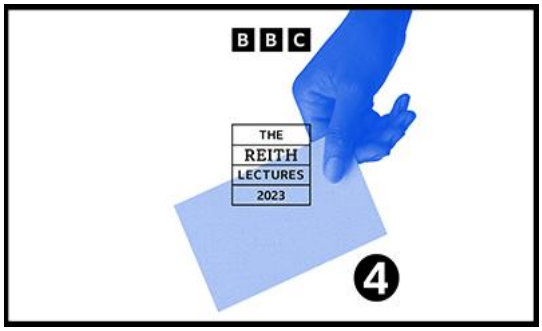

The Reith Lectures 2023

with Prof. Ben Ansell



Lecture 1: The Future of Democracy

ANITA ANAND: Welcome to the 2023 BBC Reith Lectures from Broadcasting House in London. Financial improprieties, parties during lockdown, assaults, affairs, cash for influence, cash for honours, cash for questions, look at the opinion polls over the last 30 years and they say pretty much the same thing, something has been ripping in our relationship with our political class. And what about us? Well, we seem more divided than ever. Unable to come together following Brexit, events overseas driving wedges between us, polarisation and a culture war that makes public debate a battle of who can shout the loudest. And add to that a feeling of them and us, depending on where you live and how much you earn.

And it's not just happening here. In America, millions still believe their election was stolen. Elsewhere journalists find their organisations shut down,

their colleagues thrown out or thrown in prison or something much, much worse. I can't think of a better time to ask some really simple questions: Are we doing this right? Can we do this better? These are just two of the questions this year's Reith lecturer is going to try and answer. He's a very brave man. A rising star of political academia, he was a full professor at just 35 years of age. His current role is at Nuffield College, Oxford University where he's a professor of comparative democratic institutions. He's also the author of several books, including his latest, '*Why Politics Fails*'. Let's meet him. Will you please welcome the 2023 BBC Reith lecturer, Professor Ben Ansell.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

ANITA ANAND: A very warm welcome to you, Ben. So you're going to try and fix democracy?

BEN ANSELL: That's right, 25, maybe 26 minutes.

ANITA ANAND: Fabulous. I mean, do you ever think you might have bitten off more than you can chew?

BEN ANSELL: Only when I was asked to do these lectures.

ANITA ANAND: Yes, well, you're here now. Do you remember, can you cast your mind back when you first got bitten by the politics bug?

BEN ANSELL: So my first political experience was in 1987 when I was nine and our primary school had a mock election, so I stood, I put my candidacy up. I won't name the party. I think what it's important for you to know is that I didn't win. And the reason I didn't win, despite my impassioned speech about how many people in this country had outdoor toilets, because I thought that's going to work really well in a primary school environment, that kind of toilet humour. It didn't work because I gave out fewer stickers than the winning party, which in retrospect-----

ANITA ANAND: You fool.

BEN ANSELL: Yes, so I learned a lot about what some people might call corruption and other people might just call smart politics at that point. There was a party that fared less well than my party did, because you could come up with your own parties, and so there were two kids called William – and I won't embarrass them, not that they're probably listening to the Reith lectures thinking we're talking about an election from years ago – but they were both called William. So their party was called The Two Williams. Now, like any good election,

the candidates could go and vote for themselves, right? So you could have that photo moment where you cast your vote. But when the final numbers were called, the two Williams had only got one vote because one of the Williams had defected, I imagine, to the party that gave out more stickers.

ANITA ANAND: When we think of democracy these days, I mean, I think you'll agree that you wake up in the morning, you pick up your phone, you doom scroll-----

BEN ANSELL: Yes.

ANITA ANAND: -----you turn on the news, you feel oppressed by the weight of it all. It all just seems so bleak and, yet, you strike me as somebody – not tigerish exactly, but optimistic about democracy and its future.

BEN ANSELL: Yes. I'm optimistic. We need to be careful not to assume that our present is worse than many of the pasts that our parents – and I'll talk about this in my talk – recently experienced. And to give you an example of that, I moved to America in 2000 and I'm like the bad penny because I moved and then there was the Bush/Gore election and then there was 9/11 and the *Patriot Act* and so the political fervour in the early 2000s had a lot of people talking about is democracy under threat? But the United States is still standing, we're still standing, and so I don't think we want to foretell the death of democracy. I think it's a resilient system and that's what I want people to get out of these lectures.

ANITA ANAND: Wow. It is time we hear your first lecture. It is entitled, 'The Future of Democracy'. Ben Ansell, the stage is yours.

BEN ANSELL: Thank you.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

BEN ANSELL: Our democratic history, even here in Britain, is just a blink in human time. To many of us sitting right here in this room today you knew a friend or family member who was deprived of the voting rights that you hold today, and my own family's democratic history tells this tale. My great-grandfather was called William and he was born in 1890 and grew up on the Isle of Wight where he worked as a plater's labourer's mate in a shipbuilder yard in Cowes. Now, earning a pittance, he was forced to live with his father, also called William. And William Senior was a fierce man with a luxurious Lord Kitchener moustache and, according to my grandfather's memoires – this is a quote, "A rather sadistic demeanour."

So, this, it seems, was a fairly terrifying experience, but it was also a disenfranchising one because it meant that, like 40% of men at the time, my great-grandfather didn't meet the property qualifications to vote in British elections. So throughout the 1910s he toiled in the shipyards, hot, tiring, dangerous work plating the sides of Britain's new battleships. But he was only finally granted the right to vote in 1918 at the end of the Great War that the very ships he'd built had fought in. My great Aunt Mo, born in 1907, she was among the very first women to be able, like men, to vote at the age of 21. So in 1918, women had received the right to vote, but they had to be over 30. Younger women had to wait until the so-called flapper election of 1929, and that was appropriate for my Aunt Mo because she was a thoroughly modern woman who liked to dance the Charleston in the grand hotels of Scarborough.

My family's democratic history, it's not only about finally getting the right to vote, because it turns out that some of my ancestors actually counted double. Until 1948, my grandfather, a graduate of Edinburgh University, he had two votes, one for his constituency and one for the university, and business owners could also vote twice, once for their own home and once for that of their business. Now, your own democratic history here in this room it probably looks a lot like mine. It's a story of missing rights and sometimes of extra ones. Perhaps your parents or grandparents came from India or Pakistan or Nigeria where they lacked a vote until independence, or perhaps from America where black Americans were denied equal rights until the 1960s, or from Switzerland where women couldn't vote until 1971.

Our democratic history, it's an oral history of relatives who lived at a time of unequal rights that has only just ended. And we sometimes think of Britain as this home of democracy, but that home, when it comes to one person, one vote, it's really quite modern. It's kind of like a shabby 1950s semi. Maybe not so shabby.

We are only recently free and equal citizens when it comes to voting, together now in our democratic present. But what about our democratic future? You see, democracy is supposed to be about ruling ourselves and so that raises the question, why are we so unhappy with our own choices? So trust in politicians, it's collapsing throughout the West. Fewer than half of people in Britain now think the state is run for the benefit of all the people. A quarter of Brits now claim they would prefer to be ruled by a strong leader who could ignore Parliament. Tyson Fury, perhaps.

And our politics is angrier. Donald Trump encouraged an insurrection. Emmanuel Macron has been beset by gilets jaunes, Justin Trudeau by truckers' convoys and, here in Britain, in a great outpouring of democracy, we voted to

leave the European Union. But seven years later, we're still fighting each other over Brexit, well, and low traffic neighbourhoods.

So we make our own choices, we rule ourselves, but we're polarised and discontent. And this is new. So had I given these lectures 25 years ago, I would have been surfing on the crest of a democratic wave which rolled on unstoppable until it stopped because a democratic flood in the 1990s with the fall of the Berlin Wall became a drought in the early 21st century.

According to the V-Dem Institute, the average level of global democracy today has receded all the way back to its level in 1986. So you see, it's not just Kate Bush making a comeback. For the first time in two decades there are now more closed autocracies in the world than there are liberal democracies. And, increasingly, the liberal part of liberal democracy is under attack. The Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban, has proudly proclaimed his country as an illiberal democracy, and in the world's largest democracy, India, even though the formal rules of democracy remain stable, and they do, civil liberties have been undermined. In 2022, the Indian government shut down the Internet 84 separate times, often before or during protests and broadcasters are regularly raided, including the BBC.

The process of free and fair elections, democracy's very core, is also at risk. In Turkey and Venezuela, opposition leaders have been jailed. In Brazil and in the United States, defeated leaders have tried to delegitimise elections by falsely claiming fraud. And outside the democratic club, authoritarian countries from Russia to China have portrayed themselves as strong-willed, strong-handed models to follow.

So our democratic future is under threat from within and without. But it's not enough for me to stand here and bemoan this, right? We need to defend our democratic values and, to do that, we're going to have to confront democracy's critics and make the case for democracy again and again. And so you might ask, what is that case? Well, bluntly, we do better in democracies.

So decades of research in the social sciences, even by me, have confirmed that in democracies human life tends to be better. So democracies have lower infant mortality. Democracies have higher literacy. Democracies even have cleaner water, although anyone who's recently tried swimming in the Thames might disagree with that. And despite what you might think about the rise of China or a few oil-rich Gulf states, overall, democracies tend to grow faster and get richer, and they do so because national wealth ultimately comes from human ingenuity and creativity.

And dictatorships fear those gifts. Democracies inspire them. And democracy also has intrinsic benefits as a political system and the paradoxical reason why we should all agree democracy is a good thing is because, well, we disagree on almost everything else. Now, if we did all agree, then why would we bother going out to the polling booth at all because surely we already know what we want so anyone could speak for all of us, including a dictator. So that's not ideal.

No, all of the machinery of our democracies, our voting booths, our elaborate electoral systems, our free-speech rights, these only matter because we disagree and successful democracy at its core then is about how we create agreeable disagreement. So to be agreeable our democracies can't cower under the threat of violence, and that violence is very, very real. As you know, in the past decade two British members of Parliament have been assassinated; every drip of violence poisons the bloodstream of our democracies.

So for democracy to succeed, it must permit us to resolve our disagreements peacefully. But that doesn't mean we'll feel happy about it because agreeable disagreement means winners and it means losers. It means competing priorities, clashing ideals and vocal dissent. So our democratic systems have a dual function. Yes, they need to be agreeable to prevent spilling over into violence, but they also need to encourage disagreement, to avoid a blunt tyranny of the majority because a simple electoral majoritarianism, it can make decisions for us in a world of disagreement, sure, but that kind of mere democracy is not enough because it's unstable and volatile. A populist democracy that hangs on the latest will of the majority will trample on our liberties in a ceaseless chase for today's approval rating. We can't govern by daily opinion poll, constant referendums will become neverendums, it'll be like having a Brexit vote every week.

For democracy to truly give us agreeable disagreement, we've got to acknowledge that there are limits to what governments, even those elected by a majority of us, can do to us. And we secure those limits, not by simply trusting our government to respect them because we're not idiots, instead we rely on other counterbalancing institutions that make up the menagerie of a liberal democracy. So the courts, the independent agencies, devolved governments and, yes, yes, really, the media because our government is accountable to us as voters, we, who send our opinions up from the grassroots, but it also needs to be accountable to these other institutions that sit to its side and elbow it sharply in the ribs, like a malicious younger brother, if it steps over legal or moral lines.

And those restrictions on what our government can do are what best distinguish our liberal democracies from dictatorships where the only limits on

leaders are their degree of capriciousness or malice. In fact, democracy's chief proponents are often the well-to-do, not the huddled masses because those with money to lose are precisely those most at threat of dictators arbitrarily stealing their fortunes. It was, after all, colonial America's wealthy merchants who called for no taxation without representation. And it's wealthy oligarchs, whose riches have been commandeered by Vladimir Putin, who are some of his most vocal critics.

So liberal democracies, they don't only empower the majority, they also can protect embattled or, indeed, wealthy minorities. But we need to be careful not to push too far in the other direction because if a few people can block popular reforms indefinitely, well then we get a tyranny of the minority instead and we cannot each have a veto on every government policy or nothing, nothing would ever get done. And you can trust me here, I know this because I'm an academic.

So for example, protections for minorities can clash with treating voters equally. Some democracies give far more weight to some voters than others. A classic example is the US Senate. Here, California, with almost 40 million residents, has the same voting power as Wyoming with just half a million. And so you might ask yourself, why can't America pass gun control laws that command majority support, and that's part of your answer.

So the institutions of our liberal democracy are like a spider's web. Each agreement, each institution, each norm of behaviour, a single strand painstakingly formed over the centuries, binding our body politic, and these strands tie our democratic history to our democratic future. But there's nothing inevitable about liberal democracy's triumph. The past few years have exposed the essential fragility of that democratic web and many of us here today feel caught in a democratic malaise that the system is not responsive, that it doesn't look out for us, and there's an irony here because we look for alternatives, we look for quick fixes. But in so doing, we may end up fuelling, rather than fighting three enemies of our democratic future.

So democracy's first enemy is entropy. If we don't actively sustain democracy, then things fall apart. To maintain the ties that bind us, to secure the deals that we make, this is all really hard work. What the German sociologist, Max Weber, called the slow boring of hard boards, and that does sound kind of boring. But the reality is there are no quick fixes because, democracy, it's about resolving disagreement and we will always disagree on new things from how to manage artificial intelligence to the merits or lack thereof of 20 mile an hour speed limits. There's always more debate, more dissent, and, yes, more voting.

And many of us feel like Brenda from Bristol. A voter interviewed as Theresa May called the 2017 general election who just despaired, “You’re joking, not another one, there’s too much politics going on at the moment.” And, you know, even as a professional political scientist, I feel Brenda’s pain. But if we stop caring, if we stop voting, then entropy sets in. Old norms of behaviour are lost, we forget how we resolved our previous quarrels and we see our disagreements on the street or online as irresolvable, as an inevitable, unstoppable and tragic polarisation, and polarisation is democracy’s second enemy.

It happens because we feel that our institutions are unresponsive, stifling, dare I say, elitist, and so we call for more participation. For example, we might think about primaries and leadership elections for political parties, but now we might discover that there is such a thing as too much democracy because leadership elections, they get dominated by active members of political parties. Now, I’m a card-carrying political scientist. I have to say, these citizens are important to a healthy democracy, but they can also be oddballs and they’re often attracted to the extremes.

And in the United States, leadership primaries have produced ever more extreme candidates, and so the consensual middle ground between Democrats and Republicans has withered to inexistence.

And the UK is not immune to this kind of voter-led polarisation. You all remember the 2019 general election, I’m sure. It saw Jeremy Corbyn, the favourite of the Labour membership, face off against Boris Johnson, the favourite of conservative members, and I think we can all agree that was a very clear choice. But it was one that left centrist voters and politicians in the backseat. And that polarisation has seeped into our everyday lives.

In 2019, over a third of Labour supporters said they’d be unhappy if their child were to marry a conservative. So, apparently, Labour supporters aren’t willing to swipe right. That’s a joke for the young people in the audience. It could be worse. In America, only 4% of marriages, on one hand, are between registered Democrats and Republicans, right? So just imagine those wedding receptions. Voters in America now live in physically separate worlds and bedrooms and that kind of polarisation in America means now many voters vote against the other party, rather than for their own.

So when Donald Trump had his mugshot taken in Georgia, this actually helped his electoral prospects because Republican primary voters blame Democrats for his legal difficulties. So a vote for Trump, even if he’s a criminal suspect, is a thumb in the eye for the Democratic party. Now, I don’t want us to obsess about political parties getting along because American polarisation was

the lowest in the 1950s, the Jim Crow era where black Americans were politically oppressed and deprived of the vote.

But the 21st century seems to be one where our party identities are defining all of our identity and this polarisation of everything is turbo-charged by our addiction to social media. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, X, pardon Elon, they're intensifiers. Their algorithms drive us to more of what we already like and perhaps that's harmless with some things like heavy metal or Italian food or, I don't know, the Crystal Palace football club. As my family can confirm, I spend far too much of my time online getting angry by Crystal Palace losses, so maybe it's not so harmless, but in politics these algorithms mean reinforcing our own views, pushing them bit by bit to the extreme, bypassing the things we agree on to better amplify our disagreement, creating disagreeable disagreement.

So the third and final enemy of democracy is our use, or rather misuse of technology and, in particular, the way that we employ artificial intelligence. Now, because so much political speech is predictable and vague, it's simple for artificial intelligence to mimic politicians, some politicians. Could any of you honestly tell apart the responses of a politician on the Today programme from the output that ChatGPT might give you if you asked it for a series of defensive platitudes and a few misleading statistics? But a bigger risk is malign imitation, through videos that fake well-known figures. So a deep fake of the Prime Minister declaring war could spread instantaneously across the Internet to friends and foes alike, it's the contemporary amped up version of shouting fire in a crowded theatre.

So AI's chief current strength and its threat to us is this kind of masterful mimicry, but it also has weaknesses, and those weaknesses may also harm our democracies because AI is great at form, but it's weaker at content. Let me give you an example. I recently asked Google Bard to write my biography, because I'm very solipsistic, but it was also revealing. So three times in a row Google Bard correctly identified I had written three books – well done – but each time two of them were books I'd never written. And, to be fair, those books did sound more interesting, but they were wrong, and getting the facts wrong it's deeply corrosive in democracies.

So, like, imagine you're trying to make your mind up how to vote in an important election and you want to make a fully informed decision, but you also want to avoid the grind of finding out information by yourself. So you ask the algorithm, and the algorithm provides you with a series of entirely plausible-sounding, but fundamentally non-existent facts. Well, since the algorithm cannot reason, it can't spot any obvious logical flaw in its claims and, as democratic citizens, if we try and outsource our own decision-making to these tools, we may

find ourselves signing up to fantasy political agendas. Elections will become illusions.

And with crucial elections in 2024 in Britain, America and beyond, we still lack rules about the use of artificial intelligence in politics and I see no desire, I'm afraid, on behalf of those who run artificial intelligence companies to take these concerns seriously. Our democratic future then is not assured. To secure it, we need to put in the hours, abjure the temptations of polarisation and avoid innovating ourselves into a dictatorship. It sounds easy.

Well, we don't have to solve everything at once. There are reforms that we can make to politics here in Britain that will buttress it against its enemies and inject some life into our democratic veins. So let's begin with that threat from AI.

The horrors in Israel have shown how susceptible people are to fake online information and, sadly, many of our politicians have proven themselves similarly gullible. Our media regulators already struggle to enforce due impartiality and accuracy on our broadcasters. And so doing so for social media, it seems to me, might be a challenge too far, after all we can't regulate malign information away when it's transported at light speed from anonymous servers, but what we can do, what we can do is back trusted sources, And, despite what you might hear, despite what you might think, our national broadcasters are still more trusted than not by the public and, you know what, that's even true for some of our newspapers.

But the mainstream media has been in a defensive crouch, attacked by opportunistic and populist politicians. So those of us who worry about public trust need a robust, self-confident, yes, and accurate media and we need politicians unafraid to support it.

Now, another thing that we could do is we could come together. Citizens' assemblies have been used in countries from Denmark to Canada, and rather than fighting online in social media silos, assemblies require us to meet up in the real world – imagine – with people that we might not agree with, even worse, and find consensus. And few political issues are more contentious than abortion, which in Ireland was illegal until 2019. Several tragic deaths of miscarrying mothers put legalisation on the agenda. But then how was it possible to develop consensus on an issue where citizens fundamentally disagreed on definitions of life and death? How was it possible to disagree agreeably?

Well, in 2016, Irish politicians asked citizens to debate the abortion issue in a citizens' assembly. Now, an assembly can't make everybody agree, but what it can do is help citizens see that others are not extremists, that there are

conversations across the divide that can happen that help you find painful, but mutually acceptable compromises. And these compromises were ones reflected in the final legislation. And you know what? Perhaps people were better at this than the politicians because the debates in the citizens' assembly were more complex and less negative in tone than those among the lawmakers in the Irish parliament.

So when we make the decisions ourselves, we're sometimes more thoughtful and kinder than the politicians that we elect. Shocking, I know. Now, it won't be easy to convince MPs to hand over their cherished powers to us, hoy ploy, in citizens' assemblies, I get that. So are there ways for us to reform our system of representative government to ensure that we're governed, well, more representatively?

So there's a common lament about British democracy. It's that our electoral system, first past the post, systematically leaves people out. So the eighth of the electorate, who voted the UKIP in 2015, received just one seat out of 650, and the Greens and the Lib Dems, with a similar combined vote share, got nine. It's hard to talk about our democratic future when the 'our' consistently leaves out a quarter to a third of the population. And a more proportional electoral system would remedy this to some degree, matching parliamentary seats to the public's votes.

But it is no surprise that the big parties aren't going to like this, right? They like the current system and I won't expect turkeys to vote for Christmas. But our current electoral system, it's not sacrosanct, right? In 1918, the British government almost passed proportional representation. There's a kind of nerd's sliding doors moment. And in recent years, we've used proportional systems ourselves in elections in London and Scotland and in European elections.

Now, proportional systems are no panacea, but they do ward off some of the enemies of democracy. They force parties to speak to the whole country, not just swing voters and more parties and hence more opinions, even ones you don't like, get represented in the heart of Parliament and perhaps also in government. And, finally, proportional elections can produce more consensual politics because no party can rule on its own. And coalitions are frustrating and they're imperfect and they rarely satisfy every party, I get it, I get it, but that's the point, no one gets what they want. Coalitions, they are a tableau vivant of the core of effective democracy, agreeable disagreement. We don't always get along, but we do have to agree how to disagree.

So let's end then where we began. Will our great-grandchildren look back at us with the same astonishment as when I look back at my great-grandfather's

story? Will they look at our electoral institutions and see them as biased or unrepresentative? Will they still be complaining about what might be hereditary cyborg peers in the House of Lords? Our democratic history, it's an unfinished story. We govern ourselves, though not always as equally as our ancestors might have hoped. Democracy is our legacy from past generations and it's an obligation of ours to secure for future generations. It's up to us. It's hard, unending, but worthwhile work for our descendants, for their democratic future and for our democratic future.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

ANITA ANAND: Just before we get questions from the audience, Ben, how worried should we be about the future of democracy?

BEN ANSELL: Democracy will outlast us. So that's the good news. The formal institutions of democracy are pretty hard to undermine and to destroy without a strong reaction. But what's easier for all of us to do, perhaps unthinkingly, is to corrode and demean some of the norms of democracy, the norms about letting others speak, norms about not casting aspersions on people as enemies of democracy, norms about the role of some of the more undemocratic elements of our democracy, like courts, and I think that's where we've struggled in this country in recent years. I don't think anyone thinks that tomorrow we won't have free and fair votes, but a lot of the menagerie, as I call it, of liberal democracy, I think, is under more threat.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. Let's turn to you. If you put your hand up very firmly in the air – there's a gentleman here at the front.

PETER BOTTOMLEY: I first stood for election in 1974 when Spain, Greece and Portugal were dictatorships and not democracies. If I looked in the index of a book on the future of democracy, would I find anything on the purposes of politics? It isn't a good idea to try to work out how we create a good society nationally and internationally, and in a future of democracy, if we would look back, not quite a hundred years, how would we have decided which year to confront Mr Hitler by force, or in my time, how could we account for getting Iraq wrong and also getting Syria wrong, which allowed Putin to then go into Crimea and all the things that followed from that?

ANITA ANAND: Gosh, that's a whopper to start with. Thank you very much.

BEN ANSELL: You know, the first part of that sounded so easy.

ANITA ANAND: Yes.

BEN ANSELL: It does raise an important issue, which is whether democracies work when we get so many things wrong. And I think they do because we're all frail, imperfect beings who make poor choices, including the people we elect to rule us. But you will all recall at the time before the invasion of Iraq, for example, how popular that was in opinion polls in early 2003, but it's hard for democratic publics to make life or death decisions, and it's certainly very hard for democratic publics to be able to trace down the complexity of history such that decisions that are made in one year have ramifications decades hence. But what I think we can say is that democracies are better able to adjust for the mistakes that they make. So we might all be wrong about things, but at least we can throw out the people who made the wrong decision last time.

ANITA ANAND: Can I throw a question back to you, Conservative MP Peter Bottomley, Father of the House, when you hear Ben say that, actually, MPs sound a lot like ChatGPT doing a defensive, ninja action, what do you think of that?

PETER BOTTOMLEY: I pay attention to the person on my right.

ANITA ANAND: Well, the person on your right, I should say, is Virginia Bottomley, who is your wife, and also-----

PETER BOTTOMLEY: She says you ought to have a thick skin, an umbrella and a sense of humour.

ANITA ANAND: Did you want to say anything?

VIRGINIA BOTTOMLEY: I think democracy is very difficult. I was brought up with a leader, Margaret Thatcher, not everybody's cup of tea, but she wanted to set out the difficult decisions and she sort of said if it isn't hurting, it isn't working, take the difficult decisions. We moved on then to Tony Blair who was all for the focus group, which is ask people what they want and then try and give them what they want. So I think modern democracy is always trying to give people what they want. In business, if you over-promise and under-deliver, you're ruined in the markets, but present democracy almost forces political parties to over-promise and under-deliver and I'm really worried that that will lead to more and more cynicism and disenchantment.

ANITA ANAND: But the question was about politicians addressing questions head on. I mean, do politicians do that enough and the fact that Ben is

saying that they may not, that ChatGPT could give a very similar performance on not answering a question, is that hurting democracy?

VIRGINIA BOTTOMLEY: It may be, but I know that when I was Health Secretary I was probably much too direct about saying people needed to face the difficult decisions. There is a tendency, particularly for an elected politician, to want to please. When you start Parliament there is a wonderful prayer, it says we shall govern wisely and avoid love of power and desire to please. Now, it's very much easier in the House of Lords to say unpopular things because I'm not elected, so I can be unfashionable. People love deriding the Lords, but we can have much better debates about euthanasia in the Lords then ever you could in the House of Commons.

ANITA ANAND: Okay, thank you very much. There is a question there.

MELISSA: Hi, my name is Melissa. I am a recent graduate. So I wonder what's the incentive for young people to engage in the democratic process. We've been excluded from things which older generations have benefited from, like affordable housing, free higher education and triple locked pensions, but, for my generation, it's been the financial crash, austerity and the cost of living crisis. So what's the point? What does democracy offer the young?

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

BEN ANSELL: So I think the first thing to say is you're right. Unfortunately, our politics has been very much split around age in recent elections, and it's something I'll talk about in a later lecture. Ultimately, democracy is about us, right? So if enough young people do turn out and vote, that can shift what politicians think, and it's tricky with our electoral system, right, because young people tend to be packed in a way that political scientists would call inefficiently into, but for young people it's like that's where fun places are, but packed into urban districts, right, that makes it harder for them to express their vote. So I get that it's harder for young people to express that, but, ultimately, that's the only way of effecting change in a liberal democracy. You can go and protest, you can write op-eds, you can do all of those things, but these are the tools that we have and the worst thing that could happen, but an understandable thing, is for young people to say, well, look, this isn't for me, it's not working out so I won't vote because that precisely makes things worse.

GILLIAN TETT: I'm Gillian Tett, I'm Provost of King's College Cambridge and also a Financial Times columnist, so part of the mainstream media that's in a defensive crouch. I'm curious, I mean, you point out correctly that last year autocracies overtook democracies for the first time since 2004, I think the

Bertelsmann figure is 67 versus 70, and you've given us lots of examples of countries to not copy, like America. Can you give us some of countries where we can actually find inspiration in a positive way right now as we try and think to create a British democracy going forward? I mean, would you like us all to be German and go into coalitions? Are there other examples where you think we could actually learn positive lessons as we have this debate?

BEN ANSELL: So I think there's a reason that we're having a democratic malaise and we're not the only people, which is that there are a series of challenges in international economic markets with the pandemic, with the great recession not that long ago that means there's just a general sense of discontent throughout the world and that's made things very hard for politicians everywhere. I think that it is hard to pick somewhere right now where things are going brilliantly. So let me then go back and say, well, 2008 was an exciting year because we saw a president who, yes, he didn't satisfy everybody's dreams for him, but we saw a president elected that most people never could have imagined be elected, particularly at that time. I think our democracies do have upside surprises, as well as downside shocks, you know, and we've had that ourselves in this country. I don't think we would want to underplay how huge a change it has been to have had a number of female prime ministers and now an ethnic minority prime minister and throughout the cabinet in the last few years, right. This is a lot of exciting change. We just all feel really glum right now.

HANNAH WHITE: Hello, I'm Hannah White. I'm director of the non-partisan think tank, the Institute for Government. One of the characteristics of the last few years, as you rightly say, has been people not just disagreeing with each other, but disagreeing with what you describe as spider's web of institutions that we have to protect our democracy. So how do we buttress those institutions if it seems that the politicians have concluded that it's actually in their interests to undermine those institutions.

BEN ANSELL: It's a real challenge and politicians accept, most of the time, that in fact they can't do everything that they want and that these institutions play an important role, but the temptation right now is just so huge to blame our courts or to blame European courts, and so I think it does require those at the very top of government, and it's not an easy fix, right, but it does require those at the very top of government to basically back off doing that, to understand that the more you do that, the more you corrode the strings that hold the whole edifice up and the unhappier you and the public will be because, as Virginia noted, it's hard to get into a system where you're constantly promising the electorate the earth, not delivering it and then just blaming some other institution.

ANITA ANAND: But isn't the very structure actually the problem? I mean, you've got elections that come up every four, five years so there is a short-termism that is built into the politician's mindset, which is, you know, I've got all of these (41:01), but bloody hell, I've got to get in again.

BEN ANSELL: We don't want to be in the kind of world that fans of Singapore often talk about, isn't it great that we can make these long-run decision? Well, yes, because you don't have competitive elections, so I guess you can make long-run decisions, but they could be good or they could be terrible and no one could do anything about it. So we do need this check and I think there has to be a four or five year moment, but how to make long-term policy then? Well, one thing you could do is not attack all the institutions that are long-termist in nature, like the civil service, but another problem is just the way that our particular political system is set up is that we have an electoral system that leads to this kind of two-party swing politics and that means we get scorched earth politics, and the reason we get scorched earth politics is there is no one else who can stop it because we have such a centralised unitary system.

ANITA ANAND: Okay, let's take the question. Who's got the microphone over here?

MIMI: Hi, my name is Mimi and I'm a recent graduate and a policy researcher. I'm interested in whether you think personalised algorithmic recommended systems that do prioritise interactivity and user engagement are actually contributing to polarisation?

BEN ANSELL: Yes, the problem with AI algorithms is that we end up being the donkey chasing the carrot all of the time with them, right? We follow exactly the way that the algorithm is structured, what kinds of news it recommends, and that's not an ideal news environment for any democracy to be in. I like getting news that I'm interested in. I do want some kind of personalisation, but I think all of us need to develop a bit of a taste for diverse arguments, but that's just not what happens on Facebook. In a way, funnily, it happened more on past Twitter, and I don't even know how to describe what's going on right now with that algorithm because it's chaotic more than anything else.

DESMOND KING: I'm Desmond King, Professor of American Politics at Oxford. You may deal with this in future lectures, but I'd like to see a bit more about institutional reforms. I would personally abolish the House of Lords immediately. In the US, we could end lifetime tenure for Supreme Court justices. The Congress has the power to do that. We could abolish the Senate maybe and take the Supreme Court here. There are more things that could be proposed and

pushed for to make democracy vibrant and more in touch with the sorts of local values you are proposing.

ANITA ANAND: Now, this being radio, you will not have seen that when you suggested abolishing the House of Lords, Virginia Bottomley visibly shuddered, but it did actually occur to me as well.

VIRGINIA BOTTOMLEY: [Indistinct].

ANITA ANAND: Yeah, no heckling from the middle. So, first of all, just taking just that specific point, is the House of Lords good for democracy or bad for democracy and then address the more general point?

BEN ANSELL: I think what I would say about the House of Lords is the getting rid of it forces us to ask a really important set of questions about what we would want from a second House and I don't think we, as a country, have thought that through. I think we could have a better second chamber, but I do think we need to have that conversation about what it is. What I would say, though, is lots of parts of our liberal democracy aren't elected, right? So we need to be careful about that. Our judges aren't elected and, thank God, they're not elected, right, because the American situation of elected judges causes all kinds of problems. So I don't think we should value parts of our democratic system just about whether we get to vote for them, but I do think that the House of Lords is like a vestigial limb that sort of didn't go away as the body evolved.

ANITA ANAND: Okay.

BEN ANSELL: Like, it's essentially our coccyx.

ANITA ANAND: Okay…

BEN ANSELL: But I don't hate my coccyx and I haven't asked for it to be removed.

ANITA ANAND: No, no, that's fine. That's fine. Well, I'm pleased to hear that. But I mean, if I can make the vestigial limb a foot, it's just I find it easier in my head. We have another sort of a toe on the foot or a finger on the hand, if you like. Lord Stewart Wood, we've heard from conservative peers, I mean, really, are you a vestigial coccyx? Is that how you see yourself? Justify why you're there and why this is good for democracy.

STEWART WOOD: I like to think I'm a vestigial coccyx, yeah, I guess. I mean, I agree with Ben, actually. Not everything in a democracy is valued because

it's elected, and I personally would reform the Lords – I agree with Des King – but you can't reform it unless you know what you want to replace it with and the thing that's always stopped Lords being reformed is there has never been anything approaching a consensus. Incidentally, the other thing stopping it being reformed is the House of Commons does not want a co-equal second chamber with the same democratic legitimacy as the House of Lords. So the reasons for its lack of reform are multiple. But it is anachronistic. There's no doubt about it.

ANITA ANAND: Okay, you're Treasury, former Treasury, that's your parish.

STEWART WOOD: I am, that's right, yes.

ANITA ANAND: Okay. So, I mean, one of the things we talked about was the limitations of time, you know, that if you've got a short term, then you've got politicians who are desperately trying to scramble their way to the next election and win it. Are we also in a situation, and this is for both of you, where actually it's more about how do you manage the purse that you've got? And that's what our democracy is these days. It's not big ideas, it's small change.

STEWART WOOD: There's no doubt we're in tough times and in tough times the purse strings issue becomes dominant and we are in an era where both main political parties in Britain seem to buy into a similar idea of this fetishising of balanced budgets. But I wonder whether this this is an enemy of democracy – you mentioned three, Ben – which you didn't mention which is the enemy of democracy is economies that stop working properly, and we've known that through the history of democracies. We've got a particular twist in the last 40 years which is we've got an international economy that's globalising and politicians that are, in general, happy to say I'm sorry, we can't control some of these great shifts in people, in companies, in finance. There's no wonder, really, that people lose faith in democracy when you live in an international economy where you can't control the things anymore that affect your life.

ANITA ANAND: Ben?

BEN ANSELL: I don't think we should downplay how serious difficult economic times are for liberal democracy. They were in the past and they will continue to be in the future. I think the first thing to say is that's why it's important for those of us who believe strongly in the institutions of liberal democracy to speak up for it because they're under challenge and there are going to be many, many people saying, look, the system doesn't work at all and convincing large audiences. So if, not just the mainstream media, but all of us go into that defensive crouch and say, gosh, you know, liberal democracy does have

problems and there's nothing we can do, then we open up the playing field to that.

BILL CASH: Bill Cash, Member of Parliament, Conservative Member of Parliament, and very keen on Brexit. Could I just simply say that I found what you said very interesting and enjoyable, but I do want to ask you a question because you talk about the future of democracy, but, of course, we've just left the European Union and we've regained our sovereignty and self-government. The question I'd like to ask you is this, would you prefer to be governed by members of Parliament who are elected by the voters, or would you rather have a system whereby the decisions for the making of the laws are not made in your own parliament but are made by a council of ministers by majority-----

ANITA ANAND: I think we know where you're coming from. I think we do know where you're coming from, that is a question, not a speech, Mr Cash, so, yes.

BILL CASH: By majority vote, behind closed doors so nobody can see the way in which the decisions were taken.

BEN ANSELL: So I think that's a completely fair and legitimate point, right, that you're making. These are hard choices that we always make when we're thinking about how the decisions made that affect us, where they are being made and how they are being made. But, look, it's a complicated world too where lots of decisions are made abroad that we have no control over at all that shape all of our lives all the time. I think the challenge with Brexit – and this is something I talk about in my book, available at all good bookstores, blah, blah, blah, at the beginning of the book I talk about when I met with a couple of members of Parliament in the committee rooms when the indicative votes were happening and MPs didn't approve of any of the options. None of them commanded a majority, from a let's call the whole thing off, through to a no deal Brexit, so I guess it feels to me that when you have so many different potential outcomes, one of which is exactly the one that you described, right, and very eloquently argued for, and another of which is the status quo ex ante, but there are lots of ones in between and I think that is the struggle of something like Brexit. We asked people to vote up or down, but it does turn out there are lots of ways of not being in the European Union because Switzerland has one and Norway has another and Turkey has another, and I don't think this country, as a whole, quite knew which of those other positions it wanted to be in.

ANITA ANAND: Okay, thank you.

PETER THATCHELL: You've identified, and we've discussed lots of different issues and problems, but is it not true, though, until we fix the fundamental of an unfair, basically corrupt voting system, none of those will be fixed. We have not had in this country a political party that's won a majority of the public vote since 1931. That's almost 100 years. Every government, bar 2010, has been based on minority public support. Without that public support, we can't reform the system, we can't renew our democracy, so I put it to you that reforming the vote is the key to unlocking all the other necessary changes.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you.

UNIDENTIFIED: Here, here.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

BEN ANSELL: You can't give a Reith lecture where you talk about proportional representation positively without feeling some agreement with that statement. There is an unfairness that's never going to go away while we have the current system. And so we've got a couple of options, one of which is just to try and have a referendum created by parties who benefit from the current system and will almost certainly lose out. We've done that once before, it didn't work out very well. I'd be surprised if it worked brilliantly again. One never knows.

Another, though, would be to think cleverly about where we could introduce more proportional elections in other parts of our polity. For example, were we to get rid of the House of Lords, we might want to think about how proportional representation might function in an upper house. We did, until very recently, have proportional representation in the London elections, but to the degree the lower levels of governance are good, and I strongly, as someone who has spent a lot of time in America, I think that giving people more power locally is a good thing. I think we should be thinking about using proportionality there and then leave Westminster as the kind of final big boss fight where we try and figure out how to do the House of Commons because attacking that big boss directly head on didn't work last time and I suspect it would fail again.

ANITA ANAND: Let's go over here.

ROBERT COLVILE: Robert Colvile from the Sunday Times and Centre for Policy Studies. I'd actually like to come back to one of the very first questions. Britain is not so much a democracy now as a gerontocracy. The average age of voters is creeping up, and because of where voters are located and because of differential turnout rates, the elderly have an enormously greater power in the voting system than the young. The economy has not been doing great. If we got

growth rates up, people would be a lot happier about politics and life in general. A really good way to get growth rates up is to build more houses, which also gives more houses to young people. Unfortunately, old people don't like having houses built, so is it not a fundamental problem that we essentially have, not a blocking minority, but a blocking majority?

BEN ANSELL: Predictors of who supports building new houses are not exactly what you might think they would be. Age isn't this kind of really obvious dividing line. So, when I surveyed people, I found that, yes, young people like building houses more than old people, but not a majority of them. And so there's a lot of generalised concern, and I think that concern ultimately comes down to people perhaps realistically believing that infrastructure won't get built alongside them and then really worrying about schools and hospitals and dentists and all kinds of things, right? So many problems in Britain are inter-connected, right, and I absolutely believe that if we built more houses this would be a happier country and it would be better for the young people of Britain, but in order to do that, we have to do all these other things, maybe economically, but probably definitely politically, and then when you add all of these things up in a time of tightened belts, that's why it gets hard to do.

ANITA ANAND: So two final questions because we are running out of time. The gentleman over there with the yellow microphone.

SASHA WARD: My name's Sasha Ward. I represent the Guardian reading workerarty. I'd like to ask if you think that the future of democracy is inextricably linked to the future of capitalism in that greater inequality seems to be a huge threat to democracy and causes massive polarisation?

BEN ANSELL: Democracies tend to emerge in more unequal countries, so that's the opposite, right, of that claim, but I'll come to your claim in a second. But the reason that happens is because unequal countries are often those where there's a new group of rich people who find themselves unrepresented. This is the no taxation without representation issue. But then it does seem that democracies function less well when they're highly unequal and I think the political science evidence is basically that democracies don't produce representative public goods, let's say, welfare spending, health systems, when they get really unequal. And so that's kind of a challenge, right, because the very thing that often causes democracies to emerge that makes them work badly, it means that it's not easy to draw a simple line. And one thing I will say about capitalism is that a system of economic production that emphasises liberty doesn't completely clash with a liberal democracy that emphasises freedom, but where it clashes is where one person, one vote and one dollar, one vote push against one another and I think the American situation where campaign

contributions are so important, that's one where inequality corrodes democracy. I think in this country it's less obvious to me that inequality in Britain, which hasn't, by the way, risen really for the last 15 years, is what's hurting our democracy now.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. And the final question, squeezing you in, a short question and a short answer, if that's possible.

AIDAN: Hello, I'm Aidan. I'm a software engineer. Robert raises the interesting point about the disproportionate voice that the old have over the young. What do you make of the Cambridge academic, David Runciman's view, that we ought to lower the voting age to six?

BEN ANSELL: What's wrong with five-year-olds? The political scientist, Philippe Schmitter, he argued that European elections should grant votes for all sort of living people – but I guess the parents would have to do it for a while – because his point was, look, actually, those are the future generations who are being most affected by policies. Now, that brings us right back, isn't this convenient, to the start of today's lecture where I talked about when sometimes people get more than one vote, right? Like my grandfather and his vote for Scottish universities, as well as himself. Well, as a parent, then you'd be getting votes for your children. I think that's something we could argue might be democratically legitimate, but you can also see how some people might say, well, why should people with large families tell me what to do? Is there something about large families that leads to a particular type of politics and so on? And so I don't think it ends the debate, but I actually think it's an interesting thing that we should debate in this country and I look forward to being in a debate with a four-year-old about why they should have the right to vote.

ANITA ANAND: If you're in a debate with a four-year-old, you're going to lose. Anyway, look-----

BEN ANSELL: It's happened before.

ANITA ANAND: We're going to have to leave it there, I'm afraid. Next time Ben is going to be talking about security. We will discuss threats from both home and abroad, but that's for next time. For now, though, from London, a huge thanks to our audience here and especially to our Reith lecturer, Professor Ben Ansell.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)