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*.

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This is a little journey we are taking together, about the systems and functioning of Politics: systems which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of the time.
And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

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In 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 31 of Taking the Party out of Politics.

Today we are going to continue our look at how we 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 continue that process, by looking at the idea of *Citizen Information*.
The fightback against *post truth politics* starts here.

So, you might be thinking: "What's the big deal"?

"I know when something is fake!"

Well, do you? Do you really?

How do you know? Do you check the sources of the statistics which you hear from other people, down the pub? Or the sources of the statistics which you hear from journalists on the news? Or even the sources of the statistics which you hear from our elected representatives, our MPs?

I doubt it. I do; sometimes. But certainly not as often as I probably should. There's just too much going on. So, if you don't double check if some good news is really as good as it sounds, or if some bad news is really as bad as it sounds, well, I don't blame you. Not at all.

But, still.

We need to do better than that. We can't be making decisions – and we can't have our government making decisions – based on incorrect information, on misled beliefs which have been formed on the basis of incorrect information, on misguided policy decisions which have been formed on the basis of misled beliefs … well, you get the picture.

Generally speaking, though. Do you think that you have a pretty accurate understanding of the way the world is, roughly what is happening, and what should probably be done about it?

You might do. But you might well be wrong.

Not your fault. But important to be aware that you might well be wrong. And that it might be just as well to check – as they say, not just to have a good feeling for what the statistics probably should be, but to know what they actually are.

Citizen Information
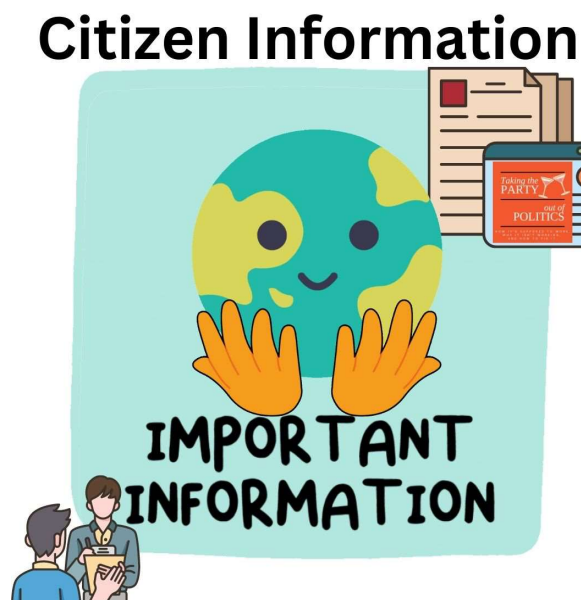
So, you *still* might be thinking: "What's the big deal"?

"I know when something is fake!"

OK. Fair enough. You have probably heard of 'fake news'.

Citizen Information

Would you be immune to fake news?

But what do you actually understand by this term? Is it just a term you have heard Donald Trump use, when talking about others. Or, perhaps, something you have heard used about Donald Trump?

You might be thinking of the version of the news about the war in Ukraine which is being shown to the average, ordinary citizen in Russia. We might be surprised that the average Russian citizen is just sitting back and accepting that Russia has just invaded another country – and according to a US general[1], perhaps as many as 100,000 Ukrainian and another 100,000 Russian troops have either been killed or injured. How could anyone just sit back, if they understood how wrong it was, and how bad it was?

Well, that's the effect of 'fake news'. You see, what we see on the news about what is happening in Ukraine (and read in the paper, or online, or hear on the radio), well … that's not what the average, ordinary citizen in Russia is seeing or hearing. They are getting quite a different picture. Different numbers. The last update from the Russian government on numbers of Russian troops killed, which was issued in September, was just 5,937. Different details. Even a different 'narrative' about why the invasion is taking place. In fact, it's not even referred to as an invasion, or a war. It's referred to as a 'Special Military Operation'.

A different set of facts. A different 'narrative'; a different explanation as to why such-and-such is happening. It all leads to a different understanding of the world. And it can lead to support – or to an absence of support – for the government.

Do you think that you would be immune to this sort of thing? If you were in Russia, and you had no other source of news – you couldn't just go and look on the internet, for example. Wouldn't you tend to just believe what your government was telling you? Especially if all your friends already believed it.

Well

Let's think about another example.

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[1]https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63580372

6th January, 2021. Joe Biden has just won the US presidential election … and Donald Trump has lost. In an effort to stop President Biden's election from being certified by Congress, the supporters of Donald Trump stormed the Congress building. Many people were hurt. Approximately 140 police officers were assaulted, one of whom later died[2]. Some of the rioters have been jailed as a result of the attack. But why did they do it?

Was it just because they all decided to do it, based on what the mainstream media was saying?

Well, nothing has quite been proven yet, because there are still criminal and political procedures under way, but the general consensus seems to be that Donald Trump was sending out incorrect information about the election, misleading facts, and there were enough of his supporters who chose to believe him over the mainstream media.

Perhaps Donald Trump's supporters genuinely did believe that there was some sort of 'deep state conspiracy' to steal the election result from Trump. Perhaps the supporters were acting in what they thought was good faith. But if Donald Trump – with his tweets, with his speeches – had managed to get the false message out to them so that they believed it, then Donald Trump was using 'fake news' himself. Perhaps the politician who complains most about 'fake news' might actually be the biggest source of 'fake news'.

Do you think that you would be different to those people in that crowd. They wanted to believe their hero. You might not think that Donald Trump is a hero. I certainly don't. But a bit of wishful thinking, a bit of him saying a few things which are actually true, and a feeling that the 'system' has been letting you down for years … well, perhaps you might be ready to believe that the 'system' was trying to rob your hero of the election.

Would you be able to rise above that?

Now, those are two big examples.

But there are smaller, more subtle, but still important examples.

Citizen Information

In the UK, our government might announce that it is increasing the spending on something – education, health, whatever. But the government might announce the increase several different times. It's only new spending once. It's not that the government is directly lying. But if you hear about new spending being announced in the summer, and then a different minister announcing how the new money is going to be spent in the autumn, you would have to stop and think very carefully if you were going to avoid just assuming that this was a second lot of new spending.

Would you know if it was the same news, being repeated?

Not fake. But certainly misleading.

So, it's not just the big things. It's the small things, the misleading things. The things which make things seem better – or, if political parties are talking about the opposition, perhaps things which make things seem worse.

2https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-Capitol-attack-of-2021

OK. So, point made; I hope.

I'm not going to go on (anymore) about 'fake news' here. You've heard of it.

What I am going to go on about is how there is too much of it, and how we need to be clear about what the facts are.

Let me give you a different sort of example.

About fake information about the world, information which is in your head.

It's not exactly your fault, but most of your understanding of how the world is, is stuff which you probably learned at school. A very few of us pay really close attention to updated statistics all the time. You might actually pay more attention to the goal difference of your favourite Premier League club than you do to the average wage in the UK – or to the average wage in sub-Saharan Africa. That's not a criticism. It's hard to keep reassessing our understanding of the world.

But, let me give you a few, up to date statistics, just to highlight how our assumptions might be a bit skewed about the way the world is.

If I tell you that there are nearly as many people in Africa as there are in China, would you be surprised? I was. We think of China as having this huge population. How could there be nearly as many people in Africa as there are in China?

Well, the population of Africa is 1,416,097,444[3] and the population of China is 1,452,371,705[4]. And, not just that, but India is right there, too. The population of India is 1,411,829,167[5]. All pretty close.

OK, well, if that didn't surprise you, then what about this?

Can you name the 5 most populous Muslim countries?

Now, if you are like most people, you might well be thinking about the spiritual home of Islam. Saudi Arabia. The Middle East. But you'd be wrong.

The most populous Muslim countries are[6]:

      1. Indonesia - 227,226,404

2. Pakistan - 204,194,370

3. India - 189,000,000

4. Bangladesh - 148,607,000

5. Nigeria - 95,316,131

And it's not until you get to number 6 that you even get close to the Middle East.

6. Egypt - 87,336,965, and then

7. Iran - 81,529,435

3https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population/

4https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-population/

5https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/india-population/

6https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-largest-muslim-populations.html

They say that: **Ignorance is bliss.** And it can also be funny.
But it can also be extremely dangerous.
We need to know what the basic facts about the world actually are. Otherwise, how do we know when some new piece of information is important.

Citizen Information

For example, if I tell you that 6.9 million people in the UK are smokers, that might sound like a huge number. Now, you probably have a rough idea of the population of the UK, so you might be able to work out that this is just over 14% of the population (14.1%, in 2019[7], according to figures from the ONS). Now, depending on your baseline information, you might think that this is a large percentage of the population, or you might think that this is actually not as large a percentage of the population as you might have expected. It depends when you last thought about smokers. Or how many smokers there are in your immediate circle of friends.

I can tell you that the number has dropped from just over 20%, between 2010 and 2019. Or that the figures today are about one third of the numbers reported in 1974[8] (which means that it was more like 45% of the population who smoked, just 35 years earlier).

What about deaths in childbirth? Are they high (I mean, even one death of a woman in childbirth is tragic, of course)? If I tell you that 229 women died during or up to six weeks after the end of pregnancy, in the period between 2018-20[9], what is your first thought?
Is that more, or less, than you would have expected?

But, this number can only really make sense if we understand what is called the 'baseline'. What I mean is, what proportion of women die in childbirth? Any idea?
Well, one way of looking at that number of 229 women who died during pregnancy (or up to six weeks after the end of pregnancy) is that that corresponds to 10.9 women per 100,000 giving birth. That doesn't make it any less terrible, but then again that is just 0.000109%. But, does the number now seem less high, somehow?

Well, what about if I tell you that that number is 24% higher than it was in the period 2017-19. It's still not a high proportion of the total number of women who were pregnant and who gave birth, but surely – understanding the background, the context, the baseline – that this represents a 24% increase (that's an increase, not a decrease: that number is getting worse, not better), well surely that is suddenly a greater cause for concern.

Do you see what I mean? We need to understand the context for the figures to make sense.
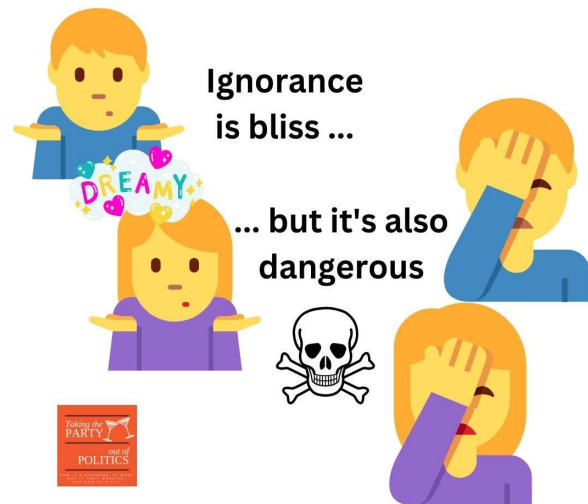
7https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/adultsmokinghabitsingreatbritain/2019#the-proportion-who-are-current-smokers-in-the-uk-its-consistent-countries-and-local-areas-2011-to-2019

8https://www.statista.com/statistics/423001/cigarette-smoking-in-great-britain-by-gender/

9https://www.npeu.ox.ac.uk/assets/downloads/mbrrace-uk/reports/maternal-report-2022/MBRRACE-UK_Maternal_Report_2022_-_Lay_Summary_v10.pdf

If I had just started with the fact that the number is 24% higher than in the last recorded period, then you might think that something truly awful was happening. But if I tell you that it is 10.9 women per 100,000 giving birth, or 0.000109% … well, that doesn't make it better, or even make it less awful, but it does give us the right context to understand what the figures mean.

And, what would be the right response? Well, probably to work out why things are getting worse, and not getting better. But also, not to panic.

Well: A recent UK poll illustrates how ignorance, reinforced by media and, to their shame, government, can encourage potentially dangerous prejudices. For example, 51% of the UK believe that violent crime is rising, when it has actually fallen over the past 7 years.

Let me tell you about some other misinformed beliefs (based on the responses to that survey). They are not maliciously held beliefs. But they do skew the rest of the way we understand the world (true figures in brackets):

- Britain's immigrant population is 31% (13%);

- £24 of every £100 is lost to benefit fraud (£0.70);

- 15% of girls under 16 get pregnant (0.6%);

- 29% of respondents believe that more is spent on Jobseekers' Allowance than on pensions (15 times more is spent on pensions).

I hope you can see that, if you happened to be one of the people who had been given the impression that the first, higher figure was the correct one, you might be forgiven for thinking that the world was a pretty terrible place. That the country had gone to the dogs.
But it hasn't. As we can see from the second, accurate figure.

We need to make sure that we have accurate, up to date information.
We need to agree on the facts. We can't have political discussion descending into whether my statistics are more accurate than yours. Statistics should be … statistics. If they have been well recorded, and meaningfully presented (so we understand the implication), then they are just the facts. We can have a political discussion about what we should do, in the light of the facts. But we shouldn't be arguing about what the facts are.

Democracy only works if the people have access to information, to understanding
Government without objective data: Leads to government by prejudice and assumption

Of course, in fact, I am far from the first person to have noticed all of this.
Let me tell you about two different types of initiatives which are trying to address both the misconceptions in our heads (because our information is out of date) and the misconceptions which we are sometimes led to believe, because our politicians are not using statistics accurately.

First, if you haven't already heard of it, you should have a look at the *Gap Minder* website, in particular at *Dollar Street*[10]. *Gap Minder* is trying to help us all to have a clearer understanding of the world, by helping us to think again about the assumptions we have about the world. *Gap Minder* "identifies systematic misconceptions about important global trends and proportions and uses reliable data to develop easy to understand teaching materials to rid people of their misconceptions"[11]. And *Dollar Street* is one of the ways that *Gap Minder* does this. "Imagine the world as a street ordered by income. Everyone lives somewhere on the street. The poorest lives to the left and the richest to the right. Everybody else live somewhere in between." And what *Dollar Street* does is to help us to try to relate to those people, all over the world, by giving us pictures of ordinary people, giving us a little window into their lives.

10https://www.gapminder.org/dollar-street/map

11https://www.gapminder.org/about/

And, starting with the founder of *Gap Minder* (a Swedish public health official called Hans Rosling), the idea is to help us to understand the real state of the world.
It could be better, certainly. But it might actually be better than you think.

Well, that's one example. It's a really good one; it is trying to help us to keep up to date with the way the world is today. I really recommend that you have a look at it.

But, next, what about something more directly related to 'Fake News'?
Have you heard of *Full Fact*[12]? *Full Fact* is a charity; an independent organisation which checks up on what information is being used, what figures are being quoted, by politicians and by others. *Full Fact* starts from the same understanding we have here, that: "bad information promotes hate, damages people's health, and hurts democracy".

What does *Full Fact* actually do?
First, they **fact check claims made by politicians, public institutions and journalists, as well as viral content online**. It is important for us all to have information we can trust. How else are we going to understand what the truth is about the situation, and how else are we going to know whether our politicians are doing a good job on our behalf.
They also **follow up on fact checks.** By asking people to correct the record when they get things wrong, we can stop and reduce the spread of bad information.
It's great that there are organisations like *Full Fact*, out there, doing this. There are others, too. Some media organisations have their own, in-house fact checking organisations (for example, the BBC has a *Reality Check* section). Some websites and some media outlets are trying to introduce a way of helping you to know whether the information on a web page is true, or just designed to look true, as a way of misleading you.
Sounds good. Organisations like *Gap Minder*, to update us on basic information about the world: a good way to keep abreast of our understanding of our place in the world, and of what other people and other countries are like. Organisations like *Full Fact*, to double check the information which is thrown about – and at us – in the media and by our politicians.

Well, the one thing which I regret about organisations like *Gap Minder* and *Full Fact* is that they are charities. They are supported by individual donations, from people like you and me, as well as a few large donations from some big donors. I mean, it's great that they are supported. But I am always a little mixed, when I know that the organisations doing the really important stuff are also having to spend a lot of their time fundraising. Making sure that the donations keep coming in.

Have you ever thought about how much of a Charity's turnover is spent on fundraising, and how much goes on what the Charity is actually there to do? There has been a study[13] suggesting that the British public would be comfortable with a Charity spending only 58% of its income on actually helping beneficiaries, and up to 42% on fundraising, campaigning, and running costs. Maybe. Of course, for *Full Fact* or *Gap Minder*, they don't have any beneficiaries, in the sense that they don't directly provide money or services to targeted individuals. They only have running costs, and then we all benefit from the information and clarity which is provided. A 2018 report[14] identifies an average spend of 10% of income being spent on fundraising, by the top 100 fundraising charities; but that average is the average of huge range of actual spending: from 38% by Crisis to 0.6% by the National Trust.

12https://fullfact.org/

13https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/-ideal-charity-would-spend-42-per-cent-of-income-on-campaigning-fundraising-and-running-costs-.html

14https://www.charityfinancials.com/insights/insider/fundraising-how-much-does-it-really-cost-charities

It would be a mistake to make organisations like that into a part of our government. It is important that they should remain independent. But, I do sort of also regret that we can't just find a way of funding the best charities, the ones which are doing the work which is making the world a better place, for thousands or millions of people, from some sort of central, public purse, without making all the charities also into fundraising machines.

Anyway. Perhaps that's just my problem. Perhaps having these organisations all putting a significant proportion of their time and money into fundraising is just the way of the world. Perhaps I just need to get over it. But I do wonder, if we really need this stuff to ensure that we are basing our decisions, and forming our opinions of how well our politicians and government are doing, that we are basing those decisions on the best, most accurate information … well, perhaps we should be funding it is some sort of way so that it is able to be independent, but is also able to just get on with the work, and not have to be going, cap in hand, to ask for more money all the time. A sort of *Citizen Information* resource, for everyone, funded by the national (taxation) purse.

Citizen Information

**Accurate
Up to date
Information**

MYTHS vs

FACTS

Taking the
PARTY
out of
POLITICS
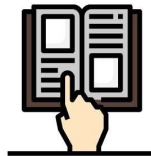
**We need to
agree on
the facts**

So, that's it. Citizen Information.

With *Citizens' Assemblies*, we have Citizens (not elected politicians, who are too worried about their chances of getting re-elected) trying to work out how best to address the real challenges of our world: the *Wicked Issues.* With *Citizen Scrutiny*, we have Citizens (not elected politicians, who are too worried about being good party members, and advancing their own careers) who are checking up on what our Government and Ministers are doing. And with *Citizen Government*, we have the idea of people like us – rather than career politicians – being the government. Or, at least, doing at least part of the work of government.

To underpin all of that, we would need to be sure of two things. First, that we were basing our decisions on the basis of clear facts. On the best advice.

What do you think?
Could we really manage to get beyond a world of 'fake news'?
We have to admit that there has always been 'fake news'. Churchill was just one of the people to suggest that there are 'lies, damned lies, and statistics' – by which he meant that the selective use of just some information could lead to even more misleading than a lie. And we have been aware that politicians have tried to put the best 'gloss' on any situation – what we call 'spin'. But it would be important not to become Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng, and to have politicians ignoring the bodies which are there to provide them with solid information, and with the best assessment of the impact of their ideas. Could we learn to rely on real data, rather than on just who shouts the loudest?
What do you think?

And, the second thing that we would need to be sure of – if we were going to go down the route of having a really effective Citizen Government – would be that we were sharing all the best ideas – not just from the Citizens who are involved in the delivery of Citizen Government at any particular time, but from any of us. Because none of us is as clever as all of us together. Now that is what we are going to look at next time. *Citizen Thinking and Ideas*.

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.