

Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party Out of Politics!*

My name is Andrew,



This is Episode 2, of a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, why it isn't working as well as it should be, and what we might be able to do about it.

By understanding a little bit more about 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 **not** a podcast about Party Politics.

This is about politics *without* the political parties. Literally, *Taking the Party **Out Of** Politics*.

There are many good things which come from having political parties – including making it possible for people to get involved in delivering our government, even if those people are not really rich or really powerful. At least, that's the theory. But this is not that story.

No. This is **not** a podcast about Party Politics.

This is not a left-wing perspective; but neither is it a right-wing perspective.

This is about Politics. This is about the systems which get us a government, and about how effective those systems are at delivering good government (such as good planning, good organisation, and generally the things we need). This is a podcast about how the systems are supposed to work, whether you are left-wing or right-wing.

This is about the Politics which we should all understand, because the systems affect all of our lives, all of the time. Left-wing or right-wing. Big society or local focus.

And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

By understanding what is supposed to happen.

By understanding why it isn't always happening in the way it is supposed to.

And by understanding what sort of things we might do to make things better.

In Episode 1, the introduction, we had an overview of what the issues are, and a general idea of the route we are going to take through this. In this, the first season, we are going to look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of us – the voters.

Next season, 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. That's where Political Parties can really get in the way.

Finally, in season three, we will be looking at what we might be able to do, to make things work a bit better.

This is Episode 2. Today we are going to start at the very beginning, and examine why we have a government at all. After all, perhaps everyone has complained about their government, at least once. What is the point of something which just costs money, and which isn't appreciated by the people who pay for it?

Well, in a moment, we'll have a look at that...

But, even before we do that, let's take a little step back, and remind ourselves of why this is all important

In almost every system in nature, the system learns from experience. This is called the theory of 'Cybernetics'. An animal learns that a certain other animal is dangerous, or doesn't taste good, and isn't worth the risk in trying to attack or eat it, and so the animal tends to avoid it. A child learns that the oven is hot, and so stops touching it. If you are sailing a boat towards a point on the horizon, but the wind and the tide are taking you off course, you adjust your course to compensate for the wind and tide, so you still end up at your destination. Cybernetics is about systems that produce feedback, and how that feedback is used to improve the ability of that system to achieve its goal¹.

Yet it seems that when things don't work as well as they should do in our system of politics and government, we are not learning the lessons. Or, if we are, then we are learning the wrong lessons. For example, if things don't improve, and if that means that voters become disillusioned with the system, they tend to stop voting or caring. Or, another example: if the system encourages a certain unhelpful type of behaviour on the part of our elected politicians - or even encourages only a certain type of person to even try to get elected - then we blame the politicians, rather than ask ourselves the question: whether the system could be improved.

That's just not good enough. If you are the sailor on the boat, you don't just give up on where you needed to get to, and allow yourself to sail to wherever the wind and tide happen to be taking you. So ... when it comes to the systems which are organising the way our country works, why do we just put up with systems which aren't working?

So, that's why what we are doing here is important.
And it's also why your involvement in what we're doing here is important.
Working together, we could develop improvements to the system, or to the ways in which we use the existing system, actually could make the system work better on our behalf. Perhaps some big changes, but perhaps also some small tweaks at the corners, just to make things flow together better. At the very least, improvements could ensure that the system didn't encourage that unhelpful behaviour (as much), or didn't disillusion voters (so quickly).

And that's important. Solutions, as well as problems. Or, perhaps, solutions which are refined by an understanding of the problems.

There are lots of problems in the world. And lots of people are ready to point them out. And there are some serious problems with the way in which our political systems are (NOT) working. But we need to do more than just point out the problems.

Rather than just concentrating on the problems, we also need to focus on identifying solutions. Of course, to identify the best solutions, we need to understand clearly and simply: what the problems are, and what causes the problems. Then we can move forward, thinking of ways to generate creative, constructive solutions – solutions which will help our political system to operate more smoothly, more effectively, and more in the interests of the people.

We need solutions and ideas for people to rally around, not just a list of problems for people to rail against.

¹ *Cybernetics*, Norbert Wiener (1948)

OK, so we need to be learning positive, constructive lessons from our experiences.

But, where were we ...?

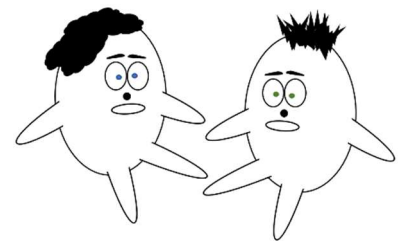
We were going to look at ***why we have a government***

And, let's really start at the beginning:

What was there before we had social groups?

Probably nothing very much. Human beings are social beings. On the whole we like being with other people; at least for some of the time. Some people more than others, of course; but we like being able to have the option of spending time with other people.

If there was anything before social groups, then it was some sort of free for all, of lots of individuals all just going out to get what they can. Or perhaps it was just family groups.



Then we had slightly larger groups.
A few families together, perhaps.

But outside the social groups, at best there was a sort of anarchy, in the sense of there being no rules at all. Some people believe that this was a version of anarchy in which it is the strongest or the most violent individuals who dominate. The Lone Wolf takes what they need, in acts of random violence. And moves on.

And that may have been the case inside most of the social groups, too. And perhaps between different social groups. Although people got together to be social, and to cooperate, if there are no rules – or, at least, if there are no social norms – then we might conclude that there is nothing to stop the strongest from just taking what they want.

So, how do we get from nothing much to social groups?

How do social groups get organised? Are there any overall principles of organisation?

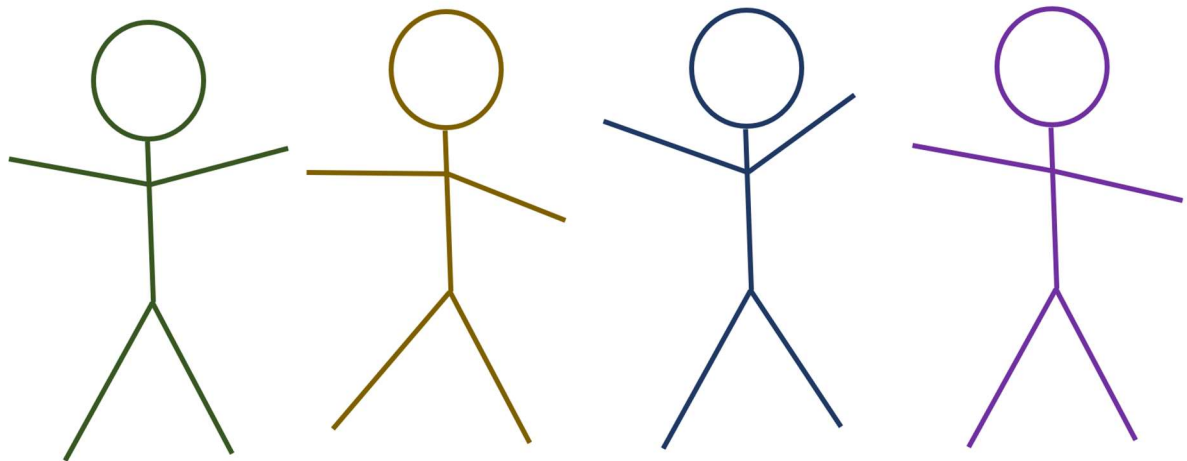
1.1. The Social Contract

Let's think about how a society works.

If you think about it, pretty much everything we do in groups works on assumptions and expectations about how we are going to rub along together.

Expectations about behaviour, mutual respect, and so on.

There are implied agreements in all sorts of things - sort of expectations about behaviour towards each other.



If you are invited round to dinner, you expect to get fed, and your host would expect you to behave reasonably.

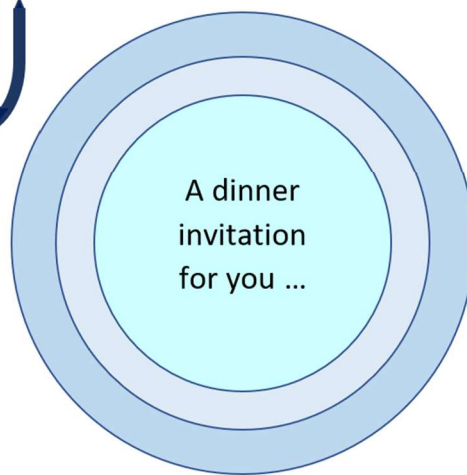
It might not happen, of course. You might behave badly. You might insult your host.

If that happened, we would all understand if that led to a bit of a breakdown in the friendship.

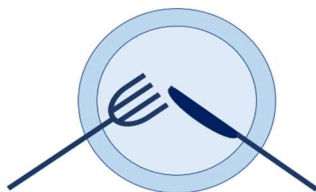
We live
in a social
world...

... expectations & advantages ...

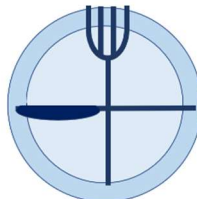
... rules &
privileges ...



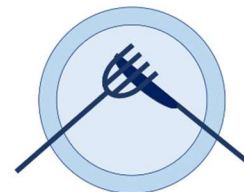
... but is the
balance
always fair
for everyone?



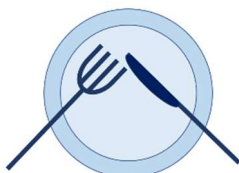
Pause



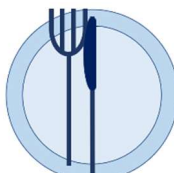
Next dish



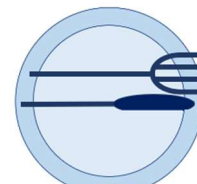
Bad



Break



Finished



Excellent

Sometimes, this takes the form of an actual contract - as in the marriage contract.

A marriage contract might include words like 'honour', or 'cherish', but even without the special wording of a wedding service, there are certain obligations which each partner is undertaking. Not just an agreement to always argue over Christmas, or over whose turn it is to take the bins out, but an agreement to work together on at least some things, at least most of the time, as a partnership.



Well, the same is true of the way larger social groups work together.

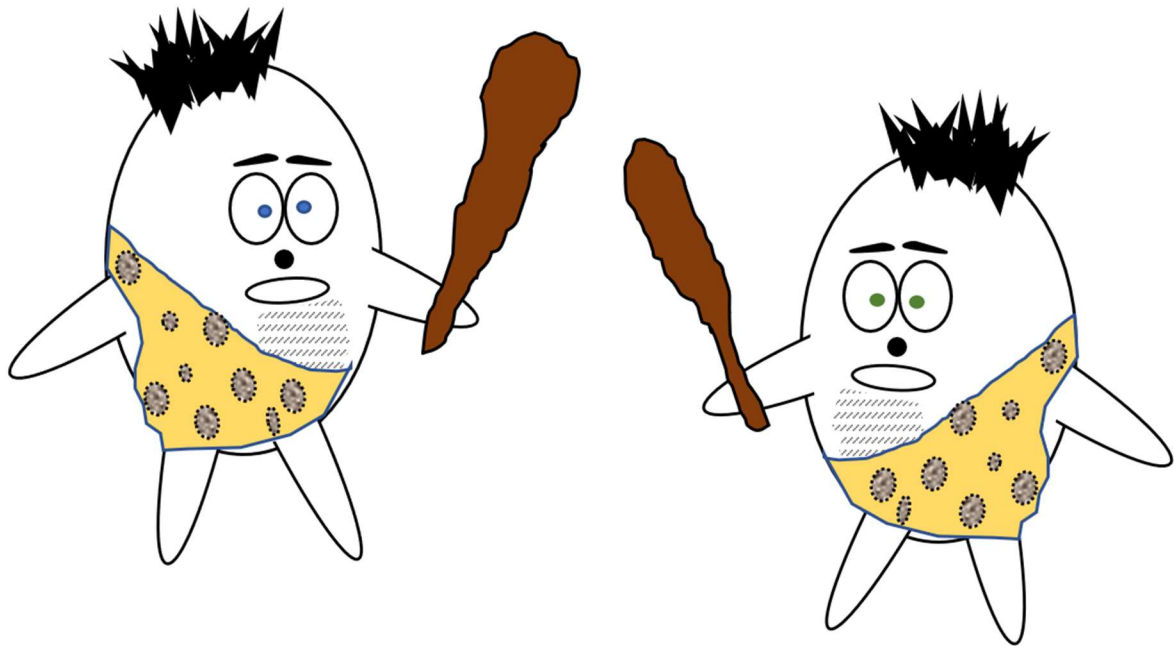
If you go back to large family groups, perhaps in nomadic times, or village communities, people got together for a variety of reasons.

To share skills and to work together - for example, in hunting or gathering food.

For company. And safety.

To share stories about what was good to eat.

To share stories about what was likely to eat you – and, in fact, we'll come back to that idea, later on, when we explore our relationship with 'The News'!



That safety partly came from the fellow members of the community, but that quickly became organised behind a leader (or leading group), mostly because it makes sense to organise things rather than for each person just to do whatever they want to do at any time.

This leader might be the strongest warrior, or perhaps the cleverest organiser of warriors. And the agreement was that members of the group would follow the leader in return for good leadership, and for being a bit safer than they would have been on their own.

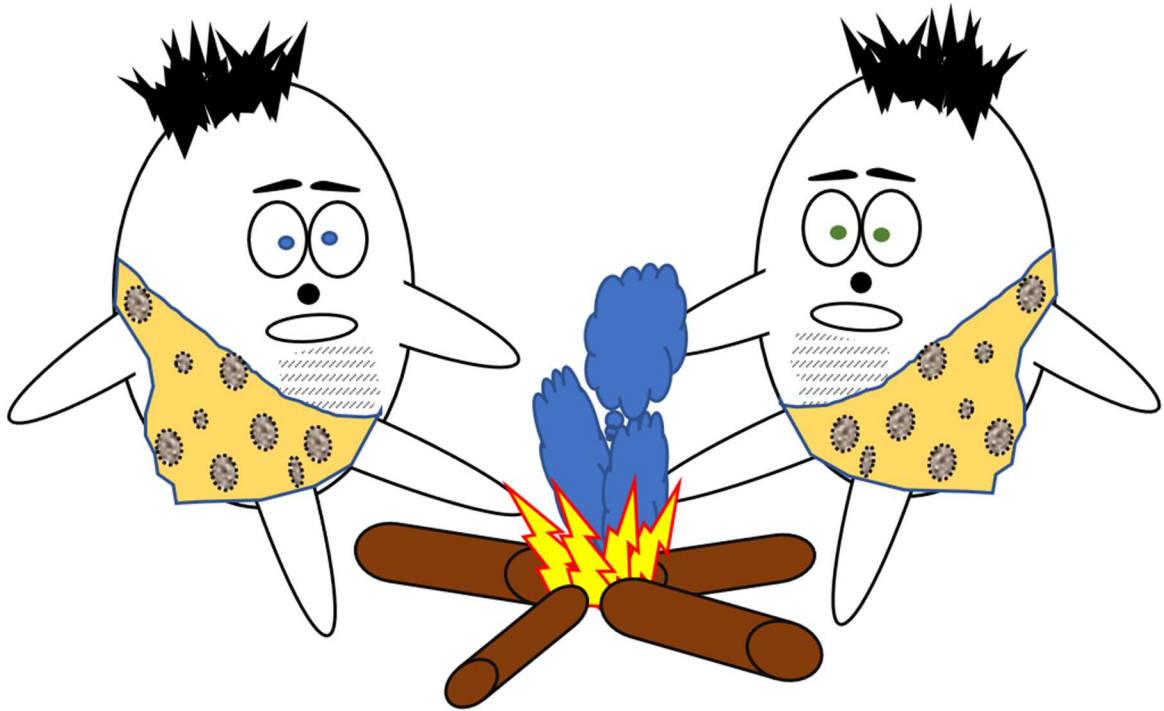


Perhaps there was still the risk of violence from the Lone Wolf, from outside the social group. There is also plenty of evidence which suggests that large social groups gathered on a regular basis, but it has always been true that we are happy to gather with people whom we know, and yet are always more wary of people whom we don't know.



And perhaps there was still violence within the social group, with tussles over who was actually the strongest warrior, or who had the right to be in charge.

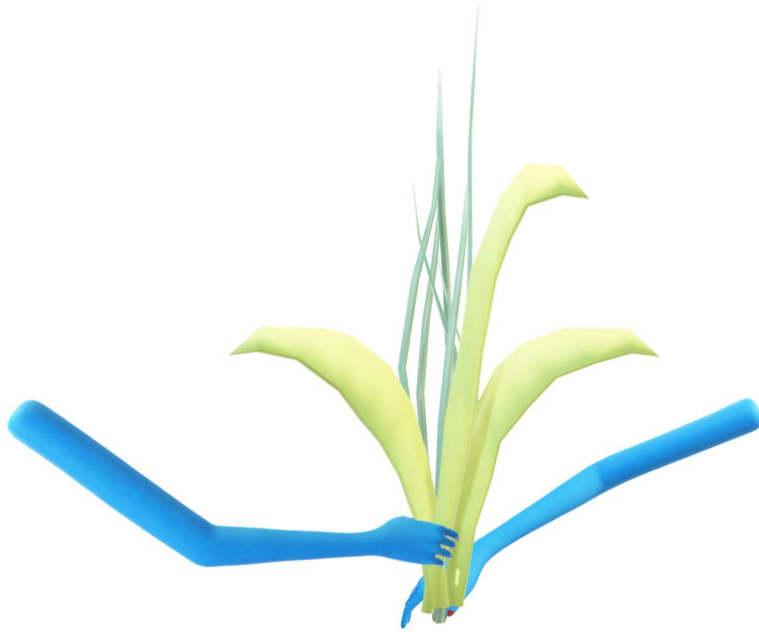
As things became a bit more organised, perhaps the leadership of the group involved more than just working out which valley to move to next, or how to ensure that everyone was safe around the fire at night.



The things which were important were not just where to go tomorrow, or what immediate danger to avoid. Thinking started to be a little more long-term.

Cooperation over planting crops in communities which were no longer nomadic, organising sewage and fresh water and building walls.

Gradually leadership became more like the government which we recognise today.



It might be that the leader was called a king.

Or that the leadership was provided by a group of wise elders getting together.

Or even that everyone got together to vote

(although 'everyone' might have meant just the adult men who were not slaves).

The social group worked together because the leader, and the organisation of leadership, was providing something which the people needed.



The leadership provided the safety and a bit of organisation.

The members of the community behaved, and contributed towards these central costs, in what became known as taxes.



The members of the community didn't fight or argue amongst themselves.

Well, not **too** much. Have you ever been stuck in a house on a rainy day with bored children?
But, not too much.



And if they did, then either the leader or some representative of the leader decided who was right and who was wrong.

And whether any punishment was necessary

– not least to ensure that other people were discouraged from fighting and arguing in the same way in the future –

in what gradually becomes a system of justice.

And so on.



There is some evidence that there might have been an idyllic period, during which violence between human beings was rare. Exceptional. In a period before any sort of organised leadership, small groups of humans may have either just kept apart from each other, or not been naturally violent and warlike to each otherⁱ. But, as soon as we get leadership, we get organisation of US against THEM. And with that came the need for rules, justice, and control of the violence which can be unleashed between US (the people whom we know and trust) and THEM (the people who we don't know, and whom we either instinctively don't trust, or whom our leaders encourage us not to trust – sort of like the Big Brother approach, where society is held together by always being against some other group).

Let me add in a quotation here from the author and psychologist Stephen Pinker:

“When bands, tribes, and chiefdoms came under the control of the first states, the suppression of raiding and feuding reduced their rates of violent death fivefold. And when the fiefs of Europe coalesced into kingdoms and sovereign states, the consolidation of law eventually brought down the homicide rate another thirtyfold.”

(*The Better Angels of our Nature* p823 Stephen Pinker)

In other words – as society became more organised, more controlled, the world became safer. It was 5 times less likely that you would die violently, if you were living under the control of one of the first states, rather than in a roaming band or tribe.

And when those early states became larger kingdoms and independent states, then the rate of violent death was another 30 times less likely.

Society and organised states were good for not getting killed by other people.

That's a pretty important first step in living better: Not dying.

Of course, all of this is rushing through hundreds (or even thousands) of years of human history, and picking up on a few threads along the way to make sense of where we are now. History is a lot more complicated than that, with a lot of bumps along the way, and twists and turns.

However, what we are really interested in here is exactly that: making sense of where we are now. And we **can** pick out, and condense, the grand *themes* of history and human development. It might have actually happened a lot more haphazardly, without an overall plan or direction, but we got here in the end. It is useful to pick up on those grand themes, and to get a feeling for the roles they played, and why they occurred.

Before we move on, let's take a step back for a moment, and consider all of this from a slightly different perspective. Let's talk about this **Civilising Process**.

Yes, we have moved, across history (and before history) from individuals to small social groups, to larger social groups, to small kingdoms and fiefdoms, to larger kingdoms, and to countries and eventually to nation states.

Part of that has been seeking safety and organisation.

But another way of thinking about how we end up with governments is to view the development as what has been termed a 'civilising process'.

The logic of a civilising process is that we can get more out of our lives by being 'civilised', because of two things.

First, we are not constantly worried about being attacked, or of someone stealing our stuff. That's a bit like the logic we have already been using. Being safe. Being organised.

Second, we understand that we can get more out of other people by cooperating with them, rather than by simply stealing their stuff.

There are two triggers for the **Civilising Process**:

- Strong, centralised leadership

And what is called

- 'Gentle commerce'

The term '*Leviathan*' has been used here, to refer to a strong, centralised leadership. The Leviathan could be a powerful king or queen, or a well-established democracy.

What the Leviathan does is to claim a monopoly on violence.

In other words, the message which the State wants you to receive is that there is no point in individuals being violent to each other, because the State will punish you. Only the State is allowed to be violent.



The Leviathan establishes laws and rules – or applies the laws and rules which already exist. The Leviathan then makes it clear that anyone who doesn't obey the laws and the rules will be punished. The punishment is clearly understood by everyone to be so severe that the risk of the punishment makes it not worth disobeying the laws and rules.

And, mostly, this works.

And, because people are (mostly) not being so violent towards each other, people are able to concentrate on other stuff. Making stuff. Trading stuff.

Again, as Stephen Pinker has said:

“The positive-sum cooperation of commerce flourished best inside a big tent, presided over by a Leviathan”

p93 *The Better Angels of our Nature*, Stephen Pinker 2011

In other words, not only are we less likely to die, once we are living under a controlled system of law and order, but we are also able to live better if we are working together with other people.

So, with a strong centralised control which makes everyone behave and follow the laws, people are able to enjoy life more. People are able to concentrate on making more stuff, rather than on simply protecting what little they already have.

Once people obey the laws, they (are able to) begin to recognise that other people are actually more valuable as potential trading partners than merely as people to rob. Diplomacy and interpersonal skills ('gentle commerce') become more valuable than mere violence.

Life among equals (men and women together) is more productive and more satisfying than a life lived by taking from others and by fighting others. And, it is certainly more productive and satisfying for the majority of people, who are probably not naturally drawn to stealing and killing, anyway. We give up (or the centralised monopoly on violence forces us to give up, or, at least, forces the more selfish and violent members of society to give up), we give up random, selfish violence, in return for stability.

Well, that feels reasonable, too, doesn't it?

Not just safety and organisation.

Leadership and government makes sense, because it makes us all behave.

And we agree to behave (rather than to steal and murder for what we want), because we all get better off as a result.

And, in fact, it turns out that it is better for the state and for the government, too. If we are more productive and happier, then the state gets richer, too. If we are stealing from each other, or killing each other – or even if we are stealing from the state next door, and killing their people – then whilst a few people might get rich from looting the 'spoils of war', most people get poorer (or die, or are injured, and therefore are less able to contribute to the economy after the fighting is over). And if the people are poorer, so is the state – even at the very most basic level that if there isn't so much activity to tax, then the tax revenues are going to be lower.

OK. So, where have we go to?

People got together *partly* because we are social beings, and because we like to be with other people...

Most of the time.

... and *partly* because we are better off in a group than on our own.

We give up some things – the freedom to behave completely as we like – because we have to respect other people in the group.

For example: perhaps we agree to pay some taxation.

We get some things – company, certainly; but also stuff such as cleaning the streets; and some increased level of safety.

We get the opportunity to make more of our lives, rather than constantly living in fear of someone stronger or more violent.



And this giving up some things (the right to do whatever you want, whenever you want) in return for getting some things (safety, better opportunities) is not that dissimilar to being invited to dinner, or working together with your partner, in a marriage or any other relationship.

There's a sort of agreement implied in it.

And at the level of a society, we call this a Social Contract.



There's a bit more background which we could add in here.

~~Don't let the word 'theory' here worry you. Just hang on for a minute.~~

~~Theory doesn't necessarily mean boring.~~ This is really about understanding more clearly why our existing Social Contract might be more like where we happen to be, rather than an ideal, perfect Social Contract.

An additional point of view on the Social Contract was introduced by a philosopher called John Rawls, to include the idea of *fairness*.

So, as we have already said, the idea of a Social Contract is that the individuals in a society agree that they will be governed, because there is more to be gained by being a member of that governed society than is lost by being a completely free, independent individual.

But what if some of the people are stronger than others?

Would they force a particular version of the Social Contract upon the weaker people, one which was more beneficial to the stronger people?

John Rawls suggested² that (in an ideal situation) the Social Contract should be drawn up in what he calls the 'original position'. This is not a real original position. It is an imagined original position, in which the deal making for the social contract is carried out behind what is called a 'veil of ignorance'. ~~This just means that the people making the deal don't know anything about the people for whom they are making the deal.~~

~~The negotiators don't know if the people are old or young, what their ethnicity or sex is, or even what the people think they need to lead a 'good life'.~~

The idea is that the 'veil of ignorance' means that the negotiators will make a completely fair deal. Making the deal for the Social Contract from the 'original position' means that 'fairness' will be at the heart of 'justice'.

John Rawls said that there would be two principles in a *fair* Social Contract:

- Each citizen would enjoy the same basic freedoms as any other citizen, and
- Any social and economic inequalities would be dealt with to try to support the least advantaged citizens.

~~Although we actually live in a society which only works because we all sort of follow a social contract – even if we don't think about it every day – this highlights that our social contract might not be perfect. Remember that the social contract isn't actually a contract. There is no single document, detailing every bit of how we should behave. Or detailing who gets what, or who has what rights. Or who has what obligations.~~

There was no 'original position', when the deal for our Social Contract was made from behind a 'veil of ignorance'. We have managed to fumble and bumble our way here. Sometimes we have had to fight for rights. Sometimes we have claimed them. Sometimes they have been given to us – though you might wonder whether – if those rights are truly 'fundamental' – anyone actually should be in a position to give us rights, if we should fundamentally have those rights anyway. Perhaps that is actually just someone agreeing that they won't keep taking those rights away. Not quite the same as giving them to us!

² *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

There are some laws; but most of the time we act in a civilised way with each other because we have learned that to behave in a civilised way is just the 'right' thing to do. And because it is better for us, than always fighting each other.

But there are still problems. There are still times when things aren't fair. There are still times when people who already have stuff aren't happy about sharing it with people who don't have stuff.

In fact, we can see that many of the ways in which our society worked was certainly less perfect than now, in the not-too-distant past. For example, we now have much more equal rights between women and men than was the case even within our lifetimes. And it's still not perfect today. We use terms like 'age discrimination' to highlight ways in which our social contract still isn't working adequately enough, to show that we don't approve of those ways.

Our current social contract is almost certainly still not perfect. It has not been drawn up behind a 'veil of ignorance'. It's just where we have stumbled our way to, so far. Although we are trying to improve things, we still have a way to go. For example, although we theoretically have laws which say that there should be equal treatment for everyone, irrespective of their racial background, we are still aware that some people don't act in a way which gives everyone equal treatment. To try to redress this balance, we get protests such as 'Black Lives Matter' (which, of course, are really just saying that 'Black Lives Matter As Well', because it has turned out to be necessary to tell some people that they can't treat Black people as though their lives don't matter as much as White lives).

Clearly our current Social Contract isn't perfect, if we have some people who still have to fight for their rights. And it's even less perfect, if there are some people who are able to deny other people their rights.

Essentially this is a way of acknowledging that our Social Contract could have been designed more deliberately. It could have been designed with more universal fairness in mind. Where we have ended up – with the systems which work some of the time, but with systems (and customs and habits and traditions) which might benefit some people a bit unfairly, at least some of the time – well, where we have ended up might not be where we would plan to be, if we could have planned the whole thing from the start.

But, of course, we didn't plan the whole thing from the start. We have just ended up here. Some steps have been deliberate.

And some definite improvements have been made

- sometimes slowly and incrementally, by people just changing the way they do things and what they think about things,
- sometimes in sudden jumps – perhaps organised by people who wanted to make the world a bit better, both for themselves and for others.

Did you sign up to the Social Contract?

rules &
privileges



expectations
& advantages

Would a new Social Contract today, be different?





Could a new Social Contract be fair to everyone?

governing – the agreement that we will obey the rules in return for those things such as safety, organisation, justice, fairness: We call that agreement the Social Contract.

But, perhaps we wouldn't have designed things like this if we had known where we were going. And, perhaps it's not such a surprise to realise that things don't always work – and don't always work out – as well as they could or should do, if the systems we are using are just the ones we ended up with, rather than the systems we would have chosen.

Those systems, good and bad, working and not working, affect all of our lives, all of the time. And that's why this stuff is so important. Important to everyone.

And we call the agreement – between those of us who are governed and those of us who do the

What is important is that all parties to the Social Contract

– king as well as subjects –

– government as well as citizens –

understand not just the opportunities which this offers to them, but also the obligations which this Social Contract places upon them.



* * *

So ... next time, on *Taking the Party out of Politics* ...

Next time, we will start to look at how all of that is supposed to work, taking a path from *Democracy* through to *Representative Democracy*.

* * *

Don't forget that we know that we aren't the only people who can have good ideas.

We really want to hear from other people, too. And that means YOU!

With that in mind, the website for the podcast is talktogether.info.

There you can follow the link to the podcast, where you will be able to find transcripts of the podcasts, as well as our email address, and lots of other information which you may find useful.

For now, thank you for listening.

If you have enjoyed this podcast, perhaps you can 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 useful.** 😊

That would be great. Thank you.

ⁱ Rutger Bregman: *Humankind* (2020)