

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**SPEECH BY THE RT HON SIR JOHN MAJOR KG CH  
INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT  
THURSDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2022  
“IN DEMOCRACY WE TRUST?”**

We are living through a time of uncertainty and political turbulence – at home and overseas.

At home, we take democracy for granted: we should not. It is far more complex than simply having the right to vote.

In many countries, there is a widespread discontent of the governed, and democracy is in retreat. Nor is it in a state of grace in the UK.

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of democratic countries grew dramatically: the arbiter of civil liberties, Freedom House, classified 110 nations as democratic.

Democrats were so confident that their way of government was the wave of the future that they stopped arguing for it.

Their confidence was premature.

In each of the last 15 years, democracy has shrunk a little, as political and civil liberties have been diminished.

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In many countries, democracy has never taken root. Where it has, it risks being weakened by populism – often with added xenophobia or muzzled by elected autocracy.

It is challenged by protest groups or new – and more extreme – political movements. Even our great allies in the United States are facing populist attacks on their democracy.

We should beware: when America sneezes, we often catch their cold.

Good government has a duty to deliver unwelcome messages to electors.

This is not easy in a world in which politicians are under continuous scrutiny from an uncontrolled internet, a 24-hour media, and an increasing number of impatient special interest groups.

Under this spotlight, unwise promises are made to placate critics or win votes and – when these are not met – the public loses a little more faith.

The hard truth is that, while government can do much, it cannot do everything. All problems cannot be swiftly and painlessly resolved on demand: it is an impossible task. If politicians *admit* that, it earns trust and respect.

Discontent grows when inequality widens, or incomes stagnate, or problems seem unsolvable. The benefit of the doubt – that most *precious* of political commodities – is lost when governments are seen to be “failing”.

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In the last 20 years a financial crash, unpopular wars, faltering globalisation, and an unfair distribution of the benefits of growth have all contributed to the present sour resentment of government.

Our democracy has always been among the strongest and most settled in the world. It rests on the conviction that the UK government acts for the wellbeing of all *four* of our nations.

With nationalism growing – in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – not everyone shares that conviction.

It relies also upon respect for the laws made in parliament; upon an independent judiciary; upon acceptance of the conventions of public life; and on self-restraint by the powerful.

If any of that delicate balance goes astray – as it has – as it *is* – our democracy is undermined. Our government is culpable, in small but important ways, of failing to honour these conventions.

Where governments fall short, candour is the best means of binding up support.

But that candour must be freely offered – not dragged out under the searchlight of inquiries. If it is not whole-hearted and convincing, the loss of public trust can be swift and unforgiving.

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We have seen that playing out in recent weeks. Trust in politics is at a low ebb, eroded by foolish behaviour, leaving a sense of unease about how our politics is being conducted.

Too often, ministers have been evasive, and the truth has been optional.

When ministers respond to legitimate questions with pre-prepared soundbites, or half-truths, or misdirection, or wild exaggeration, then respect for government and politics dies a little more.

Misleading replies to questions invite disillusion. Outright lies breed contempt.

In our democracy, we are able to speak truth to power. But, if democracy is to be respected, power must also speak truth to the people.

And yet, in recent years, they have not been doing so.

There has been cynicism about politics from the dawn of time. We are told that politicians are “all the same”, and this untruth conditions electors to condone lies as though they were the accepted currency of public life.

But politicians are not “all the same”. And lies are just not acceptable.

To imply otherwise is to cheapen public life and slander the vast majority of elected politicians who do *not* knowingly mislead.

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But some *do* – and their behaviour is corrosive. This tarnishes both politics and the reputation of parliament. It is a dangerous trend.

If lies become commonplace, truth ceases to exist. What and who, then, can we believe? The risk is .... nothing and no-one. And where are we then?

Parliament is an echo chamber. Lies can become accepted as fact, which – as the Speaker has pointed out – has consequences for policy and for reputation.

That is why deliberate lies to parliament have been fatal to political careers – and must always be so.

If trust in the word of our leaders in parliament is lost – then trust in government will be lost too.

At No.10, the prime minister and officials broke lockdown laws.

Brazen excuses were dreamed up. *Day after day* the public was asked to believe the unbelievable. Ministers were sent out to defend the indefensible – making themselves look gullible or foolish.

Collectively, this has made the government look distinctly shifty, which has consequences that go far beyond political unpopularity.

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No government can function properly if its every word is treated with suspicion. A report by the Constitution Unit of UCL tells us that the public trust the courts more than the civil service; the civil service more than parliament; and parliament more than the prime minister.

The lack of trust in the elected portion of our democracy cannot be brushed aside. parliament has a duty to correct this.

If it does not, and trust is lost at home, our politics is broken.

If trust in our word is lost *overseas*, we may no longer be able to work effectively with friends and partners for mutual benefit – or even security.

Unfortunately, that trust *is* being lost, and our reputation overseas has fallen because of our conduct. We are *weakening* our influence in the world.

We should be wary. Even a casual glance at overseas comment shows our reputation is being shredded. A nation that loses friends and allies becomes a weaker nation.

And when ministers attack or blame foreign governments, to gain populist support at home, we are not taken seriously. Megaphone diplomacy merely increases hostility overseas. International trust may not be easy to regain.

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Our way of life is built around the maintenance of law. The public expects our government to work within the law and the accepted rules of public life.

It was unprecedented when this government broke the law by proroguing parliament, to avoid debates on Brexit that might not have gone as they wished.

I had promised, in a BBC interview, that if the government attempted to muzzle parliament I would challenge their action in court.

So I did – though not as swiftly as the civil rights campaigner, Gina Miller. Lawyers presented our cases separately but they were, in essence, identical.

*Both* our challenges were upheld unanimously by the Supreme Court, who ruled that the government's actions were un-lawful.

“It was,” the court said, “impossible to conclude there was any reason, let alone a good reason” for proroguing parliament for five weeks in the run up to Brexit.

The prime minister said he “disagreed” with the court, and the then leader of the House accused the Supreme Court judges of “a constitutional coup”. The government accepted the verdict, but in bad faith. It did not apologise – nor mend its ways.

It went on to introduce legislation, giving the government the power to break international law, albeit – as one minister conceded – “in a limited but specific way”. Fortunately, the issue fell away, but it was a proposal that should *never* have been put forward.

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It cut overseas aid – which parliament had set at 0.7% GDP – *without* the prior approval of parliament (although this was obtained retrospectively).

And this is the government that fought a referendum to “protect the sovereignty of parliament” and the sanctity of domestic law.

All of this is against the backdrop of the prime minister being investigated for several apparent breaches of the ministerial code.

He chose to ignore critical reports on his ministers; rejected advice from his independent adviser on ministerial standards – who resigned; and attempted – but failed – to overturn a unanimous Standards Select Committee report that condemned the behaviour of a parliamentary colleague and friend.

It may be possible to find excuses for each of these lapses – and others – but all of them, taken together, tell a different tale.

The prime minister and our present government not only challenge the law, but also seem to believe that they – and they *alone* – need not obey the rules, traditions, conventions – call them what you will – of public life.

The charge that there is one law for the government, and one for everyone else is politically deadly – and it *has* struck home.

Our democracy requires that the truth and the law should be respected and obeyed – above all, by the government. But, sometimes, it seems that – even if it is obeyed – it is not always respected.

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When a leading tabloid labelled judges “enemies of the people” the justice secretary did not leap to their defence. Other cabinet ministers publicly disparaged “leftie lawyers”, “activist lawyers”, and attacked judges for “exceeding their authority”.

Public denunciation of judges and lawyers gives credence to the belief that the government wishes to usher in a compliant judiciary.

It should back off.

The late Lord Bingham, one of our greatest judges, once remarked that there “are countries where the judges always agree with the government – but they are not countries in which any of us would like to live”. That was true then – and is true today.

There have also been attempted assaults on civil rights – not all of them successful. The government briefed, but rowed back from, a serious attack on judicial review: but the intent was there and may return.

It proposed legislation to allow the police to “stop and search” anyone at a protest meeting “without any cause for suspicion”.

It attempted to legislate to allow the police to impose conditions on protest marches likely to be “noisy”. These are not the only examples.

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Apart from being unworkable, such proposals would have alienated the public from the police. I recall anti-poll tax marches, anti-war marches and anti-Brexit marches which attracted huge numbers – and were *certainly* noisy. Would these have been banned?

The intent of these protestors was not to prevent the public from going about their normal lives. These protestors *were* the public, expressing deeply-felt opposition to Government policy.

But – although they may be uncomfortable for *any* government – protest marches are a safety valve for free speech. Democracy should treat them with care.

The government was lucky that the House of Lords rejected these proposals, but there is no certainty they will not return in another bill.

Such a denial of civil rights is wrong in principle, *and* in practice.

If the power of the state grows, and the protections of the law diminish, then the liberties of the individual fall.

The mother of parliaments should not permit this.

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We British are a kindly people. When appeals are made for those in distress – at home or abroad – the good heart of our nation responds with compassion and generosity.

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But, increasingly, across the Western world, populist pressure leads governments to be less generous to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

At present, an estimated 70 million people are displaced – three times as many as at the end of the second world war. In the next 30 years, climate change may force a further 143 million people to leave their homes.

To this, we must add unknown numbers of families fleeing from intolerable hardship and repression.

The problem is huge and growing. It needs a collaborative and international solution to help refugees, and protect the target communities that now bear the burden. Without such an approach, the next generation will inherit an insoluble problem.

In America, they build walls to keep migrants *out*. In Europe, they build camps to keep them *in*.

Here, in the UK, the government wishes to remove British citizenship from dual nationals, *without* any notice or right of appeal.

It proposes serious action against criminal gangs that traffic migrants – and rightly so. But it also proposes to criminalise the migrants themselves.

We should search our souls before doing this.

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Can it *really* be a crime to be frightened; homeless; desperate; destitute; fleeing from persecution, or war, or famine, or hardship; and to cross half the world on foot and dangerous waters in an unsafe boat, in the hope of finding a better life?

Of course, if the numbers are too large, this creates an appalling problem for local communities. But surely, to seek sanctuary from an unbearable life cannot – morally – be treated as a *crime*?

Yet, the government's Border Bill proposes to punish asylum seekers who take an unsanctioned route, with a jail sentence of up to four years.

There must be a better way to protect areas such as Kent, than filling our prisons with miserable unfortunates, whose only real crime is to seek a better life.

Prison – for these refugees – is punishment without compassion.

I *do* sympathise with the awful problem facing the government. But these proposals are not natural justice, and are decidedly un-British.

I hope the government will reconsider.

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The UK has long been admired for having the highest standards in public life. We are not perfect. There is no golden age. But, for generations, we have been seen to set an example for others to follow.

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Many years ago, in the wake of a scandal that became known as “Cash for Questions”, I set up the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Nolan set out guidelines to guard against poor behaviour.

Recently, in a comprehensive report, the committee – now under the chairmanship of Lord Evans of Weardale – reported that we need more rigorous enforcement of ethical standards.

It would be reassuring if the appointment of the guardians of ethics was fully independent and – where appropriate – new powers to initiate, investigate and report were put on a statutory basis.

In a foreword to this report, I endorsed the committee’s commendations in full, and I hope the prime minister will accept them without delay.

If the prime minister were to agree to this, it would help to regain the UK’s reputation as the standard for democracy; for fairness; for honesty; and for pragmatic common sense in protecting our national interests.

That reputation, built up by our predecessors, is invaluable to our national interests: it should be protected, not demolished.

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The style of the government creates its own problems. It looks for enemies where there are none. Moreover, it then chooses the *wrong* enemies.

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Most recently, it has been waging campaigns against the civil service and the BBC. In neither case is this wise – or justified – or even in the government’s own interests.

The civil service is the support structure to government: treating it as a hostile “blob” which seeks to undermine the government is both foolish and wrong.

As for the BBC, it is a crucial part of our overseas “soft power”, and a policy of undermining it and starving it of funds is self-defeating for UK interests.

Ministers should remember that *both* these institutions are more trusted than the government itself. They should focus their attention on reforms to improve public life.

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Finally .....

There is rarely a good time for a bad idea, but sometimes – when faced with the alternatives – a bad idea can appeal. So it is with the funding of politics.

The present funding of our democratic system leaves it prey to special interests. The Conservative Party is too dependent upon business and a small number of very wealthy donors.

The Labour Party is in hock to trades unions, and a different cadre of donors. Minor parties are also obligated to funders.

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This carries risks that besmirch politics. Many believe – sometimes, but not always, wrongly – that honours are offered as a reward for funding our democratic system: that donors are given access to ministers, and are able to influence policy.

It is a perception that corrupts our system. The honours system is cheapened. And the political system is made to look corrupt. This damages democracy.

It is time to re-focus on how our politics is funded. The system needs cleansing. It must never be the plaything of the rich, nor of pressure groups, yet no-one wants our politics fully funded by the state. Certainly, I don't.

Legislation should limit funding by individuals, by companies, by trades unions, to sums that no-one can reasonably claim would entitle the donor to favours, rewards, or undesirable access.

Donors must not be seen to sway policy through an open cheque book.

If a restriction on donations means an increased level of public funding of political parties, of elections, of referendums, then so be it.

I don't like this outcome, but it is the lesser of the evils and – despite my distaste – it is a price worth paying if it removes any suggestion of corrupt advantage, and restores the reputation of representative democracy.

“One man, one vote” is a sound principle: and this essential fairness should not risk being undermined by any one man and his money.

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Our democracy is a fragile structure: it is not an impenetrable fortress. It can fall if no-one challenges what is wrong, or does not fight for what is right.

The protection of democracy depends upon parliament and the government upholding the values we have as individuals, and the trust we inspire as a nation.

But these values *cannot* be partial; *cannot* be occasional; *cannot* be taken out and paraded for political convenience. They are eternal.

Democracy is a life-long companion, not a passing fancy.

Trust, integrity and values are the structure upon which our democracy is founded.

If they are rooted in our politics and our way of life, they provide a pathway to take any child from the backstreets of their youth, to the pinnacle of their ambition.

We must protect this way of life. It is more precious than any government, any political party, or any individual.

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For many years, travelling the world, I have been received as the lucky representative of the most stable democracy of them all.

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The UK was seen as the democracy, tested by time, whose virtues had built the mother of parliaments and a free, independent – and fair – legal system that was widely copied. All held together by a language that united the world.

We were seen as the free-est of nations, safe in our island, with allies and partners in every corner of our world. It was a position of influence, built up over centuries – envied, praised and copied.

All of this gave the UK a unique position in the world. It was not simply the influence of military or political power – but of *example*, which is as important as trust.

And trust *matters*.

It matters for self-respect. It matters for gentle persuasion. It matters for hard, uncomfortable decision-making.

It matters to our parliament. It matters to our country. It matters to our United Kingdom. It matters in how we are perceived by others near and far.

And it matters for the long-term protection and wellbeing of democracy.

***END***