



# Crossing Channels

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by  
**Rory Cellan-Jones**

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Season 2 - Episode 9

## ARE COUNTRIES BECOMING HARDER TO GOVERN?

With

**Louis Baktash** (Bennett Institute)

**Mathieu Carpentier** (Toulouse Capitole University, IAST)

**Michael Kenny** (Bennett Institute)



## Are countries becoming harder to govern?

### GUEST SPEAKERS

Louis Baktash (Bennett Institute), Mathieu Carpentier (Toulouse Capitole University, IAST) and Michael Kenny (Bennett Institute)

### HOST

Rory Cellan-Jones

### Rory Cellan-Jones 00:06

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones. Are countries becoming harder to govern, and if so, what should we do about it? That's the subject of the latest in our podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. And as ever, we're going to use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex challenge. Why has governing France and the UK from the centre become so difficult? What has been the impact of recent political protests and movements? And is devolution the answer to the French and British governability challenge? To explore these issues today, we have Mathieu Carpentier from the IAST. Mathieu, start us off, what does your research focus on?

**Mathieu Carpentier** 00:57

My name is Mathieu Carpentier, I'm a professor of Public Law at the University of Toulouse in France. I work mainly on constitutional law and comparative constitutional law specifically, and constitutional theory. And nowadays, my research focuses on the statues of counter-majoritarian institutions in contemporary democracies.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 01:22

Great, thank you, Mathieu. From the Bennett Institute, we have Mike Kenny, and Louis Baktash. Mike, remind us of your main research interests.

**Michael Kenny** 01:30

Thanks, Rory. Well, I'm very interested in the story of devolution in the UK. And I suppose more generally, how questions about the governance and the future of the UK's domestic union have become so contentious and sort of salient in our politics. And I've just been working on this for a while and have written a book that will be coming out later this year on that issue, which is really trying to understand why these issues have become much more challenging and difficult for British politicians and government.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 02:01

Louis, what does your research focus on?

**Louis Baktash** 02:04

I'm a PhD student under Mike's supervision at Cambridge, and I study regional policy in France and in the United Kingdom. Particularly, I look at recent changes in regional policy in these two countries, and how we can explain these changes. And I look a lot at electoral politics and trying to understand how political realignments in the last few years have explained these changes.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 02:29

So that's our panel. Now, first of all, I always like to challenge the assumption in the question we are exploring. What is the evidence then that countries and in particular, the UK and France are actually becoming harder to govern? Mathieu, take it away.

**Mathieu Carpentier** 02:42

When you talk about governability, you talk mainly about two things. First, the acceptability of the reforms that have been passed. And frankly, I mean, France is in this respect kind of a case in point when you have a huge reform that was part of the President's manifesto when he run for re-election, which ends up with France being in turmoil, people in the streets, and the riots, and that you all have seen on TV. So obviously, the acceptability point, I think, is a real issue because the mere fact that someone has been elected is by no means an indicator that his policies will be actually accepted. The other issue, I think that is relevant, is the fact that the ability to effectively change the country, to put forward an ambitious agenda of reforms is

hindered by many factors, such as pressure exerted by markets and the economic actors. But in the case of France, I think that a particular point should be focused on which is what one could call the inertia of bureaucracy. The fact that civil servants, well they pride themselves in the fact that they are not politically appointed, actually, it's more complicated than that, but they have a certain political ethos where every political issue is reframed in terms of a technical one, of an issue of expertise, if you like. And this is why true change is so hard in France, especially when, you know, when the current ministers, they are not lifelong political, elected members of parliament and so forth. So they don't have the authority to put back the political in the policies they want to enact.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 04:46

Mike Kenny, we've got a government here in the UK, which got a very solid majority, one of the biggest majorities of the last few decades. Is there really any evidence that the UK is hard to govern at the moment?

**Michael Kenny** 05:01

I think if you look at the last few years, there's quite a bit of evidence that the UK, like many other countries, France included, has suffered a number of shocks. The energy crisis, the cost of living crisis, COVID, the pandemic as well, which have sort of originated largely from outside, either in the context of the pandemic or the world economy. And those have made governing, even if you've got a majority, very difficult. Obviously, in the UK case, we've also got the more self-inflicted challenge of Brexit, which has, I think, sort of tested our governing institutions and indeed the sort of competence of our politicians like no other challenge since perhaps the Second World War. So I think you've got, you've got those kind of, you know, shock moments and events. But I also think there's something else at stake in the governability idea, which is about certain systemic difficulties, just really difficult social problems and policy challenges that lots of democratic states are struggling to get to grips with. So in our context, I suppose the most obvious one is economic growth, trying to, you know, get growth back, but also make it more inclusive, more across the country, but also institutions like the health service, as well as other related social challenges. We've just got, I think it is a mixture of these sort of unpredictable shocks, as well as a sort of growing sense that there are huge challenges in front of our politicians that they're struggling to grapple with.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 06:34

Now, Louis Baktash, I think you see across both countries, don't you really? What's your take on the rise of ungovernability, if I can use it as an ugly term?

**Louis Baktash** 06:42

I think that that question can be asked in two different ways. I think Mathieu had more of a structural answer, and Mike more of a contextual answer. I think if we look at a very short timeframe, it is much harder for Macron to govern because, well, especially compared to a few years ago, we had a massive majoritarian parliament. Now, he's heading a minority government. So clearly for him, it's harder to govern.

Even with a big majority, he had issues with the acceptability of his reforms. Now, it's even harder. In the UK, if I think about May's government a few years ago, I would argue it's a bit easier to govern now, thanks to the majority the Conservative party won at the last general election. I think what's interesting is that there are common challenges, and Mike talked about them, they are also very different issues in France and the UK. And I think it is getting harder to govern these countries, but also for different reasons.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 7:40

Well, let's drill down into one thing that the two countries have in common, which is a very centralised form of government and the deficiencies of that. And Mike, again, that, I suppose has been seen more recently to be a weakness has it?

**Michael Kenny** 07:54

Well, I mean, this debate about the British governing model, and whether too much power is hoarded at the centre, you know, we have a central government that is trying to sort of govern the whole of the country. The criticism of that model is again a jolt and has recurred at different points of crisis. Obviously, the situation now is a bit more complicated because we've also got some devolution arrangements, which are fairly substantial in kind in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, much less clear in England, what any what the equivalent to that is.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 08:30

Harrow in England is still massively concentrated in Whitehall, rather than the big northern cities, for example.

**Michael Kenny** 08:36

It is indeed. And you know in England, there's a very weakened stratum of local government and councils that have had their funding systematically reduced and their functions narrowed. And there's been a lot of debate about, should we have a sort of tier of devolved government between councils and Whitehall. And over time, the last sort of four or five decades, I mean, there's been recurrent attempts to build a layer of city regional or regional government, and the success of the government that comes in after that has generally unpicked it and tried to pursue a different model. So we've had lots of chopping and changing in terms of that challenge to build a sort of intermediate devolved layer in England. Because England is just in a different position to the other parts of the UK. Because it's larger, it's more heavily populated, and it has more resources within it, which matter to the British state.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 09:35

Mathieu and Louis, let's look at the French example. My impression, having lived in France 40 years ago, for a year, in Paris, was all around me was everything that symbolised France, the grandes écoles, the government, the arts, an extraordinarily centralised country. Is that still the case, Mathieu? And is it seen as a problem?

**Mathieu Carpentier** 10:00

Obviously, things have changed over the last 30, 40 years. France, ever since the French Revolution, has a strong tradition of centralisation. And this obviously, is a feature of our constitutional identity and has been so for quite some time now. But it has been very clear, for quite some time, too, that the centralisation of power is not a desirable situation, both for you know, local authorities and a centralised power itself. So basically, it's been 40 years that a process of decentralisation has been underway, and obviously, it has a lot, a lot of advantages and good things to it. Local authorities have more powers, they are democratically elected. So it gives also the citizens some kind of a close-knit representation. Whereas you know, when you elect someone to go to Paris, I mean you do not see him or her very often afterwards.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 11:15

Louis, we've seen a graphic example of people who don't think government is working, certainly not for them, over recent years and particularly over recent weeks in France with the revolt over pensions. Just tell us about that, and whether that's any different from protest movements of 40, 50 years ago?

**Louis Baktash** 17:07

What's different with protests in recent years in France, I think is, if we look back at Macron's campaign, he wrote a book in 2016, called the *Revolution*, where he revolutionised French politics. And in that book, Macron laid down a vision of democracy, which would be centred around the relationship between him, the president, and the people directly. And so there was an opposition in his mind to what we call in French *les corps intermédiaires*, the intermediate bodies, that is trade unions, that is also to some extent, a local government in a way, and he sort of tried to personify France, French politics, and to some extent it works. When we look at the gilets jaunes, what's really interesting in that protest movement is that it's been organised almost spontaneously. It's been organised outside of trade unions, outside of political parties. But maybe that's what made the gilets jaunes particularly dangerous. I think that's what made them worrying for Macron and for French political elites in general. When we look at recent events, or in the recent weeks, what's interesting compared to the gilets jaunes is the lack of violence in the different demonstrations across the country.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 12:44

Because let's be clear, to British eyes, protests on the streets in France have always had a lot more violence than we're used to.

**Louis Baktash** 12:54

Yeah, probably but there's been some material degradation, I was about to say, there have been some fires in some French cities. But what's interesting is that until Article 49.3 of the Constitution was used to force that law through Parliament, protests were relatively peaceful, because they were organised by trade unions. The thing is, Macron by undermining trade unions consistently, by refusing to listen to them, it is

creating an incentive to act outside of these *corps intermédiaire*, of these intermediate bodies. I think that's the main difference in France with protests in recent years, it is that undermining of intermediate bodies.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 13:34

And have the various protests over the years - the gilets jaunes and right now the pension protests - have they actually had any impact on public policies? Because certainly seems with the pension changes, that's just forging ahead.

**Louis Baktash** 13:51

Clearly, in terms of the pensions reform, that hasn't worked, and the law has been signed by President Macron. So it is happening. But the conversations are still happening. So there's still that hope that there might be some pressure on policymakers and the law might be either abandoned or subsequently reformed later. I study regional policy in both countries and what's interesting is, the gilets jaunes have had an effect on Macron's policy. So I was talking about how in *Revolution* Macron opposed the *corps intermédiaires*. He also wrote about the need to rethink French decentralisation. So limit the power of the *Département* eventually getting rid of the *Département* in favour of the regions, merge *Département* with the *Métropole* with these inter-municipal groupings at a city region level. What's really interesting is that gilets jaunes changed that. Quickly, if we look at the origins of the gilets jaunes, what started was the increase on fuel duty, but actually, if you go a bit back a few months before that in 2018, you see what really created some resentment against Macron was the decision to limit the speed of secondary roads from 55 to 50 miles an hour, from 90 to 80 kilometres an hour. And that change was picked up by local politicians, by the opposition, especially on the centre right from the *Republicains*. So there was an instrumentalisation of the centre v. periphery cleavage, what Christophe Guilluy called "La France Périphérique". It's a term that's contested and there's a lot of things to criticise in it. But what's really interesting is that that narrative is used to frame a lot of events. And so the gilets jaunes protests, becoming framed by this idea of "La France Périphérique" forced Macron to rethink his policies. And you see in terms of regional policy, more attention given to left behind areas, as we call them in English, but also Macron has to rethink its political strategy, working more with mares, with local officials from these traditional local authorities. And all that rhetoric around limiting the power of local officials goes away, forcing Macron to think that.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 16:05

Mike Kenny, we certainly don't have movements on the scale of the gilets jaunes in the UK. But has there been public resistance in a way that has worried the government and changed policy? Of course, the great example is Brexit.

**Michael Kenny** 16:22

I mean, just picking up on Louis' interesting account of the gilets jaunes and its origins. I mean, I do think there's an there's something here about cars and people's attitudes towards cars and petrol prices and so on, we are beginning to see, aren't we, coming out in some of these protests emerging around the city

based schemes for restricting traffic, and the idea of a congestion charge here in Cambridge and the protests in Oxford, there's something actually that is isn't just a French thing here.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 16:52

And they turned out to be much more local though interestingly, don't they? They're really powerful, and you could say the most powerful lobby in the UK is the NIMBY lobby, which is having a huge effect on central government's planning abilities.

**Michael Kenny** 17:07

Yeah, that's a really good example of one of the most systemically difficult issues in UK politics, which is around the way in which the planning system works. And you know, obviously, a lot of this comes through politics, the unwillingness of politicians to take decisions that might make them unpopular with their constituents in areas where these issues arise. But going back to your bigger question there, Rory, I think Brexit is an illustration of where this works very differently in the UK. Because Brexit is both, in a sense, a very particular example of protest politics, but it's also because it's a referendum, it's also in internal politics within the system, you know, it because of the result it has to be enacted, and also has a very wide range of support both politically and socially. So I think we don't have the gilets jaunes but we do of Brexit and one of the effects of it, is to draw the political elite towards the challenges of left behind places towards the idea, the recognition of the idea that that there are parts of the country that feel pretty deeply neglected by public policy that are not in the sort of small number of cities that have had a fairly stable growth rate that are not in particularly prosperous or productive areas. And I think this is where there's a really interesting parallel between Britain and France is that Brexit as this shock event has shifted, I think, the tenor and focus of a lot of British policy debate as a consequence.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 18:47

Mathieu, one thing that is different from 50 years ago is the internet and social media. Has that shifted the balance of power? Has that, it was often said to be a democratising influence and I think people are questioning that now, but has that in itself made France, for instance, more difficult to govern?

**Mathieu Carpentier** 19:04

Macron got elected in part because he was very social media savvy. But nowadays we can see that, and that also goes back to what Louis was talking about, going around the intermediate bodies, is the fact that nowadays, social agitation, one of the main tools it uses is social media. So for instance, the gilets jaunes movement started on Facebook. And the same goes with nowadays, the current protests. Everybody is on social media now. And obviously, what could have been confidential or not as widespread as it can be today before, now becomes an affair of state in a few minutes. So whether it's Macron making a blunder during a visit to local government, or whether it is a protester saying an inappropriate thing about the President. Social media serves as a kind of echo chamber, which can be used both by the executive, both by

the government to its own profit but also by people wishing to contest its authority. So yes, I would say yes, it has made France harder to govern.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 20:29

Louis, it seems that social media is now a vital tool to get into government. But once you're in government, it makes it harder to actually do anything. And in particular unpopular things that the governments used to pride themselves, certainly at the beginning of their administrations, on being able to do things that might be unpopular, that might be good for the long term, has it made them more short-termist?

**Louis Baktash** 26:36

I don't know if it has made them more short-termist. It has allowed people to organise themselves outside of more traditional means. It has allowed politicians to appeal to certain categories of the population to certain demographics more easily as well. We saw that not only in electoral campaigns, but we can also see that in the context of recent political events in France in the UK, it sees politicians just taking their phone, tweeting something as an immediate reaction to an event without the usual policy process or the usual consultation. What's really interesting with social media as well, is it has allowed some people, a small number of people, for example, to exert more pressure on politicians. It doesn't mean it's a mass movement. I'm thinking of that SaccageParis hashtag that was very popular. This small group of less than 100 people managed to exert huge public pressure on Anne Hidalgo, on the mayor of Paris, pushing her to react. So I think social media has definitely changed the way people can exert pressure on politicians.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 22:11

Let's move on to what may be the answers to making government better, making it more effective. Mike, in a [recent report](#), you analyse the deficiencies in England's administration, particularly, and make the case for devolution. Why might that be the answer to governance challenges?

**Michael Kenny** 22:30

There's been quite a long-standing debate about whether England in particular, which is what is the focus of our [report](#), needs a system of government that's more flexible, perhaps less top-down and less centralised, and also one that gives a bit more voice to people in the different localities, different local areas in which they live. And there are a whole sort of set of different hopes that are attached to that idea of English devolution. How, how realistic some of those are is hard to say. I think one of the drivers of this renewed interest in the idea of devolution has actually been this growing concern in British politics at what's happening to the regional economies. I think the fact that growth has been so uneven.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 23:25

The London problem, the fact that London and the Southeast is such a huge part and pulling away from the rest of the country.



**Michael Kenny** 23:31

Exactly. So in particular in the wake of the banking financial crisis of 2007-8, it's that period, after then, when there's such a sort of imbalance in the way in which the economy recovers, that I think has really shifted the dial for many politicians. And then on top of that, of course, you have Brexit as well, which I think sends a signal to politicians that actually, you know, a lot of people are very unhappy about exactly that kind of question. So I think a lot of the hope that sort of invested in devolution in England is about the economy and about whether this would give the tools to decision makers nearer to the ground, you know, in the different parts of England, to actually make the kinds of decisions that would perhaps prioritise things in ways that would ultimately benefit those areas, economies. Now, there's a lot of hope invested in the economic prospects of devolution, and it could well be that that would improve things for some areas. But I think at the popular level, the reason why devolution, I suspect is becoming a more interesting idea, and there isn't wild enthusiasm about it. But I think what might be putting it into people's minds is actually the failings of central government. It could well be that actually if centralisation is not delivering what it says on the tin, then people might be more inclined to think well, actually, I'd rather vote for Andy Burnham and have him have more powers or Andy Street or you know, that you can begin to see a sort of logic for devolution in popular politics potentially build up in that kind of way. But I mean we're a long way from having a citizenry that is crying out for radical governance reform.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 25:23

Mathieu, what's the story in France? Is the citizenry crying out for reform of the way government works? Are policymakers thinking about it? Are academics coming up with ideas for how the structure of government should change?

**Mathieu Carpentier** 25:36

Yeah, well, the Constitution has been under a lot of pressure these days, because it provides the government with a toolkit that is quite, quite powerful in terms of how it can enact its policies without much obstacles. I mean, constitutional reform is something that comes back to the fore every two or three years in France, ever since the last big amendment that was brought to it in 2008. So the main thing, actually, that people are talking about is how to improve the participation of the citizenry of the French citizens in shaping policies that will be enacted. And there have been attempts to improve this participation. Macron has set up two citizens assemblies, selected through sortition, one on the environment, the other on assisted dying. But nothing big comes out of it. I mean, you've got these assemblies, everybody talks about it. They do a lot of work. They are very great. But at the end of the day, they have no

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 26:52

They're seen as talking shops, mere talking shops, are they?

**Mathieu Carpentier** 26:56

That's how they are perceived. Obviously, they bring a great deal in terms of informing the public opinion, on making it move to some extent. But in terms of its concrete, immediate consequences, they are close to nil. So should a constitutional reform be made so that the citizenry can participate more extensively in policymaking? Maybe. But I do not see that coming soon since the French constitution is very hard to amend both chambers of Parliament, both Houses of Parliament have some kind of a veto right over constitutional reform, and especially the Senate, which is not on the same side of the President right now. During his first mandate, Macron tried to bring ambitious constitutional reforms. Twice, actually. And twice, it was crushed by the threat of the Senate's veto. So the French Constitution is hard to amend, and no real change will be made without reforming it. So I do not see it coming quite soon. But I could be wrong.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 28:16

Louis, what's your take on France and the UK too, whether there is likely to be any movement here or whether these are ideas that are just floating around academia and around some opposition politicians, but are not going anywhere?

**Louis Baktash** 28:33

What's the distinguishing element of French and British course of devolution, in France, I'd argue decentralisation, the principle of it, is more consensual among politicians, of government opposition, left, right. There is this common agreement that decentralisation is a good thing. In the UK, though that hasn't been the case. And we see in the history of British/English devolution a lot of hesitation. Labour, for example, with the metropolitan councils that had been abolished just afterwards by the Conservatives. However, I think something is changing in British politics. And it's interesting to see that levelling up as a slogan is also being picked up by Labour. Combined authorities have been created under Gordon Brown, under New Labour, have seen expanded powers under the Conservatives. So there's that change in British politics. As far as French politics is concerned, it is indeed really difficult to change the Constitution. And that might be why Macron is so keen on making alliances with local politicians, it's to get that support within the Senate. But also what's interesting as well is when we look at gilets jaunes, the protesters had a lot of different demands. However, one thing that stood out was the call for the RIC, the *Référendum d'initiative Citoyenne*, or citizens' initiative referendum. The RIC was basically one of the big arguments of the gilets jaunes, one of their main demands, and that is a call for more participation in policymaking, for more control over the institutions that govern French politics. And that idea of a RIC has been picked up by different politicians within the far right, within the large left wing coalition that we see now. So is it likely? In England it is, I think, it is likely we will see a lot of changes because something is happening between the Conservatives and Labour. In France? Well, I guess it all depends on the results of the next election.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 30:35

Mike, just bring us to a close by telling us where you think the more radical change is likely. And maybe whether there are ideas outside these two countries around the world that they should be looking to, as examples?

**Michael Kenny** 30:50

You know, reflecting on the conversation it's interesting, these, or we've identified, these two different tools that governments have turned to use as they face these pressures that we were talking about in terms of ungovernability. So one is, you know, do you tackle the structures of government and pass some more power and responsibility and energy down the line, down the chain? Or do you use the tools that Mathieu was talking about, which a number of governments got interested in, trying to engage citizens very directly through these kinds of new emerging techniques, citizen assemblies, and so on. And I mean, in a way you can see them as both different kinds of attempts to sort of engage citizens differently and to understand them better but also, I think, to try to address the growing desire for voice and for recognition, which I think is so central to sort of democratic politics. And I think if you think of those two approaches, then sure. I mean, it really makes sense to look at a lot of different countries that have tried both. Many people in the UK look to Germany and think that the answer is that we turn ourselves somehow into a federal model of the German kind. And I think that kind of impulse was perhaps understandable. It's born of frustration at different aspects of British institutions and culture. I mean, I think what it often neglects, is that that would be a wholesale transformation of pretty much everything. That would be a very radical leap in a different direction. And if you look at history, it tends to suggest that countries take that leap only, or nearly always only, at moments of intense crisis. When they've been invaded, when they've experienced violent civil conflict internally. And that's not where we're at in these contexts. Yes, they're becoming harder to govern, perhaps, but neither are quite at the point of sufficient crisis, I think, to really embrace a very radical model, at the moment.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 32:52

Well, that's all we've got time for on this episode. Thanks to Louis Baktash and Mike Kenny from the Bennett Institute and Mathieu Carpentier from the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. Let us know what you think of this latest episode of season two of Crossing Channels. You can contact us via Twitter - the Bennett Institute is [@BennettInst](https://twitter.com/BennettInst) - the Institute for Advanced Study is [@IAS\\_Toulouse](https://twitter.com/IAS_Toulouse) and I am [@ruskin147](https://twitter.com/ruskin147). If you enjoyed this episode, then do listen to our other Crossing Channels editions, most notably our recent one on the hype around emerging technologies. And please join us next month for the next edition where we'll be looking at religion.