

The UK is suffering from top-down political thinking. D...

<https://www.liberaldemocrats.org.uk/Blog/2025/02/05/the-uk-is-suffering-from-top-down-political-thinking-do-we-need-to-go>

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Top-down thinking tells us what we can't do because it assumes things aren't possible, which is precisely what our politicians keep saying. Is it time to liberate ourselves with some bottom-up thinking?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQuxSaeV2Tg&si=_qauCBVujKdLwbot

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=tium4-17e6ec0-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=&logo_link=episode_page&button-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Do we need bottom-up thinking in the UK? I think we do, and I think that requires some explanation.

I'm a little wary to offer binary choices on this channel, because I know that people then get very excited about one or the other. But in this case, I'm going to suggest there are three ways of thinking which are important?

One is bottom-up thinking.

One is top-down thinking.

And one is the bit in the middle where we find real progress.

The trouble we have in this country at this moment is that we are dominated by top-down thinking.

Top-down thinking is thinking that is based upon the prior assumptions that a person has made before they ever reach the point that they have to make a decision.

So, for example, if we use Rachel Reeves as a perfect case of a top-down thinker, she believes the government cannot create more money, and therefore, she says she has to live within her means.

She believes that there are things called fiscal rules and that she has to comply with them, even though she makes the rules up and nobody expects her to comply with them.

She believes that all wealth is created in the private sector and nothing is created by the public sector.

And everybody else knows that education, healthcare, and all sorts of other things do add value, but she does not.

In other words, she has a preconceived set of notions before she ever comes to make a decision about the economy, which are absolutely, fundamentally wrong.

Let me give you another demonstration of top-down thinking and how it can be so dangerous, or at least just wrong, and I found this one on the web, but I think it's quite good.

Suppose you go to a station to meet someone. Your phone is flat, so you can't call them. You're standing on the foyer of the station hoping to see this person, and we're talking about a big station here, and what you think is that your friend will be wearing a red coat because the last few times that you've seen them, that is what they were wearing.

So what do you do? You look for people in red coats.

You never find your friend. You miss them. You go home without them.

Why? Because they were wearing a blue coat. It's as simple and straightforward as that. You made a straightforward category error by assuming that your friend would be wearing a red coat, and that's just as big a mistake as Rachel Reeve's when assuming that the government cannot create its own money when very clearly it can because it has its own bank.

And this is the problem of top-down thinking that thinking takes place inside a narrow silo where the assumptions are all made in advance.

Now, let's compare that with bottom-up thinking. Suppose you're looking at buying a property. You get the estate agent's details. There's a floor plan and it lays out what each of the rooms is currently used for.

It says kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, sitting room, and whatever else they wish to call the rooms in question. And you could, if you were a top-down thinker, go into the house and think in the way that the estate agent has instructed. In other words, when you go into a bedroom, you think, this is a bedroom.

Alternatively, you could go in and think you could change the assumption. You could go in with an open mind. The fact that there's a bed in there at present, and a bedside table, and a wardrobe or whatever else, doesn't mean that you couldn't use it for something else. You could.

The fact that there's even a kitchen in a certain room in the house doesn't mean to say that if you wanted to, you couldn't rip it out and transfer it into what was called a dining room by the estate agent. If you wanted to, you could do that. If you're a bottom-up thinker, you'd look at the house as a blank canvas. You'd consider the possibilities that each room presented to you, on the assumption that it wasn't in its current use, but it was empty as, of course, it will be on the day you move in. And you would consider the option of changing everything if you so wished. In other words, you're looking at the possibilities.

But, and I add an important 'but' here because bottom-up thinking is constrained. You look at the possibilities, but very clearly if you're looking at the details of a house which costs £500,000 and your budget is only £350,000 it doesn't matter what you think about those rooms; you won't be able to change them.

If you're looking at a house with a budget of £350,000 and a price of £350,000, but your imagination requires that you spend another £100,000 to change it to suit your purposes, again, you're not going to get what you want.

So, there are constraints on bottom-up thinking; you've got to live within the real world.

But at least you're considering the possibilities, because once you've realised that you do need certain things and this house isn't providing it, you can at least then move on and work within your budget to find the things you do want. In other words, bottom-up thinking liberates you to work out what is necessary to achieve your goals.

In contrast, top-down thinking says you can't do a whole pile of things, whether it's looking for a person in a blue coat, or spending money you haven't got, even though the Bank of England would let you do that. And, therefore, you don't believe those

things are possible.

Bottom-up thinking is, therefore, liberating, even if there are constraints.

Top-down thinking is always a constraint.

And that's why we need bottom-up thinking in the UK at present. We've had top-down thinking of a neoliberal sort for over 40 years now. We've been told that markets work, that government does not work, that governments should not run deficits, that the government must back off from any form of activity because consumers want choice. That tax is bad, that taxing the wealthy is particularly bad, and everything else. None of those things are true; they are all assumptions. But they have been given the status of, well literally, givens; things that are fixed, that cannot be changed. And that's all wrong.

If we started with bottom-up thinking, we would approach government in a very different way.

We'd look at this country and say, what do we want to achieve?

Well, the first thing we want to achieve is a country where people do not live in poverty. We wouldn't want children to suffer that consequence.

We would want people to have decent education and health care.

We would want a functioning justice system.

We would want social care that worked on behalf of people.

We wouldn't want food that poisoned us any more than we once wanted cigarettes that killed us.

We would not want those things.

What we would want is a system that worked. And we would work within the blank canvas of the resources that we have, the 67 million people who live here, and the capacity that they've got to generate wealth between them, and work out how we could do that to best effect.

That's how we break the political logjam that we've got.

We have got a political logjam. It's entirely the consequence of top-down thinking, which is preventing us thinking that any alternative is possible.

It's why young people are rejecting politics, quite reasonably so.

It's why people are alienated by the political process, quite reasonably so.

It's why people think that Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves are completely out of touch, quite reasonably so, because what they say makes no sense to the ordinary person, who can clearly see that the assumptions that they've made are utterly illogical and totally removed from the reality of lives as they know it.

In that case, we have to start again. We have to do some bottom-up thinking. But when doing so we do very clearly have to compromise as to what is possible.

It isn't possible to spend without limit, and anybody who tells you it is, is wrong because we get inflation.

We cannot both build Heathrow and new social housing because there are a limited number of people who have the skills to do both, and by and large, they're transferable. So we have to choose between do we want hospital schools, social housing and other things that are useful to people, or a new runway that frankly is only useful for a few people?. We will have to make those difficult choices.

Bottom-up thinking does not stop that. But what it does do is empower us to imagine what is possible. And at the moment, all we get from politicians is a story about what is not possible.

I believe in possibility.

I believe we can do better than we are doing now.

I believe that top-down thinking is stopping us doing that.

I think we have to start with a blank canvas, and then work out what is possible, and then deliver it, and that's what politics now demands.