Transcript of ‘Understanding Citizens' Assemblies’

Season 3, Episode 6, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business, I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]

Jan: Find out how a democratic process with an inverted commas, 'the mini-public', is contributing to the wider policy debate on climate change.

[Theme music]

Paul: Did you used to behave yourself in school assemblies, Jan?

Jan: Uh, yes, 'cause I'm a good girl. Of course.

Paul: Jan, did you *really* used to behave yourself in, uh, assemblies? [Jan laughs]

Jan: Yeah, well, okay, I went to a really big school. So, I mean, you could do something or you could do nothing and you just like disappeared into the background of a mass of kids.

Paul: Aah, so when the head teacher was speaking, he wouldn't notice if you were at the back half asleep.

Jan: [laughing] No. No, I think not. I think not. What about you? Were you good in assemblies?

Paul: Uh, for the most part. I'm pretty sure I was probably told to stop talking at least once in my, uh, school career.

Jan: Dear listeners, that doesn't surprise me.

Paul: Do, do you remember though in assemblies you had lots of different people behaving in different ways, and different attitudes towards it?

Jan: Yes, yes. And um, you know, so for some people, you know, really enjoyed finding out things through the assembly format. Other people were kind of quiet and sort of, yeah, not so, not so keen on listening.

So yeah, big groups of people and finding out what they think is quite hard work, I'd say.

Paul: Yeah, so many people just sort of bored out of their minds in my recollection, especially when the teacher was telling a parable that he'd probably read at least five times over the previous five years [Jan laughs] and had just churned it out again, hoping no one would remember.

Jan: Well, if I weren't paying attention, that would be a good time to pay attention.

Paul: That might be the last experience many of us have had of things called assemblies.

Jan: I suspect the last and the only, in a way.

Paul: Yes…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …yeah. I'm, I'm trying to think. No, I don't think. Yeah, 'cause if I, if it is the last, if I've had any since, I can't remember, and if I've had any before that, no, yeah, school assemblies.

But there are other types of assemblies.

Jan: Right. Let's get into the other sort, 'cause then I think we ought to leave school days behind us. 'Cause it wasn't much fun, I have to say.

Paul: Well, there's assembly plants [Jan laughs] where they do manufacturing and they put, together cars and things…

Jan: …pull yourself together, man. Come on, come on…

Paul: …no, no, you pull a car together, not yourself. [Jan laughs] They don't have human assembly plants…

Jan: …no, no…

Paul: …that's generally called a uterus and a womb and things like this. So, yeah…

Jan: …ooh, this has gone a wee bit biological. [laughs]

Paul: [laughing] Sorry. You, you didn't expect that term. So, uh, what should we not talk about assembly plants then? Ahould we talk about a different type of assembly…?

Jan: …yes, yes...

Paul: …how about a citizens' assembly?

Jan: Well that sounds fun. That sounds much better than school assemblies and any of the other assemblies you've done too.

Paul: And we'll explain a little bit more about what citizens assemblies are in more detail. But generally citizens assemblies in our context bring together different people from across, uh, society with their views and opinions of a particular issue. In our sense, sustainability issues and environmental issues, to get the views of the people and then what happens to them, I guess we'll find out.

Jan: Yeah. Well let's, let's get on with finding out more about that.

Paul: Yes, 'cause we're gonna talk to someone who is an expert on citizens assemblies, someone who is described as an interdisciplinary, qualitative social scientist…

Jan: …mmm…

Paul: …isn't that a good phrase…?

Jan: …that's brilliant.

Paul: Yeah. I dunno at all what it means, but it sounds good. Uh, someone who's a former Senior Research Associate in Lancaster Environment Centre who now works in the School of Engineering at the University of Manchester.

Welcome, Dr Andy Yuille.

Andy: Thanks very much. Pleasure to be here.

Paul: And good to have you with us.

So, Andy, to start, can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you've come to work in areas around sustainability?

Andy: Yeah, sure. Well, I guess sustainability has always been my passion. Um, the thing that I've most been interested in. So I focused my first degree around, uh, sustainable development and environmental philosophy.

My first kind of real job was, uh, coordinating a project called Crisis Fair Share in London. Uh, so we had teams of volunteers, um, going around London, uh, collecting food that was surplus to the commercial sector from supermarkets, manufacturers, producers, sandwich shops, and so on, bringing it back to a central depot and, uh, kind of sorting quality, controlling it.

Then the following day, we would deliver it out to homelessness projects, um, according to their needs for that day. So that kind of really hit the nail on the head. So, like, doing social good by reducing food waste and reducing the bills, the waste disposal bills, of the companies we worked with.

Um, a little bit after that, um, I moved into more kind of sustainability policy and advocacy work. Um, so I was a Senior Policy Officer for the Campaign to Protect Rural England. Um, and I also spent a long time, uh, chairing and coordinating Northwest Environment Link, which is, was a, uh, coalition of all the major environmental NGOs in the Northwest.

And as part of that, um, there were lots of kind of innovative governance experiments going on at the time, right. So I was a member of the regional assembly, which, uh, was responsible for planning policy and housing policy. I worked with the regional development agency on economic strategy, and all of these things were places where elected politicians and council officers would come together with stakeholders from the social, environmental and economic sectors to, to make better policy, basically.

To get, um, a wide range of views inputted into kind of policy at crucial moments, but also to kind of force together people who might often have kind of oppositional or conflicting viewpoints, and get 'em to work together to, yeah, to, to come up with compromises that would work for everyone.

Jan: That last point really attracts my attention because we are living through a very polarised setting at the moment, um, at a sort of a global, but also a national level.

Has that polarisation always been with us or do you think it's advanced more, more so in recent times?

Andy: I mean, I think there have always been different and conflicting views on things certainly, but polarisation has definitely kind of increased and accelerated, uh, both internationally and, and kind of nationally over the last few years. Yeah, definitely. And, and that's one of the things that citizens' assemblies are very good at addressing, as I'm sure we'll come on to talk about.

Jan: Brilliant. Andy, I, I think of you as a sociologist. Have I got that right?

Andy: Uh, yeah, I would say broadly, broadly speaking. So I think, uh, Paul said I was an interdisciplinary social scientist, which means I kind of, I draw a bit on sociology, on geography, on politics, um, on science and technology studies. But yeah, I guess sociology is my kind of core discipline…

Paul: …I actually said interdisciplinary *qualitative* [Andy laughs, Jan joins in] social scientist. Not my words…

Andy: …apologies…

Paul: …the words of Andy's own profile.

[Jan and Andy laugh]

Jan: I think that you might be one of the few sociologists that we've had on here. And, and one of the things that we like to do is sort of explore how different disciplines, even if you are picking from many other disciplines, think about things.

So how does, what do sociologists investigate and how do they go about doing that?

Andy: Okay, well, broadly speaking, sociologists examine, like, how human societies or bits of those societies work. So they look at how kind of groups and identities are formed, how, uh, institutions shape our behaviours, how kind of social patterns and norms and expectations kind of affect our everyday lives.

So that, it's a kind of, it's a very broad field of study, but the central idea is basically that, a lot of the things that we tend to think of as being very individual are actually shaped by kind of social forces.

Um, so we might have questions like, uh, how does workplace culture affect employee behaviour? Or how does social media, as you were mentioning, uh, affect, um, kind of political polarisation, that sort of thing.

Um, and we investigate those questions with a, a wide range of different techniques from kind of large-scale surveys where asking thousands of people about their views on things, statistical analysis using kind of census data or health data or crime statistics.

Um, much more kind of small-scale qualitative things, which is where I come in around kind of interviews and focus groups of digging into questions a little bit more deeply.

Um, and also, uh, increasingly, deliberative research, which is again, where citizens assemblies come in.

Paul: So within that then, um, before we get onto citizens assemblies specifically. What have you been researching with your work, where you say you're doing lots of interviews, et cetera, what are you interviewing people about? What are you, your areas of interest?

Andy: Uh, I guess my overarching area of interest is how public decisions that have a big impact on the environment are actually made.

So, who and what contributes to those decisions? What kinds of knowledge and evidence and value are included. And what kinds of knowledge are excluded, you know, whose knowledge counts?

And how do, how does decision makers and stakeholders and the public kind of come together, or not, as the case often is, to make those decisions?

Paul: So, what then are citizens assemblies? We've talked a lot about them. I gave a brief summary, but you can, no doubt give a more detailed and accurate description.

What are they, and why are they valuable in the context of tackling issues such as climate change?

Andy: Okay. First of all, what are they? They're, they're kind of one example of what we call, uh, deliberative mini-publics, right? And there are others like citizens' juries, citizens' panels, uh, consensus conferences, lots of different examples. They're all basically the same thing.

And, uh, deliberative mini-public, right? It's made up of two parts. Firstly, the mini-public. Um, so they are a group of citizens that are broadly representative of a wider population. Could be like for example, the UK public, or a local authority area.

Um, the way those people are selected is usually through a process called sortition, right? To make sure that you have that representativeness. It's a kind of civic lottery. So basically hundreds, possibly thousands of people, depending on the scale, are invited to participate or to express interest.

Um, from those people who say they'd like to take part, um, they're then kind of stratified to make sure that your kind of key demographic indicators like age, gender, ethnicity, disability, maybe occupation type or, or income level are reflective of that wider population.

And there's also usually criteria specific to the, the topic under discussion. So like in, uh, the case of climate, for example, you might look at people's level of concern about climate change, um, whether they live in urban or rural areas, and what their kind of political affiliations are. Um, so that's, that's your mini-public bit. It's a small group that represents a bigger group.

Uh, the deliberative bit is where it, uh, this kind of research is different to, like, focus groups or other kinds of kind of conversational research. Uh, so it always starts with the learning phase. Um, so there will be, uh, balanced and impartial, often impartial, uh, information provided, um, by a range of different speakers.

So they could be experts in the field. Um, I said often impartial. So we could also have, like, social commentators coming in to present like specific views on a particular issue. Um, but if we do, then obviously there's a balance between, basically, pro and con. Um, assembly members then have a chance to interrogate that information, so they'll interact with the, the experts and the speakers.

Um, they can question them, they can probe deeper, they can challenge them because, believe me, assembly members do not just accept things at face value. Um, and then they go on to, like, amongst themselves, working in small groups kind of reflect on that information, um, and are guided through a series of, uh, structured conversations by professional facilitators.

Um, kind of, examining the ins and outs of the issue, um, at hand, and leading eventually to the third step, which is drawing conclusions. Uh, so those conclusions are, are sometimes, but very rarely, a consensus across the whole panel.

More often it's a, kind of a majority response or some sort of voting or, uh, a process that kind of rather than seeking consensus draws out what the differences are and, and why those differences exist.

And yeah, so that's, that's why it's a particularly valuable, form of, uh, research, uh, to inform like contentious policy issues like climate change. So rather than just getting people's kind of knee-jerk reactions to, like, what they feel or what they think right here and now, it gives people the opportunity to explore based on good quality evidence and the other perspectives and, uh, backgrounds and experiences that that other members provide, um, to really dig into what kind of motivates them about something, what they think the barriers to doing something about it would be, what the kind of conditions could be put in place to get over those barriers, how that might affect lots of different kinds of people.

Um, and so that, that's helpful to get over political polarisation because it's a space where people can agree disagreeably, no, the other way round, [Jan laughs and Paul joins in] people can disagree, agreeably.

[Everyone laughs]

Paul: …agree disagreeably. That sounds like me and you, doesn't it?

Jan: …it does, it does, I was thinking exactly that.

Andy: Um, and obviously, yeah, it brings a wide range of perspectives, kind of, into play and, and gets at like really informed public opinion about things and, and with huge amounts of rich and textured detail that is necessary to inform effective policymaking.

Paul: I just want to go back briefly. You mentioned there about getting the balance, so that if someone comes in and talks about one side of an argument, someone will come in and talk about the other.

This is something that always used to be fired at the BBC, that maybe they went too far with their balance and maybe if they had someone talking about climate change, did they have to have someone there who was a climate change denier, denying that this all takes place?

What extent does it apply within climate assemblies in terms of, do you need to have some people who might come in and say, climate change isn't real, et cetera?

Andy: You absolutely would not. Because we *know* that climate change is real, right? There's, like, 97% of climate scientists are firmly kind of agreed that no, this has been proven. So we always start with facts, right? With high quality evidence, high quality information.

So, so in this case it would be, yeah, we, we started, or in the process I'll talk about in a little bit, we started with an introductory, um, set of meetings where people were introduced to the science behind climate change, the climate impact to the kind of policy measures, um, that are being taken, uh, in order to address it.

Where we might have social commentators presenting kind of different views on things, that might be things around, um, car size, for example. So we might have people talking about the benefits of reducing car size and other people talking about maybe why people need bigger cars.

So it always starts from the fact, so the, the whole, the idea that we need climate sceptics in the room as speakers is not necessary. But we might have people who talk about, for example, why we should go more slowly on climate policy, and that sort of thing.

Jan: So as a Joe Public, what are the chances for me to be drawn into a, a citizens' assembly? Will it depend on where I live, or how alert I am to, you know, some calls in the local media, or something like that?

Andy: Uh, well, as I said, it tends to be done throughout this process of sortition, um, and that, it's still quite done in quite an old school way, which is that literally letters are sent to randomly selected postcodes…

Jan: …oh, right, yeah…

Andy: …so yes, it would depend on whether you are in a country or an area where, um, a body, like a local authority or government, uh, or a university, is commission, commissioning a panel.

So it was specifically not looking for people who have an existing interest or existing knowledge about the issue in question. Um, so it, it's kind of random selection. So it's, it's something that you're, you can't really kind of go out of your way to get involved in [Jan laughs] It, it mostly…

Jan: …if I'm seeking to be in a citizens' assembly, I'm probably excluded from it for that very reason, you know?

Andy: [laughs] Exactly. I mean, there are some exceptions to that. So this is the, the kind of classic model of doing assemblies. Um, but some community groups, uh, activist groups and so on are also now using a citizen assembly type process for slightly different reasons.

So if you are in, there are, um, the ways that deliberative research and deliberative democracy are being used is expanding, but in terms of kind of informing policy then that, that random selection is absolutely vital.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Apart from Jan's over enthusiasm, are there other disqualifying factors? I used to remember when I was a journalist, if ever I was stopped in the street and asked to take part in a survey, they asked your profession quite early on, you said journalist, and it's thanks very much, on your way. Because they weren't allowed to speak to journalists.

And it's happened to be even more recently when I've been sent occasional feedback forms from particular things that I've taken in. If you say you're a journalist or you say you even work in, uh, marketing or PR, no.

Are there similar disqualifying factors that people who you might have invited randomly and then you find out, oh, hang on, they're X, they can't be involved.

Andy: Um, I suppose it's possible depending on the, the particular assembly you're talking about. So, so, um, the one I'm gonna be talking about later was looking at, like, national UK climate policy, so we probably wouldn't have included anyone who has a, a role in DESNZ, uh, in government shaping climate policy.

Um, but generally speaking, um, no, we, we want it to be as inclusive as possible. Certainly there's not an occupational, automatic occupational disqualification, but there may be specifics to do with what the, the panel is specifically addressing.

Jan: So how widespread are citizens' assembly and is it, is it a very UK-orientated exercise, or do we see it elsewhere in the world?

Andy: Uh, so over the last 10 years or so, I suppose, um, citizens' assemblies have been increasingly used, um, mostly in the UK and in Europe. Uh, there are a few examples, um, in other parts of the world though, but it is, it's currently quite kind of Euro- and UK-centric.

Um, in terms of citizens assemblies' on climate, in particular. Um, in the UK there's been a, a national level one that was commissioned by kind of six different, um, parliamentary select committees working together, which is very unusual.

Um, there's also been a national level one in Scotland and I think around 30, um, kind of local or regional ones. Across Europe there have been around, I think, 20 national climate assemblies, with kind of trailblazers in France, in Spain, Ireland, um, and around another 200 kind of more local…

Jan: …ooh, wow…

Andy: …or regional scale ones.

So, so it is, it's increasingly being seen as a very useful mechanism to kind of get through issues where there is strong political polarisation or, or political deadlock, right?

Where there's, there's a lot of doubt about exactly what we should be doing to move forward in on an issue that everyone agrees is important in some way.

Jan: That's much more widespread than I'd, I'd imagined.

Andy: Yeah. And, and, again, that, that's just looking at climate assemblies…

Jan: …yeah…

Andy: …um, so they are used, uh, for a lot of other kind of knotty political issues as well.

Um, probably some of the best known are two of the eight different ones that the Ireland government have run nationally. Um, so they had an assembly on abortion rights, liberalising abortion rights, and on equal marriage rights.

And in both cases, the recommendations of those assemblies were put to a national referendum. Um, and were, were in turn supported by the majority of the population. So they changed the law.

Jan: Yeah. That's amazing. I didn't, so I was aware those votes were going on, but I didn't realise there were, there were sort of like this, this deliberative process behind it to get to that point. That's really very impressive, isn't it?

Andy: Yeah. And that kind of, that does, I, I suppose it brings together two different, um, aspects of kind of expanding democracy beyond representative democracy.

And that's, that's kind of what citizens assemblies are all about. Because, you know, we have a, some of the lowest levels of trust in governments and in politicians and in policymaking processes, um, now that, that we ever have had. And it's slowly declining, or even rapidly declining, in some places.

So, so people in government, um, often want to look for other ways to, to make the democratic process more democratic. One of those is direct democracy, the referendum on a particular thing. But as we know from Brexit in this country, it can often get very polarised. There can be a lot of misinformation.

So the other kind of end of that extreme is deliberative democracy, um, where as I've described, you know, you get people from all walks of life into a room to talk through the issues, understand each other's perspectives, have those discussions based on high quality evidence, um, and lead to kind of improving policy making that way.

Paul: So do the politics of a nation as a whole shape both the likelihood of an assembly being put together in the first place *and* what that assembly might be tasked with examining?

Andy: Um, I would say broadly speaking, yes. I mean, although we have had, you know, we've had, um, citizens' assemblies on climate across Europe, um, with all kind of different stripes of, um, government from the, the kind of left leaning to the much more right leaning.

Um, it's, there has been some research done on whether, uh, particular kind of political affiliations are more or less likely to make either politicians or, like, members of the public more or less likely to trust in deliberative forums like this. Um, but that's, it's a little bit inconclusive so far. [laughing] It's quite a new area of study.

Um, but, but certainly it's, it's likely that the agenda of the government or of indeed the, the local authority if it's operating at that scale, is gonna shape the questions that are being asked. Because, you know, what they want to know is, you know, what do well informed people really think about this issue? So if it's not an issue that's on their agenda, then um, then it's not gonna be taken up.

I suppose the, the kind of exception to that is a more research based, uh, assembly that's actually commissioned by a university or a research group rather than by a government or a local authority. And they could, like,

deliberately be exploring questions that are not being adequately addressed, uh, by the government.

Jan: And where governments, uh, you know, sort of initiate the process of a citizens' assembly. Um, and then if they don't like what comes back, does that sort of start to undermine the whole thing?

So if you're asking the question as a government, you've got to be prepared to hear things you might not wish to hear. So is there a problem of sort of democratic legitimacy? If you set one up, people come back to you and say, I'm not gonna talk about that.

Andy: I mean, both yes and no, right? So, um, there are lots of examples, um, like the one I gave, uh, in Ireland where the recommendations of assemblies have been taken seriously, have been enacted, um, by government or, or adapted. Maybe they, they may have had to go through a process to make what the assembly said, practical and achievable.

Um, however, and that obviously does like, that enhances the legitimacy of the democratic process. People like us have been involved in developing that, um, those policies.

There is also some evidence that, uh, governments tend to cherry pick recommendations, [Jan laughs] which could be like, those are things that they were inclined to do anyway, or they could be those things that are cheaper, um, or things that they, based on their own values, rather than the evidence of the panel think will be more palatable to their kind of their wider electorate.

Um, there's also some things that they just, they can't act on. So particularly when you're looking at local assemblies, assembly members don't necessarily have a really good grasp of exactly where the levers of power lie. So, so, you know, in many cases, local authorities have commissioned assemblies, and assemblies have come up with recommendations, some which are just outside the remit of the, the council to deliver.

Um, so there's, there's a couple of issues there. One is the, um, making sure that if an assembly is responding to a, uh, a request from a particular body, that their, their responses, their recommendations sit within the remit of that body. That that's a, a basic design feature, I guess.

But the other is about where assemblies sit in the democratic process, like, the extent to which they're institutionalised, the extent to which governments

commit to enacting their, um, their recommendations. Or at least commit to kind of responding in detail to as to which recommendations they're gonna take forward, which they're not, and why not.

Um, because, you know, quite frankly, it's unlikely that all of the recommendations of an assembly will be kind of achievable or doable now within current public spending limits, or might, like, conflict with other, other government priorities, and so on.

Paul: And do assemblies that do produce suggestions, reports, get to hear back from relevant government departments, governments as a whole, about why maybe some of their recommendations have been adopted and why they haven't? Or they just left to find out this is what's happened, and then go, well, why didn't they listen to us?

Andy: So I would say that varies to an extent from assembly to assembly. So like I said, there's, you know, throughout Europe there have been kind of 200 odds, um, and, and that's just looking at climate.

It depends on the, on the way that the assembly has been set up and that the extent to which it's been institutionalised, as I said. And usually, at the very kind of minimum, there would be some level of response, um, from the commissioning body to the assembly members, but it may not always be satisfactory.

And one of the problems, uh, with assemblies and their, their lack of institutionalisation is that, you know, they're, they're quite big endeavours, they're quite resource intensive to, to run. And resources tend to be given over to the setup, like the recruitment, the design of the process, the delivery of the process, and then it kind of stops.

So that whole follow on from what happens after the panel and, and process tracing of, you know, which recommendations are taken forward, and which are not, and why not, and how that, how that unfolds in the policymaking sphere.

That's, that's underfinanced and under-researched at the moment, I would say.

Jan: Two additional things that occurred to me as you spoke. In general, how long are these processes? And then, secondly, who leads it? Who gets to be the person in the room saying, welcome, welcome, this is what we're going to do.

Andy: Uh, so how long varies enormously, depending on the, like, the scale and the complexity of the issue at stake. Uh, so you can have, like I was talking earlier about some community-organised assemblies. That might just be by a case of a single day.

Uh, usually a, kind of a commissioned assembly would take place over like at least several weeks involving a number of different sessions. They, they tend to be held on, you know, evenings and weekends so that, obviously, people who have jobs can take part in them.

Um, so yeah, a, a few weeks is a, a fairly normal length of time, I would say. Now the, the process that I've been leading recently, that I'll be talking about more in a moment, um, was actually run over two years. Um, which, because we were dealing with like a wide range of very complex subjects.

So yeah, they, they can, they can, vary widely. Some are now being kind of instigated on a permanent basis. Uh, so for example, in Brussels, um, there is a, a permanent climate assembly that has been kind of put together. So obviously the members of that assembly rotate after a while. You can't expect one person to, to do that for the rest of their lives.

Um, but yeah, that they have a permanent assembly, uh, advising them and scrutinising, their, their climate policy. Scotland also doing something similar. So they don't have a permanent assembly, but they are bringing, um, citizens' assemblies into their, their policymaking and scrutiny functions more broadly.

So a couple of years ago I was on the, the, uh, advisory board for a, an assembly that was, uh, looking at not developing new policy, but at how well the government had actually implemented the policy they had previously agreed to put in place.

Um, so, uh, there's usually gonna be a number of people involved in that kind of in the organising the, uh, the assembling of the assembly. [Jan laughs] Um, so you might have a, um, like someone or people team from the commissioning body. So for example, the, the climate change committee, uh, in the UK used a citizens' panel to inform their advice to government on the seventh carbon budget. Um, and so the, some of their public participation team was quite closely involved in the design and development of the panel.

Uh, you, the actual standing in the front of the room and, and kind of guiding people through that will be done by professional facilitators. And there are a

number of organisations who have started to kind of specialise in running assemblies.

So, uh, Involve and Shared Futures are ones that I've worked with quite closely. I think Ipsos ran the, uh, the climate change committee one. So, so it's, it's basically it's a team of professional facilitators. Um, and they will also usually kind of provide individual table facilitators. So you'll have a facilitation lead, um, and there are numbers of facilitators to work wit, small groups to guide them through the conversations. Plus kind of people from the facilitating, the commissioning body kind of overseeing things, and helping with, work out design development, and so on.

Paul: So generally, Andy, do you think that citizens' assemblies, particularly around climate change, have been a success?

Andy: I mean, that depends entirely on how you judge success, doesn't it? Um, I think they have been very successful in demonstrating a kind of strong and consistent public support for action, um, to tackle climate change, um, in areas that governments are often not willing to stray into.

Often because they're worried about, uh, public backlash or public resistance, which I think, you know, the assemblies have conclusively demonstrated, um, is not the case.

So, so publics are much more willing to make change that everyday lives and support government action to enable that than government kind of believes that they are. However, they all, this is always conditional support, right? That support is conditional on government, putting in place particular kind of policies, infrastructure, investments, and so on, to make that possible.

That's definitely successful. I mean, that, that's a very consistent finding. Um, have they been successful in changing government policy? I mean, to a much more limited extent, I would say. Um, but yeah, there are examples where they have, and I think there is, there's definitely scope to, to build on that and to make them more integral to, to policymaking.

Jan: So you've, we've promised our listeners, and you've promised us, to tell us about the one that you've been most recently involved in. So let's move to that

With all of those principles and all of those, uh, design features in place, can you tell us about the work you've done with our Energy Futures panel?

Andy: Yeah, certainly. So, so as I said earlier, this was a very long-term panel. It ran over two years. Um, what we were interested in exploring here was, was two things, basically.

Firstly, the, the kind of type of energy demand reduction measures that the public would support, and the extent to which, uh, they would support those. And also what, what conditionality lay underneath that support. So what would need to be in place for people, uh, for the public to support reducing energy demand?

So why we're interested in that? Um, well, basically we, we know that reducing, uh, the amount of energy we use can contribute substantially to meet our climate targets. We know it can save us money as households, as individuals, as a nation.

We know that that can be done in ways that improve people's quality of life, that, that can, uh, improve health, give us cleaner air, warmer homes, and so on. Um, and it can also contribute to our energy security by making us less reliant on very, very volatile international fossil fuel markets.

But governments of all stripes have historically been unwilling to kind of venture into the territories of reducing energy demand. Um, in part because they believe that the public won't wear it, right, that the public will not be willing to change things in their everyday lives.

And when I talk about energy demand reduction, there's kind of this two, uh, interconnected arms to that, I suppose. One is technology change. So shifting from gas boilers to heat pumps, insulating homes better and moving from petrol cars to electric vehicles, that sort of thing.

The other is more of a social change, so changing the way that we do things like what we eat, uh, what we buy, um, how we get around. So that sort of thing.

Those two things are often seen as, uh, if not oppositional, then quite detached. But actually adopting new technologies, that's a social process as well. Um, so you need the same kind of analysis of why people would or would not choose to, to take on new technologies, to implement that.

Um, so that, that's kind of the, the overview of what we wanted to do. Uh, it was sparked by a, a previous research project, uh, from back in the early 2020s, uh, when a, a research centre called CREDS wanted to establish, okay,

exactly how much could reducing energy demand contribute to our climate targets.

Um, and they used, uh, the same, uh, computer model that government uses to set and inform its climate and energy policy and its energy targets, called UK Times, um, to run a series of scenarios from which they concluded that energy demand in the UK could be reduced by over 50% between 2020 and 2050.

Which is a huge amount, but that was based on what was technically possible, didn't have any input from the peoples whose lives would change by making these changes. Didn't have any input from the people who would be affected or would need to support or actively kind of change their behaviour to, to, um, to reach those kind of levels of demand reduction.

So that's basically where we picked up. So we wanted to investigate what's the social mandate for kind of doing all these different things. What's the social mandate of, of changing the way that we, we consume energy, the way that we, we kind of run our everyday lives?

Uh, we concluded, um, so our kind of, and, and the, I guess I'm gonna just pause a minute and come back. Um, so the really innovative thing about what we did was to combine, like, the quantitative modelling that, that does make up the, like the most central piece of evidence for government policy, with the deliberative process.

You, you need energy systems modelling to set targets to know what you need to do if you're going to achieve certain aims to, to quantify things. But energy systems models are very, very bad at representing humans and human behaviours and how we make choices and why we make choices.

So bringing these, these two things together to, like, generate quantified future scenarios with a social mandate, with a kind of underpinning social support, um, we think is, is absolutely vital for kind of seeing our way through, um, this, this, [takes a big breath] the issue of tackling climate change.

And our, our sort of, our headline finding, I guess, um, is that our panel members, uh, support it or the, the final panel-led scenario that we generated, um, would result in a 37% reduction of energy demand between 2025 and 2050.

Um, and probably more important than that, that quantification for me is, is having all that, that really rich textured detail about what government would

need to do and what, what industry would need to do, what social changes would be needed in order to generate those levels of support.

Paul: Do you feel there are things that businesses could learn, could adapt, could change from what you've seen both in citizens' assemblies generally, and from the findings of your particular work?

Andy: Absolutely. So again, going back to the, well maybe let me take a step back, first of all. Um, so how we got to that, that kind of headline finding of a 37% of, of reduction in energy demand. Um, we, we started by looking at a number of individual sectors. Um, so we looked at kind of what we eat, what we buy, how we heat our homes, uh, and how we get around.

Uh, and for each of those, um, sectors individually, we, we kind of started by taking the, the panel members through that deliberative process of learning, of reflection of deliberation and drawing conclusions.

Um, and the outputs from those panel discussions were then used to develop new model scenarios, new model runs, um, with a kind of, a quantified, um, energy demand reduction for each sector, um, based on particular conditions.

We then fed that back to the panel, um, and they were able to question and challenge and kind of probe what we'd done and why we'd done it. And kind clarify all of that. And then in some cases we refined those sector-specific models based on their, uh, on their kind of reflections and their feedback.

We then combined all of that together into whole system model to give the panel members an opportunity to kind of balance off the main pillars of getting to net zero. So that is, reducing energy demand, uh, increasing clean electrification and carbon dioxide removals.

And so following those, another kind of set of iterative discussions, we then ended up with our kind of final headline, um, panel scenario. So, so, um, the findings from the, our Energy Futures panel, very strongly reflected kind of a public recognition that, uh, change in order to reduce energy demand, um, has gotta come both from kind of changes to public behaviours, but also changes from industry.

Um, so they, in some cases, I mean, generally speaking, um, they were very much keener on trying kind of collaborative and voluntary measures, um, before bringing in regulation. But they were also very clear that if industry was

not able to kind of make the changes that they saw as necessary through kind of voluntary procedures, then new regulation would be necessary.

So thinking, for example, about what we eat. Um, so they recognised that changes needed to take place on the consumption side, the public side, and they wanted to see that driven by, um, by information, by education, by community kind of projects and engagement, by using a wide range of different kind of media and channels to reach people to, to normalise eating less meat, essentially.

Not, not everyone going vegan or vegetarian or, or, like, stopping the meat industry altogether, but, but eating less meat. Because as a nation, like, we, we need to for our health. Um, and, and also, uh, because the, yeah, um, the meat farming industry is a, a big cause of climate changing emissions.

Um, so they also wanted to see on the kind of production and retail side, um, changes to, for example, how supermarkets, um, do their discounts and promotions. How they do kind of product positioning, how they engage with their consumers through things like, you know, recipe cards and, like, having ideas for how you might want to use different foods, like, on the shelf, so that people can like, have a, a chance to engage.

A lot of what our panel members said was, yeah, I, I'd be very happy to eat less meat, but I've, I've got no idea where to start really. You know, this is the way I eat, this is the way I've always eaten, this is the way that people around me eat, so I, I just don't know where to start. And they saw supermarkets, restaurants, and so on as having a big role in helping them to change that. Um, and again, as I said, ideally voluntarily, collaboratively, but with regulation, if, if that wasn't possible

There were other, other kind of business-related findings, I think. So while, while they were keen to see regulation on some things, um, for example, uh, to make electronic appliances more repairable, um, and more durable and more modular.

So like if one bit of your, your phone, or your whatever device it may be fails, then you can just easily get that replaced rather than having to get a whole new one. Um, they also were very keen on like being fair to business, so like having, if there are any policy changes like this, like for example, the, the phase out of gas boilers, which, if their conditions were met, the vast majority were in favour of, but having a very long lead in time for that so that both the public

and the businesses who kind of provide those services and those products have time to kind of shift their, their business models, their, their production cycles and so on.

And they were also very kind of protective, I think, of business, of small business in particular. So they didn't want to see new regulation driving people outta business. If there was a particular kind of area or a particular industry that was being targeted by kind of client policy, then they didn't, yeah, they didn't wanna see people like losing their jobs and losing their businesses.

They did recognise that the way we do things, the kind of products we produce, the kind of services we provide and the way we, we provide and produce those might have to change. But they were very keen on seeing kind of adequate support from government to, to help people kind of shift their, their products, or their ways of producing, or the services they provide to more kind of sustainable angles.

Um, so I think there's a there's a recognition that a lot of industry needs to change, but that it needs support to do that just as much as the public does. And that, that there's a strong awareness that, that neither the public nor industry nor government can kind of carry the responsibility or the burdens or the risks of all these changes by themselves. There has to be a kind of a joint effort between all three of those sectors.

Jan: And the 37% is quite an arresting number…

Andy: …mm-hmm…

Jan: …in terms of, you know, in that range that, that you're talking about as being a possible contribution from, you know, demand management. Um, so, so that's really, you know, that's blown me away already, it's such a large number.

But also some of those issues you're drawing out is that it's, it may be proof of the pudding in terms of, you know, the, the various aspects. So not just sort of black and white, but okay, this, but we need some help with that and we need this to come together. Uh, that's just really quite amazing.

These are really smart people. How many, how many people are on the panel pulling all that together?

Andy: Uh, so we, and I agree, they're, they're very smart people. [Jan laughs] And, and this is the one thing that climate assemblies has shown again and

again and again, which is that, you know, Joe Normal, everyday members of the public are absolutely able to engage with really complex policy issues, really complicated subjects, to take on onboard information and to, and to discuss and debate and deliberate, um, in, in ways that often it feels like policymakers aren't willing to trust regular people to do.

Um, so how many people were there? Um, the, the panel that was made up of 40 people, um, now that did change somewhat over time. Um, so, you know, two years is a very long commitment, people have changes in their lives that meant that they were not always able to continue. So, for example, if people, if people moved out of the area, if people got a job, if their caring responsibilities changed.

Um, so I think we, we replaced around, I think, six or seven of those people over that time. Obviously, kind of fitting in the precise demographic gaps that were left. But yeah, so the short answer is 40 people, Jan. [laughs]

Jan: That's so impressive.

Paul: And so then briefly before we finish, Andy, can you tell us what you think is gonna come next? What does the future hold for citizens' assemblies?

Andy: So I think citizens' assemblies have, two kind of different directions to go on. Um, which aren't, they're complementary, right? They're, they're, they're not mutual exclusive.

Uh, one is a very kind of practical direction. So a lot of assemblies, particularly around climate so far, have dealt with, have tried to kind of mush together the, sort of, the really big issues with the, the policy detail over the, the what with the how.

And that's, that's, that's just very difficult, right? You're trying to do too much at once. So on the one hand, I think there's a, a really strong role for practical deliberation around the how. Okay, if we know, broadly speaking, what it is we want to do, assemblies can be great at, at working out how to do that.

So what kind of, if we know that we want to, let's say, like, reach net zero, um, yeah, how exactly we can do that in all these different sectors, what are the policies that the public would support? What would, um, what kind of investment, what kind of help, you know, what they need to, generate that support? So there's a very practical kind of how we do things question.

The other side is a much more kind of political with a small p, maybe a big P now as well, um, sort of deliberation. Which is where there's not a, a clear sense of, um, shared political or shared public ambition or direction.

So, you know, up until very recently, the, the vast majority of the public and all political parties were absolutely clear, we have to get to net zero by 2050. There was consensus on that. That's no longer the case. Um, although it is, like, noteworthy that the political fragmentation of the consensus on climate is, uh, much stronger than the public fragmentation.

So, like, the vast majority of the public, way over 80%, are still highly concerned about climate change and want to see government action to tackle it. Over 60% still want to see, uh, net zero achieved by 2050. Uh, but that means there's a lot of people who, who aren't wanting that. And I think we have to, we have to acknowledge that, right? That, that reaching net zero by 2050 is no longer a consensus issue.

And so there's a role for, um, political deliberation, for bringing together people in the way that I've described to, to work at if this is actually what we need to do? If this is actually what we want to do, and if not, what is it?

Now there's risks involved in that, obviously, but given the kind of political fragmentation then, then that sort of political deliberation alongside the practical deliberation is, uh, yeah, important avenues to go down. But also to try not to mix the two too much because you can't do them both at the same time.

I think the other thing that, that really needs to be done, if we want this to be a tool to legitimise policymaking is to make it much more visible, right? Yeah. As I said, you know, there've been hundreds of these processes and one of the key reasons that, that policy makers have engaged with them is to, to build trust and to build legitimacy into the policymaking process. That only knows, it only works if people know about it, right?

So, so I think having much more visible kind of um, communicated much more extensively to the rest of the population, that this is how we're making policy, this is why we're doing it, um, and this is what the outcomes are and this is how we'll respond to it. I think that's, that's important.

Paul: Well, Andy, thank you very much for giving us such an insightful look into the world of citizens' assemblies.

Andy: Thank you very much. Been a pleasure.

[Theme music]

Paul: It's really good to see, Jan, that there are people who are being educated, being made more well-informed about issues of climate change and such, who are then able to reflect various groups of society and put suggestions forward, so that the governments, departments, local or national understand what the thoughts are of the people out there.

Jan: It is indeed. And um, I suppose it made me think of citizen science…

Paul: …mm-hmm…

Jan: …where people can help feed into a scientific process. And this is, if you like, citizens' assemblies, is taking that knowledge and expertise suitably refined with, with lots of information through to policy.

Just imagine if you're one of those 40 people, what, what you would come away with in terms of understanding and also people you'd meet and the kind of conversations and discussions you'd have. That'd be amazing.

Paul: On the other side, and this is something I think we're gonna discuss right towards the end of this series with another guest, the worry that might come with it.

The fact that you might learn so much about what's happening to our planet all at once in these sessions, not having known before. The danger it may be becoming overwhelming.

Jan: It could do, although, because it's got a policy link. So for, and you know, it depends how it's put together I guess. But I quite liked, you know, here are the energy demand reduction options…

Paul: …mm-hmm…

Jan: …here they might work out. So of course there is that, that worry that it might, you know, feel too much, but also here are choices that we need to make. Yeah.

Paul: Yes, yeah. I can see both sides of it…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …but I, I can definitely see how there's the potential for worrying if you're suddenly, maybe a little bit more uneducated as to the dangers of climate change and what it might do to planet, you yourself as a person, and then you find all this out all of a sudden …

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …over the course of two climate assembly meetings. Ah, yes. [Jan gives a short laugh] So I, think, yeah, there's lots of education going on there, which is good…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …I think it just, yeah, obviously as long as that balance is there. And I liked the term that Andy used of 'deliberative mini-publics'.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Mainly 'cause it made me think, mini-publics, oh, that's just little children.

Jan: [laughs] Well, I suppose, um, I mean, kids could be involved in…

Paul: …well, I…

Jan: …many citizen assemblies. [laughs]

Paul: I'm sure there will be in some parts of the world, citizens' assemblies made up of junior people, much as there are junior governments and junior other assemblies of other kinds.

Yeah, yeah.

Jan: But I also took as point at the end that the visibility of these processes are maybe not, uh, very high. Um, so actually, I mean, I certainly, I kind of knew they existed. I sort of knew what they were, but I had no idea about the volume and the amount of the, of citizens' assemblies that have been put together.

So I, I think that the visibility *is* quite low.

Paul: Now I hadn't realised they were quite so widespread beyond the UK…

Jan: …yeah.

Paul: I was aware of them, England, Scotland. Um, I don't know about Wales. I guess Wales would probably come in, England and Wales tend to operate quite similar kind of operations at this kind of thing sometimes.

But yet the fact that it's spread throughout Europe, and certainly in countries where maybe the politics of the government doesn't always necessarily reflect positive attitudes towards tackling climate change, there might still be assemblies taking place there. So that's really good to see.

Jan: Yeah, really interesting design.

Paul: It is. So what should we talk about next week.

Jan: More design.

Paul: More design? What, a different kind of design?

Jan: Why not?

Paul: Should we design some clothes?

Jan: Yes, please.

Paul: How, how are you, have you been working at your loom?

Jan: Yes. [laughs] Well, it wouldn't be nice. I'd, uh, I've done a little bit of weaving, but it's such a beautiful practice.

Paul: Well, let's find out about that en masse, on a giant scale and the textile industry, fabrics, waste within that industry, and what might be done to address those issues. And we'll be speaking to Dr Madiha Ahmad, who is from here at the Pentland Centre.

Jan: Brilliant. I'm up for that.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]