# CONSTRUING IN THE POLITICAL REALM – REFLECTIONS ON THE POWER OF A THEORY

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*At first glance, the range of convenience of personal construct theory does not necessarily include the world of politics which seems to be shaped by forces that are often beyond the scope of individuals' agency. However, Don Bannister quoted George Kelly as opting for politics as a field where he would like personal construct theory to go, Kelly himself travelled around the world in 1961, interviewing psychologists about their life in their respective countries, and lately 'constructivism' has become one of the theories applied in international relations. Therefore it seems worthwhile to take a fresh look at 'PCP and the world' and the chances of political action informed by personal construct theory.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Just as constructs have a *range* of convenience and a *focus* of convenience, so have theories. And the focus or the foci of convenience of Personal Construct Theory (PCT) are certainly (1) understanding and helping people in trouble, (2) the modulation of constructs through education, and (3) understanding and possibly modifying the functioning of organisations. However, the fundamental postulate and the corollaries of PCT are worded in a much more general way so that they seem to be applicable to a much wider area of phenomena. Indeed, PCT has made forays into other domains, such as architecture, marketing, the arts, and many others.

And politics. In 1981, Don Bannister said:

*The last conversation I had with George Kelly was over a meal. It was a very bad chilli con carne in Columbus, Ohio. We were discussing broadly where we would like personal construct theory to go in an elaborative sense and I remember at the end of the meal George suddenly and finally opting for politics. That is where the meal ended so I never did get to find out whereabouts in politics construct theory is going. And, alas, George died before I went back to the States.* (Bannister, 2003, p. 181)

## KELLY ON THE ROAD

But we do know something about what Kelly might have had on his mind – from his paper on 'Europe's matrix of decision' (Kelly, 1962). This was a talk he gave, strangely enough, at the 'Nebraska Symposium on Motivation' in 1961 and has been cited occasionally. But as I am going to show, I believe that the 'political Kelly' still needs to be re-discovered.

In 1961, Kelly and his wife travelled around much of the world; he researched and analysed the constructs that guided the people in the countries he visited, especially in the Soviet Union and in then divided Germany: twice, just before the erection of the Berlin Wall and a short time after. In true Kellyan fashion, he arrived at bipolar constructs such as:
- humanitarianism vs. opportunism
- idealism vs. materialism
- ideas vs. wealth
- (German) scholarship vs. (American) simple-mindedness (pre WW II)
- (German) vulgar materialism vs. (American) scholarship (post WW II)
- oppression vs freedom

That was nearly 50 years ago – it is up to speculation what constructs he would have identified today!

It is interesting to see how Kelly handled these constructs not just as meanings or opinions or attitudes (although they seem to be on a very high level of generality) but as – as the term goes now – 'self-guiding narratives', i. e. as guidelines for the vital decisions that individuals as well as nations are required to make: hence the 'Matrix of Decision'. One of his aims was to inform his fellow Americans about their own impending choices, thus exhibiting a practical political intention. Apparently, anticipating future developments on a larger scale was an important issue for him. That is, of course, as hazardous as a weather forecast. In hindsight, some of the predictions Kelly articulated in 1962 did not materialise – naturally so, as Peter Cummins (2000) analysed almost forty years later. Predictions about the future of the European countries are limited by the failure of anticipating a number of other developments, such as the reduced importance of a national identity – at least in the major part of Europe – and the lessening of the influence of World War II – which had ended only sixteen years before at the time of Kelly's travels. Perhaps the 'decision matrix' has too many components to allow an accurate prediction. Or, long-range predictions may always lie outside the range of convenience of a personal construing system!

But what I found instructive is how Kelly talked about general matters, such as constructs prevailing *in a country* (or constructs *about* a country), as well as about the choices *individuals* were facing. While the former sometimes sound somewhat stereotypical the treatment of the individual aspects appear very empathetic and realistic – at least to a citizen of one of the countries in question who was twenty at the time of Kelly's expedition: me.

## DON BANNISTER'S DIALECTICS

Bannister's paper of 1981 (Bannister, 2003) (which the quote is from) is titled 'The psychology of politics and the politics of psychology' and he addresses the two ways of 'pre-emptive construing' indicated by this dichotomy. Is it the environment, the circumstances that force the individual to act in a certain way – those 'up there', the forces of history, the complexity of it all? Or is it psychological matters that drive politicians to behave in a certain way – the psychology of politics (and politicians)? Both positions he calls simplistic:

> *For example, from the point of view of psychoanalytic theory radical political positions and political attacks on social authority are sometimes seen as manifestations of unresolved oedipal conflict with political authority structures representing 'father'. Conversely, radical political thinkers sometimes take the view that, say, psychoanalytic psychology or some allied theory is merely part of the ideology of bourgeois individualism...* (Bannister 2003, p. 182)

At the end he concludes that Personal Construct Theory is politically *libertarian*, politically *egalitarian*, politically *fraternal*. And of course, in doing so he refers to the ideals of the French Revolution. He quotes an early essay of Kelly's titled 'Social inheritance' and proposes that *"your construct system is not your private, isolated invention, your desert island. It is essentially partly a fraternal gift to you and partly your fraternal gift to others"*.

This is echoed in Bill Warren's (1996) elaboration of the "egalitarian outlook as the underpinning of personal construct theory".

Constructs that Bannister seems to think important are:
- (politically) left vs right
- control of the means of production, distribution and exchange by state managers vs by private owners
- authority vs liberty (authoritarian vs democrat)

He coins a nice phrase for people who develop an "intelligent interest" in politics but refrain from "action, involvement, personal responsibility and personal reaction", and are content with reading the paper and watching the news on TV. Bannister himself, however, was at some stage in his life involved in what is termed 'anarcho-syndicalist' politics and in his non-academic

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books – he was an accomplished novelist – wrote about politically active workers in the mines of Northern England.

Already in 1967, he had, together with Fay Fransella, used the repertory grid technique as a measure of political construing, namely to operationally define the "degree of interest in politics" and to predict voting behaviour (Fransella & Bannister, 1967). But after that, only very few papers appeared that connected PCP and politics.

- In 1975, Nancy Mihevic wrote about "Information, valence and cognitive complexity in the political domain", with students as subjects who rated political figures on bipolar scales (Mihevic, 1975).
- Larry Leitner, in 1983, investigated construct similarity, self-meaningfulness, and presidential preferences (Leitner, 1983)
- Jimenez, Lopez and Moreno-Jimenez (1985) explored the use of repertory grids in analysing electoral strategies – unfortunately in Spanish.
- Stella Theodoulou used PCP concepts such as *transition* and *control* in discussing economic aspects and compared Labour and Conservative Party supporters with respect to their construing: Labour supporters preferred the use of *propositional* construing over *constellatory* and *pre-emptive* construing, with Conservative Party supporters favouring a mixture of *preemptive* and *constellatory* construing. Labour supporters tended to be more *aggressive* (in the Kellyan sense) in their construing while Conservative Party supporters showed more *hostility*. This is an interesting example of the application of Kellyan theoretical concepts to the political field. (Theodoulou, 1996).

**THEM AND US – AND ME**

These researchers looked at certain phenomena in the political landscape in a similar way as other social psychologists do, albeit with a PCT mind and using PCT tools. Some other authors seem to deal with issues that affect them more 'personally'. They live in countries troubled by social upheaval, political disarray and war: Peter Du Preez in South Africa (1972, 1975, 1979), Dušan Stojnov (2003) in Yugoslavia, and myself

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in once divided Germany (Scheer, 1996). One important issue seems to be the construction of 'otherness' (Scheer, 2003) and the individual's positioning in the complex web of socially determined relationships – hence the title of this section.

Dušan Stojnov looks at Serbs and Croats – citizens of one country once but belonging to two peoples that had been enemies before and after their forced unity after the end of the Hungaro-Austrian Empire in WW I. He elaborates on the choices a Serb was facing: *going to war with Croats* means *chance to survive*, *peace with Croats* means *being slaughtered*; and for a Croat: *going to war with Serbs* means *being yourself*, *peace with Serbs* means *loosing your being*. "For both sides, going to war was a rationally anticipated decision to save their core national interests." For someone outside the Balkans and not involved in these tragic events it may seem difficult to understand the notion that national (or ethnic) allegiance determines so thoroughly how people feel about themselves and their very selves.

The constructs Stojnov mentions are:
- survive vs being slaughtered
- being yourself vs loosing your being

Interestingly, Stojnov found in a study on Serbian national identity – *after* the war – the "puzzling result" that the respondents chose to consider their belonging to Serbian nationality as a peripheral social issue. Having to choose between being *'demonised in the eyes of the international community'* and *'giving up his/her national identity'*, they chose the latter – as a generation that "stated constructs such as Health, Self-Respect, Love and Acceptance as their collective core – their social identity". Which, of course, sounds familiar to a member of an 'advanced' Western society.

So on the one hand, going to war against the neighbours was seen as inevitable for Serbs and Croats, *as Serbs and Croats*, but then, at a closer look, the individuals *do* seem to have other choices. It also shows that prevailing constructs depend on the overall context – in this case the times of war or peace.

Peter Du Preez (1972, 1975) can be considered as a pioneer in applying PCT concepts to political analysis. Imagine South Africa in the

Seventies: The National Party has been ruling the country since just after the war. The world around the country is changing while apartheid is still the guiding doctrine in domestic politics. Du Preez published a number of studies analysing parliamentary debates. The parliament then consisted of representatives of the ruling National Party, with its roots in the group of 'Afrikaner', descendants of the original Dutch settlers, the United Party, a modern conservative party, representing mainly business interests, and the liberal Progressive Party. In analysing parliamentary debate statements from 1948, 1958 and 1968 Du Preez found a shift from 'race' based to 'nation' based constructs (which excludes the blacks), mirroring a changing external political environment that required accommodating to the relationship with emerging 'black' nations around them while keeping the apartheid system at home. The details are now more of historical interest, but Du Preez' analyses are a good example of how to use PCT concepts for describing processes on the macroscopic level of political decisions. And it is stunning how his description of the National Party's leading constructs matches the Serbs' and Croats' public constructs that Stojnov described: for the National party and its Boer constituency it was about '*survival* vs. *lose control, lose culture, exterminated*'.

But Du Preez cautions us:

*We may construe a person's identity in terms of peripheral or even irrelevant constructs. That is we may simply misunderstand him. We may think that his nationality or his race is the key to his identity; whereas he attaches importance to his religion, the fact that he is a good musician, and his loyalty to his family.* (1979)

As an involved participant, I have speculated somewhat (Scheer, 1996) about the processes connected to the re-unification of Germany – among hundreds of writers who did that *without* a PCP perspective… I have often asked myself whether my construals of the recent developments in my country are due to me being 'a German', 'a West German', 'a West German of the Left', 'a psychologist', 'being born in the war, now of retirement age', or is it just *because*

*I am the person I am*? Which brings us back to Don Bannister's dialectics. So, without ignoring the forces of destiny, I am left (or we are left) with questions such as:

- what do *I* make of this?
- Why do I *look at things* this way? In other words, why do I *construe* events this way?
- What *choices* did I have, and what did I choose?
- And why did *others* make other choices?

We shall look at some of these issues from a Personal Construct Theory perspective.

## RE-INVENTING THE WHEEL?

Of course, attempts at connecting psychology and politics haven been numerous in the past. One may recall that, for instance, psychoanalytic scholars have extensively analysed Hitler's childhood and the like. When I started searching the literature data bases I discovered to my surprise that 'constructivism' has been one of the major theories in the field of 'International Relations' for more than twenty years, along with 'Realism', 'Liberalism', the 'Theory of International Society', and 'International Political Economy' (Jackson & Sörensen, 2006). The term used is 'social construct*ivism*' (not construct*ionism*) and the authors don't seem to refer to the 'social constructionists'. Again it seems to be a distinct academic 'culture' with little connections to obviously related disciplines. Often quoted exponents are Alexander Wendt, Peter Katzenstein, to name but a few. The theory posits the social construction of, e. g., power politics, which is in this view not given by nature and hence capable of being transformed by human practice. Another theme is that "ideas matter". The proponents discuss, for instance, the influence of a 'culture' prevailing in a given country on its foreign politics. Of course it is never about 'personal' constructs, although some of what is discussed could be called 'shared' or 'public' constructs.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY

Now let us have a look at what PCT might have to offer specifically to help with understanding what makes the 'political being' tick, Aristotle's 'zoon politikon' participating actively in the life of the 'polis', the city state of ancient Greece.

### Consistency vs. fragmentation

At a conference of academics involved in Trade Union issues that I attended recently, many participants were puzzled by an experience they had had. Trade unions, at least in our country, are usually involved in battling xenophobia, they are in favour of the integration of refugees and asylum seekers, and participate in demonstrations supporting these causes. This is in agreement with their usual positioning on the political left. But then, some of the union officials on the local level do just that but on the other hand are strongly opposed to giving jobs to foreigners. This my colleagues could not understand because it seemed contradictory.

Don Bannister in the paper mentioned above seemed to expect consistent behaviour, too: He wondered why some "free-wheeling, libertarian, political democrat" may be "tyrannically authoritarian within his or her family". And people like me are surprised that in many 'developed' countries majorities of a similar magnitude support social reform and capital punishment at the same time – attitudes that seem incompatible.

I think that we – intellectuals, academics – tend to maintain what might be called a 'consistency myth', in spite of the fact that many people – and us included! – often have fragmented construct systems that seem contradictory. In the above-mentioned issue, I came to think that some of the union officials might have a superordinate construct of solidarity: solidarity with your own 'mob', in a kind of self-help way, the way that helped the working class founding organisations and developing strength to withstand the oppression and exploitation by 19th century capitalists: A *fighting solidarity* vs. *lonely succumbing to threat and pressure*. If the perceived threat (e. g. to job security) comes from foreigners entering the country illegally their solidarity is with their own folk.

### Hierarchy and organisation

Thinking along an 'authoritarian vs. democrat' construct, Bannister says that

> ... *if you are truly a democrat, whatever that may mean to you, and if you have a very wide range of convenience for that construction then you will be a democrat within your family, you will be a democratic parent, a democratic family member.* (2003, p. 185)

Apparently, for him being 'truly' a democrat means having '*authoritarian* vs *democrat*' as a superordinate construct (and choosing the 'democrat' pole for oneself). Obviously, in the example cited above, being friendly towards foreigners was *not* the superordinate construct.

I think that it follows that if you want to find out about someone's political attitudes it would be appropriate to elaborate or help him/her elaborate the superordinate constructs rather than stick to the behavioural level.

### Choice and validation

How do we develop 'political' constructs, how do we choose? The same way we develop all our other constructs, by experiencing validation or invalidation, by achieving extension or definition of our constructions etc. How then would a 'democratic' construction be validated? Not necessarily by the results of our democratic voting procedures…

Let's take an example: I know people who think and say: "you are lost if you rely on others, better make sure you are independent and got your own." (as in Billie Holiday's song: *God bless the child – that got his own*). If '*rely on others* vs *being independent*' is a superordinate construct this will have far-reaching consequences. Choosing the right hand pole may reflect a deep distrust of human interaction, based in a lifetime's experience – 'validation'. It may result in a selfish manner of dealing with others,

ignoring their interests and needs. Circumstances allowing, an authoritarian political attitude and behaviour may result. However, the choice, in order to avoid being lost, really seems to be in favour of 'being in control of my circumstances and conditions' – but does that mean 'being in control of others'? I.e., being authoritarian? Not necessarily. Other influences (and other choices) may have to be added to go that way.

One of my jobs in the context of union work was to help selecting students (and later tutoring them during their studies) who had applied for a scholarship granted by a union-based foundation. In Germany we have a number of such foundations that are linked to the political parties, to the major churches, and to the federation of trade unions. The scholarships are granted to gifted students whose political, moral and other convictions put them in the vicinity of one of these organisations and who had shown involvement in some sort of community, social, or political activities. Most of the students I had to do with came from a working class background, had achieved their General Certificate of Education not through a standard high school career and had been involved in some sort of political activity. In the given context, it is interesting to see how they got involved in politics. Some followed a path paved by family tradition, with parents being Labour party or Union officials. Others had met with injustice and irregularities during their earlier vocational training and consequently had 'taken up arms' against that. Still others had experienced some other ethical dilemma and made their choices, had engaged in environmental (such as Greenpeace) or prosocial activity (e. g. working with disadvantaged or handicapped children).

But this question is a much wider one: *Why is it* that some people oppose pressure, fascism, suppression – and others don't? Why do some people get involved in politics and or prosocial volunteer activities? (I am not talking about professional activities here – that would raise other interesting questions: why does someone choose to become a politician?). Why do some people leave the armchair perspective of "taking an intelligent interest" behind and get involved?

I have asked this myself for a long time because I have been involved in political activities since I joined a pacifist organisation at the age of fourteen. That was in line with family values although my family was neither actively involved nor pushy about it. Most of my friends did nothing of this kind, except later maybe donating to Amnesty International or Greenpeace. Others did volunteering work for Rotary, Animal Shelters or Environmental Groups. Many just lived their lives. I still do not have a stringent answer – need to do some laddering to find out about my superordinate constructs....

**Change of public constructs**

*Public constructs* may be called constructs that are shared by large proportions of a society or by society as a whole, constructs that guide political action. Such constructs and construct systems may change as part of a historical process. The 'Freedom of a Christian' as promoted by Martin Luther and 'Freedom from oppression' as advanced in the French Revolution are separated by almost three centuries. But they may also change in shorter periods of time.

An interesting example is the term 'reform' (see. Fig. 1). Or is it a construct? As a construct it will be determined by its opposite pole. During the second half of the 19th century there was a dichotomy of *changing* the intolerable social and economic conditions vs *conserving* the status quo. Change meaning advancing, hence *progressive* vs. reaction to it to re-establish the status quo ante, i. e. *reactionary*. On the 'change pole', there was a dispute between people preferring a radical *revolutionary* way and others preferring a slower, more evolutionary *reformist* way. So on the *social change pole* there were was a subordinate construct about how to go about it.

Now we have been witnessing a change of perspective, hence a change of constructs. With an ageing population in the developed countries, extended life span, reduced life-time working age etc., the systems of social security may at some stage get into financial hassles. Rather than looking for ways of reducing expenses for military equipment, space research, road construction etc., the dominant political forces in the Western countries are intent on reducing the 'costs of social security'. Hence the proponents of maintaining and defending the achievements of earlier generations with respect to social *re-*

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*forms* are labelled *conservative*. On the other hand, reducing pensions, privatising superannuation, reducing benefits of the health care system, reducing job security is labelled *reform*: health reform, job reform, superannuation reform, railway reform etc. In social-psychological terms this seems to be a matter of semantics. But I think that would be much too weak a term. It is really about changing ways how things (in this case social conditions) are *construed*.

However, in this case we don't really choose. I think I am not too paranoid to suspect that constructs of this sort, for use in public, political discourse, are consciously manipulated by the makers (and shakers) of public opinion.
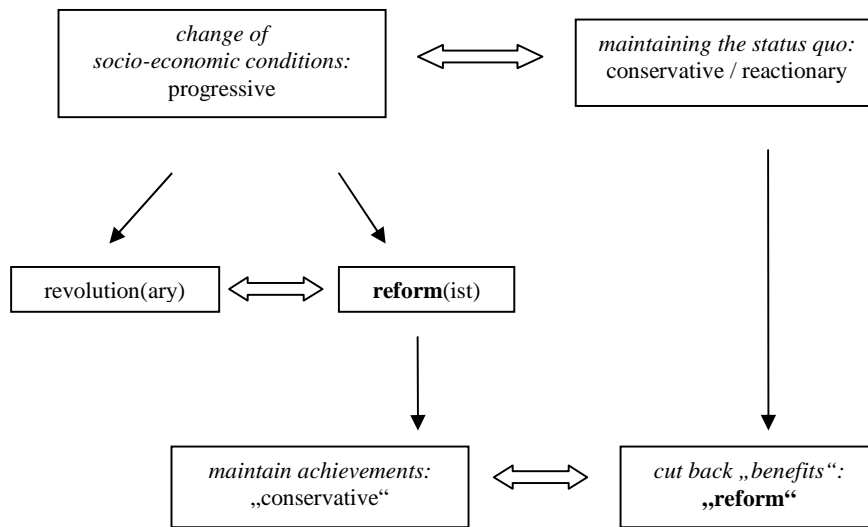


Figure 1: *The strange fate of a construct*

### Ways of construing

I mentioned that the concepts of 'preemptive', 'constellatory' and 'propositional' construing have been used in studies about supporters of political parties in the UK. And it is not difficult to observe preemptive construing in some representatives of the governments (or 'administrations') of certain states. Bill Warren (1996, p. 108) encourages the concept of cycles in analysing political action:

*In the authoritarian outlook, preemption reigns. The cycle of circumspection-preemption-control (the CPC cycle) in which the person first considers a range of possible options, then narrows the options to a single dichotomous option before*

*choosing a pole of that dichotomy, proceeds in a distorted fashion.*

### THE POWER OF A THEORY: THE POTENTIAL OF AND CHALLENGES TO PCT

I am sure that there are many phenomena in what happens in the political sphere can be *described* using PCT concepts. But beyond mere description PCT could help *understand* the processes and the reasons why actors act in a given way. Du Preez maintains that people – including political actors – often continue to act in ways which seem futile and unproductive because the alternatives to current action, as they construe them, are worse. They then reconstrue and change the matrix of decision. If they are politi-

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cal actors, their – personal – construction systems are converted into policy and law. Mass media publicise the constructs of key political leaders until they became public constructs. (Du Preez, 1975, p. 267).

Fay Fransella in the chapter on "New avenues to explore" that concludes her handbook (2003, p. 450) quotes the historian David Gillard that we

> *... can assume that foreign policy consists of the construing by a small number of identifiable individuals of the behaviour of their counterparts in other states. This they do through identifying their opponents' personal constructs and trying to change or reinforce them by a wide choice of methods, which can range from intimate discussion to total war.*

Gillard recurs to an analysis of the Munich crisis of 1938, and a day-to-day analysis of the months before and after the meeting.

> *By diplomacy and propaganda those policy-makers [about 20 British politicians, diplomats, service chiefs] relied on their own constructions of Hitler's personal constructs in their bid to change them – and those of his subjects. Hitler, of course, was doing the same kind of thing. Both sides got it wrong.*

Many people would probably find this kind of approach inappropriate, as too 'person-centred' or 'psychologising'. But if one looks at the foreign politics of the major powers in our times the temptation to construe politicians' construing this way seems very attractive. In Gillard's view, "of all possible approaches to the problem of international history, the theory of personal constructs comes closest to being scientific". This is of course not to deny the impact of economical, societal, geostrategic forces that have to be dealt with in the relations between countries. Maybe PCT could complement the notion of the political social constructivists mentioned above that "ideas matter" by extending this approach to include personal constructs and construction systems.

Could PCT then have an impact in the realm of politics? I would say that PCP certainly could not change the course of history. But we might try to imagine how the world of politics (and politicians!) would look like if they were inspired and informed by the spirit and the accumulated body of knowledge – or should we say: wisdom? – of PCP. For instance:
- PCT concepts like search for definition, extension, validation/invalidation maybe helpful in understanding political construing and acting.
- PCP can teach us to accept complexity, fragmentation, contradictions – and help us search for superordinate constructs.
- All this while being aware of the range (and limits) of convenience of PCT, i. e. remember that PCP is about psychological *processes*, including those of political actors, but not about political *forces*.

But it would certainly need more examples of how a PCP approach would work. For now, as not more than maybe a dozen or two articles have been published during the last forty years, this may seem absolutely futile. So PCP scholars and practitioners would have to do their home work first. This would be a major task if we look at the – as it was called in the olden days – man-power (or now person power) of the PCP movement. There are about 300 members of the PCP email discussion lists and nearly 600 subscribers to the e-journal *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*. If we double that number arbitrarily, we arrive at maybe 1.000 PCP supporters. But there is more potential: the most popular entries in the *Internet Encyclopaedia of PCP*, 'personal construct theory' and 'repertory grid methods' have nearly 5.000 'hits' or 'visits' per year!

**A FINAL FANTASY**

My personal fantasy is something like a 'personal construct think tank'. I am aware that there are a lot of 'think tanks' operating in the world of politics. They are financed by governments, the military, big corporations; they hold expensive meetings and produce glossy reports (or secret dossiers) – something the PCP community

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could only dream of (íf it is deemed desirable at all, that is).

But what about a 'virtual think tank': a kind of 'brain trust' operating in the Internet? In fact, some time ago, I invited a small group of people involved in PCP whom I knew to be interested in politics to join in a network for 'PCP and politics'. The aims would have to be modest for the time being. But for the PCP community who share more than Bannister's 'intelligent interest' in politics, this might be an option, and a start. And the URL is: http://www.personal-construct.net/politics.

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