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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined on the line from Oxford by Anand Menon, the leading political scientist and professor of European politics and foreign affairs at King's College, London. An influential commentator on Brexit, Anand is the director of the 'UK in a changing Europe,' a unique think tank that uses social scientific research to monitor the Brexit process. Previously a lecturer at Oxford University, Anand has held visiting positions at New York University and Columbia University. An expert in west European politics, Anand has warned that five years on from the referendum, few voters have seen the benefits of leaving the EU and asked 'what if they became impatient.' Anand, thank you for joining me.

Absolute pleasure, good to be with you.

Now, your Twitter feed announces you as a 'bitter and twisted observer of politics,' was that description from you or from a critic? I mean, to be honest, I agree with you. I am also one of those people.

Oh, it was from me, though I think you'd struggled to find someone who disagreed. I think I can be quite dour. And particularly when I'm sort of writing about politics, I think that comes through. So it was my phrase, but I've not ever found anyone who said that's not true.

You said even during the referendum campaign and from the start of Brexit that taking back control wouldn't be as simple as the slogan said it was and so it's proved.

No, absolutely. But I think, you've got to bear in mind and there was a set of circumstances in this country that made Brexit particularly difficult not least the fact that we had a minority government for much of the negotiation, but whoever you are, whatever country you are, even if you don't have the very unique circumstances of Northern Ireland to worry about. And of course that came back to haunt the negotiations for years; leaving the European Union is difficult. I mean, the paradox about that is in a sense, the problems we had with Brexit proved the Eurosceptics

right in the sense that they always said the European Union interferes in too much of domestic life. And what we've done over the last five years is find out just how great that interference is. Untying yourself from 40 years of membership is an immensely difficult and complicated task. And it's one that's not really over yet.

I mean, most recently you've written that leavers are now likely to be disillusioned with the lack of any benefits. Is that insight from scientific research?

Well, yeah. I mean, we've done focus groups and we've done survey work with a lot of voters in general and leave voters in particular. And what we found is actually among a lot of leave voters there are very, very high expectations in terms of what Brexit will deliver. So we did a set of focus groups with people we labelled comfortable leavers, so relatively well-off leave voters and their expectations were you'd end up with a decrease in crime, that you end it with greater investment and crucially you'd end up with a massive sort of renaissance of British manufacturing because of Brexit. So it is possible, there are very few signs of it yet and it might be that this doesn't happen. But what I was arguing was that it is at least conceivable that down the track some of these people say, hang on a sec, where are these benefits that we expected to come from this?

And those with high expectations of Brexit expected the NHS and industry to be suddenly transformed like a magic wand was going to be waved when we took back control.

I mean, yes and no. For some of them, it wasn't so much an issue of immediate transformation. It was a question of priorities. And I think that whole thing that red bus with the NHS on the side with 350 million on the side, the point of that was to say: 'We should be focusing on ourselves and not focusing on the European Union.' And, rightly or wrongly, that was a message that resonated with a whole number of voters who thought that actually we should put ourselves first. Now, whether or not leaving the European Union makes that easier or not is an open question. But I do think there was a subtlety and a political effectiveness to the leave message, which led to so many people turning out and voting for them.

I had Lynton Crosby on the podcast a year or two ago and he was saying that one of the reasons why remain lost is the way that he framed it, is that it was full of people who agreed with each other. He made the analogy that if you sold used cars and you hadn't sold any, you'd be sacked as a car salesman within six months. And yet, a political communicator's job is to persuade people to come over to their cause. And what his point was is that they all agree with each other. They're not actually making efforts to communicate with what he would call real leave voters. They were just sort of posturing in front of their fellow remainers. And he made the point that true communicators would want to talk to people in working men's clubs in Middlesbrough and read regional newspapers, rather than just writing columns in the Westminster commentary, all effectively agreeing with one another.

I think there's a degree of truth to that. I mean, there were many reasons why remain lost. They didn't run a very good campaign. Actually, I think they drew exactly the wrong lessons from the Scottish referendum of 2014, because I think Cameron and his advisors thought project fear worked in Scotland, so it will work now. The fundamental difference of course, was in Scotland the pro-independence camp started off at about 25, 26%, and worked their way up to 45% by the time the vote actually happened, so they gained 20% during the campaign. With the European Union, public opinion was pretty much 50-50 split at the start of the campaign. So running the sort of campaign that isn't going to inspire people or get them to your side was never the most effective strategy. And of course, other things popped up as well like the relative ineffectiveness of Jeremy Corbyn, who I think most people would agree didn't exactly put his shoulder to the wheel when it came to the referendum campaign, didn't help either. Particularly actually, when it comes to those working men's clubs you were talking about, you could imagine if a full-throated Corbyn campaign in favor of remain would have targeted exactly those people.

Well, I resigned when, I mean I was a party member for 23, 24 years before Corbyn came in, then I resigned due to anti-Semitism and then only rejoined when he slung his hook as it were. But one of the things that really annoyed me about the Corbynite is they said, 'Oh, here's someone who's a new politician, a new thinking, but actually let's be honest, he was a Brexiteer. He only pretended to be a remainer because the vast majority of the Labour party were remain. And he was doing the very same cynical trick that regular vanilla politicians do, that he said he wasn't.'

There was this sense about him that he was doing this because he felt he should rather than because his heart was in it. I mean, you can say many things about Jeremy Corbyn, but a new thinker, I don't think is one of them, as most of his ideas seem to be pretty well-worn. And if you trace him back in the political debates, he's someone who was historically an avowed Eurosceptic. So I think people found it hard to take that seriously. And I remember at one point in the referendum campaign, seeing the fact that after he made one of his speeches notionally in favor of remain that loads of people Googled what is Labour's policy on the referendum, because it was absolutely unclear to.

Has the vaccination politics of COVID complicated our relationship with the EU even further. I mean, some Brexiteers were dancing a jig and sharing the news with joy that the EU seemed to be quite sluggish in getting their act together regarding the vaccine. And that was spun as a triumph for Brexit that free of the EU shackles of bureaucracy, that we were able to get our population vaccinated without these unelected Brussels bureaucrats.

I mean, it's complicated relations with the EU in one way, it's made life a lot easier for the government in another. So the way it has complicated relations with the EU is there was definitely this sort of sense of competitiveness that sprung up. And when the European commission rather stupidly appeared to toy with the idea of invoking article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol to stop exports of the vaccine into Northern Ireland that gave the Brexiteers a trump card that they still wave around. When you

hear Lord Frost talking now about why we can't really trust the European Union, he refers back to that abortive article 16 incident. So it's made things more tense, I think, but for the government it's made things easier as well, because if you look at the polling, I think the last polling I saw from Ipsos MORI said that something like 49% of remainers thought that our vaccine rollout had been relatively successful because of Brexit. So actually the whole history of the vaccine saga has reinforced support for Brexit, which has been great for the government of course.

Now, when you think of academics, you think of them sort of with huge mustaches sitting in high back chairs, nursing a brandy by the fire, living in an ivory tower, but you're the polar opposite of that, I mean, you wanted the UK and the changing Europe to produce accessible reports, very much engaging with the public and making the case. Was there a decision somewhere along your career that you wanted to be as open and accessible and as personable as you are?

I've always wanted to, I've never been very good at academic jargon. I suppose my success at this, if you see it as a success, comes from the fact that I was never that great as a social scientist and not that technical. But actually the decision for the 'UK in a Changing Europe' came from our funders who are the economic and social science research council, the research council for social science. And they said, what we want you to do is go out and communicate what the research said. And we were forced to do that with the public, because of course we were created in 2015 and the first challenge we had was trying to get messages across to the public during the referendum, where our audience was the general public. It wasn't politicians, it wasn't lobby groups. It was the British people at large. So I mean, it took a lot of practice. It's quite hard. I mean, we had to learn how to come over as impartial. For instance, one of the great strengths of us as an organization, I think, is the fact that we just try to present the evidence, we don't try to present our opinions as to what's good, what's bad, or what people should do. I mean, our strap line during the referendum was helping you to make an informed decision.

You've clearly put some thought into how you engage and how you communicate with the public. I mean, you're using Twitter quizzes and you've made some very snappy TikTok clips. I mean, these are not the actions of a stuffy, archaic academic. This is someone who's really throwing themselves into the debate and into the culture that we have.

I suppose, cynically you could say they're not the actions of someone with a modicum of self-respect, but I mean when it comes to the TikToK stuff, the credit goes to the sort of members of our team in their twenties, who said this would be a good thing to do and I rather stupidly went along. But yeah, I mean, there are different strands to our work, so we do stuff with the civil service and with politicians and the tone of that is obviously quite different, but I'm very committed to the fact that actually to have proper politics, you need a public that is informed. And I see one of our roles as being communicating to the public. And the way you communicate to the public is not by being stuffy and not by writing in jargon, but by approaching them on

mediums that they might be more inclined to engage with than, say, academic websites.

But the think tank tries to be authoritative and independent. Is it a symptom of Malaysian politics that is so divisive, do you just get labelled a remainer just frankly, for questioning how the process is proceeding? I mean, with any other politics, you would want to hold the government to account for executing a policy. And yet with Brexit seems so divisive, but any criticism of that Brexit might not be going as the government originally said it would do, you're not worth listening to, because you're a bloody remainder and simultaneously with the other side, you know, Brexiteers can't be as vocal as they perhaps ought to be saying this hasn't gone down as well, because it's all taken so dreadfully personally.

You're absolutely right there. Actually, it is very hard to criticize the way Brexit has been handled while not appearing to be anti Brexit. And that is something we get accused of because God knows, the way Brexit has been handled has been far from perfect. And I'm not necessarily talking about the current government, I'm talking about the previous government. So we do get that, but actually one of the amazing things in the sort of Brexit space is whatever you say, one side or the other will have a go at you. So I spent half my time being criticized for being a Brexiteer, half my time being criticized for being a remainer. I mean, the whole thing is so polarised that there's virtually nothing you can do or say that isn't going to attract abuse from one side of the debate or the other.

Does it bother you on a human level that this has become normalized? This hostility and divisiveness. When Trump was president, I forget who it was but someone used to tweet everyday, 'reminder guys, this is not normal.' You know, I'm not suggesting that we go back to the old days of deference, but there used to be a time when we could disagree without being disagreeable as Obama put it. And I think for now, how do you sort of set those feelings aside now and just deal with the world as it is. The old cliche is you can't control the cards you dealt with, but you can control the way they're played. Is it just pragmatism now for everyone now, academics and all?

I mean, it is difficult. And there is a lot of sort of nastiness around, particularly on social media. I mean, I try my best to be lighthearted on social media and not take myself or whatever I'm doing all that seriously. And to try never, ever to respond with rudeness to people. It doesn't bother me that people can be a little bit rude, to be honest, I sometimes get frustrated by the fact that people will latch onto what they think you've said and go off on their traditional riff without actually thinking about it properly. It is very, very hard, particularly on Brexit, but more and more on other issues of public policy as well, to have a rational debate these days, because everyone is so bought into their own point of view that you can sort of predict. One of the frustrating things about political debate nowadays is you can absolutely predict what someone's going to say, quite often simply by their Twitter bio.

How do you overcome that yourself? Do you almost categorize them as not worth arguing with. My view is if someone disagrees and it's constructive and

respectful then I will engage, but the minute they start to get even snarky, I'll mute them. And if they're abusive, I just block them.

Yeah. I've never actually blocked anyone on Twitter, I have to say. I'll usually look, and if it looks like there's been a torrent of abuse, I'll just ignore it for a while to be perfectly honest. I mean, if there's stuff there that is interesting and people have bothered with the substance, then I'll try and engage. But otherwise I'll just ignore it and I'm perfectly happy ignoring it. I don't feel personally slighted. I don't feel personally offended. It doesn't upset me particularly, but actually used right, Twitter is really, really interesting, And I think very, very useful, indeed. That's to say, you can put up an idea, people will debate it. Used wrongly, it just becomes a slanging match. And you know, it's quite hard to predict which of those two outcomes you're going to get if you tweet something.

I'm trying to think of a polite way to say, what do you do? You know, what is your job? I mean, you've got the academic side, but in terms of the think tank, the politicians come to it for research. Does it help inform policy making? Is it more advocacy? Could you take our listeners through what a typical week is? And frankly, you know what it is you do and how you go about doing it?

You're not the first to ask what I do. To be honest, first and foremost, I'm in no sense really an academic at the moment because my full-time job is running 'UK in a changing Europe' and that involves lots of things. It involves a lot of time talking to civil servants and MPs, trying to find out what they're interested in and in a sense this part of the job is a bit like being a dating agency, I try and connect non-academics who are interested in a particular subject with those academics who are working on that subject. So it might be that you talk to an MP who's saying, I'm thinking about this issue, do you know anyone who could help me out? And I sort of put them in touch. A lot of it is giving talks to people who are interested about where Brexit is and where we've got to in the process now. We try to produce our own work in-house so quite a lot of my time is spent writing stuff or helping to put together reports and things like that. I mean, I have to say, since I took up this job, the one thing that I can say sort of a 100% is I love it. I mean, one of the reasons I love it is it's just so varied. I get to meet a whole load of interesting people. If there was ever a moment where it was exciting to be a political scientist, it's now isn't it. I mean, my God, getting to study politics at a time when politics seems to be going absolutely mad is an absolute treat I have to say.

So what are the ups and downs in a typical week then? What are the bits you enjoy? And what are the bits that you get through? I mean, I don't like doing my books, but I do it because I don't want to go bankrupt.

Yeah, I don't like the sort of admin and paperwork. And I think no one in our team would dispute the fact that when it comes to the sort of intricacies of management, I'm not particularly good at the sort of bureaucratic side of stuff at all, I find that frustrating. The rest of it, I could honestly say I love every single aspect of the rest of it. It's basically sort of interacting with people, having interesting conversations about what's going on in British or European politics, writing about it, doing interviews about

it. I mean, it's been very, very busy for the last five years, but I've loved every single minute of it I have to say.

What's next on life's to do list?

I mean, I'm hoping that we'll get funding to keep going for another few years, in which case I'll probably keep doing this. My first priority actually is to get back to watching live football again in the autumn, which is the thing that's dominating my thinking at the moment, keeping an eye on the site when tickets get available, that's priority number one.

This is meant as a compliment, but you strike me as quite a reasonably normal bloke.

Thank you. I don't think I'm unusual in hoping I am a reasonably normal bloke. I mean, I think you should be able to have a political debate as conversation. It shouldn't be shouting. It shouldn't be finger-wagging. It should just be a normal conversation between two people who might disagree, but are willing to listen to the other side. And when you get that, it's fantastic. And one of the things that I've loved over the last five years is you get to do a lot of public events around the country from all parts of the United Kingdom. And the one thing I found for all this talk about political polarisation. If you can get an audience of a few hundred people in a room, they tend to be reasonable and tend to be happy to engage in a rational discussion or debate and pleased to find out stuff they didn't know before.

I mean, there is a risk for academics entering public debates. How do you feel about colleagues being cancelled for expressing views that don't fit with the current consensus? I mean, some people in my view have been cancelled properly, it's been revealed that they're not very nice people, they've been bullies or whatever, and you think, that's right, that they should be held to account. And others I've felt that particularly with social media, that can be someone who's said something that's unfortunate and there's may be devoid of any context, it looks and sounds terrible. And then their entire career is cancelled. What's your view on the so-called cancel culture?

I mean, I'm a great fan of playing the ball, not the man or woman, which means that actually, if someone says something, you address their arguments, you don't resort to any sort of personal attacks. You don't resort to saying, well, you're not someone worth listening to. I think basically the best way to deal with arguments you don't approve of is to beat them, is to show why those arguments are wrong, is to argue strongly against them. So in general, I'd favour debate over this sort of 'cancel culture.' In academia I think there's a couple of things I'd say, firstly, I think a lot of the stuff we hear about what goes on in universities is massively exaggerated. You know, we don't spend our days deciding which speaker we shouldn't host on the campus because they're views don't agree with ours. And to a significant extent, I still think universities are places where you can come and have an open and honest debate between conflicting perspectives.

You gave a TEDTalk on how to fix Britain. Can you sum it up for our listeners? How can we fix it? I'm interested now in fixing it. You've got me signed up now, how do we fix it?

I'd say two things. Firstly, one of the points of the TEDTalk was that yes, the referendum was about UK membership of the European Union, but it also revealed a huge series of discontents about the way the economy works, by the way our politics works. And I think actually timing is crucial when you come to how to fix it, because I think the coincidence of Brexit and then COVID has led to a mindset in which people are now willing to a, recognise that there was stuff that wasn't working perfectly, whether it's social care or whether it's an equally economy and there is one of those moments now where actually I think if we do it right, we can at long last address these problems. I mean, remember one of the frustrating things is none of the problems that Brexit revealed to us were new. We shouldn't have been unaware of them even before the referendum, but the referendum was a bit like the sort of nation putting up a mirror to itself and saying, oh, hang on a sec. That's not good. Is it? So I think the way to address them, I mean, if you want to go into specifics, we can go into specifics. What I'm saying is we need to take account of what is a unique moment in our political history, where we can start to think big about whether it's the climate or whether it's social care or whether it's economic inequality. And so far, the government has talked a fairly good game on all of those things, but I think it needs to have its feet held to the fire so that it actually delivers.

Do you think Britain could ever be reunited after Brexit? I mean, there's a cultural and geographic divide that we seem to see in elections these days. I mean, on my better days, I think, yeah, you know, this too shall pass and it will blow over one at a time and all of that. And then other times I just think people are so frightfully angry now. You see it in the queue in Starbucks and in traffic, more so than now, particularly on social media where you think people automatically assume bad faith on the other side. I don't know whether it's because I did 12, 13 years in politics, but I would have a robust knockabout with my opponents, but we'd all go for a drink in the pub afterwards. And it was strictly business at the end of the day and I hugely admired many of my opponents. I didn't assume that because they opposed me that they either hadn't listened to the arguments or that they were evil and things like that just seems to be such a presumption of bad faith these days.

I mean, I sort of had my political education in the first part of the 1980s. So the first thing I'd say is, you know, these things happen occasionally that the country becomes, I was growing up in west Yorkshire during the miners strike. So I've seen polarisation before. So it's not a first. And whilst I think that the Brexit division, this new sort of cultural division that we've seen revealed by the Brexit vote, isn't going to go away anytime soon, I think it's going to continue structuring our politics. I do think that the debate doesn't need to be as angry or as bitter or as aggressive as it is now. So these things come and go. I think at the moment, we're at a moment of high polarisation that doesn't have to be the case forever I don't think.

Which politicians do you credit for telling it straight about Brexit? I mean, you criticise Corbyn rightly so. I can't stand the guy. But I've seen some really good

politicians from the Liberal Democrats, from the Conservatives and from Labour. I've seen some disingenuous politicians on all parties. Are there any politicians in particular that for you stand out as managing to sort of walk that fine line by being true to their principles, holding the government to account, making the case, but also not seeming to fall out or alienate people.

I think for me, the key thing here is honesty about cost benefits and trade offs. One of the most frustrating things about Theresa May as prime minister was that she just refused, over and over again, to accept that Brexit involved trade-offs. So she would say we're going to get control back, but we're going to keep trading frictionlessly with the European Union, which of course we couldn't. Now there were many MPs in the house of commons at the time who were very, very good at pointing out the flaws in that you can think about people like Dominic Grieve perhaps, or even Rory Stewart became more open about the trade-offs that Brexit involved. To their credit, what I'd say is that people like Lord Frost are more open about the trade-offs. Now that Lord Frost will at least say, yep, we are going to take back political control and there might be an economic cost to be paid for that, but we are prioritising the politics. So I think actually Brexit was a long history of denial on the part of the government. And that's one of the reasons I think why the debate took so long and became so angry and so bitter.

I was thinking about this before I asked you, which is, do I know anyone that's actually either changed their mind from the very second the referendum was called right through to even now. And that is my big problem, is that whatever the rights and wrongs of it all, the whole thing seems to be a waste of time because people I know in my real life, I'm on Twitter and I'm in politics. They were either for or against Brexit vociferously, right from the day the starting gun was fired and no one's changed their mind. Do you know of anyone that sort of sat in the middle and thought, well, yes, I'll, I'll take a reasoned assessment as to the pros and cons of either case and vote accordingly. Or am I totally on another planet?

There's some very rare politicians whose views on Brexit, I think Jesse Norman, who is part of the treasury team now, I don't think he ever came out with his views on Brexit. Thinking back to the referendum, if I'm not mistaken, I think Sarah Wolliston changed sides from being pro-leave to pro-remain. I think that's the case, but in general, you're absolutely right. If you look at the polling, there is precious little evidence of people changing sides in this Brexit debate. And one of the reasons for that is the Brexit divide is a values divide as much as anything else between social liberals and social conservatives and those sorts of values don't change very, very quickly. You don't suddenly change your mind on them, but in general, there are very few people I think, who have switched sides in this Brexit debate. And actually the other thing about it is that this sort of polarisation is real that both sides not only tend to firmly believe in their own cause, but tend to have a very negative perception of the other side as well.

Yeah and they're assuming bad faith on the basis of the other parties independently of whatever view they come to. And that's the bit that troubles me really. I mean, I was a soft remainer, we had an in principle referendum

where the British people were asked to vote in principle, whether to still remain a majority of people that voted, voted to leave. We've since had two general elections where the party manifestos of all the main parties was to get Brexit done. I mean, from a democratic argument, whether the policy be right or wrong, you can't argue for a stronger mandate for what the British people want. You even have to look at the Brexit party triumphing at the European elections and yet many remainers would say, or there was a lie on the side of the bus and therefore we should do it again. I mean, I have friends that are remainers that didn't want a second referendum because they were worried they might lose that as well. They wanted to be able to call for a second referendum publicly, but secretly hoped they didn't get one.

Yeah. I mean, it was very, very messy and there were all sorts of dangers inherent in the idea of a second referendum. And I think for all the claims that this was an advisory referendum, I think it was fairly clear that if a majority of the British public voted to leave, it would have been incredibly difficult for the political class to say, actually, we hear you said this, but we're not going to leave really. The more interesting question I think is whether, because the vote was close and because leavers were divided about what they wanted out of Brexit, we should have had more of a conversation about what kind of Brexit we had. But instead of that, we had Mrs May turning up and saying, Brexit means Brexit. These are my red lines. And as a result of that, the whole thing got very, very polarised. And one of the interesting and rather depressing things about the process between 2016 and 2019 is the way that the centre-ground people who were saying, yeah, we should leave, but we should try and retain as many economic ties as possible, were completely hollowed out with second vote people attacking soft Brexiteers and hard Brexit people attacking soft Brexiteers. So soft Brexit eventually became an untenable position to hold. That being said, I do wonder whether soft Brexit would have worked, because if you have a referendum campaign, based on the idea of taking back control, remaining in the single market is almost the worst of all worlds because you have no control. And yet you're still not a member state with a vote.

I was a party member. I mean, I'm back in the Labour party now, but for 24, 25 years, whatever it was, I was a Labor party member. The hard left, there were a few token people at party meetings, but largely it was sensible people at the party. And one of the things that really interests me when Jeremy Corbyn became leader is he then attracted lots of people to join the party membership that were massive supporters of him and inspired by his leadership. The problem for me was I was massively out-voted then. York Labour party and Milton Keynes Labour party, where I live now, you know, we used to build to get the moderate candidates there. Whereas I was one of, you know, there were 60 of them and 10 of us, and it interests me how these people can come along and hijack mainstream parties. I'm thinking of Jeremy Corbyn, I'm thinking of Donald Trump where, you know, there doesn't seem to be many sensible Republicans now in American politics. It's the people that shout the loudest, as you said. And I wondered, is party politics dead? Given that you can be a Brexiteer or remainer within any party, frankly, what is it that makes you a Conservative these days or a Liberal Democrat or Labour? I've struggled to answer that. And I'm a member of the Labor party.

The nature of parties and who they stand for has definitely changed. I think it would be very hard to become a candidate for the Conservative party if you were an outspoken remainer at the moment. I think something like 82% of the people who voted for Boris Johnson in December 2019 were leavers. So the Conservative party looks something like a leave coalition at the moment that has incorporated elements of the Brexit party and UKIP. But you're right, that causes problems in other areas because whilst the conservative party is very united over Brexit issues and perhaps immigration and perhaps shouting at footballers for taking the knee, I suspect that one of the things we'll see as we get into the autumn and we're dealing with sort of post pandemic economics is that Brexit coalition is incredibly fragile when it comes to discussing economic policy. Because on the one hand, you've got your sort of pro-Brexit, red-wall Tories who actually want a bigger state, more state intervention, are happy to live with higher taxes, if it means a greater investment, but you've got your pro-Brexit traditional shire Tory who, for whom all of that is anathema.

Do you think things will ever return to normal? I mean, I don't know what normal is, you know, where there'll be a slightly more deferential, slightly more respectful tone, or is this the slippery slope? I mean, I worry how things can get any more divisive or rude or angry. I mean, is this going to be a slippery slope to where nothing means anything anymore and it's victory at all costs and a scorched earth policy from all sides.

Politics has always been a contact sport. I mean, I'm not a great fan of deference. And I think the era of politicians saying we and the experts know best, we'll figure it out and don't worry about it. I think it's quite good that we've had this sort of political uprising in a way, because it means for instance that there are far fewer safe seats now, there are seats that people have taken for granted for many years have been lost in the last couple of elections. And I think there was a danger, I think in the early part of this century of politicians treating the electric with a degree of contempt, the important thing now. And of course, it's very, very hard to judge this government because as soon as they came in, we were struck with a pandemic, which is that they need to start delivering on their promises. Whether things go back to normal. I suspect that if we end up with economic issues dominating post COVID, that we end up with a tricky economic recovery, perhaps with rising employment. And perhaps with high inflation, political debates are going to sound very familiar to people who remember back before Brexit, because we'll be talking about economics rather than talking about values issues. So that all hinges, I think, on how the economy does as we emerge from the furlough scheme in particular.

Do you have any sympathy for today's politicians? I mean, without getting into the rights and wrongs and the individual decisions that they make, it seems to be a pretty tough media environment. You know, politicians of any party seem to have hundreds of people wanting to line up and call them the most terrible despicable names on social media. You don't seem to be able to do right for doing wrong. I mean I know lots of very talented, very caring people that are my friends where, you know, as a citizen, I would love for them to consider politics as a career. But as their friend, I'd say you must be daft, get yourself

into the city or into industry, get yourself earning a few bob and look after your family and try to engage in the community as best as you can but avoid party politics, the civic space, wherever possible.

I heard a lot of people saying that, I have sympathy and indeed a significant amount of respect for many politicians because they do, as you say, a really difficult job. And for many, it may be most of them, they do it for a good reason that they want to actually help people. They want to make a difference. They want to change things, but it is quite an ugly job at the moment. And on top of the sort of old-fashioned frustrations of, 'Oh God, I've got to follow a whip I might not necessarily agree with.' There is, as you say, the sort of abuse side of things, I think you need to be very thick-skinned to go into politics now. And I suppose one worry about that in the words of Isabel Hardman's really good book on it, that we're in danger of getting the wrong politicians, because the sort of people you're talking about your mates are just going to think actually no thanks, I'll just get another job, thank you very much.

So do you think things are going to get better or worse? I mean, I appreciate that's sort of an almost insipid level of vagueness, but how optimistic are you that things will start to settle down and maybe we'll start to make some progress on some of the other issues because when we have huge economic challenges, not least the pandemic and all manner of what have you facing us a nation and indeed a planet.

I think the economy will recover quite quickly from lockdown. I think as I said before, unemployment is going to be the key issue that we can make that transition from post-furlough to a high employment economy again is absolutely key. But what we need is for politics now to deliver. One of the arguments you heard for Brexit was it would make politicians responsible for the outcomes in this country. They could no longer blame the European Union. So what I really hope is that politicians now start to deliver on their promises that they actually say, okay, we promised a level of this country here is what we're going to do in a practical rather than a purely rhetorical sense. If not the danger is that we start to sink back into political apathy again. Remember, if you go back ten years or so, one of the problems that the Labour party had was that its core voters stopped voting. And then they increasingly turned to parties like UKIP and that kind of total dissatisfaction with and contempt for politics is a really unhealthy state of affairs. So that's the key thing I think now is politicians actually showing that they can deliver.

How would you judge the success of 'UK in a Changing Europe' three, four or five years from now, if things have gone brilliantly well, is there something that you can manifestly show that that's different, a result of you guys existing? Is it about helping change the tone? Is it about having a better informed electorate and media? How do you measure whether you're doing a good job?

It's really difficult. I mean, part of it is sort of qualitative, that's to say testimonials. And then we have a lot of testimonials from journalists that we've helped over the years since the referendum. And I think we have helped them be more accurate in their reporting of the issues that we cover. There are other metrics like, you know, Twitter

followers and things like that that are superficial, but number of visits to our website. But I just like to think that the more people, whether it's the general public, whether it's business leaders, whether it's civil service, whether it's politicians that are exposed to the research and can make decisions based on knowing what the facts are the better. So for me, it's just a question of continuing to reach as many people as possible. It's not a question of the decisions they take. It's a question of knowing that they're basing those decisions on real evidence. I think that leads to better politics and to better public policy.

Would you ever become a politician yourself?

I think it would require an enormous fight with my partner.

Wouldn't that be the first test then if you beat them and managed to win them round?

Yeah, that could be the case. I realise that was a very politician's answer I gave you then

It was great, you passed the test.

To be honest, I have no clue what I'll do after 'UK in a Changing Europe.' I am fairly convinced that I don't want to go back just to being a sort of normal academic again, because I like too much of the sort of non-academic stuff that I have to do. And I want to keep doing the writing and stuff like that. But what exactly will I do next? I do not yet know, but if you have any suggestions, let me know.

Well, I mean, Europe and Brexit is obviously one of the big-ticket issues that we're facing, I mean, there's plenty of others that there's no shortage of challenges for the nation, climate change being one.

Absolutely, and actually one of the things the 'UK and a changing Europe' are going to do is try and expand our remit a bit. As we're sort of looking at post-Brexit Britain now, ironically for an organization set up to think about the referendum, there are more challenges and opportunities for us in post-Brexit Britain because we need to start rethinking the country. And one of the things everyone seems to agree with is we need to think about how politics works. We need to think about how the economy works. We need to think about the state of the constitution and the relations between the devolved authorities and Westminster. There are so many issues that we now need to address and all those issues, there is a body of good social science research that our intention is to bring to the attention of those people who were taking the decisions in those areas.

I spoke to Gillian Tett recently at the Financial Times, and she was talking about some of the big challenges that we're facing now, that people were talking about many years ago, but they didn't really reach a critical, massive

public consciousness in terms of awareness. The pandemic being the obvious one, several people were saying we're not ready for a pandemic, but no one really cared to listen to those people. And she was saying that there's several huge challenges that humanity's going to face in the next five, ten, 15, 20 years that people aren't giving sufficient thought to. And she cited the antibiotic apocalypse that, you know, a small graze on your knee three or four years from now might mean certain death because of a prophylactic overuse of antibiotics, particularly with factory farming. And she also talked interestingly about algorithms, AI, that already because of machine learning algorithms are educating themselves. And there isn't actually a human being, if your mortgage got turned down and it was an AI driven bot that turned you down, that the chief executive of the building society wouldn't actually know why the algorithm turned you down. And he would just have to sort of go on Newsnight saying, well, we've got to trust the algorithm, ladies and gentlemen, without actually even being able to control it? Do you actually think that we're going to face some huge challenges, generational level challenges over the next few years and should we be giving more credence to those and preparing for them, if so?

Absolutely, I mean, we're just hopefully coming out of a generational level challenge in the form of the pandemic. I think Gillian's absolutely right about some of the dangers of AI. You've got to have human judgment there ultimately I think, you can't just leave it to the machines. There needs to be a space for humans to intervene. I think you can list the problems. There's the climate emergency, which is going to be an enormous issue and is already an enormous issue in terms of weather patterns. There's the future of work, what happens if more and more jobs become automated? What would people do for a living? What jobs do we give people? So there's a myriad of problems. And one of my slight concerns about all those problems is they're all very long-term problems. And one of the things our politics is sort of congenitally rubbish at dealing with is long-term problems, politicians for very obvious and very good reasons, tend to think five years ahead to the next election where we have delivered. You're not going to solve any of the problems we've just talked about in five years time. So actually probably what you need is a slightly more consensual cross-party approach to those sorts of issues, to make sure that we come up with longterm solutions. And on that, I'm not at all confident that our political system is able to deliver.

Interestingly, in 1997 when Tony Blair was elected prime minister and Gordon became chancellor, one of the things that people objected to at the time, but then retrospectively said was a stroke of genius, was giving independence to the Bank of England that, when Nigel Lawson was chancellor, he could manipulate interest rates in his short term interest electorally and make the electric field better off prior to an election. And they rightly said that this is something so important that it shouldn't be in the hands of politicians. And I was with a friend of mine who was a junior adopter and another friend who was an assistant head teacher. And both of them said education and health are too important to be left to the politicians, that there should be a truly independent chief executive of schools and the NHS that takes decisions that are advised by physicians and by educators and that actually party politicians should get the hell out of so many important areas of politics. Do you think that idea has

any credence? Why do we give independence to the Bank of England, but not the NHS?

My answer to that is yes and no. On the one hand, you do need to have experts feeding into policy. On the other hand, as we found during that referendum in 2016, people don't like to sense that they have no even indirect control over outcomes and simply fobbing things off to unelected sort of expert panels or committees or central banks or whatever means that you asked the question, what the hell are politics for you? Remember that Tony Blair famously said that globalisation is inevitable in the way that autumn follows summer, I think was the quote. That's the sort of thing people don't like hearing: 'Oh, it's out of our hands.' The experts are dealing with us. Ultimately politics is as much about people feeling that they have an input into the process as it is about finding the right answers. And the key is to find the right balance between the two. But I think giving things to non-elected bodies to decide on is dangerous from a democratic legitimacy point of view. Even if you believe that they might come up with the right answers more often than politicians do.

I mean, you are right though the process itself, advocating short-termism within politics, but also sort of localism that might not be proportionate. I mean, when I stood for parliament in 2005, I was Labour's candidate in a very leafy, rural Conservative seat. And one of the big things was that I think it was either Malten or Beverly, the hospital there had a specialist heart unit. And the NHS was saying, it's not a big enough population centre to have specialists, heart doctors or surgeons. They should go to Leeds or Hull or wherever it might be so that more people can be helped by that. And of course I had a conflict of interest because as a strong local voice, I was speaking to people on the doorstep and they wanted those heart surgeons to remain local to them, which I don't blame them for. But also as a citizen of the UK, I was thinking: 'Well, surely we want more people to survive.' And therefore that small hospitals should actually let their heart specialists go the whole or to bigger population centers. So I had a conflict of interest there where I was trying to sort of, speak up for the local community as indeed they expected me to, but also secretly hoping that my argument wouldn't prevail.

Yeah. I mean, here, it's about the government being joined up, isn't it? Because it's all very well, a health trust taking a decision about centres of excellence and where we should base care so that we can provide the best for the most number of people. But at the same time, therefore what you want is local politicians with the ability to react to that by, say, putting on better free bus services to those centers of excellence. I mean, one of the problems we have in this country, I think, it's because decisions are split amongst so many different tiers of government. Getting the kind of joined up solutions that you need is very, very difficult. Indeed. You see in Greater Manchester, for instance, that Andy Burnham has some responsibility for health and for local transport. So you'd hope that somewhere like that you can be more joined up than in other parts of the country. But I think, yes, these decisions are difficult, but I think if you take into account the fact that by doing more good for more people, you are causing hassle for some people and you need to take that into account and make provision for them. You can get around it. But I think it requires a kind of joined-up government that we're historically, not all that good at.

Anand, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you so much for your time.

Thank you Paul, I really enjoy that. Take care of yourself.