
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 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*.

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 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.

So, today we're going to have a look at what it is like if you *do* manage to get elected.

The short answer is: confusing, poorly organised, and not very efficient.

The Westminster structure (and particularly culture) isn't working.

It isn't helping our representatives to do a good job on our behalf. In fact, a lot of the time, it
is actively making it difficult for them to do a good job. And, when they are able to do a good
job, it is more often *despite* the system, not *because of* the system.

Let's look at why that is the case – and perhaps that will help us to start to think of ways in
which we could tweak the systems we currently have, to make them work a bit better.

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Let's start with what it is like when a newly elected MP first turns up at Westminster.

When *you* start a new job, your new employer will (almost certainly) spend some time making sure that you understand what is expected of you, and making sure that you understand how to do your work. Or, at least, any new employer who actually wants you to be able to do the job *well* will do that.

As a newly elected MP, far too much of this is left up to the individual. And there is an awful lot of it.

On the practical side, most MPs will be representing constituencies which are not in London, and so they will need to sort out somewhere to live, and perhaps to work out how the changes are going to affect their whole family. They also need to set up offices and to hire staff for their new London base, because even if they had a team and a base back in their constituency, an awful lot of their time is now going to be spent in London.

And then they need to find their way around the Palace of Westminster (what we call the Houses of Parliament). Like many old buildings, it is a bit of a maze, to say the least. Some people say that it takes up to 7 years to truly find your way around!

Their membership of the House of Commons is one thing. But MPs are also a member of their political party's Parliamentary Party. This means they also have to deal with all the other people and systems within their Parliamentary Party.

The biggest challenge here might be the Party Whips. These are the people who organise the Parliamentary Party, and who enforce party discipline. The most well-known example is that the Whips ensure that (on issues in the House of Commons) Party members vote in the way which has been approved by the Party. However, the Party Whips also allocate office space, tell MPs where they need to be and when, and allocate positions on committees (more about committees later!).

Within all of these practical issues (where to live, how to find your way around, being told what to think), MPs also need to work out what they actually have to do, for themselves and for their constituents. In other words, it is only after sorting out some fairly major practical things, that MPs can even *start* to think about doing the representation bit of their job – the bit which they are really there to do, on our behalf.

The **Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation** says that an MP is both

- a *legislator*
(debating, making and reviewing laws and government policy within Parliament)
- and
- an *advocate*
(representing the interests and concerns of their constituents and constituency).

As well as this, some MPs will become Ministers within the government (more about Ministers later); some will become members of committees; and some will have formal roles within their Parliamentary Party.

The thing is, there is no official explanation of how an MP will do all of this.
There is no guide to how much time they should spend on this activity or on that activity.
There isn't even anything about what happens if they aren't doing well enough.

Again, if you start a new job, you would expect to be told what good performance looks like.
In fact, you would probably have a pretty good idea, even before you start a new job.
What is expected of you.
What time you should be at work.
How much, or how fast, or how many is expected of you.

The problem is that an MP can be very busy, all of the time, but might not actually be achieving anything very much.

At any moment, an MP might be¹

- taking part in a debate in the House of Commons,
- meeting constituents, campaigners, journalists, or ministers,
- attending different functions, such as campaign launches,
- sitting on a select committee or bill committee,
- tabling parliamentary questions,
- writing articles for local or national newspapers, or
- trying to gather support within their own Parliamentary Party to influence party policy.

Without guidance (and perhaps even with guidance), how would you know which was the most productive thing to be doing?

If you had wanted to be an MP in order to make a difference, how would you know if you were doing the right things, to actually make a difference?

Few MPs think that Parliament functions particularly well.

¹ Why we get the wrong politicians, p42

So, with all of the practical challenges to getting organised and to doing anything, let's take a quick look at how MPs can (try to) make a difference.

How does an MP get anything done?

In fact, when it comes down to it, **the way to make a difference often ends up being all about becoming a minister** – or a member of a committee, or to have some special other job – rather than being the representative of the people who voted for you. And, to become a Minister, you have to make sure that your Party understands that you are a really committed Party member. And that means – doing what you are told. Voting the way you are told to vote. Saying what you are told to say. Otherwise, why would your Political Party want to give you a more important job.

But that means NOT saying what you think or believe.
It means saying what you are TOLD to think or believe.

Apart from directly representing their constituents on particular issues, the most important reason that we elect our MPs is for them to make good laws, or to improve the existing ones.

There are two ways in which this can happen.

First: there is participating in debates in the debating chamber of the House of Commons. This is probably the image we all have when we think of MPs at Westminster, sitting on the green leather benches, shouting at each other and waving bits of paper around.

Second: there is taking part in the preparatory and background work on laws, in smaller groups called committees.

These committees are smaller groups of MPs, with the numbers of each party on each committee approximately proportional to the number of MPs each party has in total. For example, if Party A has 400 MPs and Party B has 200 MPs, then there might be 4 MPs from Party A and 2 MPs from Party B on each committee.

We'll look more closely at how these committees fit into the Parliamentary processes in a future episode, but let's just make a couple of observations now, from the perspective of the MP.

A. Time on a committee can seem pretty pointless.

If you are from Party B, and you only have 2 members on a committee, you are almost always sure that the 4 members from Party A are going to out vote you. At first glance, this might seem to be right: Party A got more MPs (even allowing for all the problems we looked at earlier with the ways in which our electoral system doesn't work properly), and so Party A should be able to control what happens. The problem is that this all becomes a sort of bullying, ego competition. New laws are (mostly) put forward by Government Ministers – in this example, ministers from Party A. Even if a new law has a problem, the committee members from Party A are not instinctively going to want to criticise their own Minister. And, in fact, they may be actively pressured by the Minister (and by the Party Whips, who manage and organise what all the MPs from their party are supposed to be doing and saying, as much of the time as they can), they may be actively pressurised to treat all criticisms from Party B as being merely politically motivated, when in fact at least some of the criticisms might be about the ways in which the laws have been (poorly) designed, even if Party B doesn't agree with what the law is trying to achieve.

So, whether you are from Party A (pressured to follow the Minister's wishes) or from Party B (out voted at every turn), your time on the committee seems pretty pointless.

B. There isn't enough time anyway.

Government Ministers (and we'll talk a lot more about Ministers in later episodes) are normally in a hurry to make their mark. A little bit like a dog in a new garden, which has a wee in each corner, marking their territory. The average tenure for a Government Minister is only 18 months. From the perspective of the individual minister, you can sort of understand why a Minister might be in a hurry to make their mark. Their whole political career might have been building up to this opportunity, and they might only have a few months!

As a result, though, legislation is often prepared in a rush, and then rushed through the committees. The committees are supposed to be the place where a small group of MPs has a really careful look at the new laws, and tries to pick up on any problems, either with the objectives of the new law, or with the ways in which the new law is trying to achieve those objectives.

But Ministers want to get on with things, and get their new laws into place (into statute). Now. The amount of detail which an MP on a committee is expected to process and understand is almost impossible. All of which means that new laws are not properly scrutinised, and we often get bad laws, or laws which are not effectively achieving what they intended to achieve. We will talk more about this in the later episodes, on the **Blunders of our Governments**.

And it's still worse once it gets to the main debating chamber, where all the MPs are voting on all the laws, even if they weren't involved in the smaller, focused committee, looking at each law in detail.

Even given this, it can be surprising how little time MPs actually spend on scrutinising new laws. The largest share of an MP's time is spent on constituency business, such as meeting constituents or attending constituency events. MPs might spend as little as 21%² of their time in the debating chamber of the House of Commons.

But is even this small proportion of their time actually being spent productively?

'Scrutiny in Parliament is terrible,' says former Liberal Democrat pensions minister Steve Webb. 'You definitely get bad legislation coming out.'

On standing down in 2015, Frank Dobson told an interviewer: 'Over the years I've developed a lower and lower appreciation of the place in terms of effectiveness. Our record on passing laws that achieved what it was claimed they would achieve when a minister introduced them [is] absolutely pathetic, quite frankly ... Even if you don't agree with the laws, at least the bloody things ought to work, and so frequently they don't.'³

* * *

So, let's take a step back, for a moment.

In the last episode, we looked at how we might think the process works for someone **Becoming an MP**, and we looked at what the process is actually like. If you remember, it isn't just about deciding to stand for election because you are a good person who wants to make a difference. It is about being part of the political party machinery – probably with a career in and around politics – so that you can get that political party machinery to campaign for you, and to work to get you elected.

What about **Being an MP**? Does that work the way we would expect it to?

Well, as you might have guessed by what we have discussed so far ... not really!

² Why we get the wrong politicians, p40

³ Why we get the wrong politicians p84

Being an MP

You arrive in Westminster.



How it's SUPPOSED to work



Being an MP

Being an MP

Being an MP



You represent your constituents

How it's SUPPOSED to work

You scrutinise legislation (make better laws)

How it's SUPPOSED to work

You keep a check on the government

How it's SUPPOSED to work

Being an MP

Being an MP



THANK YOU!

THANKYOU



You do a good job & you are appreciated

How it's SUPPOSED to work



You stand down & do a different job



How it's SUPPOSED to work

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

Get elected



Arrive in Westminster



Make things better

Represent your constituents



Scrutinize legislation
[make better laws]



Check on the Government
[Select Committees, House of Commons]



Do a good job

Get a pat on the back

Stand Down?

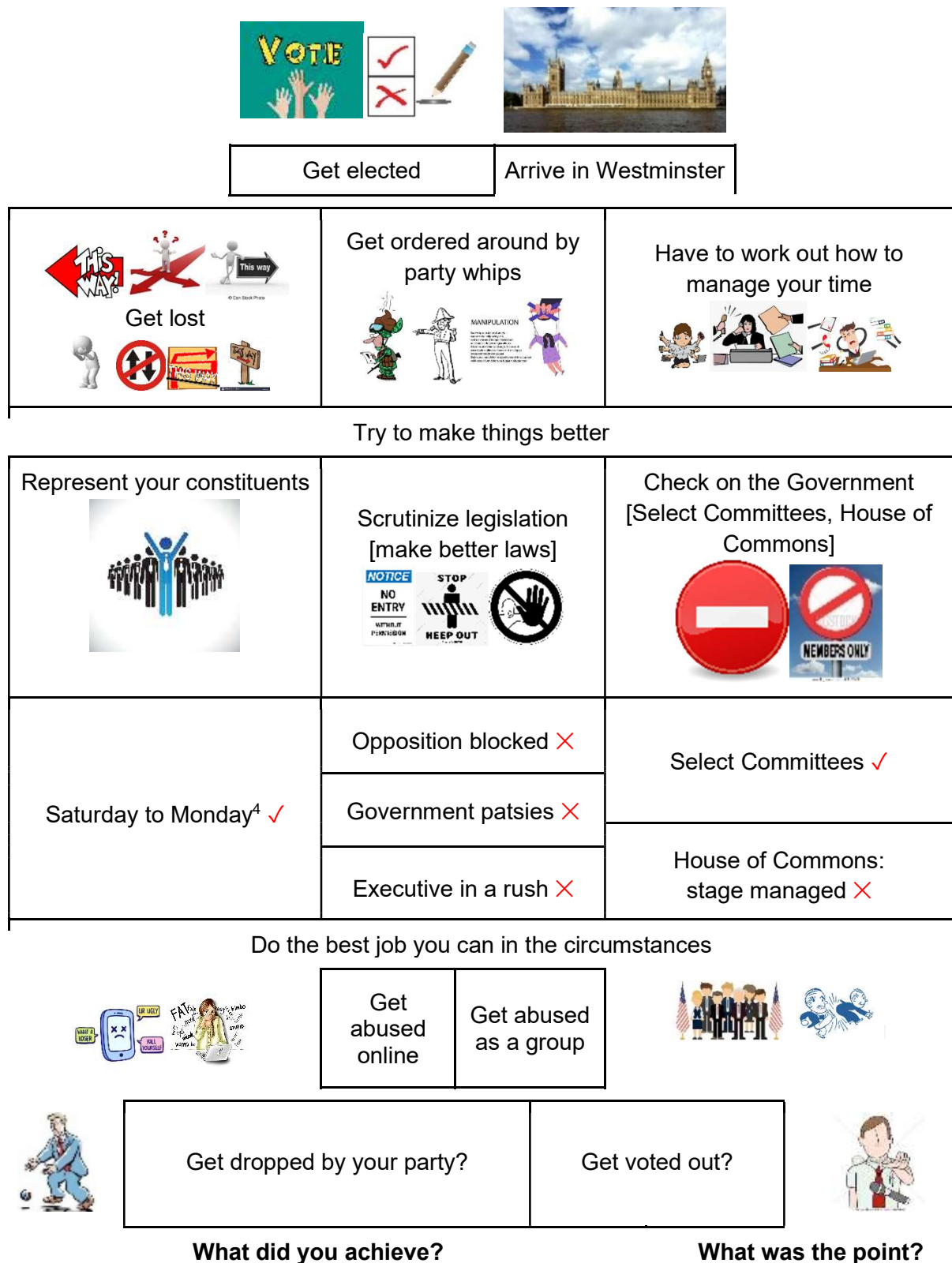
Do a different job

Stand Again?

Return to *Campaign*

Sadly, life isn't like that.

Being an MP: 2. How it actually works



⁴ Some MPs are also in their constituencies on Fridays, but they only manage to do this by skipping some of the Parliamentary Friday sessions. This might seem to be a good trade off, because many of the Friday sessions are concerned with what is called "Private Members' Bills", rather than government business, but it is still a trade off

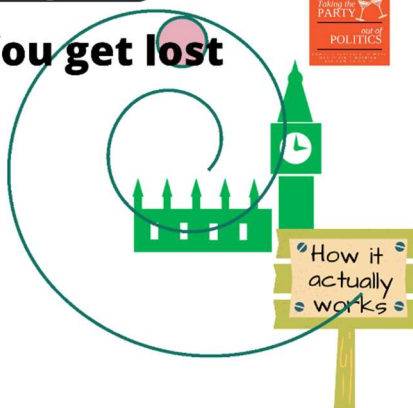
Being an MP

You arrive in Westminster.



Being an MP

You get lost



Being an MP

You get ordered around by party whips



Being an MP

You have to work out how to manage your time



Being an MP

You represent your constituents



Being an MP

You try to scrutinize legislation ...



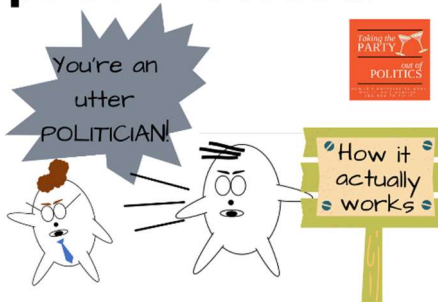
Being an MP

You try to check up on the Government ...



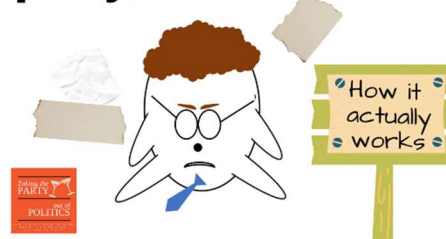
Being an MP

... you suffer personal abuse ...



Being an MP

... and you get dropped by your party, or voted out



So: What is the lesson which this *dysfunctional* system drills into MPs?

The lesson is that: pretty much the only way in which an MP is really going to be able to make their mark is to be in the Executive (having power, being part of the Government). Just **Being an MP** isn't enough, because you just get told what to do (how to vote), or your vote doesn't make any difference.

In fact, the system presents MPs with three rational courses of action. MPs may not even be aware how the system pressures them into choosing one of these (or a combination of them), but it is happening anyway.

1. Climb the greasy pole
(become a Minister, and have your chance to make your own mark)

or

2. Get out
(give up)

or

3. Coast
(keep a low profile, don't bother about it all too much, and see if you can get re-elected without too much fuss next time)

None of these is really good enough.

In fact, none of these is good enough **at all!**

So, if the system is pressuring MPs into following one (or a combination) of three unsatisfactory courses of action, we should look at how we should adjust the system, or at least adjust the ways in which we use the system.

* * *

Becoming an MP is hard.

Being an MP is hard, too!

The systems seem to start off making it hard for an MP to do very much – and they are certainly not helpful. The systems then seem to encourage MPs to go down one of three, different routes – none of which is really what we would want them to be doing. At least, not as their primary course of action. No problem in becoming a Minister in due course. But if you have to compromise what you are doing and saying, all the time, just to curry favour with your Political Party, so that you get your chance to be a Minister at some point in the future, then you're not really thinking and working on behalf of your constituents – you're just doing what you are told by Ministers and by Party Whips. In other words, you are just allowing our Democratic, people's power to actually be concentrated in the hands of just a few Ministers and Party Whips. And that's not the point. Not at all.

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.

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Next time, we're going to look at **Parliament: How it's supposed to work and how it actually works**

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.