

Occupy Melbourne Guide to the People's Assembly

The Facilitation Working Group of Occupy Melbourne has prepared this guide in order to explain the key aims, functions and processes of the People's Assembly. It is by no means a closed model. Rather, it can and should be adapted by the People's Assembly.

What is consensus building?

Within the vast majority of political and economic institutions, the normal method of decision-making between two people with different opinions is antagonistic. Both people defend their position with the aim of convincing their opponent until they have won or a compromise has been reached. It often involves one or both people exerting power to block their opponent from defending their opinions and interests.

In contrast, consensus building is a constructive process through which two people with differing ideas can work together to build something new that neither had envisaged before. This requires that we actively listen, rather than focus on preparing our oppositional response.

Consensus building is based on the principle that an inclusive process of decision-making has the power to transform the initial opinions of all involved.

Ways to facilitate consensus building:

- Create a relaxed group atmosphere, which encourages participants to listen to, respect and support each other
- Make sure the task that is currently being worked on is clear
- Identifying points that fall on common ground to begin reworking a proposal
- Not considering others as opponents, but rather components of the whole group

What is the People's Assembly?

The People's Assembly is a gathering of people committed to making decisions by working towards consensus. Participants of the People's Assembly must engage peacefully and respectfully.

Deliberation in the People's Assembly should not centre upon ideological discourses or preconceived ideas. Instead it should deal with practical questions: What do we need?

How can we get it?

The People's Assembly aims to facilitate dialogue and getting to know one another, in order to establish common ground and encourage compromise through mutual recognition of difference. It is based on free association, meaning if you are not in agreement with what has been decided you are not obliged to carry it out.

How are decisions made in the People's Assembly?

All decisions made by the People's Assembly will be reached through a process of consensus building. The following procedure aims to promote consensus building, while including the provision for a 90% majority vote in special cases.

1. A Working Group or individual participant makes a proposal using the following format:

1. What is being proposed?
2. Why is it being proposed?
3. How can we carry out the proposal if it is approved?

Each proposal should be presented within 2 minutes, unless the People's Assembly approves an extended time limit.

2. The Moderator will ask: "Does anybody need any clarification on being proposed?"

If there are questions relating to the proposal, a member of the Participants Team will relay the question to the person who made the proposal, who may answer within 2 minutes.

3. When there are no more questions, the Moderator will ask: "Are there any strongly opposed opinions?"

If there are, the Moderator will advise the Assembly that a maximum of 3 arguments against and 2 arguments for the proposal will be allowed.

Members of the Participants Team will approach participants who wish to speak and ask:

1. Is your intervention related to what is being discussed? (Remind the participant of the issue being discussed)
2. Is it a direct reply to something that has been said?
3. If so, is it for or against?

If the participant's proposed intervention bears no direct relationship to the issue at hand, she or he will be directed to the Speakers Forum, Working Groups, or noted down

as a speaker for the Any Other Business round, depending on the nature of the proposal.

4. Following the arguments for and against, the Moderator will check consensus and if there are still strongly opposed opinions the Moderator may ask the Assembly to discuss the issue for 3-5 minutes in small groups and invite people to suggest modified proposals. Anyone in the Facilitation Team may also suggest modified proposals.

5. If no modified proposals achieve consensus, the Working Group or individual participant responsible for the proposal is asked if they wish to withdraw the proposal to be reworked and brought to the next People's Assembly, or if they would prefer to attempt to have their proposal approved via a 90% majority.

Extra points on process...

-Like the proposals, comments made in the "Any Other Business" section should be confined to 2 minutes, unless the Assembly approves an extended time limit.

-Participants hoping to speak in the "Any Other Business" section should be asked about the nature of their intervention to assess if it is more appropriate to the Speakers Forum or another Working Group, keeping in mind that the core business of the Assembly is to deal with matters related to the occupation.

What roles and functions are involved in the People's Assembly?

LOGISTICS:

-At least one person responsible for the equipment of the Assembly

-Organise the crowd with corridors running towards the speakers' floor

-In charge of the PA system

-Provide seating for people with disabilities (or who are very tired), water and shade (umbrellas) if temperatures are high and sunshine is direct, etc.

ASSEMBLY PARTICIPANTS:

-Actively listen to the proposals and arguments of different speakers

-Participate in small group discussion when consensus is not reached

-Make individual proposals or subjective evaluations (having requested the Participants

Team to do so) during the “Any Other Business” round at the end of the Assembly

PARTICIPANTS TEAM:

- Two to three people (depending on the size of the assembly) positioned amongst the participants and next to the corridors
- Responsible for noting any request from the moderator(s) to be relieved
- Conciliatory, positive, neutral and patient
- Try to involve people who have not yet intervened in the debate
- Conscious of resisting power imbalances that exist in broader society (i.e. around race, gender, etc.)

PARTICIPANTS TEAM COORDINATOR:

- One person who organises requests to speak that are forwarded to them by the Participants Team before passing them on to the Moderator
- Select speakers so that the same message is not repeated, as well as mediating between people with similar arguments with the aim of presenting a unified proposal for debate
- Once the round of speakers has been coordinated, the Participants Team Coordinator informs the Moderator Support Person so that they can call on the speakers to intervene in the right order

MODERATOR/FACILITATOR SUPPORT PERSON:

- One person who backs up the Moderator
- Only person in direct contact with the Moderator in order to help them maintain their concentration and impartiality
- Help the Moderator synthesise and reformulate proposals in an objective and impartial way
- Prevent the assembly participants from distracting the Moderator, make the Moderator aware of any errors in their vocabulary or summaries, inform them of any last-minute announcements, help them stick to the agenda, etc.
- May assist the Moderator (with her or his consent) by intervening when there are

silences, over-heated discussions or serious digressions

MODERATOR/FACILITATOR:

-One or more people who are responsible for welcoming the participants to the Assembly, explaining the nature and workings of the Assembly, conciliating distinct positions without aligning themselves personally with any of these, summarising each intervention during the rounds of debate if needed and repeating the consensus as recorded in the minutes

-Can ask to be replaced or be removed via consensus of the Assembly

-Responsible for ensuring an atmosphere favourable to the exchange of ideas and for establishing a positive tone

-Should the need arise they may also release tension with motivating interjections

TIMER:

-Times the people speaking and notifies them to when 2 minutes is nearly up

MINUTES TEAM:

-Two people responsible for noting all interventions that do not have a script

-In the case of consensus resolutions the Minutes Team can ask for any resolution to be repeated word-by-word and subsequently ratified by the assembly

-The Minutes Team should cross-check their minutes and forwards them to occupymelbourne@gmail.com

INTERPRETER TEAM:

-One or two people who translate oral interventions into sign language for the hard of hearing and vice versa