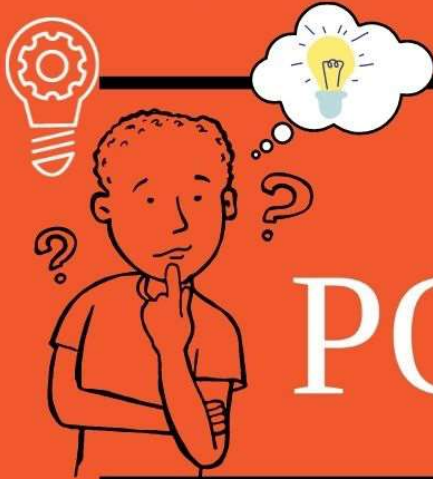


Episode 32:

Taking the
PARTY



out of
POLITICS

Citizen Thinking

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 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 are also sharing some of the best of YOUR ideas, about how
to make things work a bit better.

Welcome to episode 32 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.

Citizen Thinking

Today, we're going to continue that process, by looking at the idea of *Citizen Thinking*.

Now, the starting point here is that: none of us is as clever as all of us together.

I mean, we have always known that. Medieval Kings and Queens had advisors – for example, the Privy Council – and there are all sorts of specialists and experts who work within the Civil Service, in Universities, and for Lobby Groups.

This is not an argument for not having experts. But it is an argument for not believing that the experts are the only ones who can have good ideas. And it is also an argument for not believing that you only need to listen to just one expert at a time. Many different points of view, many different ideas, altogether, give us a richer and fuller understanding.

The point here is not just about all the people whose job it is to come up with good ideas. The point is that, from time to time, any of us might come up with a new way of thinking about things. A new perspective. A new idea.

But how would anyone else know? If you had a great idea, who would you tell? Who would listen?

Well, if we are going to try to have the most effective Government, delivering the best services for the best value, then we need to work out if there is a way of sharing all of the best ideas. And, also, a way of filtering out the very best of all of them.

Gather stones together

This is a slightly different possibility, when compared with the other ideas we have discussed in this series. Sort of a third answer; perhaps more of a way of changing the system, rather than changing the way we use the system. But still on more or less the same theme - of gathering the best ideas together, and of engaging the public.

Citizens' Assemblies bring together representatives of the public to engage on a particular issue, to answer a particular question (or to address a particular topic). Citizens' Assemblies are a great way of engaging the public to address the *wicked issues*, and to make it possible for our elected representatives to act (with less fear of suffering electoral consequences).

However, Citizens' Assemblies are set up by government. The terms of reference are set up by government, and the topic or question is chosen or phrased by government. That's great for the purposes of the Citizens' Assemblies. But, there is still more that we – the public – could do.

Lots of us have good ideas. In fact, it doesn't matter how clever any one person is. No one can have as many good ideas on their own as all of us can have together.



So, how would we gather together the best ideas?
And how would we sort out the ones which were really, really good?
We have touched on this before. Technology is moving on.

There are platforms where we can engage with essential information. The best ideas. Background details. *Gap Minder*, for example, or even the Social Media version of sharing Gap Minder like information in a gentle competition with your friends, such as the *Talk Together* quiz app. The stuff which demonstrates that we understand, and that we have thought about context and implications¹.

There are platforms where ideas are shared. There are tools which enable those ideas to be sifted, amalgamated, combined, and sifted again. There are tools which enable us to demonstrate the thinking and the logic behind the ideas.

There are platforms where our thoughts about ideas are sifted. YouGov is a little bit like that – it throws out some comments at you, and asks what you think of those comments. Or voting for your favourite competitor on a reality TV show. There are elements here of a popular sifting.

Another is the stock market. It's not always perfect. But the stock market does collate the thoughts and expectations of everyone who is – quite literally – putting their money where their mouth is: by buying the things which they think are going to be worth having, and by selling the things which they think are not going to be worth having.

Or, indeed, any supply and demand situation.
We will pay more for a cold drink if we can buy it when and where we want it – out at the beach on a hot day – than we would if we were buying a multi-pack of exactly the same drink at the supermarket close to home (although, perhaps it wouldn't be chilled, at least at that point). We are prepared to pay more than the price we could have paid, because we want it more, at that point (on the beach), in that condition (chilled). So the price is higher.

So, this is the suggestion:
It would be possible to start to encourage (as many members as possible of) the public to engage in an on-going sharing of ideas. Perhaps also in an on-going sharing and updating of context and information. Demonstrating that we are up to date, and that we understand things. Perhaps that we understand the key information as provided by a new type of media.

In due course, it might even be possible to put all our best ideas together, to develop our own manifesto.

Create our own list of the things which we want our politicians to deliver.
Now, who would like to stand for election to deliver what we the people actually want?

¹For example: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=si.peb.clients.talktogether_quiz

So, how would this work, in practice?

In practice, there would have to be two parts to this. Possibly three.

First, there is the gathering of the best ideas.

Second, there is some way of filtering all the ideas, so that we have the very best ideas.

And, perhaps, third, there is some way of working out what really is the best thing to do.

Not just to act because an idea sounds good, but to look at all the implications, and to try to make the very best guesses about the future.

Let's take an example idea, and follow it through the three stages of this process.

Let's imagine that we reckon that it would be a good idea if **NO** heavy goods vehicles (trucks and lorries) were allowed to travel in the fast lane of any dual carriageway or motorway. You may have been stuck behind one lorry, in the fast lane of a two or three lane carriageway, as it gradually – oh, so gradually – edges past another lorry. Perhaps the overtaking one is travelling a mile an hour faster than the other. Perhaps not even that much more. I have certainly been stuck behind such a pair of lorries, sometimes for 5 or 10 minutes, as one tries to creep past the other. And the result is not just that passenger vehicles get backed up, behind the lorries. It is also that drivers get frustrated, and then start to drive faster, in some sort of attempt to make up the time wasted, stuck behind the lorries. Faster – which makes it both less environmentally friendly, but which also makes it much more dangerous, for everyone else on the road.

Well, let's consider how we would put this idea out into the world: **NO heavy goods vehicles should be allowed to travel in the fast lane of any dual carriageway or motorway.** How would we put it out there?

Let's work through those different stages.

First, gathering ideas together.

This is actually just a technical solution. At one level, not much more sophisticated than the comments sections at the foot of articles of online media outlets. Lots of people already post their ideas, their reactions, what they think of an article. Well, there are lots of fairly straightforward options for collating ideas, which don't have to be much more sophisticated than this.

It might help to have people try to categorise their ideas a bit, so that they can be sorted. Perhaps use a basic web form, so that it can be identified as something which refers to transport rather than to defence, something which is urgent or something which is not urgent.



This is actually already in line with the **Government Digital Strategy**.

Action 14 says that: Policy Teams will use digital tools and techniques to engage with and consult the public.

And, thinking about our idea about lorries in the fast lane, we would fill in an online form, indicating that it is concerned with transport, that it isn't urgent, that it might be about improving public safety. That it might be about making travel on the motorway network safer, and about making it more environmentally efficient. And so on. Sort of like putting

tags on a web page, or hashtags # on a Twitter post, so that it will appear in certain targeted searches.

Not particularly complicated, technically. The complicated bits come next – working out how to do anything with this vast pool of ideas and suggestions.

So, that takes us to the next stage.

Second: filtering all those ideas. How do we work out which ideas are the very best ones, the ones which we should really think about seriously? I mean, we can't realistically take on board 69 million new ideas (one per person in the UK) every week; or even every year. OK, well, have you ever heard of the [Wisdom of Crowds](#)?

The idea of the 'Wisdom of Crowds' dates back quite a long time. For example, a British statistician called Francis Galton was supposed to have been at an agricultural fair in 1906, and to have observed a competition to guess the weight of an ox, once it had been slaughtered and butchered. The story goes that the 800 people who guessed, some experts such as farmers and butchers, some less expert, well, between them, the AVERAGE of all the guesses was amazingly close to the exact number. The average of all the guesses was 1,197 pounds, when the actual weight was 1,198 pounds.

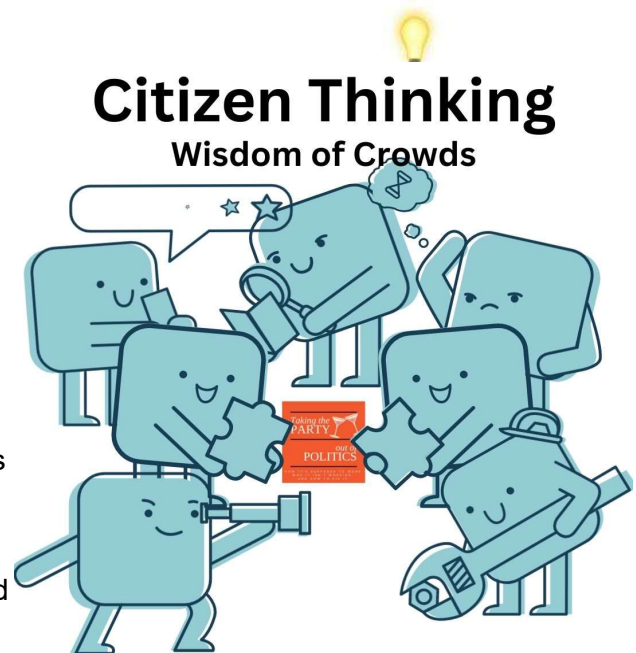
Well, this is an idea to take carefully. The average of all knee-jerk reaction, uninformed, unreflected, unexamined opinions in the UK might not necessarily be best policy. Opinions which are reached on the basis of 'feeling', or prejudice, rather than clear, good information. But, on the other hand, whilst all number one records aren't brilliant, and not all the best records made it to number one, most of the very best records have made it somewhere high up the charts.

In other words, if there was a way of sharing the wisdom of crowds, the insight of everyone, together, then perhaps there would be a way of sorting through all the ideas. If you think back to the estimates about the weight of the ox, the people who put in their guesses probably stopped to think about it. Had a walk around the ox. Thought about other oxen which they had seen before. Compared it to their mother in law. Well, probably not the last one. But you see what I mean? The average of all those guesses was not just an average of a bunch of random numbers. It was the average of some very carefully considered estimates.

Attempts to do this – to share the Wisdom of Crowds – are still being developed, and they are called 'Decision Markets'.

How would you set things up to get the best from Wise crowds and decision markets: sharing (and identifying) the best thinking? Well, something along these lines:

1. Diversity of opinion: each person should have some private information, even if it's just an eccentric interpretation of the known facts.
2. Independence: opinions are not determined by the options people see around them.



3. Decentralization: people are able to specialize and draw on local knowledge.
4. Aggregation: some mechanism for turning collective judgements into a collective decision.

If a group satisfies these conditions, its judgement is likely to be accurate.

Why?

It's not quite a mathematical truism, however much we might like it to be.

'If you ask a group of diverse, independent people to make a prediction or to estimate a probability, and then average out those estimates, the errors each of them makes in coming up with an answer will cancel themselves out. Each person's guess has two components: information and error. Subtract (cancel out) the error, and you're left with the information.' p10 (The Wisdom of Crowds)

As long as there was good information in there in the first place.

Diversity expands the set of possible solutions and allows problems to be conceptualized in novel ways. It also makes it easier to make decisions based on facts, rather than on influence, authority, or group allegiance. (P36, paraphrased)

'...a large group of diverse individuals will come up with better and more robust forecasts and make more intelligent decisions than even the most skilled "decision makers"' p32

Now, this is complicated stuff. There could even be bits done by automated computer algorithms, as we are seeing now, with things like decisions on whether or not to give mortgages to people, or whether such-and-such a prisoner should be considered for parole.

It is important that this sort of combination of the wisdom of crowds and group decision making is not made into the final decision on things. There has to be at least one other step before putting something into policy. Perhaps two or more other steps. But, before we get to that, there are lots of different bits which need to be brought into ensure that good Group Decision Making is taking place.

Group Decision Making

Groups decision making is decision making in groups consisting of multiple members/entities. The challenge of group decision is deciding what action a group should take. There are various systems designed to solve this problem.

Formal systems

- Consensus decision-making tries to avoid "winners" and "losers". Consensus requires that a majority approve a given course of action, but that the minority agree to go along with the course of action. In other words, if the minority opposes the course of action, consensus requires that the course of action be modified to remove objectionable features.
- Voting based methods
- Range voting lets each member score one or more of the available options. The option with the highest average is chosen. This method has experimentally been shown to produce the lowest Bayesian regret among common voting methods, even when voters are strategic.
- Majority requires support from more than 50% of the members of the group. Thus, the bar for action is lower than with unanimity and a group of "losers" is implicit to this rule.
- Plurality, where the largest block in a group decides, even if it falls short of a majority.
- Dictatorship, where one individual determines the course of action.

Decision making in social setting

See also: Groupthink

Decision making in groups is sometimes examined separately as process and outcome. Process refers to the group interactions. Some relevant ideas include coalitions among participants as well as influence and persuasion. The use of politics is often judged negatively, but it is a useful way to approach problems when preferences among actors are in conflict, when dependencies exist that cannot be avoided, when there are no super-ordinate authorities, and when the technical or scientific merit of the options is ambiguous.

In addition to the different processes involved in making decisions, group decision support systems (GDSS) may have different decision rules. A decision rule is the GDSS protocol a group uses to choose among scenario planning alternatives.

- Gathering involves all participants acknowledging each other's needs and opinions and tends towards a problem-solving approach in which as many needs and opinions as possible can be satisfied. It allows for multiple outcomes and does not require agreement from some for others to act.
- Sub-committee involves assigning responsibility for evaluation of a decision to a sub-set of a larger group, which then comes back to the larger group with recommendations for action. Using a sub-committee is more common in larger governance groups, such as a legislature. Sometimes a sub-committee includes those individuals most affected by a decision, although at other times it is useful for the larger group to have a sub-committee that involves more neutral participants.
- Participatory, where each actor would have a say in decisions directly proportionate to the degree that particular decision affects him or her. Those not affected by a decision would have no say and those exclusively affected by a decision would have full say. Likewise, those most affected would have the most say while those least affected would have the least say.

Plurality and dictatorship are less desirable as decision rules because they do not require the involvement of the broader group to determine a choice. Thus, they do not engender commitment to the course of action chosen. An absence of commitment from individuals in the group can be problematic during the implementation phase of a decision.

There are no perfect decision-making rules. Depending on how the rules are implemented in practice and the situation, all of these can lead to situations where either no decision is made, or to situations where decisions made are inconsistent with one another over time.

Moral dimension of decision making

The ethical principles of decision making vary considerably. Some common choices of principles and the methods which seem to match them include:

- the most powerful person/group decides (method: dictatorship or oligarchy)
- everyone participates in a certain class of meta-decisions (method: parliamentary democracy)
- everyone participates in every decision
- direct democracy, consensus decision making

There are many decision-making levels having a participation element. A common example is that of institutions making decisions that affect those for whom they provide. In such cases an understanding of what participation level is involved becomes crucial to understand the process and power structures dynamics.

Control-Ethics. When organisations/institutions make decisions, it is important to find the balance between the parameters of control mechanisms and the ethical principles which ensure 'best' outcome for individuals and communities impacted on by the decision. Controls may be set by elements such as Legislation, historical precedents, available resources, Standards, policies, procedures and practices. Ethical elements may include equity

Perhaps this needs to involve some element of 'gamification'.

Not "deliberative polls", but rather more like fantasy football, with ranking, and super forecasting mixed in

Owen Jones: The Internet as the heart of the democratic revolution

... the rise of the Internet and, in particular, social media provide fresh opportunities for new movements to link together. So far, they have failed to do so in a coherent way. They have to do so, and to start organising around similar demands, because - like Britain - they will find it impossible to change their country alone.

The Establishment p 312

Information, set out both sides, rank them

Then background reading

Read and re rank

There's at least one website out there which is already doing something very much like this. Like a more sophisticated, more involved version of YouGov. You might find it interesting, in terms of methods of informing and introducing background info. It's called Open Up UK (<http://www.openupuk.org/>)

Open Up UK tries to explore what we think about things, by getting us to share our opinions on different ideas. Not just the big idea (such as should the UK leave the EU), but on all the little ideas which are behind it (such as would the UK be better able to control immigration if it left the EU, or our influence in the world would be greater if we left the EU). Unpicking the big ideas, and clarifying for ourselves what our own opinions are on all the little ideas which are behind those big ideas – well, that can help us to understand whether we really agree with what we thought was our opinion on the big idea.

So, it's not easy. But the basic idea isn't that complicated. We have a big pool of ideas. We allow everyone to have time to have a look at them, and we allow a system of online voting for the best ideas, to allow the best ideas to be filtered out.

And, where would this leave our idea of not letting lorries into the fast lane of the motorway or dual carriageway? Well, if enough people thought that it was a good idea, and voted for it, then it would gradually drift towards the top of the list of suggestions.

But, we can't just stop there. A concerted campaign by a pressure group, for example, might bring an idea to the top, even though it wasn't that good an idea, or wasn't an idea which would help everyone. Just because a lot of people have voted for our idea of keeping lorries out of the fast lane, doesn't mean that there might not be unintended consequences. Perhaps a knock on effect on food supplies. Perhaps an increase in greenhouse gas emissions from transport, rather than a reduction.

We need at least another stage.

So, Third, even though we now have a much shorter, condensed, combined list, how do we work out whether we should really take any of those ideas on, and really put them into practice? Well, have you ever heard of [Superforecasters](#)?

The idea of Superforecasters is that there are some people who are really good at assessing things. Superforecasters mostly deal with predictions about the future. Is there likely to be a revolution in such-and-such a country in the next 5 or 10 years? Is there likely to be a nuclear conflict in Europe as a result of the conflict in Ukraine? Questions like that.

How do they do this, and why are they good at it? Well, there's a long answer to that, but it involves people who are patient, and who are prepared to look objectively at all the information, people who are good at balancing pros and cons of different information, people who listen to information, but who are not necessarily swayed by that information. People who are doing their thinking independently, rather than a committee of people, together in a room who might be swayed by the strongest personality in the room.

There are lots of variables, and if you are interested in learning more about Superforecasters, then it's a really interesting subject. You will find links in the transcript of this podcast, on our website at www.talktogether.info.

Anyway, with our first filtering of ideas, so that everyone and anyone gets to contribute to what they think are good ideas, possibly even with some computer algorithm doing some of the sorting as well, we could ask our specialist, Superforecasters to have a careful look at the top, most popular ideas.

Thinking about our idea about lorries in the fast lane: would there be unintended consequences, such as delays in food deliveries for perishable food stuffs, like vegetables and salad? Would there be an impact on greenhouse gas emissions. It is important that



there is a pool of independent thinkers, who are given the space and resources to analyse these ideas, before they are genuinely put forward to our policy makers to make into reality.

Could you be a Superforecaster? Well, why not? It could be anyone. The point about Superforecasters is that they are not necessarily specialists in the field they are working on, only that they are prepared to put in the thinking and the learning to be able to make good decisions. In fact, just being involved in the first, initial sifting of the best ideas is a little bit like being a mini-superforecaster, anyway!

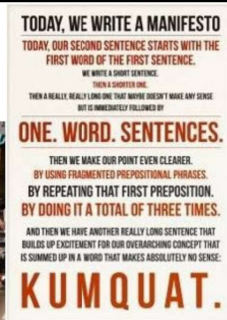
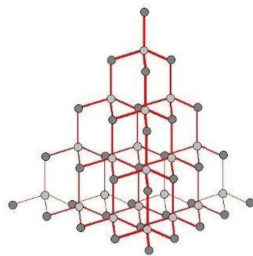
Successful group decisions

P65

One key to Successful group decisions is getting people to pay much less attention to what everyone else is saying, ...(because) collective decisions are only wise when they incorporate lots of different information.

In summary:

- Share ideas – a technical infrastructure, using technology intelligently.
- Vote online – make informed choices, not just random opinions; linked up thinking about the future, not just isolated opinions.
- People will rise to the responsibility.
- Democratically develop a popular manifesto from these ideas and choices.
- Then elect people to make it happen (rather than elect them to choose what happens).



Truth be told, this might be more than we are ready for.

But it is important to have this in the backs of our minds.
Because it is nearly possible already...

But, why should we be thinking of doing any of this, anyway?

What are the issues, what are the facts what are the options, what do you think

Together, not separately

It's great that there is a plethora of different lobby groups about which people are passionate. It's great that there is passion, thought, feeling going into each issue. But we shouldn't actually be run by the ideas which come just from the people who are best at getting those ideas heard. It should be about the quality of the ideas, not about how good you are at lobbying. Or even how much money or power or connections your lobby group has.

To run a country, all these things need to come together.

The existing political parties have clearly failed to take at least some ideas, and at least some pressure groups seriously, or at least have failed to address their concerns and aims seriously. It seems as though they are happy that our passions should be divided. Divide and do whatever they want, rather than reflect what we want.

Have you ever heard the poem:

"First they came . . ." by Martin Niemoller

First, they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

We need to rally around the best ideas, no matter whether they have the biggest budgets, or not.

The loudest voices, or not.

Or whether they went to school with the right people. Or not.

If we combine our passions, we can be heard more clearly together. We can convince others, and make it possible for everyone to understand why our issues are important. We can set out what could be done, how it could be different, and how it could make things better.

It might have been true that we might once have needed wise heads to rule over us. But we have grown up. We have learned. We can take part, we have ideas to contribute. And we should come together, talk things through together, and see that we are listened to. Together.

Citizen Thinking

Together, not separately

"First they came . . ." by Martin Niemoller

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Behind all of this is a very basic formula:
People + good information = good decisions

We need to be careful, not leaping before we are ready.

What other people are thinking

Be careful not to make news of other people's opinions (dependent news)

Herding

Thinking what other are thinking

Disclose information without hype or comment from people in positions of influence
(Wisdom of Crowds p 255)

Sharing knowledge is power

There are definitely some problems with Existing consultation models

Too much about detail

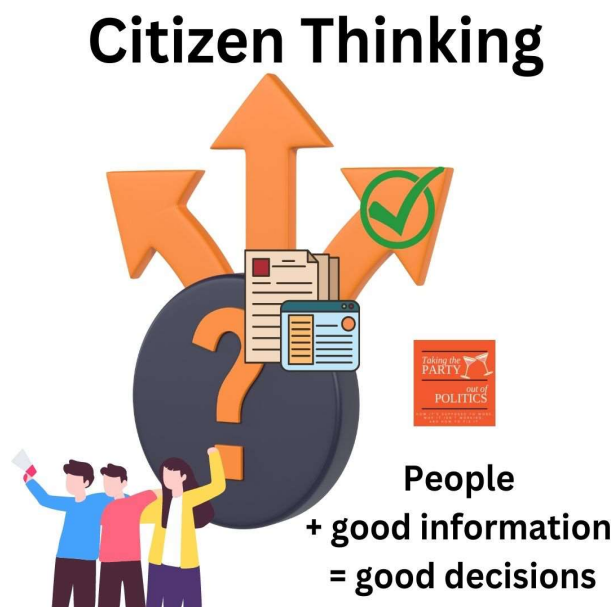
A way of saying we have consulted

Not sophisticated algorithm

But we do need to do better:

... we have to hope for some better prospect of expressing who we are, what we value in our state and our public services, and where we belong in the world.

Polly Toynbee and David Walker: Cameron's Coup p 300



So, that's it. Citizen Thinking and Ideas. Ideas and thinking from all of us. Gathered together into a great big database pool of ideas. Sorted. Perhaps a little bit by algorithm, automatically by computer, perhaps by some sort of decision market, with people voting for the best ideas, perhaps by people building their 'fantasy football of ideas' rating, by being really careful about the quality of the ideas they support, to ensure that people are doing so sensibly, thoughtfully. But using the insight and perspectives of everyone, in a decision market incorporating the **Wisdom of Crowds**. Then sorting the ideas again, in a very careful analysis by **Superforecasters**. Spending the time to assess things very carefully. The pros. The cons. The unintended consequences. The most likely real impact of a change.

And then putting these ideas to our policy makers. Those policy makers might be our elected politicians. They might be our members of Citizen Government. Perhaps a bit of both.

Armed with the best ideas, with all the best information to understand the implications and impact of those ideas, well, then perhaps we might actually get better government.

What do you think?

Could we really manage to get better government?

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.