Episode 25:

Taking the PARTY

out of POLITICS

The UK and The EU

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*.

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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 some of those systems work a bit better.

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In Season 1, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of us – the voters.
In Season 2, we took a 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.

Welcome to the fifth episode of our mini-series, looking at people, organisations, and issues which fall outside the established (party) political systems. We are looking at how some of those people and organisations are seeking to influence what happens in this country, and in the world more generally – in other words, seeking to affect our lives for the better (but – not necessarily – bothered about party politics). And, we will be looking at some of the issues which currently aren't being addressed successfully by our political party dominated system of politics.

Today will be the second of three short episodes in conversation with Professor Anand Menon, from Kings College London.

Prof Menon: Hi, my name is Anand Menon. I'm a professor in European politics at King's College London and I run something called *The UK in a Changing Europe*.

Today we're going to look at the relationship between the UK and the EU.

The European Union. That's the economic (and, increasingly, the political) grouping of all those countries just the other side of the English Channel.

There is a story about a headline – almost certainly an urban myth – which says a lot about the confused relationship which the UK has long had with the rest of Europe. According to the myth (because no one seems to be able to find anywhere where the headline was

actually printed), there was fog in the English Channel, and the headline suggested that the Continent (that is, the rest of Europe) was cut off: **"Fog in Channel; Continent Cut Off".** The interesting thing is not really whether the headline ever appeared – it almost certainly didn't – but that the myth of the headline has persisted, and what that says about the way that the British understand the complicated relationship which they have with the rest of Europe … with 'The Continent'.

The headline supposedly appeared in the 1930s. Certainly, there are references to its supposed appearance, dating from the early 1930s – and ever since. It supposedly appeared, then, before the Second World War. Long before the European Union (or the EEC, or the European Coal and Steel Community [1951]).

There are (at least) two points in relating the story. First, it is that the Britain saw the Continent being cut off from Britain … not Britain being cut off from the Continent. As though the focus of all things which are important was actually Britain. But, simultaneously, the second point is that Britain sees the Continent as important; as a focus; as something which Britain cares for. Otherwise, why would it matter if it were cut off? There might be a sense of overblown self-importance in seeing Britain as the focus of what is important, but there is also a sense of connectedness with the rest of Europe – a connectedness which is worth noting, if the connection is 'cut off' (even if only by fog).

And there is a third point, too: about the fact that the urban myth persists. That is partly about the fact that the British love to laugh at themselves, and at their gentle idiosyncrasies. But it is also partly about the fact that the British recognise themselves – or, at least, some of their fellow Brits – in that urban myth. In that slightly out of balance sense of self-importance, yes, but also in that recognition of a connectedness with Europe which is at risk of being cut off.

So, let's speak to Professor Menon about the relationship between the UK and the EU, and see if we can understand a little bit more about it, about where the roots of the status of our current relationship with the EU lie …

Our relationship with Europe

Perhaps we could start with our relationship with the European Union. Professor Menon: Can you give us a a brief overview of the UK's relationship with Europe over the last X years?

I don't know what point you'd like to start. Would that be when we first entered the European Community? Would it be since World War Two? Would it be since 2016, and the referendum on leaving the European Community? What, what date would you pick?

Prof Menon: Well, depending on how long you've got. I mean my obvious starting point, I suppose, would be 1945 and our relationship has waxed and waned.

I mean the big difference between us and the other countries of Western Europe in 1945 was that we came out of the war with a clear sense that we'd won, whereas even countries on our side in the Second World War didn't feel like they'd won: because they'd been utterly destroyed by that war.

And that shaped our attitudes to lots of things, not least European integration, which of course started in 1950 with the Schuman Declaration. You'll notice on the 9th of May that the rest of Europe has the day off for Europe Day, which is the day he made that declaration. That was the start of the building of what has become the European Union, and we stayed apart from it.

We stayed apart from the Coal and Steel community, that was created in ‘52 from the European Economic Community, and that was the precursor of the European Union that started in ‘58. It was only when in the 1960s we started to realize that our economy wasn't flourishing to quite the extent that the economies of continental Europe were, that we started to have second thoughts.

So, we applied to join twice.
We were turned down by the French twice. We eventually joined in 1973.

The fact we joined late, I think, is absolutely fundamental because we joined a club whose rules had been set by others.

How might those rules have been different?

Prof Menon: I think if we had joined the European Community in 1958, it wouldn't have had a common agricultural policy that looked like the agricultural policy that existed in '73 because we would have said "Hang on!" and said "We're not joining a club whose rules exist to protect French small farmers".

So, joining late made life more difficult for us, because the whole thing was structured in a way that was slightly alien to us.

The second thing I'd say that made us distinct in Europe is that we joined because our economy wasn't working. We thought that by joining we could improve how our economy worked.

For every other Member State of the European Union, European integration is an economic project, but it's an economic project designed to achieve explicitly political objectives. For the initial 6 Member States, pooling coal and steel, back in 1952, wasn't just about pooling coal and steel; it was a way about pooling the things that you used to make war. European integration was a way of making war impossible.

For the countries of southern Europe, for Portugal, for Greece, for Spain, joining the European Community, when they did in the 1980s, wasn't just about joining the European Community. It was about putting an end to a period of dictatorship. For the countries of Eastern Europe, joining the European Union was about saying goodbye to the Soviet Union, and regaining what they saw as their rightful place in Europe. All of which rather boring detail is meant to make the point that for everyone else in the European Union, this is something that is explicitly political in nature.

We were the only Member State, I would argue, for whom this was purely economic. What that meant, I think, was that the ties binding us to the EU were far weaker than those that bind other Member States to their membership. This is one of the key reasons, I think, why, if you fast forward to 2016, we didn't feel the sort of attachment that led us to vote to remain … and we voted to leave.

The UK's relationship with Europe

So, thinking about our relationship with Europe, are there ways in which our relationship could – should – have been better?

Prof Menon: I think one of the paradoxes of our membership of the European Union was we were a lot more influential within it than I think many people in this country realized. The single market, which is one of the crowning achievements of the European Union, was to a large extent of British creation. It was Margaret Thatcher's creation. So, one of the issues around our membership of the European Union is that I don't think we were quite as marginalized and quite as powerless as many people seem to think.

I think the second thing about our membership of the European Union was that it was far too easy for politicians to bash it.

This is clearest, I think, in the case of David Cameron, who spent years saying rather ridiculous things like, "Oh, I hate spending my weekends at European summits", which always struck me as a little bit childish and sulky. But it was meant to signal to voters: "Well, you know this is a waste of my time"; whereas in actual fact those summits were a time when Heads of State and Government of 28 countries came together. Got to know each other. Shared policy priorities. It was a very useful thing to be at.

So, Cameron, I think, was guilty of this knocking the EU. And of course, in Cameron's case, all of a sudden in 2016 he did a screeching U-turn, and started telling us why the European Union was fundamental to our economic prosperity. So, that looked a bit weird, and helped him lose the referendum. But I think even under ostensibly pro-European Prime ministers, like Tony Blair, more could have been done to emphasize the influence wielded within Europe and the impact that Europe had on us

One of the cases which were never made (particularly in the light of the referendum, where of course, the Leave campaign talked about taking back control), was that EU membership gave us a degree of control over other people's economies. The single market gave us access to the markets of all the other Member States at a time when our businesses – because of the Thatcherite deregulation and privatization – were leaner, meaner and more competitive than many of their competitors in the European market.

Who was to blame for our poor relationship with the European Union?

Let's think about that in a little more detail. If our influence within the European Union has been underestimated – perhaps undervalued – by the UK population, who is to blame for that? Politicians are sometimes blamed for the way in which the general population regarded our relationship with Europe. Are there other constituencies we should hold to account for the way in which Europe was perceived? I'm thinking of the Media, for example.

Prof Menon: Yeah, the media had a line. I mean for many years some of the red tops were very determinedly anti EU and would knock the EU at any possible opportunity that certainly played a part, I think, in shaping public opinion.

I think I would look at politicians more than the media, in the fact that I think, if we'd had a more positive political debate about Europe as a Member State, things might have been different. So, what I'm saying is: those people who believed in membership never really put their back to the wheel.

How could we improve our relationship with the EU now?

OK; understood. So, despite the wisdom of hindsight, we are where we are now, and we have to make the best of things. What do you think the UK government could do over the next 5 or 10 years to make the most of our relationship with the EU, given where we are now`?

Prof Menon: Well, I think that's a loaded question in the sense that for those in power now making the most of the relationship isn't the priority. Winning the politics is the priority and the fact of the matter is that what Boris Johnson did in that election of December 2019 was that he basically created a coalition of leave voters. Because he did that, I think there is a lingering belief in the government that picking fights with the EU is good politics, because it reunites that coalition. So, I think, if you ask that question to a member of the government, they would dispute the premise of the question.

[The government would say] "Why should we see having good relations with the EU as an end in itself, whereas actually we tend to see EU relations as a means to a political end?"

And there isn't a simple answer to that. It's our largest trading partner for example.

Prof Menon: It is our largest trading partner. For many "Leavers", the economic impacts are baked in, and it's something they're willing to accept. We live in a world now where our trade with the European Union is going to decrease quite significantly because of Brexit. That happens to be the world we live in.

I think, if you asked a member of the government, they'd say:
"This is what we voted to do; this is what we've done. We now need to get on and make it work and look elsewhere for our key political relationships".

That, of course, is going to have a negative economic effect.

How do European countries view the way in which the UK has acted upon the outcome of the Brexit referendum?

Going back to the way in which this is perceived from the European side, it was said at the time that many of the European countries, many of the European leaders, were taken aback that the result of the referendum was taken so literally in this country.

How do those people see us now, having finally left?

Prof Menon: It's hard to generalize. I think that many people in the EU see Boris Johnson as a populist leader, and they see Brexit as having provided the conditions for this kind of populist politics. I think that many of them look at it, and realize just how intrusive EU membership is.

For anyone like me, I spent 20 years in my career teaching politics and institutions of the European Union. The fact that Brexit was a tremendous nightmare didn't come as a surprise to me. I suspect that Brexit would have been a nightmare, even without the unique issue of Northern Ireland, and even without the unique contingent circumstances of a government without a majority.

Why was it (why is it still) so difficult to 'Get Brexit Done'?

Prof Menon: Even doing Brexit under the best of circumstances would have been difficult. Ironically it would have been difficult precisely because the Brexiters were right. Because the Brexiters old argument was: "Hang on a second! This was meant to be just a common market, but now we're in something that interferes in every single aspect of our life!"

What the Brexit process proved was, yes, absolutely, it interferes in every single aspect of our lives. From pension settlements in the divorce payment to the European Union, to the devolution settlement we have in this country (which only really works in the context of single market and customs union membership), to how our businesses function, to how our Constitution functions, the nature of law has changed because we've left the European Union. In that sense, if you were the person who thought "I'm happy to be a member of common Market, but nothing more", then you're quite right in wanting to be out. But you shouldn't have expected it to be easy.

In a sense, this is where "cake-ism," comes in. Wanting to have your cake and eat it. Brexiters, who argued that the that European integration had gone too far, whilst in their next breath saying leaving it will be easy. If you actually if you take the first point seriously, there is no way that extricating yourself from something is going to be easy.

And going back to what you were saying about the beginnings of the European Union, it should have always been clear that for everybody else, for all of the other members of the European Community, it was always about more than. A mere common market.

Prof Menon: Yes. Though, that that being said, they've always found it hard to agree on anything other than a common market. Political union still remains a nice cosy phrase that people on the continent spout when it suits them for political reasons, without much in the way of acting on it, it has to be said.

But nevertheless, you know narratives are important in politics. To take one simple example, the French President (and the French don't need lessons from me when it comes to nationalism), always does press conferences in front of two flags: the EU flag and the French flag. That would be simply inconceivable in this country, at any point in our membership. Maybe under Ted Heath, right at the start it would have been conceivable.

But that sort of symbolism matters. It's a sort of maths. It shapes people's expectations.

And you can see that symbolism carefully stage managed, throughout France; and elsewhere in Europe. But not so much here.

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Next time

Next time, on Taking the Party out of Politics, we are going to continue our conversation with Professor Menon, looking a little bit more about the one of the more complicated issues which has been left by Brexit – the recent huge change to the relationship between the UK and the EU: Northern Ireland. Because whilst we can joke about the Continent being cut off from the Britain – because Britain is an island – there is an extra complexity in the fact that Britain is a part of a slightly larger political union: the UK. And the UK still has a land border with the EU: the border between Northern Ireland (which is part of the UK, just not part of Britain) and the Republic of Ireland (which has absolutely not left the European Union). And the situation is that Northern Ireland has – infamously – not been simple, for decades; perhaps for centuries. How do we resolve the problem of a land border with the European Union, across the island of Ireland, when there are many people who live on that island who don't want there to be a land border between the North and the South?

Well, that will be our question for Professor Menon, next time.

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.