in better shape?

[00:18:49] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Absolutely. I mean, I think it's important to say, you know, for someone like me who researches deliberative mini-publics, the temptation is to think, wow, mini-publics are the cure to end-all cures, and they're a panacea. And of course they're not a panacea. They're one of many innovations that have potential to try and enhance our democratic health.

[00:19:08] But on the local journalism point, we're operating in a very different information space now than we were months ago, years ago, you know, almost days ago. We're seeing the rise of generative AI. We're seeing, you know, increasingly improved deep fake technologies. All of those things are deeply corrosive for our democracy.

[00:19:30] And I think, you know, bringing it back to a local level is a really important avenue to look at, both from the perspective of citizens and from all of the other ingredients that you need. You know, you need trusted information sources, and local journalism is such an important part of that.

[00:19:46] **Sabreena Delhon:** Well, and a big part of the current state of our information ecosystem is presenting a really, flat and, and sad picture of citizens as, you know, polarized or disengaged or apathetic. And a lot of this comes from how we also rely a lot on polling data and voter turnout to just simply determine the health of our democracy. So how do mini-publics bring more depth and more nuance to how we understand citizens and their political participation?

[00:20:19] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** So the polling data can certainly... I think polling has its place, and you know, it's really interesting, but it can sometimes present a kind of bleak picture. It can make us feel, you know, I think a lot more divided than we actually are. And we need to take polling as part of this whole ecosystem. What is a poll? It's really a top-of-the-head response to something. It's a sort of a gut reaction. It's a quick answer to a question that's phrased a certain way.

[00:20:46] And in many ways, that's sort of the opposite of what deliberation is about. Deliberation, we might come into the process with a certain opinion, and by the time we get to the end of the process, we might have a totally different opinion, or we might have the same opinion we had at the beginning, but now we have better reasons for having that opinion.

[00:21:04] When people actually sit in a room with each other and have an opportunity to talk and to learn, and they're not sort of, you know, hiding behind a keyboard, we can often find out that we have more in common perhaps than divides us. Obviously, one of the examples, you know, I've discussed is abortion in Ireland.

[00:21:23] Abortion, I think, is an emotive topic anywhere. In Ireland, it was especially toxic. We had this assembly where people came in from different ages, walks of life, different parts of the country, and were able to engage. There are also examples from here in Canada. One interesting example comes from Vancouver in 2014.

[00:21:46] This was a case where a planning dispute erupted in a particular neighborhood in Vancouver. The city council had published a 30-year development plan. There was huge consternation in the community who felt like, you know, they hadn't been listened to, and I think a lot of the upset was to do with density and building heights and so on in this development plan.

[00:22:08] And the community really felt as though decisions had been taken without their views being taken on board. And so the city of Vancouver, in that case, took a slightly novel approach of establishing a citizens assembly. It was the organization MassLBP that's based here in Toronto, which has run, I think, over 50 citizen deliberative processes across Canada. They were engaged in...

[00:22:30] **Sabreena Delhon:** Our friend Peter MacLeod. Yes.

[00:22:32] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Which has been doing, you know, fantastic work. So they set up a citizens assembly, and again, a group of citizens tackling urban planning issues, which is...you know, I mean, if I was called to be in a citizens assembly about urban planning, I wouldn't have the first clue, you know, about what goes into urban planning.

[00:22:47] But again, the citizens in that case were able to study the issues, make recommendations, and on paper it was quite a weekly empowered forum. I mean, the city council didn't undertake in advance that we will implement what the citizens say. But in fact, the city council ended up engaging really well with the recommendations.

[00:23:07] The vast majority of recommendations were in fact implemented, and importantly from an institutional design perspective. For those recommendations that were not implemented, the citizens were reconvened and had the opportunity to engage. Well, here's why we're not taking on board these recommendations.

[00:23:24] And at the end, there was quite a high level of satisfaction on behalf of the citizens, even in respect of the recommendations that weren't actioned, that they understood the reasons why, and they felt like their voices had been heard. So all of that is to say deliberation doesn't eliminate disagreement, and I think that's an important thing to say.

[00:23:46] We don't have to get consensus at the end of this process because reasonable people can reasonably disagree on issues. That's okay. But it's about changing the quality of democratic engagement, and I think that that's what some of these examples can tell us, and I think it tells quite a different story sometimes from what the polls tell us.

[00:24:05] **Sabreena Delhon:** Well, and I'm really struck by your point about how people act really differently when they're not behind a keyboard. When you're in-person with someone, there's just a richer aspect to the exchange. You're just gonna behave differently. And it makes me think about having spaces to exercise that muscle before you're in a more structured mini public kind of setting.

[00:24:28] So I guess my question, Seána, is also, what's the role of third spaces? Just simply having somewhere to be where you can run into citizens and talk about whatever, and maybe you don't agree, but it doesn't matter 'cause that's so-and-so's neighbor, and, you know, just being known and understood. And especially for young people, what is the significance of having places that you can kind of ladder up to the mini public context from?

[00:24:54] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Yeah, I mean, I think the mini public piece is fantastic, and it's structured and, you know, there are different ways of doing them, and they seem to work really well. They're, they're not a panacea, and they're not the only thing that we need to turn to when we're in times of, you know, democratic decay. And those third spaces are so valuable, and I think that's really the value in being able to use our imagination to find those civic spaces. From my own experience, just from having studied the mini public piece, one of the important points about the mini public is that you're trying to bring in the shy people.

[00:25:30] You're trying to be inclusive, not just in terms of getting people of different ages and people from different socioeconomic backgrounds or, you know, whatever the case may be. But you're getting a whole mix of personalities in there. And I think when it comes to politics and it comes to running for office, and I know the Samara Centre has done really interesting research on some of the reasons why people might be put off from running for office, particularly maybe if you're a minority, if you're a woman, it's a tall order to put yourself out there like that.

[00:25:59] But one of the things about the citizens assemblies and, and some of the third spaces, is that it creates that inclusive environment where we get to hear from people that are not necessarily the people that are going to sit at the top of the room with the microphone and talk down at everybody else.

[00:26:13] But, you know, the people that might not necessarily be speaking up in their day-to-day life, that their viewpoints matter and are important too, and should be given a platform to be able to feed into the way that we're making decisions. So I think all of those efforts are so important.

[00:26:29] **Sabreena Delhon:** So my next question is ripped from the headlines. You recently wrote an op-ed about what's going on in Alberta. Premier Danielle Smith confirmed moving towards a provincial referendum to have a referendum on a referendum about whether to remain in Canada. Recent reports have also confirmed that the separatist movement in Alberta has been fueled by foreign interference. This actually relates to work we do here at the Samara Centre through our Verified project. What's your take, Seána, on referendums as part of the democratic process? Do they work or not?

[00:27:01] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** So I learned a new word this week, and it was called east-splaining, and it's when people from the east of Canada explain things to people in the west of Canada and tell them maybe why they're right or wrong about certain things.

[00:27:16] **Sabreena Delhon:** I'm from Edmonton.

[00:27:19] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** And I'm from further east than here. So I should tread carefully before I give all of my opinions to Canadians about what they should and shouldn't do. But look, the use of referendums, as I said, I come from a country with a referendum culture. We have referendums a lot.

[00:27:37] They're much more rare in other places. And the use of referendums themselves, never mind the question, the very use of a referendum in a democracy is a little bit polarizing. Some people see them as this very pure form of political expression. It is the people speaking in their own name, where they're not voting for a party, they're not voting for a candidate, they are voting directly on this issue, and that they're a very important part of the democratic fabric of our society.

[00:28:04] Other people take a completely different view. Some people see them as a very blunt instrument that can be very polarizing. They can leave us more polarized than we were perhaps than when we started. And some people warn of, you know, the danger to minorities of this majoritarian tool. And, you know, the late American scholar, Derek Bell wrote, speaking from a US perspective, "The more direct democracy becomes, the more threatening it is."

[00:28:32] So people have very legitimate concerns. But I think comparative experience shows, despite the fact that referendums have a bad name, that they're not really inherently democratic or anti-democratic. A great deal depends on the process around them. So we're talking about the clarity of the question, the quality of public information, the role of institutions, whether citizens have had an opportunity to deliberate on the issue in advance.

[00:29:00] And I think it's less helpful to think of a referendum as an isolated moment of voting where we give our top of the head kind of response. I think it's more useful to see the referendum as forming part of a wider process. And in the Irish case on abortion, you know, the referendum was really a capstone on a wider process of citizen deliberation and participation.

[00:29:24] So looking at how might a deliberative mini public actually work in the Alberta context? And again, to say this is not to replace, you know, tough decisions that representative decision-makers have to make, but maybe we'll take a leaf out of the sort of, I suppose, obvious recent example of Brexit. One of the big issues with that referendum was that a vote to remain in the UK was clear enough, status quo.

[00:29:50] You know, we know what the relationship with the EU is right now, and maybe it can be changed or, you know, altered in a way that responds to public sentiment a bit more. The vote to leave was an unknown. And not enough, or I wonder, was very much at all work done in advance of that referendum to show people this is what leaving means.

[00:30:15] In the case of abortion in Ireland, we knew what voting to keep this constitutional provision would be. It would be more of the same. It would be people traveling, taking abortion pills, and so on at the beginning of the process, we didn't know what a new regime would look like. Would it be like England?

[00:30:30] Would we have abortion in very limited circumstances? Would we have an unlimited right? You know, what would it look like? That's where the citizens assembly stepped in and filled the void. It said, "This is a blueprint of what, how the law could work if we vote." And so in the Alberta context, what would a future look like for Canada and for Alberta if Alberta were to leave?

[00:30:50] Would it be an independent country? Would it be, you know, would it have closer ties to the US? Would it have some kind of renegotiated constitutional relationship with Canada? Maybe we don't know the answers to those questions, but could a representative sample of citizens be able to come together to look at maybe similar developments that have happened in other parts of the world, how they worked, but also the local context right there to see what could the options look like?

[00:31:21] Because to be fair to people, if we're asking them to vote on something, we should have some clarity on what they're voting for. And maybe there's a percentage of people that might be saying, "Well, I would vote for this to send a message." Well, you can do that, but then that vote might pass, and then you, once that genie's out of the bottle, it's very difficult to stuff it back in again.

[00:31:39] So I think that citizens assemblies can step up on some of these technical issues that sometimes we don't give citizens enough credit for being able to, you know, formulate proposals around. So, you know, I don't think that the lesson is that citizens shouldn't be trusted with difficult and important constitutional questions. I do think that they should be, but I think that we should be setting our citizens up for success perhaps. A lot more than we perhaps are now.

[00:32:08] **Sabreena Delhon:** And, and it sounds like the importance of time and space to move through those conversations is really important and kind of counter to how reactive political discourse is right now.

[00:32:20] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** I think so. I mean, I think the deliberative process, the idea around it is slowing politics down. Let's sit down in the same room. And, and that's what deliberation is. Deliberation is not consensus, as I said before, but it's about weighing, it's about discussing. And you know, as I say, sometimes we change our minds, sometimes we don't change our minds. But hopefully we have more reasoned arguments for why we're taking the position we're taking.

[00:32:45] **Sabreena Delhon:** So in preparing for this evening, Seána and I, you know, talked about all of this stuff, and one of the things that you shared was how good citizens feel after they've provided input through these processes. But we also know that sometimes citizens feel like when they vote or give input, it doesn't make a difference. And you've mentioned that citizens, you know, they do feel good after they give this input. But I'm wondering what happens in the, in the months and years that follow. Can you give us some examples, some Canadian examples of when mini-publics and the input that citizens provided through them have influenced policy?

[00:33:26] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Sure. Well, the thing to say is, you know, perceptions of impact matter hugely. If we are going to ask our citizens to take the time and effort out of their lives to come and deliberate on a topic, and then if, you know, our empowered decision makers are just going to say, "Actually, we don't, we don't like those recommendations, we're not gonna bother actioning them," I mean, that's a real morale issue.

[00:33:51] Citizens are not going to want to be involved in a process where they feel like they're not going to make any difference, we'll say. And there have been some good studies on non-participation, because shockingly, there's a high level of non-participation in citizen processes. So, some scholars from the Netherlands have looked at the reasons that people cite for opting not to participate in a citizen deliberative process. And one of the top reasons given was like, "Well, it's probably not gonna make any difference."

[00:34:18] Citizens are going to be much more willing to engage when they see that they can have a tangible impact. And one example of that was the abortion assembly. The citizens' assembly is not the reason that Ireland had an abortion referendum. A referendum was on the cards. It was going to happen. Actually, what the citizens' assembly did that was its sort of, you know, magic contribution to the process, was it prepared a framework for what abortion regulation should look like in Ireland after the referendum.

[00:34:48] Ireland's the country that basically had no legal access to abortion at all. Where do you go from there? You know, you decide, okay, I'm gonna make a change. What is the change? The citizens actually developed a framework for how abortion should be governed and gave the government something that it could go to the public with and say, "If you vote yes in this referendum, here's what we're going to enact."

[00:35:08] And this is why many scholars and commentators are really interested in this idea of institutionalization. So in order to, I suppose, have a more empowered role for citizens, in the Ostbelgien Parliament, so the German-speaking part of Belgium, has introduced a permanent citizens council in the past few years.

[00:35:27] So this is composed of a rotating cohort of ordinary citizens who look at the issues of the day and make decisions on other topics that citizens assemblies should consider, and it's embedded back into the democratic process. So Parliament, you know, is not, you know, beholden. They don't have to undertake all these recommendations, but they need to engage and justify if they choose not to action some of these recommendations.

[00:35:50] But I think at the end of the day, the important thing to note is that mini-publics are not replacing political accountability. There's a lot of things that politicians can do to dampen the impact of citizens assemblies, and I think of the aforementioned electoral assemblies in BC and Ontario. If the political class is not willing to support this, to raise the

public awareness, to really take it seriously and implement it, then we'll continue to just have these isolated exercises, and they're not really going to make any difference.

[00:36:21] Governments will still always, you know, make decisions, but I think it's about creating more meaningful channels whereby citizens can feed into those decisions. And if they're set up correctly, people can come out of the process really feeling like, "I made a difference," you know? "I was involved."

[00:36:37] **Sabreena Delhon:** Amazing. Seána, it's been such a pleasure to learn from you this evening. Thank you so much for sharing your knowledge and expertise with us. And I wanna thank our audience for joining us tonight as well. Let's have a round of applause.

[00:36:54] And before I wrap up, I just want to hear it one more time. It was, "Hello, divorce. Goodbye, Daddy?"

[00:36:54] **Dr. Seána Glennon:** Bye bye, Daddy.

[00:37:02] **Sabreena Delhon:** Bye bye. Okay.

[00:37:11] **Sabreena Delhon:** Group Chat is produced by the Samara Centre for Democracy, Canada's leading nonpartisan charity dedicated to strengthening and protecting our democracy. Visit samaracentre.ca to join our mailing list, learn more about our work, and to support it with a donation. Please follow, rate, and review to help spread the word about this show. Thanks for listening