WORKSHOP SUMMARY

STRENGTHENING IRISH DEMOCRACY IN AN ERA OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS
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A diverse group representing government, business, civil society, media, and community groups were gathered in September in a TASC workshop, to discuss threats to Irish democracy and potential actions to address them. After a fruitful dialogue, Minister Eamon Ryan provided a keynote address describing his vision for the future of democracy in Ireland and Europe.

This workshop reflects TASC's long-held interest in sustaining democracy since its foundation in 2001. TASC has produced toolkits on open government and deliberative democracy and published research analysing the pressures facing civil society, causes of political disaffection, and ways to improve social inclusion.

Opening Remarks

Mike Jennings, TASC's Board Chair, opened the workshop with an assertion that the greatest threat to democracy is not far-right groups or online misinformation, but indifference, unawareness, smugness, and an overall lack of vigilance. He said that "even in this highly engaged, politically informed room with a wonderful collection of people who care actively and work actively for democracy in all its manifestations, there is still a critical need to discuss the fragility of democracy and identify pathways towards greater resilience – and the workshop is an opportunity to do so.

Warm Data Workshop as an innovative approach for a dialogue

The session involved small group discussions and a dynamic dialogue that is intended to feel democratic. The process aims to enable the issues experienced by participants, in their contexts, to be shared in conversation with others.
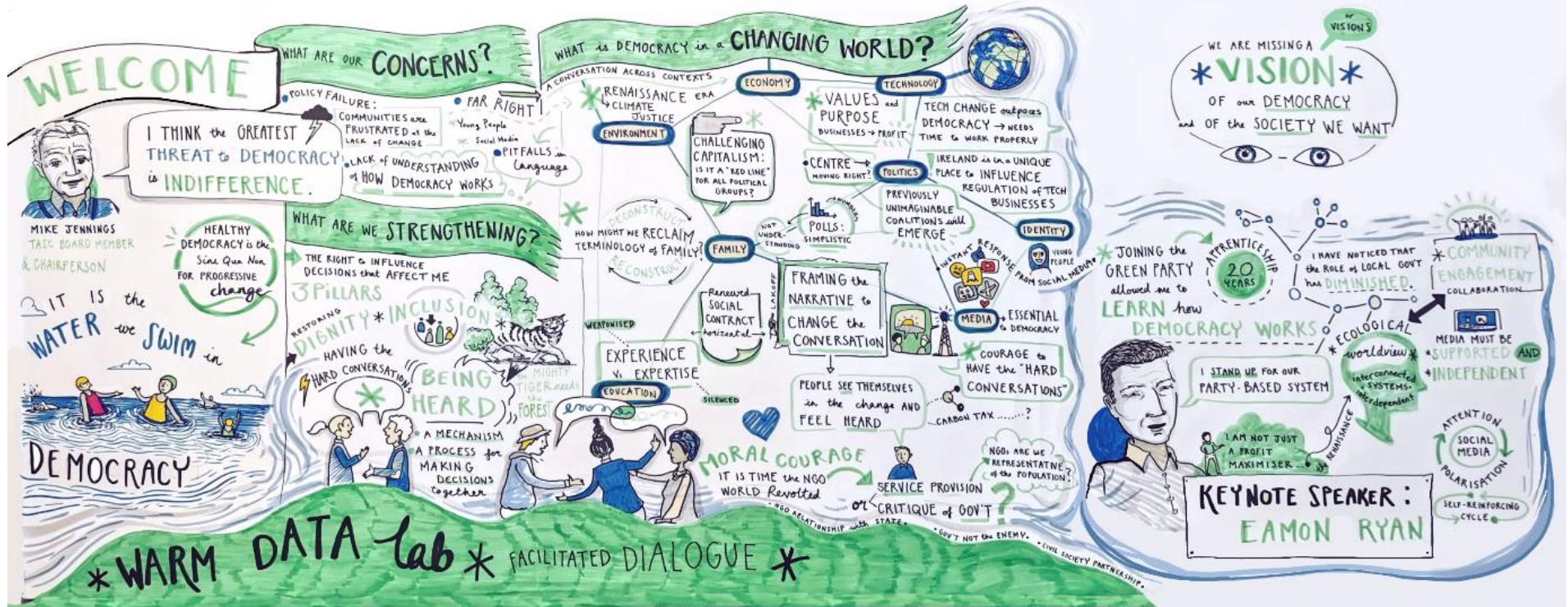
This sharing across contexts is designed to craft a broader and deeper understanding of systemic issues and support sharing of ideas across groups who may not typically have an opportunity for in depth discussion on this topic. As a result, this process offers a warm, in-depth, more open, dialogue that moves beyond the responses that people may arrive with. As one of the participants noted: **"The method sparked my curiosity, and I came into the conversations with less of an 'I know', and more of an 'I wonder'".**

The workshop was designed and facilitated by Kathryn McCabe. Emer McNally, as a graphic facilitator, captured and visualised the insights from the conversations.

Visual notes of the workshop by Emer McNally

What are the main concerns and threats to Irish Democracy?

The workshop started with a brief description and some statistics about trend that threat the Irish democracy:

- Mistrust of government and media in Ireland
- Mixed levels of trust in democracy in Europe
- Democracy under threat internationally
- Repression of civil society
- Visibility of far-right protests and mainstreaming of far-right positions
- Inequality and income insecurity in the Irish society
- Rapid pace of technological disruption

The participants were asked to share their own concerns, and what they are noticing in their work and life, that seem like threats to democracy. Key concerns mentioned include:

- **Far-Right:** The rise of far-right actors and ideas become embedded in working class communities, attracting young people, replacing traditional social communist or social democratic parties, and threatening democracy

- **Information Gaps:** There is a lack of understanding of how democracy and democratic process work and how communities can impact legislation. This explains some of the frustration and anger, as people feel alienated from the system – and predicament exploited by far-right groups.

- **Policy failure:** There is a long-term frustration in communities due to lack of change, deprivation, and lack of community consultation. Far-right groups are leveraging this to create divisions and advance an anti-democratic agenda.

- **Language and Communication Pitfalls:** Participants emphasised the importance of language and communication in engaging communities. Far-right rhetoric, often simple and emotionally charged, resonates more effectively than the distant, technical language that can alienate the public. To counter this trend, democracy must be redefined through inclusive, accessible, and context-specific communication, ensuring that all voices are heard, particularly in addressing complex issues like inequality and domestic violence.

The importance of democratic innovation such as deliberative democracy was mentioned as a potential solution, noting that there are challenges to advocate it.

What are we strengthening? What is democracy?

In this part of the workshop, the participants were asked to pair up and explain their perception of democracy in a simplified way. The goal was to understand how different people view democracy and what they think that needs to be strengthened. The exercise aimed to foster a common understanding before delving into specific challenges and solutions.

- **Democracy as a tiger in a forest:** One of the participants opened the discussion on the nature of democracy with a metaphor of a tiger in a forest, emphasizing the need for a protective environment. Another participant continued this metaphor and highlighted the interdependence of species in an ecosystem.

- **Restoring Dignity:** Participants discussed the importance of dignity, fair employment opportunities, and the sense of pride that comes from educational achievements, despite historical systemic barriers.

- **The sense of being heard:** Conversation highlighted the different relationships with democracy among generations, influenced by historical events and current social media dynamics. Young generations feel unheard within traditional democratic processes. To fill this void, they may seek out community on social media – an environment that may seem more attentive, in contrast to the perceived deafness of democracy. The rise of far-right movements in Europe is mentioned as an example of people feeling heard in social media but not in democratic processes.

- **Democracy as a process of inclusion:** Democracy should be a process of inclusion for those who have historically faced exclusion. Various parts of a society might have varying democratic needs. The conversation underscored the importance of designing more inclusive structures in democracy, and highlighted the need that these structures will support equality and freedom in decision-making processes, as well as the need for a better understanding of democratic principles.

This part of the workshop led to the next part – "Warm Data Lab", aiming to foster interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue.

Warm Data Lab: What is democracy in a changing world?

To foster a free-flowing exchange of ideas, participants were asked to move around the room and engage in conversations centred around politics, economy, family, media, community, identity, environment, and technology. Discussion highlighted the following topics:

The role of civil society and state relationship

Several speakers talked about challenges related to the NGO sector and Democracy and potential changes:

- **Complex relationships between Civil Society and the State:** Civil society in Ireland evolved out of a state that was unable to deliver services, and the relationships between NGOs, civil service, and democracy are often complex. NGOs often find themselves caught between their dual role of providing services and critiquing policies. The pressure to deliver services can hinder their ability to criticise the state and its policies. This tension is compounded when State funders threaten to cut funding if NGOs speak out, placing organisations in an untenable position as they strive to serve vulnerable communities.

- **Need for Advocacy and Accountability:** NGOs must critically reflect on their roles and responsibilities, particularly how funding constraints affect their ability to challenge government policies. While moral courage and independence are essential for effective advocacy, many organizations face internal conflict, struggling to balance service delivery with maintaining their independent voice. To safeguard this voice, NGOs should collectively push for greater independence and the right to critique policies without fear of reprisal. Civil society must remain critical of the government, but not to the extent of becoming adversarial. Instead, the relationship between the government and NGOs should be one of partnership, where both can engage meaningfully.

The NGO sector must also take a more proactive role in strengthening democracy. This involves advocating for changes across various sectors, including media and politics, to ensure that civil society's role is recognized and valued. Some have even suggested that civil society should have gone on strike to emphasize its critical function within the state. NGOs need to be more accountable to the public they represent, embracing better methods of deliberation and public input to enhance their role as democratic actors.

New tools for assessment of government's performances and public opinions

- **Assessing State Performance**: A key idea raised was the development of a scorecard to evaluate how well the government is implementing its strategies, addressing central issues, and meeting public needs. An interesting area of study would be how young people engage with this scorecard, using their media skills to critically assess the government's performance.

- **Deepening Understanding of Public Opinion**: There is a recognized need to gain a more nuanced understanding of public opinion and its complexities. To achieve this, it is important to explore more effective tools for engaging with citizens and capturing their experiences. This approach would move beyond simplistic polling methods, offering deeper insights without reducing public opinion to oversimplified metrics.

Inclusive Language and Vision/s

- **Vision/s for a better society:** The group emphasized the importance of strengthening democracy with a long-term vision, rather than focusing solely on short-term crises. While people have visions for Irish democracy and society, there is a lack of visionary leadership and political parties to support collective action. A more visionary approach, beyond narrow technocratic debates, can inspire collective purpose and engagement.

- **The importance of using inclusive language:** Participants noted the exclusionary nature of language and the importance of shared values to bridge differing perspectives. They called for more inclusive conversations to address societal challenges, avoiding binary thinking and embracing interdependence**.** The group also noted the absence of big ideas in current debates, emphasising the need for a more visionary and inclusive approach that reflects diverse viewpoints.

- **Media and Democracy:** The media can stoke fears and division, and there is a need for better regulation to protect the media landscape and to ensure a healthy democracy.

- **Community and Conflict Management:** There is a need for better conflict management within the community. One of the speakers reflected on the gradual loss of shared values leading to individual benefit over collective good. There is a need to unpack conflicts and find shared values, even among those who might be labelled as far-right.

- **Renaissance and a new social contract:** There is a need for a new social contract that prioritises human-to-human interactions over state-based relationships, aiming to foster a more inclusive, horizontal, and transformative approach to societal issues.

The participants agreed that there is a need to move forward and find ways to engage with each other and meet community needs. There is importance in creating space for collective action and horizontal engagement. The meeting concludes with a commitment to moving forward, continue the conversation, and finding ways to address the challenges discussed.

Keynote speaker: Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan

Minister Ryan reflected on several topics that were discussed during the workshop, with the following main points:

- **The importance of political learning and democratic party-based system:** Minister Ryan described his political journey, and his joining to the Green Party at the late 80s, and his progression from a Green Party member to a city councillor, TD, and eventually a Minister. He highlights the importance of learning through practical experience, including working with civil servants and local authorities. His work on environmental issues, particularly traffic and air pollution, allowed him to learn how democracy works. He concluded that this shows the strength and benefit of being in political party, including the checks and balances they provide, which ensure effective governance. There is a discussion within the party first, before going out, and it help to work and deliver for people.

- **Challenges related to media and social media:** Media and social media in the current political environment pose challenges. Minister Ryan shared his experience of facing abuse online, noted that social media algorithms impact polarization and division in the society, and highlighted the importance of protecting democracy through responsible media regulation. He mentioned the importance of investing in local journalism and media to support independent and diverse voices.

- **Gender Representation:** The Minister reflected on the importance of gender representation in politics and discusses the need to raise the rates of gender quotas and extend them to local government.

- **Local Government:** Minister Ryan shared his efforts to engage with local councils and the challenges faced in strengthening local government. He emphasised the importance of local government in delivering practical, tangible changes for communities.

- **Community Leadership:** Minister Ryan emphasized the success of community leadership in Ireland during economic crisis and underscored the need to reinvesting in it. He highlighted the crucial role of community engagement in climate action and concluded by advocating for collaborative leadership to tackle climate challenges and strengthen democracy.

Future Steps and Engagement

At the workshop's conclusion, TASC Director Dr. Shana Cohen highlighted the need for community engagement and action to strengthen democracy. Participants agreed on the importance of long-term democratic resilience and inclusive dialogue to tackle societal challenges. Following these key points, we invite you to consider and send your thoughts using this Online Form:

- What else needs to be done to strengthening the Irish democracy?
- What can make a difference, and how would you like to contribute?

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CONTACT

www.tasc.ie   contact@tasc.ie   (01) 616 9050