



Giving Tomorrow's Citizens A Voice Today

Event Summary

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Does the United Kingdom need a Commissioner for Future Generations? What would that role look like and how could we set it up? Participants at an event in April 2017, hosted by FDSO in partnership with the [Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity](#) and the [Centre for the Study of Democracy](#) suggest there is room for an ombudsman-type role to represent the interests of unborn generations, and identify three possible roads towards it.

What we do today affects our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. These future generations will have to live with the environments, economies and societies that we leave them – and we have a shared responsibility to pass on something worth having.

As parents and individuals, this is an easy concept to grasp: no matter who you are or where you're from, you want what's best for your children.

But at a national and local level, future generations remain officially voiceless. The problem is that governments and people operate in the here and now. Short political and budgetary cycles, departments driven by individual targets, and an electorate that votes today, all contribute to a short-termism in politics and business that looks for immediate returns over enduring benefits. Since future generations are not present, their interests are too often overlooked.

So how do we get people – particularly governments – to address major challenges that span generations? That means making long-term decisions and connected responses that extend over successive political cycles. And, more to the point, how could the UK Government do it?

Learn from example

Participants at [an FDSO-hosted event on future generations](#) in partnership with the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity and the Centre for the Study of Democracy, suggested that we could start by learning by example. There are a handful of countries that have tried establishing an official commissioner for future generations as a way of giving the people of tomorrow a voice in national decision making.

The event's speakers – FDSO trustees [Peter Davies](#) and [Sándor Fülöp](#) – described their experience of two: the [Future Generations Commissioner in Wales](#) (created as part of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015); and the [Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations](#) in Hungary. There are other examples too, including [Finland's Committee for the Future](#), which works as a standing committee in parliament; and [Canada's Auditor General](#), whose legislative duties include sustainable development monitoring.

In each case, the precise remit and scope of the commissioner's role may be different. But, argued Fülöp, they all share certain characteristics – they are all value oriented, future-focused, transdisciplinary, problem-oriented, independent and transparent.

In addition, both Fülöp and Davies emphasised the need for a future generations commissioner to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people; through participation and consultation. Some participants argued that such a position also needed to be legally binding – to ensure that it wields 'real' power and that it cannot simply be ignored or, worse yet, abolished, at the stroke of a minister's pen.

When it comes to appointing a commissioner for future generations in the United Kingdom, lobbying for supportive legislation is likely to be futile in the next few years. The snap general election has created a new mandate which sets out the agenda for the next parliament, and the next couple of years will be taken up with the implications of the run-up to Brexit.

But, as several participants at the FDSO-hosted event pointed out, in many ways this is also a time of opportunity. Human rights legislation is up in the air; and the [Great Repeal Bill](#) (which sets out how the government will put EU laws and regulations onto the UK statute book after Brexit) could provide the space needed to incorporate future generations into laws as they are transferred from Europe. The continued devolution of powers to city and regional mayors could also open up space for innovations in long-term thinking at more local levels.

Three roads to representation

Taking into account the current political realities, Victor Anderson, from the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity – who responded to the two speakers as a provocateur – suggested three possible ways to fit an ombudsman-type role into the UK government.

First is the government route: establishing a government office for future generations that acts as an advisory body. Of course, such an office has no legal mandate to make the government act one way or another. But experience from Hungary and elsewhere suggests that it can still be influential. "Nonbinding advice can be very powerful if it is well-researched, well-argued, and well-publicised," said Fülöp.

Second is the parliamentary route, by which a committee is established in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords to advise on legislation (including both amendments and new ideas). This idea was popular with several participants at the event. They seemed to prefer the House of Lords option, arguing it is in a better position to take the longer view.

Others argued that the level of ambition embodied in a committee (in either house) was simply too low for the scale of the problem we face; and that we need a fully-fledged ministry or third house of

parliament – even to the extent of accounting for 10% of all budgets and consultation rights across the board – to offer future generations the representation they deserve.

The last road to representation is the judiciary, establishing a mechanism for protecting future generations' interests through UK courts. This might be an advisory body. It might equally be a requirement on the Supreme Court to interpret legislation in a way that is consistent with the interests of future generations.

Every contribution counts

Whichever road we choose, participants at the FSDS event were clear that getting people from all sectors of society on board is a must. That means persuading government authorities, businesses, communities and individuals that we have a shared duty to act in the interests of future generations; and that our government must be held accountable to them.

But how do we get more people to care and contribute? Some suggested focus groups and deliberative bodies. Others argued that social media was the key: that engaging a broad base of people through various social channels could help start a national conversation and generate the civic momentum needed to make change happen.

Peter Davies suggested the first step is a lot simpler: change the language away from 'sustainable development'. "Couching the debate in terms of future generations rather than sustainable development could go a long way to sparking people's interest and deepening their understanding."