

## **The Lunar Society 2017 Annual Dinner**

On Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> November, The Lunar Society hosted members and guests at the Edgbaston Stadium with The Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg as guest speaker.

Nick spoke about artificial intelligence and machine learning and the impact on politics and society, and also touched on the subject of his new book – ‘How To Stop Brexit and Make Britain Great Again’.

The Society’s Chair, The Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith, introduced the evening’s events and touched on how, if the original Lunar men were around today, their focus would have been on some of the technological preoccupations of today, as well as the economic, ethical, social and political opportunities and challenges of the digital age and the technology that accompanies it.

Jacqui suggested also that the Lunar men would not have underestimated the challenges of Brexit for their research, trade and our place in the world. They would recognise that we face a profound challenge in our international role that will impact us for many generations to come.

Jacqui introduced her old parliamentary colleague, Nick Clegg, to speak. Nick was previously the leader of the Liberal Democrats and deputy prime minister in the first post-war coalition government from 2010-2015.

Nick began by acknowledging that while the link between AI and Brexit might otherwise be tenuous, the two issues are big generational shifts in how we organise our society.

He likened them in some ways to mirror images of each other. Artificial intelligence, or the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ – is all about how we shape our future. Brexit, he said, is something decided on based on a view of or hankering for our past. People are prone to overstate the disruption AI will bring, and understate that which Brexit will bring. Both of them could be spectacularly mishandled by governments.

AI – or more accurately, ‘machine learning’ – involves algorithms that can develop on their own. Nick cited the work carried out by Google DeepMind in teaching computers to play games. The idea that machines can teach themselves sets this apart as a technological revolution – but it impinges not on what we can do with our hands, but on how we think. An example of an all pervasive application of artificial intelligence is one that is used to compose music. He prompted the audience - what if the creative process is not unique to human beings?

The effect of this particular ‘revolution’ on work is different because all revolutions of the past have displaced blue-collar manual labour. This is the first technological revolution that will have impact on white collar work – for example, clinical diagnosis by an algorithm.

When it comes to artificial intelligence, Nick was emphatic that he doesn’t share the ‘apocalyptic vision’ of the supposed ‘march of robots’. Instead, he pointed out that there is no evidence of this yet – so far, this technological revolution is creating other forms of work. As people and as societies, we are infinitely adaptable. In some of the most automated economies, employment is at its highest level ever.

Nick set out how he hopes to become a public advocate of what international and domestic governments need to do in order to ensure we get the best out of artificial intelligence and avoid the worst. This includes ethical and regulatory considerations, along with the ever-crucial management of data.

Alongside his overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the AI revolution, Nick contrasted his pessimistic views about Brexit. His view is that there is no example of any other society as sophisticated as ours in the democratic world that has taken such a radical decision about our future against the stated wishes of those who will inhabit that future – namely, the young. Nick voiced his opinion that it was wrong and ‘democratically unsustainable’ that the 70% of 16-24 year-olds who voted to remain in the European Union have largely been ignored.

Nick called it an ‘extreme’ and ‘uncompromising’ interpretation of a finely decided decision. His view was that Theresa May could instead have sought a spirit of compromise in her duty to follow the instruction of the people, having acknowledged that she is prime minister of a deeply divided country, largely the young and the old. She could have stated that we as a nation would seek to leave, but also to retain the core advantages of economic integration of European Union.

Nick also took issue with the ‘utopianism’ that was presented to the people to make the case for Brexit (for example the supposed £350m for the NHS), calling it a ‘complete fiction’, arguing that while there might be a place for utopianism in religion and culture, it is not a sensible basis on which to take decisions about the future of our country.

So, what to do?

When dealing with complex and controversial issues such as artificial intelligence and Brexit, Nick emphasised the importance of not rushing, or making decisions in a panic. There is a great need, he said, to take the time to work out what is right for our country. When it comes to AI, we just need the space and time to do this. His hope is that the almost hysterical pessimism about the tech sector and Silicon Valley doesn’t topple into rejection of new technology.

On Brexit – currently underway is some rushed and panicked decision-making to meet deadline at end of March 2019. Instead, it would be wise to play for time in the coming months – and we should also try and seek consensus. The ideal would be the two sides reaching out to each other to achieve a new accommodation on the part of the EU that gives something to both sides.

Nick stated his personal belief that there remains a deal to be done where the UK remains part of the single market, but would enjoy greater liberty about how to interpret rules on freedom of movement. The Lunar men were part of the British tradition of Enlightenment, and they believe in science and progress with a respect for evidence.

With these three things - time, consensus and respect for evidence, which should have a central role in public decision-making, both the technological revolution of AI and the dilemma of Brexit could be navigated more successfully in future than otherwise might be the case.

Following his speech, Nick took questions from and engaged with the audience in a discussion of various aspects of the rise of artificial intelligence and his proposal of how Theresa May should best have dealt with the referendum result.

The evening was an overall success with guests having had the chance to engage in discussion about two highly pivotal subjects that will undoubtedly shape the coming decades in this country.