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ORATION

Reflections on the Brexit Revolution

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I. Introduction

A. *Catherine Barnard*[1]

It's a great honour and privilege to welcome Anand Menon to deliver the Mackenzie Stuart Lecture. As many of you know, the Centre of European Legal Studies, CELS, hosts an annual public lecture in honour of Lord Mackenzie Stuart, who was the first British judge to be the president at the Court of Justice in Luxembourg. And there have been a number of very eminent scholars and judges who have given this lecture over the years.

This year's speaker is my wonderful friend and colleague Anand Menon, Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London, director of the academic think-tank UK in a Changing Europe, and a regular voice in Britain's public debate. He is a social media star and a traditional media star. He's even made some very watchable TikTok videos.

As director of UK in a Changing Europe, he has done three remarkable things. First, he explains the issues around Brexit with clarity, pizzazz, and humour. He's made complex political, economic, and, dare I say it, even legal issues accessible, clear, and engaging. As one admirer of his work says, he doesn't shout or posture or moralise, but he does insist on facts, on fairness, and on precision. And, most of all, on usefulness. His work is a public service; he writes to help people see things they might otherwise miss, to name dynamics, to name power, and to name consequences.

Second, he's shown academia that there is a different way of engaging with the public. He has given 'impact', such a buzz word in our circles, a new meaning. He's shown how it's possible to translate academic literature which might be read by a few dozen people into a 1,000-word blog which is accessible and read by many thousands.

He's shown, too, how, in the vexed terrain of Brexit and beyond, it's possible to take an impartial stand and present facts. In the run-up to the referendum, I think I spent more time with Anand than I did with my own family, doing town halls up and down the country. I never knew which way Anand was going to vote. He's engaged with hundreds of politicians, civil servants, and thousands of members of the public. This engagement may be seen through his writing and his appearances on *Question Time* and even on Radio 4's *The News Quiz*.

Third, he's given a new meaning to interdisciplinarity. He's shown how political scientists, economists, geographers, and lawyers can all work together, not in a tokenistic way but where the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

He's also incredibly generous. He's shown generations of academics how to bring his magic to their work. He's also brave, taking on some of the worst on social media and calling it out. I'm very proud to call him my friend. I've learnt a great deal from him, and I fully expect to learn a lot more from this lecture.

[1]We have decided to include the introduction as well as the lecture this year because it helps to provide context for the lecture. Anand Menon, founding director of UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE), and Catherine Barnard, senior fellow at UKICE, have worked closely together since 2016.

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B. Anand Menon

Thinking about it, I've spent most of the last 12 years studying Brexit up close and personal, and a lot of it, as Catherine said, in her company. And thinking on my way over here about some of the moments we've lived through, there are three moments in particular with Catherine that stick in my mind.

They all concern her ability to keep a poker face while being appalled. The first took place on the 24th of June 2016, a date that, for obvious reasons, has stuck in my mind. We were at College Green, that place opposite Parliament where the journalists congregate when something big is going on. The place was packed. Catherine was sitting in the Radio 5 tent next to Jeremy Corbyn as he said, 'We might as well just trigger Article 50 this morning and get it done with'.

Her mouth twitched, but she kept that poker face. The next time was about two or three years later. We were in the House of Commons, listening to a presentation by Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the EU Suella Braverman. Suella was, I assume, blissfully unaware that Catherine was in the audience. I asked her (I was chairing the session) at what point she had become Eurosceptic. Ms Braverman's response? 'I think it was when I was a student at Cambridge, listening to lectures on the European Court of Justice by Catherine Barnard.'

The third occasion was far more serious, and happened in 2019. It was the day of the indicative votes. And on that day a Tory MP had rung me and asked if a couple of us could come in and answer questions from his colleagues ahead of the votes. So three of us, myself and Catherine included, went along to what turned out to be a packed parliamentary committee room. After three years of negotiating and talking about nothing but Brexit, the first question was, 'A customs union means freedom of movement, doesn't it?' The Barnard poker face once more.

Next June marks the 10th anniversary of the referendum. So I've started trying to think things through, and to make sense of it all. I know that Ivan Rogers came to Cambridge—not for this lecture but for another one in 2017—and he talked about the Brexit revolution.

Ivan was talking mainly about the revolution in relations between the UK and the EU. But I want to talk about a different Brexit revolution. I want to apologise to all those who've come here expecting a law lecture. I'm not a lawyer, so there isn't going to be much law in what I'm talking about. I want to talk about the Brexit revolution in our politics, how it happened, what it consists of, what it means for us now.

Arguments are a bit like methodology—things you need to be extremely serious about before you get tenure. If you're a young academic, you have to play by the rules. But I'm too old to worry now. Insofar as I have an argument, it comes in several bits.

First, you can't understand Brexit without understanding the long-term dissatisfaction that built up in this country for a significant period of time beforehand. Second, Brexit's impact on politics was huge, and one of those impacts was actually to provide us with a unique window of opportunity to finally address those problems. Third, the failure to do so and the failure to do so quite dramatically explains where we've reached today in terms of our politics: with faith in mainstream politics shattered, and with Reform UK ahead in the polls.

Brexit, in other words, is both cause and consequence of a lot of what has gone on in our politics.

We hear a lot about how the problems we face in our country are down either to Brexit or to, as the phrase goes, 14 years of Conservative government. The fact of the matter is that popular dissatisfaction with the status quo dates back far longer than that. In 2001, when Tony Blair was re-elected for the first time, Labour lost some 3 million votes.

If you trace those voters, insofar as you can, a lot of them floated off to UKIP, and many of those who survived voted for Boris Johnson in 2019. Those 3 million voters represented a significant chunk of the New Labour electorate, and they fled.

The reason why people were fleeing, as the Hansard Society discovered at the time, was not because they thought Labour was bound to win and so there was no point voting. Rather, it was because they

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felt the mainstream parties were all the same, and politicians could not be trusted to deliver. However, because of the peculiarities of our election system, none of this seemed to matter much at the time. Labour may have lost 3 million voters in 2001, but they lost only six seats.

They haemorrhaged votes again in 2005, but still were re-elected with a majority of 66. The Government of 2005 was elected on the lowest vote share of any government until Keir Starmer's.

There was, in other words, a sense of dissatisfaction with how we were being governed, with the lack of choice on offer, all the way back at the start of this century, and this growing dissatisfaction, this disillusionment, was turbocharged by two events.

Towards the end of that first decade, of course, we had the MPs' expenses crisis. We don't talk about it much anymore, but it was a seismic event that fundamentally reshaped attitudes towards politics. Just to remind you, five Labour MPs and two Tory peers were sentenced to between 12 and 18 months in prison. On top of that, around 250 MPs were forced to pay back a total of £1.2 million.

And, of course, this played out against the backdrop of the other crisis that had started the previous September with the collapse of Lehmans—the great financial crisis. There's hardly a worse time to watch MPs being shamed for claiming money for their house or their moat than during a financial crisis. And the impact of this crisis was eye-watering in scale.

Gross domestic product in the course of one year shrank by 6% and the effects were persistent. Ten years later, in 2018, our economy was a mere 11% bigger than it had been in 2008. It was 16% smaller than it should have been if prior growth trends had continued. And, crucially, the impact of the financial crisis was massively unequal.

Prosperous places with high productivity, with well-educated workforces, suffered far less than poorer parts of the country. I remember being struck during my daily commute from Oxford to London—there was absolutely no trace of the financial crisis. And I remember going back home to West Yorkshire in about 2010, 2011, and seeing something quite different.

That, in a way, symbolised the impact of the great financial crisis. It was massively unequal and hit the poorer places worse. And this, of course, was exacerbated by the choice of the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition between 2010 and 2015 to impose austerity. Now, I think the case has been pretty clearly made that deciding to impose stringent cuts on the welfare state at a time when, as Paul Johnson put it, borrowing was cheap as chips was a mistake.

Austerity exacerbated the inequality that I've talked about—£30 billion was removed from the welfare budget. It also had a negative impact on life expectancy in the country as a whole, and massively exaggerated differences in life expectancy between different parts of the country.

On top of this came the cuts to local council funding, the consequences of which we are living through. The worst-hit places—Barnsley, Liverpool, Wakefield, Blackburn—saw cuts of up to 40% in council funding in a period of six years.

On top of that, as disillusionment bubbled away in the run-up to the 2015 election, something else became clear too, which was that inequality was as much political as economic. In that election, UKIP won 4 million votes, give or take, and gained one seat; UKIP won 13% of the national vote and got one MP. By contrast, the SNP won 5% of the national vote and got 56 MPs.

There's an in-built inequality about our electoral system, as much as there was about our economy, and by that election of 2015, the British Social Attitudes Survey was finding about a quarter of the population saying it's not worth voting. I remember a woman in Sunderland, when we were out and about in the referendum, saying to me: 'Why vote? You could stick a red rosette on a donkey in this town, and it would win. Voting makes no difference. You have no real choice'.

This was the time, for those of you who remember, of that famous interjection by Russell Brand. 'Why would you vote? They're all the same.' And there was a wonderful piece in *The Guardian* by the comedian Bridget Christie in about 2013 when she was writing about Andrew Lloyd Webber. She pointed out that there were two occasions when he came back to vote in the Lords. One was to remove working tax credits from poorer people, and the second was to vote in favour of gay marriage. As Christie wrote, he in a way typified the zeitgeist of the time. He 'hates the poor and he loves queers'.

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'Remainia', as *Guardian* journalist Raphael Bear was to call it, was that liberal—economically and politically—class that dominated politics and increasingly were at odds with a significant chunk of the British population. And again, of course, in 2015, first past the post did its job in the sense that it disguised this bubbling dissatisfaction.

Now, I'm not here to argue that the referendum was simply a victory for the left behind. Only 21% of Leave voters had routine or semi-routine jobs. The middle class comprised almost 60% of Leave voters. But what the referendum did do was mobilise what you might call the left outs. The people who didn't usually participate in politics.

Three million people voted in 2016 who could have voted in 2015 but didn't. And the vast majority of those 3 million voted Leave. In places where there was a growing apathy about normal politics, people turned out en masse because of the belief that in a referendum, where all votes count equally, you can actually have your say and be listened to.

Social values were obviously key to the referendum result and I'm going to come back and talk about them in a minute. But there was also a real element of economic geography to this. Places where median wages were lower were disproportionately likely to vote Leave. Or, to put it in a catchier way, places with a Pret a Manger voted Remain. Pret sets up in towns where people are young and affluent, where populations are diverse.

And this economic geography is absolutely fundamental to our political story. There's a pattern here. It's self-reinforcing. The places that have suffered as a result of austerity, as a result of the great financial crisis, are the places that suffered most because of Covid, and they're the places that tended to vote Leave.

Now, of course, the referendum wasn't the end of Brexit. What we had instead was three or four years of turmoil and political gridlock. To be fair to parliamentarians, the reason why Parliament couldn't agree on Brexit was because Parliament was precisely as divided as we were. There was no stable majority either among the British people or among MPs for any particular form of Brexit.

So, Parliament struggled to digest the results of the referendum. But the process over those few years had a revolutionary impact on our politics. The first was about what makes people choose to vote the way they do. Peter Pulzer, the Oxford political scientist, had famously argued in the 1960s that class is the basis of British politics. All else, as he put it, 'is embellishment and detail'.

That was once absolutely the case. You voted left versus right, and your vote was determined by your view of economics, of the size of the state, of the appropriate amount of redistribution and things like that. What the referendum did was introduce a new divide that had been festering in the background of our politics for a long time but was given real expression in the referendum.

This was the division between social liberals and social conservatives. As I said, this division was not new, but the referendum gave these identities real form and meaning by crystallising them into camps named 'Leave' and 'Remain'. And these identities became entrenched. It is the case still to this day that more people feel a Leave or Remain identity than feel an attachment to a political party.

And this had a real and immediate impact on our politics. People did not generally tend to switch between the Conservatives and Labour. But in 2017 more than one in 10 switched directly. Twelve per cent of the Tories who voted for David Cameron in 2015 voted for Jeremy Corbyn in 2017. We had to get used to saying things like 'Labour win Kensington', or 'the Tories win Stoke'.

During this period, the Conservatives basically became the party of Leave. Conservative support among Leave voters had been about 40% prior to the referendum, was about 70% by the time we got to the 2017 election, and reached an eye-watering 80% by the time of the election of 2019. Politics divided along Brexit lines.

So, the electoral geography of the country was redrawn and by 2019, with the Remain camp divided among a number of parties, the Tories managed to unite the Leave vote, which saw Boris Johnson to victory. More people in fact voted for Remain-backing parties than for Leave-backing parties. But Nigel Farage helped Johnson out by standing his candidate down in a number of seats.

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That Brexit impact is still present in our politics now. No one talked about Brexit last year during the election campaign in 2024. But despite that, voting and vote switching happened within Brexit blocs (Tory/Reform for Brexit, Labour/LibDem/Green for Remain) rather than between Brexit blocs. Voters didn't switch from a Remain-supporting party to a Leave-supporting party or vice versa.

This time it was Keir Starmer who profited, as Reform UK helped split the Leave vote. So, you had the inverse of what happened in 2019. The Leave camp splintered between Reform UK and the Tories.

If the first big change brought about by Brexit was the realignment of politics, the second was in the substance of politics. The Conservative manifesto in 2017 was about the most left-wing manifesto put forward by any governing party as the party attempted to secure its support among Leave voters. A few months after that election, Theresa May went on to implement the energy price cap suggested by Ed Miliband and which David Cameron had labelled 'Marxist'. The Conservatives started to talk, as Theresa May did, about burning injustices, about the 'just about managing'. The day after his election victory in 2019, Boris Johnson called senior civil servants in and said the whole government had to shift its focus to improving the lives of working-class voters in the North of England who backed Brexit. Brexit, in other words, was shifting the focus of political debate.

Our politicians were talking about the kinds of regional inequalities that no one had discussed for many years. There was genuine hope that some of that discontent that had manifested itself so obviously and so loudly in 2016 would finally be addressed. The problem, of course, is that lots was said, but virtually nothing was done.

By the time Theresa May left office in 2019, several of the burning injustices that she had talked about had become even worse than they had been at the time she talked about them. There were some legitimate excuses for this. Parliament basically didn't govern from 2016 to 2019, so preoccupied were MPs by Brexit. Then we had Covid.

Nonetheless, it is striking just how little progress was made on levelling up during Boris Johnson's term as prime minister. A lot of fine words; very little in the way of action.

Politicians failed to deliver. And, consequently, we saw a significant rise in distrust in politics amongst Leave voters, which was particularly striking as, in the immediate aftermath of the referendum and of the 2019 election, the faith of those voters in the ability of politics to deliver increased quite markedly. This was not to last. Whilst in 2019 47% said there was a great deal of difference between the parties, the figure by 2024 was just 12%.

We had, if you like, gone back to the future to 2015, to a situation in which people lack faith in politics, where they believe there is nothing to choose between the major parties.

This long-term failure to deliver, and particularly the post-referendum failure to deliver, increased dissatisfaction with mainstream politics and opened the door to populism.

This was a trend made easier by the willingness of supposedly mainstream politicians to use overtly populist language. As early as the 2016 Conservative Party conference, Theresa May had declared that those who claimed Article 50 could only be triggered following a vote in Parliament were trying to subvert democracy. The following month saw the infamous 'enemies of the people' headline in the *Daily Mail*. That same week, Sajid Javid suggested on *Question Time* that judges had tried to frustrate the will of the British people.

Over the next three years, the media variously referred to Members of Parliament as saboteurs, as wreckers, as mutineers, and as traitors. The tension arose in part because a parliament made up mainly of Remain supporters was having to implement the outcome of the referendum, to Leave. Parliament thus became an easy target for the ire of Brexiteers, who were able to say that MPs were trying to prevent the implementation of 'the will of the people'.

In 2018, things got even weirder. Theresa May, as you might recall, negotiated her agreement with the European Union. However, rather than going to the tea rooms in the House of Commons to try to sell it to her colleagues who were ultimately going to have to vote on it (spoiler alert: they rejected it), she set off on a nationwide tour to persuade the British people that this was a good deal.

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It was a slightly bizarre spectacle, only surpassed, I think, by what happened after she started to lose the votes in Parliament. She appeared on our televisions and, in a remarkably populist intervention, declared that voters were tired of the infighting, tired of the political games and of MPs talking about nothing but Brexit.

This was classic populist language. This was the elite versus the people. And, of course, this got far, far worse under Boris Johnson. You had the whole row over prorogation. You had that whole week or two when the Government was openly toying with the idea of ignoring legislation passed to prevent a no deal Brexit.

By portraying Parliament as a constraint, Johnson was making the case for the early general election that he craved and eventually got. But the language was remarkable. The Conservative Party manifesto of December 2019 declared that the UK was paralysed by a broken parliament that simply refused to deliver Brexit. It went on to criticise MPs for devoting themselves to thwarting the democratic decision of the British people, opening up a destabilising and potentially extremely damaging rift between politicians and the people.

Such populist language resonated. The Hansard audit of democratic engagement, a survey on the health of our democracy, found in 2019 that 54% of Britons agreed that Britain needs a strong leader willing to break the rules; 43% expressed a preference for political parties and leaders with radical ideas for change who haven't been in power before; 42% felt that many of the country's problems could be dealt with more effectively if the Government didn't have to worry so much about votes in Parliament. The increasingly populist language of politicians was reflected back in the increasingly populist views of the British public.

And this should come as no surprise to any of you. What we have seen is a steady decline in trust in politics. And if you think about it, over this period, this roughly 10-year period, the British public serially expressed their desire for profound change. Four million people did it by voting for UKIP in 2015. Far more voted Leave in 2016. We had a massive vote for Jeremy Corbyn in 2017. The vote for Boris Johnson in 2019 was, in part at least, a vote for a new way of doing things. And, of course, Labour's manifesto in 2024 was entitled simply 'Change'.

One driver of discontent was the lack of economic growth or any increase in median real wages. Brexit, in other words, was partly a response to an economy that was seen as not working. Yet Brexit also, of course, added to our economic problems. Even for those sceptical of the economic forecasts published pre-referendum, we now have enough data to know that they were broadly accurate.

In response to the economic effect of Brexit, Keir Stamer has undertaken his famed 'reset' of relations with the EU. I won't lie, I'm pretty cynical about the substance of what is being done.

So let me preface my remarks on the reset by saying that things have moved on a long way since, only just over three years ago, Liz Truss couldn't decide whether France was a friend or a foe. We've seen a massive shift in the tone of our relationship not only with the European Union but with the individual member states of the European Union as well.

Yet despite the fanfares that surrounded that summit back in May 2025, the only thing that the two sides actually agreed on, apart from a (let's face it, bog standard) security and defence pact, was fisheries. And whilst that's great if you're into fish or if you're a fisher, the fisheries industry contributes less than Harrods to our economy every year. If you're looking for aggregate growth, a deal on fisheries with the EU is not the place to get it.

We have, of course, agreed to negotiate with them over possible deals on agriculture, on electricity, and on emissions trading. All would remove some of the frictions to trade. However, they all have to be negotiated, and, in each case, there are all sorts of details over which the talks could flounder.

Added to which, the spirit of joint enterprise that seemed to pervade the summit of May 2025 seems to have dissipated somewhat, particularly on the EU side. The EU has problems of its own and does not regard the relationship with the UK as a priority. It is also not in the mood to do us any favours, as underlined all too clearly by the failure of negotiations over UK participation in the SAFE programme intended to foster greater cooperation on weapons development and procurement.

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Consequently, it is far from clear to me that these negotiations will be successful. It's certainly not clear that they'll conform to the timescale laid out by Nick Thomas-Symonds, who gave this lecture last year, and said that he wants the agricultural deal to be in place and working by 2027.

I fear that Nick Thomas-Symonds has never negotiated with the European Union before, because that strikes me as a very, very compressed timeline. And even if we get everything we want, we get the electricity, we get the emissions trading, we get the agriculture, the Government's own economic assessment reckons this will gain us under 1% of GDP. So, in the greater scheme of things, in the scheme of that ballpark 4% figure that the OBR talks about as a Brexit impact, it's relatively small beer.

And this is where the problems start. The costs of Brexit are tied up in the decision to leave the single market and the customs union. That's where the real economic gains are to be had. The British Government realises this, and is now talking in terms of what I'd call 'selective alignment'—aligning with EU rules in sectors like chemicals, where we see a clear benefit for us.

That'd be nice, wouldn't it? Maybe we could chuck in another couple of sectors too? Maybe cars?

The problem is that the EU doesn't want us to be able to do this. They have been quite clear. The UK has a choice. It rejoins the single market—with all that involves in terms of freedom of movement and payments to the EU budget—or it stays pretty much where it is.

Remember, the European Union has no interest in 'making Brexit work'. European political leaders, facing populist challenges of their own, aren't interested in seeing Brexit Britain flourish when they're facing political opponents saying, 'Why are we submitting ourselves to all these EU laws?'.

On the UK side, the Government has been equally clear that it will not rejoin the single market or negotiate a customs union. So even if this reset works, even if we negotiate, everything we're meant to reset—and, my word, there will be bumps on the road even to this destination—the relative economic impact will be quite small.

Now, you might say we have a sensible, centrist, level-headed lawyer in charge of our Government with a massive majority. So why can't they be bolder? It's a good question. I mentioned earlier that 2005 saw a government elected on the smallest ever vote share achieved by a government. That was until last year. Keir Starmer pulled off something quite remarkable by getting a majority as big as he did on the back of a vote share of under 34% of the British people.

My friend and colleague Rob Ford argued that Labour have created the tallest, wobbliest electoral Jenga tower we have ever seen. The party lost votes in the constituencies they already held. Wes Streeting almost lost too many votes. He's got a majority of 500 now. Labour lost votes where it was already winning but managed to gain them where it needed them to beat the Conservatives. Hence this idea of a Jenga tower. It's very, very tall, but the foundations are incredibly weak.

All the weaker because, when asked why they voted Labour, 49% of Labour voters say they voted Labour to get the Tories out. In other words, the election of 2024 was not one where enthusiasm about Labour swept them to victory. It was about people being desperate to get rid of the Conservatives.

Clearly, this Government hasn't been bad enough to justify its appalling poll ratings. Rather, it's a government that has come to power at the end of the story that I've just told you, a story of progressively growing disillusionment with both politics and the economic state of the country that has been bubbling away for almost a quarter of a century now.

And that is the dilemma that Keir Starmer faces. He's confronting a whole raft of long-term problems that we just haven't addressed properly for a long time. But the public are impatient and want to see answers now.

One of the corollaries of a haemorrhaging of trust in politics is that people do not give politicians the benefit of the doubt if they say that fixing things will take time. Some of the structural problems we face cannot be fixed overnight. But that does not mean the public will be understanding.

Let me say a couple of things about this. The next election is just under four years away, and four years is an eternity. In four years' time, President Trump might no longer be president of the United States. Four years ago, Boris Johnson was unbeatable. Tim Shipman wrote on Twitter that

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Boris Johnson squats like a toad across British politics. Four years ago, Keir Starmer was considering his position as leader of the Labour Party because he'd been hammered in Hartlepool. In other words, an awful lot can change.

Consequently, it is far too early to say Labour will lose the next election. But the polls look bad; Labour are very, very unpopular. And part of this is about the fact, just to go back to Brexit, that Brexit represented a really unique opportunity to try to challenge and respond to discontent. For a brief moment, politicians seemed to get it.

When people asked me, 'What do you think is the most positive thing about Brexit?', I used to say, 'People are talking about stuff they should have been talking about 10 years ago. People have noticed that the North isn't doing very well. People have realised that just because national GDP is growing, it doesn't mean the people in Sunderland are getting the benefit'.

In the aftermath of the referendum, I used to laugh about the fact that the BBC was sending correspondents up to places like Hartlepool. It was a bit like a David Attenborough show: 'This is the lesser spotted Leave voter, a creature we've never really thought about before, that turns out to be more numerous than we'd assumed'.

But finally we were thinking about them. And so Brexit opened that door of possibility. But it was an opportunity that was squandered. And I think the British people have made their point repeatedly; as I said, they have voted repeatedly, openly, and obviously for a change. And when that change hasn't materialised, that has spilled over into dissatisfaction and a lack of trust in mainstream politics.

So where are we now? We're in a position where we have a government with a massive majority that is governing from a defensive crouch. Partly because of the fragility of that majority; partly because they clearly have no vision for the country and its future.

But it is a government that needs to find something that looks like solutions to long-term structural problems, and to do it in a ridiculously short space of time. This isn't fair, but it reflects how long we have waited for those solutions to be put in place.

Brexit was about political failure pre-2016. It was about a failure to understand how dissatisfied people were before. The absence of a response to the referendum that sent such a clear signal was, I think, another massive political failure. It's a failure we may all come to regret.

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