

Episode 33:

Taking the
PARTY



out of
POLITICS

**Changing how we
use the system**

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

Welcome to episode 33 of Taking the Party out of Politics.

Today we are going to wrap up 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. And, in this
series, we have taken our understanding of the problems, our understanding of why things
aren't working as well as they should be working, and we have started 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 bring all those ideas together, by looking at the overall idea here:

Changing the way we use the system.

Or, if you like: **what we could all start doing, today**, to make things a little bit better.

Because, yes, the current system needs some tweaks. But those tweaks aren't going to happen overnight. In the meantime, what can we actually do, to make the existing system work a bit better, and perhaps even to hurry forward the day when we can tweak the system itself.

The way in which we use the current system

We need to look at whether there are better ways of communicating what we want to happen [rather than just to select a representative who is perhaps very slightly more interesting to us than any of the others on offer, and to be making that selection only once every 5 years].



We are not children who need to be led.

We are intelligent members of a mature democracy.

We value being part of a functioning society, and we are sufficiently well educated that we are able to think.

So, what could we do differently?



First today, we are going to look at a three of the big things which some people might think might be the best ways of getting the best out of our system today: whether people care enough, whether there should be more consultation, and whether there should be more petitions. Then we will look at what other things we could actually do.

First,

Is the problem that people don't care?

[Is the problem that people don't care?](#)

Absolutely not.

People are passionate about all sorts of stuff, and they campaign on all sorts of different things.

- Occupy the City.
- Marching against War. - **Iraq: the biggest ever march and it changed nothing**
- The Countryside Alliance.
- Protesting about student fees.
- **Climate; XR, Just Stop Oil**

Even professional associations protest – like teachers protesting about the government forcing all schools to become academies.



But when we campaign about such things, we are separate.

The thinking is not (obviously) linked up.

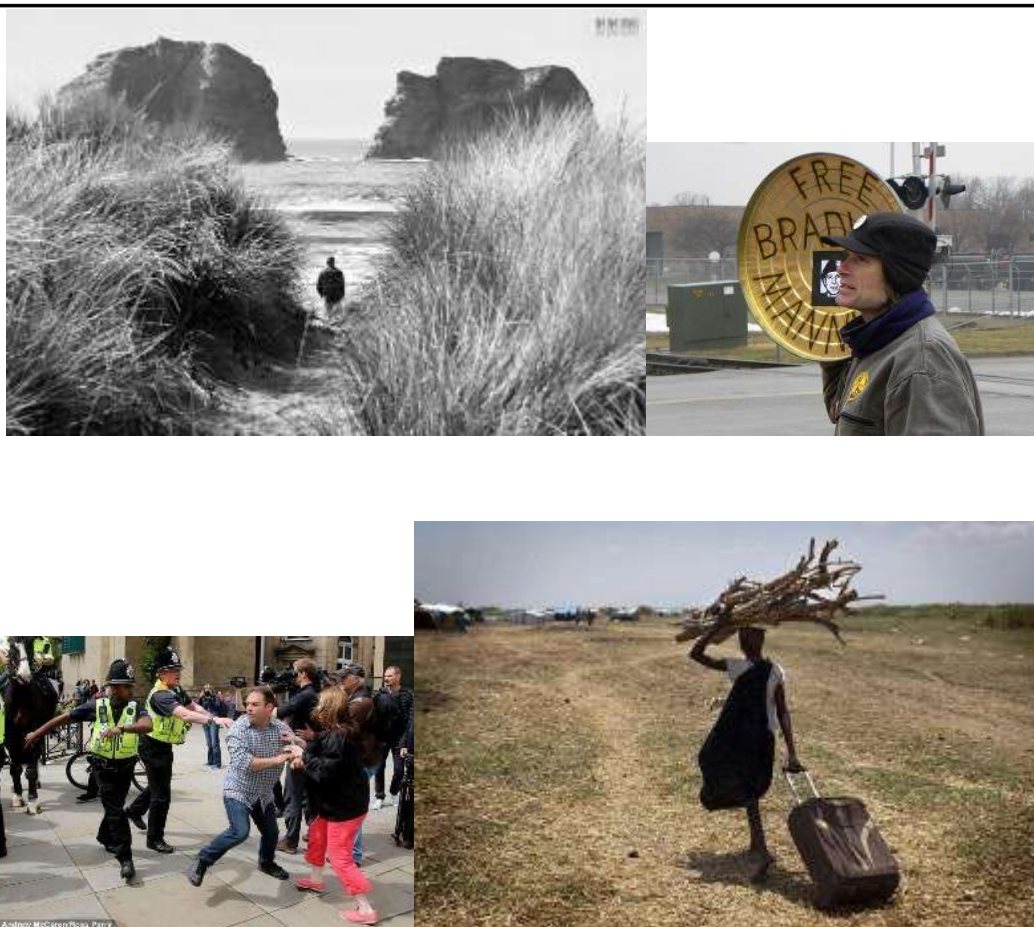
The government might make supportive or interested noises. Or not.

The government might actually discuss things. Or not.

But an expression of a million people walking in the street is actually pretty easily ignored.

The government might not actually do or change anything.

And, without looking at the linked-up implications of what we are all asking for, separately, it might actually be right not to do or change anything.



That said, we should not lose sight of the fact that some people are disengaged (or, at least, are at risk of becoming disengaged), because they don't believe that society (or government) cares about them, or has their interests at heart.

Young adults are now more individualist, doubtful about the value of state support and suspicious of redistribution through welfare. ... the young are less collectivist by instinct. ... They are not inactive over what they think are important, but drawn to single-issue politics.

Polly Toynbee and David Walker: Cameron's Coup p 286

Which one of the protests mentioned here actually made the government stop in its tracks and think again?

Actually, it wasn't the one which got most people out in the street.
It wasn't the one which lasted longest.

It was the professional association (and unions, and others, to be fair) – teachers getting together and stopping the government [forcing all schools to become academies](#).



Change the way ...

1. It's not that people don't care enough



... we use the system

We are stronger together.



Second

Should there be more consultation? Should there be more consultation?

Yes, but probably not in the way that you might think.

There is already quite a lot of consultation, mostly over small, local issues.

- Where should this road go – around your town, or through it?
- Should there be resident's parking outside your house?
- Should we build on the park near to where you live?

That's important, of course.

But that sort of consultation is limited, for two reasons.



First, the nature of being human is that we will think differently about something which is happening to us personally, rather than to everyone.

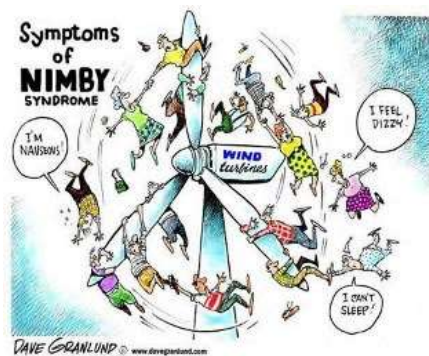
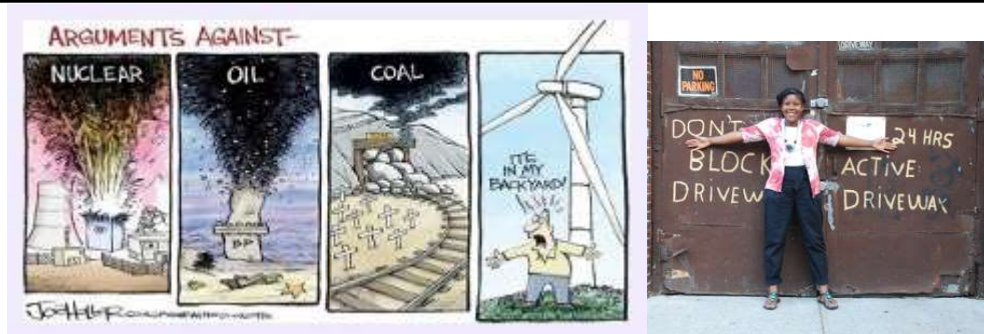
1. Should we house newly released young offenders somewhere, once they have finished their sentence, and help them to find rewarding lives?

Of course.

2. Should we house them next door to you?

Ah.

The answer might be different to the second question ...



Second, most consultations allow anyone to have their say.

And the authorities know that very few people will really understand everything.

The information and the context might be there, but most people either won't read it or won't understand it (it's not necessarily brilliantly explained!).

And so, consultations can be seen simply as a way of allowing the public to let off steam before the authorities do what they were going to do anyway.



That's not always true, of course.

There are some consultations which are genuinely undertaken by civil servants who really want to get the best input possible from the public.

But not always.

Consultation is hugely important.

We need to pool expertise.

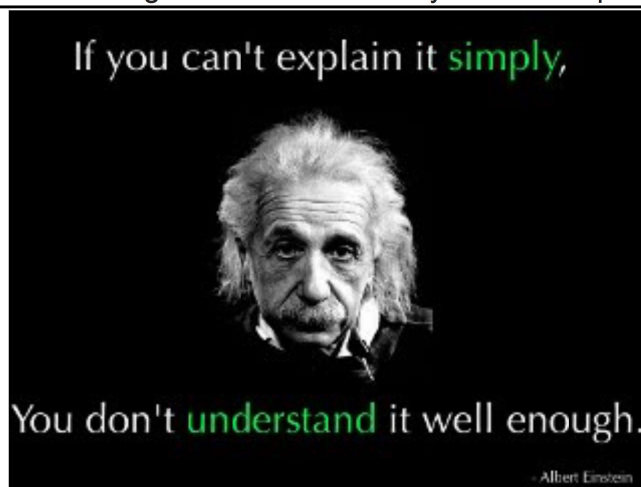
No politician, no civil servant, can have as many good ideas as can all of us together.

We all need to understand how things affect everyone.

We need to understand what the best advice is on the long-term impact, the long-term cost.
But it needs to be structured in a way which enables useful, constructive outcomes.

Not just something which is easy for a civil servant.

Not just something which suits a wealthy investor or private company – with good lobbyists.



Change the way ...

2. It's not that we need more consultation.



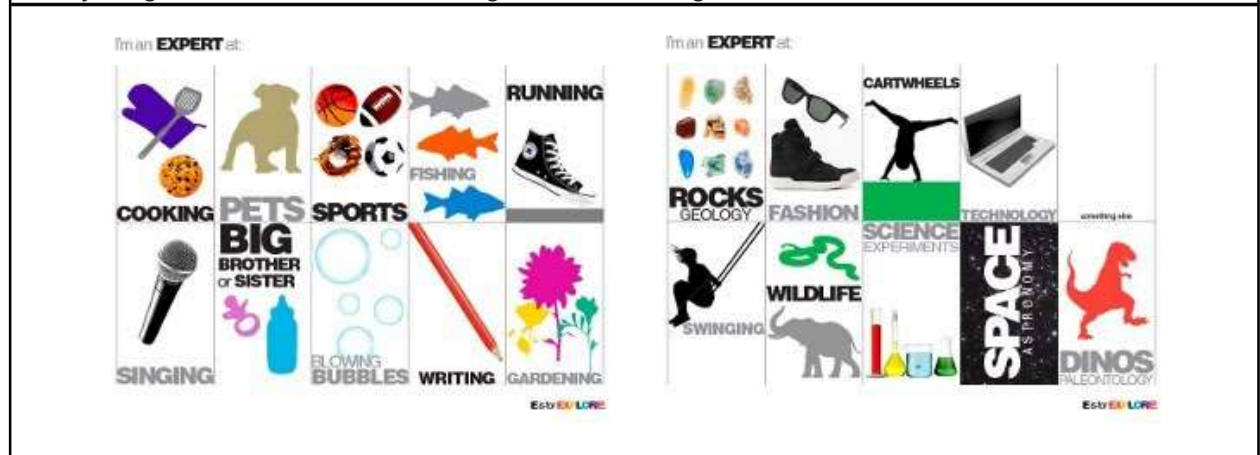
... we use the system

Respecting minorities, because that's important.

(I might be in the majority today, but I might be in the minority tomorrow, and I don't want to be in a country where an uncaring majority wouldn't listen to me)

Looking at solutions which are really good for the country, good for the people.

And, yes, good for the environment, good for our neighbours, and so on.



So how could we do that?



Third

Is the answer just to sign petitions? [Is the answer just to sign petitions?](#)

Is on line voting the answer?

Like [YouGov](#) or [Change.org](#) or [38 Degrees](#)?

Not on its own.

First, the same point applies here – it is important that the situation is explained before you **CLICK** to communicate your support.

Your informed, considered opinion is worth so much more than your initial reaction (which might be, for example, your reaction to only part of the story, or to an emotion-laden photograph).

YouGov[®]
What the world thinks

change
.org

Do we really value an opinion which consists of the quick clicks of 100,000 people who have linked through from a social media feed, read a one-sentence introduction, and looked at a mournful picture?

That's not a set of informed, considered opinions.

It doesn't reflect any real effort, and real commitment to thinking about the issue.

And so on-line petitions don't have the sort of impact [on government thinking, on policy] which they could have.



Change the way ...

**3. It's not that we need
more online petitions.**



... we use the system

YouGov, for example, ask interesting questions. But that is all they do.

There is no background information. No context.

Either you know, or you don't.

If you don't know, your vote counts as much as the opinion of someone who has just read about the issue in any one of our different newspapers. And even having read about it in a newspaper – well that doesn't necessarily make your opinion informed in a balanced, rounded way, does it? We all know that any one newspaper – even one which we might like – has a particular angle on things. A particular perspective. A particular agenda.

In fact, your *uninformed* opinion actually undermines an *informed* opinion.

A collection of (potentially) uninformed votes is too easy to justify ignoring.

Background Information



Background Information

Second, a set of votes on a single issue, in isolation, is also easy to justify ignoring.

Government involves more than just saying:

I want this one, and this one, and this one.

Government consists of making choices.

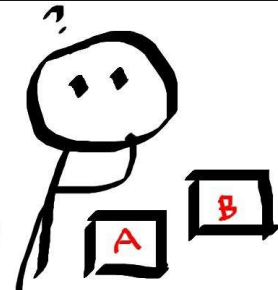
This, but (unfortunately) not this.

In fact, Politics is sometimes described as *The Art of the Possible* for exactly that reason.

No nation is ever rich enough, no budget is ever big enough, to do EVERYTHING.

Not even Norway.

Politics is about choosing to do *this thing*, but understanding that we will not therefore be able to do *this other thing* as well ; because we can't afford to do both.



And that can be pretty complicated.

Not impossible, as long as it is at a reasonably broad level, not too detailed.

Big issues, and general themes are possible.

We can't all get involved in every little detail.

But it is certainly possible for us to understand the big stuff, and to put our ideas together about it all.



So, our opinions have more power if they are combined across a range of linked (reasonably high level) themes.

And they have more power if they are properly informed.

And if we can demonstrate that our opinions are properly informed, then the expression of those opinions – whether through online surveys or demonstrations in the street – would carry more weight.



So, after considering those ideas – and finding that they are not the answer:
what can we do?

It's not that people are not voting enough.

Nor is it that they don't care.

The problem here is that the structure of the way things work not just enables, but *actively encourages* short-term thinking and a lack of (serious) consultation.



The problem is that we (have been taught to) think that the ballot box is enough to ensure that things are magically done better, simply through a change of colour at Westminster.

But it's not.

The next lot face:

- the same media pressure,
- the same need to grab headlines,
- the same pressures to avoid dealing with the *wicked issues*,
- the same urgency to make a mark. Any mark.



There are two perspectives which need to be taken here.

First, there is what we need to do as individuals, so that the ways in which our politicians and governments act are different.

Second, there is what we need to do in terms of looking at how we use our systems differently. We will look at that further in the next section.

As individuals, we need to ensure that we are better informed. And to ensure that our elected representatives know that we are better informed.

Not about scandal, or about the news of the moment. In fact, there are some interesting questions about whether the 'the news' is helpful to us.

As human beings, we are influenced by two strong tendencies. Tendencies which are, perhaps, innate parts of just being human.

The first tendency is the *negativity bias*. Essentially: we remember stuff which is bad more than we remember stuff which is good. This was important when we were still sitting around the camp fire, when we were nomadic hunter gatherers. It was important to be aware of dangerous stuff. It was important to be aware of what things might kill us or eat us. Better to have our awareness of dangers reinforced, even perhaps more than might strictly be necessary, than for us not to notice the warnings – because it only takes one missed warning for you to die.

But the world isn't like that, now. The world around us today simply isn't as dangerous as it was when we were nomadic hunter gatherers. We live longer, healthier, safer, more productive lives – even allowing for our tendency to over eat!

Our *negativity bias*, however, means that we are tuned to listen for bad stuff. We focus on the bad stuff. We notice it. That's what we remember. And that's what colours the way in which we see the world around us.

I'll give you a little example.

Towards the end of 2022, Oxfordshire County Council – after a long period of consultation – brought in some 'filters', at 6 points around the City of Oxford¹. These are traffic cameras which will count the number of times you drive down some of the key routes; routes across the city centre, and a couple of routes on inner ring roads. It isn't stopping anyone from driving on the roads. Just limiting driving on those roads to only twice a week (on average: 100 times a year is the actual limit).

The idea is to ease traffic on key roads, so that the buses operate more smoothly, so that there is more reason to take the buses in the first place.

The 'filters' won't stop you using those roads, just limit them. And it won't stop you driving from one end of the road to the other – because you could always go round the outer ring road, rather than the inner ring road, for example.

But some independent reporting² of this suggested that the 'Marxists' (not really sure why that came from, but I suppose that it is intended to be a term of abuse) at Oxfordshire County Council were going to 'lockdown' residents into their zones, to stop them visiting other zones. The reporting made it sound like some sort of post-

¹https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s63533/CA_NOV2922R06%20Annex%203%20-%20Consultation%20Brochure.pdf.

²Oxfordshire County Council Pass Climate Lockdown 'trial' to Begin in 2024

<https://www.visionnews.online/post/oxfordshire-county-council-pass-climate-lockdown-trial-to-begin-in-2024>

apocalyptic, fascist dictatorship (again, I'm not sure about the term 'Marxist', but we'll let that one go!).

It certainly made for attention grabbing headlines and reading. Because it sounded so negative. And we all have a tendency to fear that authorities might be out to try to control us. But it wasn't the way it was reported. Not at all.

Change the way ...

**learn
more**



**4. We need to do more
as individuals.**



... we use the system

The second human tendency, when it comes to news, is the *availability bias*. This means that we assume that the things which we have noticed (in the news) are relatively common. We hear stories about bombings, or child abductions, or terrorism, and those stories tend to stick in our minds. And what is then in our minds affects the way in which we view the world.

Even though the world is safer. Even though people live longer, better lives, we tend to see the world as more and more dangerous.

Perhaps this is an inevitable consequence of 24-hour news channels, and Twitter feeds, and Facebook 'bubbles'. Every digital and broadcast outlet is trying to grab our attention (because if nobody is paying attention, then they are not selling advertising, or not justifying what they are doing). And since every news outlet knows what will grab your attention, since they all know what will shock you, what will horrify you, what will make you click for more details ... well, what every news outlet does is to provide us with more and more extreme examples of what is happening in the world.

What we don't get is the news story that a reporter is standing in a place where today there is no conflict. What we don't get is the news story that today there are 137,000 fewer people living in extreme poverty than yesterday – even though that could have been the news story every day for the last 25 years¹.

Actually, the world is getting better. But that's not newsworthy. Actually, the world is getting safer. But that's not going to grab our attentions. There are challenges we really need to deal with on climate change, so perhaps that should always be the lead story in the news. But what we get is other stuff. Stuff which is likely to worry us. Stuff which is likely to frighten us. Stuff which makes us assume that the world is a dangerous place, and that most people in it are likely to be dangerous to us.

I worked in Cairo (and many other places around the world) for a while. When I said I was going there, many people were worried about me. The stories they had in their minds about Egypt were that it was a dangerous place. Beheadings in the desert. Tourists being machine-gunned on a coach. Yes, those things happened. But not that recently. And, every day, nearly 100 million people in Egypt DON'T die. Nearly 100 million people in Egypt are nice people. People who will smile and greet you when you walk past them in the street – even if you are walking through an area where tourists don't go. Of course, you have to be sensible. Don't take silly risks. But: are you going to not go outside in the UK, because there was a bomb outside a pop concert in Manchester several years ago?

Things happen in the world. But, every day, most people don't have a problem. Most people are happy, and most people are happy to exchange a smile, a nod, or a hello. And most people will help you if you have a problem.

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 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.

So, how do we do that?

Well, there are at least three ways which I would suggest.

Full Fact.
Dollar Street.
Knowledge Games.

Full Fact. Well, not just Full Fact. But Full Fact was the fact checking organisation which I first noticed, checking up on the accuracy of statistics which were being thrown around by politicians. People make mistakes. Sometimes, people just get the wrong end of the stick, and they quote a statistic out of context, or draw the wrong conclusions from the numbers. Sometimes, deliberately. Sometimes, just by mistake.

Fact Checking organisations, like Full Fact, and many other really good ones, exist to check the accuracy of the facts which have been used by politicians (and other public figures). They check the accuracy of the facts, so that we can check the validity of the conclusions which are being drawn from those facts. If the facts are wrong, or are in the wrong context, then perhaps the action which is being taken on the basis of those facts is also wrong. Or perhaps that action is going to be counterproductive, or not achieve its own objectives.

Fact Checking is slower than the headlines. The headlines want to be the first. They want to grab your attention. Fact Checking takes time. And a little bit of time, a little bit of perspective – well, that's a good thing.

Perhaps we should spend at least part of the time which we currently spend consuming 'The News', listening to (or reading) reports from Full Fact. Or listening to the radio or podcasts from programmes like 'More or Less', who check the numbers behind the stories. That might give us some extra perspective on the news stories. That might help us to listen to the news with a bit more understanding. To listen to the stories with a bit of a critical eye. Not just to assume that the first headline is correct. The first headline might just be the first impressions, from someone in the middle of a disaster situation. It might just be an attempt to make you buy this newspaper rather than that newspaper. But we shouldn't be using headlines, the kneejerk reaction of the moment, as a way of understanding the world.

Dollar Street is an initiative from <https://www.gapminder.org/>. Gap Minder started with the work of a Swedish public health official, Hans Rosling, and is continued now by the foundation which he and his family started.

Gap Minder is based on the fact that, at best, we probably remember statistics about the world based on what we learned at school. And, even when we learned those statistics, they were at least a few days – or perhaps weeks, or perhaps months, or perhaps years – out of date. The facts about the world change all the time. As soon as they have been collected, they have changed. And by the time they have been collected, and sorted, and published, they have changed. And if we only remember information about ‘poor countries’ from what we studied at school – and *how* many years ago was that? – then our understanding of the world is certainly out of date.

If we are viewing the world based on our misconceptions, then we are not understanding the world correctly. We form prejudices – even with the best will in the world – and we make assumptions. And those prejudices and assumptions are not helpful.

Dollar Street <https://www.gapminder.org/dollar-street> is part of the Gap Minder foundation, and aims to change our assumptions by comparing the facts of every day life around the world.

There are loads of other great tools on the Gap Minder website. Try the World View Upgrader <https://upgrader.gapminder.org/> – it’s a little quiz designed to help you to understand where your ‘knowledge’ about the world is out of date, or misplaced, or just wrong.

And, related to <https://upgrader.gapminder.org/>, there are other possible 'knowledge games'. I put one together. Talk Together is an app, available for free on Google Play, in the UK. It is based on the idea of a Trivial Pursuit type competition with friends, where the questions are statistics and facts about the UK, and about UK history. You could try that. And, you could make some suggestions about how it should be improved.

But the idea – I think – is a good one. Using the sorts of games which we like to play anyway – with friends, quizzes – perhaps we can keep our knowledge about the world ticking over.

What do you think?

Do you have any suggestions for how we could improve the Talk Together app?

And, why should you bother? Why should you care?

Well, I like this quotation, from Ken Follett. It's wasn't intended directly with reference to what we have been talking about, but I think it still applies.

If you don't take an interest, then what happens is your fault. (Ken Follett Winter of the World p554)

Well. Moving on from our understanding of the world – well, at the heart of this entire project is the idea that we could share our best ideas, and use the existing systems, slightly differently

This is the second thing which we could do, and it is really about all the things we have talked about in this series.

From Citizen Assemblies, to Citizen Scrutiny, to Citizen Government, to Citizen Information, to Citizen Thinking.

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. Beyond a world of 'fake news'. Being clear about reliable information, so that we really understand the world as it actually is. A pool of independent, Citizen Information.

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. *Citizen Thinking and Ideas*.

Here, we are inviting you to email us – or to message us through the Facebook page, or Instagram, or Twitter – but there might be technological solutions, too. What about a website where ideas could be pooled, and everyone could have a look at the ideas, and 'like' the ideas which really seemed to have something really good about them, so that the best ideas came to the top, and then we encourage our politicians to have a look at the best, publicly generated, publicly sorted, publicly rated and ranked ideas.

What do you think? Could we do that?

Well.

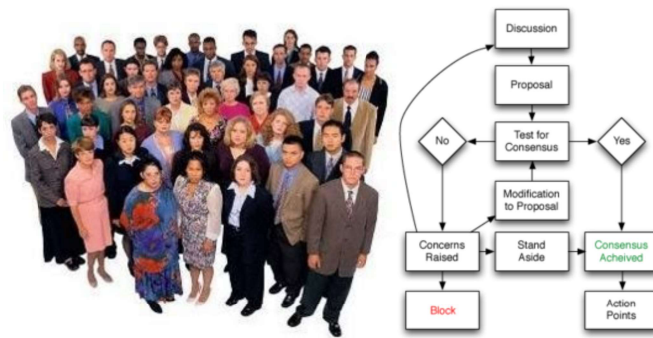
The technology is more or less there to enable us to do so, if we wanted to.

We need to

- Change the pressures on the system;
- Enable a system which allows (and encourages) politicians to represent us properly, and to be competent administrators. Possibly supported by more Citizen involvement in government – from voting and thinking, to checking and getting things done.

And, most of all, perhaps the simplest, and yet the most demanding of all, we need to

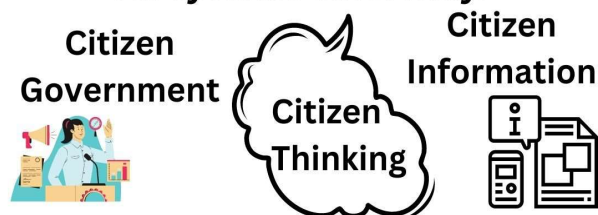
- Be better – and better informed – users of the system ourselves



Change the way ...



5. We need to use
our systems differently.



... we use the system

So, that's it. Changing the system – eventually. Changing the way we use the system – as soon as possible. And changing the way we are, ourselves: now. Or, at least, as soon as you have finished listening to this podcast.

Have a look at Gapminder. Have a look at Dollar Street. Perhaps test yourself on the Talk Together app – by playing a quiz game against your friends, just for fun. Make sure that you check out the stories behind the headlines, so that you understand what is actually happening – not just what some newspaper owner (or even an embittered campaigner with a blog) wants you to think.

What do you think? Could we really be better? Be better informed?

Be better at selecting and even at managing our governments?

And perhaps, eventually, to get better governments?

Let me say that I am far from perfect.

I do my best. But I know that it's still not good enough.

A bit like exercise, and not eating that extra chocolate biscuit.

I'm far from perfect. But I am trying to do better.

Thank you for listening

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

