

The Right Honourable David Mellor, PC, QC | Why Don't the Best and the Brightest go into Politics Anymore?

- And welcome back. Tonight we have another accomplished guest speaker, David Mellor, who will be presenting to us on why don't the best and the brightest go into politics anymore. Thank you very much, David. For those of you who don't know him, allow me the privilege of introducing him. David Mellor was born in Wareham, Dorset in 1949, and educated at Swanage Grammar School, Christ's College, Cambridge, and the Inns of Court School of Law. He was called to the bar in 1972, and practised as a barrister until he joined the government. He became a QC in 1987.

He was the Member of Parliament for Putney from 1979 to 1997, and spent 11 years in government: four of them as Mrs. Thatcher's youngest minister. He held two cabinet posts: Chief Secretary to the Treasury and founding Secretary of State for National Heritage, now the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. He also spent five years as a Home Office Minister, responsible for criminal justice policy and broadcasting, and was the Foreign Office Minister responsible for the Middle East and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Since leaving politics, David Mellor has pursued a multifaceted career as an international businessman, broadcaster, and journalist. As a businessman, he runs his own consultancy specialising in arranging the acquisition of Western companies by Far Eastern and Middle Eastern investors. He spent more than a decade as a senior advisor to a range of international companies, including Ernst & Young and BAE Systems. As a broadcaster, he presented the cult football phone-in "606" on 5 Live for 8 1/2 seasons, and has spent 15 years with Classic FM presenting a variety of programmes. Currently, he has a two-hour slot on Sunday evenings, and frequently presents a programme on Saturday evening as well. On LBC, his Saturday morning programme with Ken Livingstone, former mayor of London, was for six years LBC's fastest growing listenership.

The show was nominated for a 2012 Sony Award as best UK programme. Recently, he was on a short list of five at the International Broadcasting Awards for International Radio Personality of 2014. He was the Variety Club's BBC Radio Personality of the Year in 1994. As a journalist, he was once described by Sir David Frost as having more columns than the Parthenon. He has had regular slots in six national newspapers over the years. For the past 15 years, he has also been the opera and classical music critic of "The Mail" on Sunday. In September 2013, he was appointed Chairman of the Elgar Foundation, responsible for the upkeep of the Elgar birthplace at Broadheath, Worcestershire, and for promoting a wider understanding and appreciation of Elgar's musical legacy. So before I hand over to you, David, I just want to say a very big thank you, and just to say that Kylie will be moderating this webinar. And please, for everybody that's listening, if you have any questions, please post on chat. Thank you again, and over to you, David.

- Wendy, thanks a lot. The University of Wendy has been a great success during this lockdown, and I'm thrilled to be asked to play my part in it. Well, Winston Churchill once said that democracy is the worst system of government, and to be a factor in the other systems that have been tried before. Now, Churchill didn't think to add, but democracy is only okay if the best and the brightest are attracted to politics. Because in his day, now that could be taken for granted.

People who were either the best through their war records, through their social position, or who were bright and had achieved great things in the groves of academia, business, et cetera, were attracted to politics as the great challenge for professional people. Today I don't think he could be quite so sanguine about the health of democracy.

Another, a good old friend of mine, Douglas Hurd, who was Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary in Mrs. Thatcher's governments, once said, "The problem today is that the issues get bigger and the politicians get smaller." And also, of course, he said that he thought that Britain today is characterised by powerful journalists and weak politicians. And so over the years that I was either engaged in politics or from the sidelines took an interest in politics, it's really worried me that the quality of people attracted into politics has diminished. And that has had a bad impact on the standing of democracy in our country.

And if it's true in Britain, it's certainly true in the United States, to which I will shortly turn. But I remember vividly as one goes across the kaleidoscope of experiences I've had in my life, being invited in the early '90s to address a dinner in Leeds, which was in honour of Dennis Healey, who had been a Member of Parliament in Leeds for 40 years, and had just stepped down at the 1992 election. And the whole bigwigs of the city of Leeds gathered together to salute him and address other business as well.

And I remember saying to that dinner, that of course Dennis Healey in the '30s was an undergraduate at Balliol College. And he alongside two other exceptional figures, Roy Jenkins and Ted Heath, also both at Balliol, were regarded as the great hopes of British politics. And there was no question in anyone's mind that so outstanding were they, they would go into politics. And I posed the question, if one went and found the best undergraduates at Oxford University, or any other university for that matter, then, and it's even more true now, and you found 10 outstanding students and asked them what they intended to do, how many of them would say they intended to go into politics? And my guess would be virtually none.

And it was interesting, and excited a bit of interest from the people who were there. And afterwards, Dennis Healey, who was a rubicund and a straightforward fellow, came up to me, and he said, "I hate myself for this." He said, "It's not my role in life to agree with you," he said, "but I think you're probably right." And sadly, I think I was right. And if I thought I was right in 1992, how much more right do I feel now? And of course, when we look across the Atlantic, in the era of Donald Trump, and indeed, let it be said, Joe Biden, how many precious hopes for American democracy can really be sustained?

Again, a memory from my memory bank of experiences, in the late '70s, early '80s, I had a chance to go to America quite a lot because I had considerable involvement with the Republican Party, and indeed with the president of those days, Ronald Reagan. And I went to both of his nominating conventions, and went to one of his inaugurations and was invited to the other. But I was by then a minister, and it was difficult to get away.

But amongst my friends in the Republican National Committee was the chairman. And one time I remember, between Reagan's two winning elections, going out to lunch with him. And he looked completely exhausted and also a bit fed up. And I asked him what the problem was. He said, "Well, you know, I periodically, every few months, have to go around the United States. I go to different states and they give me, they've arranged for me to meet prominent figures. And my job is to go in and say, 'How'd you like to be governor?' Or 'There's a Senate race coming up in two years' time. How would you like to be considered to be the Republican candidate in the Senate? How would you like to contest our primary?'"

And he said, "A number of people, 'cause they knew that was what I was trying to do, wouldn't even see me. And a number of those that came to see me would say, 'I don't need that in my life,' or 'My wife would divorce me.'" He said, "It's becoming increasingly difficult to find the kind of capable people that we need to have in the Governor's Mansion, in the Senate, or or even in the House of Representatives." So that's always been tricky. Because if you're a senator, you get six years. If you're in the House of Representatives, you only get two. And so American democracy has suffered again from the fact that America is so exceptional in so many areas of human activity. But it's hard to make much of a claim, is it not, for American presidential politics?

I mean, I could never have imagined Donald Trump getting elected president of the United States, and yet he is the president of the United States. One of the reasons for that is that his opponent, Hillary Clinton, was way past her best at the time that the election was held. And her husband, Bill, although certainly had all the ability needed to be president. And there may even be those who thought he was a successful president. By the time it came to Hillary, everyone was pretty well aware that if Bill was around the Hillary Clinton White House, it would only be to do a bit of light influence pedalling.

And there were plenty of people who weren't so keen on that. You would've thought, would you not, That the Democrats would've learnt their lesson from this. And yet along comes Joe Biden coming out of an undistinguished field. You know, when Hillary Clinton was running, there were no shortage of people against her. And if she wasn't exactly Snow White, they were certainly the seven dwarfs. And may even have been more than seven. And by the same token, here we have Joe Biden.

If he is elected president, he'd be the oldest, even older than Ronald Reagan was. And Biden looks one step away from the care home. Why is it that young Americans in their prime, I don't mean young terms of that youthful, but you know, men and women in their prime, in their 50s, in their 60s, with experience of life and with real talent and with a commitment to the public good,

why are they so reluctant to come forward? Well, I can think of plenty of valid reasons.

So probably that bit of my speech I should reserve for the UK, which I know perhaps rather better. Just to say, some people will say, "Well, Ronald Reagan, how good was he?" But the answer is Ronald Reagan was actually extremely good. I mean, Ronald Reagan was certainly not the best actor to go into politics. There's the famous story of the agent in a care home himself, who when told Ronald Reagan was going to be president, he said, "No, no, no, no. Jimmy Stewart for president. Ronald Reagan for best friend."

But Reagan, I mean, I was very friendly with Chuck Heston, who was a far superior actor to Ronald Reagan, and had a deep interest in politics, had a very high Department of Defence clearance. I could talk to him when I was Foreign Office Minister about all the things that were going on with the Soviets. But once he got in on a public platform, all he could talk about was gun control and stuff like that. And it never, which he was very against, of course, it never really worked for him. And the same was true of John Wayne who used to make political speeches, and they were verbal haymakers to match the kind of haymakers that he used to land during his cowboy film years.

So Ronald Reagan was actually a formidable character. I remember going out during his first election with a team of people from the Republican National Committee. And I sat next to a woman who she and her husband and two other couples were the ones who plucked him out from the screenwriter, from the Movie Artist Guild, and put him up to be governor of California. I said, "You know Governor Reagan pretty well. What kind of president would he make?" And she said, "Oh, Ronald will do just fine. Because Ron is never embarrassed to be surrounded by better brains than he's got himself."

And of course, Ronald Reagan was the chairman of the board. And where Ronald Reagan was so successful was, he recognised that in America you have to be not a partisan leader of a party. You've got to be Uncle Sam. You've got to be the head of state. And nobody did it better than Ronald Reagan. And against that background, Ronald Reagan, a kind and gentle man, committed to the wider public good, never seen as a narrow partisan. When you consider the antics of Donald Trump, where he and a lot of other distinguished American presidents must be turning in their grave.

But the arrival on the scene of Joe Biden suggests there is no relief from the idea that the presidency is now becoming a place where second-rate hacks, not even second rate some of them, contest with each other. And that has to do of course with the conditions that the modern politician faces. And that's where I better come back to the UK, and be on surer ground of knowing exactly what goes on. Now, the first thing to bear in mind of course is that in the history of Britain, members of Parliament were originally people of substance from their own communities who were sent to Parliament as representatives of their communities as an act of public service.

Later on in the 20th century, it became impossible not to pay them. And I'm not against paid members of Parliament. When I was first elected to Parliament in 1979, I was very happy to have a salary: I needed one. I was not a person of independent means. But the problem is that once you start paying people, you then get a group of professional politicians. And professional politicians are what has really caused the problems in our country, because of course the professional politician becomes the career politician.

The career politician becomes somebody who drives out what Parliament should really be all about, which is getting people who have other career options, who pursued other careers successfully, indeed, who continue as in the old days to pursue their jobs. When I started in Parliament, Parliament would not meet until the afternoon. People were free to do whatever they wanted to do in the morning. And a lot of people continued to follow their professions.

What that meant was that you had independent-minded people who were not afraid of taking on the whips, not afraid of taking on the parliamentary leadership, and they were not afraid of losing their seats. Increasingly however, there is a cadre of professional politician, where people have done nothing else in their lives except be involved in politics. They go to university. They leave university. They become research assistants to prominent politicians. They then stand for Parliament. They get elected. And in no time at all, they're knocking on the door of government.

And if you're not careful, they end up getting bigger places in a government than their experience of life justifies. And of course when you then add on the fact that for a lot of people, you know, when I was first elected to Parliament, there were members of Parliament who served in the war. There were members of Parliament, honourable and gallant members they were known. There were members of Parliament who were of such experience and authority that even into quite considerable old age, they were nevertheless always reliable in terms of making sure if the government was making a wrong move at what they were then prepared to say and do. And they weren't to be regarded as lobby fodder.

The problem with having young people, professional politicians who've never known any other job, is that they come to these positions too young. And when they get to those positions, they tend to make a mess of it. Which brings me to David Cameron. Now, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on David Cameron, but David Cameron's a classic example. Not that he didn't have the ability to be a good prime minister, but he did not have the experience to be a good prime minister. And he did not take trouble to acquire that experience, or indeed, even attach himself to people who had the wisdom to supplement his own lack of experience. It's always a risk. It was a risk with Tony Blair. It was a risk for David Cameron.

If people come into the job of prime minister without having ever held any previous government office, and if like David Cameron they don't actually value experience, then it becomes a problem. I remember very well my partner Penny Cobham thinking that I needed reeducation on the merits of David Cameron, an old Etonian. Penny had once married even an old Etonian. She was in favour of old Etonians.

So I was taken to have dinner with David Young, that wonderful man of whom Margaret Thatcher paid perhaps the greatest tribute that any of us who'd been ministers would expect to receive. And certainly she never gave me that kind of tribute. "When" she said, "other people bring me problems, David brings me solutions." And I said to David, "You go into Downing Street voluntarily to work on enterprise issues three or four times a week." He said, "Yes, I do." And I said, "And how often do you see David Cameron?" And he said, "Two or three times" pause, "a year."

Feeling he had to explain, 'cause I looked a bit puzzled by this: "David Cameron isn't comfortable with people of my age." Well, had he been more comfortable with people of David Young's age, he wouldn't necessarily have made the huge error, which I continue to believe, and this is a subject for another night perhaps, of having the Brexit referendum just to see off, you know, a Nigel Farage. He's not a big beast, but a yapping terrier who could fasten his teeth into your ankles. But Nigel Farage in the course of, he's a good friend of mine. I enjoy having a drink with Nigel. But yeah, he's never been elected to the British Parliament. He's done all right in European elections. But then, you know, pretty much anybody can do all right in European elections if the wind is in the right direction.

In order to see off Nigel Farage, he embarked upon a referendum. Now, if we wanted to leave the EU, if a leader really took the view that this was what should happen to the country, a leader should say that and campaign for that. What a leader shouldn't do is be like David Cameron: embark on a referendum, think they were going to win it, want to win it, and then lose it. And that is the position in which we find ourselves today.

And let me just say that we are all preoccupied at the moment with the COVID infection. But this very day there has been further arguments in Brussels between the two negotiating teams. There is every chance that we will indeed do what I know some people have wanted to do all the time, and that is leave the EU at the end of the year without a deal. And you have to say to yourself, "What's the point of it?"

You know, I knew Margaret Thatcher very well. And some people pray in aid of Margaret Thatcher on this European venture. But Margaret Thatcher was too wise a woman to want to have anything to do with that. What Margaret Thatcher believed was that Europe was a bad thing, but there was no point in trying to get out of it. What we had to do was screw them for as much money as we could. And that's exactly, that's exactly what she did.

Now, as I think of my time in Margaret Thatcher's government, it's quite clear to me the diminution of talent in government. When I compare some of the big figures of those times with the people we have now. I mean, not too long after I joined the government in 1981 as parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Energy, I went off to do the same job at the Home Office. Willie Whitelaw was the Home Secretary and also Deputy Prime Minister, a strong man in every way: winner of the military cross. And well deserving was Willie of the Prime Minister

Margaret Thatcher's famous tribute to him. "Everyone needs a Willie," she once said. And indeed, I'm sure we all agree that that's probably right.

And he once said to me about the Falklands War, he said, "You know, I had to say to her, 'Margaret, when they bring you bad news, don't shout at them. Because they'll never bring you bad news again. And you need to get the bad news.'" Now, whether you thought Willie Whitelaw was a genius or whether you didn't, Willie Whitelaw was a formidable person, who is his modern-day equivalent as Deputy Prime Minister, a rabbit in the headlights chap called Dominic Raab, who is also Foreign Secretary.

I was first joined the British government, the Foreign Secretary was Peter Carington, enormously experienced, a wise man, a strong man, not a man who prime ministers could take for granted. And the Chancellor of the Exchequer was Geoffrey Howe. Now, I'm actually rather in favour of Rishi Sunak. But what worries me is what it might be. He might end up like William Hague, put into a big job too quickly, and therefore never quite making it. William Hague, a very fine politician, but by the time he was elected leader of the Conservative Party, he was too young to really cut it.

Rishi Sunak, I mean, I felt for him as the former Chief Secretary of the Treasury responsible for the government's budgeting. I felt for him when he said, having spent 12 billion pounds in one month on this furloughing scheme, facing the possibility that a budget deficit of schedule before COVID to be 55 billion was likely to be 327 billion. And might indeed, on worst case scenarios, go to over 500 billion, he said, "Oh, well, we could be facing a recession of a kind we have never experienced before." Rishi, what took you so long to understand that?

But the difficulty is that without the experience, he doesn't even have the experience of the 2008 downturn, let alone some of the others that we've all lived for, lived through, it becomes almost impossible to get these difficult judgements right. Anyway, the other problem that faces anyone contemplating a political career is the media. And the media is a many-headed monster. On the one hand, of course, you get media intrusion into people's private lives. We've all had a bit of that, where they take a joy in finding out something disadvantageous, plastering it all over their front pages. And once they've got you in a situation where you can't say it's all wrong, then of course they add to the story in ways that don't always show a great respect for truth, because they believe they know their customers.

And I think the British people love to have their eyes to the keyhole of other people's bedrooms, and get some perverse pleasure out of those kind of stories. Again, I think back, and forgive me if this is a series of name drops, but I've met some very interesting people in my time, and I listen to what they say. I mean, if I talked to you about Winston Churchill, as I'm going to do, it's probably much better than instead of giving you my opinions on Winston Churchill, I tell you the opinion of colleague of mine in the chambers, it was only 40 years ago, called Dennis Kelly, who was Winston Churchill's research assistant on the history of the English-speaking peoples and stuff like that.

Dennis was a huge admirer of Churchill, once saved Churchill from death. Churchill loved his goldfish, and the goldfish tanks in those days had a lid. And in the lid there was an electric light. And when it fell into the water, Dennis had to physically restrain Churchill from leaning in and grabbing it. And God knows, you know, for Churchill to be electrocuted while he was there working with Dennis wouldn't have done Dennis much good, and he made sure he didn't. But I said to Dennis, "Why don't you write about Churchill and say what he was really like, as a great admirer?" And he said, Well, yes," he said, "I did admire him."

But you have to remember also that it would be difficult for me not to be honest and say he was incapable quite a lot of the time. And we're talking about a man who'd already seen Britain through two wars, but was going to become prime minister again. In fact, he was prime minister for another four years from 1951. Now, the point I'm making is that in an era of 24-hour news, it would be impossible for Churchill to survive the scrutiny that he got. And we're not now talking about necessarily scrutiny of things in his private life that were particularly serious.

It was just the fact that enjoying a drink and having brandy for breakfast was not conducive to public confidence. It's the consequences of having brandy for breakfast paraded over the front pages on a regular basis. The same I think is also true of 24-hour news, because you get endless dollops of politicians being endlessly interviewed. And very few of them having the capability to come across very well in this media round that the government insists on doing every breakfast time, where various cabinet ministers, very few of them having any particular eloquence or indeed fluency, are dragged before a whole succession of breakfast shows.

And I ask myself, "What would the average ambitious kid think as they watch those programmes?" Do they think, "I want to be that man or I want to be that woman?" How wonderful to be a minister of that and be able to, you know, to be interviewed about these great issues in so far as they have any time for the whole spectacle. They are surely far more likely to associate themselves with the perma-tanned presenter, who of course can never be worsted in these encounters because it's so much easier.

And I've been on both sides of the microphone. I've written about great issues and tried to resolve them in a ministerial capacity. It's a lot easier to write about problems and solve them. It's a lot easier to ask questions than to answer them. And so what I'm really saying is that the problems that confront our democracy and confront people who might want to go into politics, it's a many-headed monster. It's not something that can be readily dealt with.

And the problem is of course that when you have a Parliament that doesn't allow people to do anything else, when you have scrutiny, that whether it's about your personal life or your inadequacies is going to be very difficult for a lot of people with choices in their lives. I think you will find, and we have already found, increasingly few people really ready to take on these burdens. 'Cause after all, if there's a big swing, I mean, when I lost my seat in 1997, more than half of the Conservative Party lost their seats. A lot of them never returned.

William Hague asked me if I wanted to go back, and I said, "William, I don't think I do. I've got a better life. Besides that, I'm actually got to start to make a bit of money." He said, "And you don't really need the letters MP after your name, do you?" I said, "Well, I hope I don't." But even those that would like to have come back, there was not much scope for it. So suddenly you find people are washed up by the electorate in their late 40s, early 50s. What are they going to do with the rest of their lives? And that's where it all gets very difficult.

And this is where I get to a difficult point, because you will want me to provide you with some answers to this, won't you? I mean, I posed the problem, this many-headed monster that threatens the willingness of accomplished people in any great number going into politics. What's the answer to it? Well, I have to reply, I'm afraid, as Hilaire Belloc did in his poem about the doctors: "They answered as they took their fees, there is no cure for this disease." And I don't know that there is a cure for this disease. There is no easy way out.

Are the media going to stop wanting to interview people in politics every hour of the day or night? Are they put off by the fact that most viewers are fed up with it? You know, attempts have been made to control the tabloid presses, certainly a lot better than in my day. But there will always be the feeling that amongst the people who are going into politics, that any blemish in their private life could be exposed at a most inconvenient moment.

The Bible said, at least the New Testament does, I'm not sure if the Old Testament has any comments on that, but St. John says, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Well, that doesn't prevent the media casting lots of stones. And I suspect an awful lot of people, they earn a good income. They've got a happy family life. They do what they do with the great joy of being able to do what they do that they ought not to be doing privately. Why would they want to risk it all by going into politics?

And because there is no single cause, as I've tried to demonstrate, for the reasons why gifted people with a choice will generally not want to go into politics. So there are of course many gifted people in politics on all sides of the House. Because there's no single cause as to why others won't go in, then there can be no simple solution. But until it is widely accepted that politicians are generally not bad or dishonest, some of them may be a bit feeble, but that's the electorate's fault. As a more literate observer than me once said, the anger of the public about their politicians is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass. I haven't got any answers, but at least I feel I made the right diagnosis. Over to you to tell me what you think. Thank you, Wendy.

- Thank you, David. So we've got a couple of questions. And although you said you didn't want to share the cure, I think we're going to ask you a few of them. So let's look to start with taking the media issue a little further into the age of social media.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: So, you know, with Facebook, with Instagram, and you know, arguably, your average person on the street being a have-a-go journalist and happy to take a photo of you or whatever else, you know, no one is allowed a private life. Do you think that is also a factor in people's considerations today?

A: Of course, a primary factor. Why should people want to subject themselves to this? What do they get out of it? They don't make a decent income. And you see a lot of people in politics, when they look at politicians now, they don't think it conveys a lot of power. They watch politicians, you know, being served up to various fashionable interviewers to rip them to pieces. What's heroic about that? What great issue are they going to solve that makes it worth tolerating that kind of life? And I think the fact of the matter is that in this day and age, it's far more attractive for a lot of gifted people to go and make a lot of money as hedge fund traders. Or if they are interested in politics, to go into politics as broadcasters or journalists.

Q: So we started to touch on the Democratic Party and their choice of Joe Biden. So you know, let's return to those who were running against him. And you know, not necessarily the top few candidates, but those further down the list, you know, who arguably, they were people with wide experiences outside of just politics, be they public prosecutors or you know, even somebody like Andrew Yang. Now, these people didn't penetrate the Democratic Party, or arguably you could say those who were supposed to elect them. So is the problem just with good people not going into politics, or is it also a problem with the electorate?

A: Well, the problem is you mentioned the name of someone, I can barely even remember him. I mean, you know, the problem is that there are too many people running for the Democratic nomination, and indeed, running for similar offices in the UK, who think charisma is December the 25th. You know, there are so many people who don't have the capability to make themselves big personalities. You know, they're not even household names in their own front lawns. You know, this is the problem that you've got. And if you think about Trump, I mean, I think Trump is an odious man. I think he's dishonest. He reminds me of what was once said about a Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and I adapt it to Donald Trump. How can you tell when Donald Trump is lying? His lips move.

But Donald Trump has got charisma, and he has got the ability to project his name in a way that everybody knows who he is. And some of those who know who he is like him because they feel he's for the little guy and he's sticking it to the powerful. I wouldn't, but that's not the subject of tonight, I wouldn't agree with that. But the truth of the matter is Donald Trump is a big personality, maybe a bad personality. And most of the others, including this chap Yang, I never heard of him, are just not big personalities. And politics requires big personalities.

Q: So here's a very technical question. Do you think that if we return to Parliament starting at 2:00 PM in the afternoon so that MPs could have outside experience, that would add, you know, to those who might be more interested in taking up the baton?

A: Enormously. And I don't think it'll ever happen. But you know, because Parliament's not a place for creches. And I actually think it's a good thing that there are more women in Parliament than there were in my day. But treating Parliament as a 9-to-5 job means you will never get people who've got other things to do. And you know, it comes down to a simple, straightforward proposition, is do you get better members of Parliament if they maintain a foot in the camp of their previous professions and continue to practise those professions, thereby being in touch with the public and not being afraid of losing their seats, not kowtowing to the all mighty party machines?

So if they, as has happened, you know, in recent times with the Conservative Party, when people who weren't prepared to support leaving the EU, they were thrown out of the party; they lost the whip. And so it would be much better if Parliament began at half past 2:00 as it used to do. But I think, you know, as even Moore once said about the Conservative Party, you know, the Conservative Party is supposed to want to turn the clock back, but it's never turned the clock back even for a single minute. And I think we're not going to turn the clock back on all of this. But you know, if you want 9 to 5, time serving undistinguished members of Parliament who probably, you know, have no other interest in life except being MPs, then that's what you get. Then you end up with a Parliament like the one we've got at the moment.

Q: So arguably over the last few months, you know, it's been an opportunity for people to look at world leaders and see who really has, who really has it, who can lead their country through difficult waters. Who have you admired over the last few months?

A: Well, I think in terms of people who've become, who've become figures, I mean, if I look in America, I know he's not a world leader, but you know, if I were a Democrat, I would ask myself, "Why isn't Andrew Cuomo on the ticket?" I mean, I don't know, maybe he didn't want to be. But he has always, the press conferences he does from New York, which has suffered particularly badly from the virus, and I know you yourself, thank heaven, have made a miraculous recovery having gone down with it, and well done to you for being back on your feet. I think that Andrew Cuomo's a good sort.

When you look around the world, Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand has done well. I think they did very well in South Korea. Damned if I can remember who the leader of South Korea is, but I'm sure they did pretty well. In Europe it's been much more difficult. And I think a lot of politicians in Europe will not survive that much scrutiny once people start. It's certainly going to happen in the UK, asking why was the response to the virus so tardy? why wasn't it anticipated? This is the third virus that's come out of China in little more than 15 years. And I think that, you know, dear Boris, who I like a lot actually, Boris.

I'm not always inclined to take Boris very seriously, but I like him, and it's good that he's become prime minister, better than some of the others we could have had. But you know, Boris must surely be asking himself, his great hero is Winston Churchill. He once wrote a book about

Winston Churchill: not one of the best books written about Winston Churchill, but a book about him, a published book about Winston Churchill. Why didn't Boris show the same insight as Churchill did? Churchill saw exactly what was happening in the '30s, and he knew something terrible was going to happen, that the rise of Hitler was inevitable. He foresaw the future, and was able therefore to respond well to it. I don't know at what Boris came to realise that this pandemic, you know, the British economy is going to shrink between January and June of this year 30%.

These are unprecedented figures. And the fact, the British government, led by Boris, blundered into this without the slightest clue until it was impossible to ignore what happened. I think that's sad, 'cause leadership is about foresight, and there hasn't been much foresight in the British response to this.

Q: What's your opinion on Mr. Macron?

A: Well, I think he's a truly awful person. Why do I think that? Because I think that, well, the problem with France is French politics of course, and the collapse of the existing political parties in France, which gave Macron a chance, as a man of no experience whatsoever, to create a party which hadn't existed before and become president. And I don't think I need to think that much about Macron, because you know what the French think about Macron; he's going to be in huge trouble getting reelected. But in his period in office, he seems to be an ultra on European integration.

All the things that I think most, well, there's no evidence that the French public wanted it. but there's no doubt, if there isn't a settlement between Britain and the EU, one of the people who will be most responsible for that is Macron and his creature Barnier. I don't understand why the EU negotiator should be a Frenchman fully signed up, you know, to being as difficult as they can with Britain. This is for historical reasons, you know. the French still want to avenge Napoleon and all the other battles they've lost: not just against us, but against the Germans. But I think we are a target of a lot of jealousy from France.

After all, London's now the sixth biggest French city, you know, because so many French people prefer to live in London than in France. We accept that the electricity in London is generated by a French-owned company. But I bet you if there was ever any attempt to have a British company generating the electricity in Paris, that would go down like a lead balloon. There's certain inferiority conflicts which Macron tries to use in order to shore up his fading popularity.

Q: You titled the lecture: Why Don't the Best and the Brightest Go Into Politics? What would you classify as the best?

A: Well, I think the best, I mean, the brightest was obviously intended to refer to people of intellect, but anyone who's been to a good university and met lots of brainy professors knows that the idea of letting them run anything apart from their departments at this particular

university would be a bad idea. So by the best, I mean, you can be the best because you're the bravest. You can be the best because in the old days, the position into which you were born gave you a sense of responsibility to others, and a willingness to use your resources to the benefit of a wider public. You could be the best because, you know, you are a sports star who chooses to go into politics like Sebastian Coe. I mean, the best allows you to look at other things than purely high intellect. Because high intellect is no guarantee of good sense and leadership.

Q: Would you view Boris Johnson as a true conservative?

A: Oh yes. Well, Boris is a true conservative. I think that, you know, the problem with Boris is that he's always been able, because he's so clever and he's charismatic, he's always been able to get away with, you know, skimming lightly across the top of a lot of the subjects that he has done, and thinks that, you know, a Latin or a Greek tag and a joke will get him through the most difficult interviews. But of course, that isn't working so well just now. And that may be because I feel very sorry for Boris, 'cause you know, he nearly died from the coronavirus.

And someone said to me the other day, one of the reasons why he's so keen to cling on to Dominic Cummings is that Boris is only working at half power. But the fact that Boris was prepared to cling on to Dominic Cummings, which has meant his rating has gone down over the weekend from plus 19 to minus one. I think Boris is dissipating a lot of the goodwill that there was for him because of some of the misjudgments that he is making. And this Cummings thing, it's a bit like watching a man fall into a quicksand, and his friends think, "Let's jump in and get him out, but save him." And of course, all that happens is they end up being sucked into the quicksand themselves. And that's what's happening to Boris and others. And it's perfectly obvious from what's been happening today that the Conservative Parliamentary Party in increasing numbers are not prepared to put up with that.

Q: Who do you see as the possible best and brightest coming up through British politics today?

A: And I think there are some very good people, and I'm not going to embarrass anybody by naming them. I'm not saying, you see, my thesis is not there aren't good people in politics. But my thesis is that there aren't enough good people in politics. But one of the problems of course with good people is you can sometimes be too good for your own good. I know that there are a number of people on the backbenches. I don't know, I think of the Chairman of the Defence Select Committee, Tobias Ellwood, who's a very good friend of Penny and I.

He was a brave one who tackled this fellow who knifed a policeman to death. I mean a courageous man, but also a clever man. And he is not a minister at the moment because he isn't a yes-man. He's not even, as Chairman of the Defence Select Committee, been invited to this gathering of select committee heads who are allowed to question Boris. One of Boris's problems is he wants yes-men. And one of the reasons he's got such a third-rate government in most respects is that a lot of the better people are on the backbenches. But you see, that is

another reason why a lot of people won't go into politics, because they think, "Well, I'm really good at what I do, so I'm going to end up as a minister."

But then they see people like Tobias Ellwood on the backbenches, and they suddenly realise it's not actually about being good, it's about being pliable. It's about being somebody who, you know, when the Prime Minister, when Boris says jump, they merely reply, "How high?" And so I think that is a further disincentive to go into politics. That being in government, it's not a meritocracy anymore. To be fair to Margaret Thatcher, you know, I mean, I don't think she ever had that much personal enthusiasm for me. She thought I was cheeky. But I was one of the first people from the 1979 intake she put into Parliament, because she thought I could handle parliamentary debates; of the many things I couldn't handle, the one thing I could handle was parliamentary debates.

You have to believe there's a fair judging system as to whether you will languish on the backbenches, which is not a job I would recommend for anybody: being a backbench MP, hopeless. You want to get into office. And if you get into office, you need to believe that that's on merit. But unfortunately these days, it absolutely isn't. You know, I mean, who can believe that someone as nondescript as Dominic Raab is Deputy Prime Minister on merit? Of course he isn't. He's convenient because, you know, he's one of Boris's playmates. He's passionately anti-Europe. It's about the only thought he ever has in his life. It reminds you of what Disraeli once said, you know, of a contemporary. He said he only had one thought in his life, and that was wrong.

Q: Do other democratic cultures have anything to teach us? Going back to your original comment.

A: Of course, and you see, I've always felt that in Britain, the fact that there has been, it has been so much of a war, a viciously conducted war, often between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. It's not always been that helpful. And I think that there are other countries where there is much more common ground between the various parties, and that is good: common ground in a democracy is good. And having gone through a period with Tony Blair where the lines, the ideological lines between the parties were not drawn that far apart. We've now gone back, we then went back to a situation under Jeremy Corbyn where, you know, I mean, the Labour Party, however incompetent the Conservatives were in office, and I mean, thank God I didn't even begin to talk about Theresa May.

I mean, amazing that woman ever became prime minister. But the Conservatives got reelected despite being as all over the place as they were, because Labour under Jeremy Corbyn was totally unelectable. And hopefully Keir Starmer will make Labour electable, and force people like Boris to take the business of government more seriously. Because if they don't govern properly, they'll be slung out. And I don't think people ever believed that when Jeremy Corbyn was the leader of the Labour Party.

Q: We've got a few US politics-related questions. I'm going to kind of package them together. Returning to Trump, and as as you say, we'll put his his character to one side for this question, but the performance over the last year or two, you know, has meant that for a lot of people where, you know, unemployment figures or even, you know, trade imbalances with China, some of the issues that perhaps they viewed the Democrats didn't tackle, that Trump's willingness to kind of, you know, plough straight in as it were, has scored him a lot of popularity.

A: Yeah. And I agree with that.

Q: Looking at Trump's performance, you know, going forwards over the next few years, you know, if he were to get reelected, you know, do you think this is a role that he can grow into, or his character is going to continue to overshadow?

A: Well, you know what? I tell you a terrible thing, like almost as bad as Dennis Healey saying to me all those years ago he agreed with me. I could see myself, if I was an American, voting for Trump. Because I think, you see, Barack Obama, who I would certainly have voted for in both the elections he ran in, but Barack Obama wasn't a very good president in foreign policy terms. He was responsible for the retreat of America from being the world leader in a number of key areas. He let the Russians back onto the top international stage. And you know, Barack Obama was much committed, and did it with great eloquence, to drawing a line in the sand. And then when somebody crossed the line in the sand, he just drew it in a different place. And do I think Joe Biden would be any different? No, I don't.

And you know, the one thing I quite like about Trump, although, you know, you'll wake up in the morning and find he's telling you President Xi is the greatest thing since sliced bread. I mean, Trump really is ridiculous in, you know, the way piles the praise onto creatures like Kim Jong-un and so on. But China is a real threat to the world now, you know. It's aggressive. This pandemic, I don't think they created this virus in one of their laboratories. but I think their inability to control the willingness of some Chinese to eat anything that moves meant that the Wuhan virus was no surprise. And instead of feeling any sense of responsibility for the Wuhan virus, their aggressive diplomacy is appalling.

The lies that they tell: outrageous. And the fact that they are now trying to take advantage of the problems in the West by trying to stop democracy in Hong Kong and by threatening to invade Taiwan, I think the Chinese are a serious threat to world peace. And to be honest, I mean, Donald Trump, for all he's a dreadful fellow, he does seem to understand, even if it's only for electoral purposes, the threat the Chinese pose. And I don't think that Biden necessarily would. I mean, it depends. Some people may think Joe Biden is a wonderful man. I'm sure he's kind to animals and helps old ladies across the roads. But I just don't see him as a leader of any stature. And I don't see him as somebody, you know, he was vice president to Obama who's a far superior intellect and eloquent fellow.

But you know, Obama in the end didn't stand up for American interests overseas. And if you

don't stand up for American interests overseas, you tend to sell down the river other countries' interests as well. And Trump, awful though he is, might be a better bet if, like me, you think that China is the number one problem facing the world today.

Q: And for the final question before Wendy comes back in, who would you place your bets on as being Biden's running mate?

A: Well, he said it'll be a woman, didn't he? And I don't blame him for that. And I'm sure there are some exceptional women in the American Senate or governors. I just can't remember any of them at the moment. But yeah, he'll choose a woman. Carly, is that it? Thank you very much. You moderated that with great skill. And I can see why people would much rather their children were an interviewer like you than a sad, old, wrecked politician like me.

- Thank you, . I'm going to pass it over to Wendy.

- Thank you, David. Thank you, Carly. Thank you, David, for a fascinating and eloquent presentation. You are a true renaissance man. I have to say that way before it was fashionable. You nailed your cuds to the mask on culture and sport through to politics, economics, leadership, and even now the COVID pandemic. I actually agree with you on your comments on Governor Cuomo of New York, who certainly has displayed remarkable leadership skills under very difficult circumstances. Your insights and your opinions have given us all food for thought tonight. So once again, David, thank you very much. Thank you, Carly. I'd like to say goodnight to everybody, and thank you once again for joining us.