
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 closer look at the **Blunders of Our Governments**. These
have been committed by British governments of all political parties, so what is at stake here
is not the competence – or incompetence – of a particular party or of a specific government,
or even of any particular individual. It would certainly be possible to challenge the
competence of many. But that's not the point here. The point here is to examine the system
which makes these Blunders possible.

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 us 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. Already 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, or finally by being pulled into so many different directions that our MPs become
effectively powerless.

It's difficult to get elected, and then once you are elected it is difficult to achieve much: you're
overworked and under supported, and you're expected to just go with the flow – all whilst
managing an onslaught of pressure from the media, pressure from your political party, and
even pressure from your own leadership or government.

Blunders and Executive power [The Blunders of our Governments](#)

So, there are big, systemic problems with the way in which our government is supposed to work. Many of these problems stem from the fact that political parties are able to influence more than one side of the separation of powers: the Executive [Government] and the Legislative [Parliament]. The conflicting pressures on MPs, which this straddling of the separation between Executive and Legislative generates, undermine the process of proper scrutiny of government policy, and the creation of new laws.

So, why is scrutiny of government policy so important?

Well, the short answer is that a very strong executive makes it possible for the Government to make new laws in an unmediated rush: without sufficient need to compromise, and without having to consider either the implications of a policy or the practicalities of implementation. We have already discussed why Government ministers might feel the pressure to get on with things – with what might be their one, brief taste of power – but even if that is understandable (from the perspective of the individual minister), that isn't a recipe for good government. And, after all, the purpose of the structures and systems of government is actually supposed to be to deliver good government – not to make it possible for a Government minister to have an individual 'crack' at making a mark for themselves. It's about all of us, and about all of our interests, not just about the career highwater mark for a minister.

So, if the systems of Government mean that policies can be rushed through without proper consultation, without proper consensus building around them, and without them being properly scrutinised ... what does that mean about the quality of the thinking behind those policies? What does that mean about whether the planning for making the policy can really achieve what it is intended to achieve? Even if we might not agree with what the policy is trying to achieve – well, at least it ought to achieve what it sets out to do ... right?

What it means is that policies get rushed into place. Consensus is not built – because the strong, centralised systems of power mean that decisions can be made quickly, and changes can be made relatively rapidly – certainly compared to some other governmental systems. Consultations are not held properly, or are not listened to properly. Lessons are not learned, because we have ministers who are in a rush, and who don't have to learn those lessons to get their policies into place.

What it means is that we get bad policies. Ineffective policies. Policies which can make things worse, not better. Not all the time, to be sure. But far, far too often. Policies which we can refer to as blunders.

Why do we call them 'blunders'? Because they are not just mistakes. We can all make mistakes. Particularly when situations change, and a decision we made in the light of imperfect information turns out to have been less than ideal

But if we did have all the information – or could have had all the information, if we had listened properly – to have avoided making a mistake? Well, then it's a *blunder*.



Government Blunders



**predictable,
but they did it anyway**

Let's look at some of the results of policies which were not properly scrutinised.

What happens when these *not-very-representative* representatives actually get to work? Well, as you are probably aware, politicians are held in pretty low esteem at the moment. The time of automatic respect for our 'elders and betters' seems to have gone. Partly because our elders might be older but they are not necessarily better. And partly simply because of the number of governmental cock-ups (that's a technical term, by the way), of which in the UK we seem to have

- more than comparable countries
- unnecessarily many

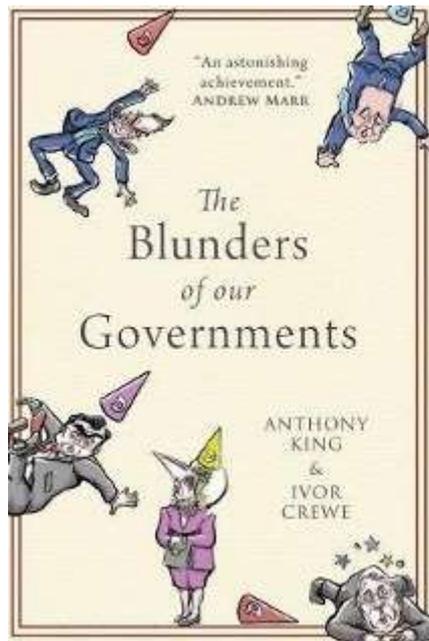


You may have your own mental list of times when you have – at the very least – been disappointed by what our government has managed to get wrong on our behalf. I certainly do.

Perhaps the most frustrating are those times when it seems as though some sort of private sector mess is sorted out at public expense – such as with RBS, BP, or Landrover.



However, just to keep this objective, I am going to focus on a list of big old government blunders [as identified in a 2014 publication by [Ivor Crewe](#) and [Anthony King](#) : *The Blunders of our Governments*].



To be clear, when we talk about BLUNDERS, we are not talking about things which went wrong because something else changed, something unforeseeable.

We are talking about things which were foreseeable, and which the government did anyway. Blunders are things which were:

- Foreseeable.
- Disappointments – that is, something went wrong, or the outcome was negative.
- Wrong judgement calls
- Blunders include errors of Commission, not omission – that is, things that were done which were done incorrectly, or which didn't have to be done, not things which were not done.
- And there are also “meta blunders”. Things which made them Controversial, unpopular



Government Blunders



**No consultation
+ No consensus
= Ineffective policies**

Anthony King and Ivor Crewe identify 12 major Blunders in the UK over the past few decades.

a) Private pensions

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, private pensions were mis-sold on a massive scale. Whilst the government had correctly identified that the cost to the country of state pensions was going to increase – as people lived longer after retirement – the solution was not simply to create a private pensions market in which people were poorly advised, or actively mis-sold financial products which they didn't really understand and certainly didn't need – or which were not as good for them as something which they already had, but had lost in the process. The result was a decades long process of governments of all political persuasions forcing the financial institutions which had mis-sold pensions to provide compensation to members of the public (amounting to nearly £9 billion – even though many members of the public had died in the meantime, or simply didn't understand how to lodge a compensation claim).

b) Poll tax (1990-1993).

This was a tax introduced by the Thatcher government, and one which ultimately led to the Prime Minister herself (Margaret Thatcher) being removed from office by her own party. Whilst one of the existing systems of raising government finance (a property tax called 'rates') was clearly highly flawed and inequitable (two identical properties paid the same for local government services, whether one person lived in the property or 8 did), the government introduced "a poll tax - a per capita tax on individuals"¹. Although this poll tax was intended to redress the imbalance of the 'rates' system, it not only proved to be both unpopular and regressive (everyone paid the same, whether rich or poor), but also proved to be very difficult to collect.

c) The Child Support Agency

An increase in the number of single mothers who were claiming benefits (effectively child maintenance) roughly trebled between the 1970s to the 1990s. The cost of social security payments to single parents went from £2.4 billion in 1979 to £6.6 billion in 1992². The urge to make fathers take responsibility for their children, and to help to pay towards this cost, was felt across all political parties. The solution, however, was not to create an agency which completely misunderstood the nature of being a single parent. Couples which were separated – but where the father was in touch, and was ready to support their child – were dragged into courts and legal proceedings, whereas in other cases the domestic situation was so complicated – perhaps with more than one father of different children in the same household, or possibly even with the father either unaware of the child, or unidentified, that payments became impossible to create. A system was given teeth which bit too hard into people who wanted to comply, just because it couldn't bite at people who didn't want to comply. And, in the end, the administration of the system cost far more to operate (about £137 million³) than the value of the new payments which were collected (about £15 million⁴)

¹ The Blunders of Our Governments p42

² Ibid p80

^{3, 4} Ibid p89

And we could go on:

- d) The way in which Britain crashed out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism
- e) Public investment in the Millenium Dome – which was really a bit of a vanity project for the Labour government – cost more than twice the original budget, and failed to attract the expected number of visitors. That's not really a shock, looking back on the plans: it had been anticipated that 12 million people would visit during the first year – about 20% of the entire population of the country!
- f) Individual Learning Accounts – perhaps not the biggest blunder in purely financial terms (losing only a few hundred million pounds, rather than billions), but the aim (of offering training to people without appropriate work-related qualifications) was undermined by the complexity of hosting thousands and thousands of relatively small financial accounts, and was too easy to defraud.
- g) Tax credits – intended to reduce the tax burden on people at the bottom of the employment ladder, to encourage and enable them to get into work, this was a system which was incredibly complicated, and created structural problems which took years to sort out.
- h) Asset recovery agency – designed to recover stolen proceeds from criminals, this agency ended up costing more (£65 million) than it collected (£23 million)⁵
- i) Farm Subsidies (non-payment) – where a change in subsidies paid to farmers was introduced too quickly, and too ambitiously (more quickly in England than in any of the other nations of the UK), resulting in payment delays which were estimated to cost farmers between £18 and £22.4 million in interest payments and fees to finance additional bank borrowing to bridge the gaps created.
- j) Many, many different, over-ambitious and improperly planned IT projects, such as The NHS IT system (NHS Patient records)
- k) Public Private Partnerships for the funding of state projects – such as the maintenance and upgrading of the London underground – the so-called Metronet. Intended to bring to public projects what New Labour politicians believed was the expertise and greater efficiency of the private sector, it created a byzantine financial mess of debt and financial collapse which the private sector companies could walk away from, but which left a bill which the state had to step in to cover 1bn - 20bn?



We might add in attempts to bring in ID cards, and the arrangements of new GP contracts, as well.

⁵ Ibid p159

And, whether you voted for or against leaving the European Union in the referendum in 2016, you are unlikely to think that the way in which Brexit has been handled has been ideal: we hear more and more of people saying things like 'This isn't what we voted for' – even from those who voted for Brexit!

And, as I said earlier, you may have your own ideas, too.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but just to illustrate the point about how incompetent our governments – as currently set up – can be.

It is important to be clear that this is not a party-political point.

Governments across the political spectrum seem to be perfectly capable of messing things up.



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So: Why does this happen?



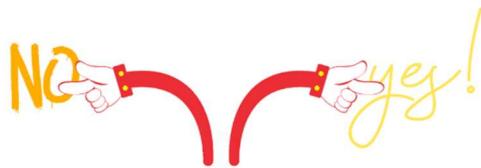
1.1.1. Structural Causes

Well, there are Structural causes

- Poorly designed decision-making processes.
 - Solution: Reform our policy making institutions
- Deficit of deliberation – too efficient, too decisive.
 - Solution: Accommodate more veto players; Take time, info, advice
- Operational disconnect. Planners are not operators. They are professional politicians. They haven't run anything. They are not interested in design or implementation. They have no long-term responsibility.
 - Solution: Encourage more politicians with broader experience than just politics. Make sure that their decisions are tracked, and that it is clear who was responsible (a great role for the media).



Government Blunders



Structural causes:

- Poor decision-making processes
- Deficit of deliberation
- Operational disconnect

Just to elaborate on that idea of operational disconnect:

Ministers (and Senior Civil Servants) are not accountable: they move on in less than 2 years ... but the results and effects of most government projects can only be judged after a minimum of 1 or 2 years [probably longer].

A new policy will not be blocked before Ministers (and Senior Civil Servants) move on.

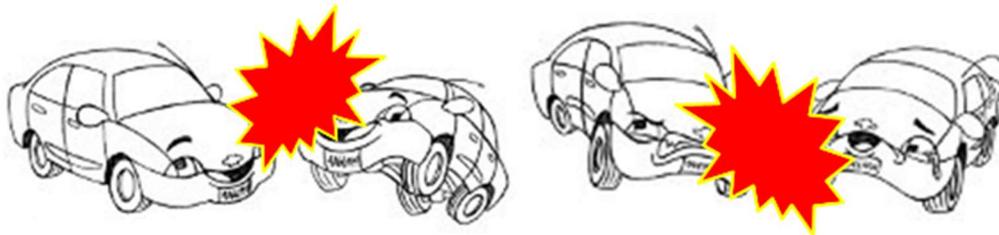
Consequences are only perceived later.

Ministers (and Senior Civil Servants) are assessed on short term achievements.

Ministers (and Senior Civil Servants) don't want to think about problems.

Ministers (and Senior Civil Servants) don't want to deal with details.

And to build on that idea ...



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In all of this, sadly, the body which is supposed to act as a check on all this rash behaviour – Parliament – becomes a bit of an irrelevant spectator.

- Whips ensure that Parliament is not able to rein in this behaviour.
- Scrutiny committees are disempowered by party loyalties, and by ministers either pressuring their fellow party members or simply bypassing the scrutiny process – and sometimes parliament itself – altogether.
- Public accounts committee (actually one of the most useful bits of what Westminster does) only checks on activity **after** the fact.



**Government
Blunders**

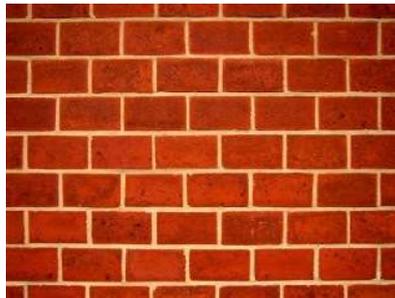
**Parliament
becomes a bit
irrelevant**

So, where does all this leave us? We have a system which isn't very representative, and a system to which politicians have to commit their entire professional lives to in order to get to a position where they can really grab headlines.

It's little wonder that, after all the grief they suffer at the hands of the media, and being aware how short their opportunity to make a difference might be, that they run around 'making a mark' (a bit like a dog in a new garden), as a result of which we get some dreadful blunders, which cost us both personally and nationally, in terms of effectiveness and financial loss. Finally, we absolutely mustn't lose sight of the fact that despite all this inadequately scrutinised activity from ministers (without adequate consultation and consensus building), the *wicked issues* are not being dealt with. They may not be cool or sexy issues to grapple with to get re-elected, but they don't go away by being ignored – and ignoring them just stores up worse problems for the future.

All of that does not add up to a recipe for good government.

We need to change things.



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.

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 wrap up the current series with an overview of problems with the way Westminster and Whitehall is supposed to work. Or, rather, with the ways in which it isn't working. Next time, we will have a **Second Summary of Impossible Puzzles**.

From how hard it is to get elected and to get started at Westminster once you are elected, through to all the different pressures on you as an MP, and all the structural issues which either bypass you completely or which push you into a corner or which drag you in different directions – well, we already know from Series One that the system of selecting a good representative is pretty much impossible, and now we can see that all these Impossible Puzzles mean that it's also pretty much impossible for a good representative to do a good job, even if they are successful at getting selected.

So, 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.