THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT IN TODAY'S BRITAIN

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PARTICIPANTS:

Welcome Remarks:

JOHN R. ALLEN, President, The Brookings Institution

Featured Speaker:

JOHN BERCOW, Speaker of the House of Commons
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Discussion:

MODERATOR: THOMAS WRIGHT, Senior Fellow and Director,
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AMANDA SLOAT Robert Bosch Senior Fellow,
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P R O C E E D I N G S

GENERAL ALLEN: Order. Order. Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is John Allen and I'm the president of the Brookings Institution, and it is my pleasure to welcome you all here today. Those in the audience who are with us but also those coming in over webcast and over CSPAN as well; so we're very happy to have CSPAN here.

We welcome you for a conversation on the role of Parliament in policy and politics at a crucial moment in one the best friends of the United States, and our closest ally, the United Kingdom.

This past year there's been a series of extraordinary developments in British politics with the House of Commons at the center of it all. Of particular interest, has been the long-running debate over the country's departure from the European Union in which there have been three defeats of the government's Brexit deal, and two extensions of the deadline.

Last week the UK, along with the rest of the EU, held elections for the European Parliament and the country will soon have a new prime minister. The leadership contest is getting underway within the governing conservative party following Prime Minister May's announcement that she will step down from party leadership following President Trump's state visit and the D-Day commemorations next week.

With all that as background, we are particularly grateful and very honored to have with us today the 157th Speaker of the House of Commons, the Right Honorable John Bercow.

Speaker Bercow began his parliamentary career in 1997 when he was elected the member of Parliament from Buckingham as a conservative. He served on the front benches as spokesman for education and employment and home affairs starting in 1999, and was appointed shadow secretary to the Treasury in 2001; shadow minister for work and pensions in 2002, and then shadow secretary of state for international

development in 2003. He was elected speaker in 2009 and has served in that role ever since.

Mr. Speaker we are delighted to have you at Brookings with us this morning. As you may know, Mr. Speaker, Brookings has undertaken a major study of the challenges and the pressures faced by democracies today. And I think I can speak for this institution in that your role as the speaker of the House of Commons, in that role, you are indeed a forceful voice in defense of liberal democracy in the world today. You've spoken powerfully about the rule of law, about respect for human rights, and the imperative of civility. And on my own, I would simply say the people in this city ought to be listening to all that very closely. And he's done it all while keeping order in the House of Commons.

Today's event is part of the Brookings Robert Bosch Foundation in this Transatlantic Initiative or the BBTI as we call it. A multi-year project of applied research and programming that seeks to reinvigorate, and more recently, to preserve the transatlantic collaboration on global issues. Events like this would simply not be possible without the partnership that Brookings has with the Robert Bosch Foundation and we are deeply grateful for that continued support.

So in a few moments I'll invite Speaker Bercow to the stage for his remarks, and after that Thomas Wright, who is a Brookings senior fellow and the director of the Center for U.S. and Europe here at Brookings, will moderate a conversation with the Speaker and Amanda Sloat, who is our Robert Bosch senior fellow at the Center for US and Europe as well. Questions and answers will follow their discussion.

And a final reminder, we are very much on the record today and we are streaming live. For those of you coming in over the internet, we are most grateful for your attendance. So with that, ladies and gentlemen, it is my great honor and pleasure to welcome to the BBTI stage, Speaker Bercow. And I look forward to his remarks and to the subsequent conversation thereafter. Sir, please join us (Applause).

MR. BERCOW: President Allen. Wow, that has a certain ring to it. That

really should be acknowledged. I'm bound to begin by observing, my friends, ladies and gentlemen, that having heard myself introduced I can hardly wait to hear myself speak. Now, whether you'll feel the same way at the end of my remarks is a matter for legitimate speculation and conjecture. But in the interests of inclusiveness, of intelligibility, of ensuring that everyone here present can genuinely attend to and feel a part of the proceeding, perhaps I can begin by inquiring whether you can hear me at the back.

While there are expressions of assent, and even some modest arm waving by one gentleman wearing a splendidly picturesque tie, upon which I congratulate him, and I take that as a modest encouragement that he is content to be able to attend and to hear. And that response, if I may say so my friends, to my inquiry "can you hear me at the back", represents a marked improvement upon the last occasion upon which I praised that self-same question to an audience, "can you hear me at the back", in which some unhelpful wag replied, "Yes, but I'll happily change places with someone who can't." so, maybe I should quit while I'm ahead. It's encouraging to know both that you can hear and that you do not appear to be altogether distraught about the fact that you can do so.

Let me, if I may, not because I want this to be a mutual admiration society but because I believe in candor and straightforwardness, respond to you, John, by saying that for me it's an honor and a privilege, as I said on the doorstep of the Institution, never would I have imagined a dead would come that I would be invited to address the Brookings Institution. I just had breakfast with the British Ambassador, Sir Kim Darroch, and your ears would have been burning, those who lead, and those who have scholarly positions at the Brookings Institution if you'd heard what he had to say.

He said the Brookings Institution is a stellar performer, hugely revered and esteemed for the sheer quality, as well as the prodigious quantity of its output. The amount you do, the focus on genuine research, on scholarship, on interaction and interplay of ideas, and on ensuring that there is at least the prospect of evidence-based policy, is something that should be commended to one and all.

There aren't many institutions that have quite the cerebral representation that Brookings has, and I think that that is something to be respected and it is to be recognized by anybody invited to be amongst your number, if only for a short period, that that is a very considerable honor.

As far as Amanda is concerned, I do want unduly, I use that helpful qualifying term, unduly, because it's my get-out clause to embarrass Amanda, but I will lay it up to you, ladies and gentlemen, I've got friends across the political spectrum, as you would expect, in the United Kingdom. I did some work with and for Ed Balls when he was Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in the Brown government and Ed and I have been friends for well over a decade. I've got the highest regard for Ed, and I spoke to Ed and mentioned my interest in coming to the United States and in the possibility of having an academic gathering, and he commended Amanda to me in terms that brook of no misunderstanding; he said how much he liked her and all the rest of it, and they cooperated on a number of fronts, but very specifically he said to me, "John, the thing you've got to understand about Amanda Sloat, apart from her very, very great knowledge of the European issue, is that she has a brain the size of a planet." So, I hope that she will bank that, it's now recorded, it's on permanent file, and she will deploy it to her advantage in times that lie ahead.

Now, before I address some serious matters to the best of my ability within the timeframe available to me, I do want to treat one quite sensitive matter, which I hazard to guess your natural courtesy would probably disincline you to raise with my directly, but if unaddressed will lurk mischievously, and perhaps from my vantage point, ladies and gentlemen, perilously in the undergrowth and which I conclude, therefore, must be knocked on the head at the outset before I further proceed, and that is the sensitive matter of height.

Very specifically, it has been bruited, I rather like that old-fashioned word, in some of the more down-market parts of the media, that I am the shortest man ever to be Speaker of the UK House of Commons. Let me say to you; let me assert, with all the

conviction and rhetorical force at my command, and for the avoidance of doubt, that there is nothing wrong with being short. On the law of averages is the likelihood, although I know not to whom this description applies because most of you are seated, that a significant number of you in this audience share that characteristic of vertical challenge with me.

We may be short, but we may also be -- judge ourselves to be and be judged my others to be -- perfectly formed. In any case, we are environmentally friendly in that we don't take up a great deal of space.

Moreover, I am -- by way of making a virtue of necessity, my friends -- I am short, I have always been short, I'm 56 years old and therefore I'm set to remain short, and indeed, given the known impact of the aging process upon physiognomy, the overwhelming likelihood is that I should become inextricably and irrevocably shorter still; and about the fact of that continued and soon to be exacerbated shortness, I am as intensely relaxed as the Svengali of New Labor in the United Kingdom, Peter Mandelson, once famously, or in some people's minds infamously observed, that New Labor was intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich.

But I'm not intensely relaxed about the matter of historical accuracy and simply as a matter of historical fact, it's quite wrong when some of these more down-market, lewd musical, fifth-rate scribblers say, "Oh well, Bercow is the shortest man ever to be Speaker of the UK House of Commons".

Sir John Bushy, Speaker of the UK House of Commons from 1394 to 1398, Sir John Wenlock, Speaker from 1455 to 1456, and Sir Thomas Tresham, Speaker of the UK House of Commons in 1459, are all believed to have been shorter than I am, although I do have to admit that this was true only after all three of them had been beheaded.

Indeed, no fewer than seven of my predecessors met their end on the executioner's block. One was killed in battled, and a further poor, unfortunate soul was brutally murdered. So you will understand that this does enable me to view the woes and challenges which afflict and confront the House of Commons, which afflicts and confronts

the British body politic more widely, and which, in all candor, I readily concede periodically afflict **me**, with an appropriate sense of historical perspective. That is to say, whatever else happens to me, I am not likely to lose my head, despite occasional rumors to the contrary.

That was a fate that sadly befell speakers in the eras that predated the emergence and confirmation of British parliamentary democracy. And that concept of British parliamentary democracy is my starting point. As Gladstone observed in the Sir Basil speech in 1855, February the 23rd, 1855, the business of the House of Commons is not to govern the country, but to hold to account those who do.

Now, of course, in our system, there is a marked difference from that of the United States. We do not have a separation of powers in the same way, and as you will readily recognize, in Britain, members of what I call the executive branch, that is to say ministers in the government, do sit in Parliament; indeed in both houses of Parliament, predominantly in the House of Commons, and in smaller numbers in the House of Lords.

But just so you are clear beyond per adventure, there are roughly 80 ministers, in varies, in the House of Commons; that is to say, government ministers in the House of Commons. But there are 650 members of Parliament, so well over 550 -- nearer to 570 -- members of the House of Commons are not part of the executive branch, and their responsibility is to question, to probe, to scrutinize, to challenge, to contradict, and even from time to time to expose the errors of omission, or of commission of the government of the day.

They are not there purely -- and in some cases they don't see themselves there for this purpose at all -- to do what the government wants. They are constituency members of Parliament, they deal with case work, they take up local concerns, they study policy, they assess legislation, they seek to better it, and to challenge and probe and hold to account the executive branch, as that branch discharges its duties.

The role of the Speaker in the British system is, of course, very different from that in the United States. I have the highest regard for, and quite a longstanding link

with Speaker Pelosi, but in the British system, the Speaker isn't a party player. The Speaker is, from the moment of election, required -- I was going to say exulted -- nay, required thereafter to eschew party politics, to renounce affiliation. And the Speaker, though a constituency MP, sits as a quasi-independent, and the Speaker is independent of, unconnected with, owing no allegiance to, and expressing no support for any political party.

My role is to umpire the proceedings or to serve as a referee, if you prefer that term. I am, if you will, the leader of the good order and fair play party. My responsibility is to try to facilitate the House so that all the different points of view can be expressed. I keep order, I encourage people to take part and I try to cut down on the number of people excluded altogether as a result of bad behavior. So you can see where the analogy of a referee or an umpire -- and sometimes even perhaps a teacher or a head-teacher -- kicks in.

In addition, I have a responsibility to select amendments to motions, and amendments on new clauses for debate and vote where legislation is concerned and periodically to make procedural rulings as I did back in March, when I simply wished to signal to the House that alongside of a variety of other considerations, an important consideration as the preservation of an, therefore, continued respect for the notion that Parliamentary time should be properly used, that the decisions of the House should be respected, and that colleagues should not be continually exalted, berated, or harangued into taking a position on a matter upon which they had already pronounced.

And that's why I said on March the 18th, the so-called same question rule; the rule that says, the convention that decrees that we don't have the same question put -- or substantially the same question put -- twice in a session was important.

And if the government wanted to come back to the House of Commons, and to put a different proposition to that which it had previously put in relation to Brexit, it would be perfectly in order for it to do so, and it subsequently did so. But simply to press precisely the same case, would run the risk of falling foul to that important, hallowed, and overwhelmingly complied-with convention.

Let me, if I may, just make three further points and then hand over for a wider discussion. First, as Speaker my principal and overriding concern over nearly a decade in the chair, has been to try to ensure that the business of the House is lively and more dynamic, more unpredictable, more urgent, more topically, more geared to the focus on discussion of, and expression of different opinions, about those matters that preoccupy our electorate. For a long time that was not the case.

The government controls the order paper, that is to say, the principal business of the House each day. This government does, its predecessor did, **its** predecessor did; this is not a party, political point. But the provision in our standing orders that allowed matters to be raised if they were considered by the chair to be urgent, had long fallen -- before I was elected in 2009 -- into desuetude.

And so specifically, the provision that said that members could apply to the Speaker to ask an urgent -- capital U -- question -- capital Q -- of a government department was almost held in abeyance. It had ceased to be.

In the year before I was elected Speaker, only two urgent questions, typically then running to 20, 25, 30 minute exchanges in the House, probing the government on some matter that had just arisen about which there was a controversy, where there was an inconsistency, where there was a change of policy, where there was a scandal or an embarrassment to be explained or defended; that wasn't happening.

And I said, well if you elect me as Speaker, I'm determined to revive and to preside over a renaissance of the mechanism of the Urgent Question, which will be a magnet for colleagues to come to the chamber rather than appearing in radio stations, television studios, or petting blogs. They will have an incentive to come to the chair because they can raise that which is urgent, and it will be a means by which ministerial feet can be held to the fire.

Now whether I'm a good Speaker or not is not for me to say. I obviously feel I can do the job and presumably my colleagues do because I've been elected and reelected

a total of four times; but ultimately no person can be judged in his own cause, others must judge that.

My central thesis to you is simply that I've done what it said on the tin, and I have granted 618 Urgent Questions over the last just under 10 years, facilitating a vast number of members to raise a vast number of questions, on a vast miscellany of different issues, spanning virtually every government department. And the best ministers in each government tend not to complain.

If I may say so, Jack Straw in the Labor Government, Secretary of State for Justice at the time, never caviled at, or remonstrated, with the decision by me to grant an Urgent Question because Jack was a man of government, but he was also a parliamentarian, and he wanted to attend to the criticisms of his position and to respond.

And in the present government, if I may say so, I would cite Michael Gove and Jeremy Hunt as very good examples of extremely capable ministers who've got the intellectual self-confidence, as well as the communications skills, and the dexterity at the box, as we call it, the dispatch box, to cope with that which is thrown at them. So sometimes people complain that the Speaker has granted an Urgent Question, but neither of those two as ever, in my earshot, complained. They are people who know that they can hack it. So that's been my approach to the business of the chamber.

More widely, I've thought it relevant -- this is possibly of less interest to some of you, but important to me and to a lot of people in Parliament -- to try to make the House of Commons more representative of the country we're charged to represent. And specifically, therefore, I thought it a priority, out with the chamber, to make the Palace of Westminster somewhat more modern.

So that’s why I thought it was ridiculous when I took office, we've got a shooting gallery, you can go pistol shooting in Parliament, but you can't put a baby anywhere because we don’t have a nursery. Well 10 years on I'm pleased to say we no longer have a pistol shooting gallery, but we do have a very well subscribed nursery, which

was a prize project of mine early on.

I thought it ridiculous and I looked somewhat enviously at the United States which, of course, has a wonderful visitor center in Washington, that we didn't have an education center. And it was a priority for me to establish a digital, high-tech, interactive, cutting-edge, state of the art facility adjacent to the House of Lords, to which in due course 100,000 young people a year will come to learn about the journey from 1215 and the signing of the Magna Carta, to the rights and responsibilities which British citizens enjoy today. That center is over-subscribed as week after week after week school children come to see what goes on, and that to me is a source of pride.

We want to bring people **into** our democracy, not repel them from it. So those were what you would call, second order issues. They are not legislative first order issues, but they are issues about the culture of the place as I think it's also relevant that we've got more women in senior positions, and I've made a particular point of appointing more women and more BME citizens of the United Kingdom to prominent positions as Speaker's Chaplains, Speaker's Counsel, Sergeant at Arms Responsible for Chamber Security. There is a lot more to do but those are the changes that have been made.

The last point I want to make to you and then I'll sit down is this, the Speaker has to avoid party controversy. The Speaker, however, can be an ambassador for Parliament and a robust advocate of democratic politics. And when I stood for election I said to colleagues, I do not intend to dress up in a fancy uniform day by day, and to remain incarcerated in the Palace of Westminster completely inaccessible to the outside world.

If you elect me, I will try to be a Speaker not just **in** Parliament, but a Speaker **for** Parliament; a Speaker who welcomes people **to** Parliament in the state rooms and hosts charitable functions three, four, five times a week, and a Speaker who gets out and speaks to schools, and to universities, and to faith groups, and to charitable institutions, and a Speaker who welcomes the United Kingdom Youth Parliament every year to Westminster, to the green benches to conduct their debates of their choice, and a Speaker

who **goes** as a matter of pride to their conference **every** single year.

I promised the UKYP that I would go to their conference every year to talk to and hear from them and the reason why I have always taken that stance, and I have honored that pledge is partly, of course, I enjoy it. You will say, ah, well Bercow generally speaking, **is** generally speaking. He enjoys speaking, so that's why he does it.

Well, there is an element of truth in that, but the reason otherwise why I do it ladies and gentlemen, and I will like to commend this to you, is that I feel that if ever we, in Westminster, and politicians in other great democracies, want again to be respected **by** young people, we have to show respect **for** young people. Respect is **not** our automatic right; it's an earned credit, or a two-way street.

Enough from me, notwithstanding, your quite extraordinary courtesy and forbearance, ladies and gentlemen, my friends of this august institution, and from wider civil society, you'll be mightily relieved to know that my speech is now definitively, at an end (Applause).

MR. WRIGHT: Great, thank you Mr. Speaker, thank you for fascinating remarks. I think that you'll find that we are being broadcast in CSPAN, but you are must-see viewing, I think, in the United States over the last two years. People, we've heard all the time, have been fixated on parliamentary questions and the parliamentary process, and I'm sure we'll find out later you may get some relatively detailed and arcane questions on the procedures in the House of Commons.

But I wanted to just start, we are sort of in an extraordinary situation, you know. Britain is likely to have a new Prime Minister, the various candidates are sort of out-bidding each other in what they will do on Brexit, it's sort of unprecedented that the government has not had a majority for sort of key piece of legislation for the last couple of years, and we really wanted to sort of unpack that and also look at your reflections on your time as Speaker.

But before we get into that, I'd like to turn to Amanda who's done a lot of

work here on Brexit, for her reflections on your speech and then maybe we could proceed from there, so Amanda.

MS. SLOAT: Well, we are delighted that you are here. Great that you are able to join us, I appreciate the kind remarks in front of my boss, and Thomas said, there has been a tremendous amount of interest in Brexit here in Washington. There has also been a huge amount of confusion, so part of what I have tried to do is to explain some of the arcane parliamentary politics to an audience here, and so we were even more delighted that you are here to explain the arcane process to us in person.

I think what I was most struck by, and perhaps a place we could start, was interested in getting your thoughts on your role and on the role of the Parliament. You yourself clearly came into the job with a very clear vision for how you wanted to operate as Speaker, a number of things that you talked about having changed; an author of a biography about you I saw said that you changed the job. I'm so interested if that was part of your intention going in.

The Sun, and I think other tabloids less hospitably called you Speaker of the Devil, which maybe you embraced that as a positive; but I was interested in hearing more on your remarks about the way in which you saw that. I think there are questions here about the role that Parliament had in shaping the debate, your role in choosing which amendments were able to go forward, your role in choosing who was able to ask the questions, your role in going back to parliamentary precedent from 1604, and I've personally been curious if you just have an arcane knowledge of parliamentary procedure, whether you have particularly staff.

In terms of making some of these rulings that really ended up being quite essential in the way the debate played out, and then more broadly the role of Parliament in this process, because it has been quite striking over the last couple of months and it's what you were referring to; how central Parliament and the legislature has come in this debate over Brexit.

One of the questions that I have been asked by people here is, you know, whether this process is undemocratic. Should May for example have consulted more? Barne was consulting quite widely with member states, so I don't want to put you on the spot specifically with your assessment of the Prime Minister, but more generally, are there lessons to be learned from this experience of Brexit in terms of the way that that Parliament itself functions?

So, many things there, you can respond to what you want but very interested in how you saw your role as Speaker, how you performed. Some of these very specific functions that ended up being quite influential in the debate, and then much more broadly what we can learn about the role of Parliament generally in these processes.

MR. BERCOW: Well Amanda, thank you very much. You've wrapped up a lot of important issues in those remarks to which briefly I will try to offer an initial response.

Yes, it hasn't been accidental the way I've gone about serving as Speaker and although you adjust a bit the longer you're in office and new challenges emerge, and you can be on the receiving end of good advice that might cause you to take a slightly different direction, I think I can honestly say, although I couldn't possibly have anticipated the Brexit situation when I stood for election in 2009, I was clear in my own mind then that there was a problem for Parliament, and specifically Amanda, Thomas, colleagues, my assessment of the situation back then was that, quite aside from the reputational carnage inflicted by our expenses scandal, there was a much bigger, more enduring challenge for Parliament. And that was put very simply over decades under governments of both colors.

The power of government had increased, was continuing to increase and needed to be decreased, of which the corollary was that the power of Parliament has decreased, was continuing to decrease, and needed to be increased.

In other words, I felt, ladies and gentlemen, that there was disequilibrium within the British body politic a decade ago. I don't say that that's gone, it will be extraordinarily presumptuous and arrogant to say that it's a case of "job done" or that I have

been able to reverse that trend definitively or decisively. I don't make such a claim, but I do argue that the way I've gone about the job is to try to allow the House of Commons -- I've no say in relation to the House of Lords -- to breathe, and yes, as a private citizen I have my own views on a range of issues, but it's not really about what I think on individual issues, it's about what Parliament's role should be.

Now, virtually every Speaker at some stage is criticized for alleged partisanship in our country. His or her decisions are poured over and people will say, ah, that's evidence that he or she leans that way on this issue, or the other way on this issue, so it's very hard to be free of the charge at best, but it's in the job description of Speaker that you are neutral between the political parties, or impartial -- if you prefer that word.

Secondly, we're in an age of transparency where everything is trolled over, so if you weren't, you'd soon be found out. Thirdly, I used to work, as Americans would put it I think, across the aisle, I used to work on a cross-party basis on speech and language and provision for children with special educational needs, the fight against global poverty, the pursuit of constitutional reform, the campaign for LGBT equality, etc. etc. I worked on those issues over many years on a cross-party basis so I had long since ceased to be tribal, and I think I could fairly claim to be someone with links across the House. And I sat on the previous Speaker's panel of chairs that shared bill committees and so on, so I don't think I found it difficult to be impartial, but I've not been impartial **about** the House.

I'm impartial **within** the House, but not impartial **about** the House. And my feeling was, well, the Speaker has got to enable the different voices to be heard, whether they be, let's say on Brexit, the voices of strong remainers or the voices of strong Brexiteers. And when the committee Brexiteers were in a minority on the Conservative benches under David Cameron, I stood up for their rights to be heard, to ask Urgent Questions, to probe, to amend, to try to scrutinize better the government of the day, because part of the Speaker's job is to speak up for, or to champion the rights of minorities.

And now in a sense, you know the Brexiteers are in the majority within the

Conservative party. I'm not caviling it that, I'm not knocking that or criticizing that; that's just a statement of fact. But there are other views, and those other views are entitled to be heard. So my approach at question time, and when ministers deliver statements or the Prime Minister delivers a statement to the House, is basically to enable everybody to be heard.

And in that sense, you can almost say I'm rather undiscriminating. There's not an absolute rule about it, but statements -- that is to say an announcement to the House by a minister -- was typically followed in the past by exchanges lasting 45 minutes or maybe an hour.

I sometimes run exchanges on statements by the Prime Minister for two hours or more, and I absolutely admit, ladies and gentlemen, I do it not out of any desire to make the life of the Prime Minister or the other ministers concerned difficult, but because I feel these are momentous matters and every voice should be heard. And if that means that we spend a bit longer, well so be it. What other incredibly important business is more important later in the day, than that the executive's representative, the Prime Minister, or the Brexit Secretary, or the Foreign Secretary, or the International Trade Secretary, should be fully, yes, painstakingly, remorselessly questioned and scrutinized.

So I think sometimes when people say, ah, well, the Speaker called this one before that one, or there was a debate and this one got in early and that one got in late; well, if I may say so, under my egis, on my watch, I've made a priority of ensuring that far more people get in of all views. So I think I've been fair minded.

On the convention, the 17th century convention; look I do have some clever people helping me. Did I have a sort of complete recall of that? No. I was aware of the issue and I did a little bit of research, and I saw for myself what had been ruled in 1604. And you know, there were people who said, ah, what an old-hat convention, but I argued that the absence of Speaker intervention in relation to that convention was attributable not to the discontinuation of the convention but rather to general compliance with it. In other words,

the Speaker hadn't had to intervene because generally it had been observed.

Now, originally, that convention owed its foundation to abuse of parliamentary time, very often by backbench members repeatedly introducing the same measure, and somebody did say to me, John, it wasn't introduce in order to frustrate the government of the day. And I said, no, but the general principal of equality should apply here and if it is wrong for a backbench member repeatedly to press a case which has been -- I use the term in the parliamentary sense, disposed of, that is to say, ladies and gentlemen, decided by the House, well the same principal should apply to a government.

And I've every respect for Theresa May. So it is not intended to knock her, but if a government has put a proposition and it has been dealt within that session, you know, the idea that the same proposition should be put over and over and over again in the hope that the answer will change, would not, in my judgment, be right.

Now as far as she's concerned, it is not for me to say whether she should have taken a different approach. The only thing I will say, I've every respect for her, she's made her decision to depart and I think on a human level, anyone can identify with somebody who leaves a job before he or she wishes, she's always treated me with complete courtesy and I respect and appreciate that; I think the loss of the majority in 2017 at the general election made it very much for difficult for her.

Now, you know, there will be people who say, well, if after that a different approach had been taken, a different outcome might have been achieved and we might not be where we are now; well, you know, that sort of speculative. And as to where we go from here, well, my own view about it is, A) we have to wait to see who emerges as the next Prime Minister, but the appetite of the House to have its say has recently been whetted and that appetite is not exhausted; indeed some would say, it's voracious.

The House will want to have its say and the idea that the House won't have its say, you know, is just for the birds. Parliament is a big player in this in that whatever view it takes, whether Parliament votes one way for one particular proposition, or for a directly

contrary proposition, or for another proposition somewhere in the middle, remains to be seen. But the idea that Parliament is going to be made due course for reasons of restoration refurbishment, be physically evacuated, but the idea that Parliament is going to evacuated from the center stage of debate on Brexit is unimaginable. It is simply unimaginable.

MR. WRIGHT: Just on that point, because I think this is a very important point that people are looking at in the present sort of context, that the candidates for the Tory Party leadership are promising several of them to force through a no-deal Brexit on October the 31st, if they can't renegotiate the back stop as part of the deal in Brussels; which most observers think it's unlikely that they will get concessions that the previous Prime Minister did not get. Do you think that a Prime Minister committed to a no-deal at Brexit can force it through? There's been speculation that if they're determined not to play ball with the House of Commons, that they can basically force it through, or that the Commons will sort of insist on a role and will be able to block Britain from crushing out of the EU on Halloween.

MR. BERCOW: Thomas, thank you. My reading of the situation is that legally the default position, in the absence of an agreement, a deal, is Brexit on the 31st of October. That is to say, in the absence of a deal, and in the absence of a further extension. That is the legal as I understand it. There was a bill passed, ladies and gentlemen, under the leadership of Yvette Cooper from the Labor Side and Oliver Letwin from the Conservative side, to prevent a no-deal Brexit.

But, I think I might even say, that piece of legislation, which was passed, is now OTOs because it referred to a particular set of circumstances in April, and therefore, it's been overtaken by events.

So, legally, the scenario, Thomas, that you highlight and which you say is spoken to by a number of people who seek to be Prime Minister, is so. There can however be a difference between what the law says and what political movement between now and then, political activity decrees. And I'm not saying that Brexit without a deal will happen, and I'm not saying that it definitely won't. I am saying, I'm very clear in my mind that Parliament,

and individual parliamentarians will have strong views about these matters. And there is a difference between a legal default position, and what the interplay of political forces in Parliament will facilitate.

It's not for me, ladies and gentlemen, I hope you understand; please don't take umbrage at this; it's not for me to seek to claim to know what is the will of the people. It's not for me to seek to claim to know that. That's not a matter for the Speaker. My job is to stand up for the right of the House of Commons institutionally, and the rights that individual members of Parliament, individually, to express themselves. And to try to take policy forward as they think fit.

So I think there is much debate still to be had and the idea that there is an inevitability -- I don't think anybody is saying this, or I'm not aware of it -- but the idea that there is an inevitability of a no-deal Brexit would be a quite wrong suggestion, a quite wrong suggestion. There is not inevitability whatsoever about that.

Howard Wilson was not one of our greatest Prime Ministers in the UK, though he was rather a canny operator, he fought five elections and he won four of them, and Howard Wilson's probably most famous adage was "a week's a long time in politics". There is a long way to go. There's a lot still to be said and nothing should be taken for granted. It was said that we would be out of the European Union by the 29th of March, and then by the 12th of April, and in due course we may be on whatever basis, we may be. But at the moment, the United Kingdom remains a member of the European Union, and there is much debate to be had and policy to be determined and conclusion to be reached.

MR. WRIGHT: Thanks, Amanda, did you want to come in in this point?

MS. SLOAT: Yeah, I was going to ask where this leaves the country in broader constitutional terms, right? We have a situation where government lost a referendum that it brought, where the government has not had a parliamentary majority to be able to deliver on the results of that referendum.

So I wonder if we're seeing tension between direct democracy, where the

people were able to speak in a referendum, a parliamentary democracy, where you have gridlock in Parliament and Parliament isn't able to deliver on that, and then also an executive that is not able to deliver on that. So interested in where you see this tension between direct democracy and parliamentary democracy, and then also more broadly, what this is likely to do to the country going forward.

It's seems now we've seen with the European Parliament elections, the two establishment parties, the Conservative, Labor, both had very bad elections; increasing support for the Greens, for the liberal democrats, of course for Nigel Farage's Brexit party, all parties arguably that had a much clearer stance on the position of Brexit, and so you have a very polarized country and a very polarized Parliament. And so, where the country even in broader terms is able to go forward with this, not to mention potential questions for Scotland, for Northern Ireland, when you have such deep divisions within the country.

MR. WRIGHT: Could I just underscore one element of that.

MR. BERCOW: Of course.

MR. WRIGHT: Just because Britain never had a referendum before 1975, it's the first ever a referendum was on leaving the EU in 1975 and the government wanted to remain, and there's virtually been no -- very few -- referendums since. There was the voting system referendum --

MR. BERCOW: Yes.

MR. WRIGHT: Which --

MR. BERCOW: In 2011 --

MR. WRIGHT: Conservatives basically won.

MR. BERCOW: Yeah.

MR. WRIGHT: And then there were regional referendums --

MR. BERCOW: Sure --

MR. WRIGHT: In Northern Ireland and in Scotland, but, you know, as someone who sort of grew up reading a lot of British history, it was drummed into us that

Parliamentary sovereignty and --

MR. BERCOW: Mm hmm.

MR. WRIGHT: Sort of the Burkean notion of the MP was what really mattered and direct democracy was this sort of European thing that led to the destabilization of Germany and other places. And I guess, just in addition to Amanda's question, I would just ask has Brexit fundamentally undermined, does it fundamentally threaten the British system of parliamentary democracy. I mean, do you see a fundamental tension between having plebiscites and referendums, and this institution that you are charged to sort of uphold its tradition and its sort of constitutional role.

MR. BERCOW: I don't want to fudge it because it is an important issue, but the risk of, ladies and gentlemen, of a nuance here and calibration -- If I can put it like that -- if you ask me is there an automatic and sort of ineluctable incapability between parliamentary democracy and a referendum, the answer is no.

There isn't an automatic and ineluctable incapability between the two. It is possible to have a referendum on a particular matter at a given time, and for parliamentary democracy to continue to thrive to proper, and to be either to a greater or to a lesser extent, unblemished by the experience.

I think the truth of the matter is that there are very few absolutes in these matters. When the decision was made by the Cameron government to seek a referendum on Brexit, the term Brexit, ladies and gentlemen, by the way, for those scholars of these matters, had scarcely been coined at that time, but we know of what we speak. The issue was should be stay in the European Union or not. Prime Minister Cameron, I think, was motivated by a number of considerations. There was a growth in the UKIT vote, he faced very considerable pressure within his own party, and he made the judgment that this was the right way to put the issue to bed.

And there were a number of people who agreed. Indeed, I remember myself at that time thinking, well there is an argument for it because the matter isn't readily

capable of resolution by normal methods; that is to say, Parliamentary debate and elections. And the reason why it couldn't be treated in that way was that all of the major parties, Conservative, Labor, Liberal Democrats, were in favor of continued British membership.

So a general election couldn't be the vehicle for sorting out the issue of Brexit. So I could see an argument for a referendum. I'm not sure -- you'd have to ask David Cameron that was his motivation. I think he was very preoccupied with the challenges that his own party faced at the time and he thought that this would be a way of overcoming some of those difficulties. I leave you to judge whether in fact the matter has been successfully resolved in the way that he envisioned and dearly hoped.

My point, really, and forgive me if you don't regard this as satisfactory, but it is my point, is that the only duty of a member of Parliament is to do what he or she thinks is right. Now, you may say, oh come on John, I didn't come to hear you say that, but that is my honest view.

So, there is a view that says, the referendum supersedes anything else. Parliament legitimately -- not as a result of a mass rally, or a certain decision to hold a meeting a la a Greek city state, you know, in Parliament square; Parliament legislated for a referendum and the referendum went in favor of Brexit against the wishes and, to a considerable extent, the expectations of much of what I will describe non-pejoratively as the British establishment, but that's what happened.

And so there is a view that says, that's it, that's it; we didn't talk about having best of three, or best of five. We didn't talk about ifs and buts or apples and nuts. We said that we would trust the people. Most members of Parliament voted for the referendum legislation, across the House, not just on the Conservative side, across the House. And the referendum happened, and that's the outcome and our task is to deliver it. That is an opinion.

Moreover, it may be that if a member of Parliament flies in the fact of that by voice or vote and says, no I don't accept that, that member of Parliament may face sanction

within his party. I'm not making a party political point, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm making a factual point when I invoke the example of my Parliamentary colleague -- and county colleague, as it happens, in Buckinghamshire, Dominic Grieve, who is a former attorney general in the Cameron government, and Dominic is a strong Remainer, a member of Parliament for Beaconsfield, he recently -- it's not binding -- but he recently suffered a no-confidence motion against him in his local party because he has said he thinks there should be a further referendum, and he thinks that it's a great act of economic and political self-harm for Britain to leave the European Union.

No he may -- I'm not saying he will be -- but he could end up being deselected and that would be a matter of political judgment for his party. Or, a member of Parliament could fly in the face of his or her constituents and get kicked out of Parliament. Those are political matters, but if you ask me, is there a legal duty for an MP to vote for the result of the referendum, or to vote against the result of the referendum, the answer is no. There is no legal duty at all. It's a matter of choice for the member.

The member must decide what he or she thinks is right; right for the country, perhaps right for Europe, or right for the world. And they may face consequences if they fly in the face of their party or their voters, but that’s a choice that they can make. That’s one point.

And the second point of with which I'll leave you in answer to this question, is that I'm not arguing for or against, I'm simply making a factual point, the referendum legislation was in the 2015 to '17 Parliament. The referendum took place on the 23rd of June 2016, and Parliament then invoked Article 50, the two-year countdown to Brexit and it did so in March 2017. Those are very significant matters.

They are relatively recent decisions, and they can't just be wished away or sniffed out, or said to be of no consequence. They are of consequence, but those matters were matters decided by the last Parliament. No Parliament can bind its successor. The most recent Parliament was elected on June 8th 2017, so this Parliament can do as this

Parliament thinks fit.

Now, you know, there might be somebody who will say, ah, well, Bercow is trying to signal that Parliament should do X or should do Y; no. Bercow isn't trying to signal that Parliament should do X or should do Y. Bercow is appearing at the celebrated and august Brookings Institution, and trying to give an honest answer to a question.

And if you ask me, you know -- I mean, I admitted on one occasion, probably unwisely but I admitted to speaking at Reading University a couple of years ago that in the referendum I had voted to remain. I admit that and I'm not adding to, or subtracting from that, that's a matter of fact. But if you ask me, am I unashamedly pro-Parliament, yes I am passionate about parliamentary democracy. I believe passionately that Parliament must do what Parliament thinks it's right.

And you're absolutely right, you know your history; Edmund Burke and at one time, the member of Parliament for Bristol, famously said in his Bristol speech, as your member of Parliament I owe you not merely my industry, the old fashioned word for hard work -- but my judgment, and I'd betray instead of serving you if I sacrifice my judgment to your opinion.

MPs, once they're elected have a responsibility -- not just a right, but a duty -- to do what they think is right in terms of voice and vote.

MR. WRIGHT: Thank you --

MR. BERCOW: I'm sorry that was a long answer to your question.

MR. WRIGHT: No, no that's great, it's great, and I think we want to go to the audience in a few minutes, but we did want to look a little bit at the broader picture as well, outside of the UK because you know, you became Speaker in 2009, right, if I'm not mistaken, and that was sort of the start of the financial crisis. And since then we've seen this upswing in populism across the Atlantic and across the world really.

And so, I guess -- and I think Amanda has her question here as well to add in -- but I would just ask, how is the tone of politics really changed in your time as Speaker?

I mean you've been witness to this sort of rise in populism and divisiveness that we've seen across the world playing out spectacularly, of course, in London. So I'd be very curious for your reflections on that, but I wanted to bring Amanda as well, in answer of the U.S. angle to this too.

MS. SLOAT: We're in Washington, so of course, we need to ask a Trump related question. President Trump of course is going to be in London next week for a state visit. He was there in 2017 and you blocked him from addressing Parliament during that time, citing opposition to racism and sexism, as well as the migrant ban.

We did note that Xi Jinping did address Parliament in a state visit in 2015, so in your effort to allow and encourage free speech and debate in Parliament, and encourage it among your MPs, we were interested in your criteria by why one and not the other.

MR. BERCOW: Okay, well I'll deal with the second question first, no disrespect Thomas, I shall come on to yours. Amanda, in relation to President Trump, the first point to make is that no request has been received by me for President Trump to address a gathering of both Houses of Parliament in Westminster. No request has been received --

MS. SLOAT: On the current trip.

MR. BERCOW: In relation to --

MS. SLOAT: You mean for his visit next week --

MR. BERCOW: The current trip, yes that's quite true, in relation to the current trip. I did express myself on this matter on February the 6th, 2017; there was a certain amount of internal correspondence at that time and it was certainly being considered at that time. I'm not sure whether it was a formal request, I don't recall receiving a formal request, but there was a certain matter of correspondence and discussion of it at that time. But it didn't happen and I have nothing to add to or to subtract from what I said on February the 6th, 2017, of which you've just given a very eloquent presage. But in this case, no

request has been received.

The second point I think is worth making because you are either academics yourselves, or you've taken interest in academic study, academic research, and empirical evidence, there is a view abroad -- and I use the term abroad in a sort of political sense -- that it is the unbreakable norm, the very established and hallowed convention for a visiting President of the United States coming to the UK to address both Houses of Parliament. And if you'll forgive me saying so, this is not so.

It is not in any sense an unbreakable norm or a hallowed convention. It has often happened, ladies and gentlemen, but it hasn't happened in every case. If memory serves me correctly -- I wasn't in Parliament at the time -- President Reagan did indeed address both Houses of Parliament in the Royal Gallery, which is a very prestigious venue, but it is usually regarded as a slightly less prestigious venue than Westminster Hall.

The fact is that President Obama was invited to address both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall, and that was very well received; his address was very well received. He was a comparatively popular President in Europe and indeed, as far as my colleagues and House Lords and I in (inaudible) could tell, in the UK. And he was also, of course, the first black President of the United States. He was invited to address both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall and he was a great source of pride to me to welcome him on that occasion.

His address was very well received, and to be honest, people to this day talk about how behind the scenes he behaved towards everybody he met. He wanted to meet every doorkeeper, he wanted to shake the hands of some of the most junior people on his private tour, which was not being filmed, and it was a very celebrated occasion.

I think I might in saying, that George Bush Senior did not address both Houses of Parliament in either of the venues that I've mentioned, or any other, and George W. Bush did not do so. I think one of them came during a parliamentary recess, and whether there was a request made, I don't know, I wasn't in post at the time, but certainly

George W. Bush didn't. So all I'm saying is that it's not in any sense an unbreakable norm, and that's the second point.

And then the third point in relation to the Chinese President is a point very well made by you, and let me be absolutely honest with you, you know I mentioned earlier that, you know, I had a sort of basic sense of how I wanted to operate as Speaker, but you learn new things as you go along, and you get new advice; and let's face it, you make mistakes. You do, you make mistakes.

And looking back, do I think there is a powerful argument that says that perhaps the Chinese President should not have been invited to address both Houses of Parliament. There is a powerful argument.

I'm not saying it's conclusive, but you know, if you say to me, well, John, you know, I'm not necessarily knocking you in relation to President Trump, but why did you think it right to allow the Chinese President's address. At the time, the Lord Speaker and I were persuaded that there was some merit; we were trying to develop that relationship. The Chinese President addressing us seemed not to provoke general consternation. That was my sense; it's something I have to take into account. I had no sense that there was a general air of outrage amongst parliamentary colleagues at the idea, and it seemed to me to be a reasonable proposition.

Was it necessarily the right decision? No, not necessarily, and I am absolutely open to the idea that maybe, **maybe**, I should have come to a different view about it. But what is passed is passed. Somebody I think, at one point, dug up the fact that in 2012 the Emir of Kuwait addressed both Houses of Parliament. Not, to be honest, in the Royal Gallery or Westminster Hall; in the most junior of the possible settings for such an address, in the Robing Room in the House of Lords; which is a much smaller room, but the Emir did.

And I remember looking into it at the time because I wasn't necessarily enamored of the idea, and I was told on advice that by comparison with a lot of other

countries in that part of the world, his record was not particularly bad, and there was something to be said for allowing him to address us.

Was I right about that? Probably not, probably not, but those matters are passed. And, you know, we made the judgment we did. I was at an earlier stage of my Speakership when the Emir of Kuwait decision was made in 2012, and then in October 2015. So I'm not sort of standing here or sitting here saying, oh I'm right about everything and whatever I say, please agree with me.

We are all open to criticism, perhaps coruscating criticism and maybe I was wrong on those matters. I don't want to dilate on the matter of President Trump, but I have nothing to add to or subtract from what I said in February 2017, and you know, nothing has happened since then to cause me to change my mind; although, you know, well quite a lot of things have happened to cause me to remain of the same view, which is why I have nothing to or subtract from what I said on that occasion.

As regards why the populism, put very simply, what I feel about that. I am concerned about that. I mean, in one sense, I'm passionate about Parliament. I'm really proud about where the House of Commons is in terms of assertiveness, and the sheer range of colleagues who speak up and speak out on matters dear to them. This is something that horrifies the government whips.

Way back in 2011, I'm not saying this was the right thing -- I'm just saying I tried to do the right thing by Parliament -- in 2011, the so called backbench business committee of the House, which was a reformer champion, decided to have a debate on whether there should be a referendum on British membership of the EU. Now the government won the vote because the opposition, I think, voted with the government or abstained -- I think they voted with the government -- and the government won the vote handsomely against a referendum at that time.

But what shocked David Cameron, and more particularly the Government Chief Whip, was that a very large number of conservative MPs rebelled against the

government and in favor of a referendum. And I think there were 81 rebels, and over 50 of them were new MPs. Now this was regarded as almost sacrilege, a new MP was normally expected just to be loyal and ambitious, and to do as he or she was told. And the government Whips were absolutely horrified that the idea that all these new MPs were voting with their consciences, but actually I'm in favor of MPs voting as they think fit, whatever the Whip says.

You know, I always had a relationship with the Tory Whips characterized by trust and understanding. I didn't trust them and they didn't understand them. So, the idea of Parliament speaking for what it believes, I think is a good thing.

I must say that, look, there's no point in vying against technology. The development of more and more social networking sites, you know, in many ways is a positive thing. There's a space for people to speak who aren't powerful or rich or established journalists and that's a good thing in many ways. I do think that when I witness, wherever the next take the British context, where I witness the sheer dumbing down and vulgarization of debate, and the replacement of the reason argument on an issue with the at hominine personal attack, that doesn't exactly make my soul sing.

I feel sad for Parliament and for politics and I have loathed -- and I have used this word advisedly -- I have **loathed** the development whereby people are subject for simply doing what they think is right, or for being who they are have been subject to the most venomous personal attacks.

And a lot of people of strong opinions in our Parliament have been denounced, and attacked, and excoriated, and personally, viscerally, brutally, viciously abused simply for saying what they think. And there is, as a matter of fact no doubt that women have disproportionately been on the receiving end of this abuse.

Anna Soubry, previously a Conservative Minister and a Conservative backbencher, now a member of Change UK, a very outspoken pro-EU member; Luciana Berger, who is also now a member of the Change UK party, but Luciana was for many years

a Labor member of Parliament. Luciana Berger is a Jewish member of Parliament who's been subject to the most racist abuse on social networking sites from the extreme right and the extreme left, and you know, the list goes; Ruth Smeeth, another Jewish member has been attacked in this.

This approach to politics and argument stinks. This has got nothing to do with genuine debate and everything to do with trying to threaten, and bully, and intimidate people out of the public square. And if I may say so, those who have reported politics as though people expressing independent-minded views, let's say on Brexit, are somehow malcontents, traitors, enemies of the people, have got a lot to answer for.

We've got to be very careful to try to preserve that principle that we play the ball not the man or the woman. Or to go back to Voltaire, I disagree with what he says, but I defend to the death his right to say it, the idea that might is right, or that a vicious pen should suffice to silence a dissident, that is against every democratic principle and every notion of political pluralism, every concept of parliamentary representation dear to me, and I think dear to people who cherish democracy.

We should not have a situation in which those who shout the loudest or the most abusively get their way, because that way, frankly, lies ruin.

GENERAL ALLEN: Here, here.

MR. WRIGHT: Thank you (Applause). So we have 15 minutes for questions. We're going to take three at a time I think and that allows you to choose what you want to answer.

MR. BERCOW: Correct.

MR. WRIGHT: And you have to be short, you have to ask the question and if you abuse that, you don't just get in trouble with me, you get in trouble with him. You are used to dealing with difficult questions.

MR. BERCOW: You can say whatever you want, whatever you want --

MR. WRIGHT: Gentleman at the very back, and say who you are please.

MR. BEUTIN: Hello, my name is Ricklef Beutin. I'm, in fact, a German diplomat working currently at one of the think tanks in town CSIC.

MR. BERCOW: You were the impressive tie.

MR. BEUTIN: Yes, I'm not asking the question to make my tie, or indeed myself more famous today, but I am interested and want to continue on with a question that Thomas just asked, and your answer to it. If you see this tendency that you describe of more split views, of more ghastly arguments, or not arguments but rhetoric; I do understand the role of yourself as Speaker as umpire, but is it conceivable that you work more in a spirit of compromise to get members of Parliament to work more in the spirit of compromise, and in the future calling on them doing anything else. Is it legally possible and conceivable politically because I think in a wider sense for Europe, maybe also over here, that's really something that we need?

MR. WRIGHT: Thank you, let me see, the lady in the middle sort of four rows up over here, yes.

MS. PANNIER: Hi, Alice Pannier. I'm an assistant professor in European Studies at Johns Hopkins SAIS --

MR. BERCOW: At Johns Hopkins?

MS. PANNIER: Johns Hopkins University, yes.

MR. BERCOW: Yes.

MS. PANNIER: My question is about the time consuming effect of Brexit and I'm wondering to what extent the activities in Parliament have been disrupted, the more mundane day to day political issues on which you, and the country MPs have to vote, to what extent have they been disrupted by the Brexit process?

MR. BERCOW: Thank you.

MR. WRIGHT: Thank you, and then one more, the lady just behind you, yes.

DR. MACDONALD: Oonagh MacDonald, former British member of

Parliament, Mr. Speaker -- fortunately before your time, or not fortunately.

MR. BERCOW: Forgive me, is it your name?

DR. MACDONALD: Oonagh MacDonald.

MR. BERCOW: Oh, Dr. Oonagh MacDonald, Labor member of Parliament for Thurrock.

DR. MACDONALD: Indeed (Applause), brilliant memory.

MR. BERCOW: A rather a distinguished academic, are you not?

DR. MACDONALD: You read the list. Very wise to have come prepared, but my question to you is quite a general one, Mr. Speaker, how would you think you will go down in history as Mr. Speaker?

MR. BERCOW: Okay, first of all on the question of whether, you know, in the light of the growth of polemicism and contrarian politics, or very personalized and vituperative politics, you know, there might be scope for, and a likelihood for greater attempt to forge compromise, I think there's quite a strong chance of that to be honest. It's not something the Speaker can decree; it's not something that is really for the Speaker to seek to promote in any very forceful way.

Why? Well, because whenever you take a position on something like that, there are people who don't agree and who will say, well, you are effectively -- even if in a benign way, even if in a well-meaning way, even if in a non-party political way -- trying to call the shots as to how we debate. And so, to give you a very simple example, ladies and gentlemen, one of the most common questions put to me is, Mr. Speaker -- in Britain -- why don't you intervene when X or Y or said minister is clearly not answering the question to tell that person to answer the question, and the answer to that is I don't because if do, I'm in danger of becoming a player on the pitch rather than the referee of the match.

And I tend to say to people, if it's obvious to you that the question is not being answered, well it's obvious to everybody else as well and people can make their own judgment about that. But actually I call people to order really only if they are completely off

the subject and, therefore, out of order in that they are not attending to the matter under debate, or if they're too long; be they a minister or backbencher.

You know, I'll often say, well, you know the abridged rather than the war and peace version would be appreciated, or you know, a late sketch writer called Simon Hoggart who accurately interpreted me when he wrote once in his column, when Speaker Bercow says, I'm extremely grateful to the honorable gentleman, that broadly translates as, shut it sunshine, and that's correct.

So it's not for me to decree that there should be more consensus seeking. Do I think there's quite a strong chance of that, I do, actually. I mean, it's not for me to take sides between different leadership contenders in a political party, but I've heard, you know, prominent people in recent days talk about the pursuit of consensus, and I know there are -- you know, just to I've you a couple of examples, Michael Gove has talked about that, Jeremy Hunt's talked about that.

There are other people on the Labor benches who would say that and I suspect most of the leadership contenders would, probably on the conservative side, would probably rather have more support in what is a very balanced Parliament, effectively a hung Parliament than not. And I think there are lots of people on the other side, so it's a question of translating the aspiration for consensus into the determined pursuit of it.

It's a bit like over the years, lots of leaders -- opposition parties and Prime Ministers -- have said, I want to bring an end to Punch and Judy. I mean quite a lot of American viewers might like Punch and Judy at Prime Minister's questions, you know, the slug fest, but there is a view, let's have more rational discourse, less personal abuse, fewer attacks of a personality kind; but the trouble is the competitivity between the parties is such that it doesn't always happen.

The support bases tend to like the attack dog stuff, and so nobody really wants to start first. They are all in favor of peace, but not just yet, it's a bit like Augustine, make me virtuous, but not yet, or not just yet. So I don't know whether that will happen but I

think there's a strong possibility of it.

And in relation to the second question from our friend from John Hopkins who divested, if I understood correctly, is our stuff being crowded out? Yes. It's not on that to deliberate policy by anybody, but the bandwidth, ladies and gentlemen, available for other matters to be treated on by the House, is inevitably denied, or restricted or curtailed, because there are only so many hours of the day. So, unless we sit for far more days in the year, well, inevitably, stuff that would otherwise be considered isn't considered.

Is that a problem? I think most people, to be honest, across the peace, would agree that that is a problem; that other matters are not getting the priority that they warrant. I don't blame that on any one individual, or indeed on one political party. It's just a fact. It's a consequence, if you like, it's the collateral damage caused by the fact that as yet, we haven't resolved the Brexit issue.

I do think it is likely to be a short to medium-term phenomenon, not a long-term phenomenon, but is it a problem, it is. You've got to be careful at what you interpret from it then, because there will be people who say, oh, I totally agree with that question and that's why we've got to -- people will interpret it to suit them. So people will say, oh well, I totally agree we ought to be talking about X and Y, and say, therefore we've got to get this Brexit deal sorted.

I'm sorry to say, at the moment we're talking about the withdrawal agreement. The idea that Brexit will be done and dusted if there is a withdrawal agreement, or indeed a Brexit on the 31st of October, is, if you'll forgive me saying so, not realistic. There are years of debate ahead as to the contours of a future relationship in trade, security and wider partnership terms.

So I think there is a big challenge, but yes we've got a duty to use our time efficiently and to try to protect the parliamentary space for other issues, including issues, if I may say so, that affect majorities, of course, public service provision; but including issues that affect vulnerable minorities of the population. Parliament exists to protect them as well,

so we've got to try to find a safe space and adequate time for those other issues to be aired, debated and policy developed.

Now, as far as the Oonagh is concerned, and her question, how do I think I'll go down I history; well, I'll certainly go down. I'll certainly go down.

I'm not sure. I don't honestly, Oonagh -- and thank you for coming. You and I don't know each other personally, but I know you were, as I say the member for Thurrock before, I think, a sort of Tim Janman sort of got in the way and took over. I've known Tim a very long time. I'm not sure he quite shared your cerebral approach to politics, if I may say so. Tim was quite a keen populist himself. I've known him a very long time, but he didn't share your cerebral to political discourse.

And I don't spend a lot of time fretting about my legacy. People probably say, well that's as well. I remember once saying in the House, I'm bound to say to the honorable gentleman, somebody had asked me about something on the internet, and I said, well, I must say to the honorable member that I don't spend a lot of time looking at these websites, and somebody called out, very wise. So, you know, I just try to do the right thing.

I would like to be remembered as -- I'd like to be remembered, if I'm remembered at all, as a backbencher's champion; as somebody who stood up for the rights of ordinary parliamentarians to have their voices heard. And I do feel, if you'll forgive me saying so, and even if you won't, that, you know, it's not for the Speaker to be the cheerleader for the executive branch. It's not the Speaker's job to make life easy for the government. It's not the Speaker's job to side with the leader of the opposition either, and be a cheerleader for the opposition.

But it is the Speaker's job to stand up for the rights of Parliament. And I've often been told -- Oonagh, you would have known him, I'm sure -- but I've often been told very approving stories about Jack Weatherill who was Speaker from 1983 to 1992. I better not quote chapter and verse because I don't have this completely proven, but I know it was said at one time that it was a prominent conservative cabinet minister who was most irked

and irritated by some of the decisions from the chair that Jack Weatherill was making.

You will know, you will remember, that Margaret Thatcher never wanted Jack Weatherill to be Speaker. She didn't think he was one of us. She thought he was what's called a "wet". She wanted Humphrey Atkins, a rather debonair character that Mrs. Thatcher rather liked to be Speaker, but the House of Commons didn't want Atkins to be Speaker. They just didn't want it; amen, end of subject.

It wanted Jack to be Speaker and Jack Weatherill became Speaker, and he ended up making some decisions which irked some Conservatives; he was a Conservative by background. And a senior Conservative went to see him and said to him, Jack, I'm bound to say that some of the decisions you're making are most disagreeable to the government. And I will remind you, Jack, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that you are a Conservative, and you are a Conservative Speaker.

And Jack Weatherill's response was to say, no. I'm not a Conservative. I gave up party affiliation on becoming Speaker, as this Speaker did, and I'm not a Conservative Speaker, I'm **this** Speaker and my job is to do what I judge right for the House of Commons, good morning. And he opened the door and that person left the room and the door was closed.

And to be honest, that's my attitude. I've got to do what I think is right, and if you're not robust enough to stand up for what you think is right, well then, frankly, you're not fit to be Speaker.

And as I said, I'm happy to be judged by people, and some people may judge we well, and some people may judge me harshly. The key question is, can you look yourself in the mirror -- in my case, it's a pretty pug-ugly sight -- but can I look myself in the mirror and answer yes to the question, have you behaved honestly. And the answer is I have, and I do so, and so I can look myself in the mirror -- however disagreeable the sight (Applause).

MR. WRIGHT: Mr. Speaker, thank you so much. I think we promised to get

you out of here at 11:15, because we know you have another --

MR. BERCOW: I don't mind taking more, I don't mind taking more.

MR. WRIGHT: You can take -- well, because we have a couple of people who have been very patient here, so this gentleman here standing behind and the lady here, and then we'll try to wrap in five minutes, so be very brief please.

MR. SCHOETTLE: Thank you. I'm Peter Schoettle, retired from Brookings. One of the key requirements for a successful democracy is an informed electorate. I'm not sure we meet that requirement in the U.S. now. I don't know about Britain, what might be done to address that problem?

MR. WRIGHT: Thanks, the gentleman behind you, yes.

MR. COLOMER: Thank you. I'm Josep Colomer, I'm teaching European Politics at Georgetown and I don't see how you envisage a no-deal Brexit, because even if the current proposal and agreement between Trisomy and Brussels is being rejected by the House of Commons, some decisions must be made on the same issues.

So about whether or not to pay the bill, several billion euros presented by the European Union; what to do with European citizens living in Britain, what to do with the Irish Border, and then if the deal is not accepted then the House of Commons and the government as you (inaudible) said, must make a deal about --

MR. WRIGHT: Wait, I think we have to --

MR. COLOMER: Themselves, inside, I mean within Britain, and the deal in Britain --

MR. WRIGHT: So no-deal -- we're just out of time --

MR. COLOMER: Oh, sorry.

MR. WRIGHT: We have the question I think, so --

MR. COLOMER: Yeah, the question is, if there is no legitimate decision, I think the legal default is remain, isn't it --

MR. WRIGHT: We have the question, we have the question, so the lady

beside you and then we'll go back to --

MR. BERCOW: Okay, I'll give a brief answer to each.

MS. MINUET: Julia Minuet, AGBM. How will diminished U.S. commitment to NATO influence any formation of your European armed forces to replace it, or

MR. BERCOW: Sorry --

MS. MINUET: Diminished U.S. commitment to NATO, will it influence --

MR. BERCOW: Diminished U.S. commitment to NATO?

MS. MINUET: To NATO --

MR. WRIGHT: So, it's a really good question, but it's a little bit outside of the Speaker's (inaudible) --

MS. MINUET: And another question, what is your vision for your country?

MR. WRIGHT: Mr. Speaker, if I could just bring in Amanda one final time, just if there's anything Amanda you wanted to underscore. I guess, Mr. Speaker, I would just add to one of the gentlemen's question on the -- first gentleman -- on the political system, I mean, in Britain there's a first pass the post system, and I wonder if you have any sort of reflections on -- if you are facing into a general election with a very fragmented political system, is it sort of outdated given all of this sort of indigenous fragmentation that we are seeing. Amanda, did you want to --

MS. SLOAT: The fragmentation, pulling off the last one -- you see, it's always the last questions that are the hardest --

MR. BERCOW: Yes.

MS. SLOAT: That you regret asking for, is on the future of the country, looking particular at Scotland and Northern Ireland, and whether Brexit is going to have longer term implications for the constitutional integrity of the UK? Like we said, you can pick which, or as many you want to answer.

MR. BERCOW: Yeah, well look, as far as the question of the electorate being fully involved in concerned, we're always capable of improvement. I'm not going to

knock the people of the United Kingdom, and the people of the United Kingdom can make decisions in general elections and in referendum, and they have regularly done so. But one is always hoping that one can broker a greater understanding, or increased awareness and an extended participation.

And it's a huge issue, but my honest answer to you is that I would like to see much better a focus on the education of our citizens. And citizenship education in schools, in my view, would be -- rolled out across the country -- a very good thing.

Just as we have sex and relationship education; just as we have some time spent on P.E., physical exercise; just as most people would accept that there is a merit in giving a basic induction to people in simple financial concepts, you know, having a bank account, what borrowing could entail, the importance of decent household management, those are good things for young people to learn; personally, I think it would be a great thing if right across the UK every British schoolchild had a basic grasp of the tenets of a modern democracy, of politics, of the importance of voting, of what different parts of Parliament did, of what the relationship is between Parliament and the judiciary and so on.

Now, that's not saying everyone should do what we call a GCSE -- which is the exam typically taken at 16 in British schools, everyone should have a GCSE in politics -- I'm not saying that, but a basic awareness I think would be a good thing. I spend a lot of time talking to school students, and I do a Skype session with school students as well from the education center in Parliament every Monday morning when Parliament is sitting, and I get asked a lot of these questions about the way the political system works, and I'm very happy to answer them and to try to use technology to get out more widely.

But wouldn't it be a great thing if the so called foundation country for democracy, where we pride ourselves on having the mother of Parliaments, too pride in telling people about the British parliamentary system and how it works. And we don't actually do so on a concentrated and focused basis. And I think there will be real merit in doing so. I often start by saying, how many of you are interested in politics, and scarcely

any hands go up.

When I say to people in schools across the country, how many of you care about the job you're going to get when you leave school, or college, or university, loads of hands go up. How many of you care that we should have decent healthcare available to all, regardless of ability to pay, a forest of hands, even amongst young people, most of whom haven't got health problems. How many of you care about our country, the United Kingdom, through diffident and by other means, trying to do its bit to improve the lot of the one billion people around the world who eke out an existence; they don't live, they eke out an existence on less than a dollar a day.

How many of you care about bettering their lot, there's a massive forest of hands go up. And I always say, well, you say you're not interested in politics, and you're obviously not interested in it, and you're often turned off by pejorative attacks and ad hominine attacks, personal abuse, people in suit shouting at each other, the pop-posities of politics, and maybe even you're not that interested in the procedures; but as far as the stuff of politics is concerned, a lot of you are very interested.

And the second question, is you know, remain the default position, no, I stand by the view that I've expressed that in legal terms the default position would be that unless Parliament acted to prevent Brexit -- you know we are scheduled, if there isn't an act to prevent it, and there is no extension, we are scheduled to leave on the 31st of October. I'm not counseling that, I'm not agitating for that, I'm not arguing for that -- I think that's pretty obvious from what I've said; I'm simply saying that is the position as I understand it. It may not be the normative view that you hold, but it is the factual position as things stand.

The very last -- forgive me -- the very last question,

MR. WRIGHT: It was a vision on the future of the country --

MS. SLOAT: It was on the future of the country.

MR. BERCOW: The future of the country. There have been some critical questions asked about President Trump; perhaps I can just say to you I am absolutely

passionate about parliamentary democracy, I am passionate, too, about our worldwide network of relationships. These should not be either/or, you don't have to take the attitude that being pro-American means being anti-European, or being pro-European means being anti-American; and our relationship with the Far East is very important.

What do I believe? I'm very pro-American; I've always loved the United States, and I think our relationship with the United States should subsist long into the future. It's much bigger than the question of what the record or performance of a particular President in the '60s, the '70s, the '80s, the '90s, the noughties or now might be. That relationship should survive.

We believe in democracy; we believe in the rule of law, we believe that on the whole free enterprise is a better source of wealth creation compatible with human liberty than any other systems devised my humankind; and that remains my view.

I happen to think that alongside a thriving economy and strong defenses in a world of great uncertainty -- and to both of those I attach the highest importance -- the question of what's in our DNA in terms of the celebration of diversity and respect for equality, is writ-large. I think that matters. I think, for example, in my own country, that multiracial Britain is much better as a country than we were before we became multiracial Britain.

Celebrating a country in which people irrespective of background, irrespective of color, irrespective of ethnicity, irrespective of religious affiliation, irrespective of gender, irrespective of sexuality, irrespective of disability, can thrive is incredibly important. And you know, my vision of the future is a vision in which social mobility is dramatically advanced. People often talk about the problem, it's a huge global problem of the fight against global poverty, but even within our own countries, there's a huge challenge of social mobility.

Now, Howard Wilson as Prime Minister used to talk about how poor he was as a kid, and Alec Douglas-Home, his opponent, once famously said, if Howard Wilson went to school with no boots on it was only because he was too big for them. Now I don't want to

exaggerate and say that I come from a background of grinding poverty. I don't come from a background of grinding poverty, but I went to what you would call a government school, I went to a state school; I don't have private resources. My wife and I have three kids all of whom go to very good state schools in London, and I feel very strongly that people should get on, on the basis of merit and resourcefulness, not on the basis of background of birth or special privilege.

And I also believe that in any society there is a -- first of all, everybody in the end depends on public services, and I don't want to be unkind, but under successive governments, for all it's faults and failings, I much prefer the British approach to healthcare, if I may say so (Applause), I much prefer the British approach to healthcare under governments of both colors, and people in the end, for the big things, they always depend on the public services; particularly in the field of health, and 93% of kids go to state schools and I spend most of my time going to state schools. And I also think, you've got to remember, there is a proportion of people who for whatever reason, can't cope and they do need a government to help them. And that's incredibly important.

I think any country that says, well you know, the rich will prosper and the devil take the hindmost; that will be uncivilized. That is not the position taken by the British government or the British opposition. That is not civilized. It should be part of the DNA of a decent society that we keep the best and improve the rest, and we in particular ensure that those at the bottom of the pile are protected, are nurtured and are given a chance.

And all too often around the world -- I'm not referring to any one country -- all too often around the world, ladies and gentlemen, this is the criticism of the performance of modern democracies, that still isn't the case. If you look to those countries in Scandinavia where the gap between rich and poor is lesser, mental health is superior, the happiness quota is greater, the level of acrimony and dispute is lower; and so I think, you know, let's try to pursue some of those features of the good society, which isn't just about wealth, but about warmth.

It's not just about how much you earn, but about what protections and quality of life you enjoy (Applause).

MR. WRIGHT: Mr. Speaker, thank you for an incredible presentation and discussion here, and thank you for your leadership, and we very much look forward to seeing you in action in the coming months. And we'll be waiting with bated breath to find out what the next developments are on Brexit, and so could I please ask you all to remain seated while the Speaker leaves through this door here, but please join with me in thanking him, and with that we are adjourned (Applause).

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