INAUGURAL LECTURE

JOHN SMITH CENTRE FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

DELIVERED BY THE RT HON SIR JOHN MAJOR KG CH

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When Elizabeth Smith invited me to deliver this lecture I was delighted to accept.

It seems to me to be in the best traditions of Scottish enlightenment that a Centre – whose mission is to restore faith in public service – should be housed in one of Europe's most ancient and venerable Universities.

So, it is – truly – a privilege to be here.

I'm here, too, because of John Smith. John was a rare talent: the sort of tenacious politician that our country could ill afford to lose. If the fates had allowed, he would have been a Prime Minister of distinction.

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Some might think it odd that I'm speaking at an event that implicitly honours the legacy of a political opponent.

But I am *proud* to be doing so. Democracy – and concern for our national wellbeing – is not the preserve of any one Party or philosophy. It is our common heritage, fought for by our predecessors.

Today, it is the safety valve through which we debate differing views: but debate doesn't mean we must disagree on everything. Because we *don't* – and we *shouldn't.*

Politics isn't warfare: it's about deciding what is in the best interests of the four nations of our United Kingdom.

And the idea that politicians should talk only to their *own* tribe, speaking only for – or to – those who *agree* with them, explains much that is wrong about modern politics. It's a bunker attitude that has to change. The public don't like it – and the public are right.

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John and I were *political* opponents, but never *personal* ones. I admired his ability and conviction – even when I disagreed with him.

At PMQs, adrenaline propelled both of us to remarks that, perhaps, were best not made but – when the ritual was over – we withdrew occasionally to my room in the Commons to enjoy a drink – or two.

Our conversations ranged far beyond politics – although we did muse upon whether we could swap troublesome members: a "Skinner for a Redwood" was one proposition.

It was a joke, of course – born of the frustrations of Party Management.

One truth about mainstream politicians is that they have more in common with each other than not. Yet they hide agreement from public view, as if consensus were a betrayal of Party philosophy – when, to most people, it seems simple commonsense.

I am a Conservative. John was committed to Labour. As a Conservative, I prefer pragmatism to ideology; negotiation to confrontation; consensus to conflict; and public service to self-service.

With which of these choices would John Smith have disagreed?

Not *one* I think.

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Ahead of us lie some crucial decisions for the four countries of our United Kingdom and our political system.

So, this evening, I shall talk of politics and public service – and the vital role of the Civil Service in delivering policy.

First, politics.

At the moment, our Kingdom is not contented. Our four nations are not in harmony. Respect for politics is at a very low level. Politicians may be praised individually, but collectively the public appears to have lost trust in them.

This is an unhappy state of affairs, helpful only to those who wish us harm, or to undermine our pragmatic system of government.

It has many causes.

A decade of uncertainty, at the end of which too many people are worse off than they were in 2007.

The 24-hour news cycle, that exposes politics to more intensive – and immediate – scrutiny than ever before.

The widespread use of social media, that enables a lie to gain traction before the truth is even sought.

The rise of populism, fake news, and unscrupulous leaders on the fringes of democratic politics.

And also the referendum on Europe, during which – to our national shame – truth was a casualty.

Facts were dismissed as "Project Fear". Fiction was treated as fact. Assertion was presented as cast-iron proof. As a result, the public was left baffled and bemused: lost between truth and falsehood.

We now know there will be *no* £350 million a week to the NHS.

In fact, the reverse: estimates of the loss due to Brexit have *already* risen up to *£800* million a week, or *£40 billion a year*.

The taxpayer will also be paying £39 *billion* to divorce ourselves from the EU, and *unknown* further amounts to pay for whole departments of staff to manage Brexit; to compensate special interest groups for lost European revenue.

And – I strongly suspect – literally billions – *billions* – more to protect our economy from the lost advantage of the European market.

In addition, the private sector is already spending *huge* sums to relocate people, offices and technology *away* from the UK to the Continent.

This was *always* the likely outcome of Brexit, but was not believed because the "Leave" campaign convinced the public that "experts" and the "elite" were conspiring together to create "Project Fear".

Sadly – as each day passes – it is becoming ever more apparent that the "experts" were speaking only the truth.

This tactic of destroying faith in expertise has helped create a greater distrust in public life.

Once trust is broken, it is difficult to resurrect – and politics will be the loser for a very long time to come.

In the midst of all this, a *fundamental* truth has been lost.

It is that the vast majority of our politicians are diligent public representatives, who fight and vote for what their conscience believes and their philosophy dictates.

It is precisely these people that politics needs – not the chancers and rogues who stray into politics believing "House of Cards" is political reality – and the truth is nothing more than a plaything.

A second casualty of the referendum was Britain's reputation for civilised debate and rational action. That has gone.

Political conduct during the referendum wrecked our reputation for civilised debate.

And there was *nothing* rational about triggering Article 50 before knowing what we wished to negotiate, or were prepared to concede to obtain it.

The referendum also divided opinion within – and *between* – the political parties, and coarsened political debate. It unleashed a poison into our political system that has caused wounds to open up and flow. These will not heal easily, even if – miraculously – a consensus deal emerges.

Opponents of Brexit were condemned as "traitors" or "saboteurs" or "wreckers". Judges were "enemies of the people". There is no truth, no fairness, no logic, in these charges; they were merely intended to abuse those who opposed Brexit, and to discourage others from doing the same.

Foreigners have been made to feel so unwelcome, that many have already chosen to return home. The hostility directed at them will not be forgotten, and may grow into a distaste for our country that – one day – will rebound on us.

The referendum was peppered, day after day, with anti-immigrant stories. At its conclusion, hostility to migrants had increased, and was made to seem acceptable. It is *no* coincidence that hate crimes have grown in number.

The voice of Britain that immigrants heard – which resonated around the world – was not that of the moderate *majority*. To me, who grew up alongside migrants in Brixton, it sounded like the voice of bigotry.

None of it reflected the tolerance for which our country has long been admired.

It is *not* the voice of the Britain that I know and cherish.

This tone of debate is not unique to our own country.

Across Europe, the Far Right has been flourishing against a backcloth of low growth, high unemployment and static or falling wages.

The "establishment" – *everywhere* – is seen to have failed, and fresh new voices crammed with negatives – *anti*-foreigner; *anti*-immigrant; *anti*-Europe; *anti*-elite; *anti-everything* – are winning support, with policy promises that can *never* be delivered.

In our *own* country, mainstream politicians are having to fight hard for a hearing. And whether they are Conservative or Labour or Liberal Democrat, it is *vital* they are given one.

As we face an uncertain future, our voters would be wise to aim for a new "Age of Reason", and elect politicians able to rebut the extreme views of those who howl at the moon whilst promising the earth.

Our politics needs advocates leading by explanation and example, *not* by stigmatising others, *not* by soundbite – and *never* by deceit.

At the moment there is much talk of a new Party in politics.

You will all be familiar with the famous line of Yeats:

> "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;"

Well, in our ancient democracy, the centre of our politics *has* held – and been an example to the wider world. Our duty is to ensure that it continues to *do* so – and to *be* so.

In this era of "fake news" and populism – that is a momentous challenge.

When I refer to "the Centre", I don't mean some amorphous new Party of "moderates" and "centrists".

Even if such a Party were elected, what would unfold when it fell out of favour? For *all* Governments are mortal.

With *mainstream* opinion sidelined, the country's *only* choice would be between the extremes of Left or Right. That would be an awful outcome. Our electorate needs a choice between Parties that are demonstrably rational, realistic – and sane.

So, when I speak of "the Centre", I mean that our three *main* national Parties – Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat – must each retain a mainstream majority of their *own*.

I hesitate now before saying what I believe I must…..

Currently, both the Conservative *and* Labour Parties are being manipulated by fringe opinion. The rationale for extremists joining mainstream Parties is logical: from within them, they can influence policy; from without, they very rarely can.

At the moment, there are people who – for now – may have their boots within the Conservative or Labour Parties – but not in their minds, nor their *hearts*.

The Conservative Party membership appears to be "hollowing out" traditional Conservatives, while former UKIP members strengthen the anti-European Right of the Party.

In Parliament, the European Research Group has become a Party *within* a Party, with its own whips, its own funding and its own priorities. Some of its more extreme members have little or no affinity to moderate, pragmatic and tolerant Conservatism.

The ERG does *not* represent a majority view but – with a *minority* Government – as now – can determine policy simply by being intransigent: which is precisely what it is doing.

Some – who can fairly be called zealots – seem incapable of looking beyond the one issue of Europe. It's not just that it dominates their thinking – it seems to *obsess* them.

The Labour Party has a different dilemma, but with a similar outcome.

It has enjoyed a vast growth in membership that has captured many constituency organisations; their National Conference; important Party positions; and has left control of policy at the mercy of a passionate, active, far-Left base rather than the centre-Left.

Yesterday, seven moderate MPs left the Labour Party. I admire their courage and their conviction. But I hope they have not cut themselves adrift forever. Labour needs *moderate* MPs, and the country needs a *moderate* Labour Party.

Complacent voices dismiss the chances of fringe opinion gaining control of the political agenda. Britain is too pragmatic, they say. Too stable. Our political system is too mature. I hope they are right.

But, in the recent past, much that once seemed impossible has come to pass. The election of Donald Trump, the growth of the Far Right in Poland, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Germany, France …..

Complacent voices expected *none* of that – nor did many predict Brexit. They regarded UKIP as a joke, an outlet for frustration, and a harmless home for anti-immigration sentiment. It proved to be far more than that.

In the referendum I voted to remain: we lost. But I have not changed my view that the fall-out from Brexit will be *long* and *painful*.

It will not end on 29 March.

The result divided our four nations. It will weaken our overseas influence; undermine our economic prospects; and impoverish those who have the least.

Many people seem to be relaxed about Brexit. I am not.

I cannot rid myself of fears that we are about to move from a position of power and influence around the world, to one of relative isolation and weakness.

Also, as a Briton, I find it painful to come to terms with the possibility that, within my lifetime, I could – I repeat *could* – see the break-up of the UK. I *hope* I am wrong, but the agonies of Brexit have the capacity to do *just* that.

Some argue that a break-up won't happen, because economic logic is against it. But sentiment and emotion is a potent mix: economic logic was against *Brexit* – yet look where we are now …..

I am not suggesting it is pre-determined that Scotland and Northern Ireland will leave the UK: it is not.

But I *am* suggesting that leaving the EU will make an independent Scotland and united Ireland *more likely* than if we remained in the EU.

In 2015, Scotland voted to stay *in* the UK – and *in* Europe. Yet English and Welsh votes are now taking Scotland *out* of Europe against their will. Scotland cannot apply to re-join unless they gain independence. The incentive to try again is clear.

As for Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein are already calling for a new Border Poll on a united Ireland. This call will become more compelling if there is a "hard" border, with all the risks of a return to violence.

I don't believe a Border Poll would succeed in the near future – but, within a few years, who can be sure?

It is *astonishing* to me that English Unionists are so avid to leave the *European* Union, that they are willing to put at risk our far more *historic* union with Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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As of this moment, the world's economy is dominated by the three great economic powers – America, China and the European Union.

As the UK leaves the EU, and the European economy stutters, that trio may shrink to a duo.

That is not in *our* national interest – *nor* in that of our Continental neighbours.

I don't wish to see Europe – the cradle of democracy – as a subordinate power to President Xi's autocratic China, or Mr Trump's dysfunctional America.

I worry, too, about Britain's diplomacy. For generations, it has been super-charged by our close alliance with America and Europe. But *we* are now leaving Europe – at *exactly* the moment the US is moving away *from us* … to the Far East.

"Punching above our weight" – as Douglas Hurd once put it – may no longer be so easy.

It may be good old British grit to hail Britain for "going it alone" but – as Churchill noted – "The only thing worse than fighting *with* allies is fighting *without* them".

That applies just as much in peacetime as it does in war.

The many challenges before us must be faced by our Governments *and* our Public Service. We take public service for granted. We shouldn't.

It's an enormous undertaking, embracing – as it does – Parliament; the Armed Forces; the Home and Foreign Service; Local Government; the Judiciary; the Emergency Services; and so much else.

We need them *all* to perform well if we are to protect the society in which we wish to live.

But that raises a question: what sort of society *do* we wish to live in?

I see no attractions in an over-mighty State, whether it is benevolent or restrictive – and it could be either. Such a State takes decisions and choices *away* from individuals or families. Liberty of choice is too much part of our national DNA to be happy with such a situation.

Nor do I favour a *minimalist* State: the so-called "Singapore of the North" option.

This may work for Singapore – but surely not for us. It is usually advocated by those with little or no understanding of how important public service is to the majority of our nation.

Its virtues of low taxes, low regulation and maximum liberty of personal choice are enticing, but the price to be paid for them is too high.

A minimalist State may be fine for the successful, the wealthy, and the self-confident – but would prove a nightmare for the majority. It is *not* a route our welfare state should take.

In a Lecture like this, it is rather un-enterprising to admire the status quo – but I *do*.

The second half of the 20th Century gave us a mixed economy and the welfare state. That seems to fit comfortably with our British instinct for fairness, tolerance and choice.

We have enjoyed this for decades, and we should stick with it. We can all acknowledge the role of the Public and Private Sectors, even as we dispute precisely where the boundaries of each should lie.

But the success of such a choice depends upon more than political willpower: the role of public service is crucial – almost no-one can be wholly independent of it. It matters to us all – and so does its efficiency.

In our future world, in which people will change jobs – even careers – faster than ever before, and in which whole industries will rise and fall, we need the Civil Service to protect and enhance the quality of *all* public service.

The Civil Service once worked under a strict code that all mishaps, all errors, were the responsibility of their *political* masters.

Of course, this was a fiction, but it was a fiction with a purpose. It recognised the separation of powers between politicians and civil servants. It protected civil servants who were unfamiliar with – and unequipped for – the savage cut and thrust of modern day politics.

For many years it was an accepted and effective modus operandi, and I was saddened when Ministers began to place public blame on those who served them.

Even when it was justified, it was unwise and unfair.

Civil servants act under *Ministerial direction* and, whilst that remains the case, they deserve to be protected by those they serve.

Civil servants are enablers. They work with Ministers to turn policy into reality. In doing so they are not merely handmaids to the mighty, but fully-fledged partners. Their role is crucial.

Departments of State have an historic memory no Minister can match. And often, of course, the civil servant can be more experienced – perhaps even more able – than the Minister: discretion forbids my offering up examples of this …..

The work of civil servants can be fiendishly complex.

Consider social security reform and the delivery of social benefits. Or the work of Ambassadors representing our country – often in hostile environments. Or the Treasury, where spending misjudgements can change the lives of millions.

This is also true of other parts of public service. It is true of our Armed Forces, who put their lives at risk for the common good. And our Emergency Services, who face the risk of injury or death on any day.

The point is this. We need to recruit talent to *every* part of public service and, in return, we need to give public service the respect it deserves.

Government – who are *elected* public servants – need *unelected* public servants to make their administration effective.

Too often, events leave Governments – *all* Governments – struggling even to catch up. And yet, if we are to achieve our future national ambitions, Governments must be ahead of the game, planning for what *will* happen rather than being overwhelmed by what is *currently* happening.

That needs efficiency across *all* public service.

Some people disparage public service as a well-paid, well-pensioned sinecure. It is far from that. Public servants are participants in the battle for a better future – and their role – often unrecognised – is crucial.

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Let me summarise.

Within a few days, Members of Parliament will make decisions that will determine all our futures. I believe we have a right to expect them to vote for an outcome that best protects the future welfare and prosperity of our nation – *without* fear or favour, and *without* deference to Party allegiance.

And, before they cast that vote, I would make this plea – to each and every Member of Parliament:

- *Do not* ignore the 63% who did *not* vote for Brexit.

- *Do not* ignore the businesses who have announced their intention to leave the UK.

- *Do not* ignore the investments that have already been pulled.

- *Do not* ignore the jobs that are at risk.

- *Do not* ignore the impact of staff shortages on the Health Service, the Caring Services, Transport, and much of the public service.

- *Do not* ignore the social and economic impact on the young – nor on those who have the very least.

- *Do not* ignore the risk of a hard border leading to violence in Northern Ireland.

- *Do not* ignore the risk of a break-up of the United Kingdom.

Let me close by reading a poem which I learned as a young boy:

For the want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For the want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For the want of a horse the rider was lost.
For the want of a rider the message was lost.
For the want of a message the battle was lost.
For the want of a battle the war was lost.
For the want of a war the Kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

This is a *classic* illustration of how one small act can have unforeseen and far-reaching consequences.

The decision Parliament takes next week can undermine or revive the reputation of representative politics.

And from that flows so much of our whole way of life.

The night before he died, John Smith said this: "The opportunity to serve our country – that is all we ask". John was referring to the Labour Party. But his sentiment applies equally to *all* those who serve in a democracy.

Every so often, in our long history, there has come a moment when Parliament has had to dig deep into its *soul*.

Now is such a moment.

Let us hope that the House of Commons has the wisdom and the will to exert its democratic right – and secure the best possible outcome for the nation it is so privileged to serve.