

Communications and politics – a case for treatment.

The first thing I must say is that the subject of this Speech – “The role of Communications in Politics” – is not a happy one for me. I’ve had enough of communications shaping (and misshaping) politics to last 10 lifetimes and would readily never say a further word about it.

The subject is, however, prompted by reflection on the nature and scale of change in communications and politics over about five decades out of the six and a half that I’ve been politically active.

What follows, therefore, is not an explosion of accumulated geriatric whingeing about how the media did me wrong (although I confess that I have bruises that are so enduring that they resemble tattoos).

Instead, I’ll try to quickly outline how I see the evolution of the character and quality of media treatment of UK politics, and the representation and digestion of politics in our democracy.

In doing that, I have to offer what is now called a “spoiler alert”: my reflections, like the daily rages which you might expect from a powerless 82-year-old democratic socialist, manifest deep anxiety about present conditions – indeed, foreboding about the future... But I’ll try to offer some practical suggestions for ameliorating change too.

That spirit of trying to find progressive answers rather than simply listing ills would certainly have motivated George Lansbury, in whose memory we gather this evening... Any proposals which he made would probably have relied rather more on faith, hope and prayer than mine do, but his 10 years of experience as the editor of The Daily Herald, an innovative national newspaper, would have kept his feet on the ground. And no-one could doubt his credentials as an intrepid foe of deferential convention.

Meanwhile, I have to say that I do not believe in any power of prayer but nevertheless embrace – sometimes cling desperately to – hope

as a motivator. I have, for many years sustained myself by coupling “pessimism of the mind” with “optimism of the will” – the combination recommended by Antonio Gramsci, Lansbury’s Italian Communist contemporary, who was imprisoned and murdered by Mussolini.

With that to prompt me, I’ll try to cover massive shifts in political communication in a way that won’t plunge you into pessimism but will give you some determination to be optimistic enough to insist upon change...

Long, long ago, in the late 1970’s, the Conservative Party had recognised the potency of sharp, snappy prods and puns. Assisted by Saatchi and Saatchi they had ridden to victory with “Don’t just hope for change – vote for it!” (a theme intelligently repeated by Labour in this year’s General Election). Most effectively, and disingenuously, they succeeded with posters proclaiming “Labour isn’t working”. Unemployment was then one and a quarter million. Three years after the Election it was three and a quarter million.

My Party, meanwhile, had mundanely failed to convince the nation that “The Labour Way is the better way” and celebrated the return to Opposition by quickly forming a circular execution squad.

The blank rounds that were fired didn’t actually kill anyone – but the noise still deafened the Party to some basic realities. Among them were:

First, that Governments have power to change people’s minds by changing their lives and prospects.

Oppositions, however, have to change minds without that power of doing, so they depend entirely on Communication...Communication of ideas, of attitudes, of conduct, of common purpose.

Second, political Parties must heed the Evening Prayer of the Reverend Eli Jenkins of Llareggub in Dylan Thomas’s “Under Milk

Wood". He asked the Almighty "to see our best side, not our worst". After really trying to relate to the hopes, fears, realities and aspirations of the electorate, political Parties must beseech doubting voters to do that too.

Those verities are so elementary and so simple that it could be assumed that Parties in Opposition would give priority, if not total primacy, to Communication that is expert, focused, resonant, evocative, and appealing to the breadth of the Electorate.

For the faction then dominating the direction of the Party and its political "activists" (not always the same thing as politically industrious) those objectives were "bourgeois affectations".

Professionalism, polling, focus groups, and the other Dark Arts of political communications would simply, they insisted, hand power to the "Image Makers" and steal their socialist souls. The faction therefore continued to concentrate their efforts on securing and sustaining their power IN Labour rather than on achieving power FOR Labour. Any focus on the voting public seemed to become an afterthought, and having urged Michael Foot to become Party Leader they then turned his political life into purgatory.

After a further and even more devastating defeat in 1983, it was essential to uproot the attitudes that had invited the rout and achieve modernisation of, and greater relevance for, the stances and presentation of the Party.

Thus began my mid-life crisis, otherwise recorded as my years as Leader of the Labour Party

I knew that wholesale correction of the condition of the Party required action to deprive the factional influences of authority through changing rules and rejecting and replacing policies.

That was easier said than done because some of the policies had - for completely understandable reasons - attained almost religious

devotion, even among some comrades who were not consciously part of any faction.

The changes therefore had to be pursued with the patience and persistence of persuasion and organisation. Declaration and denunciation would have been more thrilling but a Party-shattering failure... The changes therefore took years. Too many years.

It unavoidably meant that I, and those working with me, had to focus almost obsessively on management, sometimes by using the weight of democracy.

Sometimes by victories in faction-to-faction combat in the full exploitative view of a generally hostile media.

Sometimes – when the timing was right – by direct confrontation.

Sometimes by clandestine manoeuvre.

To give an absurd example of that: I sprung the Red Rose on the Labour Party as an Annual Conference surprise because I knew that if I tried to make even this symbolic change through the National Executive Committee it would be impeded by interminable public wrangling over the “treacherous” replacement of Labour’s amateurish version of a Stalinist banner. The fact that the red rose had been used as an emblem by Nordic and other socialist Parties for years would have made no positive persuasive difference.

The punishment for all those years of self-indulgent introversion – and the policies that stuck to it – came, of course, in the ballot box, the polls, the press and – consequently – broadcasting.

Plainly, the effects of all that were corrosive and cumulative. They were – inevitably – targeted on me to the extent that Jim Callaghan – an admired friend but not customarily a Kinnock defender – said that he had “never witnessed” such relentless personalised attacks before.

I accept, of course, that my own flaws and inadequacies deserve some blame for that and much else. But, subconsciously I suppose, I acted on the ancient advice of an old Tredegar comrade – Cllr Walter Jones, a toughened veteran of the ruined 1930's – “never huddle”, he said, “always struggle”.

I, therefore, pursued the necessary changes, with the eventual assistance of communications that coherently, sometimes brilliantly, conveyed the authentic message that a changed Labour Party was serious, responsible, in favour of efficient production as well as fair distribution, and pre-occupied by the well-being, security, and future of our country rather than by its own internal machinations.

I make this self-conscious excursion into the 1980's because it is relevant to the subject of this speech: some of my eventual successors had become deeply aware of the malign multiplier effects of the media treatment of the Labour Party and of me in the 1980's.

John Smith, widely - and rightly - respected for his intelligence and political prudence, did not feel motivated to develop a specific Communications strategy. The small, fragile Tory majority he inherited and the chaos of Black Wednesday assisted that, and convinced him that “one more heave” would be enough to win power.

Many did not take that view. Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were among them. They had been seared by witnessing the years of pillorying throughout the '80's and into the '90's. Upon securing the Labour Leadership, therefore, Tony immediately recruited the young tabloid journalist and occasional broadcaster, Alastair Campbell.

He strongly – ferociously – shared, and acted upon, his conviction that attack and defence through disciplined communications was the only feasible and acceptable course.

Clearly, Tony had natural communication assets and Ali was probably the greatest poacher turned gamekeeper in political history. Between them, they sensibly sought to win any positive coverage available and, if possible, to neutralise the negatives.

I confess to rage at their 1995 excursion to the gathering of Murdoch executives in Australia. Not because – as I told them - they were supping with the Devil (that goes with the Leadership task), but because I thought that Beelzebub would exploit them as supplicants and their “collaboration” would be fruitless. When that didn’t happen and, instead, the Murdoch papers supported Labour, I recognised that the effort had value. My anger gradually dissolved. I did warn, however, that they would eventually be betrayed when Murdoch decided he’d had enough of social democracy. And, of course, that happened - but, happily, not for a long time. With the Sun at their backs, therefore, the New Labour New Dawn was breaking.

All that, of course, was deep and real change in the way that communications “shaped” politics and vice-versa.

Among other things, the term “spinning” came into vogue with overtones of manipulation and dishonesty. The truth is more prosaic – journalists have long asked for guidance on “the story” and, long before Ali Campbell’s emergence, spokespeople like Bernard Ingham had started to give “the story” to them in order to convey the desired version of veracity. Campbell just did it with more forceful rigour and effectiveness than most others.

In any case, “spin” was one of the necessary ways in which politics had to adapt to a World and a time that generated more

information and more demands on political expression than ever before.

The pivot point was probably around the beginning of the final decade of the last century. It brought changes in communications relating to politics and everything else that were more profound than anything since the invention of printing – and it began far away from – and out of sight of – Australia, Wapping, or Westminster:

In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee, researching in Geneva, discovered how to connect hypertext with the internet to establish what he called “The World-Wide Web”.

I don’t think he would object to me describing him as a lifelong “open-minded progressive in the real World” and – as someone of high intelligence and rational motivation - he anticipated that it would become a transformative means of liberation from borders on maps and in minds.

That was sensible:

Geo-politics around that remarkable innovation included the collapse of Communism under its own contradictions, the crumbling of Apartheid, the combined military actions to eject Iraqi invaders from Kuwait. The latest wave of Globalisation was reducing barriers to trade and travel. In China, mass dissent which bravely challenged despotism was murderously repressed - but it seemed to be a harbinger of possible progress.

In such global conditions, optimism about the potential for spreading truth and for overwhelming lies, for advancing enlightenment and emancipation, seemed justified.

That positivity about illuminating communication was further boosted in the UK by the inauguration of rolling 24/7 coverage by Sky News, also in 1989.

In the USA, Fox News and Talk Radio – like other truth-trashing Right-Wing media – benefitted from being unleashed from obligations of

honesty and balance by Reagan's abolition of the 1949 Fairness Doctrine in 1987.

In the UK, however, Murdoch-owned Sky was bound by public broadcasting rules and conventions and its pioneer operators intended to rival the BBC in quality and objectivity – which it has now for 35 years. Indeed, it provoked emulation – Radio 5 Live came in 1994, the BBC TV News Channel in 1997, and ITN tried it for a few years.

And then came the Internet.

The combination of universal access to communication and consumption of news and views, and perpetual broadcast provision for both, was quickly grasped by established media, by a limitless public, and by commercial interests.

In the dozen years between the liberating fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the terrorist destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001, the Internet achieved levels of circulation that vastly exceeded the extent of what had taken printing five centuries and broadcasting eight decades to accomplish.

And that was just the start: What became known as “social media”-platforms using the Internet followed and flourished: Facebook started in 2004, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010 and Tik Tok in 2016...

In this century, the spread of information to billions of people through that “social media” was – and is - not merely wide.

It is deep – as deep as innermost feelings of loves and hates, of passions and resentments.

It facilitates social – and anti-social – interaction. It generates endless audiences. It extrudes stupendous profits through advertising.

That means of expression – multiplied prodigiously since 2007 through over two billion iPhones – “shapes” communication AND politics organically and, inevitably and increasingly, by deliberate

contrivance. Sometimes that is for enlightened and benign purposes, sometimes with malignant motives.

These titanic technological inflections, going further and – crucially – faster than any previous industrial or cultural revolutions, have shifted the world of political, and just about every other, means of communication on its axis.

And it has not been as benign as we once hoped: Plural democracy gradually followed a few steps behind the industrial and commercial revolutions of the 17th to 20th Centuries. The Parliamentary Revolution in the UK, the uprisings in America and France, Chartism, Reform Acts, legalisation of trade unions, adult franchise, the Welfare State and “rules-based order” all testify to that. The technological and communication revolutions of the 21st Century threaten to shrink democracy.

To take one example: For print media, the rapid and massive loss of display and informative advertising to social media has cut income from that source by well over 50% in UK national and local newspapers in 17 years. That, and other technological change, has meant reduction of over a third of mainstream - and over a half of local and regional - journalists in the same period.

The results also include the concentration of ownership of the local press and the closure of over 200 local titles since 2005; the increase of what one distinguished newsman calls “Churnalism” – recycled, unchecked chaff from press releases and the Web; the withdrawal of specialist reporting, especially of civic and political journalism – Councils and Courts - in the Locals, and foreign and industrial correspondents in the Nationals.

In national newspapers deadlines relate breathlessly to the next hour of “rolling news”, not reflectively to the next day. Public enlightenment has given way to public enthrallment. Coverage of “celebs”, showbiz, and the Royal Family (all much the same thing) takes precedence.

Inevitably, most of the newspapers that still sell operate under the dictatorship of the “bottom line” that is vigilantly examined by the (mainly tax-exile) owners. Speed, impact, shock and awe, fear, and smear boost sales.

Sensation, scandal, and various aspects of sexual behaviour have been the main characteristics of some papers for decades. Now “clickbait” and easy, cheap, pasted material are also part of their stock output.

Such conditions are not, of course, universal. There are editors of integrity and fine journalists still plying their vital trade. But the forces of shrillness, salaciousness, superficiality, proprietorial profit - and the capricious power that it enables - are ranged against them.

That matters, especially in an industry which has successfully resisted any of the meaningful regulation that was thoughtfully proposed by the Leveson Report, Part Two of which was amputated by the Conservative Government in 2018.

In this country, Newspapers are, for a variety of historical reasons, more politically powerful than in just about any other democracy – though not as influential as they sometimes boast, and certainly not as influential as they were a decade or so ago.

Their vitality and veracity (or relative lack of both) are still, nevertheless, very important, not least because broadcasters seeking news and opinion to provide accessible material inevitably - and sometimes lazily – echo the tone, vocabulary and twists of the written press. And that occurs even when they are consciously seeking dispassion and objectivity out of professional ethics or statutory duty or both.

Newspapers are obviously not, however, Social Services (though many have exercised that function) and they must be commercially viable to survive. But change, mainly propelled by social media, is moving from feeling their collar to gripping their throat – and they don’t yet have a resilient answer to that.

The “paywalls”, introduced with the co-operation of Google and Facebook, might protect revenues and journalistic standards for a while among what used to be known as “newspapers of record” that try to sustain that identity.

But that means separation between people who can and will afford access to detail and reasonable dispassion in their news and comment and people who can’t or don’t.

Both segments of society will still get “information and opinion”. There is insatiable demand for both. But one gets it from the deliberately erudite and professedly objective sources and the other gets it from millions of chat rooms as consumers of the “Daily ME” which generally feeds and reinforces predispositions, and includes false news, conspiracy theories, trolling, libel, and worse.

If these travails were all confined, by some miracle of divine intervention, to print media it would be a deeply troubling menace to the veracity and dependability of information which is the basic requirement of plural democracy. But, of course, it can’t be.

Broadcasting is deeply affected and infected by newspaper output and by the scramble for instant impact, the need for assertiveness, aggressiveness and argument which is more “stimulating” than discursive dialogue.

There is a coagulation of ownership in local radio similar to local press, and a comparable primacy given to “entertainment” and “presentation” over substance.

In addition, there is increasing development of ersatz, mimic-democracy in “Reality” TV shows that arouse passions, give rapid gratification, and offer the appearance of “engagement” through excitably reported voting.

The race for “ratings” to draw adverts, justify budgets, nourish egos, and validate existence dominates so much of what pours from TV screens and, increasingly, “streamed” output.

As ever, the customs, practises, fads, fashions and feed of print media virally influence broadcasting.

Crisis is in, caveat out.

Chat is cheap, controversy easy.

Facts are onerous, detail boring.

“Fresh news” is up, reflective nuance down.

As complication increases, simplification explodes.

In perpetual broadcasting, filling space and time means putting a premium on opinion and commentary – including speculation and conjecture – too often neglecting verified facts.

Polarisation is then all but guaranteed, indeed compulsive, and it comes to characterise public discourse and reporting.

In a communications environment, information has expanded gigantically and understanding has dwindled with attention spans.

The implications for democratic politics – which depends on the exchange and digestion of words and ideas - are obvious. And the effects are plain in soundbite vocabulary, as recent examples testify:

“Orthodoxy” is everything that appears to have failed and is stale, not the product of experience and reasoning.

“Fiscal precision” is “abacus economics”.

“Experts” are part of a “manipulative elite”, not the source of proven truths.

“Mistakes” are glibly consigned to the past and excused by the urge to “move on”.

Sensitivity to the concerns of others is “woke” and a damnable constraint on unrestrained behaviour and speech.

And it is barely possible to say courteously “You are wrong. You are believing and supporting a lie”. That is “patronising”, “abusive”,

“insulting”, even though the lie is the worse condescending mockery of intelligence.

Meanwhile, “hustings” for Party Leadership or General elections, current affairs panel discussions, and political audience participation programmes have the studio sets, charts, animation and buzzing hosts. They give the appearance of Gameshows.

“Balance” in radio and TV exchanges is provided either by pitting a climate change-denying flat-earthier against a proven expert or by duels between journalists who can give the impression of “independence” and “objectivity”.

Politicians, it seems, must be regarded to be “all the same” or “in it for themselves”, or both, and merely used to recite Party doxologies unless they arouse newsworthiness by “rebellious” or by being “controversial” – which can mean anything from being gutsy or slightly eccentric to blatantly outrageous, or offensively nasty or plain daft.

In such circumstances, it is increasingly difficult to hope for sober political discourse. I will never forget my toe-curling disgust when, in the last General Election TV hustings, Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer were required to indicate their fiscal policies by answering “yes” or “no” to complex economic questions.

It really is small wonder that Media “notability” – “Celebrity” – rather than sober statesmanlike suitability or noble attributes or even evocative brilliance increasingly provide the path to power.

Sometimes that can be fortunate – President Zelensky, a famous TV comedian with qualities of political greatness, is a rare positive product...

Sometimes it is abysmal – Trump and Johnson are on a lengthening list of “politainers” which includes Meloni and Farage.

Some on that list may, of course, have reached pre-eminence on the basis of talent, courage or wisdom. Who can know when they have never displayed those distinctions?

All we can be certain of is that without the rocket fuel of being thought of as “novel”, “disruptive”, “entertaining” and – irony of ironies - “anti-elitist”, and deprived of the propulsion of social media, one would be a bankrupt New York property developer, one a predictably controversial UK columnist, and one a real ale guru and commodity trader in the City.

At this juncture, I have to emphasise that I am not speaking as a headshaking octogenarian bemoaning the loss of a Golden Age of integrity, objectivity, and gravity in politics and communications and claiming that “things were better in my day”.

There was no such Halcyon Era.

I am simply – even plaintively - declaring “that was then, this is now – and things are different”.

Different for Communication. And different for democracy too. That is partly because the Communications climate for politics has been warmed through Global Shouting in print and broadcasting.

But there are, of course, other developments which are contributing to mendacity, distortion, and misdirection in the Information Universe – and they are systematically organised.

I haven't the expertise to offer you analysis and comprehension of the full nature and scale of the seismic wave of social media Communication that is engulfing the World. Perhaps no-one has. I simply observe that algorithms – “a process of rules to be followed in problem solving operations, especially by computer” – enable analytics – “the systematic computational analysis of data” - which are engines of polarisation that facilitate microtargeting of individual consumers and, vitally, individual voters.

And it is that which gives commercial, social and political interests a weapon of influence and persuasion that is unprecedented and unequalled in Communications.

Like water and fire that can be, and has been, used for positive and progressive purposes or for the malevolent opposites.

New technology and AI might certainly provide answers to global crises ranging from climate change to poverty and healthcare. I am no Luddite. I live in hope because I recall that from Obama's election to the Arab Spring, the Maidan Square revolution, and the courageous resistance that has been shaking Iran's theocratic despots, social media has been a force for good or attempted advance.

But meanwhile, Trumpism and worse "isms" have successfully used the power of digital communication to pull millions towards the abyss of bigotry, hate and violence internationally, nationally, and intimately.

Among the casualties of that malignancy have been mental illnesses – especially among young people, truth, fairness, freedom, and democracy.

"Hacking", "trolling" and anonymous – sometimes confected – whistleblowing thrive for good or ill. They can enlarge transparency and democracy. They can also endanger or poison both.

"Influencers" with no accomplishments or mandate now mould opinions.

"Gaslighting" (an old term with a new meaning) creates self-doubt and acquiescence.

"Bots" – automated programmes – and "troll farms" are now part of our vocabulary.

In their time, Hitler and Goebels understood and exploited the potency of the newly arrived radio. Imagine if they had obtained access to social media. Maybe their would-be emulators already have.

When democracy was expanding and growing in use and confidence institutions and rules developed to set parameters for debate, commonly agreed facts could be subject to interpretation, people with different perspectives could nevertheless be connected to a shared reality.

It obviously wasn't a state of Utopia but the ability to disagree without detesting was so conventional that its existence was only really noticed when it broke down.

Increasingly and rapidly it is diminishing now. A completely unregulated internet is slowly dismantling existing guardrails and social media is helping to divide politics into self-reinforcing silos or "filter bubbles" whose occupants are impervious to even the flawed debate in the mainstream or "legacy" media. Differences of opinion are intensified to a point where opponents – or even people who look or sound or act differently – become "othered". They are then perceived as enemies that must not be merely defeated in argument but demonised and eventually destroyed.

Eight years ago, after the Brexit Referendum and Trump's first victory, much was written about evidence of sinister data-scraping psychographic specialist organisations such as Cambridge Analytica, or malevolent foreign entities like the Putin regime, that were using microtargeted adverts on digital platforms to distort democratic outcomes.

Concern was – and is – justified.

But the problem is not just the exploitation of digital platforms like Facebook or Instagram or X or Tik Tok that are commonly used – it's the way in which they are designed in the first place.

Trump's 2016 Campaign was more effective in its use of Facebook adverts because Facebook showed them how to do it while Hillary Clinton's Campaign ignored similar offers of assistance.

The digital potency of Trump's 2016 and 2024 campaigns and Farage's Reform Party in the UK now does not arise so much from paid-for advertising. It comes much more from the organically viral qualities of apparently simple answers – indeed, simplistic and misleading responses – to complex problems.

And when that doesn't provide an acceptable expression of preconceived opinions, people are encouraged to rail against some

faceless, all-powerful “elite” and simultaneously to blame those who are weaker, more vulnerable, just “different”. And that shouting up and punching down is usually done anonymously.

Several of these attributes have, of course, characterised populism through the ages. Now, however, there is a means of delivery which is faster and wider than ever before in human history.

Thirty years ago, the nerdy geniuses who introduced the great leap in communications facilitated social media and shared the innocent belief that the breath-taking innovations of affordable technology would emancipate understanding and voices.

That view was shared by democratic Governments who regarded the hard-to-regulate nature of the internet as a virtue. Bill Clinton was not alone when he dismissed efforts by the Chinese to halt the advance of liberty facilitated by the internet saying “Good luck with that – it’s like trying to nail Jello to the ceiling!”.

The optimists in communications and politics were, obviously, partly right. There IS more knowledge and freedom. BUT there are also organised distortions of one and deliberate offences against the other.

In the maelstrom of “bias-confirmation” and systematic falsehoods the “Alt Right” and Dictatorship States have realised that it is not always necessary to suppress facts and truth in the manner of the old bigotries and tyrannies – it is only necessary to diminish respect for, and trust in, both.

Ostensible democracy – counterfeit democracy - can be manipulated – it can sustain the appearance of freedoms, accountability and diversity while serving the purposes of those who control the State and its system.

Faced with these realities, I believe that Democracy which is still buttressed by values and components of reasoning, tolerance, justice, plurality, truth and equity before the Law must take a stand against that perversion, using its mighty power of legitimacy.

In doing so, democracy will have to embrace the reality that accepting – supporting – freedom of expression means enduring the abuses of that right while contesting them.

It would not be justified or possible to shut down freedom of expression in order to combat the distortion of expression. The tools for securing change therefore have to be resilient, rational discernment – when they go low, we go high – and, crucially, the Rule of Law.

That's not “nanny State”. It's recognising that whilst freedom of thought cannot and must not be controlled, sustainable and universal freedom of thought, markets, communications, and conduct has to be defined and protected by proportionate rules set by informed deliberation that establishes accountable and enforceable regulation.

And that must include psychometric microtargeting so that data management by an ill-motivated, well-funded few does not displace or corrupt the clumsy but answerable democracy of the many.

Neither the social media corporations nor democratic legislatures will or can do that on their own. Achieving and applying the necessary reforms in social media and all that derives from it, including its power to manipulate consumer tastes and political opinions, will require unprecedented and continual collaboration between the tech giants and democratic Governments and Institutions.

That is not a wishful hope, it is a tangible possibility:

The tech moguls have an almost exclusive monopoly of data – the oxygen of the digital cosmos – so they have monumental power. But – crucially – most of them understand that such ascendancy must carry colossal responsibility.

That is because, with a few notable exceptions, they are “liberal progressives” and they manifest that in a variety of benevolent ways

– sometimes through instinctive altruism, sometimes, maybe, as a constructive cosmetic or as a project of personal vanity. The important factor is that they manifest responsibility whether because it is in their nature or because of rational philosophy or because it's good PR.

Those who are dutiful to democracy are consequently horrified that their innovative genius, while expanding freedom, has also facilitated intolerance, fanaticism, poisonous populism and worse.

They further know that authoritarian regimes – including China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and others - are twisting the internet to enable suppression and surveillance on an Orwellian scale while denying them unconditional access to the territory of the despots.

It is worth noting, of course, that all of the corporations, including those led by the self-appointed warriors of free speech, tamely conform to the requirements of the dictatorships...

Nevertheless, enlightened personal convictions, the realities of freedom in democratic societies and its absence from tyrannies makes most of the tech giants cherish stable, open societies, value free markets and respect the creativity of liberty. They want to sustain those invaluable conditions.

That combination of personal principles and public concerns has already encouraged some of the leading innovators to introduce modest systems of restraint, policing and self-supervision. Even Mr Elon Musk used to say that he doesn't want a "hellscape" though, in the two years since he used those words, he has not given the impression that he will fulfil the intention...

On the contrary, Musk is now, following the re-election of Trump in the first mainly social-media contest in political history, going to be in Government (though, uniquely, in a role that allows him to continue his commercial activities!).

He is, without doubt, deeply political. He must consequently be assessed through the lens of partisanship...

He has personal wealth of over \$250 billion and significant operations in strategic industries and services including batteries, software and electric vehicles, AI ventures, space rocket and launch technology. He also has satellite internet connections to remote areas (including Ukraine), and ownership of more satellites than the total owned by all Governments in the World. Donald Trump's programme of de-regulation, tariffs and subsidies will hugely benefit Musk, indeed, he has gained \$50 billion since November 6th.

In short, Elon Musk probably has the greatest unaccountable power of any private individual in all of history.

Even if he offered the impression – or, indeed, the reality – of being a benign emancipator, his monolith of omnipotence could not be acceptable in this 21st Century. The impunity enjoyed by the ultra-wealthy through the ages cannot be permitted for Musk or anyone else.

He has said of himself “I wouldn't say ‘trust me entirely’”. He should be taken at his word. “Riches”, as Proverbs tells us, “hath not innocence”. Unassailable riches and power, as common sense and history tells us, have to be assailed in the Cause of liberty, prosperity and humanity.

We can take some encouragement from the fact that steps towards accountability, regulation and restraint have been taken by some of the tech giants so far. They are hesitant and limited but they do indicate advances toward what Tim Berners-Lee has called “maximising the public good”.

But that will obviously not be enough, by itself, to ensure the dominion of the “Common good”. That is only possible if democracy exerts its power of legitimate authority:

Since Governments cannot realistically displace the might of tech, they will have to recruit it - using, if necessary, the implied or actual threat (or application) of sanctions including further taxation, licensing, huge fines, supervision, controls on output, and

enforceable legal rules on advertising, electoral practise and ownership.

That process of regulation has already begun in several democracies. The EU's Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act and AI Act, all agreed by twenty-seven Member States, are a start – certainly not a conclusion – to multinational regulation. In the USA, Google has been convicted as a monopolist. In Australia, there are formal proposals to stop under-16's using social media while similar proposals are said to be “on the table” of our Government. The Chief Executive of Telegram is assisting the French police with their enquiries and a Brazilian judge has shut down Elon Musk's X platform for multiple offences.

Earlier this month, Robert Habeck, the Vice-Chancellor of Germany, said “The regulation of algorithms, of X or Tik Tok, through the application of European legal norms is a central task. We cannot place democratic discourse in the hands of Elon Musk or Chinese software”.

Here in the UK, by happy coincidence, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology yesterday published a Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety. It reaffirms the Government's commitment to implementing the Online Safety Act 2023 and declares that “ any company afforded the privilege of access to the UK's vibrant technology and skills ecosystem must also accept their responsibility to keep people safe on their platforms and foster a safer online World”.

The Statement consequently focuses on 5 complementary themes of Safety by design to stop harm occurring.

Increased transparency and accountability of online platforms

Maintaining regulatory agility to keep pace with technological and behavioural changes

Developing inclusive resistance to potential harms and disinformation

And fostering in safety technologies and to drive growth.

All of the instruments of regulation that are being, and must be, considered have precedents in the last 200 years of society's efforts to civilise "the hidden hand" of unrestrained enterprise.

Those controls started to come even when the franchise was rudimentary and tycoons and nobles ruled. The scale of the task now is greater and more dynamic than ever, but the nature of the task is similar to so many civilising precedents. In this century, mature democracies surely have more power to legislate and apply protection if they choose to use it.

While the tech companies could – indeed, probably will - try to find ways of evasion and impunity (and maybe temporarily succeed), the means of doing that would be expensive and exhausting even for them, especially if the new statutory environment becomes multinational (as it must to be effective).

At the very least, changes now should include:

- 1 Making "platforms" legally recognised to be publishers because they manifestly issue information to the... public and are not merely "messengers".
2. Algorithms must not be protected by commercial confidentiality,
3. Tech tycoons and their companies must be subject to personal liability for the content they promote rather than subject to corporate fines which, however large, are merely running costs now.
4. In the USA and elsewhere, the tech corporations must be dealt with under anti-Trust laws just as the energy giants were over a century ago.

That is clearly unlikely to occur in the next four years when the oligarchs will own the White House and other components of US Government. But it will come at some time if for no reason other than the need to sustain competitive capitalism.

Meanwhile, the difficulty is that our democratic institutions are analogue in a digital age. Politics moves at the speed of Elections , the technological revolutions move at the speed of electrons.

One idea advanced by more enlightened elements in the tech World is to build in a public interest for every new algorithm. They understand that, faced with changes in the statutory and operational environment, it would be better for the tech giants to assist internationally with the design and implementation of arrangements needed to ensure AGAINST exploitation and vindictiveness, anonymity, and animus, and FOR information, choice, enlightenment and knowledge.

And this generation of tech owners needs to do it now before mortality overtakes them, or control of their companies moves to other powers.

Ladies and gentlemen, to state the obvious, Communications has shaped, and will always shape, politics and politics helps to shape communications. Neither can ever operate in silence or by trying to escape each other.

But when – for the first time in human history - a system of communications can deliberately or accidentally come to alter democracy by controlling information and shaping minds, communication and politics must combine to defend and advance that precious asset of accountable governance.

First, because all alternatives to even flawed democracy are ugly in their oppression and denial of freedom and creativity. There is no “enlightened” despotism because tyranny cannot afford to allow enlightenment.

Second, because most people who are politically conscious – certainly the great majority of those who seek and achieve democratic election – want to participate in and be representatives of a virile, plural democracy with its potentially infinite opportunities, securities, and liberties.

The preconditions of that are eternal vigilance and effective action.

The task of democratic government is getting harder. The odds against success in achieving regulation and sustaining freedom are getting higher. But so too are the stakes – and the price of failure is unthinkable.

The time of unsuspecting myopia, comatose complacency, deferential democracy and bewildered inactivity must end.

Action is needed now. We are already too far behind the challenge.