

Good Evening Ladies and gentlemen.

It is my very great pleasure to join you this evening - many miles from home and ever further from my comfort zone.

Because, you see, the Lunar society is for men of science. Experts of engineering – for the ruminative, the contemplative, those deep diving brains that work the grit of an idea so hard - and for so long - that they shape and smooth a pearl to benefit the whole world.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am not a man of science. I'm not a man at all. I'm not an expert. My daily bread is to be combative, not contemplative. Pugnacious not philosophical.

As your fine chair, Jacqui Smith, will attest, politicians are the ultimate generalists.

But Ladies and Gentlemen, I have something else to confess, not only have I drifted TO a generalism. I have drifted FROM one too. From journalism to politics.

But, having confessed my professional weaknesses to you all, I'm going to make my generalisms a strength tonight.

Because, at base, I do one thing and one thing only. And that is communicate.

Whether that was in my former life as a BBC journalist, attempting to inform and educate – to bring the whole world into the living rooms of the country.

Or, in parliament – to posit ideas, to present evidence and build support for a better way forward.

Or, from Thursday, delivering my firstborn book into the world – a longform discussion of how far women have come in the hundred years since many first got the vote and the long, winding road we have to go until the promised land of parity is sighted.

So if my specialism, if I beg to call it that, is how we communicate, tonight I'd like to bring the two together.

How the way we communicate is changing politics.

And my central point this evening is that it is not changing politics for the better.

Indeed, I believe that our public discourse is being corrupted and degraded – to the extent that important voices are now choosing to absent themselves from the public square.

I warn you now – this might be one of those “diagnosing the condition without dosing the patient with a cure” type of evenings.

But I will offer some thoughts on how we might temper the disease that currently afflicts our public life

So first - let's look at the way we receive information, how we choose to interact, what we demand of those who seek to

govern and why the comfort of the echo chamber is causing the discomfort of a politics more polarised than at any time in my lifetime.

To do that – let me take you on a scamper through history.

If we look at that in relation to politics, we see the first great change in the 1920s and 30s.

Politicians who spread the word through mass rallies and pamphleteering could now find themselves – through radio - speaking directly and intimately to electors in their own homes. The powers of oration that marked men apart at Speakers' corner or on a streetside dais sounded – frankly – shrill and hectoring. No one understood this better than Franklin D Roosevelt in the united states whose so-called 'fireside chats' helped propel him to an unprecedented four election wins.

If we stick with the States, the next big shift came in 1960. Nixon versus Kennedy. A titanic election with huge interest in their head to head. In their famous presidential debate Nixon left the stage convinced of victory due to the substance of his answers. And, subsequent analysis confirms that the listening

audience on radio handed him the win. However, the much bigger number who tuned into the television broadcast saw a twitchy, sweaty-lipped contender up against a handsome, sunny, relaxed and attractive adversary. As such, the majority of the TV watchers plumped for Kennedy.

Television has dominated our public life ever since – and it is still the dominant media.

But we are now going through the third big shift in communications – following the advent of the web and the birth of social media.

This has been, in some ways, beneficial to us all.

It has democratized information in a way that our grandparents could never have imagined.

And it has ended the hierarchy of information too: we are no longer passive recipients to the message of a newspaper, or a political party, or a government.

We are able to have our say too – and we can all help shape the news as we do. A blogger can have more cut through to more people than a newspaper.

But, in my view, these advantages are now clearly challenged by the downsides of this new culture.

I don't mean to be alarmist but I genuinely see this as a threat to the hard won rights to freedom of expression and democracy that we have spent centuries cultivating in this country.

Firstly, just as the web has democratised information, so it has mobilised the politics of rage and hate.

Far from being a place where women, minorities, the disabled or dispossessed can feel free to express themselves, social media too often becomes a place where the kind of abuse of those with such protected characteristics we as a society thought we were battling against and winning, actually has space and time to thrive.

Somewhere where responses to individual opinions are too often answered with the most brutal attacks, disparagement, threats of violence, and more.

The platform, Twitter, gives these instructions: 'Find a bunch of things you love. And then find people to follow. That's all you need to do to see and talk about what is happening.'

But that is not the experience of thousands of people who hoped that would be true. People who would appreciate and, indeed, need a platform like that for the discussion of ideas. Too often it seems that some users 'find a bunch of things they hate. And then find people to hate. Then tell them how much they hate them. And why.'

Secondly, as we yell at each other online, so - like troops facing off against one another in a battle neither can win - we have dug online trenches, all the better to ensure we only speak and listen to people of a similar mindset.

In the starkest example of this - during the American election campaign of 2016 - we saw how voters living next to one

another retreated into their own silos, all replete with their own facts, their own information, and their own pre-packed opinions.

Ironically, the web – this magical place which gives us access to every bit of information on the planet – has narrowed horizons, not broadened them.

Within the online trenches we have dug, we are creating breeding grounds for misinformation, for conspiracy theories, and for plain lies to fester and spread. A place to recruit followers to the tribe. While Donald Trump hires, fires, abuses and misdirects directly from the oval office over his smartphone, even here in the UK it is now more likely that a MP will have a tweet quoted in the media, than any statement they give to parliament.

And thirdly, there is the negative reaction to this.

Speak to producers of current affairs programmes for TV and radio these days and they'll tell you something disturbing. Pundits and politicians who are asked to speak on a particular

subject are now self-censoring their views and opinions in order to be spared the inevitable online backlash.

Their view is simply this: it's not worth it. Why subject yourself to it? Easier to set out a bland prospectus, say nothing much controversial, and go home.

For myself, Twitter is no longer much of an interactive experience, as I used to use it. Abusive daily missives in the hundreds or sometimes thousands have seen to that.

When I started online 8 years ago, it was fun. Nowadays, rather than having a conversation online, or a chat with people I've met there, my account is set to transmit the usual stuff politicians do: pictures of people campaigning on the doorstep, pre-prepared graphics from the party put out to highlight whichever policy we're promoting that day and snaps of me meeting with charities, businesses or groups of schoolchildren at the parliament.

Journalists too admit this. I spoke to BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg for my book recently. She told me that where previously she used to ask people on Twitter what they were

interested in, and what questions they'd like her to ask, now she no longer does because of the bile she faces. The threats of violence became so extreme – and so prevalent – that the BBC felt required to hire her security protection for a recent party conference.

Or The Times Literary Supplement Editor, Stig Abell, who received Tweets from a troll who graphically threatened to rape his wife in vengeance for his opinions. The aggressor started commenting that he was outside the couple's house and talked about which house lights were on. Twitter's initial response was to do nothing – claiming the content didn't breach their rules.

It seems absurd that the protections that people enjoy offline, do not carry in practice into the online space. Threatening to assault, or rape, or attack someone face to face, in the street is a crime. Yet emboldened by the intoxication of anonymity, many think they have full freedom to do so in the electronic space. And that anonymity can make the threat even more chilling for the victim. 'Doxing' – publishing someone's home addresses and personal details online against their will – adds a frightening physical threat to ethereal abuse.

In my own case, I've had pictures that I didn't know were being taken of me by a cameraphone posted online in real time, alerting people to which shop or pub I was in, and details of the train I was on published to a website dedicated to documenting politicians' whereabouts.

In other words, a technology designed to communicate directly with people in a way we could never have imagined, is now leading to self-censorship and LESS freedom of expression not more.

So let me use the rest of my allotted time this evening to set out some view on how we change this. Acknowledging that these are small steps on a giant climb.

And let me limit myself to just two ideas which I hope we can discuss afterwards as well.

First off – we aren't helpless.

AS I said before, the new media age means we're no longer passive recipients.

And despite everything I've said, what is still exciting about the new media age is that it isn't any longer all about a politician like me, or a journalist like Laura Kuenssberg.

All of us have a media profile now. We are all a few clicks away from having our thoughts read by thousands and thousands of people, changing the public discourse as we do so.

So, we can all act.

And the thing we all need to do, more than ever, is to try to bring back some basic standards to our public discourse.

To ensure civility, decency, politeness, humility have their proper place in the way we communicate.

This isn't just about good manners and doing the online equivalent of offering your seat for a grannie on the bus.

By doing this, we can all help restore faith in our way of life.

In a brilliant article this week on how Twitter has corroded our politics, writer Rafael Behr says this:

“When a political culture is bleached of civility, when the public realm becomes pathologically ill-mannered, it loses its capacity to mediate between competing interest groups. It becomes more brittle and less amenable to the ethos of compromise without which a pluralist democracy cannot thrive.”

He adds: “A subtle thread connects manners and democracy. To behave well in the town square, not flinging abuse at strangers, for example, is a habit born of mutually recognised rights and unwritten norms. Those social codes are as much

part of the democratic eco-system as free elections and independent courts.”

He's absolutely right.

I am a politician of the centre – in the belief that society benefits from the mutual recognition of competing interests.

But if all we do is hurl insults at each other from our trenches, the centre risks becoming a no-mans land.

A scorched earth place we daren't go for fear of looking weak, or opening ourselves to attack. And all hope of progress is lost.

I see no contradiction in a post-crash world breeding the accelerated rise of populists of the left and right – of Trumpism and momentum, AFD in Germany, 5 Star in Italy and Marine Le Pen making the run-off in France – with platforms that allowed those movements to swell. Allowed the howls of the angry and dispossessed to become a chorus, an old-fashioned mob. A tribe dismissing all those not already a member – and, once the

speaker is dismissed of not being from the tribe, you don't even have to deal with their argument.

To reclaim that centre-ground, we need to end the viciousness.

That way we begin to start building that ethos of compromise so necessary for our progress.

And my second, and final point is this.

If we are going to deal with the politics of anger in the online world, we need to think harder about answers too – and in the actual world.

This week we're marking the tenth anniversary of the defining story of our time – the financial crash of 2008.

So much of what we're going through now stems from that crisis: from our loss of faith in markets, to our cynicism with the established order, to the decision to leave the European Union and even the election of Donald Trump as US president.

And politicians can be as civil and polite as they like but we will never communicate properly unless we start to face up to the consequences of that crash, the deep discontent it has left in its wake among working men and women, and the urgent need to build a fairer system.

Now it is, of course, easier said than done. But what does this work look like?

It means, for example, rebuilding local democracy – as is happening here in Birmingham.

So many of the policy ingredients of economic growth – skills policy, education, enterprise support, planning, infrastructure – are best placed in the hands of local government. Let's see more of that, please.

It means, for example, focussing on the things that matter to people – like the housing crisis we face across Britain. Our planning laws are antiquated and sclerotic. Let's shake them up so young people can dream again of buying a home.

And it requires us to lift our heads to the horizon, in this unbelievably fast-changing world, to make sure Britain is ready for the coming technological revolution.

So that when AI, robotics and automation combine to change the way we work and live, we stand ready to benefit and maintain jobs for our people.

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, we will not cure our political culture by good words alone.

As others have said, the politics of anger will be solved by the politics of action.

When a child born now will grow up genuinely believing he or she can have a better quality of life, a greater security of employ, an earlier start on the housing ladder than his or her parents – because this generation, is the first in 70 years that doesn't believe it – and nor should they.

Last week I spoke at a dinner for the John Smith centre for Public Service. A non-party political venture set up in the name of the late Labour leader, by his family, to foster and encourage the ideals he exemplified. It's motto is the last public statement John gave before he died – "The opportunity to serve our country—that is all we ask".

And at that dinner, I was asked – how could we restore our public discourse when the ideas and challenges were so small. This wasn't starting a national health service or rebuilding after a world war. Politics today is the incessant drumbeat of dull managerialism.

I politely disagreed. The challenges we face – that next industrial – technological – revolution, the establishment of our country's post-brexit future in the world, the changing demography which explodes the current model of financing elderly care and support and an internationalism that pits our young people against those the world over, are challenges as great as those we have ever faced. It is only through working with others, breaking from our tribe, advancing in a bipartisan way to shape a national consensus and narrative that we can meet these challenges head on.

For all the anger and opprobrium aimed at the body politic; I still believe in public service - and that the centre is worth fighting for.

Let me conclude on a note of optimism.

Generalists or experts, we all have the power to communicate for the better.

In so doing, we can all help bring our fractured and fractious country back together.

ENDS