

Room for a View: Democracy as a Deliberative System

A briefing

Simon Burall

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*This is a briefing on the publication *Room for a View* which can be found on our website www.involve.org.uk/room-for-a-view*

Democratic reform comes in waves, propelled by technological, economic, political and social developments. There are periods of rapid change, followed by relative quiet.

This is a period of innovation and significant political pressure for change to our institutions of democracy and government. As a result there are a significant number of reforms either on the table or under serious consideration. These range from wholesale attempts to reform institutions, through to innovations in practice and policy.

With so many changes under discussion it is critically important that those proposing and carrying out reforms understand the impact that different reforms might have. *Room for a View* provides a simple framework for analysing the health of our democratic system as a whole, of the impact of individual reforms in their own terms and on the system as a whole.

What's wrong with current approaches to democratic reform?

Most democratic reformers, whether within government, civil society and academia, focus on electoral democracy. However, elections rarely reveal what voters think clearly enough for elected representatives to act on. Does a vote for a party mean support for its policy on health, the environment or defence? Or merely a preference for the party's leader? Or something else entirely? As a result changing the electoral system, or increasing the number of elected posts will not, alone, significantly increase democratic control by citizens.

A deliberative systems analysis of UK democracy

Deliberative systems thinking arose, in part, from the analysis above. Rather than focusing purely on the extent to which individuals and communities are represented within institutions, it is equally concerned with the range of views and narratives present and how they interact.

A healthy democracy is one where there is a high level of representation and exchange of views within and between different parts of the system, for example, between citizens with different opinions and experiences, and between these citizens and elected representatives. Decisions should be informed and influenced by a wide range of perspectives.

Adapting the work of the political theorist John Dryzek, *Room for a View* suggests there are seven components to the UK's political system, as viewed from a deliberative perspective. It describes and analyses the health of each in turn:

1. The **public space** includes the media, civil society and citizens. Its health is related to the range of views and narratives visible and impacting on each other.

2. The **empowered space** is where legitimate collective decisions are taken, for example Parliament. Its health also depends on the range of views interacting.
3. The **transmission** of views and narratives between the public space and empowered space is important for ensuring that the latter responds to citizens. It is working well when the full range of views are transmitted and impact on decisions being taken.
4. The health of the fourth component, the **accountability of the empowered space to the public space**, is determined by the extent to which those with power are answerable for the decisions they take.
5. The **private space** is made up of political conversations at home and in communal spaces such as the work place or places of worship. Its health depends on the extent to which they inform, and are informed by, the public and empowered spaces.
6. The **public examination of the qualities of the system itself** requires the system to have mechanisms to evaluate the health of the components of the system. The longer term health of the system depends on this because every political system experiences a fall in deliberative capacity over time as a result of societal changes, interest groups taking over particular institutions and so on.
7. Stepping back even further, no deliberative system is totally independent; most are embedded within larger systems. A system's health therefore also depends on its decisiveness; can it make the decisions that affect people's lives, or are they in reality being imposed from the outside, for example.

What does this mean for the UK?

Overall, a high-level assessment suggests that the health of the UK's democracy is fragile. The representation of alternative views and narratives in all of the UK system's seven components is poor, the components are weakly connected and, despite some positive signs, matters are in general getting worse. The net effect of this low deliberative capacity is to open the UK system up to increased domination by a small number of special interests, populism and rising distrust.

Room for a View also shows the complex effects changes to one part of the system, can have on others. For example:

- The robust debate in the public space in Scotland about independence was in many ways good for Scots in deliberative terms. However, the fact that very little was transmitted to other parts of the UK suggests something wrong with the UK's deliberative capacity overall;
- Access to information and the publication of thousands of data sets in open format should be positive. However, if knowledge of their availability isn't transmitted effectively to the public space and if what they show isn't accessible to large swathes of the population, they will only inform a small number of the debates in the public and private space. There will be little improvement in deliberative capacity.

The complexity of interactions within the system suggests the need for a holistic and thorough analysis of any changes that take place organically or are proposed.

What next?

Room for a View sets-out a brief and high-level assessment of the UK's democratic health using a deliberative systems approach.

It suggests that a focus on the key institutions in the empowered space, such as Parliament, the Executive and other powerful bodies, while important, isn't enough; it is vital to pay as much attention to the rest of the UK system's seven components. In the same way, we need to worry as much about the representation of views and narratives as we do about the representation of individuals and communities.

We look forward to working with partners and democratic reformers both inside and outside government to explore how this different way of analysing UK democracy might affect our views of its health. We also look forward to discussing together what it might mean for priorities for reform.

Read the full publication on our website www.involve.org.uk/room-for-a-view

The deliberative system

Meta-deliberation

The system is deliberative and periodically examines the democratic qualities of the system and components



Private Space

The political conversations and interactions which take place everyday in spaces which are non-civic in nature



Public Space

The wide range of political conversations which interact with and affect each other within the public realm



Empowered Space

Where legitimate collective decisions are taken

Accountability

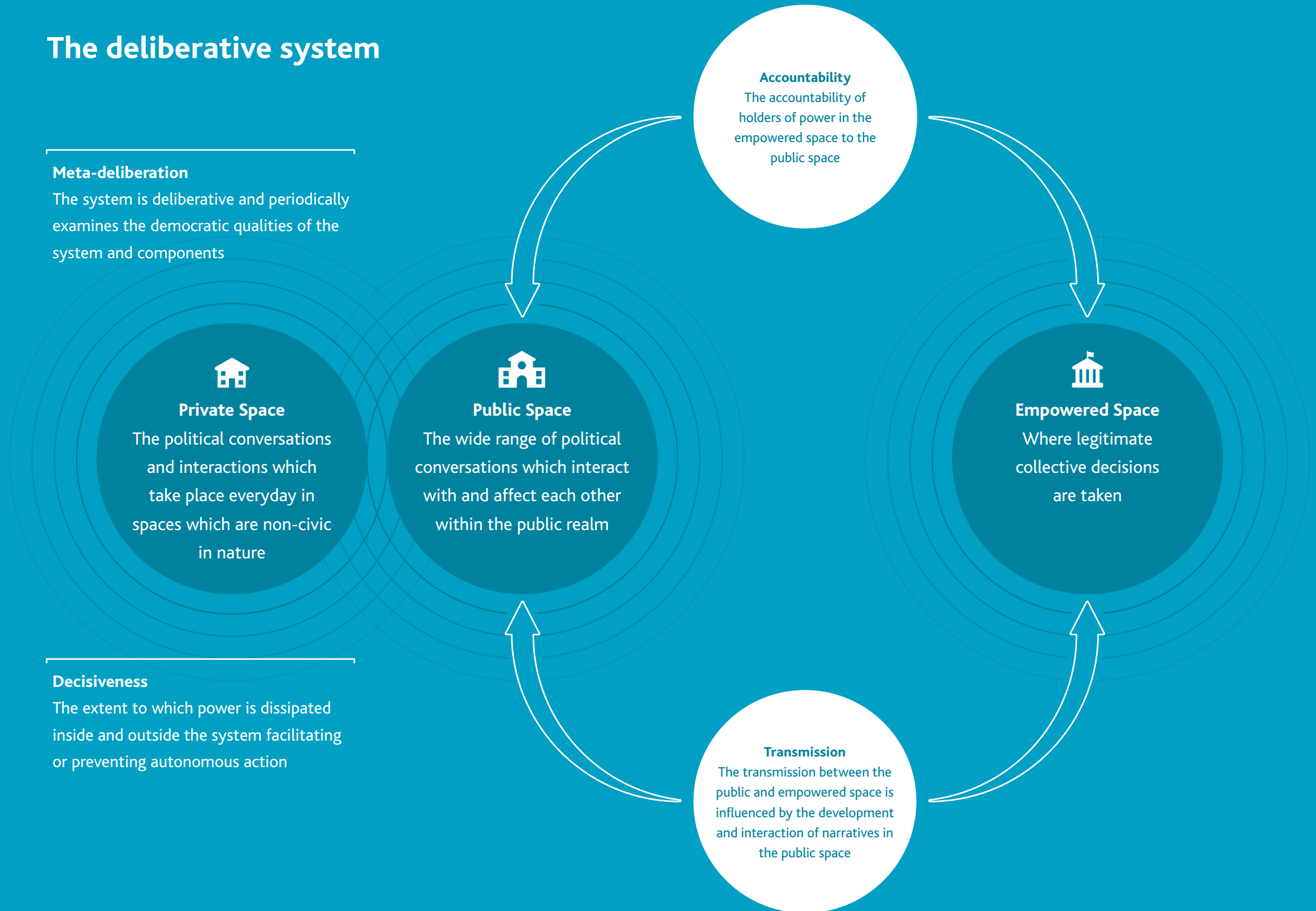
The accountability of holders of power in the empowered space to the public space

Transmission

The transmission between the public and empowered space is influenced by the development and interaction of narratives in the public space

Decisiveness

The extent to which power is dissipated inside and outside the system facilitating or preventing autonomous action



Involve

33 Corsham Street, London, N1 6DR

Tel: (+44) 0207 336 9444

Email: info@involve.org.uk

www.involve.org.uk

@InvolveUK