

Episode 28:

Taking the
PARTY



out of
POLITICS

Citizens' Assemblies

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

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

Because:

by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,
and *why* they are a bit messed up,
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

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

In Series 2, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective
of someone trying to get elected, and then trying to do a good job.

This is Series 3. In Series 3, we are going to be looking at what we might be able to do, to
make things work a bit better. We will be using our understanding of what bits of our
political systems aren't working, and why they aren't working, to explore ways in which we
might be able to change things around a bit to make it all work a bit better. Importantly,
whilst we will be sharing our ideas, we will also be sharing some of the best of YOUR
ideas, about how to make things work a bit better.

Welcome to episode 28 of Taking the Party out of Politics.

Today we are going to start our look at how we might **solve** some of the big challenges
facing us and our political system.

Yes, that's right. We have spent the past year or so, detailing the problems. But now we are
going to take our understanding of the problems, our understanding of why things aren't
working as well as they should be working, and we're going to start to bring together some of
the best ways in which we could change things.

And, it is about changing things. Tweaking things. Adjusting things.

It isn't about throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

There are many good things in our political system, and we should keep the good things.

But we shouldn't be overawed by the good things.

We should acknowledge where there are shortcomings ...
and we should work out how to fix them.

Today, we're going to start that process, by looking in more detail at *Citizens' Assemblies*.

Are we proposing a revolution?

Honestly, I don't think so.

We are certainly proposing changes. Tweaks. Adjustments. But I don't think that any of them comes even close to constituting a revolution.

Having said that, of course, some people like to think of change as being a revolution. Some people find it easier to get passionate about big changes.

And it is true that: **Some things we're fighting against, some things we're fighting for**

Owen Jones: Democratic Revolution

Proponents of a democratic revolution need to have the same commitment to a long-term vision. Britain would be a country both run by and run in the interests of those who keep it ticking, rather than run as a get-rich and keep-rich scheme for the wealthiest. It would mean a society organized on the basis of social need rather than short-term private profit. It would mean extending democracy to every sphere of life: not just politics, with the odd national election, but also to the wider economy and the workplace.

The Establishment pp 301-2

What we are interested in is whether we can make things work better. For all of us.

1.1. Changing the way the system works: Taking the Party out of Politics

How would a different way of using our systems operate?

The starting point, is that we should be **better engaged as voters, and as citizens**. This is really a baseline. And we made the point in our last episode.

Beyond this, there are three main aspects of a different way of using our existing systems.

First, we need to have a system which takes the **electoral pressure** out of the *wicked issues* (and which might even have applications beyond that).

Second, we should take every opportunity to **share the best ideas**.

Third, we need to have a system which takes the **political party pressure** out of checking the quality of what is going on.

Taken together, we might call this a *Citizen Democracy*, to sit alongside our *Representative Democracy*.

Today, we're going to look at the first of a number of ways in which we might have better Citizen Democracy. Today, we're going to look at Citizens' Assemblies.

But first, let's set the background to that. Let's just remind ourselves why we, as citizens, as voters, why we should be more engaged with our political processes.

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1.1.1. Citizen Engagement (4.53)

As we said in the last episode, as individuals, we should ensure that we are better informed, and we should ensure that our elected representatives know that we are better informed. This helps us to make better decisions, to understand better what is going on, and to keep our elected representatives on their toes.

Not about scandal, or about the news of the moment. We need to ensure that we are better informed about the big stuff. About the long-term trends. About how things are changing; and about how they could be changing differently.

We need access to considered summaries of what is important. Not just attention-grabbing headlines and endless speculation. And we probably need some way of demonstrating that we are up to date, that we have thought about the basics.

There are organisations which are trying to help us to do this.

There are fact checking organisations, which try to check the information and facts which are quoted in the media (and to check that 'facts' used by politicians are actually accurate), including [Full Fact](#) and the BBC's [Reality Check](#). There are also podcasts, like the BBC's [More or Less](#). Sadly, these are still not the attention-grabbing, front line news. We need to make an effort to find them, and to pay attention to them. But they are there.

There are also some rather wonderful organisations out there, which are trying to ensure that our understanding of the world isn't rooted in either wrong information or outdated information (many of us learned about the world at school, and have sort of assumed that the basic statistics haven't changed much since – when they often have changed out of all recognition). Hans Rosling (a Swedish physician, academic, and public speaker) was a real leader in this area, and [Gapminder](#) continues to try to offer an engaging way of understanding what the facts really are.

There are also apps which try to share facts and figures about the way the world actually is and works, in a trivial pursuit, game-like structure, such as the [Talk Together](#) app. The aim here is to make it fun to keep up to date.

If we want our systems to work, and our elected representatives to work in our best interests, then it is our responsibility to be reasonably well informed. This will protect us from too much fake news, but it will also ensure that our elected representatives are kept on their toes.

This should really be a starting point. A baseline.
A basic assumption for Citizen Democracy.

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Citizen Assemblies (7.47)

Moving forward from being better engaged as Citizens, the first part of the answer about how we can change the way the system operates is:

Citizen Assemblies.

The *wicked issues* are those issues which are seen by politicians, and by political parties, as being too risky to take on, in electoral terms. Although they are important, and despite the fact that ignoring them is going to make them worse, these are issues which require actions (such as raising taxes, or changing what services are provided) which politicians believe are going to be so unacceptable to the electorate that they are not prepared to confront the issues¹.

Whether our politicians are right or wrong, they believe that they will lose the next election if they try to address these issues. So, how do we take the political sting out of these issues?



¹There is a wider category of problems called 'wicked problems'. These are also very complicated, involve many different stakeholder groups, and require special approaches to address - and special courage and conviction to do so. The term 'wicked issues' seems to be the one most associated with 'wicked problems' in the context of politics and government, whereas there can be 'wicked problems' in business, in social situations, or in your personal life.

Well, what many countries have done is to follow the route of a *Citizens' Assembly*. It works like this.

First, you start with a representative group of people. For example, a group of 100 people might be brought together to represent all 68 million people in the UK. Within that 100 people, if 90% of the UK population is white², then 90 of the 100 people would be white. If 48.5% of the population is male³, then 48 or 49 of the 100 people would be male. If the population of Yorkshire is 5.3 million⁴, then $5.3/68 = 8\%$ of the participants would be from Yorkshire. If 42% of the UK population has graduated from university, then ... well, you guessed it: 42 out of the 100 people would be graduates, whilst at the same time, if 21% of the population was in 'professional' jobs⁵, then 21 of the participants would have 'professional' jobs.

And, of course, if 45% of the population voted Conservative at the most recent election⁶, then 45 out of the 100 participants would be people who had voted Conservative at the most recent election.



And so on. You get the idea.

2<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/2011censusanalysisethnicityandreligionofthenonukbornpopulationinenglandandwales/2015-06-18#:~:text=In%202011%2C%207.5%20million%20people,African%2FCaribbean%2FBlack%20British.>

3<https://www.statista.com/statistics/281240/population-of-the-united-kingdom-uk-by-gender/#:~:text=In%202018%20the%20population%20of,females%20and%2032.98%20million%20males.>

4<https://www.yorkshirenetwork.co.uk/yorkshire/yorkshire-facts-and-statistics/#:~:text=Yorkshire%20has%20a%20total%20population,and%20the%20Republic%20of%20Ireland.>

5<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment-by-occupation/latest>

6<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-5077990>

OK, so you've got your representative group. What happens next?

To start with, there's some group training.

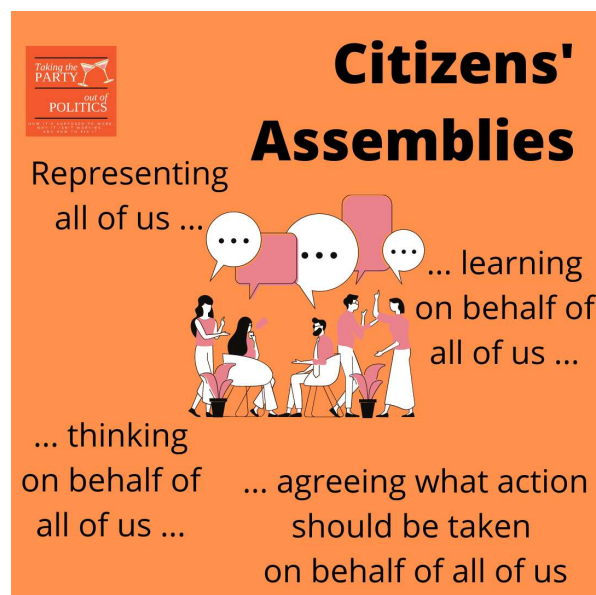
There are some key principles for how the citizens' assembly is conducted, including:

- openness of proceedings;
- fairness in how differing viewpoints are treated and of the quality of briefing material;
- equality of voice among members;
- efficiency;
- respect; and
- collegiality⁷.

The participants are given training and support in all sorts of stuff.

How to get the most out of statistics, and how to understand them in a way which makes sense and in a way which usefully informs decisions.

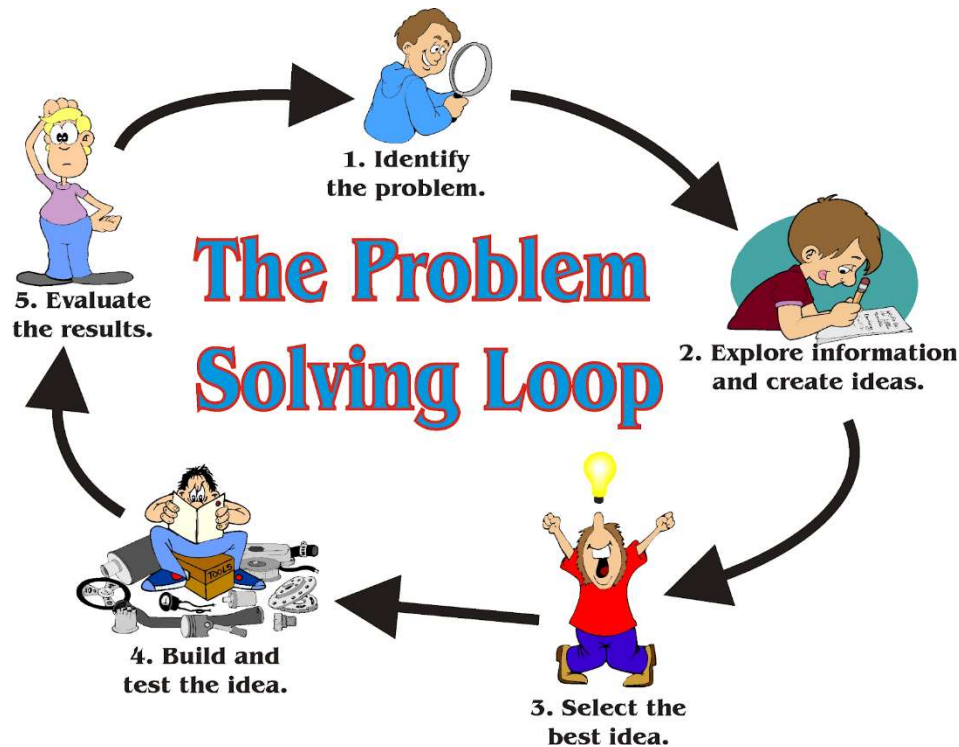
How to listen to other people constructively – to other members of the citizens' assembly, of course, but also to people who might give evidence to the citizens' assembly.



⁷<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/the-irish-abortion-referendum-how-a-citizens-assembly-helped-to-break-years-of-political-deadlock/>

Because the next stage is to look at the evidence.

Working together, and in a process which might take days, or weeks, or even months, the citizens' assembly looks at all the evidence on the issue. This might be reading documents, looking at statistics, listening to experts (and questioning those experts, to make sure that their evidence is understood), as well as listening to members of the public and to representatives of interest groups.



For example, imagine that the *wicked issue* is funding for the health service. Of course, that might be just too huge an issue on its own. How do you even phrase the question which the citizens' assembly should consider? It needs narrowing down. Perhaps within that huge, complicated area, the citizens' assembly might be given the task of giving the government guidance on the action which should be taken on providing suitable health care for the elderly. That's still a pretty big area to consider, but perhaps a bit more manageable.

The citizens' assembly would want to listen to health care experts, but also to older people who were receiving support (or not receiving support), to people who provide care to the elderly, to providers of medicines and health care equipment, and also to representatives from related areas, such as social care. For example: none of our governments have yet managed to establish a (funding) linkage between bed blocking (in expensive NHS hospitals) by older people who need a space in a (cheaper, local authority funded) care home. A funding linkage? Because, ultimately, it comes down to budget priorities and budget pressures. But because local authorities aren't responsible for NHS budgets, then there is a lot less incentive for local authorities to make space available in care homes. And in the meantime, the country as a whole (that's all of us) is paying for too many of the expensive hospital bed spaces.

Depending on how the task for the citizens' assembly was set up, the final advice might be just advice, but it might be binding on the government - in other words, the government might be obliged to follow it. That might sound a bit risky for the government – a hostage to fortune. But, on the other hand, it might give the government the perfect excuse to act on the *wicked issue* without risking any electoral fallout at the next election.

Citizens' Assemblies

Reporting back to us

Reporting back to our government

Showing why their recommendations make sense.

There are lots more details, of course. Exactly how you select 100 people to be representative of the whole country is a skill in itself. Some people might be both university graduates, and white, and also from Yorkshire, and also be in professional jobs, and so they would be counted in various different categories all at the same time. In fact, every member of the citizens' assembly would be counted in many different categories, just as each of us is not only one thing. Not just female, but also a doctor, and also under 30 and also ... and so on.

The terms of reference (exactly how the task is phrased) for the citizens' assembly are hugely important. Every stone you turn over might reveal sixteen more really crucial things

to consider ... but the citizens' assembly has to stay on task. For example, there might be huge implications for climate change in the way in which investment is made in making the housing stock more environmentally efficient; but if the focus is supposed to be on welfare of the elderly then the climate change argument might not be a reason to invest in more insulation for the homes of older people. Or, alternatively, it might be. That depends on the terms of reference.

So, anyway, the citizens' assembly makes it possible for the country to address the *wicked issues* without it being a problem which is just too risky for politicians who have to keep at least one eye on the electoral cycle and on being popular enough to keep their positions.

Does it work?

Well, it has been used in many countries. Mostly very successfully. There have been challenges, of course, but those have been lessons to be learned. In the Republic of Ireland in 2018, for example, the people were able to vote on a referendum on making abortion legal. This was a classic *wicked* issue. A hugely emotive topic, with strong opinions on both sides (such as the Catholic church and the focus of the rights of the foetus on one side, and the rights of women to have control over their bodies on the other side).

The process leading up to the referendum included a citizens' assembly which met over a period of 6 months, heard from 25 experts, and reviewed 300 submissions⁸. At the end of the citizens' assembly, 87% of the assembly members agreed that the law on abortions should be changed, and in the referendum 64% of the wider population agreed.

It was an incredibly divisive issue, with strong passions on both sides of the discussion, all across the nation. As a result, it was a *wicked issue* which politicians were not able to deal with. But the citizens' assembly made it possible for a national discussion to take place, and for a referendum to be held which led to changing the law – as well as to healing some of the divisions over the issue.

There are many other examples of citizens' assemblies which have been held in many different countries around the world, with all sorts of terms of reference, and all sorts of outcomes. It's not perfect. But it is a lot, LOT better than just having politicians who aren't prepared to deal with the issues at all.

The Citizens' Assembly process is already being used in the UK. A bit. Not really properly, because I bet you haven't heard of it – and one of the important parts of a Citizens' Assembly is that we should all be aware of what is going on. We might not want to follow all of the information. But we should know that we COULD follow all the information, if we wanted to. We should know that the Citizens' Assembly really is representing the people of the country – and we should know that we can therefore trust that the ideas and conclusions which the Citizens' Assembly produces are ideas and conclusions which we can respect, and which we can trust.

⁸<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/the-irish-abortion-referendum-how-a-citizens-assembly-helped-to-break-years-of-political-deadlock/>

For example, a Climate Assembly was held during the spring of 2020⁹, as a project of the House of Commons. The report was presented to six of the Select Committees of the House of Commons ([Business Energy and Industrial Strategy](#); [Environmental Audit](#); [Housing, Communities and Local Government](#); [Science and Technology](#); [Transport](#); and [Treasury](#)).



Excellent. It remains to be seen how much of the Climate Assembly report will be acted upon by the government (so far, to be honest, not much: sadly), but let's address more of the *wicked issues* as soon as possible.

Because the longer we leave them, the more wicked the issues become.

Citizens' Assemblies: addressing the Wicked Issues

Why are we doing all this? Why should you be interested in all of this? (18.20)

Because it's all about you. And me. And all of us.

It's about the way our country is run, in whose interests it is run, and about how that affects the way all of us live.

There is an interesting term which is sometimes applied to us, the voters: The disinherited.

The disinherited

Not because we are owed something by the past.

But because we are disabled from realising our potential contribution to society by the incumbent political caste.

No point saying that I wouldn't start from here

Citizens' Assemblies are one small way in which we can start to make a difference.

⁹<https://www.climateassembly.uk/>

We might not want to be starting from here, but here is where we are.
We can look at what mistakes put us here, and we can try to avoid repeating those mistakes.
It might be useful to identify who made the mistakes, if that is going to help us to avoid repeating them (by avoiding trusting those people). But simply parking the blame on someone doesn't help.

We need to do something.

We need to do the right thing.

And Citizens' Assemblies are one way in which we can start to do exactly that.



Citizens' Assemblies



Is our
government
grown up
enough
to listen?

So, that's it:

Get a small group of people together. Maybe 100. Specially selected to be representative of the range of people and perspectives across the country. Young, old. Rich, poor. Different races and genders. Different political views.

Give them all the information about a topic. Let them ask all the questions they need to. Let them discuss it, and think about it. Let them hear from the experts, and from the people who really care about the topic.

Let anyone who wants to, listen in. Publicize the process.

Publicize the information and the ideas and the background to the topic.

And then: ask that group of people to make a decision on that topic, on behalf of all of us. A decision which is nuanced and informed

And then ask our elected representatives to follow up on that decision.

In fact: then insist that our elected representatives follow up on that decision.

Because the Wicked Issues might be difficult. But they are important.

And it is not good enough that we just keep ducking them.

Or that our elected representatives just keep ducking them.

Next time:

Next time, we are going to move on to look at whether there are further ways in which we can involve citizens – not just political party politicians – in *some* of the important politics in our world, to get things to work a bit better. In particular, we are going to look at an idea called *Citizen Scrutiny*.

If you think about it, it is a bit strange that the bodies which are supposed to check on our government are also controlled by our government. These bodies are called Scrutiny Committees, and the idea of holding our government to account is a good one. There should always be someone who should ask us to think twice before taking a big decision, or who should bring different opinions to the table. But if those Scrutiny Committees are controlled by the same political party which is in Government – and if your performance on a Scrutiny Committee, as an MP, is going to affect how likely it is that your political party is going to reward you with a chance to be a Minister, to be part of the Government – then what sort of checks and balances are those Scrutiny Committees really able to provide?

Well, perhaps we need a slightly better system, one which is a bit more independent of the political parties. And, that might be called *Citizen Scrutiny*. That's next time.

If you would like to have a look at transcripts of the podcast, including links to all of our sources and references, please go to www.talktogether.info, and follow the links to the Podcast from there. And, of course, if you would like to contact us – not least if you would like to share any ideas which you have about how we could make things better, or if there are any areas of how Politics is supposed to work, but why it isn't working, which you would like to draw to our attention – 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.