

BETTER POLITICS

Having good discussions, enjoying them more and becoming a better citizen.

A lot of our news is bad news. Partly this is because our media companies need to be profitable and bad news has more appeal. But bad news is not necessarily fake news and there is indeed a great deal to be concerned about. We may worry about Climate Change or Immigration or the Social Services or the consequences of Brexit. We may be concerned about the rich getting even richer while those people working hard on average incomes struggle to pay their bills, particularly if we ourselves belong to this large group.

On the other hand, we can, of course, simply ignore what is going on around us and focus on our own lives. But just concentrating on our own lives cannot be right. We are, after all, citizens in a free country. We vote in elections. So we should make some space in our thoughts and conversations for politics, which is all about reconciling our personal interests with those of the society we live in and cannot live without. A lot of us do take some interest in politics. Many a conversation around the family dinner table or in the workplace or pub is directly or indirectly about a political issue.

But how good are these conversations? How many of our opinions are based on facts? How many of them have been thought through? How can we be good citizens in a free country if we are either uninterested in politics or don't really know what we are talking about ?

There is a problem here. Politics today is complicated. Partly, this is because we, or rather our parents, grandparents and so on, have dealt with so many of our social problems. We no longer let the poor starve on our streets; we do not criminalise gay people, treat women as second-class citizens and neither do we talk seriously about invading France. Today's issues tend not to be straightforward "either-or" questions. They are more like dilemmas: How do we reconcile reducing carbon emissions with economic growth, which reduces poverty? What is the right balance between upholding the principle of Free Speech and allowing our tabloid newspapers to spread hate with their lurid headlines? To what extent can we get employers to pay higher wages to their workers without increasing joblessness?

While our brains like such dilemmas, our hearts don't. Thinking takes skill, time and effort. It gives one a headache. Feeling on the other hand is a bit like breathing. We do it automatically. It is a reflex. We do not even realise that we are doing it.

So there is a bit of a conflict between our duty as citizens in a complex world and our inclination to focus on doing our job, bringing up our children and having as much fun as we can.

Most of us would not want to give away their right to protest and to vote. But not many of us want to spend hours coming to grips with a whole range of complicated questions.

So here is a simple checklist which will help to raise your game when you are discussing a political topic which interests you.

Like many of the checklists pilots use at various phases of a flight, this one can easily be memorised through an acronym, namely DECOAT. The **D** stands for **definition** and the **E** for **evidence**. The **C** is about three items namely, **context**, **costs** and **consequences**. The **O** signifies **objectives**; the **A** reminds you to consider **alternative** ideas and the **T**, finally, is about both **tradeoffs** and **time**.

Still interested?

Then take a look at the following pages. It won't take you long and who knows, you might even have more fun with your political discussions

1. Definition

(What exactly are we talking about?)

Example: Inequality

Smith: I'm not surprised about all the talk about inequality. I read in the paper that a rich banker here in London spends about forty thousand a year on his pets. That's more than twice the money I can afford to spend on my family. That can't be right!

Jones: Would you want to swap with him? Or are you telling me that you don't have enough to live a decent life?

Smith: Well I wouldn't want to swap with him but I have trouble paying the bills even though I work hard at my job. It seems unfair.

Jones: You're right. It doesn't just seem unfair, it is unfair. Life is unfair. But suppose you somehow got more money, a job with more pay, say. Now you don't have to worry when the gas bill comes or when your car needs to be repaired. You are no longer behind with your rent. Maybe you can now eat out with your family once a week or go off to somewhere nice for a cheap holiday without worrying about paying for it...

Smith: Yeah, I would like that.

Jones: But what about the rich guy with his pets? While you were busy finding a better job, he doubled his money by sitting on his arse and betting on some shares or whatever.

Smith: I wouldn't really care much about him now that my own life has gotten better.

Jones: Then we are not really talking about inequality are we? We are talking about sufficiency.

2. Evidence

(What information do we have? How good is it?)

Example: Immigration

Lizzie: I went to the surgery round the corner for my knee. I was on time for my appointment but had to wait for an hour. D'you know, I was the only white English person in the room. It was full of all these Sikh men and Muslim women in burkas....

Sue: Yeah I know. Nobody can call me a racist but I just don't see how the NHS can cope with all this immigration.

Tracy: There's lots of immigrants here in Leicester but is it the same all over the country?

Lizzie: I can't tell. But we can't keep letting in all these people year after year.

Sue: How many came here last year?

Lizzie: Dunno.

3. Consequences (unintended)

(If we do what you say, might something else happen, that we do not want?)

Example: Minimum Wage.

Harry: Do you know what the minimum wage is in this country?

Bob: No

Harry: Its just under eight pounds an hour.

Bob: How much is that in a month

Harry: Let's see: If someone works an eight hour day for twenty working days then it comes to £1280 a month or somewhere around fifteen thousand a year.

Bob: That doesn't sound like much. Even if they don't have a family they have to pay rent and fuel bills and stuff..... The government should increase it. Why should companies be allowed to get away with paying people so little?

Harry: Yeah but then more people would be unemployed wouldn't they?

4. Context

(What are the circumstances around what we are talking about?)

Example: Political Correctness

Anne: What are you up to tomorrow?

Ben: Going to the demo

Anne: What's it all about this time?

Ben: The statue of Cecil Rhodes outside the college

Anne: So you are one of those who want the statue removed?

Ben: Yup.

Anne: Why?

Ben: How can we celebrate an imperialist and a racist who believed that white people were superior to everyone else?

Anne: But hang on, when was he born?

Ben: Dunno. But I know he died about a hundred and twenty years ago...

Anne: But things were different then.....

5. Cost

(What is the cost of what we are supporting? There's no such thing as a free lunch; Cost does not necessarily mean money)

Example: Social media

Darren: So you want to quit Instagram and go to Vero?

Sandy: Yeah

Darren: But someone told me you have to have a subscription.

Sandy: Yeah

Darren: But Instagram is free.

Sandy: No it isn't.

Darren: Of course it is. You don't pay anything.

Sandy: You're giving them your data and they are selling your stuff to advertisers.....

6. Objectives

(What do we really want?)

Example: Discussion in the cabinet of the UK Prime Minister concerning six billion pounds available for extra spending.

PM: Any suggestions?

Minister: I think we should spend it to help small children of single working mothers.

PM: That's out of the question.

Minister: Why?

PM: Because Paul Dacre (editor of the Daily Mail) doesn't approve of single mothers.

Minister: So what? Paul Dacre isn't running the country, we are.

PM: We won't be, if we lose the next election.

7. Alternative Hypotheses

(Maybe there is a different reason....)

Example: Damage from video game addiction

Robert: I read somewhere that young people who spend five hours or more per day playing video games tend to get depressed.

Jean: Maybe young people who are depressed tend to spend more time playing video games....

8. Trade-offs

(Perhaps it's neither A nor B but some sort of balance between them.)

Example: Taxation.

Mohammed: We've got around a hundred and thirty billionaires in the UK and another nine hundred people with a hundred million or more. We need a high wealth tax on these people.

Ramesh: We are a free country and freedom means the right to own property without having the state taking it away from you.

Mohammed: Hang on. Its all very well to talk about property ownership. But what if some of these people just inherited lots of money? And what about those who made their money on the back of public goods that they did not pay for? Where would Mr. Zuckerberg be if the Internet had not been built with public money?

Hussein: What you two are really arguing about is the tradeoff between freedom and fairness.

9. Time

(How long is it going to take?)

Example: Lecture given by an astro-physicist who has won the Nobel Prize.

Astro-physicist: I have calculated that a huge meteorite is going to crash into the earth and destroy it completely. This is going to happen in fifty thousand years.

At this point, a member of the audience collapses. Luckily, there is a paramedic present and she manages to revive him. As soon as he regains consciousness, he turns to the speaker.

Audience member: Could you repeat what you just said?

Astrophysicist: I said that the earth would be completely destroyed by a meteorite in fifty thousand years.

Audience member: Oh!!! Thank God!!! I thought you said "five thousand years."

That's it.

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