

Theresa May: Churchill Attlee Democracy Lecture

Marking the Hansard Society's 80th anniversary

14th May 2024, Westminster Central Hall

[APPLAUSE]

Introduction: The Rt Hon the Baroness Taylor of Bolton

Good evening, everyone. I cannot see you because of those lights, but hopefully you've got a good view of the platform here. My name is Ann Taylor, and I chair the Hansard Society at the moment. And this is a particularly important year for the Hansard Society because it was founded in 1944, which means that this is our 80th anniversary year.

And it really is quite a critical time for parliamentary democracy. I think we're seeing lots of signs that pressures are there, that trust is diminishing. And it does, in fact, create some real challenges for us all. The Hansard Society was founded by a combination of support from Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee, crossing that political divide. And they thought there were many challenges to parliamentary democracy at that time. And as I say, I think that they are still there, although perhaps in a different form.

Throughout the history of the Hansard Society, it's been considered a very trusted interlocutor between different parties, different groupings, dealing with all parties and trying to be constructive and effective. And I do not think anyone has ever accused the Hansard Society of being partisan.

I think the Hansard Society itself describes itself as the critical friend of Westminster and focuses on remedies to address some of the weaknesses in the way in which Parliament, and I would say, particularly the House of Commons-- but maybe I'm biased-- but the way in which Parliament works.

Now, there is a leaflet on your seats. And this outlines the three priority areas of the current work of the Society-- improving the way in which we make law and, in particular, regulations, supporting the next generation of MPs. And I think the last generation had a very difficult entry because they'd only been in Parliament in 2019 for a very short time

when COVID struck. But also, we need to look at transforming the language and the rules of the House of Commons so that procedures and processes in Westminster are easier to understand and engage with.

So over this anniversary year, we're hosting a number of events, and at the heart of them will be the debate about how our Parliament and our politics can be more effective in how we can all help not just politicians, but the wider public and media, as well. And that is one reason why I'm very pleased that we have got students from several schools in this area.

I think many of us think that students don't get involved enough and aren't often invited. So, it's very good that you could come this evening. So, what we have this evening is the inaugural Churchill Atlee democracy lecture. And it's our intention to invite a prominent speaker each year to reflect on the state of parliamentary democracy in the UK and, indeed, around the world. And we were really delighted when the former Prime Minister agreed to give this lecture named in honor of her predecessors and our first members.

We did invite Theresa May before she announced that she is to retire from the Commons at the next election. Nevertheless, after three decades and having served extensively throughout some of our more turbulent years, I think that we can say that she is well placed to reflect on Parliament now and, indeed, think about the future. And so we are very grateful to her for giving up her time.

And this is, as I say, not just the first of our anniversary lectures, but also the launch of our 80th anniversary appeal. And all the ticket sales this evening will go towards that appeal. I think perhaps people don't understand that the Hansard Society does not receive any public funds. It doesn't have any rich benefactors. It is actually quite hard work to keep the show on the road.

We are an independent charity and we rely on what grants we can obtain in our membership. And indeed, donations are very important. And it is 20 years since the Hansard Society last had an appeal. And that was to mark the 60th anniversary. So it's not that we come cap in hand very often. But I think events like tonight do help to focus the spotlight on the work of the Society and the need for support.

The proceedings this evening will be presided over by my friend and fellow trustee, who probably needs no introduction to everyone here. Jackie is a former political journalist-- I

don't know that you don't still dabble a little-- and broadcaster, who has seen the work of Parliament and, indeed, the Hansard Society over many years. So thank you to Jackie for agreeing to do this. Thank you to Theresa May for agreeing to come. And I'm sure that we will enjoy this evening's discussion. So Jackie, over to you.

[APPLAUSE]

Introduction: Jackie Ashley

Thank you very much indeed, Anne. And welcome to you all. And apologies if my voice is getting a little bit squeaky. I'm suffering from hay fever for about the first time in my life. And it's not fun. But if my voice runs out, Theresa has agreed to interview herself afterwards, so that will be fine.

Provided my voice doesn't run out.

It's that time of year, I'm afraid. But it's lovely to see so many of you here. Thank you very much, indeed, for coming. The format is going to be that Theresa will give her lecture. She and I will then have a little chat about it. I've already had a little glance at it. There's some very interesting points I want to pick up from it. And then we're going to have questions.

We've already had quite a few questions submitted. So we'll group them. And we'll take some from the floor and some that have been sent in. So hopefully we'll have a bit of a discussion, as well, afterwards. We will finish promptly at 8:30, because that's when I think we get chucked out. But we have still quite a lot of time to come.

So I'd just like to say, I first really came across Theresa May when I was a Guardian journalist. She was a Conservative MP, so not natural allies, you'd think. But I was working, in those, days back in the '80s and '90s-- '90s, not the '80s-- with Harriet Harman, who was trying to increase the number of Labour women MPs. And Theresa had seen some of the stuff we were doing and asked me along to-- what was it called? Westminster women, what were they called-- a lot of Conservative Westminster women that you were setting up?

Women to Win.

Women to Win. That was it. And asked me along to come and speak to them. I remember this rather shocked reaction from her colleagues. Who's this Guardian journalist you've

invited? But anyway, there started a very good conversation, didn't there, between Conservative and Labour women that continued over many years. So many, many fellow feelings there.

Theresa needs no introduction. She entered Parliament in 1997 when Tony Blair's landslide took place. Probably not the most propitious time to become a Conservative MP, but survived those years in opposition with many a shadow responsibility job. She became Home Secretary in 2006-- 2010. Served for six years as Home Secretary. And then after that, became Prime Minister in 2016. And so we're delighted to have you tonight. And we very much look forward to hearing your lecture. And can I invite you to take the lectern? Thank you.

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

The Rt Hon Theresa May MP

All right, thank you. Thank you very much, Jackie, for that introduction. And it is, indeed, an honour to deliver this inaugural Churchill Atlee Democracy Lecture and in so doing, to mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Hansard Society and to launch your 80th anniversary fundraising appeal. And it's fitting that you've chosen to name this lecture after your first two members.

Sir Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee were both distinguished statesmen, but first and foremost, they were parliamentarians. They believed in the power of our parliamentary system to maintain stability, to provide good governance, and to enhance democratic accountability.

They were committed to the idea of Parliament as the representative forum of the nation. And they were champions and for the primacy of the Commons, as the elected chamber. It's indicative of that belief that they both opted to remain active participants in political life after Downing Street. And I'm proud to have followed in that tradition.

And it has been a privilege to have spent the last five years participating from the back benches. Although, it was a rather unfamiliar existence at first. I'd only been a backbencher for a year upon entering Parliament before I was appointed to the opposition front bench.

And I spent 12 years auditioning for government, holding 11 different briefs, serving under four party leaders.

As you've just heard, in 2010, I joined the government as Home Secretary before becoming Prime Minister six years later. Now, as you would expect, a lot has changed over those years, much of it for the better. I'm glad to say that reference to what Jackie has just been talking about, there are many more women in Parliament now, for instance. But there is still much more we can do.

So as a member of Parliament, approaching the end of her 27 years tenure, I'd just like to share some reflections with you on my time in public life, on the state of our democracy, and on how it could be made stronger and more effective in the future.

First, we should ask ourselves, why democracy? Churchill said it is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried. And of course, democracy does have its flaws. But alongside our values of liberty and justice, of our commitment to the rule of law and to an open market economy, democracy has been the platform upon which modern history has been built.

Over the last century, we've seen tremendous progress in virtually every major area. Life expectancy has increased from around 55 years old in 1920 to over 80 today. Infant mortality has plummeted. We've seen the development of revolutionary medicines and treatments, rights for women and minorities that were once an aspiration we now take as accepted. We now have universal access to education and higher levels of literacy than ever before. The advent of personal computers and the internet has changed the face of everyday life beyond recognition.

And with significant growth of our economy, we've seen a huge rise in living standards, with average incomes multiples of where they were hundreds years ago. So we have much to be positive about. But it becomes easy to take our way of life for granted, to take our freedoms and values for granted. Establishing the superiority of those values was the result of centuries of sacrifice.

And just ask yourself, would this degree of human progress have been possible through an alternative means? Had Churchill and Attlee not succeeded in their fight for freedom, had history taken another turn, could we expect these same achievements in a less open

society, one without the rights and freedoms we've enjoyed under the control of an overbearing state, with little freedom of expression or thought with innovation stifled, with no wealth creation to raise our living standards, and to enable us to care for those in need? I think not.

We owe democracy a great debt. And to ensure our values endure for generations to come, we must therefore cherish it and conserve it. If we fail in that endeavour, we will all pay the price. But we must be honest with ourselves. Democracy is in trouble here in the UK and around the world.

We know from opinion research that support for our democratic institutions is wavering, especially among the young. The most recent United Nations Human Development Report showed that for the first time ever, more than half the global population supports leaders who may undermine democracy. Polling by Kekst CNC for the Munich Security Conference showed that over the last three years, support for democracy across the developed world has fallen.

Of all the countries surveyed, support for democracy is lowest in the United States and Canada, and it revealed an approval rating of only 70% in the UK and just 58% among young people. Think about that for a moment.

Almost a third of the British population cannot say that they support democracy. Research conducted a few years ago by the think tank Onward found that more than a third of under 35-year-old voters believe that putting the army in charge would be a good way to run the country. And nearly a quarter think that democracy is a bad way to run the country.

There is a growing dissonance between what voters want from their politics and what is on offer from their parties. Many communities feel left behind by social and economic change, and populist politicians have seized the opportunity to capitalise on a crisis of confidence. Exploiting often understandable concerns, they promote a politics of division, identifying enemies to blame for our problems and offering only easy answers.

And frequently, populism aligns with nationalism.

And online, disinformation on social media amplifies extremes of view. Our domestic politics is increasingly characterised by rancour in public debate and abuse towards those in public

life. We need only to be reminded of the murders of Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, or the scenes at the US Capitol in 2020, to see how fragile support for democracy can be.

And from beyond our shores, our adversaries seek to capitalise on this fragility, exploiting our openness, sowing discord in our societies, and attempting to destabilise our liberal way of life. The resilience of democracy and our democratic values is being tested like never before.

These developments have combined to create a flashpoint in our democratic story that I believe should concern us all. Because less democracy means less freedom, less control over our lives, and less opportunity for generations to come. This is particularly concerning in a world where the balance of power is already shifting away from the democratic west and away from the rules based international order that has been the guarantor of our security for decades.

So it's incumbent on those of us engaged in public life, indeed on anyone who cares for the future of our democracy, to ask ourselves, what can we do? I don't have all the answers. But I do want to touch on what I believe should be four central missions in this endeavour-- to restore trust in our politicians, to strengthen our parliamentary process, to reinforce our wider democratic institutions, and to protect our democracy from extremism and exploitation.

As ever, a good place to start is in the constituency. On my last appearance at the dispatch box as Prime Minister, I spoke about the vital link between every member of parliament and the constituency they represent. While an MP's first duty, as Churchill said, is to what is right for the honour and safety of the country, I called the link between an MP and their constituency the bedrock of our parliamentary democracy and our liberty.

I said that because support for our political system depends on the faith placed in MPs by the people we are there to serve. People must feel represented to believe politics is delivering for them. And in our modern representative democracy, it's no longer enough to simply turn up in Westminster and shuffle through the voting lobbies. Our constituencies rightly expect us to be taking up their issues and concerns, fighting their corner, and visible in their communities.

What might seem a frivolous constituency engagement to some people, attending a village fete, opening a post office, speaking at a primary school, those are the occasions when voters have an opportunity to see MPs working for them. I'm reminded of the time when I was sitting in Madrid at an international meeting of interior ministers when I was Home Secretary. And the US Homeland Security Secretary asked me what it was like being in a system where, as well as being Home Secretary, I was also an elected Member of Parliament.

And I said, well, it's like this. Today I'm sitting with you all discussing counter-terrorism. Tomorrow morning, I will open a community vegetable garden.

[LAUGHTER]

But that vegetable garden was important for those constituents. Our constituents expect us to be making a tangible difference to their everyday lives. MPs may have the power to change legislation, to create new rules which people must follow, but we exercise that power in their interest, not ours. We work in the service of others. And we should be accountable to our voters.

The fundamental expectation is that we play by the rules. It means operating within constitutional norms and meeting the high standards expected of us by Parliament and the public. And of course, playing by the rules means following the law, because we are not a breed apart. We are not special because we are elected. We are not exceptional human beings.

The perception of double standards does more than offend a British sense of fair play. It strikes at the core of public trust in politicians. That's why, for instance, the so-called lockdown parties in Downing Street and Whitehall were so damaging, and ultimately led to the downfall of that administration. The whole episode suggested that there is a culture of exceptionalism here in Westminster, that the rules somehow don't apply.

In fact, having a role in public life requires us as politicians to think more carefully than others about our actions. There are other examples from recent years, of course, including MPs being found to be offering or undertaking paid advocacy, MPs who've been suspended from the House for drunken abuse or harassment. In my own time as Prime Minister, I had to deal with shocking instances of bullying and sexual harassment that had been taking place in Parliament.

And of course, the expenses scandal, over 15 years ago, left a deep scar on voters' consciousness, a sense of wrongdoing that has not been forgotten. It only takes a few high-profile instances to damage the reputation of all politicians, no matter how dedicated we might be to our constituents. And it's our collective reputation which determines public trust in the democracy we serve.

So, the accepted standards of conduct in public life must be a high bar. Indeed, we must engender a culture of high standards. Now, the Nolan Principles have now underpinned the ideals of public service in this country since they were first introduced in 1995. Selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. All of us in public life should seek to fulfill those ideals-- not just every five years when an election looms, but at all times.

An important aspect of being able to demonstrate those principles and meet the high expectations of the public is by ensuring we get the right politicians. The type of person who wants to become an MP must be someone who is driven by a sense of service, somebody who can be content to be elected and simply do a good job for their constituents and their country.

Frankly, we could do with fewer MPs entering politics with the sole ambition of becoming a minister. The public is not served by politicians with tunnel vision towards their elevation to high office. In today's politics, it seems like everyone coming into the House wants a long career as a government minister. And for many, it probably doesn't stretch their imagination too far to see themselves as Prime Minister one day.

The fact that there aren't enough ministerial jobs for everyone apparently hasn't dampened expectations. So, across all parties, we should be constantly looking to ensure our selection procedures are fit for purpose, that they deliver a diversity of candidates, people who want to serve, and who recognise their responsibility to their constituents.

We also need to ensure that there is an appropriate blend of skills and experience in the House. I believe that outside politics, that outside experience before politics, is essential, whether that's in a professional, vocational, or voluntary role, but one which carries significant responsibilities. As I've said, many MPs think they are capable of being a minister. But it's really nothing like being a backbench MP, and more closely resembles that of a senior executive in a large organisation.

You go from having a team of two or three assistants with virtually no levers to pull to overseeing a large workforce of thousands with enormous budgets and complex projects to deliver. It's not a task that plays to everyone's strengths. So, we should do more to prioritise breadth of experience in candidate recruitment, to widen the collective skill set of the House, and enable our MPs to have a better understanding of the issues that affect people day to day.

Because the quality of representation, the quality of decision making, and the quality of scrutiny in our system is strongest when those of us in public life reflect the population we serve. I spoke earlier about playing by the rules. It's especially pertinent in our constitutional system, where adherence to convention is an important element of our democracy.

The flexibility afforded by our uncodified constitution has served us well over centuries. By and large, its slow evolution has enabled it to meet the requirements of the day, where other countries have found themselves caught in a legal straitjacket. But our system only works if conventions are not cast aside wholesale, or at least not willfully misrepresented.

It rests on those in positions of authority, being trusted to uphold the values and traditions of our public life. Now, of course, in our parliamentary system, the role that exemplifies that most is the speaker of the House of Commons, the one person, above all others, who is expected to be neutral in their work. The practical, exercisable power held by the Speaker to shape public debate and the work of our legislature is often under-reported.

The workings of the House are determined officially by the Standing Orders, but the interpretation and application of those Orders is entirely within the hands of the Speaker. In areas where the Standing Orders are not clear, we consult works of authorities such as Erskine May and adhere to proven historical conventions.

If we depart from our established constitutional rules to suit short term interests, we undermine faith in our democratic system. For centuries, we have not needed to have formal mechanisms to hold the speaker to account. We have been able to rely on him or her to defend our constitutional norms, rather than use their high office for political gain. Sadly, that ended with John Bercow, who I believe abused his position to promote his own political view, not just in a single debate but time and time again. Throughout the Brexit process, it became clear to me that John Bercow had acted to try to thwart the delivery of

Brexit and follow his own agenda. Indeed, the impression was that he favoured a second referendum and opposed the policy of the government.

And this manifested in several ways. He reinterpreted Standing Orders. He ruled that amendments could not be laid when the rules should have permitted them to be put down. He overrode the long-standing constitutional convention that the government of the day determines the business of the House. And he effectively tore up the rulebook on the use of a humble address, demanded by the Labour party, which until 2017, had not been used substantively since 1866.

It was not only an affront to parliamentary procedure. It also breached another of our fundamental norms in not seeking to involve the monarch in our political debate. Sadly, it's a mechanism which has since become an accepted part of the opposition's armoury. And crucially, at a point where the government's discussions with the DUP had reached the stage where they indicated privately that they would support my Brexit deal, the Speaker ruled that he could not accept another vote. And as a result, the carefully crafted agreement unwound and was to be no more.

In my view, that was the point at which we'd lost the opportunity to have delivered an earlier exit from the EU, one which prioritised our economy, was more beneficial for Northern Ireland, and maintained better relationships with our European neighbours. It cannot be right that one person, however unlikely, has the ability to shape and influence our political decision making with virtually no practical constraints.

So, I believe we should take a closer look at what checks and balances might be required here. But there is a balance to be struck. We should not throw away a structure that has served us well over centuries because of the behaviour of one individual. And I should also say for Parliament to function effectively, we cannot wholly outsource that responsibility to the Speaker and to the clerks.

It's an unfortunate reality that the conventions and Standing Orders of the House simply aren't understood sufficiently by enough MPs. That's not necessarily the fault of MPs, particularly those new to the House, but it is a failure of the system. Few other large organisations would appoint hundreds of new staff to complex and important roles and offer them barely any training in how to do their job effectively.

In 2007, I sat on the Modernisation Committee, which recommended a longer gap between the election and the day the House first meets, partly to make time for an induction program for new MPs before Parliament started its work. We recommended 12 days, sometimes followed, but by no means the norm.

The situation has improved since I entered the House in 1997, but I believe there is still more that can be done to establish a proper training programme for new MPs. And such an initiative should seek the support of all the major parties and could be overseen by the party whips.

And I welcome the work that the Hansard Society has been doing in this area through its Building a Better Commons Project. Similarly, I welcome the Society's work on reviewing the rules and customs of the house, which will be presented to MPs in the next Parliament.

In particular, I support calls for systematic and regular reviews of the Standing Orders and wider practices and conventions, which may not be sufficiently established in the written rules of the House. And I look forward to reading the recommendations of the task force.

Aside from the management of house business, the day-to-day work of MPs in scrutinising the government is a crucial part of our democratic process. And I am pleased to say that the House of Commons today plays a stronger scrutiny role than the one I encountered in 1997. In particular, I'm thinking of the introduction of debates in the chamber selected by the Backbench Business Committee and the introduction of debates in Westminster Hall since 1999.

I remember leading one such debate in Westminster Hall not long after leaving office-- an unusual thing for a former Prime Minister to do, you might think. And I'm told I'm the only former Prime Minister to have done so. Even more surprising was the topic under discussion perhaps, the reduction of fast rail services through Maidenhead, Twyford, and local branch lines.

[LAUGHTER]

One BBC journalist remarked that I was giving it both barrels on behalf of commuters in my constituency. I chose to raise my constituents' frustrations on this issue because Westminster Hall has become an incredibly effective way of bringing insight from the front line of public service delivery directly to ministers.

But there is more the House of Commons can do to perform its scrutiny role more effectively. In the Westminster system, our fusion of powers allows governments to dominate, particularly those with large majorities. Questions, debate, and the committee system all help to hold the executive to account, although they depend to an extent on government's willingness to engage.

And I can say, as somebody who has spent literally hundreds of hours at the dispatch box and at committee, the experience can be demanding. Nevertheless, I believe that over recent decades, the balance of power has shifted incrementally from the legislature to the executive.

I worked on this issue as a member of the Modernisation Select Committee and as shadow Leader of the House. And when I delivered my last Hansard Society lecture in 2003 as Conservative Party chairman, I called for the House to be given more powers to scrutinise senior government appointees delivering public services.

Of course, during the Brexit debates, we saw efforts by Parliament to wrest control of the agenda from the government, but that stands as an exception to the general trend during my time in the House. And in particular, I am thinking of the shift in emphasis from primary to secondary legislation.

Acts of Parliament are increasingly drafted in the broadest and vaguest of terms, with much of the detail left to Statutory Instruments, created at the stroke of a minister's pen. But it's often the detail that tells us how the law will actually affect the lives of the people we represent.

Secondary legislation receives substantially less scrutiny, particularly under the negative procedure in which an Instrument is signed by a minister and becomes law before Parliament has had a say in the matter. And 80% of all secondary legislation uses the negative procedure.

The instruments cannot be amended. And in practice, they are hardly ever rejected. The last time the House of Commons voted down a Statutory Instrument was in 1979. And compare to that point in time, there are now on average over 1,000 more Statutory Instruments a year.

So, if the detail is mainly left to secondary legislation, it will not get the level of scrutiny that it could receive if the provisions are set out on the face of the bill itself. One way to potentially address this challenge is by introducing a new convention that requires the government to provide a draft of secondary legislation that could foreseeably be created alongside the original bill when it is introduced.

But ideally, the government should not be leaving significant elements of our laws undecided, and instead be providing more detail within Acts of Parliament themselves. Because secondary legislation is not a tool at the government's disposal for an easy ride. It should not be used to avoid scrutiny.

There are other areas too, where Parliament should have a stronger voice. The quality of legislation can be improved with more regular use of pre-legislative scrutiny. And Parliament still lacks a systematic approach to undertaking post-legislative scrutiny to find out if our laws are actually working.

A dedicated Joint Committee of Parliament could undertake this task effectively, inviting input from the public. And doesn't it make sense to spend more time asking whether the laws we have passed have worked in the way they were intended? Beyond Parliament itself, we can do more to reinforce the wider institutions of our democracy so that voters can have faith that our system is working effectively and in the interests of the people of this country.

I've spoken about the legislative and executive branches, but I should also touch on the judiciary, which I believe has too often come under attack, accusations often emanating from Members of Parliament who seek to use judges in the courts as scapegoats for their own political failings. I fear the distinction between the role of judge and legislator is being lost in today's world, and sometimes willfully conflated.

Parliamentary sovereignty has, for centuries, been the central tenet of our constitution, asserting the authority of Parliament as the supreme legal body in this land. MPs make the law. Judges interpret and implement it. We should not bemoan judges' interpretation of the law as it stands. Instead, it is the responsibility of legislators to make better law.

The judiciary know that if they publicly promote a political view, they open themselves to challenge. Of course, it's entirely legitimate to disagree personally with one legal ruling or another. I certainly have done. But that does not entitle people to question the integrity of individual justices or bringing to question the legitimacy of our legal system.

By undermining the judiciary in this way, we further erode public faith in the institutions of our democracy, and therefore in democracy itself.

There is conventional wisdom in Westminster that the public are hostile towards judges having a say in determining politically controversial matters. But in fact, the public value our courts for this very role. This was born out in a YouGov survey conducted last year for the UCL Constitution Unit, which found a clear majority of people support a central role for judges at the heart of our constitutional system.

In fact, it found that public trust was much higher in the court system than in politicians. And most people wanted strong roles for the courts in protecting human rights and adjudicating on the limits of government powers. So, I say to those seeking to villainise a judiciary that cannot easily answer back, who wilfully discredit our legal system for their own expediency, it's time to show responsible leadership.

I say responsible leadership, because faith in politics is underscored by the taking of responsibility. Taking responsibility for one's own actions rather than blaming others, and for those in positions of leadership, taking responsibility for the actions of those we lead. It is particularly inexcusable to see the civil service repeatedly and publicly vilified and blamed when policy is not working in the way politicians intended.

Over the years, I've had the privilege to work alongside thousands of dedicated officials and have seen at first hand the professionalism and commitment they bring to their roles. Like in any workplace, it is entirely proper to expect high performance.

I suspect the civil servants who have worked for me over the years would say I could be a demanding minister. But I would like to think that they knew that when challenge came, it was respectful and was motivated by a desire to see policy work and for government to be effective. But in our system, the buck stops with ministers. And it's been my experience at the highest levels of government that, far from the tropes of satirical comedies, ministers are in charge.

The seals of office do not confer power without responsibility. Suggesting that the objectives of elected politicians are being blocked by the civil service or government departments, or the judiciary, or by another kind of establishment stitch up simply develops a narrative that organs of the state are somehow anti-democratic. This damaging rhetoric

weakens faith in our system of government. It undermines faith in elected office and undermines support for our democracy.

Finally, I would like to pick up on a theme I touched upon earlier, that protecting our politics from extremism and exploitation is fundamental to the health of our democracy. We are living in an age of populism and easy answers. Sadly, our politics increasingly presents the world through an absolutist prism of winners and losers.

The winners are seen as strong men. They believe that if you stand firm in your position for long enough, you will always get your way. They prefer to agitate their own faction, rather than find common ground.

They believe that walking out and slamming the door is strength, but compromise is weakness. This is corroding our public debate. It drives tribal bitterness, subverts freedom of speech, and damages the health of our democracy, all great news for our adversaries, who seek to undermine us by targeting vulnerabilities within democratic systems and in liberal society-- adversaries like Vladimir Putin, who pursues policies designed to disrupt western democracy and append the postwar international order, which he believes has served western interests over his own.

I'm not revealing state secrets when I tell you that the UK is under constant pressure from Russian espionage, from those who seek to infiltrate our political and commercial life, who seek to recruit informants, commit sabotage, blackmail, cause disorder, and create distrust. And increasingly, this activity takes place in cyberspace, where Russia is a sophisticated player that can intrude into private networks, threaten critical national infrastructure, and has attempted to influence our democratic processes.

And of course, Russia isn't the only state seeking to undermine our way of life. Commonly, Russia sets out to spread disinformation and run influence campaigns. And historically, its own state-owned media, channels like Russia Today and Sputnik, have attempted to implant Russian narratives directly into western society.

But perhaps most significantly, it has exploited the inherent weaknesses of social media in being able to easily amplify untruths on an exponential scale. And regrettably, in recent years, it's experienced some success. Its online bots and trolls disseminate false facts and pernicious narratives, designed to deepen our existing divisions within society and to undermine faith in democracy and our values.

And unfortunately, our adversaries can too often rely on a chorus of online extremists and conspiracy theorists to amplify this content, driving up the salience of the most divisive issues facing the western world, pitting sections of our society against one another, enabling extreme political views to become an accepted feature of our public debate and weakening the very fabric of our democracies.

So, to protect against exploitation from foreign adversaries, we need to work towards cohesion and cooperation in our politics at home, not driving polarisation in our society, but bridging divides wherever they exist.

It has always been my view that the best long-term solutions arise from the politics of moderation. In my party, we have a tradition of mainstream, centre-right conservatism. We call it one nation. It encapsulates the idea that we should seek to bring people together, not create a society of warring cultural tribes.

And to bring people together, politicians must seek to get things done, rather than simply get them said. But to get things done in a democracy requires a willingness to compromise, to painstakingly search for the common ground. Being prepared to make compromises in order to make progress does not mean compromising on our values.

Rather, it is precisely the way to defend them. So, as I prepare to vacate my seat in the House of Commons, I look to tomorrow's MPs to put this into practice. I say to them, the future of our democracy is in your hands. Live up to the responsibilities of your office.

Don't reach for the easy answers. Demonstrate that compromise is not a dirty word. Above all, remember that being a Member of Parliament is not a position of power, but a position of service-- service to your constituents, service to Parliament, and service to your country. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]