

# PM speech on the state of politics

This will most likely be the last time I will speak at length as Prime Minister and I would like today to share some personal reflections on the state of politics in our country and around the world.

I have lived politics for half a century. From stuffing envelopes for my local party in my school years to serving as a local councillor, fighting a by-election, winning a seat, to serving for 12 years on the opposition front bench, and for nine years in the Cabinet as Home Secretary and Prime Minister.

Throughout that time, in every job I have done, I have been inspired by the enormous potential that working in politics and taking part in public life holds.

The potential to serve your country, to improve peoples' lives, and – in however big or small a way – to make the world a better place.

Looking at our own country and the world of which we form a part, and there is great deal to feel optimistic about.

Globally, over the last 30 years extreme poverty and child mortality have both been halved.

Hundreds of millions of people are today living longer, happier and healthier lives than their grandparents could even have dreamed of.

As a world, we have never cared more deeply about the ecology of our planet's environment.

From treating the earth as a collection of resources to be plundered, we have within a generation come to understand its fragile diversity and taken concerted action to conserve it.

The UK is leading the way in that effort with our commitment to net zero emissions.

Social attitudes in our country and many other western countries have transformed in recent decades.

There are more women in senior positions today than at any time in history.

When I was born, it was a crime to be a gay man, legal to discriminate on the basis of sex or race, and casual bigotry was a socially acceptable fact of daily life.

All that has changed – and greatly for the better.

There remains a long, long way to go to achieve what we should rightly seek – an economy, a society and a world that truly works for all of its people.

Where everyone has the security of a safe home and enough to eat; the opportunity to get a good education and a satisfying job to support their family; and the freedom of thought, speech and action to do and be everything their talents and hard work fit them for.

The generation of young people growing up today – in the UK and around the world – have it within their grasp to achieve more in the decades ahead than we today can imagine.

They will have the chance to harness the great drivers of change in the world today – from artificial intelligence and the data economy; cleaner forms of energy and more efficient modes of transport; to the technological and medical advances that will extend and improve our quality of life.

The twenty-first century has the potential to be a pivotal point in human history – when economic, social and technological progress reach a combined apogee with the benefits multiplied and with everyone enjoying a share.

It will not come about without effort.

We will all have to work hard – individually and collectively to reach that better future.

Crucially, the full power and potential of a small, but strong and strategic state must be brought to bear in that effort, establishing and maintaining the legal and economic structures that allow a regulated free market to flourish.

Co-ordinating its own interventions to maximum effect – supporting science and innovation, supplying crucial public services and infrastructure, leading and responding to social progress.

At our best, that has been the story of the democratic century that we celebrated last year when we marked the first votes for women and working men in 1918.

It has been democratic politics, an open market economy and the enduring values of free speech, the rule of law and a system of government founded on the concept of inviolable human rights that has provided the nexus of that progress in the past.

And a healthy body politic will be essential to consolidating and extending that progress in the future.

It is on that score that today we do have grounds for serious concern. Both domestically and internationally, in substance and in tone, I am worried about the state of politics.

That worry stems from a conviction that the values on which all of our successes have been founded cannot be taken for granted.

They may look to us as old as the hills, we might think that they will always be there, but establishing the superiority of those values over the

alternatives was the hard work of centuries of sacrifice.

And to ensure that liberal inheritance can endure for generations to come, we today have a responsibility to be active in conserving it.

If we do not, we will all pay the price – rich and poor, strong and weak, powerful and powerless.

As a politician, my decisions and actions have always been guided by that conviction.

It used to be asked of applicants at Conservative candidate selection meetings, 'are you a conviction politician or are you a pragmatist'?

I have never accepted the distinction.

Politics is the business of turning your convictions into reality to improve the lives of the people you serve.

As a Conservative, I have never had any doubt about what I believe in – security, freedom and opportunity. Decency, moderation, patriotism. Conserving what is of value, but never shying away from change. Indeed, recognising that often change is the way to conserve. Believing in business but holding businesses to account if they break the rules. Backing ambition, aspiration and hard work. Protecting our Union of nations – and being prepared to act in its interest even if that means steering a difficult political course.

And remaining always firmly rooted in the common ground of politics – where all great political parties should be.

I didn't write about those convictions in pamphlets or make many theoretical speeches about them.

I have sought to put them into action.

And actually getting things done rather than simply getting them said requires some qualities that have become unfashionable of late.

One of them is a willingness to compromise. That does not mean compromising your values.

It does not mean accepting the lowest common denominator or clinging to outmoded ideas out of apathy or fear.

It means being driven by, and when necessary standing up for, your values and convictions.

But doing so in the real world – in the arena of public life – where others are making their own case, pursuing their own interests.

And where persuasion, teamwork and a willingness to make mutual concessions are needed to achieve an optimal outcome.

That is politics at its best.

The alternative is a politics of winners and losers, of absolutes and of perpetual strife – and that threatens us all.

Today an inability to combine principles with pragmatism and make a compromise when required seems to have driven our whole political discourse down the wrong path.

It has led to what is in effect a form of “absolutism” – one which believes that if you simply assert your view loud enough and long enough you will get your way in the end. Or that mobilising your own faction is more important than bringing others with you.

This is coarsening our public debate. Some are losing the ability to disagree without demeaning the views of others.

Online, technology allows people to express their anger and anxiety without filter or accountability. Aggressive assertions are made without regard to the facts or the complexities of an issue, in an environment where the most extreme views tend to be the most noticed.

This descent of our debate into rancour and tribal bitterness – and in some cases even vile abuse at a criminal level – is corrosive for the democratic values which we should all be seeking to uphold. It risks closing down the space for reasoned debate and subverting the principle of freedom of speech.

And this does not just create an unpleasant environment. Words have consequences – and ill words that go unchallenged are the first step on a continuum towards ill deeds – towards a much darker place where hatred and prejudice drive not only what people say but also what they do.

This absolutism is not confined to British politics. It festers in politics all across the world. We see it in the rise of political parties on the far left and far right in Europe and beyond. And we see it in the increasingly adversarial nature of international relations, which some view as a zero sum game where one country can only gain if others lose. And where power, unconstrained by rules, is the only currency of value.

This absolutism at home and abroad is the opposite of politics at its best. It refuses to accept that other points of view are reasonable. It ascribes bad motives to those taking those different views.

And it views anything less than 100 per cent of what you want all the time as evidence of failure, when success in fact means achieving the optimum outcome in any given circumstance.

The sustainability of modern politics derives not from an uncompromising absolutism but rather through the painstaking marking out of a common ground.

That doesn't mean abandoning our principles – far from it. It means delivering on them with the consent of people on all sides of the debate, so they can ultimately accept the legitimacy of what is being done, even if it

may not be the outcome they would initially have preferred.

That is how social progress and international agreement was forged in the years after the Second World War – both at home with the establishment of an enduring National Health Service and, internationally, with the creation of an international order based on agreed rules and multilateral institutions.

Consider, for example, the story of the NHS. The Beveridge Report was commissioned by a Coalition Government.

The Health Minister who published the first White Paper outlining the principles of a comprehensive and free health service was a Conservative.

A Labour Government then created the NHS – engaging in fierce controversy both with the doctors who would work for the NHS, and with a Conservative opposition in the House of Commons which supported the principles of an NHS, but disagreed with the methods.

But the story does not end there. Just three years after the NHS was founded, Churchill's newly elected Conservative Government was faced with a choice, a choice between going back over old arguments or accepting the legitimacy of what had been done and building on it.

They chose to build on what had been established.

Today, because people were willing to compromise, we have an NHS to be proud of – an institution which unites our country.

Similarly, on the international stage, many of the agreements that underpinned the establishment of the rules-based international order in the aftermath of the Second World War were reached by pragmatism and compromise.

The San Francisco Conference, which adopted the United Nations Charter – the cornerstone of international law – almost broke down over Soviet insistence that the Security Council veto should apply not just to Council resolutions and decisions, but even to whether the Council should discuss a matter.

It was only a personal mission to Stalin in Moscow from US President Truman's envoy Harry Hopkins that persuaded the Soviets to back down.

Many States who were not Permanent Members of the Security Council did not want the veto to exist at all. But they compromised and signed the Charter because of the bigger prize it represented – a global system which enfranchised the people of the world with new rights, until then only recognisable to citizens in countries like ours.

It's easy now to assume that these landmark agreements which helped created the international order will always hold – that they are as permanent as the hills.

But turning ideals into practical agreements was hard fought. And we cannot be complacent about ensuring that they endure.

Indeed, the current failure to combine principles with pragmatism and compromise inevitably risks undermining them.

We are living through a period of profound change and insecurity. The forces of globalisation and the pursuit of free markets have brought unprecedented levels of wealth and opportunity for the country and for the world at large. But not everyone is reaping the benefits.

The march of technology is expanding the possibilities for humanity in ways that once could never have been conceived. But it is changing the nature of the workplace and the types of jobs that people will do. More and more working people are feeling anxious over whether they and their children and grandchildren will have the skills and the opportunities to get on.

And although the problems were building before the financial crisis, that event brought years of hardship from which we are only now emerging.

Populist movements have seized the opportunity to capitalise on that vacuum. They have embraced the politics of division; identifying the enemies to blame for our problems and offering apparently easy answers.

In doing so, they promote a polarised politics which views the world through the prism of "us" and "them" – a prism of winners and losers, which views compromise and cooperation through international institutions as signs of weakness not strength.

President Putin expressed this sentiment clearly on the eve of the G20 summit in Japan, when he said that the "liberal idea has become obsolete"...because it has "come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population."

This is a cynical falsehood. No one comparing the quality of life or economic success of liberal democracies like the UK, France and Germany to that of the Russian Federation would conclude that our system is obsolete. But the fact that he feels emboldened to utter it today indicates the challenge we face as we seek to defend our values.

So if we are to stand up for these values that are fundamental to our way of life, we need to rebuild support for them by addressing people's legitimate concerns through actual solutions that can command public consent, rather than populist promises that in the end are not solutions at all.

In doing so, we need to show that, from the local to the global, a politics of pragmatic conviction that is unafraid of compromise and co-operation is the best way in which politics can sustainably meet the challenges we face.

Take the example of how we address some of the concerns and fears over globalisation.

[Political content removed].

But we know it is free and competitive markets that drive the innovation, creativity and risk-taking that have enabled so many of the great advances of

our time. We know it is business that pioneers the industries of the future, secures the investment on which that future depends, and creates jobs and livelihoods for families up and down our country.

And we know that free enterprise can also play a crucial role in helping to meet some of the greatest social challenges of our time – from contributing to the sustainability of our planet to generating new growth and new hope in areas of our country that have been left behind for too long.

But you do not protect the concept of free market capitalism by failing to respond to the legitimate concerns of those who are not feeling its full benefits. You protect free market capitalism and all the benefits it can bring by reforming it so that it works for everyone.

That is why I have introduced reforms to working practice and workers' rights to reflect the changes in our economy. It is why I launched the Taylor Review into modern forms of employment like the gig economy – and why we are delivering the biggest improvements in UK workers' rights for twenty years in response to it.

It is why I have advanced changes in corporate governance – because business must not only be about commercial success but about bringing wider benefits to the whole of our society too.

And it is why we have put in place a Modern Industrial Strategy – a strategic partnership between business and government to make the long-term decisions that will ensure the success of our economy. But crucially, a strategy to ensure that as we develop the industries of the future, so the benefits of the trade and growth they will give rise to will reach working people – not just in some parts of the country, but in every part of our country.

These are steps rooted in my Conservative political convictions. They are not a rejection of free enterprise. But rather they are the very way to restore the popular legitimacy of free enterprise and make it work for everyone.

I believe that taking such an approach is also how we resolve the Brexit impasse.

The only way to do so is to deliver on the outcome of the vote in 2016. And there is no greater regret for me than that I could not do so.

But whatever path we take must be sustainable for the long-term – so that delivering Brexit brings our country back together.

That has to mean some kind of compromise.

Some argue I should have taken the United Kingdom out of the European Union with no deal on 29th March. Some wanted a purer version of Brexit. Others to find a way of stopping it altogether.

But most people across our country had a preference for getting it done with a deal. And I believe the strength of the deal I negotiated was that it delivered on the vote of the referendum to leave the European Union, while

also responding to the concerns of those who had voted to remain.

The problem was that when it came time for Parliament to ratify the deal, our politics retreated back into its binary pre-referendum positions – a winner takes all approach to leaving or remaining.

And when opinions have become polarised – and driven by ideology – it becomes incredibly hard for a compromise to become a rallying point.

The spirit of compromise in the common interest is also crucial in meeting some of the greatest global challenges of our time – from responsibly harnessing the huge potential of digital technology to tackling climate change; and from preventing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons to upholding and strengthening international rules in the face of hostile states.

During my premiership, the UK has led the way both domestically and internationally in seeking a new settlement which ensures the internet remains a driver of growth and opportunity – but also that internet companies respond more comprehensively to reasonable and legitimate demands that they take their wider responsibilities to society more seriously.

That is why we are legislating in the UK to create a legal duty of care on internet companies, backed up by an independent regulator with the power to enforce its decisions.

We are the first country to put forward such a comprehensive approach, but it is not enough to act alone.

Ultimately we need a realistic global approach that achieves the right balance between protecting the individual freedoms of those using the internet – while also keeping them safe from harm.

That also holds the key to further progress in the fight to protect our planet.

Here in the UK we have recently built on the 2008 Climate Change Act by becoming the first major economy to agree a landmark net zero target that will end our contribution to climate change by 2050.

Of course, there were some who wanted us not just to make that net zero commitment but to bring it forward even earlier. And there are others who still question the science of climate change or the economic costs of tackling it.

But we were able to come together to agree a target that is supported across the political spectrum, across business and civil society – and which is both ambitious and also deliverable.

Just as the nations of the world were able to come together and agree the historic Paris Agreement of 2015, a settlement which if unravelled would damage us all and our planet.



And just as we seek to protect the hard fought Paris Climate Agreement, so I also believe we must protect the similarly hard fought JCPOA – the nuclear deal with Iran, whatever its challenges.

Once again it took painstaking pragmatism and compromise to strike that deal.

Of course, there are those who fear a reduction in sanctions on a country that continues to pursue destabilising activity across the region, and we should address that activity head on.

But whether we like it or not a compromise deal remains the best way to get the outcome we all still ultimately seek – to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, and to preserve the stability of the region.

Being prepared to compromise also means knowing when not to compromise – and when our values are under threat we must always be willing to stand firm. Just as we did when Russia deployed a deadly nerve agent on the streets of Salisbury, and I led international action across the world to expel more than 100 Russian intelligence officers – the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers in history.

We are here today at St James' Square – the location from which Dwight Eisenhower led the planning for D-Day. And it was standing on the beaches of Normandy with other world leaders last month – remembering together all that was given in defence of our liberty and our values – that most inspired me to come here today to give this speech.

Eisenhower once wrote: “People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable...Things are not all black and white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, right and left, are in the gutters.”

I believe that seeking the common ground and being prepared to make compromises in order to make progress does not entail a rejection of our values and convictions by one iota, rather it is precisely the way to defend them.

Not by making promises you cannot keep, or by just telling people what you think they want to hear. But by addressing the concerns people genuinely hold and showing that co-operation not absolutism is the only way to deliver for everyone.

For the future, if we can recapture the spirit of common purpose – as I believe we must – then we can be optimistic about what together we can achieve.

We can find the common ground that will enable us to forge new, innovative global agreements on the most crucial challenges of our time – from protecting our planet to harnessing the power of technology for good.

We can renew popular support for liberal democratic values and international co-operation.

And in so doing, we can secure our freedom, our prosperity and our ability to live together peacefully now and for generations to come.