



*out of*  
**POLITICS**

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HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO WORK  
- WHY IT ISN'T WORKING -  
AND HOW TO FIX IT.

## **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*.

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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.

Left-wing or right-wing.

International Intergovernmental, or Parish Council.

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 sort of things we might do to make things better.

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This is Season 1, in which we are taking a look at how government is supposed to work,  
from the perspective of us – the voters. In Season 2, we will be looking at how government  
is supposed to work, from the perspective of someone trying to get elected, and then trying  
to do a good job. Finally, in Season 3, we will be looking at what we might be able to do, to  
make things work a bit better.

In the introduction, we had an overview of what the issues are, and a general idea of the route we are going to take through this – and why this is important.

In Episode 2, we started to think about why we have a government at all, and the tacit – perhaps unspoken – agreement which exists between:

– those who do the governing, and

– those who agree to be governed

(what we call the *Social Contract*).

In Episode 3, we discussed what we mean by the word ‘Democracy’, along with other ideas, such as consideration for others and respect for minorities. Then moved from there to start to explore the particular form of ‘*Representative* Democracy’ which we use.

And in Episode 4, we started to explore how the mechanics of electing representatives – and ultimately a government – well, how all of that is supposed to work. And why it isn’t working as well perhaps we imagine that it should do. In fact, perhaps why it is actually impossible for it to work, given the way in which the system is set up.

For example:

How is it possible to be elected on the basis of a set of promises (your manifesto – what you say that you will do if you get elected), to get elected on the basis of a set of promises for which some people vote – but then once you are elected, how is it possible to be fair, and even-handed, and to represent the needs of every one of your constituents? Even the ones who didn’t vote for you.

And, if you are elected with less than 50% of the people who voted, then that is even harder.

And, how can a government claim to represent the country, if it is elected with less than 50% of the votes cast nationally – which has been the case for every UK government since 1935?

Well, you won’t be shocked to know that it isn’t really possible to do all of those things. Or even any of those things.

Our governments represent us, but then again, they don’t represent us.

They are our representatives,

- internationally, for example, in negotiating our Foreign Policy, and
- nationally, in deciding who pays how much tax, and how much money is spent on education or healthcare or defence or transportation.

But then again, they aren’t really representative of us – most of us didn’t vote for them.

Or, to put it another way: most of us voted AGAINST them.

So, our governments represent us, but they aren’t really representative of us.

This is an important distinction, not just a careful bit of logic or grammar. We will come back to this idea again, during Season 2.

The individual people who are elected – our representatives, our MPs – just have to do the best that they can, muddling through, trying to do what they think is right, what they think is best, keeping an eye on trying to be reasonably good and fair where that is possible, but also keeping an eye on their responsibilities as a member of a particular political group, and also keeping an eye on making sure that they are clearly doing the right thing by the voters who did vote for them, so that they can get re-elected next time.

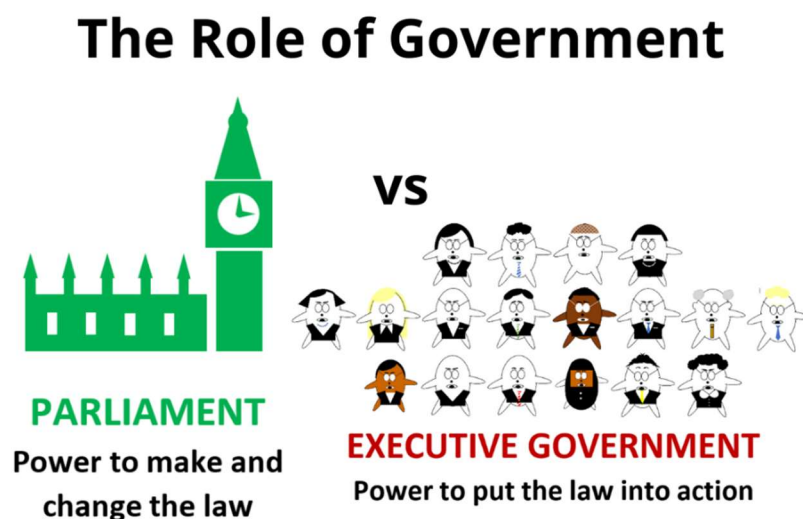
If you were counting, that's at least three eyes.

We do get good people who are elected, and they probably are mostly trying to do their best for as many people as possible. But, as we will see in Series 2, that is mostly because they are good people not because the systems encourage that. Or even because the systems make it easy – because the systems don't make it easy for the people who are elected. In fact, the systems make it pretty difficult for everyone involved.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.  
Back to today.

And so, on to today.

Today we are going to make sure that we are clear about the different roles which are played by our government and by our parliament. Because, sometimes, it can seem as though these are the same thing. But they absolutely are not.



## The Role of Parliament



## 1.1. The role of Government vs the role of Parliament

So, let's put all of the electoral problems to one side for a moment.  
Don't worry. We aren't forgetting about them. We'll come back to them again later.



**EXECUTIVE GOVERNMENT**  
Power to put the law into action



**PARLIAMENT**  
Power to make and  
change the law

In the meantime, let's look at the difference between Parliament and the Government. 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.

Let's start with Parliament.

### 1.1.1. 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 <sup>1</sup> 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.

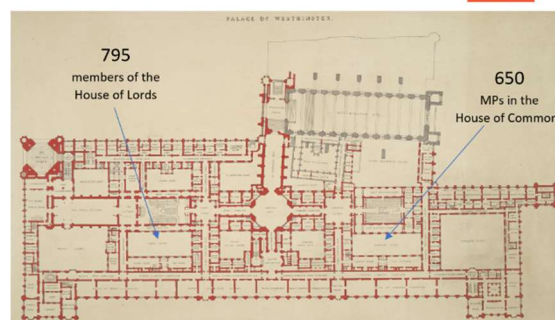
A lot of the time, MPs work in other rooms:

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.

Sometimes, they are working in various larger spaces, meeting rooms, and so on. Perhaps in small committees, doing some detailed work together.

## Parliament



## House of Lords & House of Commons

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

## 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

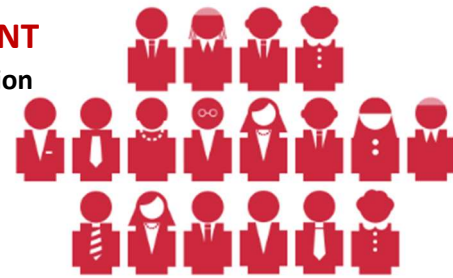


HM Revenue  
& Customs

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## EXECUTIVE GOVERNMENT

Power to put the law into action



### 1.1.2. The Government

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

The Government comes out of two things we have already mentioned.

- 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 time<sup>2</sup>, 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), are the Government. They also have seats in Parliament, but most of their work is done in Government Departments

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 Series 2.

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 theory<sup>3</sup>).

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 – ensuring that they are fair and even-handed only in so far as they are keeping everyone equally unhappy.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.





### 1.1.3. What Parliament Does

#### 1.1.3.1. Checking the work of Government

One of Parliament's main roles is to examine and challenge the work of the government, by questioning ministers, through debates over complicated problems, and in committee work. There is a lot more to be said about this, but we will come back to all of this during Series 2. For now, let's just have a quick overview of what is *supposed* to happen.

#### **What Parliament Does:**

##### **Checking the work of Government:** *Questions*

MPs and Members of the House of Lords can question government ministers. This can be done either in writing or on the floor of the House during the regular oral question times.

Ministers from each government department attend the House of Commons on a rota basis to answer oral questions. Each major Government department is allocated to a particular day of the week, with a rota agreed by the Government and Opposition parties. There are special days for the Prime Minister to be questioned (Prime Minister's Questions).



##### **What Parliament Does: Checking the work of Government:** *Debates*

Debates in the House of Commons can be on any subject. The debates provide an opportunity for MPs to discuss government policy, to discuss proposed new laws, and to discuss topical issues of the day



##### **What Parliament Does: Checking the work of Government:** *Committees*

Committees of smaller groups of MPs and/or Members of the House of Lords look at specific policy issues or legislation in detail. This is called 'scrutinising', and the committees are sometimes called 'scrutiny committees'.

Different committees have different roles ranging from offering advice, to producing reports or altering legislation.

The House of Commons has departmental select committees. These were established to 'shadow' government departments and to scrutinise the spending, administration and policy of each department.

Both Houses have both permanent and temporary committees.

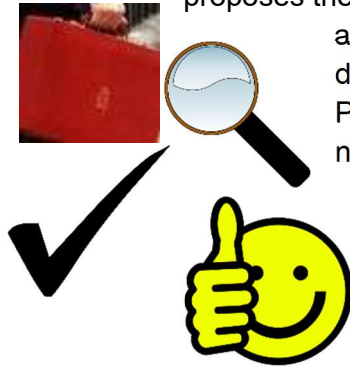
MPs and Members of the House of Lords also work together in Joint Select Committees. The government issues responses to most committee reports.



There are some other things which Parliament does, as well

### 1.1.3.2. What Parliament Does: Making Laws

A central role of Parliament is to make new laws as well as to make changes to existing legislation. Most new laws and changes are proposed by the Government, but Parliament has to agree to them. So, although it is the Government which proposes the new laws and changes (at least most of the time), and although it is the Government which leads and directs the discussions and the direction of the new laws and changes, it is Parliament which actually decides on whether to vote to agree to the new laws and changes. It is Parliament which actually *makes* the laws.



Well. In theory, anyway.



### 1.1.3.3. What Parliament Does: Checking and approving Government spending and taxation

The Budget is presented to the House of Commons by the Chancellor of the Exchequer each year. MPs debate the Budget proposals, and scrutinise the Finance Bill which brings them into law.



### 1.1.3.4. What Parliament Does: Having ultimate authority

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.



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So, 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. (20:45)

## 1.2. So, where have we got to, so far?

There are lots of problems with the way in which we select our elected representatives (our MPs). These range from the challenge of trying to achieve three things with one vote, to the problem of first past the post - both at the constituency and at the national level.

When all the MPs get to Parliament, the party which won the most seats in the election then forms the government. The Government then drives national policy and manages the way in which things are run, with Parliament trying to check up on the Government in detail. Things are supposed to be balanced so that Parliament should be in ultimate charge (Parliamentary Sovereignty), and so that the Government can't just do whatever it wants, with no limits or controls. (21:30)

**Today** we looked at the balance between Government and Parliament. Our Government is quite a small bunch of our MPs (about 26 or so, out of the 650 who are elected), and they are trying to set the agenda, to make a plan, to carve out a path to the future for our country. And Parliament (which is all the rest of the MPs, *plus* the 26 ministers who are in the Government), is trying to check up on what the Government is trying to do. Trying to make sure that the plans have been well thought through. Trying to make sure that everything has been taken into account. Trying to make sure that avoidable mistakes aren't made. And trying to make sure that all of our interests have been taken into account.

Government is trying to make things happen.

Parliament is trying to make sure that those things are reasonable, and that they are in all of our interests.

Quick spoiler alert: this balance, between Government and Parliament?

Well: it isn't working as well as it could do.

And, just a quick quiz for you – can you guess what one of the big reasons is that this balance isn't working as well as it could do?

Can you see what it is, yet?

I'll give you a clue. The title of this podcast. The title is 'Taking the Party Out of Politics'. So ... Can you guess what is one of the biggest reasons why the balance between Government and Parliament isn't working as well as it could?

Well, more on that, in Series 2.

In Series 2, we are going to explore further why the balance between Parliament and Government isn't working the way that it is supposed to. We will be looking at how our political systems are supposed to work – and how they aren't working – from the point of view of the people trying to work within the system. First, we will look at the challenges involved in getting elected – and the resulting pressures which that puts on candidates, and the sort of candidates who are prepared to put up with all of those pressures. Second, we will look at the challenges involved in getting things done *once* a candidate is elected as an MP. Quite a lot, as it happens!

So ... next time, on *Taking the Party out of Politics* ...

Next time, we will be looking at the final piece of our impossible challenge. You know the one. Trying to achieve three completely different things with one vote – choose a good local representative, from a political party which looks as though it could form a competent national government, and which appears to have a good set of policies, to do the sorts of things which we think should be done. All three things. Once every five years. With just one vote.

We have looked at the challenges of choosing a local representative who is actually representative of us, and then how challenging it is for our elected representative to represent the needs and wants of all their constituents, particularly if less than half of them actually voted for that representative.

We have looked at the challenge of having a national government which, in the UK, has not received more than 50% of the national votes cast, at any election since 1935 (even though some of them were quite close). Are we really, successfully choosing a government which will represent us, if the norm is that most of us actually voted AGAINST that government? Is our representative democracy, actually very representative, at all?

Well, the final piece of that impossible challenge is the list of policies which political parties also offer us. Their list of electoral promises. Vote for us, and we will do this. And this. And that. The final impossible challenge for us voters, is to understand how seriously we should take that list of promises. How much attention should we pay to political parties' manifestos? And, perhaps equally importantly, how much fuss should political parties be allowed to make about things which were (or were not) in their manifesto, after they have won (or even after they have lost) an election?

Next time: *Manifestos*.

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For now, thank you for listening.

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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.