💔⚡Conflicts & Politics⚡💔

Introduction - 10 minutes

Conflicts are necessary to politics. They are inevitable and in fact they are creative. One theorist claims that "*politics is the reconciliation of paradox",* it does not deny differences or ignore differences - it holds them within it. How do we get people to usefully cooperate? How do we govern shared resources? How does the collective achieve more than just individuals negotiating? This is the job and business of politics.

Another way to think about conflicts is "getting stuck". Conflicts don't have to be just about anger or arguments, much worse conflicts can be about ending up in a moment of stasis or being stuck in a cycle of indecision.

Question: Take 5 minutes to think about where you might be getting stuck on decisions around the governance module.

Answers here:

Many governance systems arise and are developed as a result of political conflicts or getting stuck. For example, when trade unionists and middle class intellectuals were first organising to form the Labour Party, they would have faced huge amounts of conflict, difference and disagreements and stasis. They had to coordinate large groups and coalitions of people with limited communications. Developing systems and processes to resolve these disagreements and create action was what resulted in the modern Labour Party rule book, processes and constitution. It lays out a governance process for managing disagreements including a process of motions. In a meeting when there is a disagreement someone proposes a motion and it is voted on after hearing limited speeches in favour and against. The motions can also be amended and the amendments voted on. This is perhaps an early form of technology and relies on voting.

But voting is not the only way in which decisions or actions can be taken. There are many ways to build legitimacy around action which do not depend on whether we take a vote on it.

DAO Action Trilemma



Going through approaches - 10 minutes

Below are some approaches (beyond voting) that may help resolve conflicts or “stuckness”. They differ in severity. They are tactics that I have seen used over the years and also ones that I have employed myself at times. They all have pros and cons and differing moral implications but each can prove useful depending on the situation.

1. 🪨Getting concrete about interests

- Most conflicts start out being about something small and quite concrete but then quickly spiral to become about bigger more abstract things such as values or “rights”
- If you are trying to generate support or build pressure it is useful to create a values campaign that builds support from your base for a particular thing. But when you are trying to achieve or negotiate an outcome this is often unhelpful or can be limiting.
- Try to avoid speaking about vague things and getting stuck in the theoretical or abstract like “I should have a right to…” talk instead about what you actually need and want. Often the abstract process will come but it will be uncovered through a discussion of concretes.
- Often in politics you are having to deal with people who may have quite different values to you, it is therefore really important to not let conflicts get stuck at the ‘values’ level and to keep it about clear and concrete asks.
    - For example, when campaigning against harsh immigration laws you might create a values campaign around injustice to mobilise a base, but when you sit down and are talking to lawmakers you need to be specific about the ask “we want the law around spouses having to earn X amount before they can bring their partner over on a spousal visa to be abolished”.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Cowriting documents can also help you really focus on the concretes. **Labour Election Review Example.**

2. 🗂️Separating the minimal from the substantial

- This is an important one. When you are having a conflict you need to orientate where the conflict is in terms of the scheme of priorities. Is this a small thing that matters less or a large thing that matters a lot?
- Often conflicts which are more substantial can get stuck in a small disagreement about something minimal or something minimal can be masquerading as something substantial.
- Think really carefully about what it is that you are actually arguing about. Over a period of days/weeks? Discuss with parties you trust that are external to the conflict to help you understand if it's 'worth it' or more worth 'letting it go'?Is this something that is worth the conflict? Does it significantly solve the thing that you are aggrieved by? Is this worth letting go? What is worth fighting on?
- Often campaigns have to be selective about what it is that they fight for, what is winnable and what is worth the effort of groups. Similarly politicians have to think about what they spend their political capital on. Is this issue worth isolating people who could be allies in the future? At what point do you spend the good will or power you have amassed. Understanding what is worth spending your energy on is important.
    - For example,

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: Can surveys or AI help us really understand the map of a conflict?

3. 🪜 Going process by process

- When you are trying to construct a consensus, it’s easier to break it down into one small process or space, rather than thinking about having to solve everything all at once. You may have parts of your territory or scope of operations where you have agreements and other parts where you don’t.
- Scoping out processes where people need to coordinate can also make overcoming entrenched conflict easier. Start small and work from there.
- You need to be comfortable with the idea that on this one thing we need to cooperate but on others we might still be completely opposed or stuck. Also on different things you will have different working relationships with people.
- You might invest a lot in creating a working compromise on one area but deliberately leave out the other areas that might be more intractable. You might have allies on one issue who are opponents on another issue.

- Also once you have created a working compromise on one area, it may become easier to establish others. You have to accept that the process of politics is constructive in itself.
    - For example, this is often how peace processes work, what first seems intractable is broken down into small steps. In the Northern Ireland peace agreements they didn't start by talking about how the area would be governed. They started with agreeing a ceasefire, then they tried a proposal for government, then they had to agree another ceasefire, then another agreement, then they agreed a referendum, then they agreed the parliament which they tried to set up but it stalled a few times, then they agreed to formally put down arms and then they agreed the justice process after the troubles.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: Step by Steps - can this be gamified?

4. 🎭Thinking creatively about legitimacy

- There are many ways a compromise or decision can be made legitimate. Often we get stuck in assuming it has to be voted on or officially agreed but things can become legitimate by many other means.
- Legitimacy itself is contextual - it requires the continued assent of people to adhere to it.
- Legitimacy can be created from customs, norms, design, trust, relationships, charisma and many other methods.
- In conflict sometimes trying to get to the written down assented processes can become the sticking point, you might try to get to other forms of legitimacy for a working arrangement first before you then try to formalise and enshrine it.
    - For example, when people sign up to ration club they write their name on the chalk door, this confirms the legitimacy of the person cooking. They aren't voted in or agreed - their name being written is the legitimacy.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: design processes with inbuilt legitimacy - much of the technology you build will have legitimacy in it. Can we think more consciously about this?

5. 🧭Generating shared purpose and/or enemy

- It is much easier to overcome conflict or take action when you create a shared purpose or reason for the group to need to cooperate.
- The articulation of this purpose can be a very strong political tool in dealing with conflict.

- This is how a stage in community organising works - you gather people in a community (who may be very different) and surface a shared purpose or “construct a shared self interest”. This then becomes the basis on which to organise. Your cooperation and governance is in service of this shared purpose.
- This purpose is strong enough to keep you in the group even when you might not get your own way. This is why groups with more abstract purposes can contain a lot of diversity of thought or factions within them.
- Sometimes purposes are clear because they form the group but they can also be constructed as community organising shows.
- You can also lean in on this by creating a shared identity for a group - like a nickname or a term - this helps to underline the shared identity or purpose.
- Similarly when you are in battle against a shared enemy, it is easier to overcome conflict. Much of Labour politics rests on this… enough said.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: Can articulating a clear purpose become a guide for action? Does this free up people to take action based on pursuing this purpose? This is how apps focused on crowd work work. Decentralisation within a purpose.

6. 👋Building a ‘coalition of the willing’

- When you are trying to overcome conflict and it is about doing a certain task or achieving a certain goal or outcome, it may work to simply build a coalition of the willing around the thing you are trying to achieve.
- Not everyone has to agree to everything. It may be that for a time you just do the thing you want to achieve with the people who are willing to do that.
- This works less well where there is a resource dispute which is finite but works very well when you are trying to achieve something.
- You can do a lot outside of formal governance systems with a coalition of the willing and sometimes get further outside of official systems.
- Furthermore often these informal coalitions of the willing can lead to the production of more formalised governance.
    - For example, we set up the Labour Society of Campaigners - a Facebook group for people who wanted to talk about campaigning in Labour. It isn’t a formal group with sanctions - it’s simply a coalition of people willing to cooperate and share things across factional lines.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: Keeping to a whatsapp group’s purpose/ functional…

7. 🤝Repairing the relational

- Often conflicts can lead to relationships breaking down or arise because there is no personal relationship in the first place.

- When you are trying to overcome conflict - establishing a relational basis can be important.
- This is why often in community organising they have shared meals or social events as it allows people to connect and relate on an interpersonal level that may be beyond the conflict.
- Building trust and strong relationships can also help you have *insurance for action.*
- Also these kinds of more informal spaces allow people to see each other beyond their roles in the conflict. I.e. They aren't just a right wing moderate labour members and a left wing corbynite - they are also both really into baking sourdough bread, or both come from Wrexham etc.
    - For example, when bridgebuilding in Labour we often had a conference BBQ on the beach in Brighton where people from different factions could have food together, socialise and have a space which was away from the conflicts in the conference.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: How does this work in online communities? How do develop relationships within communities? Measure one to one contact? DMs?

8. 🔍Dealing with feelings and spotting proxies

- In political spaces people end up fighting about things that are often proxies for other things going on in their own lives.
- This is important because the personal is the political and our own commitments and politics are developed by our own personal experiences. But this can mean that things become very heated very quickly.
- It's important in conflicts (particularly when they become very heated or emotional) to be aware of these other elements that may be at play for people.
- This is where framing meetings and facilitating them the right way is important. It is also important to encourage people to think about their own positions in this way when trying to overcome conflict.
- Practices like reflective listening and other skills can be useful in uncovering deeper things that may be going on for people.
- "Hi everybody, we've had a long day, and we all come from different places. So please remember to be kind to each other." Say this at the beginning of the meeting does wonders.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: Basically a lot of outrage on social media platforms is due to this…

9. 📖Utilising stories

- Sometimes when you are trying to overcome conflict using the metaphors of journeys or telling stories or narratives about synthesis or overcoming conflict can be powerful.
- These are arguably more political or rhetorical methods but can be very important in terms of getting people into a place where they can move forward.
- Often appeals to history or normalising conflict and its resolution can be useful in this.
    - For example, the story of the film Pride is an important one for the Labour Party as it's an attempt to show how tensions between social and economic conceptions of equality can be overcome. This is an important bridge that maintains our coalition so telling this story is key to remind people of what is possible.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: Mythology in online communities provides legitimacy and holds things together. Wikipedia roles and stories.

10. 🔣Harnessing symbolic ambiguity

- This is a slightly trickier one… but just as it can work to get to concretes in a conflict to properly explore it. Sometimes it might suit you to create a more symbolic fudge or ambiguity to overcome conflict.
- A lot depends on the kind of conflict - where it can be broken down to concrete, that is a good thing to do but if you are in a situation where the conflicts are less clear and more amorphous - sometimes some constructive ambiguity can be important.
- This isn't often used but can be useful when you realise that people are talking at cross purposes but need a common frame to construct from.
    - For example, on the left of the Labour Party they often talk about being more democratic is about expanding the membership into a larger movement. Whereas on the right of the party they talk about being more democratic as being about not being inward looking and in touch with the voters. In reality these are similar concepts… they are both about Labour being more in touch with the people we represent. Often when talking about a more democratic Labour Party using the words "Labour being more in touch with the people we represent" was a better frame on which to start a more constructive discussion.

Political Tech Thoughts

- Political Technology Thoughts: Can LLMs help with rephrasing contentious questions?

Exercises/ Game - 50 minutes

Scenario 1: 10 minutes
5 minutes feedback
Scenario 2: 10 minutes
5 minutes feedback
Scenario 3: 10 minutes
5 minutes feedback

Can you go back to your stuckness points? - 5 minutes

How will this affect the technology you build? Add in thoughts - 10 minutes