
Taking the
PARTY



out of
POLITICS

HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO WORK
- WHY IT ISN'T WORKING -
AND HOW TO FIX IT.

Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party out of Politics!*

This is a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, ...
... why it isn't working as well as it could be working, ...
... and what we might be able to do about it.

Because:

by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,
and *why* they are a bit messed up,
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

This is a little journey we are taking together, about the systems and functioning of Politics:
systems which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of
the time.

And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

In Season 1, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of
us – the voters.

This is Season 2, in which we are trying to look at how government is supposed to work,
from the perspective of someone trying to get elected, and then trying to do a good job.

Looking ahead, in Season 3, we will be looking at what we might be able to do, to make
things work a bit better. Importantly, when we get to Season 3, we will be sharing our ideas,
but also sharing some of the best of YOUR ideas, about how to make things work a bit
better.

Today we're going to have a look at **The Wicked Issues**. These are the really important
things which *need* to be dealt with – and which get more difficult to deal with if they don't get
dealt with – but which our politicians believe we don't really want them to deal with. Or,
specifically, that if they do deal with **The Wicked Issues**, then they won't get re-elected.

So far already, the whole process isn't working properly for our elected representatives – our
MPs. In Season 1, we looked at how hard it is for voters to make the electoral system work
properly: so that the people whom we elect are likely to be good representatives –
representing us, and representing our needs and preferences. So far in Season 2, we have
looked at how hard it is for a new MP to get elected; how hard it is for a new MP to work out
how to be effective once they *are* elected; and then how the systems within Parliament mean
that much of their work is then controlled by party whips, or bullied into line by Ministers, or
simply by-passed ... by having secondary legislation slipped into bills at the last minute.
It's difficult to get elected, and then once you are elected it is difficult to achieve much, you're
overworked, and you're expected to just go with the flow – all whilst managing an onslaught
of media attention, most of which is either trying to sensationalise things (just to grab our
attentions), or has an agenda all of its own.

On top of all of that, our elected representatives have to deal with **The Wicked Issues**. Or, in fact ... they don't deal with **The Wicked Issues**.

So, this is a kind of an odd thing: **The Wicked Issues**. Depending on what you already think about MPs and their foibles and predilections, the name "**The Wicked Issues**", well it might give you the wrong impression. The **Wicked Issues** aren't wicked in themselves. They are only **Wicked** because they are difficult to deal with.

We have MPs who are unable to scrutinize our government properly and a system in which the political parties dominate both the Legislative and the Executive in an entirely unhelpful way, and we have the Media scrutinizing every step, every word, every action. This makes it possible for our Ministers to rush stuff through without adequate consultation and consensus building, leading to blunders which cost us all.

What we don't have, is a system which encourages our elected representatives to take on the *Wicked Issues*¹.



We've all come across a 'wicked problem'. A 'wicked problem' is one which is difficult to solve.

It is possible to solve it ... but solving it for the long term might involve some difficult choices in the short term. A little bit of a challenge. Perhaps a little bit of sacrifice in the short term, for longer term gain.

Perhaps a 'wicked problem' in business, wondering about whether there are ways in which our business can be more socially responsible, or more environmentally responsible, or both ... and still remain competitive. Perhaps a 'wicked problem' in our personal lives, wondering about the right balance of something, whether that is calories or socialising.

In politics, a 'wicked problem' is referred to as a *wicked issue*.

The *wicked issues* are the things which are really important, but which don't get dealt with. Climate Change. Care for the Elderly. Saving for our retirement. Supporting the more vulnerable members of our society (which might cost a little bit extra now) before they get into difficulties and need even more support (which would cost a lot more, later). Some of us might be getting a bit better at saving for our retirement (and, some of us, not so much!), but there are plenty of other things which we still aren't dealing with properly

The *wicked issues* don't get dealt with because the short-term challenges are things which our elected representatives believe will mean that they won't get re-elected. If you are trying to diet, and you are thinking about the pizza in the fridge, then the person who tells you that

¹ Who Governs Britain (Anthony King) p90 "...the wicked issues': issues on which the taking of decisive action in the country's long-term interests is accompanied by the risk of the government's suffering electorally or even being thrown out of office in the short or medium term. In connection with these wicked issues, voter power is so great that matters of great importance to the country are simply removed from the political agenda. Because ministers are reluctant to put their heads above the parapet, the issues are either not addressed at all or are addressed but in a halting and piecemeal fashion."

you can't have that pizza is not going to be your favourite person in the world at that moment. Perhaps later, when the diet has worked. But not at the time.

Our elected representatives are afraid that we won't re-elect the people who tell us that we can't have the pizza. Or that we have to pay more taxes if we want better health care. Or that we have to make changes in the way in which we live if we want to stop Climate Change getting any worse. These are all *wicked issues*. Well, not the pizza (that's down to you, and the good friend who is trying to help you), but you see where we are going with this.

If you have the pizza today, the diet is only going to get more difficult tomorrow. As a society – sometimes even as a global society – we aren't dealing with the *wicked issues* ... and so they are just getting *more* challenging to deal with.

But our elected representatives don't have the courage to deal with the *wicked issues*. Or perhaps it would be more honest to say: perhaps we don't *give* them the courage.



The *Wicked Issues* are the problems which we all know are there, but which involve taking on too many difficult challenges and vested interests to encourage anyone to want to address them.

For example, whilst Ministers in successive governments might want Britain to be able to 'punch above its weight' in world affairs, very often those same Ministers are NOT prepared to invest sufficiently in defence to make this really possible – or even just to address the inefficiencies and misjudgements involved in military procurement² – meaning that the money which is available isn't always producing the best results for our armed forces. The results are that our armed forces are often overstretched, and asked to do things for which they don't have the equipment, or the manpower, or the resources, and so on.

We occasionally even end up with rather absurd (albeit temporary, or perhaps 'transitional') positions such as having aircraft carriers without any aircraft which can fly from them. It may well be that we *will* have all the aircraft available for our aircraft carrier by 2023³, but why were they not available when our aircraft carrier was commissioned, in 2017⁴? (Commissioned, in this context, doesn't mean 'ordered'. The ship was actually launched in 2014, and the commissioning in 2017 was when it was more or less ready for the Royal Navy to take it over and start practising with it)

Or, why wasn't the commissioning of the ship (and the building, and therefore the investment) delayed until the right aircraft were all going to be available? There's a difference of 6 years or so between the date of the ship being commissioned and when all the planes will be available for it – which is more than 10% of the expected lifespan of the ship itself⁵.

² BBC News - Ministry of Defence 'failing taxpayers' by wasting £13bn, Labour says
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59876757>

³ <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/carriers-with-no-aircraft-the-myth-that-refuses-to-die/>

⁴ <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/the-fighting-arms/surface-fleet/aircraft-carriers/hms-queen-elizabeth>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/aircraft-carrier-what-you-need-to-know/about-aircraft-carrier>

It's not quite as simple as that, of course. There are complicated lead times, and things such as jobs to consider, but a bit of linked up thinking, and the courage to act upon that thinking, might mean that we could get better results for the money we *do* have available, and thereby better support our armed forces.

The same inability to act can be seen on things like health, or addressing the needs of an ageing population. Younger people might not feel particularly interested in saving more, or in paying more taxes to sustain older people, particularly when it seems that those older people are sitting in expensive houses which the younger people can't afford. Complicated. But doing nothing isn't the answer.

It costs a lot of money to keep someone in need of care and support in a hospital bed. Very often, such a person can reach a stage where they need *some* care and support ... but not at the level which is provided by a hospital. So, it would make sense to have lots of available spaces in care homes – providing the level of care and support needed, but not costing as much as a hospital bed. That would actually save money, in the long run. But – do we see lots of investment in care homes?

Well ... what do you think?

And there are many other *wicked issues*, including things like climate change, food, water, and energy security, illegal drugs, and many aspects of increasingly expensive public services – even down to things like organising the sewage and the sewers properly, so that we don't get flooding, or polluted rivers or beaches. These are all complicated, difficult issues, with no easy answers.

Because our parliamentary system is so combative and competitive, any elected representative who stands up to say that we should deal with this or that *Wicked Issue* realises that they are going to be an easy target for the opposition.

Why would they be a target? Well, remember that our parliamentary system is combative? It's all about point scoring. Too often, it's not about you doing something better than the opposition; it's about making sure that you highlight anything which the opposition might do which might be less than perfect ... lowering the barrier, rather than raising it.

It's really easy to suggest that our courageous, principled representative is actually being irresponsible, planning to spend too much money. Why create a system which raises costs for business? That makes good, easy, media headlines ... even if the reason for the extra costs was actually to increase the level of environmental responsibility: making things cleaner and better for the future. Our plucky, well-intentioned representative will face all sorts of lobbying from well organised, vested interests⁶. Much of the media might be

⁶ There are many illustrations of ways in which lobbying and the funding of political parties is a matter of enormous concern – potentially twisting and warping what happens, and what decisions are taken. Just in 2020, there have been concerns over donations from business interests in the UK (for example, Richard Desmond obtaining preferential planning consent around the same time as he made donations to the Conservative party <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/robert-jenrick-richard-desmond-housing-tory-donor-westferry-a9631876.html>), as well as from overseas

positive, but an awful lot of it will be marshalled by those well organised, vested interests), and be strongly critical. Or it might just be rabble rousing by unscrupulous opposition MPs who want to score an easy publicity point with a journalist who stops at the first half of the story (raised costs for businesses), without checking on the full story (trying to make things more environmentally responsible. It doesn't matter whether it is true or not, because bad news is easier to remember. Or, if you like, mud sticks. It may not be true that our thoughtful, responsible representative was being irresponsible with money (it might actually be saving money to invest in us all having better health now, so that we don't have to rely on more expensive medical care later), but sometimes we as voters only remember the bad stuff – even if the bad stuff wasn't true. This all then just means that our well-intentioned representatives are less likely to get re-elected. And their party is less likely to get into power.

So, you can see, it's a bit of a vicious spiral. If you stick your neck out to make a good point for the long term, but then you don't get the chance to make those long-term changes (because you don't get re-elected, because of the bad publicity and so on which is raked up by opposition parties which are just opposing for the sake of it).

Once a party is in power – even with a massive majority – it is unlikely to want to take on too many of the *Wicked Issues*, because that might mean losing power.

And, let's be honest. Some of the blame sits firmly with us: the voters.

Far too often, we don't pay enough attention.

There's so much news, and so many details, and so much spin on the way different information is presented as being a positive story or being a negative story, that we tend to stop paying as much attention as we should.

The public wants to believe that things are going to get better, not that there are really big problems and really big issues which need to be faced.

Or, at least, when it comes to an election, that's what politicians think that we want.

Our politicians don't believe that we really want to face the challenges of dealing with the *Wicked Issues*.

And so, our politicians act (or, sadly, they don't act) accordingly.

Our system breeds strong, focused power, in which Ministers can force through some personal projects. Sadly, our system doesn't breed the broad, consensus building strength and resolve which is needed to take on the *Wicked Issues*. A consensus which would mean that opposition for the sake of opposition, point-scoring for the sake of point-scoring, would be put to one side, in the interests of really doing the difficult, long-term things which we really need to be done.

Are there any situations where this changes?

I'm really glad you asked that.

influences (*Moscow on Thames* <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/25/moscow-on-thames-russia-billionaires-soviet-donors-conservatives>)

In October 2021, the Pandora Papers revealed that Mohamed Amersi (a donor to the UK Conservative Party) had been fined £700 million for corruption, by a US Court.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-58783460>

In fact, there are. When public opinion changes, the *Wicked Issues* become less ... well, less *wicked*. If by taking on a *Wicked Issue* an MP, or a government, is not going to get shot down in flames, because they are following the national mood or opinion, then it is far less risky to take on vested interests. If politicians believe that the public is ready to pay for something, then an issue might be addressed.

In 1997, the Labour government was elected (at least partly) on the basis of intentions and promises which included raising taxes in order to invest more in the NHS. People love the NHS, and people – voters – were prepared to pay more for it. And much more was indeed invested in the NHS.

[Some might argue that it was not (all) invested as well as it might have been, but that's a different point.]

But this voting-to-pay-higher-taxes, well, that doesn't happen often. Far too often, the *wicked issues* are simply put onto a pile of 'too difficult' or 'too risky'. Or, rather, put at the bottom of the pile, in the hope that it will go away if we ignore it. Or be somebody else's problem, further down the line. Not my problem. Not right now. The result may be that a particular politician, or government, successfully avoids the challenge in the short term; but in the long term, the problems normally get worse.

In the case of action on climate change, for example, in recent years we have all become much more aware that action is necessary, and that things are only going to get worse the longer we hesitate or fail to make decisive changes in the way we live and work. Many individuals try to do the right thing, by using more fuel-efficient cars, or by recycling more, or by eating less meat. But although these actions are important, as they all add up collectively, they are also mere drops in the ocean ... *unless* our country takes large scale, national action, collectively (and other countries follow our lead), it is clear that the world climate is going to change even more dramatically. And not for the better.

Although sea levels are rising; and weather is becoming more violent and unpredictable; and plastic is being found in our fish; although many (many!) animal and insect species are becoming extinct, in what some people are calling the 6th mass extinction in the history of our planet; although **great areas of the UK will suffer from water shortages and our soil is becoming so poor that we won't be able grow enough food to feed everyone; and most serious of all, although we are rapidly approaching the so-called "tipping points" where regardless of what we do irreversible changes will take-place in the seas and on the land leading to a "hot-house earth" and the end of civilization as we know it, our** politicians don't yet seem to be ready to take sufficient action to make a difference. And we have just seen this in action, in the watered-down agreements which were reached in Glasgow, at COP26.

And perhaps that is because politicians don't (yet) believe that the public is prepared to take on board the impact which that action would have. Perhaps they are right. Perhaps we, the public, the voters, need to make it clear that we are ready for our government to take a lead on things, and that we are ready for the fact that this will mean that our lives will be different.

But, at the moment, the way in which we make it clear to our government what we want ... well, at the moment, the system is that we have one vote, every 5 years, to choose a competent local representative, who is also a member of a political party which we hope will form a reasonably competent government, and also to choose a single political party manifesto with perhaps 100 different things in it. Just one vote, for all three things together.

So, how do we make it clear to our government that we want things to be dealt with? Perhaps not through the current system. At least, not the way we currently use the system.

* * * * *

Unless, of course, you have some different ideas. Some suggestions as to how things could be different. Perhaps about how we could use our systems differently, or about how we could tweak them so that they worked better, in all of our interests.

~~Next time, we are going to look in detail at the Separation of Powers and the Conflicting Pressures of Being an MP.~~ Our elected representatives may already be torn between what they know to be the right thing, and what they feel that they might have to do to get re-elected. Or what is the right thing for their constituency, and what is the right thing for the country as a whole, or perhaps for the planet as a whole. But there's more pressure still on our MPs, pressure which is baked into the Parliamentary system. So, more on that, next time.

If you have any ideas, we would love to hear from you. In Season Three of *Taking the Party out of Politics*, we will be exploring various ideas about how we could make things better. And we would love to hear from you. Just email us with your ideas, on info@talktogether.info. If your ideas are good – or if they help us to understand things more clearly – then we will include them in Season Three. We might even contact you, to interview you about your suggestions! We look forward to hearing *your* thoughts.

* * *

Next time, we're going to look a bit more at what we call the **Separation of Powers**, and the **Conflicting Pressures** which that **Separation of Powers** places on **Being an MP**.

That's going back a little bit, to the distinction between Government and Parliament.

Government is supposed to be there, leading the country, coming up with the new directions in which we need to go, and the adjustments to things like our laws, so that they make sense in an ever changing, modern world.

Parliament (made up of all of our elected MPs in the House of Commons, plus the members of the House of Lords) is supposed to be checking up on Government, to make sure that it isn't going too crazy, too fast, too far.

But a majority of our elected MPs are also members of the party (or parties) which get to form the Government. They are the ones who get together, and by agreeing who will be their leader, they decide on who is the Prime Minister, and therefore decide who is in the Government. A majority of our elected MPs are the source of Government's power.

So ... just how much real checking up on what Government is up to, how much serious holding to account, are the majority of our MPs actually going to want to do?

Well, next time we're going to have a look at all of that.

For now, thank you for listening.

If you would like to have a look at transcripts of the podcast, including links to all of our sources and references, please go to www.talktogether.info, and follow the links to the Podcast from there. And, of course, if you would like to contact us – not least if you would like to share any ideas which you have about how we could make things better, or if there are any areas of how Politics is supposed to work, but why it isn't working – then please email us at any time on info@talktogether.info.

If you have enjoyed this podcast, then I hope that you will take the time to tell your friends. And perhaps you could also take a moment to give us a rating wherever you found us – that not only helps other people to find us; it also just really makes us feel appreciated. ☺

That would be great. Thank you.