ATTLEE FOUNDATION LECTURE 2026 – Sir John Major

A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR DEMOCRACY

First of all, I would like to thank the Attlee Foundation for inviting me to deliver this Lecture. I am privileged to be here this evening, and delighted to be at King's, where I feel very much at home.

It is a quarter of a century since I left front line politics, but I still have an observer's interest in our world and our country. Both are in an uneasy state, and actions – or in-actions – this year may be pivotal to the future.

Let me do a little ground clearing.

Some may be surprised that a former *Conservative* Prime Minister would deliver a lecture in honour of a former *Labour* Prime Minister.

They *shouldn't* be and, in a world of grown-up politics, they *wouldn't* be.

It is easy to admire Clement Attlee for his record of achievement; his political courage; his resolute defence of our country's values; his creation of the NHS; his commitment to public service; and the manner in which he put the interests of his country before his own – or those of his Party.

Of course, were he and I both active in politics today – there would be differences of policy, of priority, of philosophy. We *are* political opponents. But mark this: *Opponents*, Yes. *Enemies*, No.

Democratic Parties *do* have enemies in politics, but they are populist insurgents who seek to divide and not unite.

They are careless of the strife they cause. They trade on grievances in our society. Where ills exist – they exaggerate them.

They then blame those ills on minority groups of a different race or religion. It is ugly politics that deserves *no* place in our country.

Our political system would work to better effect – and be more honest – if mainstream politicians acknowledged that their *priorities* – I emphasise *priorities* – have far more in common than they wish to admit.

That may surprise you, but consider this: *all* our three main Parties are in favour of greater economic wellbeing; secure defence; decent public services; thriving health provision; affordable housing; flourishing education; and healthy employment.

This is what we expect in our liberal democracy, and when these priorities are not delivered the nation becomes disenchanted – as it is now.

We are not alone.

Over the last two decades, democracy has been retreating around the world.

Nearly three-quarters of our world live *outside* democratic protection.

Autocrats undermine democracy to entrench themselves in power. If we do not recognise the dangers of that, and protect ourselves against it, autocracy may, one day, overwhelm us.

At my age I have a limited lease on the future, but let me say with all the force I can muster: if we were to cast aside our mainstream politicians – as polls suggest we may do – then a gap would open up, and that gap may *not* be filled by democrats.

So – if you rejoice at the dire polling of Labour and the Conservatives – beware of what you wish for.

If they were to fall, who knows what will rise: you may find that autocrats-in-power do not share the democratic instincts of the politicians you have discarded.

Many people worry about what lies ahead. Some are bewildered, even frightened, by the changes in our world. It would be a self-inflicted wound if they turned to the extremes of politics because democracy was not speaking for them.

We *know* democracy can succeed in the most unpromising circumstances: the Attlee Government proved that eighty years ago.

After a crippling war, our country was near bankrupt. The War had enhanced our reputation for courage and persistence, but left our immediate prospects in tatters. Six years of conflict had left families bereaved, cities destroyed, and the Exchequer bare.

The British people had endured *years* of hardship. The age of deference was on its death bed – and our battle-weary predecessors demanded a brighter future.

In retrospect, 80 years on, the 1945-50 Government, and its Prime Minister, are held in high regard. The problems they – and their successors – faced, and overcame, should be an inspiration for what could be achieved today.

But there is no room for complacency. No reason for the careless assumption that democracy is so entrenched it cannot be undermined. *It can* – and around the world – *it is*.

Electors should treat with suspicion rash promises from infant Parties that have never experienced the complexities of democratic government.

Our liberal-democracy is not perfect, but it is far preferable to any of the alternatives. It has checks and balances unknown to other systems. It has the ability to dismiss the inadequate, and haul down the over-powerful.

It exists to serve the nation. It does *not* compel the *nation* to *serve* the State.

Our political system is an *enabler*. Its policies enable peace, resists war whenever possible, and promotes justice, wellbeing, growth, care where needed, enhanced life expectancy, and transformation of life opportunities.

Along the way it makes mistakes, but its purpose is to extend freedoms of choice and action that more extreme politicians would curtail.

But … but … we cannot ignore the uncomfortable truth that, in recent years, our democracy has fallen short of expectations.

People have faced higher costs and rising taxes. They have seen *no* real increase in their post-tax income – nor in their standard of living.

When – over a period of many months – our three mainstream Parties collectively register barely 50% in opinion Polls it is time to be concerned over what may lie ahead.

In a bid to reassure electors, politicians talk of "reform" to come. It's a useful word – reform. It can mean everything or nothing. Reform means change. Change means upheaval. Upheaval provokes opposition.

Upheaval *may* be necessary but – sometimes – it is better to make progress on the everyday issues of politics.

Is policy strangling initiative or encouraging it?

Are tax levels deterring savings and investment?

Is planning holding back housing for the homeless and the would-be home owner?

Does the benefit system *encourage* or *discourage* unemployment?

Can the triple lock be targeted to pensioners who really *need* it?

Can Parliament act more strongly against the misuse and abuse of social media and, if so, how?

Can we fund the Armed Forces we need?

Will this mean more spending – or savings elsewhere?

There is certainly no shortage of issues to settle. But it is not only policy that needs updating: so does our political system.

Politics has a grubby underbelly that can make it look seedy.

We need a spring clean.

Is political funding corrupted if – with no qualifications *other* than money – donors receive honours or preferential access to Ministers?

Should political donations be capped to protect against undue influence? I believe the answer is – yes.

Should the House of Lords be elected or appointed? An elected Upper House would meet democratic aspirations, but would be a monumental mistake. It *could – and would* – challenge the primacy of the Commons and create constitutional confusion.

It would not retain the wisdom and lifetime experience to enable it to discharge its primary function of revising legislation. It would not be a *partner* to the Commons: it would be a *rival*.

Recent General Elections have thrown into doubt the continuing validity of the "first past the post" system of voting.

As voting preferences spread more widely it provides distorted results. The democratic case for examining this is growing, although changes would come with distinct drawbacks.

Should Members of Parliament who defect to a different Party be compelled to face a by-election? Constitutionally, no – as they are deemed to be elected as *individuals*.

But, in the real world, they are elected as representatives of a political Party. So – yes: logic and common decency suggest they must face the electorate again in a by-election.

If the House of Commons wishes to regain the respect it has lost, it must justify the status-quo – or change it.

And one further thought: is it not time to recognise that Brexit has failed to deliver its many promises, and the loss, *each year*, of *£100 billion* of European trade, and *£40 billion* of tax revenue is doing enormous damage to the lives and livelihoods of the British people – and their future?

Money is the root … of good public services. Imagine how much better they – and our military power – might be if that money was still available to the Exchequer, instead of being thrown away with such a casual disregard of the consequences.

I do not believe we can fully rejoin the European Union in the near future. But economic wellbeing tells us we should re-build relationships with our closest neighbours as swiftly and as comprehensively as possible.

When we left the EU, we broke up a European alliance of 500 million people. We did so as America – with its 340 million citizens – pivoted away from us towards the East.

Suddenly, our closeness to the European and American power blocs was reduced. This left the UK more solitary and vulnerable.

My father was brought up in America, and taught me to admire the virtues of that great Republic.

Our two countries saw the world through similar eyes, and had much in common. But our relationship, once rock solid, is now more nuanced – and more distant.

After WWII, the Marshall Plan helped rebuild shattered European economies and – in the post-war years – America was the rock upon which democracy prospered.

America's influence was overwhelmingly benign when President Truman committed to "*support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure*."

America's purpose, echoed by later Presidents, was to secure a freer – and safer – world, in which the strong pledged their protection of the weak. No fee was asked. No deal demanded. No investment or payment expected. It was altruistic policy in a harsh world.

It was what made America great.

I saw this first hand at meetings in the White House and Pentagon, when the most senior Military personnel of both countries were present. Their mutual respect and friendship was self-evident. Trust was instinctive and total. *Nothing* was held back.

Our political and military relationship was one of shared values – on *every* issue from human rights to free markets. So I know what we had, and deeply regret that it seems to be falling away.

Since the turn of the century, America has economically out-paced both the UK and the European Union. At the millennium, the GDP of America and the EU was similar. Today, America is half as big again.

There is now a new tone from America. President Trump argues that America is being "ripped off" by trading partners and – without consultation – he raised tariffs on imports from wealthy *and* poor countries, whether friend or foe.

When the Supreme Court ruled these to be illegal, he reimposed a 15% general increase using different powers *not yet tested in Courts*.

Uncertainty was reinforced by the President's dismissive attitude to Europe, his demands for the ownership of Greenland – the territory of a *NATO ally* – and his expressed view that the incursion of Ukraine by Russia was solely a problem for Europe.

This is not the America we have known.

Vice-President Vance also accused Europeans of being a greater threat to freedom in Europe than Russia. That was offensive and absurd in equal measure.

It was *President Putin* who sent Russian troops to invade Ukraine – not vice-versa. It is *Russia and Putin* that conducts a "shadow war" of mis-information; takes cyber action aimed against Western Europe; and murders political opponents within Russia and – as we saw at Salisbury – in *other* territories, too.

When President Zelensky visited the White House to seek support, he was "ambushed" – no other description suffices – by President Trump and Vice-President Vance. It was *Zelensky – not* Putin – who was accused of "gambling" with World War III. This turned truth on its head.

Yet when President Putin arrived in Washington, he was greeted with full honours. Putin revelled in his red-carpet reception, and appeared able to persuade President Trump that black was white.

President Trump's priority is set out in two alluring slogans: "America First" and "Make America Great Again". This *explicitly* puts *self*-interest before the *wider* international interest, and has begun to further pry apart the "rules based" system that was built and led by America herself.

That system was fraying – but is now fracturing. If diplomacy, consultation and co-operation breaks down, we will be moving towards the law of the jungle with which *no* country should be content – and in which *no* country is safe.

My fear is the risk of stepping into a world in which "might is right", and the mighty behave in an unprincipled and lawless manner.

In such a world the rights and prosperity of weaker nations are subordinate to the will of the strong; greater powers are deferred to – not because they have justice on their side – but because they have the power to *compel* acceptance of their will.

Such a concept is truly terrifying.

How different that is from our expectations. In 1949 – one year after the Marshall Plan was put into action – the NATO Treaty was signed.

The Treaty included an Article 5 Agreement that an attack on *one* Member will bring *all others* to their defence.

But is that still so?

Will America – with *all* her military power – still be willing to come to the defence of a NATO ally? NATO is, of course, a *defensive* – not an *offensive* alliance.

I hope so. But the Vice-President is on record as saying "I just hate bailing out Europe again". The American Defence Secretary added: "I fully share your loathing".

Were these remarks merely frustration? Or were they voicing future policy?

It is striking that *neither* comment was disowned by the President.

If America *did* resile from Article 5, it is hard to see how an American could remain as Supreme Allied Commander. Yet it is inconceivable – given America's great military power – to imagine anyone *other* than an American leading NATO, as it is currently constituted.

I suspect that, underlying all this, is America's determination that Europe should bear a higher share of NATO's overall costs. That would be fair. The burden has fallen too heavily – and for too long – on America's shoulders.

American power was vital in winning both World Wars in the last century, although history tells us that she joined World War I only in 1917 *after* German submarines sank American ships.

And, in World War II, only *after* Japan attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbour in 1941.

The worry for the future – to voice the *private* fear – is that past American Presidents only gained the support of their public to enter the two World Wars *after* America herself was attacked. In future, without that imperative, can we be utterly confident of American participation?

President Trump – against his own campaign oratory – has shown himself prepared to use America's muscular power on overseas missions.

I am conflicted by the American-Israeli attack on Iran.

In one sense, this was a wholly understandable response to Iran's behaviour over many decades.

I have *no* illusions about the distasteful nature of Iran's clerical leadership. They unleash terror – and fund murder and mayhem through their proxies.

This brutal regime has shown it is willing to murder *any* of its own citizens who are brave enough to protest at the mis-government that scars their lives.

So – why am I conflicted?

It is because of what was *not* done ahead of any military action and – crucially – the wider implications beyond that.

There was no diplomatic attempt to obtain a UN Resolution to give legality to the war. *No* nation – other than Israel – was even *consulted*.

This was despite the fact that the war was bound have much wider repercussions across the Middle East – and beyond.

Many nations will pay a price for this war.

Hostilities will not end when bombing stops. Old hatreds will linger. New hatreds will have been born. A new generation may have been radicalised. Retaliation may be deferred – but it is likely to come.

This war will have a long tail.

Its aims have never been clear and – since the conflict began – they have been changing by the day. No exit strategy is known.

The President demanded surrender. He is unlikely to get it.

For Iran, one should think Persia, and remember her history.

Persia was a dominant world power when America and the UK were still living in mud huts. She will not admit defeat.

Neither America nor Israel were prepared to put "boots on the ground". This comforted their domestic audiences, but made regime change – always unlikely – completely impossible.

Whilst they restricted conflict to the air, American leaders encouraged Iranian citizens to take to the streets and confront well-armed Basij volunteers. These are part of the Revolutionary Guard, which murdered 30,000 demonstrators only weeks earlier.

Unless – and until – the regime is seriously tottering, that encouragement to rise up is an invitation to suicide.

In due time, the war will end.

What will it have done for the rule of law and the protection of the rules-based-system of behaviour that has served the world so well in the aftermath of World War II?

The American Defence Secretary was contemptuous of …. "vague notions of international law" and the "…. stupid rules of engagement".

Such disregard of law is a shameful example for a law maker to set.

If the international rule of law is dismissed so casually, what are we left with?

I can only speculate, but I believe we will be left with a more fearful world, in which wars may be more numerous and alliances less secure.

A world in which disputes are settled – not with diplomacy or adjudication or agreement – but by force: the victor being the most militarily or economically powerful.

This heralds a playground for the strong, perhaps Russia or China – or even America – and a future of unease, even fear, for the weak.

That would be a *wretched* legacy to pass on to the next generation.

The mercurial nature of President Trump upends the accepted norms of diplomacy.

But the message for the UK and Europe is clear and unmistakable: we must plan and enact policies to improve self-dependence.

This will require us to raise budgets to enhance our military capacity for defence *and* offence. That effort must be *within* NATO and not separate *from* it.

It will be an expensive and long-term commitment. After decades of peace, Governments must now persuade their electorates that military spending must rise – perhaps at the expense of social expenditure or higher taxes?

Assuming that *can* be done, countries must agree to purchase arms collectively. And, in doing so, the weapons must be inter-operable on land, air, sea – and below the sea. That will mean purchases from national suppliers may be less easy.

Matters such as these – complex as they are – *cannot* be left undecided if NATO is to be battle ready and a credible deterrent to any hostile intent.

Do not misunderstand me. I do not – in *any* way – wish to push America aside. She remains the most important ally to the whole of Europe.

For the UK, the Trans-Atlantic partnership is key to our security and intelligence. It is in our national interest to sustain this relationship even if we are in dispute on other issues.

At No10, during Gulf War I, I experienced first-hand what could be achieved when working closely with one of the finest foreign policy teams America has had: George H W Bush, James Baker and Brent Scowcroft. President Bush and I *never* held back from speaking truth to each other, and never *once* did that impair our relationship.

But today, there is a tendency to tip-toe around the President to avoid upsetting him. Although I understand that, *I do not agree with it*.

Sovereign States that demean themselves will be seen as subordinates and not allies. That is *not* a role for the UK.

If we disagree with American policy we should say so – as a friend that cares for the wellbeing of an ally. Statesmen do this in private – *not* in public.

Our frankness may cause uncomfortable interludes, but we must never lose sight of what is morally decent and right, and stand up for what we believe.

In all our years of history, this is what the UK has done: it was right *then* – and it is right *now*.

Let me return to the words of Clement Attlee:

"…. peace does not come about through wishful thinking. Peace is not just a negative absence of war; peace means that you get rid – as far as you can – of the *causes* of war."

What do we mean by "Peace"? It seems an easy question – but is not.

To fully enjoy peace, men and women need to be free. By free, I don't only mean to be at liberty. I mean to be free of war; free of fear; free of want. I mean freedom to worship without persecution, and freedom to speak against injustice and oppression.

The concept of peace is wide-ranging. Peace of mind is very precious but – in the 21st Century – a majority of people in the world don't enjoy it: the growth of stress, of pressure, of mental health, tell us that we are far from that ideal.

There has been progress. Many diseases that killed or crippled have been overcome. Child mortality has fallen dramatically.

Hundreds of millions have moved out of dire poverty; similar numbers now have fresh piped water and electricity.

But, as rich nations reduce their aid budgets, poor nations continue to struggle – and the international liberal order loses its attraction … and its potency.

There is an ancient responsibility upon *every* generation to leave behind a better world than they inherited. We are not doing well on that front.

Our young generation has no direct experience of war. They have grown up in a better environment. They travel more. Intermingle more. Inter-marry more. They are blind to colour and ethnic background. They are free of many of the inhibitions and prejudices of their forebears.

They do not view ancient enmities through the same eyes as previous generations. They welcome communal action on issues like climate change that can only be overcome by working together.

"Peace" – said Attlee – "does not come about through wishful thinking …"

Indeed not….. not in *any* form.

It comes about by working together – with civility, respect, fortitude, and mutual understanding – to diminish the causes of dispute and strife.

If we truly wish to create a safer world, *that* is the route we must take.