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PHILOSOPHY WHITE PAPER

Direct Democracy & Sortition Assemblies

What we believe, and why it matters

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"We do not turn time back; we move forward with the wisdom its patterns reveal."

This paper sets out, in plain language, the philosophy behind Direct Democracy and Sortition Assemblies — DD&SA. It explains what we believe, why we believe it, and why it points toward a better way of running public life in the British Isles and beyond.

You do not need a degree to read this. You do not need to know anything about political theory. You need only to have wondered, at some point, why the people who govern us so often seem to ignore us. That question is the starting point for everything that follows.

1. The Problem We Are Trying to Solve

Most people in the British Isles feel disconnected from the decisions that shape their lives. They vote every four or five years, watch as the winning party does broadly what it would have done regardless of who voted for it, and then wait again. If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Trust in politicians and public institutions has been falling steadily for decades.

This is not simply a problem of bad people in power. Some politicians are honest and capable. The problem is structural: the system itself produces predictable, repeating failures, no matter who is in it.

What does 'structural' mean?

Think of a building with a cracked foundation. You can repaint the walls, replace the carpets, and swap out the furniture — but until you fix the foundation, the cracks will keep returning. That is what we mean when we say the problem is structural.

The current system of elected representative government was not designed to do what most people assume it does. It was not designed to be a genuine democracy. And its architects said so openly.

Bernard Manin, political theorist: elections were deliberately designed by the Founders of modern government to produce government by an elite — not government by ordinary people (Manin, 1997, The Principles of Representative Government, Cambridge University Press).

Elections select for a particular kind of person: one who is ambitious enough to campaign, wealthy or connected enough to run, and skilled at telling people what they want to hear. This is not a flaw in how we hold elections. It is how elections work. They select the charismatic and the well-resourced. They do not select the wise, the honest, or the ordinary.

The result — across country after country — is that public decisions increasingly serve the wealthy and the well-connected, not the majority. Research from the United States found that the preferences of average citizens had almost no independent effect on public outcomes, while the preferences of economic elites and organised interest groups carried decisive weight (Gilens and Page, 2014, 'Testing Theories of American Politics', Perspectives on Politics, 12(3), pp. 564–581). Studies of comparable quality across European democracies show similar patterns.

DD&SA begins here: with an honest account of what the current system actually produces, and a determination to design something structurally different.

2. Our Central Claim: Good Governance by Design

The central claim of DD&SA is precise: it is possible to design institutions that produce good governance structurally, not accidentally. We do not rely on the hope that the right person will come along. We build a system in which good decisions emerge from the design itself.

This is the difference between luck and architecture. A well-designed bridge does not stay up because a brave engineer is holding it together. It stays up because the forces are properly distributed. DD&SA applies the same logic to public decision-making.

Three things we think any honest system must guarantee

<p>DIGNITY</p> <p>Every person has equal worth. No voice should be worth more than another because of wealth, education, profession, or social connection. Decisions affecting everyone must involve everyone, in principle.</p>	<p>AGENCY</p> <p>People must have a genuine ability to shape the decisions that govern their lives — not just the theoretical right to vote, but a real and meaningful opportunity to participate, reason, and be heard.</p>	<p>TRUTH</p> <p>Decision-making must be grounded in honest evidence. This means protecting the process from spin, propaganda, and the manufactured certainty that comes when powerful interests control the information people receive.</p>
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These three conditions — dignity, agency, and truth — are not vague aspirations. They are structural requirements. The architecture of DD&SA is designed to make each of them real and enforceable, not just promised.

3. The Philosophical Foundation: Non-Domination

DD&SA is grounded in a political philosophy called civic republicanism — specifically, in the idea of non-domination, developed most fully by the philosopher Philip Pettit.

Non-domination is a particular way of thinking about freedom. It is not simply the absence of someone stopping you doing something right now. It is the condition of living in a system where no one has the power to interfere in your life arbitrarily — whether or not they choose to use that power.

Philip Pettit: freedom in the republican sense consists in the secure enjoyment of non-domination — the condition of not being subject to the arbitrary or uncontrolled power of another (Pettit, P., 1997, Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government, Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Consider the difference between a worker who is treated well by a kind employer who could, at any moment, dismiss them without cause — and a worker whose rights are constitutionally protected so that no employer has that arbitrary power. The first worker may feel free day to day. But they are still dominated: the employer's arbitrary power hangs over everything they do. The second worker is genuinely free.

This distinction matters enormously for governance. A system in which elected politicians have enormous discretionary power over citizens — power that cannot easily be checked, challenged, or reversed — is a system of domination, even when individual politicians happen to behave decently. DD&SA is designed to remove that arbitrary power from any individual or group and distribute it structurally through the citizenry itself.

The political philosopher Philip Pettit also argues that genuine non-domination requires what he calls 'contestability': citizens must be able to challenge public decisions through fair and accessible procedures, not merely accept them (Pettit, 1997). DD&SA embeds contestability at every level of its architecture, from local to national.

4. Why Sortition? The Lottery Principle

Sortition means selection by lot — choosing people randomly from the eligible population, rather than by election. To most people raised in a culture of electoral democracy, this sounds strange. But it is ancient, it is well evidenced, and it is philosophically coherent.

Where did sortition come from?

Sortition was the primary method of selecting officials in ancient Athens — widely regarded as the birthplace of democracy. Athenian citizens understood that elections, by contrast, were aristocratic: they selected those who were richer, more prominent, and better at persuasion. The lottery, they argued, was the truly democratic method, because it gave every citizen an equal chance to govern (Van Reybrouck, D., 2016, *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*, London: The Bodley Head).

After Athens, sortition fell out of use as elites reasserted control — and the version of 'democracy' that returned in the modern era was deliberately designed around elections, precisely because elections reliably produced elite government. The Founders of modern electoral systems were honest about this: they did not want ordinary people governing. They wanted a respectable, stable ruling class chosen through popular consent (Manin, B., 1997, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Why does the lottery produce better decisions?

Contemporary evidence supports what Athenian democracy intuited. When ordinary citizens are given access to proper information, time to deliberate, and a structured process, they produce decisions of high quality — often higher quality than those produced by professional politicians.

The Irish Citizens' Assembly of 2016–2018 is the clearest modern example. One hundred and sixty randomly selected Irish citizens deliberated for eighteen months on the question of abortion law — a question that professional politicians had refused to touch for decades. They produced a considered, nuanced recommendation that was put to a national referendum and passed with a substantial majority. Ordinary people, given the right conditions, handled one of the most difficult social questions in Irish political life with greater wisdom and greater legitimacy than any parliament had managed (Citizens' Assembly, 2017, First Report and Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly, Dublin: Citizens' Assembly).

Similar outcomes have been documented in Belgium, Canada, Australia, Iceland, and at local levels across the United Kingdom. The evidence base is now substantial: deliberative assemblies of randomly selected citizens produce legitimate, well-reasoned decisions when properly supported (OECD, 2020, Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave, Paris: OECD Publishing).

DD&SA does not assume that ordinary people are perfect. It assumes that no one is — and that a system relying on random selection is structurally fairer, more representative, and less corruptible than one relying on election.

5. How DD&SA Translates Philosophy into Architecture

It is one thing to state principles. It is another to build institutions that reliably honour them. DD&SA translates its philosophy into a complete civic architecture: a working system of assemblies, processes, safeguards, and rules that can actually govern the British Isles.

The Sortition Assembly System

DD&SA replaces elected parliaments with three tiers of Sortition Assemblies: Local, Regional, and National. Members are selected by stratified random sampling — a method that ensures the assembly reflects the full demographic composition of the population: age, sex, ethnicity, income, educational background, geographic location, and other relevant characteristics. No one campaigns for a place. No money buys a seat. No party machine decides who serves.

Members serve for a fixed term and cannot serve consecutive terms, preventing the accumulation of personal power. They receive a Civic Stipend during service, ensuring that participation is not limited to those who can afford to take time away from paid work.

The Deliberative Process

Being selected is only the beginning. Members go through a structured deliberative process: they receive expert evidence from independent advisers, hear from affected communities, engage with a Mandated Challenger whose role is to argue the strongest case against the leading proposal, and then deliberate together before reaching a determination. This process is designed to produce considered, evidence-based decisions rather than reactive, partisan ones.

The philosopher James Fishkin calls this 'deliberative polling' — what ordinary people think when they have been given the chance to think properly (Fishkin, J.S., 2009, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press). DD&SA builds deliberative polling into the permanent architecture of governance.

The Civic Floor

Every person in the Civic Commonwealth of the British Isles is guaranteed a set of basic conditions that no assembly, at any level, can remove. These include adequate nutrition, shelter, healthcare, education, and the protection of fundamental civil liberties. We call this the Civic Floor. No deliberative process can vote to remove the floor from beneath any citizen.

This is a deliberate constraint on democratic power, grounded in the philosophical understanding that genuine freedom requires certain material and social conditions as prerequisites. A person who is hungry, homeless, or denied medical care cannot meaningfully participate as a free and equal citizen. The Civic Floor is not charity: it is an architectural requirement.

Anti-Capture Architecture

Every governance system is vulnerable to capture: the gradual takeover of institutions by organised interests who shape decisions to serve themselves. DD&SA addresses this with a dedicated anti-capture architecture: an independent body charged with monitoring influence and conflicts of interest; mandatory transparency of deliberative processes; strict rules on lobbying and commercial relationships; and the Mandated Challenger system, which ensures that the strongest counterargument to any proposal is always heard.

These provisions are not optional add-ons. They are load-bearing elements of the architecture, as essential to the system's integrity as the sortition principle itself.

6. The Structural Engineer Principle

DD&SA includes a provision that distinguishes it sharply from most reform proposals: the Structural Engineer Principle. The person who designs a bridge does not get to live on it as its permanent guardian. Once the bridge is built and tested, others use it and maintain it. The engineer moves on.

This principle applies directly to DD&SA. Ian R. Graham BA (Hons), as the architect of this framework, holds no privileged institutional position within the system once it is operational. He cannot be appointed to an assembly, cannot hold a governance role by virtue of having designed the system, and has no veto over how the system evolves. The system belongs to the citizens it serves, not to its creator.

This is not a formality. It is a philosophical commitment: a recognition that even the best-intentioned designer can become a source of domination if they remain embedded in what they built. The structural engineer steps back so that the building can stand on its own.

7. What DD&SA Is Not

Clarity about what we are proposing requires equal clarity about what we are not proposing.

What people sometimes assume	What DD&SA actually proposes
<i>A return to ancient Athens</i>	A modern, fully specified civic architecture designed for the British Isles in the twenty-first century.
<i>Rule by random mob</i>	Structured deliberation by representative panels with expert support, evidence standards, and full process transparency.
<i>Abolition of expertise</i>	Integration of genuine expertise into a process where citizens — not experts — make final determinations.
<i>A left-wing or right-wing project</i>	A post-partisan structural reform. The problem of domination is not owned by any political tradition.
<i>A perfect system</i>	A better-designed system: one that produces good governance structurally rather than contingently, and that can be reviewed and improved through its own constitutional processes.

8. A Note on Language: The Words We Use

Language shapes thought. The words used in any governance system reflect — and reinforce — the values embedded in it. DD&SA uses a deliberately different vocabulary, not for the sake of novelty, but because the old words carry old assumptions that no longer serve.

We do not speak of 'laws': we speak of Civic Rules, because rules made by citizens for citizens carry a different authority and a different spirit than edicts handed down by a professional class. We do not speak of 'courts' and 'judges': we speak of Consequence Hearings and Magisters, because our approach to harm is restorative rather than punitive — focused on repair and understanding rather than retribution. We do not speak of 'prisons': we speak of Mental Care Facilities, because those whose behaviour causes serious harm need care and rehabilitation, not caging.

We do not speak of 'policies': we speak of Frameworks, because a framework is a living structure that can be adapted as evidence and understanding develop, not a directive handed down from above.

The governing polity is always the Civic Commonwealth of the British Isles. Not the United Kingdom. Not Great Britain. A commonwealth: a body of shared life, held in common, for the benefit of all.

9. Where Do We Go From Here?

DD&SA is not a protest. It is not a petition. It is a fully specified civic architecture — a complete, operational design for how the British Isles can be governed better, produced to publication-grade standards and grounded in political philosophy, deliberative democracy theory, constitutional design, and comparative evidence.

The corpus of DD&SA documentation covers every major domain of public life: the assembly architecture; civic justice; health provision; environmental governance; education; trade; policing; financial systems; housing; local governance; civil liberties; digital infrastructure; and more. It is designed to be implemented — not eventually, not in principle, but in practice, through a structured transition architecture that is itself part of the corpus.

We are building toward a Foundation, a website, and a growing public presence. We are not asking for permission. We are building something real.

The question is not whether the current system is broken. Most people already know that it is. The question is whether a better one is possible. DD&SA answers: yes, and here is exactly how it works.

Key References

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