

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 should 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 Episode Five of our special bonus mini-series, in which we will be looking a little more deeply into the **5 Impossible Puzzles of Political Participation**, from our perspective, as voters.

We first discussed these Impossible Puzzles during Season One of the ***Taking the Party out of Politics*** podcast. If any concept here doesn't immediately make sense, or if you feel that you want to learn more about that topic, please go back to listen to the appropriate earlier episode

Taking the Party out of Politics is joining you on a little journey, to explore the systems and functioning of Politics: systems which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of the time.

Left-wing or right-wing.

Intergovernmental Climate Change Summit, or Parish Council Zoom Meeting.

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

By understanding: what is supposed to happen.

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

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

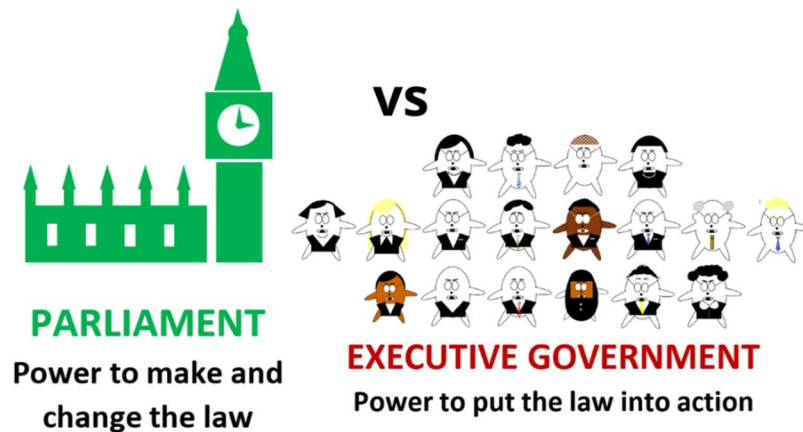
So, this is Episode Five of the **5 Impossible Puzzles of Political Participation** mini-series (5 puzzles, so you won't be shocked to learn that there will be 5 episodes in total, in this mini-series).

This episode is about the **Impossible Puzzle for Parliament and Government** – where we have one political party not only *running* the Government, but also controlling the system which *checks up* on the Government.

So, let's start at the beginning: **what's the difference between Parliament and Government?**

Sometimes, it can seem as though these are the same thing. But they absolutely are not.



The Role of Government



The Role of Parliament



The role of Government vs the role of Parliament

 <p>EXECUTIVE GOVERNMENT Power to put the law into action</p>	 <p>PARLIAMENT Power to make and change the law</p>
<p>Let's look at the difference between Parliament and the Government.</p> <p>Many people might think that they are the same thing, but they really aren't. And if we are clear about the differences, and about how they interact, we should be able to understand some other problems with how the system isn't working in our best interests.</p> <p>Let's start with Parliament.</p>	

Parliament

PARLIAMENT
Power to make and
change the law



Parliament is in two parts.

All the elected local representatives become Members of Parliament [MPs], in the House of Commons - 650 of them.	The 795 ¹ eligible members of the House of Lords are mostly appointed for life (not elected).
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Parliament is there to represent the interests of the people and the interests of the country.

Together, the two parts, the two Houses, the House of Commons and the House of Lords, together all of the members – the *elected* ones in the Commons and the *not-elected-but-appointed-for-life* ones in the Lords – together they are in Parliament to represent our interests, and to make sure that the Government takes our interests into account.

The Government needs Parliament to agree before it can make any new laws or raise any new taxes.

Sometimes, MPs get together in the House of Commons, and discuss things all together. In fact, the House of Commons isn't really big enough for all 650 MPs, and if they are all there (perhaps on days when something really important is being decided), then many of them have to stand.

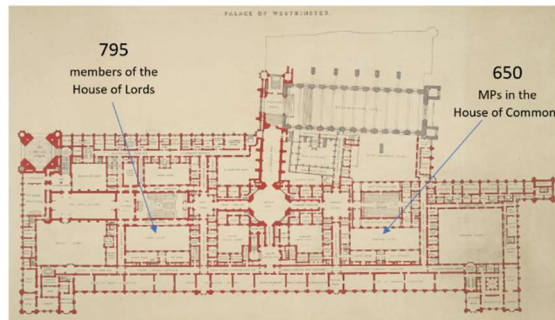
A lot of the time, MPs work in other rooms:

- some in the Palace of Westminster (which is the building we think of as 'Parliament'), and some in nearby buildings (for example, in Portcullis House, which is just across the road from the Palace of Westminster).
- Sometimes MPs are working in their offices. Perhaps individually; perhaps with their support staff (assistants, secretaries, researchers, and so on). Perhaps in small groups. Some of the time, that is in Westminster, and some of the time, that is back in their constituency – the constituency which they represent – perhaps speaking to some of their constituents who have problems or questions, perhaps working with local businesses or with the local Council. Making sure that our MP knows what is going on in their constituency, what the different needs and wants and preferences are, for all the people whom they represent.
- Sometimes, MPs are working in various larger spaces, meeting rooms, and so on. Perhaps in small committees, doing some detailed work together.

But, at least some of the time, MPs are working in their headline role, as Members of Parliament. Perhaps all together in the House of Commons. Perhaps in smaller, targeted groups, called Select Committees or Scrutiny Committees.

¹ <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/lln-2020-0050/>

Parliament



House of Lords & House of Commons

So: What does Parliament do?

Well, we have already touched on this.

Parliament's work – well, the clue is in the word itself. It's about talking.

Parliament has to look closely at (scrutinise) how the Government is running things, and at what the Government is planning to do. Parliament is expected to make sure that decisions are open and transparent, workable and efficient, and fair and non-discriminatory. All really important stuff.

We will come back to look at the processes which Parliament follows a little bit later.

For now, let's just leave it there. Parliament is where all our MPs do a lot of their work.

[And where a lot of the Members of the House of Lords also do a lot of their work. Because even though they are *not-elected-but-appointed-for-life*, a lot of them really are trying to do a good job – at least as far as they understand it – on behalf of the people, and on behalf of the country.]

Some individually. Some in small groups. Some with all of them together. A lot of reading. A lot of thinking. A lot of discussions. And, at least in theory, a lot of calling the Government to account. And we'll have a lot more to say about that later on!

How is that different to the Government?

I'm glad you asked.



HM Government



Department
of Health



Department
for Business
Innovation & Skills



Ministry
of Defence



UK Trade
& Investment



Home Office



HM Revenue
& Customs

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EXECUTIVE GOVERNMENT

Power to put the law into action



The Government

We have also touched on this already. Just a bit.

The Government comes out of two things which are really important.

- Having a plan to get things done.
- and
- Political parties.

Let's explore that a little bit more.

What is the Government?

- The Government is the group of people who are responsible for running the country.
- The Government is a smaller group, within the overall group of 650 MPs.
- The Government is selected by the political party which has the most MPs, and usually consists of MPs from that party (there are exceptions).

Most of the time², the leader of the party which has a majority of MPs after an election (remember that's *a majority in Parliament*, not a majority of the votes), the leader of the party which has a majority of MPs becomes the Prime Minister.

We can talk about *how* someone becomes the leader of a party another time. It's quite complicated, and the political parties all use different systems. For now, let's just work with the fact that there *is* a leader of the party which has a majority of MPs after the election, probably a leader whom all the voters knew would be the party leader who would become the Prime Minister if their party won.

The Prime Minister then selects the other 25 members of the Cabinet:

- 4 Great Offices of State (Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary)
- 18 **Ministers** of the Crown (mostly these are the heads of government departments, such as the *Ministry of Defence*, and have the title *Secretary of State for ...* in this case, *Secretary of State for Defence*)
- 4 Other members

These 26 Members of the Cabinet (25 of them selected by the Prime Minister – although there might be quite a bit of deal-making within the Prime Minister's party, to keep everyone happy, and to make sure that the Prime Minister themselves remains at the head of it all), those 26 Members of the Cabinet are the Government. They also have seats in Parliament, but most of their work is done in Government Departments

² This can be more complicated. For example, if there is no party which has a majority [e.g. in 2010] then it might be that two parties have to work together, in what we call a coalition, doing lots of little deals together, or perhaps one big deal.

PM Power

At first glance, this makes it look as though the Prime Minister has all the power. All the major positions of power – the Members of the Cabinet – are directly appointed by the Prime Minister. And the Prime Minister can dismiss the ministers, too, and appoint new ones.

That makes it look as though the Prime Minister holds all the cards. If the PM can dismiss you, as a Minister for Paperclips and Stationery Extras, then you probably feel as though you need to make sure that the colour of the Post-It notes which are provided to Cabinet Meetings is the PM's favourite colour.

However.

Remember that the Prime Minister is appointed by their party. The PM is the leader of the party which has most seats in Parliament. The PM is either appointed by the MPs of that party – the ones who have been elected – or by the wider membership of the party, or by some complicated combination of the two. I mean, if there is an opportunity to make things more complicated, particularly with systems that have been around for centuries, then we can be pretty sure that our political parties will have explored most of the ways in which things could be made as complicated as possible. And then changed them again, after that, as well.

So, the PM can appoint and dismiss the Cabinet Ministers.

But the Cabinet Ministers are (usually) all members of the wider political party which has chosen the PM to be PM. So, the power to appoint and dismiss the Cabinet Ministers is actually an even more complicated balance of power and favours and keeping everyone happy – or equally unhappy – than the arguments might be in your house as to who gets to hold onto the remote control for the TV. Who watched which favourite programme last Tuesday, who did the washing up, who has done their homework, and who had a bad day because their boyfriend broke up with them and so deserves a bit of extra sympathy? That might be complicated, but the balance of keeping everyone happy, or at least not too unhappy, in their wider political party is actually even more complicated for the PM.

Well, it's at least as complicated as the live-action-reality-drama-in-your-own-lounge game of TV remote Diplomacy.

So, yes, the PM has power. But that power is dependent on keeping other people happy. So it is a very delicately balanced power. Sometimes it is a power which depends on charisma and charm, on power and how high personal ratings are in the public opinion polls, and can have nothing to do with how good a Minister is at their job, or how good the Prime Minister is.

We'll come back to that again, in Season 2 of Taking the Party out of Politics.

Anyway, back to **The Government**

The Government is responsible for deciding:

- How the country is run
- Managing things day to day
- Setting taxes
- Choosing what to spend public money on
- Choosing how best to deliver public services, such as:
 - the National Health Service
 - the police and armed forces
 - welfare benefits like the State Pension
 - the UK's energy supply

Sometimes, the Government just has to try to manage things which happen. For example, in 2020, the Covid 19 outbreak was not part of the plan for any political party, but the Government which had been elected in December 2019 just had to try to manage the situation as well as they could. Whether they are successful partly depends on how well positioned the country already is to deal with situations, and partly on how well the Government Ministers (the Cabinet) organise things.

However, most of the time, the Government is trying to take the initiative on things.

What things does the Government try to take the initiative on?

Well, in theory, the Government should be trying to do a combination of two things.

First, the Government should be trying to do what is in the best interests of everyone in the country - because the Government is leading Parliament, and Parliament is made up of the MPs who are representing ALL the people in each of their constituencies, not just the ones who voted for them.

Second, the Government should be trying to do what it promised to do in its election manifesto. This is the plan for what the government will do, which is presented before an election - so this is the list of things which people who voted for the winning party wanted (in theory³).

Of course, doing both of these things simultaneously is a very special juggling act. Perhaps almost always an impossible juggling act. It is certainly a little bit like the magician behind the curtain (have you watched the Wizard of Oz, recently?), in so far as it works best if you don't look too closely, and if you don't ask too many questions.

But, of course, that is **exactly** what we are here to do – ask questions!

And, if you have ever been in a pub where *no one* apparently voted for the government, but where the general consensus is that everything that is currently wrong with the country is the government's fault (I can't be the only one, surely?), then it is an impossible juggling act which most governments fail at – perhaps ending up ensuring that they are fair and even-handed only in so far as they are keeping everyone equally unhappy.

³ In theory? Because, is it likely that (a) the best candidate locally, and (b) the best set of policies (the best manifesto) and (c) the best party nationally are ALWAYS all selected with one at the same single vote?

Parliament and the Government

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/relations-with-other-institutions/parliament-government/>

So, Parliament and the Government are different.
They have different roles and do different things.



The Government

The Government is the group of people who are responsible for running the country. The Government sets taxes, chooses what to spend public money on and decides how best to deliver public services



Parliament

Parliament is all our elected representatives (MPs in the House of Commons) plus the members of the House of Lords. They are there to represent our interests, and to make sure that our interests are taken into account by the Government.

The Government cannot make new laws or raise new taxes without Parliament's agreement.



Parliament looks closely at the Government's plans and monitors the way the Government is running things.

Government ministers are required to come to Parliament regularly to answer questions, to respond to issues raised in debates and to keep both Houses informed of any important decisions they take.

The idea is that this makes it possible for Parliament to hold the Government to account for its actions.



So, how does Parliament do this?
How does Parliament hold the Government to account?



Well, essentially, the theory is that this happens in one of two ways.
Sometimes with both of these ways combined.

The first way, is with all of Parliament combined. In the House of Commons, all 650 MPs together, agreeing with – or disagreeing with, or fine-tuning by making amendments to – new laws and rules which the Government is trying to create.



Remember that it is Parliament which has the power to create laws. Not the Government.

The Government might write up new laws, and plan and research them, but it is Parliament which agrees to pass them. Or not.

First, all of the MPs in the House of Commons.

And then the House of Lords also agreeing. Or not agreeing.



The second way is sort of a smaller, more focused version of this. It's called Committee work. Parliament sets up smaller Select Committees or Scrutiny Committees, to look into the detail of what the Government is proposing to do, before reporting back to the whole of Parliament. Because this doesn't involve all 650 MPs, or all of the members of the House of Lords, it can be a more efficient way of looking into the details of things – because, just as we elect our MPs to do all of the thinking about all of the details on our behalf (because otherwise we would all spend all of our time doing this, and no one else in the country would get anything else done), so Parliament chooses a smaller group of MPs (and sometimes some members of the House of Lords are in



the same committee, sometimes the House of Lords have their own committees), to focus on all of the details. Because even Parliament doesn't have enough time to look into all of the details of everything, and has to divide tasks up.

In both the big format – Parliament – and the small format – committees – MPs and Members of the House of Lords can question government ministers, and civil servants, and members of the public and representatives of organisations which are going to be affected by this or that possible change in the law.



But, and this is the Impossible Puzzle for Parliament and Government.
But, but.



Let's go back to the beginning, of how we get a Government.

There are 650 MPs.

The Political Party with more than half of the total number of MPs (or a clubbing together of two or more political parties, to get to more than half of the total number of MPs, working together in a coalition), the Political Party with more than half of the 650 MPs, so more than 325 MPs – that Political Party gets to form the government.

OK. That seems about right (as long as we assume that the electoral system has delivered the right balance of MPs to Parliament – that's a different set of problems, but let's just assume that we have the right balance of MPs in Parliament to accurately represent the views of the people who voted). That seems about right. We have a situation where more than half of the MPs get to select the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister then selects their Ministers, their Cabinet. So, effectively, the Political Party with more than 325 MPs gets to select the Government.

Everyone else, all the other MPs, get to work in Parliament, or in Committees, checking up on the work of Government. Making sure that what the Government is doing isn't too outrageous. Making sure that policies and regulations and laws – and the ways in which those regulations and laws are followed and enforced – making sure that what the Government is doing is sensible, and properly thought through.

The membership of the Committees, of course, reflects the number of MPs which each party has. So, if there are 650 MPs, and the political party which has formed the Government has 400 MPs, then we would expect that if there was a committee of 65 MPs, that 40 of them would be from the political party which has formed the Government.

Of course, a committee wouldn't be that big. But you wouldn't have a committee of 6.5 people, either.

So, let's imagine that there is a committee of 7 MPs. 4 of them would be from the political party which has formed the government, and 3 from the other political parties – what we call the Opposition.

Well, again, that seems about right. The voters in the country have elected a majority of MPs from that political party, so that should be reflected in the balance of activities which Parliament is carrying out, so that what Parliament is doing is accurately reflecting the balance of opinions across all of the voters across all of the country.

But!

What that means is that the Committee which is supposed to be checking up on the Government, the Committee which is supposed to be quizzing Government ministers about their plans – well, that Committee is dominated (4 out of 7 members) by MPs from the same political party as the Government.

So, what that means is that those Committees are sort of set up to be in favour of what the Government is doing. I mean, if you had a tennis match, and 4 out of the 7 line judges and umpires were from Novak Djokovich's coaching team – well, how would you feel if you were Rafa Nadal, playing in that sort of set up?

And, of course, the same is true when the whole of the House of Commons meets. The largest political party got to select the Government, but then that same political party has a majority when it comes to voting for or against the laws which that Government is proposing.

What this means is that the largest political party gets to form the government, and then also gets to control the Committees and the whole of the House of Commons, when it comes to checking up on the work of the government. Sort of like marking its own homework.

Well, this is the Impossible Puzzle for Parliament and Government.

* * *

So, where have we got to, so far.

Parliamentary sovereignty is a principle of the UK constitution. It makes Parliament the supreme legal authority in the UK. Parliament can create (or end) any law.

That sounds very grand.

And, the Government, led by the Prime Minister, is setting the pace.

Parliament is doing the checking up, the agreeing or not agreeing, the making sure that all of our interests are fairly and properly represented and taken into account.

At least, that's how it's supposed to be working.

But

- whilst the Government is trying to make things happen;
- and
- Parliament is trying to make sure that those things are reasonable, and that they are in all of our interests

... the political party which got to form the Government – that same political party also gets to control all the systems which are doing the checking up, the agreeing or not agreeing, the making sure that all of our interests are fairly and properly represented and taken into account.

So, how can we be sure that all of our interests are actually being fairly and properly represented and taken into account?

Well. We can't.

And that's the **Impossible Puzzle for *Parliament and Government***.

Unless, of course, you have some different ideas. Some suggestions as to how things could be different. Perhaps about how we could use our systems differently, or about how we could tweak them so that they worked better, in all of our interests.

If you have any ideas, we would love to hear from you. In Season Three of *Taking the Party out of Politics*, we will be exploring various ideas about how we could make things better.

And we would love to hear from you. Just email us with your ideas, on

info@talktogether.info. If your ideas are good – or if they help us to understand things more clearly – then we will include them in Season Three. We might even contact you, to interview you about your suggestions!

We look forward to hearing *your* thoughts.

* * *

This is the last in our short, bonus series of the **Impossible Puzzles for Representative Democracy**. I hope that you have found it interesting, as a way of looking under the bonnet a little bit, at the way our political systems are supposed to be working, but also trying to get our heads around 5 important ways in which it is kind of impossible for them to be working.

We will be back shortly, with Season Two of *Taking the Party out of Politics*, in which we will be looking at more of the ways in which things are supposed to be working – and some important ways in which they aren't working as well as they should be working – this time from the perspective of our elected representatives. Because, although it might seem as though there are sufficient challenges for us, the Voters, there are also some real challenges for the Voted, for our representatives. Our elected representatives might start off with really great intentions, with wonderful motives to do the best job they can for their constituency and for the country, but very often the systems which we have in place don't make it easy for them to do a good job. In fact, sometimes the systems actually prevent them from doing a good job!

More of that, then, in Season Two, coming later this year.

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For now, thank you for listening to Taking the Party Out Of Politics.

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