

## ***“Weekend in Westminster – your CIBUK at the Battle of Ideas”***



### **Dear Subscribers**

Please forgive this longer than usual letter.

Your intrepid correspondent braved the wet and slippery streets of Westminster last weekend to report on a stimulating series of debates courtesy of the Academy of Ideas which staged its 2-day annual festival around the corner from the Houses of Parliament at Church House on Great Smith Street.

As the sirens and flares of the Pro-Palestinian marchers continued to puncture the rain on Parliament Square, another crowd were cramming into nearby lecture halls to listen to a range of debates from *'Free speech on campus'* and *'The state of the global economy'* to *'The impact of AI on art'*.

For the benefit of our readers, your correspondent attended those debates most pertinent to CIBUK.

These did NOT include *'Sex, Drugs Rock'n'Roll: Has Music lost its Edge?'* Or *'Feeding babies: Is Breast always Best?'*

### ***The Battle of Ideas Festival 2023***

Hundreds gathered in the Assembly Hall for the welcome address, which was given by the Academy's founder and director, Claire Fox.

Contesting ideas, she said is fundamental to a healthy democracy and in that spirit each of the debates had been constructed to give equal time to both speakers and audience in order to encourage a vigorous exchange of views.

What follows is an outline summary of the five debates your correspondent attended, incorporating the main points arising from each.

## KEYNOTE DEBATES

### 1. BREXIT: How can we take control?

The debate revolved around the recent publication of the book '*Taking Control: Sovereignty and Democracy after Brexit*' which makes the case for re-building the UK's weak and withered institutions after 40 years of suffocating decay inside the European Union.

On the panel were two of the book's four authors – Philip Cunliffe and Peter Ramsay. Alongside them were Baroness Kate Hoey and James Hallwood, Head of Policy and External Affairs for the Council for Deans of Health – the university faculty for nursing, midwifery and allied health professionals.

#### ***'EU membership disguised the decay of our internal political systems.'***

This is the central premise of the book and one on which all the panellists agreed. Strengthening the sinews of our democratic institutions outside the EU is a task which has barely begun.

#### ***'People, not systems'***

Among the book's other proposals are reform of the voting system in favour of proportional representation and the abolition of a second chamber.

Hallwood and Baroness Hoey expressed doubt about the book's recommended constitutional reforms. PR, they said, leads to political horse-trading and undermines the direct link between political parties and the wider electorate.

What is really needed they said is a better calibre of politician.

That final point became a running theme throughout the conference.

### **NATO**

Resigning from NATO, another of the book's recommendations, was met with snorts of derision from both panellists and audience. The UK has been a member since its inception in 1949 and at no point has our membership been an impediment to national self-government.

If anything, the combined threat from Russia and China as well as recent developments in the Middle East have made the need for a united Western response even more important.

### **A United Ireland**

The authors also advocate a United Ireland on the basis that all who live on the Island are Irish. That was not the view of Baroness Hoey who argued fiercely against such a proposal. What was needed she said was a political party determined to take back control of Northern Ireland which is currently trapped inside the EU.

#### ***'Revitalising our relationship with the Commonwealth'***

Part of the Brexit dividend includes re-invigorating our relationships with countries around the world. Citing the CPTPP, the noble Baroness urged the government to take advantage of the potential trade opportunities now on offer, beginning with our historic ties with the Commonwealth.

#### ***'Brexit is a process not a moment'***

James Hallwood argued that the 2016 Referendum result did not provide a detailed mandate for what was to come. But on the issue of self-determination, the vote was very clear. And he urged each and every one of us to hold our MPs to account on that central sovereign issue.

## **2. Power Play: who runs Britain?**

Following her opening address to conference, Claire introduced the panellists ahead of the first debate. When it came to the topic itself however, she misread the title.

Instead of *'Who runs Britain'* she said, *'Who ruins Britain?'* Such is the state of the country nobody seemed to notice.

Among those on the panel were Matthew Goodwin, professor of politics at the University of Kent, Harry Lambert of *The New Statesman* and Amand Menon, Director of *UK in a Changing Europe* and a prominent anti-Brexiteer.

All agreed that bureaucratic power structures, a lack of accountability, inadequate training and sheer incompetence have led us to the sorry state we're in.

Made worse, according to Harry Lambert, by the unprecedented economic inequality that now exists in the country.

### ***'Power no longer exercised vertically – but horizontally'***

Matt Goodwin described how moral and political legitimacy has been dissipating from our elected institutions since the 1970's. A combination of globalisation, and a desire by elected officials to farm out difficult political decisions to judges, experts and quangos has left a void at the heart of our political system with little accountability to the voters.

### ***'Sickened by narcissistic elites'***

Support for multi-culturalism, diversity and mass immigration has further alienated the elites from those they are supposed to serve. Populist anger at what is going on around the country is simply not being acknowledged by those in charge.

### ***'Elitism is ok. Incompetence is not'***

There is nothing wrong with elites per se according to Pamela Dow, former PPS at the Department of Education. We revere elite actors, musicians and sports teams. However, our political elites are incompetent. And that is the real issue.

Better education and training are the key. If we wish our public institutions to provide a better service, we need to encourage the best and brightest to apply for those positions.

### ***'In office but not in power'***

Furthermore, she said the huge rise in regulation, including legislation on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and the growth of HR departments have all conspired against those who actually want to get things done.

### ***'Hyper-globalisation is in retreat'***

Dissenting from the others, Amand Menon observed that globalisation is in full retreat. Geo-politics has seen to that with the invasion of Ukraine which has exposed the West's vulnerability to hostile supply chains across a range of vital commodities including oil and gas. Some form of protectionism is bound to follow.

### ***'Government can effect change'***

He also disputed the inevitable rise of the 'blob.' Really it was down to political will. Both Thatcher and Blair got things done. The failure to do so today is down to incompetence, an observation shared by the whole panel.

Our current MPs, he argues are performative rather than effective.

### ***'It's all about the money'***

According to Harry Lambert most people are concerned not with the culture wars but with economic reality. £4 in £10 goes to the top 10%, £1 in £10 goes to the bottom 10%.

### ***'Culture is downstream from the Institutions'***

Matt Goodwin by contrast argues that culture and economics are inextricably linked. Citing

the de-banking scandals as an example, he says all our institutions including the purely economic are now being infected by this neo-Marxist ideology. Professor Goodwin argues that root and branch reform of our institutions including an overhaul of recruitment policy is required to arrest and reverse this slide towards hard-left totalitarianism.

### **3. Bouncing back or Basket Case: the State of the UK Economy**

#### ***'Political pygmies'***

The real problem, according to Phil Mullan, author and writer on the intersection of economics and politics, is the lack of vision among today's politicians. Comparing today's technocratic micro-managerialism with the grand vision of FDR and his New Deal, Mullen urges politicians to be brave, take risks and above all practice 'bottom-up experimentation' as the best policy mix to transform our regional economies.

#### ***'US is 39% richer than the UK'***

On the subject of America, emulating the US may be the best option for the UK now we are free of the EU, according to Sam Bowman, founding editor of [Works in Progress](#) and a former director of competition policy at [ICLE](#).

The US boasts higher economic growth, higher productivity and higher wages than the UK. What's worse the UK's infrastructure costs are now amongst the highest in the developed world. Small wonder we were unable to complete HS2.

#### ***'UK-US comparisons are invalid'***

The US is far bigger than the UK with an unlimited energy supply, making any comparisons between the two economies meaningless according to Economist Vicky Pryce.

Poor skills and training lie at the heart of the UK's historic low rates of productivity and that is where the focus of government action should be.

#### ***'Debt-based consumption is not the route to wealth.'***

Until the UK starts to produce things again, it will remain mired in debt according to William Clouston, district councillor and leader of the SDP. Among other things he advocates an active industrial policy in order to stop our great small businesses becoming the property of others.

Arguing for a moratorium on any further immigration, he fully endorses a drive to improve the UK's skills base arguing that hiring cheap labour from abroad is not just wrong but immoral and economically self-defeating.

What is needed is a fundamental change of mindset from those who govern us, with a renewed emphasis on production rather than consumption as the best route to prosperity.

### **4. Should we leave the European Convention on Human Rights?**

What could have been a stimulating and far-reaching debate turned out to be a hugely disappointing event.

Among those on the panel were commercial barrister Steven Barratt, freelance journalist John Oxley and human rights lawyer Jamie Burton KC.

For over an hour the panel discussed the minutiae of the ECHR and its philosophical merits of protecting minorities against the 50+1% majority without once addressing the practical issue everyone had come along to discuss: the extent to which the ECHR appears to be acting as a barrier to the lawfully elected government conducting its own immigration policy.

It fell to your correspondent to draw the panel's attention to the elephant in the room and

ask them to address the issue head-on.

Alone among the panellists, Steven Barratt was commendably supportive and acknowledged the extent to which the ECHR was subject to judicial activism.

For those who are interested on the implications of ECHR membership, a [much better discussion](#) took place on GB News between Nigel Farage and Martin Howe KC.

## **5. War on the past: A war on the public?**

Assorted academics and historians gathered in the Assembly Hall to discuss the abuse of history for political purposes which is an increasing feature in our schools and universities.

These 'culture wars' are particularly virulent on university campuses in North America, Australasia and the United Kingdom, resulting in ruined careers, a closing-down of debate and the outlawing interpretations of the past which are deemed unacceptable.

Among those on the panel were Ivan Krastev, political scientist and chairman of the Centre for Liberal Studies in Sofia, Bulgaria.

### ***'History has no place for narcissists'***

The young, he said, are keen to pull monuments down but not erect them. They seem interested in their own personal experiences and display little curiosity about the choices and values of those who lived in the past.

Ivan Hewett, music critic for *The Telegraph* endorsed the point and said that the current generation of revolutionaries had no interest in the historical arts unlike their predecessors. Only by returning to the past can you recognise something that is bigger and more enduring than yourself.

### ***'If Edward Colson was so bad, why did they build a statue in his honour in the first place?'***

Sean Lang, senior lecturer in History at Anglia Ruskin University raised this obvious point in relation to the statue-toppling incident in Bristol.

Not only was this a criminal act, he said, it also displayed a staggering lack of curiosity about the past. Its very destruction was designed to erase rather than enlighten our understanding of the past.

Professor Robert Tombs made the point that an attack on the past is an attack on the public. Having a shared history is vital to our identity and sense of national cohesion. The vilification of the past, he said, is designed to destroy rather than create.

### ***'The past should belong to all of us and should not be controlled by one particular group or another.'***

So said Ashley Frawley, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Swansea. The current fetish for 'presentism' is a crime against history.

Moreover, as Sean Lang noted in his concluding remarks, if we fail to contest the space, others will fill the vacuum. It is up to all of us to stand firm in the face of this nihilistic provocation and uphold intellectual rigour and evidence-based research as the basis for honest historical debate.

And so say all of us.

*Departing the Festival, one was struck by the fizzing energy and intellectual hunger of those who attended. If our political and media class displayed a fraction of the same enthusiasm, the UK would be in a far better place than it is today.*

*CIBUK would like to thank The Academy of Ideas for staging the event and providing a focal point around which ideas can be freely discussed without fear or provocation. Long may the battle of ideas continue!*

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*With all best wishes*



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