

Title

Reflections from the Chair: Navigating Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss

Abstract

In this narrative account I reflect on my role as Chair of Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. This role is unique within the Assembly model since it spans both the operation and delivery of the work, both member and overseer, and is both internally and externally facing. It is a multifaceted and sometimes ambiguous position, at times moulded by the Chair themselves. In this article I share some considerations of the functions and challenges of the role, emphasising the part the Chair must play in contributing to the work of the Assembly, representing the Assembly and its recommendations as they traverse through the political structures, and the personal costs and opportunities involved in the role.

Keywords

Citizens' Assembly; Chairing; deliberative democracy; biodiversity loss; Ireland

Introduction

Ireland stands out as a unique case where national Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) have brought about significant changes in Irish society (Courant 2021; Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). What may be distinct to the Irish process of CAs and has not yet been extensively explored in existing research is the role of the Chair. This role has previously been given to experienced civil and public servants or members of the judiciary, who have in-depth knowledge and/or experience of the relevant policy area (Courant 2021; Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). They are considered a non-partisan bridge between the members of the CA, the public, and the political system. Ireland has more recently nominated well-known individuals who may also bring a sense of buy-in or authenticity to the issue at hand. Based on my background as a science communicator, broadcaster and educator, I was invited to chair of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (hereafter CABL). In this article I reflect on the role of CA Chair and my own experiences.

Background

In 2019 the Irish Government declared a Climate and Biodiversity Emergency and in 2020 committed to holding a Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (Government of Ireland 2020a). The CABL was formally established by the Oireachtas (i.e. both Houses of Parliament) in 2022. Similar to previous CAs, the topic was specified by Government with funding and coordination run through the Department of the Taoiseach. A secretariat team of a Secretary and other seconded civil servants oversaw the administration of the CA. This governance structure, where the commissioning body of the CA (i.e. the Irish parliament) step back from any decision-making, allows for the topic to be considered without influence from

any government department (Carrick, 2022; Saintraint & Suiter, 2024). All sessions of the CA were live-streamed and recorded for transparency (see citizensassembly.ie).

Membership was sourced through a two-step random stratification process, resulting in 99 participants selected who matched the characteristics of the Irish population (CABL, 2023). These 99 members came together on a one-day inaugural meeting, an optional one-day fieldtrip, and five full weekends, between May 2022 and January 2023 (CABL, 2023).

The CABL shared their recommendations with the Oireachtas through the cross-party Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate and Environment, a pathway embedded within the terms of reference of the CA. This committee published their report supporting all recommendations made and presented this to government. An official response from government was published in 2024 (NPWS, 2024), supporting all but ten of the CABL's recommendations.

The Role of Chair in Irish Citizens' Assemblies

Calling upon someone to take on the responsibility of chairing a CA is a critical step to ensure that the process remains neutral, transparent, and aligned with the norms of deliberative democracy (Van Crombrugge, 2020). The appointment and function of Chair varies, however, across jurisdictions. In France the Chair is chosen by the CESE (Economic, Social and Environmental Council) leadership. In Scotland two convenors act as a public face and advocate of the Assembly. In Ireland the Chair is nominated by the Taoiseach (Suiter & Saintraint, 2026) and is usually a non-partisan person that can be considered 'independent' from government. While this person has been previously selected to provide rigour and strategic management function (Fourniau, 2026), the role has more recently included acting as a bridge between members of the CA and policymakers in government.

The Chair is responsible for the running of the assembly and is the sole judge of proceedings. Aside from the terms of reference established by the Oireachtas there is no other formal documentation regarding assigned functions, and these seem to vary according to the person in the role (Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). However, there are some functions that are central to the position including: overseeing the design of the programme of work; ensuring the membership is sufficiently and adequately informed to make recommendations; and ensuring briefing materials, experts, and moderators are impartial and not biased towards either side. In addition, the Chair is expected to: facilitate discussions and plenaries; review summary reports of sessions with the secretariat; based on these reports, draft proposed recommendations with the secretariat to be discussed, reviewed, refined, and voted on by members; contribute to the final report; and act as a spokesperson on the work of the CA to external audiences and policy makers (Carrick, 2022; Curato & Böker 2016; Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). For the duration of the CA it is strongly recommended that the Chair not engage with any political representatives, in order to respect the independence of the assembly. When recommendations are agreed, the Chair should provide oversight, integrity assurance, and institutional intermediation for the recommendations.

There is also an expectation that the Chair should convene and liaise with a Steering Group of CA members, who are elected by the group and act as a mediator between the Chair and the

CA members as a whole (Carrick, 2022; Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). The Chair is also expected to review external submissions to the CA¹ and ensure that relevant views are included in the programme of work. This is done in conjunction with an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) (Fourniau, 2026), whose role is to provide unbiased, high-quality guidance to both the Chair and the membership when required. The Chair should engage with the team of table facilitators and note-takers² and should also take note of how members are organised each weekend, ensuring the members seated at tables are distributed well for each meeting.

Before embarking on designing a programme of work for the CABL, conversations I had with two previous Chairs highlighted the necessity of allowing appropriate time for an issue to be discussed and ensuring that the direction of discussions among members could occur with minimal interference from others (Kuyper 2012). These previous Chairs also recommended that the guiding principles utilised in previous CAs be considered and agreed by members, and these were adopted by members of the CABL in the first session (see Arnold, 2019). Aligning with advice from the EAG, I also worked with the secretariat to ensure that presentations related to cultural, historical and sociological aspects of biodiversity loss were included in the programme, alongside high-quality scientific research and input from stakeholders such as landowners, community groups and environmental organisations.

The role of Chair in Irish CAs has evolved to include being the public face of the CA, engaging with media and others external to the process. This helps ensure that members, who must grapple with many difficult issues and topics alongside navigating relations with other members and their own communities. As phones are discouraged at the tables during sessions, external interests can feel distant from the process without any direct social or other media connections to the work. The Chair can therefore become a focus for media and others, deflecting unnecessary attention from other members of the CA.

The public facing role is also important in the context of stakeholders, since the topic at hand can be viewed as a potential threat by certain groups (e.g. Willis et al. 2022). Early engagement of relevant interests can overcome potential conflicts and enhance legitimacy perceptions in the eyes of key stakeholders (Carrick 2022). In the CABL the secretariat proposed that participating in purposeful communications with external stakeholders in advance of sessions might unravel potential tensions, and I made particular efforts to therefore engage with agricultural media³ to welcome submissions, discuss contentious issues, and attempt to build trust in the CA process. Furthermore, in advance of the formal CA sessions, the secretariat arranged an open consultation meeting between myself and a broad range of stakeholders to share with them the terms of reference of the CA and invite them to make submissions (which many did). In addition, prior to the first full weekend

¹ Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland generally have a mechanism by which external submissions can be made by those who are not members of the CA and these are made available to the members. On publication of the recommendations of the CABL, all submissions were made freely available on the website.

² These facilitators and note-takers were employed by an external agency, Quality Matters, for the CABL.

³ Media work was done in consultation with a communications company contracted by the secretariat and is common practice for CAs in Ireland.

session, the secretariat and I travelled to the largest national agricultural show, the Ploughing Championships, to meet with farm groups. At this event I personally invited these groups to speak to the CA the following month. This led to direct engagement with all of the national farming associations, who each had an opportunity to present to the CA, liaise with members, and answer questions during a plenary session. This explicit focus on external stakeholders was important to ensure that there was a diversity of voices and perspectives heard during CA presentations (Suiter & Saintaint, 2026), but also that they had an understanding and knowledge of the process.

Deliberation in a CA does not work in isolation but is part of a wider political system (Farrell & Suiter 2019) and the uptake of CA outputs requires leadership (Kuyper, 2012). My role as Chair and advocate for the recommendations therefore extended beyond the lifetime of the CA itself. In the first instance I was invited to present the recommendations to a Joint Oireachtas Committee, who would formally communicate the work to Government. I was also invited to present the work to politicians at government buildings and, in the following months, was asked to speak with a wide range of national and international policy, stakeholder, civil society, academic and political individuals and groups about the work and recommendations of the CA.

Group-building: trust, integrity and community

The exceptional nature of being part of a national CA may play a role in developing a sense of collective identity among members (Felicetti et al. 2012). However, asking people to work on a collective task does not necessarily create a sense of community. In advance of the CABL I spoke with my colleague Prof. David Farrell, and he urged me to try to develop a sense of community among members. I therefore spent as much time as I could speaking with and getting to know individual members throughout sessions. During round-table discussions I walked between the tables to make myself available or to chat where there was opportunity. During breaks I made sure I was listening to and speaking with members, gleaned feedback and responses to the proceedings. In as much as I could, I spent informal time with members and was grateful for the opportunities arranged by the secretariat to facilitate social gatherings. These informal get-togethers helped me get to know people, learn their names, and find out where they were coming from in the context of the work. This familiarity made it easier to engage with members in plenary discussions, and also helped me in liaising with the CA Steering Group and other prominent voices as they emerged from the membership.

Building on my own familiarity with the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), I tried to emphasise the three core elements of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire during sessions. I regularly thanked members for their contribution to the joint enterprise of making recommendations on behalf of their fellow citizens⁴. I highlighted the mutual engagement of members, where no one member (including myself) had an opinion which was more or less important than anyone else's. I tried to encourage a sense of shared meaning in the work and discussions, which also extended to the EAG and secretariat as supporting members of the CABL. Because I am a firm believer in laughter giving cohesion to

⁴ Throughout this article 'citizens' refers to all those living in Ireland and not just those with citizenship status.

a room and have experience as a teacher trying to engage teenagers in their learning, I unashamedly made bad jokes that people could laugh at or with. I believe this affective work (Lynch 2007) contributed to the positive dynamics in the room and a sense of community, however temporary, which helped to build the capacity of the group to differ and diverge in constructive ways.

The Chair is recognised as the 100th member of the assembly in Ireland and, if required, would make a casting vote on an issue (Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). While this was not necessary at any point in our CA, it brings a tension to being part of the group and being separate to it at the same time. While the appointment of a Chair may be done in order to ensure the process is not hijacked or biased by one side (Van Crombrugge 2020), it runs the risk of members not feeling ownership of the process (Böker 2016). I therefore felt a responsibility to give confidence to members that I, as the 100th member, would maintain the integrity of their discussions in the process and output of the work. This was exemplified in attempting to align the interests and wishes of members with the programme of work, which was regularly amended based on feedback and discussions. For instance, a session on the Rights of Nature was included only after requests from CABL members. Members also had concerns that the recommendations of the CABL would be ignored by government and I wanted to instil confidence that I would follow through on communicating their recommendations to politicians in the Oireachtas.

While I was officially part of the membership, it was in some ways an isolated role - different to other members and distinct from the secretariat and EAG. This contrasting nature of the role, as part-of and apart-from, was emphasised by the fact that assembly members have an active part in the strategic management of the CA (Fourniau, 2026), with the Chair as a main point of contact for members and for the Steering Group (Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). The Chair is, however, also the go-to person for the secretariat, the EAG, external stakeholders, and, indeed, any person interested in the work (including media). As part of this distributed form of governance (Fourniau, 2026), I was continuously informed and advised by the secretariat, EAG, Steering Group and members in regular conversations as to what decisions needed to be made, what actions should perhaps be taken, and what many perspectives needed to be considered. This was, at times, overwhelming. However, being both an integrated and isolated member of the CA may be a necessary part of leadership in ensuring the legitimacy of input throughout the programme of work (Suiter & Saintraint, 2026).

A demanding role: personal and emotional costs

As a public face of the CABL. I could highlight to stakeholder groups how and why they should engage with the assembly. In addition, I could ensure that the public was familiar with the work, something I very much wanted to do as I knew that public awareness could influence political attention (e.g. Suiter & Reidy, 2020). My background as a science communicator and educator helped me immensely in this regard. By liaising with media, I could draw attention to the process, welcome others to witness and attend to the work, highlight the transparency of the CA, and communicate the core messages and recommendations (Farrell & Suiter, 2019).

As the public face, however, the Chair must withstand the scrutiny and contestation of those external to the process (Curato & Boker 2016; Smith & Setälä 2018). This was not something I had considered before taking on the role and it was the first time (during the initial meeting of stakeholders) that I was accused of being part of the ‘elite’. As someone from reasonably modest, rural background in the west of Ireland, this was an unexpected accusation. Nonetheless, it did open my eyes to the need to maintain my own integrity throughout the process. This likely proved of benefit, since I was conscious and cautious at all stages of any perceived bias that could undermine the governance and structure of the CA. Since the recommendations have been published, I have had to withstand criticism from some, including those in State Agencies, as to how members of the CA were chosen, their right to make recommendations, how knowledgeable they were, and cynicism on how they came to their recommendations. In standing over the quality and integrity of the work I have, by accident, become a spokesperson for CAs more generally, supporting the premise of deliberative democracy processes to inform policy and defending accusations of CAs being a performative tool of government.

As an academic, I was incredibly lucky that some of the functions of a CA Chair could be incorporated alongside my workload. Given the volume of work, however, this required much time beyond the expected working week. In addition, the affective work involved in getting to know such large amounts of people, attempting to build a conducive and positive atmosphere within which to collaborate, and trying to cultivate a sense of joint enterprise and community came with some emotional expense (Lynch 2007). While I would not have conducted the role any differently, I could have accounted for the additional time and energy it took and should have requested a reduction in my existing workload.

As a working mother of a young family, it was hugely important to have the support of my husband since participating in the CA meant many weekends away from home (Lynch, 2007; Scurry, 2022). It is also important to add that, due to my being absent for so many weekends in close succession, I had the added guilt of not being around for my young children during these times. This was compounded by the fact that after a long and intense weekend, I did not always have the right amount of energy to come home as a plugged-in parent on Sunday evenings.

When initially invited to take on the role I refused, since I felt unqualified both in knowledge and skills to take it on. This may well reflect a gendered response to the invitation to take on a leadership role, and I am very grateful to the CA Secretary Art O’Leary for encouraging me to accept the invitation.

Conclusion

While the nature of the work and recommendations of a CA is very much dependent on the topic under their consideration, it is necessary that policymakers, stakeholders and the wider public have trust in the process (Carrick, 2022; Parry & Curato, 2024; Suiter & Saintaint, 2026). I feel the role of the Chair is important in this regard, since it provides a non-political bridge between the members of the CA, those included in the governance of the CA, the public, and the political system. The role of Chair contributes to the distributed governance of

CAs in Ireland, promoting mutual engagement across the membership (Fourniau, 2026). Furthermore, the role can contribute to the governance legitimacy of a CA (Suiter & Saintraint, 2026).

On reflection, I believe it is integrity, both personal and deliberative (Parry & Curato, 2024), that epitomises the role, since the Chair must lead without unduly influencing or biasing any directions or outcomes of conversations of the CA and must accompany the recommendations in line with the sentiments and meanings deliberated on by members. A lot of power comes with the role, which has the risk and potential to influence many elements and aspects (Parry & Curato, 2024; Suiter & Saintraint, 2026). The role of Chair should therefore continuously be considered, critiqued and reviewed during a CA, with and by other actors within the governance sphere (Carrick, 2022; Suiter & Saintraint, 2026).

While facilitating conversations of a unique, eclectic, and large group during plenary sessions can be challenging, it is a very rewarding and privileged role. Chairing the CABL has had a huge impact on my personal and professional life. It opened my eyes to the importance of biodiversity and how our sustainability conversations often focus solely on climate, without recognising the fundamental role nature has in underpinning the health of our society, climate mitigation and adaptation, and economic stability (Dasgupta, 2021; United Nations Environmental Programme, 2025). It also highlighted to me that when people are afforded time, space, and well-communicated evidence, they can make decisions that are sometimes surprising, revelatory, and transformative.

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⁵ All sessions (referred to as 'meetings' by the CA themselves) of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss took place at the Grand Hotel in Malahide, Co. Dublin

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