Deliberation Gateway
GATEWAYS SERIES

019

PAPER IV

The Age of Stewards

Passengers, pilots and engineers

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SERIES
Gateways
Paper IV

KIND
paper

VERSION
v1.0

DATE
2026-11-23

ABSTRACT

The destination of an aircraft is not decided by an airline company or a pilot. It is decided by the passengers. Similarly, the task of reaching the destination safely falls to the pilot and crew. And the engineers who build, test and maintain the plane give the pilots the tools they need to implement the will of the passengers. What if society was more like that aeroplane?
Mini-publics drawn by lot could do deep dives and set collective civic direction through well-considered public judgments. Stewards —chosen for trustworthiness and competence, as opposed to charisma and financial backers—could carry out the will of the assemblies. Technical people would be employed to design and tell the truth about the democratic machinery, and build the "wind tunnels" in which democratic innovation is tested, in stages, before anyone is asked to board. Indeed, for the last forty years, that is precisely what the deliberative democracy community has been doing: working out how to build systems for citizen engagement. The time has come to deploy them at scale, but what's missing is the kind of leader that wants to work alongside civic assemblies, following their direction. Here we explore what that might look like. Welcome to the Age of Stewards.

Three jobs on one plane

Ask a pension trustee who they work for. Not the fund, not the employer, not the government. They work for a nurse who is twenty-five now and will draw her pension in the 2060s. The trustee has real power over a great deal of money and none of it is theirs, and the law is quite clear that they must not use it for their own ends. Such a trustee is a steward: someone whose authority is real and who operates entirely in service to the needs of others.

What kind of relationship ought to exist between a steward like that and a room full of the people they serve? The analogy of an airline pilot works surprisingly well, because nobody confuses the principal jobs that are necessary to keep an aeroplane in the air and running smoothly.

The passengers decide where the plane is going, and they don't make that decision in the air. They don't decide by shouting, or typing in CAPSLOCK on the internet, or by recording their neighbouring passengers on their mobile phones, or vilifying in public videos those people who want to go to Miami instead of Texas. They decided when they bought the tickets, and the whole apparatus of the flight exists to honour that decision. The pilot's job is to get the passengers to their chosen destinations safely: read the weather, route around the storm, land the thing, and do all of that without once proposing a different destination, unless safety demands it. The engineers built the aircraft and the ground systems that help guide the aircraft, and their job is to tell the truth about what it can and cannot do. An engineer who says a wing will hold when it won't has killed everyone. An engineer who says a wing can't be built because they'd rather the plane went somewhere else has stopped being an engineer.

Three jobs, three kinds of authority. Purpose belongs to the passengers. Competence belongs to the pilot, air and ground crew. Truth about the machine belongs to the engineers. The arrangement works because each authority stays inside its own question, and the worst days in aviation are the days when one authority takes over the others: the pilot who knows better than the flight plan, the passenger who reaches for the controls, the engineer overruled on the physics by a project manager who wanted a cheaper wing.

We can apply similar ideas to a nation, which can be thought of as a complex system of human actuators and human sensors. This comparison is only an analogy, and an analogy borrows structure while proving nothing. So we don't take it too far, but it's interesting enough to make us look at how we actually choose our leaders. We elect one person to tell us where we're going *and* to fly us there *and*, half the time, to overrule the engineers and scientists, who issue clear warnings. Then we're surprised when the plane goes somewhere nobody asked for and the wings fall off on the way.

The passengers are the citizens, and they set the destination. A ballot can't do that as there are at once too many choices that are compressed into one vote, and not enough bandwidth in a voting system to get good resolution. A ballot carries around two bits of information per person every five years and bundles a thousand questions into one. In contrast, mini-publics are a new tool that could allow citizens to choose the

direction for society: cohorts of everyday citizens drawn by lot, given the time and the evidence, doing the deep dives on the questions that decide where a country is going and publishing what they conclude. The citizens' assembly is the best-known kind. Often when we say assembly, we mean mini-publics of many kinds.

The pilots are the stewards, chosen to carry out the will of the assemblies. Not to set the direction, which isn't theirs to set, but to get us there: to navigate, to trade off, to handle the storm, to be competent under pressure and honest about the fuel. Chosen for that, and removed for failing at it.

The engineers are the technical people, and they build the machinery. The scientists, the professions, the technical bodies that say what can be built and what it costs. They are owed deference on the physics and denied it on the destination. In the world of deliberative democracy the people who design civic engagement processes and architecture play roles a lot like court clerks. They have specific jobs to do, and are fired for interfering. You would not expect a court stenographer to snort or laugh or shake their head in response to a witness's testimony, or to misrepresent text in the formal record. It takes a certain kind of person to remain objective on process, and not get swayed by their own emotions.

Imagine a morning, some decades from now

She was chosen as the steward of energy for the north of the country two years ago, and this morning, the first thing on her desk is a new direction.

The direction isn't hers. It came from the region's standing assembly: one hundred people drawn by lot from the region she represents, each serving full time for one year. Every three months, twenty-five of them finish their year and twenty-five new members are drawn to replace them, so the room always holds a hundred people and is never the same hundred for long. They don't choose their own questions. A second hundred, also drawn by lot, meets for one week each year to decide which questions the region most needs answered, and in what order, and then goes home. The standing assembly has the rest of the year to answer them. One of this year's questions was: what should the region's energy system be by the middle of the century? To answer it, the members heard the engineers on what the grid could carry, the fishing communities on the estuary and the towns along the pylon routes. They read the business plans for the next decade and the predicted growth. They heard from environmentalists and investors, and they argued, in public and in private, and at the end of it they published a judgment of forty pages that says, in plain language, where the region is going: how much of its power it will make for itself, how fast, at what price to whom, and which things it will not do at any price. And who gets the profits? The pension funds that fund it, which pay them out as defined-benefit pensions, guaranteeing a stipend for all the pensioners, allowing many people to retire early and vacating jobs for the young. When the energy question comes round again, a later room can revise the judgment, and does, a little. The engineers' reservations are printed beside it, unedited.

Her job is to realise the direction chosen by the people. She has a budget, a department, a licence that says what she may and may not

do, and a log. Every time she departs from the given direction—and she often has to because real life is real life—the departure is logged in a publicly readable ledger. The weather in our analogy may change, events happen, moods swing, new discoveries are made and economic prices fluctuate. Sometimes, the direction written in calm conditions does not cover the reality on the ground. However, the assembly reads the steward's log. So does everyone else: especially the media, the public, and her predecessor—not to mention her mom. When she stood for the post she didn't promise the region a destination—the region had already chosen one. She promised that she could fly, and that she had a plan to deliver their proposal, and the contest was about whether that was true. It was a quieter election than elections used to be, and turnout was higher, because for once the question on the ballot was one the voters could actually answer, and one they all agreed on. This morning's direction concerns only the location of a new power plant. The assembly has reached a verdict on which back yards will welcome it, in exchange for cheaper energy.

None of this is science fiction. Assemblies like hers exist, in pieces, in Ostbelgien, Paris, Dublin and Bend, Oregon. What hasn't happened yet is the arrangement of the pieces, and the civic habit of it, and a generation of leaders sworn to uphold the democratic will of the people rather than their political sponsors.

Who sets the destination

The hardest thing to accept in the analogy is the most important part of it. The passengers on a plane all want the same destination by definition, whereas a country's passengers do not. That, I think, is exactly what the true purpose of an assembly is. It's the room in which the real pain of real people is heard by those who would never otherwise feel it, and in which many disparate wants can become a single direction. It can do that when a ballot can't because the time is taken by attendees of the assembly to really listen to different points of view. While a consensus is often not reached, the set of pains that must be addressed is aired, rather than stifled or suppressed, and used to shape the solutions in full cognisance of the trade-offs.

Interestingly, we can actually put a number on how much information such an assembly can process, back-of-the-envelope style. The Democracy Tree borrows Thomas Landauer's estimate that a person commits new information to long-term memory at about two bits a second, and that a whole lifetime's store is around a billion bits of learned information. That's a conservative floor, since Landauer (not to be confused with Rolf Landauer, who also talked about the physicality of information) only counted what people could be tested on afterwards. Such a lower bound on human learning is enough for our discussion, to compare deliberation with voting. We can imagine a civic assembly that took a hundred people forty full days of hearings and reading, eight hours a day. Two bits a second, times 3,600 seconds, times eight hours, times forty days, is about 2.3 million bits for each member and 230 million for the room: a quarter of one person's lifetime of learning, spent on one question. Compare this with a voter who gives a campaign three hours of half-attention and picks up about twenty thousand bits, most

of them the same half a dozen sound bytes everyone else heard, which are mostly about the opposition's dirty habits rather than anything useful about policy, and then the voter hands back two bits of information as a tick on a sheet of paper. In contrast, the civic assembly hands back forty pages that say where we're going and why. And a good part of what each individual member learned during that process is completely different from what everyone else learned, because it came from understanding the lives of the other members in the room and the effect such a proposal would have on them. **Why** other people think what they think.

Ireland has already run this experiment many times. Ninety-nine citizens drawn by lot spent five weekends in 2016 and 2017 working out what the country's abortion law should say, and in 2018 a little over two million voters supplied their one bit and two thirds of them said yes. Majorities of that size are rare in Congress. The assembly mapped out the landscape in detail and the country gave the verdict. The National Strategy Project is now trying something very like it for the United Kingdom's long-term goals. Reading that as passengers choosing a destination is my interpretation, not theirs, but the fit is close. Elections were never a good way to choose a destination, but they might be a perfectly reasonable way to choose a pilot, once you know where you're going.

Who flies

We can think tentatively about the attributes that would make a good steward, as a pilot of society. What follows is only a sketch; a trial would find where such a sketch could be improved.

A lottery is a way of choosing people to enter a decision-making process. It is the method that is the least open to capture by third parties, and I'd use lotteries for choosing almost anything, but not for choosing a pilot. Even the Athenians, who filled most of their offices by lot, elected their generals, because generalship was the one office in which incompetence killed. Pilots are generals in that sense. The direction can be set by anyone with the time to understand the question. The flying can't.

So a good steward would have to pass two quite different tests, judged by two quite different sets of people.

The first test is trust. Will this person take advantage of us for their own ends? People are actually quite good at answering that. Nobody needs a qualification to decide whether they'd leave their keys with someone. So the trust test could be performed by randomly chosen members of the public: a panel drawn by lot, which interviews the candidates, asks the questions ordinary people ask, and publishes what it made of each of them. That test would have to last for quite some time. Anyone can pretend for 45 minutes. It could even include tests like joint tasks with the random cohort: go on a survival weekend. Build a bridge together. Work in a soup kitchen. Something where you really get to see what someone is made of. A real test.

The second test is competence, and here's the uncomfortable truth: competence in a field can only be judged by the competent. A cabin full of passengers can't tell a good pilot from an over-confident one until the plane crashes. Only other pilots can. So the competence test could

belong with outgoing stewards, people who've done the job and are leaving it, whose views would be published.

The two tests, trust and competence, would only gate entry to a pool, and getting into that pool ought to be really, really difficult, in exactly the way that becoming an airline pilot is difficult: hundreds of logged hours before anyone lets you near a cabin full of passengers. Once in the pool, there are further hurdles. Only a handful of stewards could be picked randomly to become election candidates. Such randomness helps thwart conspiracies and collaborations aiming to game the system and support preferred individual candidates. Finally, the steward for a given post could be chosen by election, so the passengers keep the last word on who flies them and everyone has a say.

In contrast, a political party today provides a destination, a crew, a set of loyalties and a set of enemies, sold together as one package. To get a competent pilot you have to buy their baggage as well. The destination and their innate hatreds. In an age of stewards a political party could be more like a well-trained crew, competing with other crews to fly for the honour of taking the passengers where they have already decided to go. What's left on the ballot is who can fly, and people can disagree about that without hating each other. Almost like public figureheads for the civil service rather than politicians.

Who builds the plane

Human systems and institutions are built by people. They weren't magically created out of thin air and bestowed upon us. They were designed by people with specific purposes in mind. Such institutions, such as banks, treasuries, capitol buildings, courts, congress, and so on, may or may not benefit everyday citizens. To create an infrastructure capable of capturing enough information about enough citizens to produce policies that help them, and to give those citizens a voice in determining policy, requires designing processes and systems that enable stewards and the public to work together.

The design of an aircraft is not random, and it's not always designed with passengers in mind. The aircraft has to satisfy many constraints. It must have sensors and control surfaces, a usable control system, and navigation and radio systems, none of which are used by the passengers at all. Another great analogy is the judicial courts, which have personnel performing specific tasks, such as ushers and administration, stenographers and security personnel. Criminal court architecture has to be designed with prison and public operations in mind: processes for restraining prisoners, and multiple entrances.

On the practicalities of a complex system, the engineer, designer or architect is owed deference. Perhaps even on the style, and aesthetic feeling. Nobody outvotes the second law of thermodynamics. Conversely, on the destination of an aircraft, the engineer who builds it is owed nothing, other than an honest opinion of whether it will get there or not, and under what conditions. There's a duty in this that technical people haven't always been asked to carry, which is to be honest about uncertainty. The engineer who says "that route can't be flown" when they mean "it needs a bigger plane, and I don't think the trip is worth

the money" has answered the passengers' question for them. What a destination is worth is for the people who'll travel. The engineer who builds in a device that quietly overrides the pilot, and leaves it out of the manual, has taken the controls without ever entering the cockpit.

There's an opportunity now in front of everyone in every democracy in the world to design a global culture and infrastructure to support that culture from the ground up. We could design and build complex systems for integration of information and deliberative processes for all citizens, local and global. What kinds of buildings does a city need to allow citizens to make decisions for themselves? What kind of knowledge sharing about each other could be created to give people the best information? How do enough citizens meet in the daily Brownian motion of life, to share meaningful perspectives? A prison plane, where passengers don't get to determine the destination, and a passenger jet are, superficially, similar solutions. How do we build processes that serve free, active passengers, that don't make them into passive prisoners?

The engineering problem in front of us is clear: can we design purpose-built civic infrastructure that makes civic engagement of everyday people much cheaper and easier? That requires designing the political and decision-making processes first, so that efficient ways can be found of implementing them. One thing is for sure: the thermodynamic cost of sharing and learning information about each other requires resource, and that means, along with Landauer's bottom line, there is a minimum amount of resource that must be allocated to public learning for a nation to claim that it is a democracy. I sincerely doubt there is a single nation alive above that threshold.

As well as the initial design and build, the other task for civic engineers is the wind tunnel. An engineer doesn't build a plane and then find out whether it flies. They build a model, put it in a wind tunnel and break it there, on purpose, where nothing is lost but a model. A mini-public is a wind tunnel for a policy: put it in front of a room drawn by lot, give the room the evidence and the time, and see which objection nobody anticipated tears the wing off.

Democracy itself has to be tested the same way. You can't send a hundred passengers into the air on a wooden biplane, however promising the design. Aviation earned the public's trust by stages: test flights with nobody aboard, then a test pilot, then a few passengers, then routes. Deliberative democracy has to grow up like that: an assembly that advises before one that binds, a stewardship pool at a school board before one at a ministry, and every stage producing a record that earns the next stage its passengers. The cheap, everyday processes that let a town settle a question in a bus shelter are test flights too.

The Gateways published on this website are just that: proposals, ideas, provocations for tests and thoughts for systems that people could design. Questions that need answering. Maquettes, sketches and models for works of art that are yet to be constructed. Just as the ancient Athenians built systems like the kleroterion and designed systems and architecture in Athens, to help the public work together, so too will we.

What could go wrong

A Gateway that sold you a future without saying where it breaks would be pure advertising. So what are the downsides here?

The pilot who becomes a passenger. The steward quietly starts setting the destination and calls it weather. No design can prevent that. What the log can do is make it visible while it happens, and cheap to reverse.

The pool that becomes a club. Outgoing stewards examining incoming ones creates a gate, and a gate prefers people who resemble the examiners. That's why the trust panels would be drawn by lot and every review published. Whether that's enough is the first thing a trial should measure.

The assembly that stops being drawn. A room whose members aren't re-drawn converges on itself, and can end up like an ant mill, the whole column following its own tail in a circle until it starves. Fresh faces are the saving grace, so how fair the lottery was would be the first statistic to publish.

Cost. All this asks more of citizens than a ballot does, and it works only if the room is a real sample and not just the people who could afford the time. Compensation, childcare, transport and plain-language evidence aren't extras. They're the fuel.

The age of stewards

We've used the word *steward* for a particular sort of professional: the trustee who holds money for people who'll retire in 2070, the industrial leader who treats a plant as part of the fabric of a local community. What they have in common is that their authority is real and is not their own. They fly. They don't choose the destination, and the best of them don't want to.

An age of stewards would be an age in which that's what leadership means. In which the question put to a leader isn't *where would you take us* but *can we trust you, and can you get us there*. In which the destination belongs to the people who'll travel, and is set by them in rooms where they had the time to understand it.

I've left a lot out. How nations that fly this way share the sky, and what markets can and can't price along the route, are discussed in the essays *Sovereign Britain*, *The Open Table* and other Gateways still to come. None of this work is finished and none of it is guaranteed. But every piece of this puzzle exists, somewhere, in some form. What's missing is the arrangement, the staged testing that would let a public trust it, and the habit.

If you, as a reader, have a better picture, with an experiment behind it, then I invite you to write your own Gateway and publish it here! In the meantime I keep working on my answers to these questions. The more variation in proposals and ideas, and the more ideas that are tried out across the land, the more likely it is that a great combination of process, infrastructure and decisions will emerge.

Further reading

- The Democracy Tree — DG 001, for the two bits and the two bits a second.
- Thomas K. Landauer, "How Much Do People Remember? Some Estimates of the Quantity of Learned Information in Long-term Memory", *Cognitive Science* 10 (1986) — the two bits a second, and why it is a floor.
- Carnegie UK, Deliberative case study: the Citizens' Assembly of Ireland — the ninety-nine, the five weekends on the Eighth Amendment, and the road to the 2018 referendum.
- The National Strategy Project — the nationwide deliberation to set shared goals for the United Kingdom.
- Deliberation & Finance — DG 004, where the question of the steward and the mini-public was first put.
- The Civic Mill — DG 017, the cheapest possible process.
- *The Open Table* (forthcoming) — the doctrine: licences, the log, the polycentric sky.
- *Sovereign Britain* (forthcoming) — the worked national vision, and how nations that fly this way would share the sky.