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The monthly summary of
consultation matters by
Consultation GuRU –

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Consultation Catch-up



Best of the Blogs

The Conservative Party has announced its policy to withdraw from the Aarhus Convention. It is an important moment as this is the international obligation to prevent large industrial/infrastructure developments with major environmental impacts being built without sufficient information and public debate. I'm not sure the Party wants to avoid publishing the impact assessments, or particularly to stop community engagement, but what it definitely doesn't like is giving climate campaigners and other NGO's cost-effective access to the Courts to enforce these critical safeguards. But without enforcement, what is there to protect us from hastily-approved mistakes?

AI can hear what is said. But who is it listening to ...? (Blog 139)



If you're not following the Party Conferences hour-by-hour then it may be because you now know that AI can summarise the whole proceedings in a jiffy – and highlight if there's anything of particular interest to you. But its ability to listen to this ... and any other deliberative session has one big drawback. WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO WEREN'T THERE? How big an issue is this, and should it deter us from exploiting the latest impressive technologies?

Have the Trades unions agreed to Labour's threatened retreat from public consultation? (Blog No 140)



For the first time in years, Trade unions appear to have the ear of Government Ministers. So, I've been wondering what they make of the recent retreat from public and stakeholder consultations? I recall that the labour movement is steeped in the 'collective voice' culture – having rejected becoming part of a corporatist state. Are they comfortable with plans to repeal so many statutory duties to consult, and replace them with vague, legally unenforceable commitments to "new and more modern forms of public participation"? There IS a strong case for radical

improvements to public consultations, but it's not a great idea to rubbish the principle when so many stakeholders – including trades unions – need the ability to express their views before key decisions are taken? As the debate warms up on better policy-making dialogues, I wonder if this is the dog that hasn't barkedyet?

Can Ministers deliver their 'Simplification and Agency' agenda? (Blog No 138)



As if we didn't know that Ministers want to curb excessive consultation, the 7th September LETTER TO MINISTERS spells it out. This Blog explores what's do-able and hoists a few red flags. For years I've argued that Government needs a *Register of Formal* consultations – which will attract the safeguards and protections that are needed. Then the rest (many thousands!) can be handled differently. But that is only part of the answer.

There's a major piece of work here – and scope for administrative innovation and political agility. But will the Cabinet Office be up to the task?

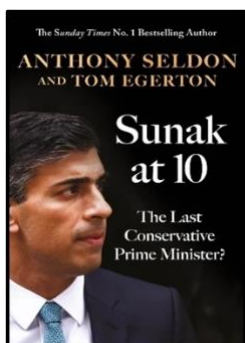
On Page 2 this month, some reflections on the stop-start local government reorganisation in England, and news of three significant recent papers from DEMOS and the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) The book review is Anthony Seldon's latest tome – 'Sunak at 10' – out just in time to start on his next PM retrospective!

Instant insights

- At the latest count, well over a dozen Councils have issued 'letters before claim' threatening Ministers with a judicial review over Local government reorganisation. This is despite a temporary suspension of many of the current proposals – a surprise **announcement by Angela Rayner** one month ago – apparently taken in the light of 'legal advice'. Almost all the Councils complain about the consultations, but mostly focus on the 'Gunning Four' aspect – namely that there is little evidence that anything said by *consultees* had any influence whatever upon the Council configuration proposals that emerged from MHCLG.
- The summer has seen the publication of several significant contributions to the issues affecting public services and local communities. In its response to the **Rewiring the State** paper, the **Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)** has published a very good analysis of the way forward and examined how the various tiers of a rewired state should collaborate to reform public services. It was the product of workshops and roundtables with 50+ councils and strategic authorities, a clutch of academics and a smattering of think tanks. Unsurprisingly it highlights the need for enormous capacity-building so that Councils can make effective use of new powers. My disappointment is that it barely touches on the need to strengthen public participation, despite recent polling data showing that 51% of the public do not trust their council to act in their best interests, while 61% of people want more information and influence over how decisions are made locally. The entire local government reorganisation programme needs a significantly improved element of public engagement – of the kind Ministers now say they favour. Here comes a good test for their intentions!
- Maybe public involvement is better secured in a future envisaged in the DEMOS paper, ***The Marshall Plan for Civic life*** which explores how best to finance a decade of civic renewal. Its core assumption is well captured in the opening line – “*There is now a broad consensus among practitioners, funders, and policymakers that Britain is paying the costs for a decades-long depletion of civic life.*” What follows is an Initial paper setting the parameters for a project to look at the alternative ways to pay for better physical – and social - infrastructure. It cites ***Pride in Place*** as a modest starting point but sees the future as needing to harness complementary sources of finance – hence the (somewhat forced) allusion to the post-war Marshall plan. So, they include public contributions like subscription-based services, philanthropy, investment funding and taxation. All sensible options and worth examining. Some NAVIGATION consultations here ...?
- A practical, impressive application of this thinking is in the other recent DEMOS paper, ***A New Civic Generation***, which advocates ways to retain in the hands of local citizens, the excess value generated by place-making. Using successful precedents such as Letchworth Garden City and Milton Keynes, it argues that asset-locked trusts can retain and build value whilst generating large revenues for new or expanded developments. And they propose citizens' panels and other forms of public involvement in the creation and management of such facilities. Excellent ideas for those interested in economic growth and community development.

Straws in the wind

The Reading List



Anthony Seldon's **latest retrospective** weighs in at a hefty 560 pages, somewhat contradicting the impression he conveys that Rishi Sunak was a reluctant, lightweight but worthy Prime Minister facing an impossible task. In contrast to his three immediate predecessors, Sunak appears well equipped with many of the required skills and aptitudes, but inexperience and a lack of preparation were exposed from his earliest days in office. The book asks us to consider whether he would have been more successful had he more decisively repudiated the follies of Truss and Johnson, but of course, he felt he had to try to keep the warring factions of his Party together. Hence the ill-fated deal with Braverman and his lurch to the right by abandoning net zero targets and tethering himself to an implausibly-precise commitment to 'stop the boats'! On the plus side he is rightly praised for the Windsor Framework and his initiatives on AI. But his unfortunate and lasting image – in the pouring rain in Downing Street - reflected someone overwhelmed by the elements, and no more able to relate a convincing narrative than the Premier who followed him. Although this volume is probably 100+ pages too long, it is a fair, balanced and ultimately generous portrait of a man who just managed to avoid outstaying his welcome.

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