

Abstract submitted by Jemma Neville

Title:

Constitution Street

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I want to offer an interactive presentation that will invite participants to imagine a new constitution framed by human rights for a hyper-local, urban context and encourage the sharing of examples from other cultural contexts.

The UK does not have a written constitution. Drawing upon recent civic engagement processes from other small Nordic nations, I am initiating a new, written constitution by, with and for the residents of one street in Scotland. Informed by interviews with my neighbours, census data and archive material, each article of the constitution will be themed on our lived experiences and aspirations in relation to one fundamental human right. For example, what does the right to food mean for the Turkish café owners, the allotment growers and the Italian fish and chip shop family on Constitution Street? What does the right to private and family life mean for same-sex families, care home residents and immigrants? These complexities will offer a portrait of present day, urban living referencing a think global, act local approach to human development.

In these wildly disorientating times for geopolitics with competing claims to national representation, agency and identity (including Brexit and Scottish Independence referenda), the realpolitik of the town, community, or street can offer tangible hope for our shared humanity over division and prejudice. Constitution Street in Edinburgh, stretches east to west for half a mile, from the sea to the city. Its mix of architectural styles and purposes embody the constantly shifting dualities of old and new in my capital city and the waves of immigration and emigration mixing culture, language and perspective. Constitution Street is a liminal land, on the cusp of change, in our age of anxiety.

Historically, UK constitution-making is about convention: codes, symbols and fluid interpretations based on legal precedent. The narrative form of this conference presentation will maintain but also move beyond this convention- the poetic capturing the conventions and open to multiple interpretations but at the same time the voices as expressed and written down will be definitive, and assertive. We, the people, retain agency of our constitution.

CV:

As a Fellow of the University of Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities, I am writing a book about Constitution Street and on sabbatical from my role as Director of Voluntary Arts Scotland. My background is human rights outreach and the cultural commons. I have a LLB Honours and EMA in human rights and democratisation from EIUC in Venice. My experience volunteering at a refugee camp in Greece has impacted on my interest in home life in constitution-drafting.