Book Section:
Leston Bandeira Gilbert, C., Caluwaerts, D. and Vermassen, D. (2024) Reimagining Engagement between Citizens and Parliament. In: Reimagining Parliament. Bristol University Press. ISBN: 9781529227024.

5. Reimagining engagement between citizens and parliament <2>

Cristina Leston-Bandeira,[1] Didier Caluwaerts, and Daan Vermassen[2]

Introduction <2>

This chapter's reimagining challenge seems more straightforward than in the other chapters in this book, as it deals with a far more recent reality. Whilst the other chapters focus on areas of activity with centuries' old practice, here we focus on a relatively new development: parliamentary public engagement. As such, there may be less to unpick and reimagine, as parliaments simply have not yet fully 'imagined' it in their own current practice. Parliamentary public engagement draws from, and extends, notions of representation, but it is a product of modern societies, having only become a distinguishable activity since the turn to the twenty-first century. However, the principles of engagement often run contrary to core parliamentary principles, making this chapter's reimagining task nonetheless as challenging. We start the chapter by establishing the significance of public engagement to today's parliament, to then outline the core principles and tensions between public engagement and parliament. We then proceed to outline a reimagined engagement between citizens and the UK parliament, to finally reflect on how close or distant this is from current practice.

Why focus on engagement <2>

The UK parliament is first and foremost an institution that legitimises political decision-making through its law-making, scrutiny, and representation roles. However, to ignore its public engagement role is to misunderstand the type of societies we live in: a digitally connected society of 24/7 communication, with an ever-expanding civil society, high expectations of governance, and critical citizens. Political institutions locked away from the citizenry are unthinkable today. Likewise, to think of the relationship between citizens and parliament confined to the opportunity to participate in elections every few years is to misunderstand today's expectations of having a say.

Parliament's core institutional framework, practices and role may have been shaped over centuries, but its relationship with the public has changed dramatically since the turn of the twenty-first century. In a context of pulverised interests, a ubiquitous civil society, hyper voter volatility, unpredictable politics and decline in party membership, the modern parliament acts as the Mediator Parliament (Leston-Bandeira, 2016): an institution that assumes a key role in mediating inputs and outputs between society and governance, but not necessarily just through the representative accountability chain. It is a parliament that needs to combine representation with other mechanisms to connect with

the public; a parliament that needs to reach out, to be open and accessible, and integrate participatory mechanisms which facilitate the involvement of people's voices and lived experiences within decision-making processes. Either as a response to the alleged crisis of democracy or as a recognition of today's expectation of more openness, parliamentary public engagement has become a key area of development for parliaments across the world (Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023). This is illustrated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the international organisation of parliaments, selecting the theme of public engagement as the focus of its latest global report (IPU and UNDP 2022).

It is in this context that the UK parliament's role of public engagement has expanded and strengthened over the past couple of decades. The 2009 expenses scandal only reinforced a development that had already been set in motion since the turn of the century, namely through the publication of the *Connecting with the Public* 2004 report. This report gave a mandate to parliament's services to invest in and expand on public engagement (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). The aftermath of the expenses scandal that brought parliament's reputation to tatters would strengthen this path, as officials attempted to redress declining levels of trust. Since then, public engagement services have expanded across all types of engagement activities, from education to participation, as this chapter's last section shows. This development is clearly patent across parliament, but it is also patchy and its impact is often unclear.

Engagement both strengthens and supplements parliament's traditional roles of law-making, scrutiny and representation. It is not just an expectation from citizens, it is also becoming part of the fabric of parliamentary business.

Principles and Tensions between Public Engagement and Parliament <2>

Before we outline what a reimagined engagement between parliament and citizens would look like, we establish the core principles of public engagement and its inherent tensions with the nature of the institution of parliament, after briefly establishing what we understand by public engagement.

The meaning of public engagement <3>

Public engagement is often reduced to meaning participation. The two are often assumed to be interchangeable, but they are not. Participation can be one element of engagement, a type of activity seeking to involve the public in a process and/or event, but engagement is far broader than participation. Indeed, public engagement in the specific context of parliament can be embodied in the following five types of activities: information, education, communication, consultation, and

participation (IPU and UNDP, 2022). Ultimately, public engagement is about empowering people in relation to their surroundings, be it because they feel better informed, confident enough to get involved, or indeed decide to participate in a political event.

Initially conceptualised as public understanding within the realms of the arts and the sciences (Sanders and Moles, 2013), the concept of public engagement has since developed to include a much broader and nuanced spectrum of connections between citizen and realm (in the present case, politics), which assume non-unidirectional relationships and an enduring effect on the citizen beyond the actual public engagement event. That is, public engagement should involve a dialogical relationship rather than a one-way flow of information and be outcome-led rather than activity focused: public engagement is not simply about going through an activity or event, it should linger beyond the occurrence of these and have an effect on the citizen. This effect could be of feeling more confident, welcomed, listened, or valued, in short empowered, or indeed, when done badly, less confident, unwelcomed, not listened to or unvalued, in short disempowered. But engagement is not just about the citizen. It is also about making better science, arts or politics. It is, in the context of parliament, about enhancing parliamentary decisions and decision-making processes by making these more meaningful to the citizen – both in how the citizen perceives them and in the quality of the decisions taken.

The core principles of engagement <3>

As established in the previous section, public engagement entails different types of activities, from providing information (e.g. parliamentary websites) to enabling citizen participation in parliamentary proceedings (e.g. petitions). We are thus referring to potentially very different types of activities. But across these, we establish five core principles of public engagement with parliament: (1) inclusivity, (2) relevance, (3) relatability, (4) continuity and (5) sustainability.

1) Inclusive engagement reaches out to a wide range of audiences, going beyond those often referred to as the 'usual suspects'. Those who get involved in politics tend to be older, white and from well-off socio-economic backgrounds. Engagement needs thus to be particularly focused on those groups who would not normally get involved. This is about reaching diverse people and community groups, but also about facilitating spaces and processes that feel inclusive.
2) For engagement to chime and lead to consequences, it needs to be relevant; relevant to the people it focuses on, to the issues it addresses, and to the parliamentary processes in place. This requires engagement with specific issues, groups and processes. Engagement methods

may be generalised, but their sense of relevance needs to be kept to each instance of engagement activity.

3) Engagement is based on connections; subjective connections that make you feel you belong, that it is worth it and that someone is listening. For those connections to take place, the citizen needs to feel they can relate to the organisation leading on the engagement initiative, be it parliament overall, a select committee, an official or indeed an MP. Meaningful engagement does not take place when it feels distant and abstract.
4) Engagement should not be a one-off. It should be built upon structures and processes that enable a continuity of contact, which assist parliament and parliamentarians in being aware of the issues, interests and needs affecting citizens.
5) Finally, public engagement practices, processes and outcomes need to be sustainable. This is for two reasons. Firstly, they need to be sustainable to be run in the medium and long-term to preserve connections between parliament and citizens. There is little point in creating initiatives that cannot be replicated or sustainably run within the parameters of parliamentary practices. Secondly and more importantly, engagement needs to consider the consequences of today's decisions for tomorrow's generations. It should facilitate discussions which consider the impact on future generations of specific decisions and policy, both those who are already born and those yet to be born.

In our reimagined parliament, these core principles of engagement would therefore be at the forefront of its relationship with citizens. However, these core principles are not necessarily in line with core parliamentary principles, as we explore next.

The tensions between public engagement and parliament <3>

Parliaments were created to represent people and take decisions on their behalf. They were not created to engage with people.[3] To represent and to engage are clearly linked, but they are not the same. As institutions of democratic political governance, parliaments embody characteristics and principles that are in tension with the principles of public engagement outlined above. We explore five of these next.

Firstly, the collective nature of parliaments. As explored elsewhere (Leston-Bandeira, 2014), parliaments represent everyone and no-one specifically. They lack a single identity (Kelso, 2007). They bring together different political groups which, collectively, represent a nation. However, these groups have different agendas, being often opposed to each other. Despite being constituted of 650 MPs and

800 odd Peers, due to its collective nature the UK parliament is an abstract and anonymous entity as it cannot represent one single identity, representing vastly different realities across the country.

When considering the importance of establishing connections at the core of engagement, it becomes clear that the UK parliament does not have the characteristics to make it relatable. As a large abstract organisation, it lacks the flexibility and persona needed to embed engagement initiatives that are relatable to the citizen. This can of course be counter-acted by focusing engagement on MPs and Peers individually, issues or indeed committees and their Chairs. But as a core principle, the collective and abstract nature of the UK parliament makes it intuitively a poor vessel for relatable engagement practices.

Linked to this, the UK parliament is also a highly hierarchical institution, where rituals and symbols set the pace and mood of the institution by reproducing distant pasts and associated senses of privilege (Puwar, 2004). Again, in many ways, this is due to its nature: all parliaments are hierarchical. This derives essentially from the processes associated with attributing legitimacy to MPs, as elected representatives and servers of the public; but also in establishing the legitimacy of the institution of parliament. Stripped of the symbols, rituals, practices and denominations which embed representatives with their status, MPs and Peers would simply be people; likewise, parliamentary spaces would simply be just another building. Still, the UK parliament goes well beyond other parliaments in being particularly hierarchical, in great part due to its reliance on practice, precedence and history as part of its legitimacy mantle. Much has been done in recent years to redress this, but again this is part of parliament's nature, and contrary to engagement's core principle of inclusivity; particularly as there are wider factors that make politics exclusionary and the realm of narrow groups of people. This means that our reimagined parliament needs to actively nurture ways to make it more inclusive to foster proper engagement.

Our third parliamentary feature in conflict with the core principles of engagement is parliament's main House's dependency on electoral cycles. Elections are of course a key vehicle in ascribing legitimacy to parliaments. However, by their very nature they also introduce priorities and narrow MPs' attention foci. Electoral cycles can be counter to the continuous nature that should characterise engagement processes. More importantly, electoral cycles and their inherent accountability to today's voters mean that MPs rarely consider consequences beyond the immediate election and voters; this encourages short-term thinking. It hinders sustainable approaches to policy making and engagement. Within the

context of an electoral cycle, engagement can become about how to win an election, rather than about the lived experiences of specific policies or their consequences for generations to come.

Fourthly, the model of representative parliamentary democracy is based on the principle of aggregation of interests following the will of the majority. This is a practical way of transforming people's needs and preferences into a governing system. However, engagement is anything but aggregation and majorities. It is about shaping processes to reach out to specific groups of people, to identify ways of making the issues of minorities come to the fore and to go beyond the majority and find solutions that are commonly accepted and based on lived experiences.

Finally, we turn to the pace of politics. Parliamentary representative democracy frameworks are in place to establish processes that facilitate governance in a timely manner – a small group of representatives making the decisions on behalf of millions. It is a system that ensures decisions are taken in a timely manner. Asking, checking, and conferring with the public on all policy decisions would not be practical or even possible. Governance includes hundreds of small weekly policy decisions, many of which are of no relevance or importance to most people. Added to this, a politics highly visible under the spotlight of 24/7 communications introduces an even quicker pace to politics. This pace is often in contradiction to engagement, which requires time to be undertaken properly.

There are therefore many practical problems in harmonising the work of parliament and public engagement. Understanding how citizens feel about issues all the time is not practical and would make policy-making an impossible task. Likewise, keeping connections and making parliament seem relevant is a difficult task. Making representatives think about future generations that are not yet born and relevant for their voting basis is the stuff of science fiction. However, none of this means that our reimagined parliament would not be able to bring in practices and processes reasserting the principles of public engagement at the core of parliamentary practice. We may simply need to think about it in a more creative way and to see engagement as a core priority. The reimagined engagement between citizens and parliament would adopt a more continuous and integrated approach between engagement and parliament's core roles of representation, law-making and scrutiny.

A reimagined parliamentary public engagement <2>

A reimagined parliamentary public engagement would abide by the principles outlined above. It would feel welcoming and inclusive, be continuous throughout the parliamentary year and term, feel relevant to audiences and parliamentary processes, be relatable through Members, Peers and staff,

but also through stories and issues, and importantly it would be sustainable and future generations aware.

Welcoming and Inclusive <3>

The first stop for this reimagined journey is the parliamentary space. Parliaments in their current form are often perceived as rather unapproachable spaces for engagement. They are physically and symbolically distant places for citizens. Their status, their location at the centre of political life often in the capital, and even their formal architecture can be a barrier for meaningful and purposive public engagement.

In our reimagined parliament, the physical and symbolic space would feel inclusive and welcoming. It would reflect the fabric of the country and its people. Rather than a space for them, it would feel as a space for us all. It would obviously be accessible for people of all abilities and disabilities (see chapter 2). But part of reimagining the parliamentary space is also about forging this space, with its actors and practices, outside of its building. A reimagined parliament would take parliamentary business to local communities across the country regularly, rather than expect others to come to the building. This outreach could be through a range of practices such as committee sessions in constituencies, or through key officers such as the Speaker having dedicated days in constituencies outside the Palace of Westminster. In a reimagined parliament, MPs would also have welcoming, and inclusive, spaces within their constituency offices to engage with their constituents.

The next stop would be parliamentary language and the way parliament communicates to external audiences, particularly the general public. Parliamentary language can seem opaque to the public. It is complex and has its own jargon, as many other professions do. But the difference between parliamentary and other sectors' activities is that this is about the public. New Zealand has passed a law that commits decision-makers to use plain language (New Zealand Parliament, 2022). Our reimagined parliament would update its antiquated language to a more modern familiar vocabulary; a simple example could be the term 'divisions' becoming 'votes'. However, recognising that parliamentary language is always going to be complex by the nature of what it addresses, our reimagined parliament would mainly invest in effective translation processes. This can be in the form of the development of guides explaining parliamentary practice tailored to a range of audiences, to the availability of translation of parliamentary business such as into British Sign Language.

A reimagined parliament would be welcoming and inclusive across its parliamentary business. Citizens invited to give oral evidence to committees for instance would feel at ease to talk to MPs and Peers, by, for example, having all the information needed to prepare themselves and to understand what a committee evidence session entails. Processes supporting any activities oriented to the public would be communicated in a clear and accessible manner, taking into account respective target audiences. Often parliaments introduce public engagement initiatives which end up by having poor take-up because they are simply poorly communicated and feel exclusive in the way they are set up (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2017). Just because an initiative exists, it does not mean it is a good initiative or that the public will feel encouraged to get involved. For diverse publics to get involved, citizens need to understand the purpose of the initiative and feel that it is worth them engaging with it. In short, the initiative needs to be appropriately communicated and set out.

Continuous <3>

As explained above, parliaments across the globe are increasingly employing a wide range of engagement strategies to reconnect with citizens in-between elections. However, one of the main shortcomings of these strategies is that they are often ad-hoc and short-term initiatives. They are organised, for example, whenever a political or policy problem presents itself or whenever a public call for more engagement is aired. Engagement is therefore often instrumental in defusing political conflicts and crises, and as a logical corollary, the commitment to facilitating engagement is usually short-lived.

In our reimagined parliament, in contrast, public engagement would be a structurally embedded practice, as a sustained and structural interaction between political decision-making, parliamentary administrations, and the citizens. Permanency and continuity would therefore be a core element of our reimagined parliamentary engagement. Our reimagined parliament would institutionalise citizen engagement: engagement strategies would allow citizens and policy makers to engage in meaningful and transformative interactions on a continuous basis and as part of a long-term strategy, rather than in sequences of ad hoc engagement or participatory iterations.

The continuous character of engagement in a reimagined parliament would also imply the formalisation of engagement strategies and practices. Engagement plans reaching well beyond the next election would be adopted transversally within parliament, and engagement officers would ideally be appointed to develop, implement and follow-up on the progress made and results achieved, across parliamentary business.

The continuous nature of engagement is therefore about regular practice that happens throughout a parliamentary term because processes are in place to activate engagement initiatives, rather than being dependent on ad-hoc decisions. But it is also about having systems in place that enable parliament to have an ongoing understanding of the core issues concerning people. One such mechanism is the 'post bag' of MPs. When the implementation of policies goes badly wrong, MPs soon start hearing about it through their post bags – see for instance the massive increase of casework as a result of the pandemic COVID-19 (Salisbury, 2021). However, this does not necessarily lead to a collective action or go beyond MPs and their offices individually taken.

One way of ensuring this continuity of contact and presence would be having a very good network of parliamentary officers across the country. As we see below in our assessment of the UK Parliament, outreach officers already exist. But these are only a couple of hands full and spread across the country. The Parliament of South Africa, by contrast, has parliamentary offices in every single constituency (Begg, 2022). These offices serve parliament, not the MP, and play an important role in establishing links between citizens across the country and the institution. Our reimagined parliament would have a network of parliamentary offices across the country's constituencies, which would not only disseminate the work of parliament and seek to understand and listen to the public's views on specific issues, but also provide a bottom-up way of citizens raising issues. This continuity of access can also take place through for instance phone and digital post boxes, such as Brazil's Congress's free phone number – *Disque Câmara* - used by millions (Barros et al, 2012). Of course, for these to be meaningful, they would need to be serviced with staff who would acknowledge inputs from citizens and direct them to a relevant service, such as a committee.

Another way of ensuring some continuity of awareness of the core concerns affecting people is through building communities of practice around specific policy areas. An obvious locus for this work would be departmental (Lords' investigative) select committees. Communities of practice would be open networks of organisations from the third and public sectors relevant for a specific policy area. For example, the Commons' Education Committee could maintain a community of practice with organisations representing key stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, schools etc.; this could be maintained across both Houses, supporting, in this case, also the Lords' Public Services committee. Each community of practice would maintain a list of contacts which would enable committees and MPs and Peers to reach out to relevant and diverse groups according to the issues they were

addressing at the time, but also meet on a regular basis. In a twenty-first century society, parliament needs far more embedded and effective mechanisms to connect with outside organisations.

Relevant <3>

As mentioned before, parliaments tend to be hierarchical spaces of symbolism, historical custom, and ritual. As such, they are often more engaging for those who are familiar and comfortable with the usually highly formalised procedures and language of parliament. In our reimagined parliament, engagement strategies would cater to a wide diversity of audiences and groups. Moreover, it would do so in languages and practices that are not only inclusive, but also demonstrate the relevance of parliamentary practices and political decisions to all. In order to do so, our reimagined parliament would rely on a wide range of engagement practices from online surveys, through permanent exhibitions and mobile roadshows, taking parliament to the people nation-wide, to practices of participatory and deliberative democracy.

To ensure relevance to a diversity of groups and people, engagement strategies would be co-created with citizens. Instead of determining engagement policies top-down, citizens' views on effective engagement should also be taken into account bottom-up while developing policies. This generates the legitimacy, effectiveness and smooth implementation of such engagement strategies.

One noteworthy evolution in recent years is the use of mini-publics by parliaments. In several countries, parliaments have begun fundamentally reimagining their relationship with citizens by relying on democratic innovations within parliament (Setälä, 2017), complementing traditional representative procedures with more participatory innovations. For instance, the parliament of the German-speaking community of Belgium has adopted a model of democracy in which a council of 24 randomly selected citizens can decide to organise a citizen assembly to prepare recommendations on specific policies (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2022). These recommendations are subsequently presented to parliament. Another way of introducing citizens at the heart of parliamentary decision-making has been adopted by the Brussels regional parliament in Belgium, through its so-called mixed parliamentary committees. In these parliamentary committees, elected politicians and randomly selected citizens deliberate and formulate recommendations on themes or bills under consideration in parliament. Afterwards, the Brussels parliament is expected to vote on these recommendations, and if rejected, it needs to explain within three months why it has not adopted the committee's ideas. There are many other examples, demonstrating that parliaments are increasingly seeking connections with citizens in a co-creative process of making political decisions and integrating those connections

in their day-to-day procedures. Our reimagined parliament would integrate a permanent structure that would facilitate co-creation with citizens through deliberative democracy processes.

Whilst the UK Parliament already has a rich portfolio of different types of engagement practices, as we see below, our reimagined parliament would make sure that staff, MPs and Peers were aware of which types of initiatives may be most suitable for each circumstance, according to the type of issue, context and target audience(s). Different methods of engagement would be deployed according to relevance of the method to the issue, context and audience(s) at stake. This would be simple to apply because our reimagined parliament would offer resources and specialised staff able to offer this advice. Crucially also, our reimagined parliament would have processes in place which would integrate a public engagement stage in each instance of law-making and scrutiny consideration.

Relatable <3>

Our reimagined parliament would also feel to citizens as something they can relate to. As we explain above, engagement is about connections, subjective feelings through which people can relate to others. Our reimagined parliament would focus on stories, issues and people, rather than processes and structures.

Engagement initiatives and points of access would be created around specific people and/or issues, so that citizens can more easily relate to these. Rather than inviting citizens, for instance, to submit their views to parliament, our reimagined parliament would showcase the issues it is covering and reach out to those who may be affected by those issues. Likewise, citizens need to feel that parliament addresses issues that matter to them. So, for instance, an education programme that simply tells pupils about the different stages of the legislative process but fails to connect to the specific context of the pupils it is targeting, by for instance outlining issues of relevance that committees may be addressing or specific critical bills passed, will be doing little in engaging and being seen as relatable. Instead, it is reproducing the idea that parliament is this abstract thing that other people deal with; it does not relate to our everyday life. Our reimagined parliament would engage through issues instead of processes.

Another way of making engagement more relatable is through people. This is often an issue for parliamentary public engagement, as staff are not meant to be seen, named, individualised, but it is often staff who implement public engagement initiatives. Our reimagined parliament would not shy away from building contacts between staff and external stakeholders. More importantly though, it

would channel engagement initiatives through Members and Peers. They are the ones who give a face to parliament, who can act and take decisions, who need to profile engagement initiatives. A simple way of doing this could be through a recording of an MP introducing an online survey meant to inform their debate in the chamber; or by including Peers in a workshop with citizens on a specific issue for a committee inquiry.

Besides focusing engagement on issues and people, our reimagined parliament would close the feedback loop effectively. One of the main problems with parliamentary public participation initiatives is the lack of feedback to those who get involved, to relate in what way the citizens' contributions have informed parliamentary business. This is often due to lack of time and resources, but it does not need to be done at an individual level for each citizen or issue, it can be done collectively, simply giving a sense that someone did listen. Our reimagined parliament would include reports for each committee inquiry, for instance, giving an indication of the sort of issues raised by citizens and how these informed parliamentary business. In our reimagined committees' reports, citizens inputs would be referenced to, as any other 'expert' evidence and short accessible reports would be created aiming at the general public to explain the sort of views brought by citizens. These would be communicated back to citizens who had contributed.

Consequential <3>

In our reimagined parliament, democratic engagement would matter, it would have an impact. Engagement strategies envisage rekindling the democratic linkage between parliaments and citizens, implying that engagement should affect both members of parliament and members of the public.

The literatures on participatory and deliberative democracy often speak of formal political uptake as a necessary condition for success. If engagement practices want to contribute to the institutional legitimacy of parliaments, they need to be linked in some way to political decision-making (Edwards, 2007), otherwise they are merely democratic experimentation with little practical use (Chambers, 2009). Even though engagement generally does not lead to substantive shifts in policies, a reimagined parliament would at the very least give meaningful consideration to citizens' opinions on substantive or procedural issues; crucially, it would be integrated with parliamentary business processes. Moreover, our reimagined parliament would offer citizens the opportunity to exchange views and ideas. If, for example, members decided not to enact citizens' opinions, they would need to explain and justify their choice to gain public acceptance of that decision.

Consequentiality can also be situated at the level of individual citizens. The success of engagement strategies is contingent upon the level of enlightened understanding citizens gain during the process (O'Flynn and Sood, 2014). All participants should be able to develop an informed opinion, have the opportunity to process information in a non-coercive setting, i.e. a setting in which strategic and power considerations are bracketed. Through this process of information gathering and processing, parliamentary engagement would act as a learning school for democracy: citizens are enabled to critically assess their own views on political issues, and in doing so, citizens learn about the challenges and difficulties inherent in political decision-making (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2018). Citizens would also feel listened to, a key element of engagement often wanting in parliamentary practices (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2017). Democratic engagement is therefore legitimate to the extent that it fosters interaction between parliament and citizens, and among citizens.

Future generations aware <3>

The decisions taken by parliament today affect not only the current electorate, but many generations to come. Because future generations will bear the consequences of our current decisions, they should be engaged in the process leading up to those decisions (Goodin, 2007). A lack of consideration for future generations infringes the principles (outlined above) of inclusiveness and sustainability, leading to intergenerational injustices. Our reimagined engagement between parliament and citizens would therefore consider the interests of future generations.

While the dangers to the principles of inclusiveness and sustainability apply to both the young and the unborn, the two groups differ in their relation with engagement. The young are only excluded from formal modes of representation, i.e. elections, but they can get involved in diverse engagement activities. The unborn, on the other hand, cannot be part of any direct form of public engagement. Indeed, engagement with those who are not yet alive is practically impossible. Not only are they not able to voice their interests, but their interests have not even been materialised and will depend on current and future decisions. Reimagining public engagement with these two groups requires a different approach each. We discuss these in turn.

In democracies, the politically underaged suffer from a double absence, both as electors and as elected representatives. Consequently, their interests and their lived experiences receive less attention in the political process. This double absence poses risks for the principles of relevance and relatability. That is, the underrepresentation of youth in parliamentary politics makes it hard for them

to make their voices heard and hampers the salience of issues that are relevant to them. This can give minors the feeling that they do not belong, or that they are overlooked in the political process.

To empower the young, all possible activities of public engagement would be employed to make sure young people are communicated with and listened to. Engagement with the underaged would therefore go beyond the classic perception of minors as passive citizens who must only be educated to fulfil their political role when they reach adulthood. Instead, our reimagined parliament would establish interaction channels to specifically inform young people and set up consultation and participation initiatives to give the underaged a voice in the political process. This inclusion would eventually lead to young people feeling more relevant and being able to relate more to parliamentary work.

The unborn also suffer from a double absence, but they cannot be engaged with directly. The only means to engage with future publics is the unidirectional way of information-giving on the reasons why we make certain policy decisions. While this form of engagement may seem blatantly insufficient compared to the drastic ways in which we impact the futures of the unborn, it is nevertheless crucial for two reasons. First, providing future generations with information on the 'why' of our decisions entails taking the possible impact of our decisions on those generations into account. By engaging with future generations by means of reason-giving, parliaments must justify their actions towards the unborn. This justification and consideration of future generations' perspectives are beneficial for the principles of inclusiveness and sustainability. Second, providing information to future publics by justifying our decisions, further increases sustainability since it allows for policy coordination across generations (MacKenzie, 2021). Every generation has the potential to cause policy reversal, which can be detrimental for long-term policies that need to be sustained to provide future benefits. The reason-giving by current parliaments provides a much-needed transparency for coordinating actions across time.

Making parliaments future generations aware does not limit itself to engagement with those future generations. The future is not an inevitable series of events waiting to unfold. Instead, the decisions we make today shape the future in many ways and even determine who will live. What this future should look like cannot be decided by abstract philosophical principles or by supposedly neutral technocratic decisions but should be the product of inclusive and deliberative processes (MacKenzie, 2021). This means that our reimagined parliament would employ a wide range of engagement mechanisms, as explored above, to engage with citizens to collectively explore possible futures and

decide on the desired future. Again, this would strengthen the principles of sustainability and inclusiveness.

How far off is the UK Parliament from this reimagined reality? <2>

Despite all criticism of the UK parliament and the patent low levels of trust over the past few decades, this is actually a very active institution in enhancing its engagement with citizens. As explained at the start of this chapter, public engagement is a relatively new activity for parliaments across the world and the vast majority are well away from our reimagined parliament (Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023). The UK Parliament is not quite there, but recent years have seen considerable development of its capacity to develop public engagement practices.

Indeed, this institution has seen significant developments since around 2005 in all five core public engagement activities – information, education, communication, consultation and participation (Leston-Bandeira and Walker, 2018). This has been possible thanks to a considerable expansion of its staff and services specifically focused on engagement activities, such as the bicameral Participation Team (which covers such wide-ranging areas as visits, education, outreach and chamber digital engagement) or the Select Committees Engagement team, specifically focused on supporting committees in their public engagement activities. Since 2015, the House of Commons also has an e-petitions system, with an associated new Petitions Committee, which has brought a significant addition to the direct relationship between parliament and citizens, performing a clear public engagement role (Leston-Bandeira, 2019).

These new structures have enabled the following developments, amongst others, in the areas of information, education and communication: a better awareness of publics beyond those who tend to engage (such as a library briefing identifying those groups who tend to engage less with parliament as a key informant of engagement strategies; easy read guides; use of British Sign language in PMQs (Prime Minister Questions); an education programme specifically aimed at Special Education needs children; an expansion of the education services and visits to parliament, supported by the innovative multi-purpose Centre for Education and the development of a pioneering Teacher Ambassadors programme; the implementation of a network of outreach officers across the country, who work with local organisations to develop information sessions on parliament; and better tailored services to communicate about parliament's activity, including a range of podcasts such as one specialising on committee work.

There has also been considerable expansion in the areas of consultation and participation, namely within select committees and in both Houses. Committees now regularly consult the public as part of their inquiries, through a range of methods such as online surveys and workshops. These activities aim mainly to collate evidence on the lived experiences of the public for MPs to consider in committee inquiries, including the use of citizens assemblies and deliberative workshops, as well as enabling citizens to define the agenda of committees. This expansion of consultation and participation opportunities goes beyond committees, such as the work of the Digital Engagement team with Westminster Hall debates, through which MPs are able to integrate into their speeches the views and lived experiences of the public, or the Youth Select Committee, developed in partnership with the British Youth Council. MPs also often consult their constituents to inform their practice, such as Chris Bryant MP's choice of a topic for his Private Member Bill in 2017, which eventually became law (UK Parliament, 2018). Finally, the new e-petitions system has encapsulated considerable and innovative public engagement practices, many of which enabling citizens to shape government policy (Leston-Bandeira, 2019).

There is no doubt therefore that the UK Parliament has considerable and innovative activity in public engagement. However, to become our reimagined parliament, this practice needs to be far more institutionalised and better resourced. Notably, understanding and appreciation of public engagement and of its value towards enhancing core parliamentary business – such as scrutiny and law-making – needs to be more embedded. Often public engagement is still too patchy and an after-thought. Whilst some staff and members understand the importance and value of public engagement, the majority still views it with suspicion and a possible clash with representative mandates (Matthews, 2021).

Having a more institutionalised approach to public engagement would ensure that it becomes a more continuous practice and better linked to ongoing parliamentary business. It would also contribute towards developing a better understanding of public engagement amongst both staff and members. A more institutionalised approach may include, for example, committee inquiries always considering the public engagement angle at the early stages of planning and including a default section on public engagement in committee reports. It may also include the presence of public engagement officers in core business teams. A much wider network of public engagement officers and of parliamentary offices in the constituencies would also help keeping more continuous connections between the institution and citizens.

Whilst some public engagement initiatives lead to change already and are fed back to the public, our reimagined UK parliament would have clear processes linking public engagement activity and output, be it linking it with parliamentary business, be it with explaining to citizens how their input was used (closing the feedback loop), supported by well-resourced capacity. This may include better systems to convey to members key messages from citizen evidence, a clearer reference to citizens' inputs in committee reports (acknowledging the value and role of this type of evidence, besides expert evidence), more regular and explicit explanations to the public on how their evidence informed parliamentary business.

To develop a more institutionalised approach to engagement, our reimagined UK Parliament would need to expand further its services (and staff) working on engagement and, crucially, skill up in digital capacities and systems. One of the challenges staff currently face is the inability to process high volumes of inputs from citizens in a timely and meaningful fashion. Parliament simply does not have the resources to do this, and yet digitally this is possible with ever more user-friendly solutions. Our reimagined parliament would have flexible processes enabling it to adapt to technological developments.

Finally, our reimagined UK parliament would have systematic processes for evaluation of public engagement practice. Evaluation is still only fledgling, despite important initiatives such as feedback questionnaires in outreach sessions and the start of monitoring of diversity of committee oral witnesses. Our reimagined UK parliament would have far more comprehensive and systematic processes to evaluate ongoing practices and draw lessons for future practice.

Conclusion <2>

This chapter has focused on parliamentary public engagement, a practice that is not necessarily embedded in centuries' old traditions, but that has gained significant traction among politicians and the public in recent years. The alleged crisis of democracy, and the perceived disconnect between citizens and their representatives, have propelled the demand for new engagement strategies, which spans a wide range of activities from informing and educating citizens, to formally including citizens in the process of political decision-making.

Even though many parliaments have tried to imagine public engagement in recent years with varying levels of success, we set out to reimagine what engagement strategies would look like in our reimagined UK parliament. Ever-louder calls for the UK parliament to position itself as a mediator

between the inputs of society and the outputs of politics, also sparked the need for a critical assessment of existing practices, and creative imagination of future practices. To guide our process of thinking through engagement, we conceptualised that a reimagined engagement would fulfil six key criteria. Engagement would only be able to create legitimacy and bridge the gap to the extent that it is inclusive and welcoming, continuous, relevant, relatable, consequential and future generations aware.

On most of these criteria, the UK parliament has made significant progress in recent years. It has taken multiple initiatives to improve its informational, educational, consultative and participatory functions, and it is currently able to engage a wide range of citizens on relatable political topics. Moreover, parliament's organisation has professionalised to further strengthen and support its engagement initiatives.

However, our exercise of reimagining parliamentary public engagement in the UK has also pointed out its weak spots. Despite an active strategy of reconnecting parliament with the people, most initiatives lack institutionalisation, integration and embeddedness. Even though parliament's engagement repertoire has broadened in recent years, its permanency and its connectedness to the parliament's key roles – scrutiny and law-making – remains limited. A reimagined engagement between the UK parliament and its citizens would be supported by far better resources and be pervasive across parliamentary practice. Crucially, it would consider impact on future generations.

Endnotes <2>

[1] Cristina Leston-Bandeira's contribution to this chapter is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 834986).
[2] Didier Caluwaerts' and Daan Vermassen's contribution to this chapter was made possible with funding from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO Vlaanderen) (Grant agreement No. G027019N).
[3] One could argue that the early parliaments were not really about *representing* groups of people, but about *engaging* with specific groups of people on specific issues, be it the Athenian agoras or the English medieval curia; as parliaments were then ad-hoc gatherings to discuss specific matters. This could almost look like engaging if it was not limited to a very restrictive group of people.