
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.

Today we're going to have a look at **Ministers & Safe Seats** – specifically, what sort of
power Ministers of State actually have, what sort of differences they can make to our laws
and to how those laws are applied ... and also just whether very many of them are elected in
anything approaching a process of real democratic representation.

So far, the whole process isn't working properly for MPs. In Season 1, we looked at how
hard it is for voters to make the electoral system to 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, for example.

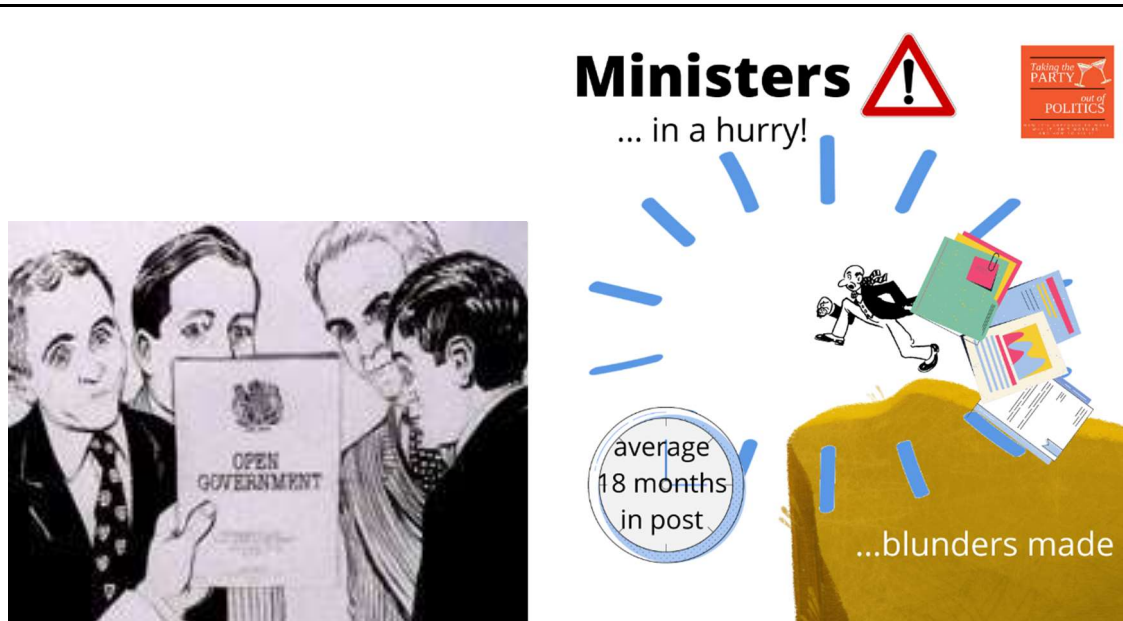
It's difficult to get elected, and then once you are elected it is difficult to achieve much, you're
overworked, and you're expected to just go with the flow.

(2m39) When we look at ministers, the situation looks even more unbalanced. And this is really important, because ministers actually have a lot of power, and what they decide can really affect what happens.

First of all, what do we mean when we use the word 'Minister'?

Well, you've probably heard of the term 'Secretary of State', such as the Secretary of State for Defence, or the Secretary of State for Education. Well, the Secretary of State for Education is the Minister for Education.

Whilst the Prime Minister is responsible for the Government as a whole, the rest of the people who are appointed to the Cabinet – the rest of the Government – all take on specialist bits of the work of the Government. Each Minister is responsible for a different part of the jigsaw of all the things which Government does.



We have already mentioned – in the last episode – that Ministers are very often in a hurry. They are in a hurry, because the average tenure for a Minister (the average amount of time that they spend in office) is only about 18 months. As a newly appointed Minister, the next 18 months (or possibly less!) might be the one opportunity to make a real difference, to actually *do* something, in a whole political career. From a human perspective, it makes complete sense that a Minister would want to make the most of (what might be) their only opportunity.

The result, however, is that Ministers are very often in a hurry to ensure that they make that impact. And, as they say, marry in haste, repent at leisure. Things which are rushed, are rarely as well thought through as things which we have considered fully.

In the last episode, we touched on part of this.

The Ministers' rush might mean that they will be very keen to push their new ideas through Parliament, to push them through the Committee stages (the very stages which are supposed to be casting a constructively critical eye over the plans, to check that they are likely to work.

There's also another whole area here.

The rush to get things into place not only risks not allowing MPs to offer some constructive criticism. It also means that not everyone is fully consulted. Well, obviously you can't consult absolutely everyone. But you can certainly consult people and organisations who are typical of the people and organisations who are going to be affected by a new law.

But very – very – often, there isn't sufficient consultation. And this can lead to some serious blunders – where new laws are put into place, but they are laws which haven't been properly thought through.

Even if they are laws which are supposed to be achieving things which we would all want (and that isn't always the case), far too often they turn out to be laws which either don't achieve what they are supposed to, or possibly even make things worse.

We'll come back to the *Blunders of our Governments* in a later episode.

I will just say that we use the word *Blunders* to mean something which doesn't just happen to be a mistake in retrospect. A *Blunder* is something which most people (at least, most people other than the Minister and their immediate team), something which most people could have told you *in advance* wasn't a good idea – and very often these are the people who should have been listened to, who should have been consulted before the law was brought into practice.

(6m) For now, let's just remember that rushing stuff isn't a good idea when you are building a house.

It isn't a good idea when you are doing your homework.

And it isn't a good idea when you are bringing in new laws – particularly if those new laws are going to change the way in which (part of) the country works, or how some people end up interacting with other people.

Anyway.

As I said, we'll come back to the *Blunders of our Governments* in a later episode.

For now, let's get back to why the process by which Ministers end up as Ministers isn't really a good example of democratic representation.

And that's within a field where we have already said that the system doesn't work, and that only a very special sort of person can afford to stand for election, and only a very special sub-group of those very special sort of people is going to want to stand for election, with all the sacrifices which they will have to make, and with all the abuse and hassle which they will get.

Even within that field, Ministers aren't really good examples of democratic representation.

(7m02) Only some MPs become Ministers

First of all, let's think about what we have already said about the way in which Being an MP is hard.

That was a couple of episodes ago, but one of the things we observed was that the system ends up encouraging our MPs either

- to give up,
- to keep their head down and to coast, or
- to be such a good 'party animal', to be so loyal to their party that their party decides to give them some more responsibility.

Now, as we said then, none of these is good enough. None of these is really giving us the MPs who are getting stuck in, representing us, representing our needs and our preferences. What it is giving us is either people who aren't getting stuck in, or people who are only getting stuck in *in the direction* which their party wants them to get stuck in.

Now, what is the result going to be of all of this?



Well, just in terms of what sort of MPs actually get to be Ministers – it's not going to be the independent minded ones. It's not going to be the ones who stick up for their constituency, no matter what. It's going to be the ones who stick up for their party, no matter what.

Hmm. Well, that doesn't sound good, does it? No. It certainly doesn't.

But then, is that really important?

I mean, the Ministers are just there to advise the Prime Minister, aren't they?

Do the Ministers really have much power?

Well, let's look at that idea.

(8m24) Ministers can wield a lot of power, in a small area

We might think that the Prime Minister is the centre of power, but the Prime Minister actually spends quite a lot of time managing different interest groups within the party, and perhaps dealing with high level, often international, meetings.

Ministers, meanwhile, can focus on their departments, and what they get up to can seriously affect our day-to-day lives.



So, whilst we might think that the Prime Minister has all the power – after all it is the Prime Minister who goes to all the big international conferences, and the Prime Minister who gets to act all ... well ... all *Prime Ministerial*.

But the details of the new laws which are brought in? The general ideas of new laws in a particular Ministry (Education, Defence, Digital Culture Media and Sport, etc.) might be discussed in Cabinet, with the PM and all the other Ministers – briefly, because they are just part of all of the business of the overall government – but the details of all the new laws are handled by each Department, by each Government Ministry. And that falls under the control of the Minister.

And, again: what the Ministers get up to can seriously affect our day-to-day lives.



Safe Seats

Most (not all, but most) ministers represent what are known as **Safe Seats**.

This is not a partisan statement: it applies to (most) ministers of all parties.

In a safe seat, almost anyone would be elected, as long as they were wearing the appropriate coloured rosette.



In fact, though we hear a lot about political parties, membership of political parties is actually a bit of a niche activity. If you want all of the numbers, then please have a look at the transcript for this episode, on our website www.talktogether.info. For now, I'll just give you the headline figure (not the details for the membership of each political party separately). The total membership of Political Parties in the UK is about $\frac{3}{4}$ million people.

As of July 2019, Labour had 485,000 members, compared to the Conservatives, who had 180,000 members. The SNP had around 125,500 members (December 2018), the Liberal Democrats 115,000 (August 2019), Green Party 48,500 (July 2019), UKIP 29,000 (April 2019) and Plaid Cymru 10,000 (October 2018). Party membership has risen notably since 2013, both in total and as a percentage of the electorate.

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05125/>

Total about $\frac{3}{4}$ million.

RSPB: The wildlife charity is delighted to announce that its membership total is now 1,076,112, the highest it has ever been. (2010).

Just to put that into some sort of context, the membership of the RSPB is just over 1 million people.

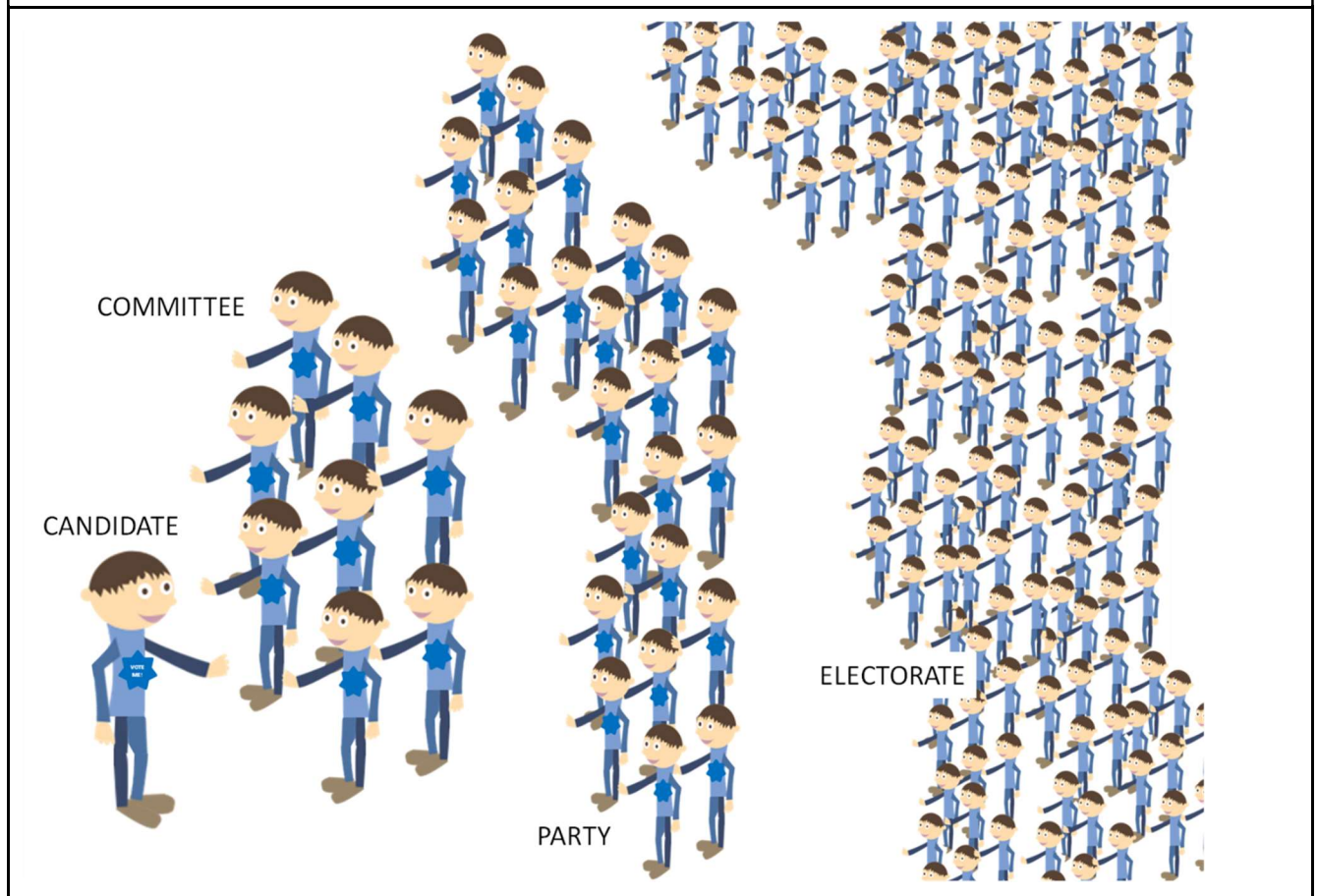
Now, birds are important. But so is deciding on national policy. Isn't it quite *telling* that more people are members of the RSPB, than of ALL national political parties COMBINED?

So, there aren't actually that many people who are members of political parties.

But the people who select the candidate for a safe seat are the local party members.

In fact, it's very often quite a small subset of local party members (the ones who regularly attend local party meetings, for example, or the ones who were able to attend on the day when the candidate was selected).

All of which means that it is, depending on which party gets to form the government, and given that we are only talking about the key 26 people who get to be Ministers, well it's only about 1,000 people across the whole country who get to select the people who will be the most influential over our lives: the Ministers.

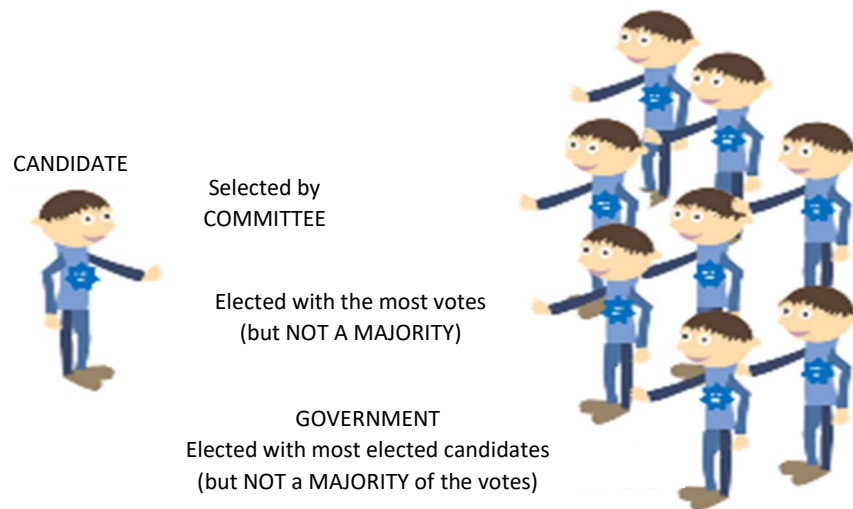


Now, if you add that to the fact that

- each elected representative has more of the votes in their constituency than any other candidate did (but not necessarily a majority), and
- the party which gets to form the government has a majority of elected representatives (but not necessarily a majority of the votes cast), and now
- our ministers, who will have a huge impact over our day to day lives, are actually selected by just something like 1,000 party members in their local constituencies,

... well ...

... it looks as though our representative democracy isn't very representative of us at all !



So, that's as bad as it can get. Right?

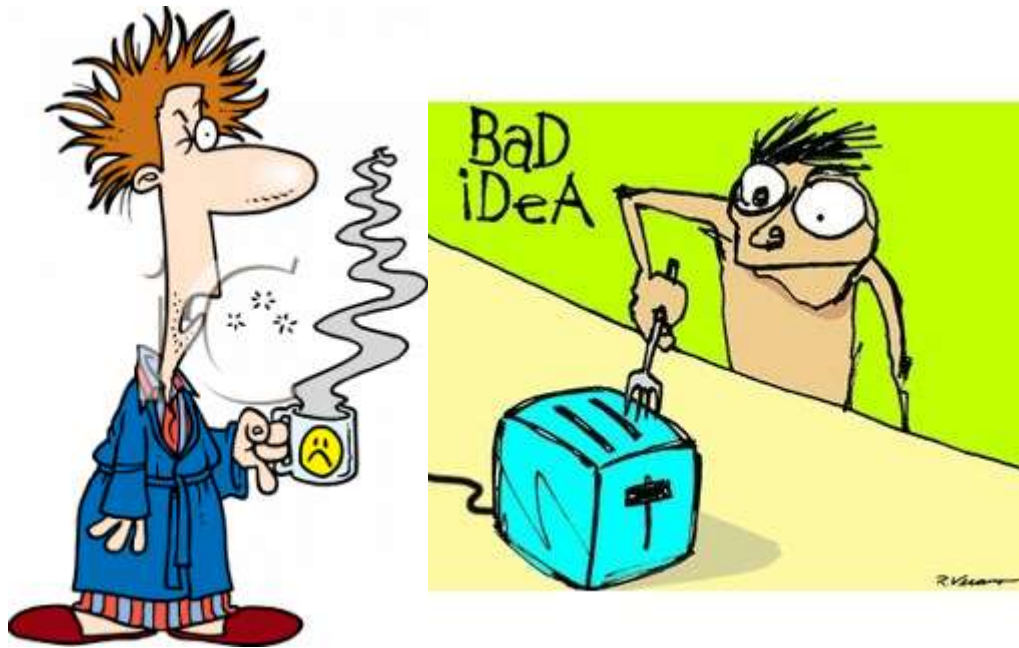
I'm afraid not.

Just wait until we have a look at what actually happens when ministers and governments get to work.

Next, though we should look at the other side of the coin we have just been examining.

We have just looked at the **process** of selecting the MPs who become our Ministers.

Let's take a look at the **pool** from which MPs (and, of course, Ministers) are selected.



The Political Class

Now, this is a point we have already touched on, but really only in passing, when we talked about the challenges of becoming an MP.

Let's look a little further under the bonnet of the idea of our MPs actually all coming from what we could even call a 'Political Class'.

Strangely, a system which is supposed to elect representatives of the people, ends up selecting from a pretty limited pool.

Now don't misunderstand. Many MPs – and other political representatives – go into politics for the right reasons. And they do many good things.

Scrutinizing the operations of the civil service (and pretty much everything else) is excellent. And they are often good local MPs, listening to their constituents and doing what they can to help. All that sort of stuff is great.

It's the other stuff which is a matter for concern. The big stuff. Major policy stuff.



It's not just the fact that ministers [the people who actually make most of the decisions which affect us] are selected in safe seats.

The fact is that most of our politicians are selected from a pretty limited choice (to which we then add the fact that Ministers are a specially selected, even more restricted choice, within that starting point of our MPs being selected from a pretty limited choice of the overall population).

Let's unpick that a little bit more.

We don't need to go through all of the challenges facing someone trying to get elected for the first time as an MP (if you want more about that, please listen to the episode *Becoming an MP*). But for now, let's just say that the nature of a political career – examined minutely by an aggressive media, requiring a certain type of person to put up with the ridicule and endless, often thankless, demands for the impossible, being prepared (and able) to take the risks and to face the challenges of standing for election – means that only certain types of people are prepared to do it.



It is actually pretty great that there are ANY people who are prepared to put up with all of the difficulties and challenges. And who are prepared to take the financial and personal risk involved (as we discussed earlier).

Most of us wouldn't be.

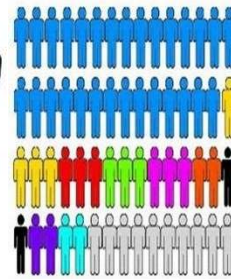
But it is a shame that our choice of representatives ends up being between ONLY the sort of people who are prepared to make that sort of huge sacrifice.



To represent people, you have to live a life among them.

To understand the pressures, challenges, opportunities and hopes which people have every day.

Westminster – or even the local Town Hall or County Council – is not everyone's world. If that's your main experience, how can you hope to represent everyone else properly?



Perhaps it would be better if we were able to have people who were prepared to put in 5 or 10 years of their lives, perhaps standing for one or two terms only, and then standing down. People who would bring with them expertise in a range of different working fields. People who were doing it a bit like VSO ([Volunteer Service Overseas](#)), because it is the right thing to do.

Not just people who had no career other than politics.

There are too many people who have not had a full life themselves, living only in the nether regions of electoral politics, party machinery and the so-called 'Westminster village'.



Now, if your instinct is to disagree with me, then you might be just putting all of this down to my mad ravings.

But I'm afraid you would be wrong to do so.

If all the things I have told you already about how the system (doesn't) work in practice, well, let me offer a bit of political theory to back it up with:

Mosca: The Ruling Elite

The idea of a 'Ruling Elite' (a Political Class) originally comes from political scientists such as Gaetano Mosca¹, and was further developed by Vilfredo Pareto². The idea is that the members of a small minority, from common backgrounds, hold most of the positions of power in a society. These are not just political positions, but also include positions on corporate boards, or people who have influence over policy through their financial support of things like think tanks. The ruling elite have common interests, and by keeping power concentrated in their hands, they maintain the powerlessness of non-elites.

It's a sort of ultimate 'them', in the sense of 'us' and 'them'.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elite_theory

² <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095747419>

Now that is absolutely NOT to say that all our MPs are part of some secret society which is covertly running the world from behind the scenes. But it is true that our MPs all have somethings in common with each other; things which most everyone else doesn't have. Things like the willingness to put up with the hassle of standing for election, and the media scrutiny. To put in the groundwork with political parties – perhaps over many years – to get selected as a party candidate. To be able to take the personal risk involved.

They may not be secretly running the world, in cahoots with CEOs of multi-national companies (well, not all of them, anyway!), but they are all a distinct type of person, who is prepared to put up with all that. They are all members of a 'political class'.

Let's just note quickly, the pressures of living a life under public – or rather, under Media – scrutiny. We'll come back to talking more about the Media in a later episode, but let's just make a quick note here:

The additional pressure of Media Expectations means that it seems that it is only an entirely consistent life which makes it possible for someone to pass Scrutiny by Tabloid.

Do we actually want our representatives to be people who always say the same thing about every issue - rather than realising that sometimes, situations change, and we might be right to change our point of view in the light of new perspectives?



Is that what we actually want – a system where only the most thick-skinned, where only the most dogged, unchanging and persistent stand up to represent us?

No.

We need people with real experience of the world, and of how things really work.

Otherwise, we end up with a government which doesn't really know how to function.

And we'll get to the heart of that in about 4 episodes' time – when we talk about the [Blunders of our Governments](#).



* * *

For now, what have we learned about Ministers?

Our MPs are a special bunch of people. They have to be, to put up with everything which goes with standing to become an MP, and then being an MP. On the whole (even if they don't think that they do), most of our MPs come from what we can think of as a *Political Class*: a sort of special social class of people who are able to do the job; who are able to take the risks associated with trying to do the job; and who are prepared to put up with the challenges and abuse which goes with doing the job.

On top of that, only some MPs really toe the Party line sufficiently well that their Political Party is prepared to select them for some additional responsibility.

Only some MPs become Ministers.

It turns out, that those Ministers – trusted members of their political party – very often (not always, but very often) represent Safe Seats.

A Safe Seat is one where anyone wearing the right colour rosette, representing what is the 'right' political party for that constituency, anyone wearing the right colour rosette would get elected.

It may be that they have become trusted members of the party because they have been around so long, because they happen to be in a Safe Seat.

Or it may be that they have been 'parachuted' into that Safe Seat, because they are already a trusted member of the Political Party (for example, as we saw with Boris Johnson, after his time as Mayor of London, when the Conservative Party found him a safe seat in Uxbridge, because the seat where he had previously been an MP [Henley] already had another trusted member of the Conservative party).

What that means is that it is the people who choose the candidate for that Safe Seat who are – in practice, even if they don't realise it at the time – selecting our Ministers.

And that means that just about 1000 people across the country are the ones who are selecting the MPs who are going to end up being our Ministers.

Not good in terms of democratic representation. Not at all !

And those Ministers are the ones who are going to be planning the details of the new laws, and pushing the new laws through Parliament and through the Parliamentary Committees ... Committees which are supposed to be taking their time, looking at the details, thinking about whether they are good laws, and thinking about whether they are laws which are doing the sorts of things which we actually want. If those Committees – and if Parliament itself – aren't given the time and the information – and the independence (from pressures from Ministers and from Party Whips) – to do a good job, then the system which is supposed to give us good laws, to improve the way the country works, and to improve our lives ... well that system is just not up to the job.

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 a bit more at the problems of **Media Expectations**. Because, just when you thought that you had got your head around all of the challenges, there's a whole other layer of problems!

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.