

**FROM EXPERIMENT TO INSTITUTION:
THE GROWING ROLE OF CITIZEN DELIBERATION**

From Recommendations to Implementation:

Lessons From the Permanent
Paris Citizens' Assembly's
Collaborative Drafting Process

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In July 2024, the Paris City Council made history by adopting a Citizen Bill on Homelessness¹ drafted by the permanent Paris Citizens' Assembly—the first time a major political body directly passed legislation written by a citizens' assembly into law. While this outcome is remarkable in itself, what deserves particular attention is the innovative process that brought it about, especially in the final stages where assembly members worked directly with political officials and civil servants to transform their recommendations into actionable policy.

In this essay, I examine how the permanent Paris Citizens' Assembly² has evolved beyond the traditional model of citizens' assemblies, where recommendations are handed to officials who take months to respond before passing them to civil servants. I show it has pioneered a collaborative approach that brings citizens, politicians, and administrators together in the crucial implementation phase. This essay focuses on the mechanics that made that final phase work,³ and also includes considerations for adapting this model to other cities and to the Canadian context in particular.

1. The Paris Innovation: Genuine Co-Creation of Policy

Historically, one of the main criticisms of citizens' assemblies has been the gap between their recommendations and actual policy implementation. The typical process involves assembly members developing recommendations in isolation, presenting them to officials, and then stepping back from the process entirely. This approach often leads to recommendations being diluted, misinterpreted, or simply gathering dust on bureaucratic shelves.

The Paris Citizens' Assembly developed a distinctive four-phase process, with

particular emphasis on the final part where recommendations were transformed into legislation. Elian Belon, secretary general of the assembly, noted that they reinforced this phase during the last assembly cycle in 2023-24, explaining that there were three meetings held between the citizens, politicians, and administration. Together, they co-constructed and wrote, “to the comma,” the Citizen Bill, transforming the citizens' initial 43 ideas into the 20 recommendations that ultimately made it into the bill.

While the term “co-creation” has become somewhat of a buzzword, it rarely captures a truly equal process that results in both a joint output and joint decision between citizens and policy makers—whether elected officials or civil servants. The Parisian case, however, truly merits the description of “co-creation.” Below, I outline the five key elements:

- **Structured dialogue between all stakeholders:** The transformation of 43 initial recommendations into 20 actionable measures involved intensive, facilitated workshops where citizens, politicians, and civil servants worked together to assess each proposal's feasibility, timeline, and potential impact. This was not simply about cutting recommendations—it was about understanding what was already being done, what could be combined for greater effect, and what needed to be modified to work within existing systems.
- **Early engagement with implementation considerations and built-in accountability measures:** Rather than waiting until after recommendations were finalized, the process brought in administrative expertise during the development phase. This enabled real-time feedback on practical challenges and opportunities, helping to shape proposals that were both ambitious and implementable. The

process culminated in the unanimous approval of the Citizen Bill by assembly members before it went officially to the city council for a debate and vote. Importantly, the process included built-in accountability measures: there is a commitment to review progress after one year, ensuring that the implementation of the recommendations will be monitored and evaluated. This one-year point will be reached in July 2025.

- **Political buy-in through continuous engagement:** The process included regular interaction with political parties, including opposition groups. As Belon noted in an interview, “The opposition parties were invited all along the process, to each plenary. Once the deliberation [the local bill] was written, there was the phase with commissions, then the vote in the Paris City Council.” This ongoing engagement helped build understanding and support across political lines.
- **Institutional integration:** A crucial factor in the success of this approach was the assembly’s formal integration into Paris’s governmental structures. The assembly’s role and mandate were written into the Paris City Council governance regulations in 2021, giving it a legitimate standing in the policy-making process. This institutional foundation meant that the assembly’s work could not be easily dismissed or ignored.
- **Impact on administrative culture:** The collaborative process has had ripple effects throughout Paris’s city administration. According to Belon, some departments initially viewed citizen involvement with skepticism, questioning whether ordinary citizens could really improve upon the work of experienced civil servants. However, the quality of the citizens’ work and the collaborative nature of the implementation process have begun to influence how departments approach their work internally.

2. Key Success Factors

Several elements appear crucial to the success of this collaborative implementation approach:

- **Political will:** Strong support from the mayor and executive branch created the conditions for genuine cooperation between citizens and officials. Intentional efforts to engage elected officials in the opposition were also important, even if some parties remained skeptical or not particularly supportive of the process.
- **Clear process design:** The four-phase structure, with dedicated time for co-creating the final legislation, ensured that implementation considerations were built into the process from the start. Skilled facilitation was also an important design factor, as the discussions were sometimes heated and went on for longer than planned due to the need to reach a consensus on points of initial disagreement.
- **Institutional integration:** Formal recognition of the assembly in city council regulations gave it standing and authority in the policy-making process.
- **Adequate time and resources:** The process allowed sufficient time (three workshops, some of which ran over time to allow the conversations the time they needed) for thorough discussion and refining the recommendations.
- **Involvement of all stakeholders:** Regular engagement with opposition parties, civil servants, and other stakeholders helped build broad support for the final legislation from the very outset.

3. Lessons for Other Cities

The Paris experience offers several important lessons for other cities, in Canada and elsewhere,

considering permanent citizens' assemblies with powers to draft Citizen Bills:

Implementation should be considered from the start, not as an afterthought. The format of the final recommendations, the process for final approval, and the time needed to ensure this part of the process does not get neglected need to be considered in the early design stages of the assembly. Dedicated time and resources for transforming recommendations into legislation are also crucial for successful implementation.

Bringing citizens, politicians, and civil servants together in the final stages can help bridge the gap between recommendations and action. While it has been more typical for citizens' assemblies to draft recommendations that they then hand onward to elected officials and civil servants, who review them and then respond to the citizens' assembly, the Parisian model demonstrates another way. Collaborative workshops where consensus amongst the triad of actors is needed adds more time to the process, but ensures that there is a high level of consensus for the final output, and reduces the time that would have been needed for officials to review and respond to the citizens' assembly's recommendations.

Formal institutional integration of citizens' assemblies through legal measures can help ensure their recommendations are taken seriously and ensure the assembly's continuity regardless of shifts in government. The citizens' assembly has become a part of Paris's democratic architecture, as have other permanent citizens' assemblies elsewhere. While one-off assemblies typically depend on political will at a moment in time and risk becoming politicized—i.e. in being associated with the party that initially launched the first one—an institutionalized citizens' assembly anchored in policy and political decision-making helps to set the foundation for a new institution that can endure. In this regard, it is also important that there is **regular engagement with all political**

parties and stakeholders throughout the process. This helps build cross-partisan support for final recommendations, as well as more sustainable support for the enduring nature of the permanent citizens' assembly.

4. Implications for the Canadian Context

The Paris experience offers particularly relevant insights for Canada, which has its own rich history with citizens' assemblies, including the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (2004), the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (2006-2007), and the Canadian Citizens' Assemblies on Democratic Expression (CADE, 2020-2022). Additionally, there have been around 50 municipal, provincial, and national deliberative processes since the first experiences in the early 2000s (often called review panels⁴ rather than citizens' assemblies, though with the same defining principles of sortition and deliberation at their core). However, challenges from these past experiences highlight where the Paris model might be applicable within the Canadian context.

Canada's early experiments with citizens' assemblies were groundbreaking but ultimately faced implementation challenges. The British Columbia and Ontario assemblies both produced well-reasoned recommendations for electoral reform that failed to achieve the required referendum thresholds for implementation. The many review panels that have taken place after these assemblies show the opportunity and possibility of public deliberation in the Canadian context, however, none of them have been legally institutionalized in order to connect them more concretely to policy-making. The Paris model offers insights into how Canadian jurisdictions might evolve their approach.

- **Multi-level governance considerations:** Like France, Canada has distinct jurisdictional

responsibilities between different levels of government. The Paris assembly's approach to addressing both municipal and state-level recommendations could be particularly relevant for Canadian cities dealing with issues that cross federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictions. For instance, housing and homelessness initiatives in Canadian cities often require coordination across all three levels of government.

- **Institutional integration:** While previous Canadian assemblies were one-off bodies, the Paris model of permanent institutional integration could be adapted to Canadian governance structures. This might involve amending municipal acts or city charters to formally recognize citizens' assemblies as part of the policy-making process.
- **Indigenous engagement:** Any adaptation of the Paris model in Canada would need to consider and meaningfully engage Indigenous governance rights and consultation requirements. The collaborative approach used in Paris could be expanded in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples to ensure meaningful Indigenous participation and respect for Indigenous decision-making processes, addressing a dimension that was not as central in the Parisian context.

Opportunities in the Canadian Municipal Context

Canadian municipalities offer particularly fertile ground for implementing a Paris-style approach. Canadian cities already have extensive public consultation requirements and mechanisms that could be built upon or amended to create more structured deliberative processes. These existing frameworks provide a foundation that could be developed into more robust deliberative institutions similar to the Paris Citizens' Assembly.

Canadian cities have significant authority

over many issues that directly affect citizens' daily lives, making them ideal laboratories for deliberative democracy innovations. The concreteness and immediacy of municipal issues can make them especially suitable for citizen deliberation, as the Paris experience with homelessness policy demonstrates.

Additionally, larger Canadian municipalities have sophisticated civil service structures that could support the kind of collaborative implementation process seen in Paris. This administrative capacity is crucial for the success of the co-creation phase that distinguishes the Paris model, where citizens, officials, and civil servants work together to transform recommendations into actionable policy.

Potential Adaptations for Canada

Several adaptations would be necessary to successfully implement a Paris-style approach in the Canadian context. In officially bilingual jurisdictions, the process would need to accommodate both English and French participation, likely requiring additional time and resources for translation and interpretation. However, there is already ample experience in multi-lingual deliberation from the citizens' assemblies and panels that have already taken place in Canada. Additional learnings could be drawn from other institutionalized bilingual deliberative assemblies, such as those in Brussels that take place in both French and Flemish.

Given Canada's larger geographic areas, even at the municipal level, hybrid models combining in-person and online deliberation might be necessary to ensure broad participation while maintaining the benefits of face-to-face interaction. This geographic challenge requires creative solutions that were not as pressing in the more compact Parisian context.

Constitutional considerations would also come into play. While French municipalities have

significant autonomy in certain areas, Canadian municipalities are ‘creatures of the provinces.’ Implementation processes would need to account for provincial oversight and authority, potentially requiring provincial-level support for municipal deliberative institutions.

Interestingly, Canadian political culture, with its emphasis on consensus-building and accommodation of diverse interests, might actually be more conducive to the kind of collaborative implementation process seen in Paris. Canada’s traditions of accommodation and compromise could provide fertile ground for the co-creative approach that distinguishes the Paris model.

Conclusion

The Paris Citizens’ Assembly’s approach to implementation represents a significant evolution in how citizens’ assemblies can work effectively with existing political and administrative structures. By bringing citizens, politicians, and civil servants together in the crucial final stages, it has created a model that could help address one of the main challenges facing deliberative democracy: the gap between citizens’ recommendations and actual policy implementation.

The success of this approach suggests that the future of citizens’ assemblies may lie not in creating parallel structures to existing institutions but in finding ways to integrate citizen deliberation more deeply into current governmental processes. The Paris example shows that with careful design and strong political will, it is possible to create collaborative processes that maintain the independence and innovative thinking of citizens while ensuring their recommendations can be effectively implemented.

Endnotes

1. “Délibération de l’Assemblée Citoyenn e Relative à La Prévention et à l’accompagnement Des Personn Es En Situation de Rue” (Le Conseil de Paris, Séance des, 26, 27 et 28 juin 2024), https://a06-v7.apps.paris.fr/a06/jsp/site/plugins/odjcp/DoDownload.jsp?id_entite=62292&id_type_entite=6.
2. “Première délibération pour la deuxième promotion de l’Assemblée citoyenne de Paris,” Paris.fr, November 14, 2024, <https://www.paris.fr/pages/assemblee-citoyenne-de-paris-la-deuxieme-promotion-est-lancee-25055>.
3. [See here for an overview](#) of the whole assembly process and outcomes.
4. “Work (Panels),” MASS LBP, <https://www.masslb.com/work-panels>.