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*Taking the*  
**PARTY**

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*out of*  
**POLITICS**

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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 should 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 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. This is Season 2, in which we will be looking 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.

Let's just have a quick review of what we covered in Season 1.

In the introduction, we had an overview of what the issues are, and a general idea of the route we are going to take through all of this – and why this is important.

In Episode 2, we started to think about why we have a government at all, and the tacit – perhaps unspoken – agreement which exists between:

- those who do the governing, and
- those who agree to be governed

(what we call the *Social Contract*).

This involves finding a fair and equitable balance between being better off within a society (safety, the opportunity to work with others to achieve more than we could individually), and giving up some freedoms (to do what we want, whenever we want, whether that is playing music really loudly, only washing if we are really in the mood, and not having to be friendly to anyone because nobody wants to be friends with a smelly person who plays their music too loudly).

It also involves finding a fair and equitable balance between things like the amount of tax we each pay, and the amount of benefit we get from paying that tax – such as new roads, a health service, a police force, and so on.

In Episode 3, we discussed what we mean by the word 'Democracy', along with other ideas, such as consideration for others and respect for minorities. The majority doesn't always force the minority to do exactly what the majority wants to do, as long as what the minority wants to do doesn't really impact negatively on what the majority wants to do – at least, not too much. We then moved from there to start to explore the particular form of '*Representative Democracy*' which we use – because we can't *all* be involved in the details of *every single* little decision. To get around that problem, we elect our representatives to study all the details on our behalf, and to take the decisions for us.

And in Episode 4, we started to explore how the mechanics of electing representatives – and ultimately a government – well ... how all of that is supposed to work. And why it isn't working as well perhaps we imagine that it should do. In fact, perhaps why it is actually impossible for it to work, given the way in which the system is set up.

For example: if at least a third of our elected representatives (our MPs) are elected with less than 50% of the votes cast in their constituency, then how can we hope that it is possible for our representatives to try to represent all the voters in each of their constituencies? If a new MP has promised a set of things, then to get re-elected, it would be reasonable for the new MP to try to deliver those things. But if only less than 50% of the voters in their constituency voted for those things, then a majority of voters *didn't* want those things. So, how does the new MP do a good job of representing *all* the other voters in their constituency?

And, even if the new MP had over 50% of the votes in their constituency, there would still be a large minority – still 10s of 1,000s of people – who wanted different things.

How do you represent their needs and preferences, as well as representing the needs and preferences of the 10s of 1,000s of people who did vote for you?

It's a pretty impossible balancing act.

With a slightly wider, national perspective, our governments, which since 1935 have not received a majority of the vote nationally, are there to represent us. But, since the majority of people actually voted against the political party which gets to form the government, then again, our government doesn't really represent us at all.

We are still lucky to get good people – at least some of the time – who want to become MPs, and that's great. But when they are able to do a good job, it is mostly because they have managed to do so DESPITE the system, not because of the system. That, of course, is what we are going to be looking at during this Season.

And, then, in Episode 5, we looked at the balance between Government and Parliament. Our Government is quite a small bunch of our MPs (about 26 or so, out of the 650 who are elected), and they are trying to set the agenda, to make a plan, to carve out a path to the future for our country. And Parliament (which is all the rest of the MPs, plus the 26 ministers who are in the Government), is trying to check up on what the Government is trying to do. Trying to make sure that the plans have been well thought through. Trying to make sure that everything has been taken into account. Trying to make sure that avoidable mistakes aren't made. And trying to make sure that all of our interests have been taken into account.

Government is trying to make things happen.

Parliament is trying to make sure that those things are reasonable, and that they are in all of our interests.

In Episode 6, we looked at Manifestos – those lists of pre-election promises, the lists of what candidates and political parties say that they will do if they get elected – and we considered whether it is possible for us to rely on them (because very often, the things on those lists don't get done, or not in the way that was originally intended, and instead, other things get done).

Short answer? – NO, we can't really rely on them.

But, at the same time, the Manifesto does give us (or should give us) some important insights into the *sorts* of things which that political party is going to want to do, if they get elected. Perhaps not exactly the list of things which will definitely happen. But this is the list of what they say that they want to do. So we should really pay attention, when we cast our votes. Because, even if it isn't exactly those things which are put into practice, it might well be some things which are quite similar.

We also considered whether governments have the right to claim that any one item on a list of Manifesto promises has a particular status after the election – just because such-and-such was on a list of 100 or so promises, can the government claim to be on a special mission (to have a 'mandate') to deliver on that promise.

Short answer? – almost certainly NOT.

Finally, in between the end of Season 1, with our summary in Episode 7, we had a short Bonus Series, focussing on the 5 Impossible Puzzles for Representative Government (including the difficulty of selecting a good local representative, and a good government, and a list of manifesto promises, all with just one vote, once every 5 years). Those are just some of the issues we will be coming back to, when we look at possible solutions, in Season 3.

So, that was Season 1.

Today, we are starting our look at the mechanics of Government, and the mechanics of Parliament, and the mechanics of the balance between Government and Parliament – we are looking at how all of that is intended to work

Quick spoiler alert: this balance, between Government and Parliament?

Well: it isn't working as well as it could do.

And so (of course!), we are going to be looking at where and when (and why!) that balance isn't working.

### **So: *Why* isn't our government working the way it is supposed to?**

We began Series 1 by saying that this is actually all about things which you already know.

More or less. Nothing we have covered so far has really been a surprise.

Perhaps you hadn't lined up all the pieces quite yet, so the idea has been to help to organise it all, and to put it into some context. But not really to produce any great surprises.

Now we are going to explore things further. It is probably still not going to produce any great surprises. Because you probably know most of these things already.

All we are doing is to bring it all together.

In Season One, we looked at why we have a government. We explored how the general systems are supposed to work in selecting representatives, how those representatives go on to become Members of Parliament, and (in some cases) to form the Government.

We also looked at some of the challenges which those systems face. Some of those challenges mean either that our system isn't working as well as it could, or that we are not using it in the best possible way, or that our system is trying to achieve too many things at once.

In Season Two, we are going to look at things from different perspectives, such as what it is like for an individual who is trying to become an MP, rather than the difficulties we face as voters in choosing an MP. We will also look at why there are even more challenges, and why these mean that things are even worse than they might already seem to be.

And (again, looking ahead) in Season Three, we are going to look at some possible solutions: ways in which we might use our current system better, and therefore hope to get better government from our system. And, importantly, we are interested in YOUR suggestions as to how YOU think that we could improve the way our systems work. Or, currently, DON'T work. Just email us with your ideas, any time, at [info@talktogether.info](mailto:info@talktogether.info).

However, back to today's episode, and let's look at the challenges for someone who is trying to get elected!

What is it like for someone who wants to become an MP?

### **Becoming an MP: How it's supposed to work ... and how it actually works**

Politicians get a hard time from the public and from the media.

Sometimes, it is deserved.

There are some self-serving coasters out there who really aren't doing a good job, and who are simply in it for themselves.

But on the whole, MPs are trying to do the right thing.  
Or, at least, they start out wanting to do the right thing.

It's actually pretty amazing that people are prepared to put themselves up for election, given that we all know what a rough time they get for their troubles. But do we actually understand even half of the challenges which they face in trying to get elected and then trying to do a good job?

Well, let's start by looking at how the process of becoming an MP is supposed to work, and then we will move on to having a look at how doing a good job as an MP is supposed to work in the next episode.

### **Deciding to stand for election**

Why would someone decide to stand for election?



In an ideal world, the answer would probably be something like ...

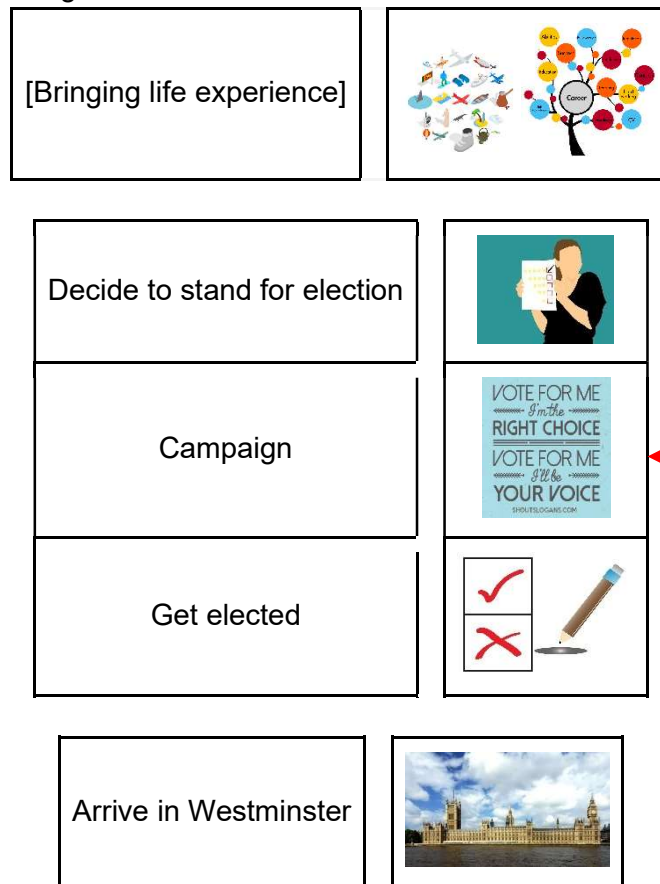
*"I would like to make the world a better place, and to help other people. With my skills and experience I think that I could do this by being an MP for 5 or 10 years. I could contribute my ideas, support other good ideas. I think I could do a good job of representing the people of the area where I live."*

Sounds nice, doesn't it?

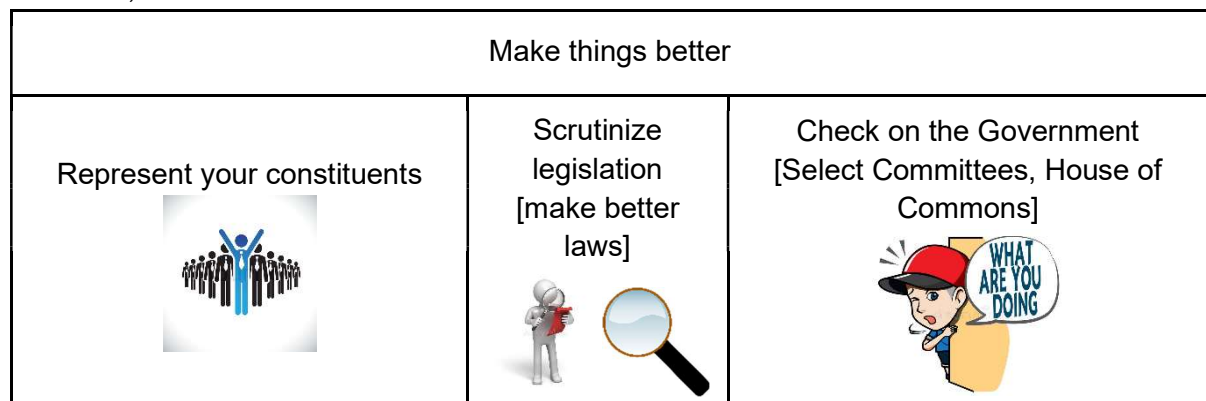
## Being an MP: 1. How it's supposed to work

So, roughly, how do we think that it is all going to work, for someone who feels like that, for someone who wants to do a good job?

Well, probably, something like this:



And then, once the new MP arrives in Westminster ...



Do a good job

Get a pat on the back

Stand Down?

Do a different job

Stand Again?

Return to *Campaign*

Well, that's more or less what we imagine, isn't it?

## As an interesting person...

Getting Elected



Getting Elected

... with lots to offer...  
... you decide to stand for Parliament



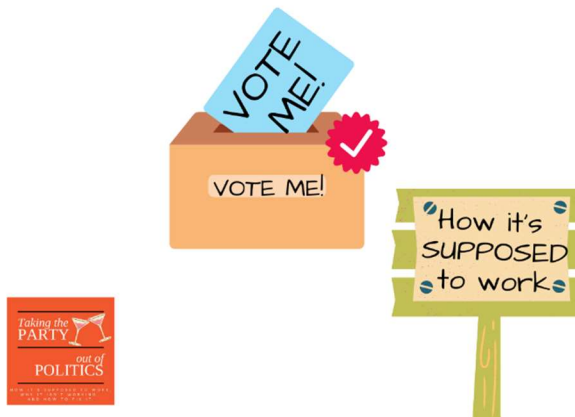
Getting Elected

... you campaign ...



Getting Elected

... you get elected ...



Getting Elected

... and you arrive in Westminster.





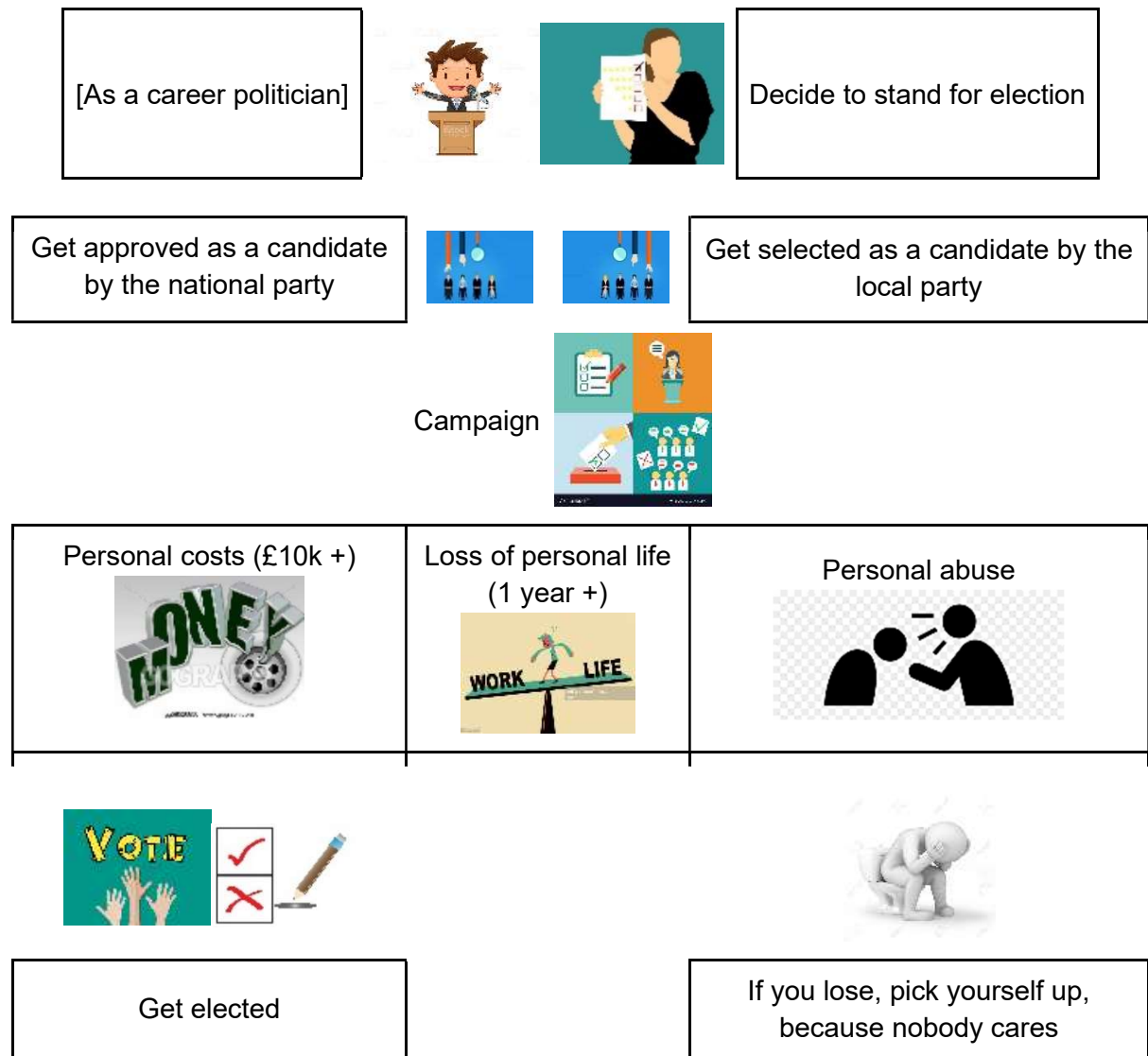
Sadly, life isn't like that.

Today, we're not going to look into what happens AFTER an MP arrives in Westminster.  
We will look at that in our next Episode: *Being an MP*.

Today, let's just look at what is involved in *Becoming an MP*.

How does it actually work?

## Being an MP: 2. How it actually works



## Getting Started - political parties, personal cost and effort

Let's start with the cost of getting elected in the first place.

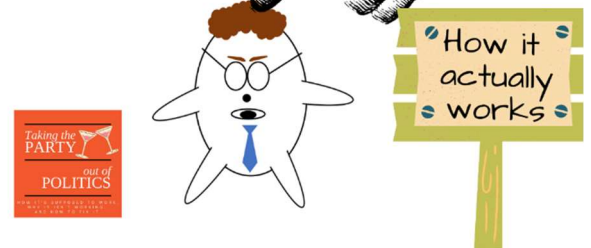
The cost of getting elected is just huge.  
There are different aspects to this.

### 1. There are the costs of getting selected as a candidate.

For most of the national parties (and you need a party machinery to get elected, these days), you need to be approved by the national party, and then also to get selected by a constituency party. The process of

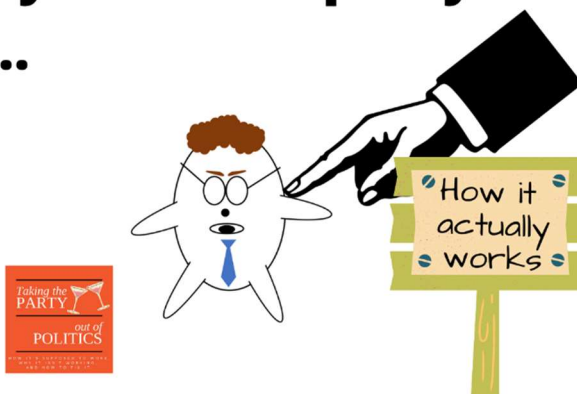
## Getting Elected

### ... you get selected by the national party ...



## Getting Elected

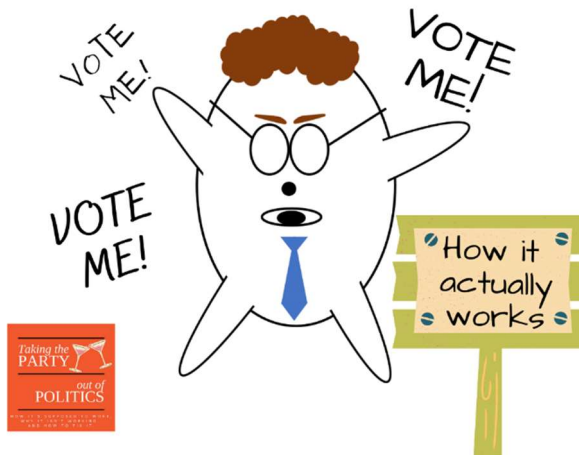
### ... you get selected by the local party ...



getting approved by the national party means that candidates really need to be political 'insiders' (such as parliamentary research assistants, or special advisors to ministers) in order to be able to stand out for the national party. Once they have got onto the list from which a local constituency party might think about selecting them, candidates then have to visit constituencies all over the country to find one where there is a suitable vacancy, and where the local party likes the look of them. And if they are selected for a constituency which is not near to where they already live, then they might have to move home - which costs thousands of pounds in stamp duty, legal fees, not to mention the change in life for you and for your family.

## Getting Elected

### ... you campaign ...



## 2. There is the deposit - the actual cost of standing for an election.

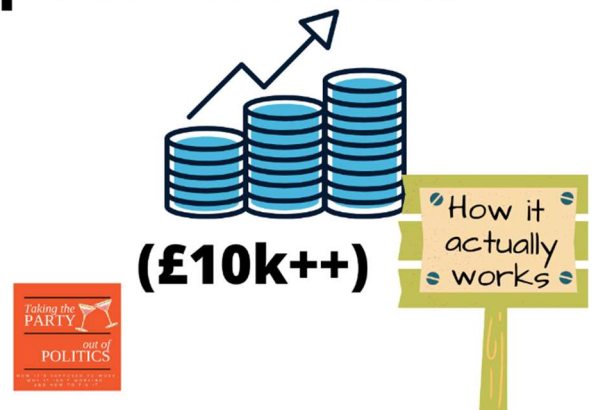
To stand for parliament in the UK, a politician has to demonstrate that they are serious, by putting up a 'deposit'. If you don't get a minimum percentage of the vote, you 'lose your deposit'. But, to be fair, that's just £500. The real costs of standing for election are elsewhere.

## 3. Then there are the costs of campaigning.

The costs of producing election leaflets and posters are met by the local party, and are carefully managed and restricted during the election period. Long before the official campaigning period, however, the cost of being a candidate can start to build up, a year or more ahead of an election. These costs include things like attending all the events where you 'need to be seen'; perhaps contributing to every good cause (at every event, even if you contributed to that same good cause at another event you attended earlier in the same day!); definitely taking time off work in order to attend all the events; and many other things – including putting most of your personal (and perhaps professional) life on hold for months. The financial costs are measured in tens of thousands of pounds. Sometimes even hundreds of thousands.

## Getting Elected

### ... you incur personal costs ...



For example, in her book 'Everything you really need to know about politics' MP Jess Phillips estimates that it cost her family around £40k for her to get elected to Parliament.<sup>1</sup>

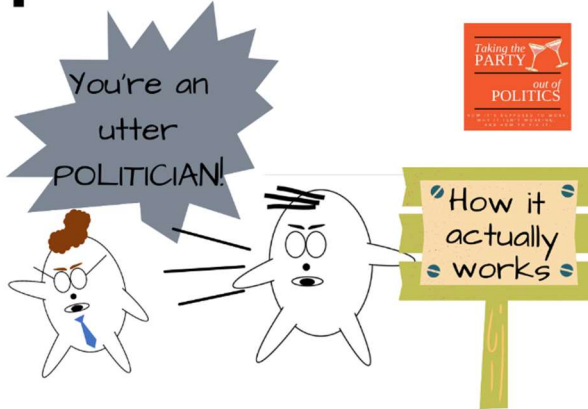
For much of the population, this sort of money is not something they can choose to risk.

<sup>1</sup> Everything you really need to know about politics (Jess Phillips, 2021, p19)

4. And on top of all this are **the costs to your personal life.**

Getting Elected

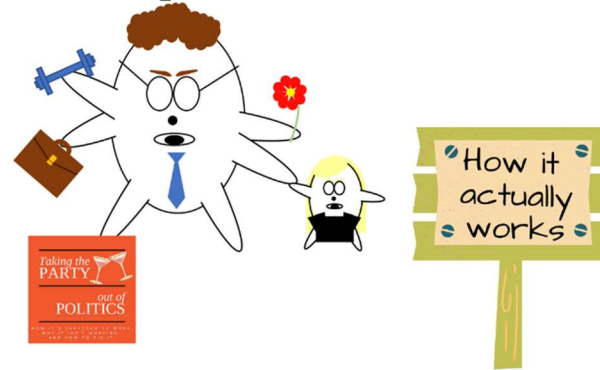
**... you suffer personal abuse ...**



Every weekend. Most evenings. For weeks. Perhaps months. Perhaps even years. The stress on your personal relationships and perhaps your home life. Many politicians end up divorced, or separated, or just are incredibly lucky to have incredibly understanding partners. Because it's just not normal!

Getting Elected

**... you lose most of your personal life ...**



Getting Elected

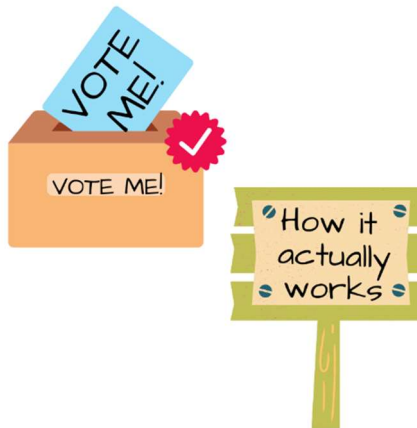
**... you MIGHT get elected ...**

5. **Finally, there is the risk of it all not happening, anyway.**

After all that, when it comes to the election you can miss out ... perhaps just because your local voters don't like the national leader of your party anymore.

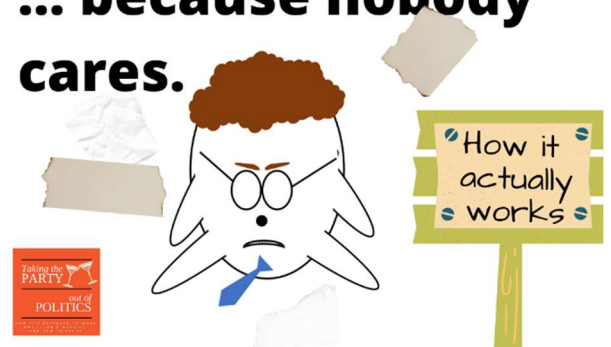
This means that the people who get elected are

1. people who can afford the risk of losing, or
2. people who really, REALLY want to get elected.



Getting Elected

**... but, if you lose, pick yourself up ...  
... because nobody cares.**



It's not something which you or I could just decide to do, as a stage in our career.

Ideally, we want politicians who have a bit of life experience (so that they bring a bit of understanding of how the world works, what's good for people and what isn't good for people).

Ideally, we want representatives who are a bit like us, so that they see the world pretty much in the same way as we do, so that they understand things that are important to us, and so that they are going to be able to work towards getting things which we want and need.

After all, they are literally there to be our representatives. And part of being our representative is being representative of us.

But what we get are people who have focused all their lives on getting to this point  
– always involved in politics, always thinking about politics.

What we get are people who are prepared to take the risks involved. The risks for them, personally. But then what we get is politicians who are risk takers, and (this is from MP Jess Phillips again) “we start to see politicians taking risks not just with their own personal or political lives, but with the lives of those across the country”.<sup>2</sup>

And, finally, what we also get is people who are there because their political parties want them to be there.

Restricting our choice to people who can afford it, to people who are able to (or who are prepared to) take the risk, and to people who are solely focused on politics, is not really giving us a choice between candidates who are really representative of the general population.

So, that ‘ideal world’ scenario ...

*“I would like to make the world a better place, and to help other people.”*

Well, that ‘ideal world’ might sound nice ... but it just doesn't work like that.

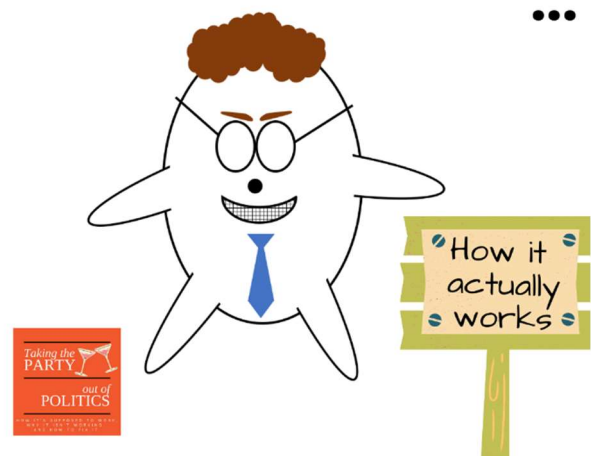
Our MPs might well start off with all those wonderful best intentions – and, in fact, our MPs might genuinely get out of bed every day, still wanting to do the very best for their country and for the world – but the system just doesn't encourage that. In fact, the system, even if only at this very first stage of trying to get elected, actively DISCOURAGES people from just wanting to do a good job. To get elected, you have to be not just a certain type of tough-skinned person, and a person who is prepared to take the financial and other risks and costs of standing for election, but you also have to have the backing of a political party.

That means that – even before they arrive in Westminster – what we get are MPs who are political party animals.

Getting Elected

## As a career politician

...



<sup>2</sup> Everything you really need to know about politics (Jess Phillips 2021, p17)

A political party exists – theoretically – to do good things for a country. But, in practice, the first priority of a political party is somewhere between ensuring its own survival and its attempts to get into power – into government. A political party is not going to put its energies behind someone who is not going to work for that political party later on. And that means being someone who is (at least most of the time) going to do what their political party tells them to do. And that means not necessarily doing what the MP actually believes in.

Seen from the best possible perspective, that is going to involve the new MP in compromising, in working with others, to get at least some things done, some things which are at least – we would hope – in the interests of the majority of the people in the country.

Seen from a less than ideal perspective – perhaps from a more realistic perspective, some might say – it is actually often going to involve the MP in doing what is in the best interests of their political party – and not actually what is in the best interests of their constituents.

It often involves doing what the Party Whips tell them to do.

It often involves being loyal to their party hierarchy, just in case this gives them an opportunity to become a Minister, later on.

Far too often, for example, it involves never admitting that someone from another party might have had a good idea.

Well, that is the sort of stuff which we are going to look at in more detail in our next Episode: Being an MP.

For today, the key message here is that *Becoming an MP* is hard.

It is costly – both in terms of money and in terms of time – and also in terms of the personal sacrifices which the candidate and the candidate's family have to make ... and sometimes in terms of the abuse and hassle which a candidate has to face.

And, to have any chance of success, in the vast majority of cases, it means having the backing of a political party (there are – occasionally – candidates who are elected as Independents, but not very often).

Because of the costs involved, and because it depends on a political party, what we get are MPs who are of a very restricted range of personality types, and who are all political *party* animals.

Politics is important, because it is what affects all of our lives. Politics is about how we organise public spending, how we organise the public services we need, and how we organise society.

Political *parties* are first and foremost, about their own survival, and about their own attempts to get into power, to get into government. Not the same thing. Not at all.

\* \* \*

*Becoming an MP* is hard.

And, next time, we will look more into the challenges involved in *Being an MP*.

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](http://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 at [info@talktogether.info](mailto: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.