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The Labour Party Is Playing With Fire Over Its Future and the Future of the Country

di Tony Blair

The Labour Party is playing with fire; or, more accurately, with its future, and that of the country.

I led the Labour Party for 13 years and through three general elections. It is a party largely of decent, well-meaning people who want the best for the country. Its mission is, as its 1994 rewritten constitution says, to ensure that “power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few” and it’s a perfectly noble one.

But I am afraid, like many progressive parties, it has an almost infinite capacity for self-delusion.

It won the 2024 election not by acclaim, but by being an acceptable (credit to Keir Starmer) default option to a Conservative government the country felt had behaved unacceptably.

However, partly because of the intellectual wasteland of the Corbyn years, it had no properly thought-through analysis of how the world was changing and what that meant for policy.

Wes Streeting is a huge political talent and Andy Burnham was an outstanding member of my government. But this leadership debate has an extraordinarily retro 20th-century feel to it. Like most politicians, they’re anxious to distance themselves from the ‘Westminster bubble’.

But Britain’s problem isn’t with a ‘Westminster’ bubble. It is with a ‘politics’ bubble. The politics of the future may be better understood by those presently outside politics.

The world is turning on its axis and today's politicians living in a 24/7 pressure cooker have barely time to recognise the turning let alone study it. These changes need long-term strategic thinking which is alien to the way most modern democracies function.

The government's principal problem isn't Keir's personality. Or a failure to communicate 'our achievements'. Or a need to assert more strongly Labour's 'values'.

It is because we don't have a worked-out, coherent plan for the country in a fast-changing world and are in the wrong political position from which we can devise one and win a second term.

The government is governing from an essentially traditional Labour 'soft left' position, parked firmly in the party's comfort zone.

Whether there is a leadership change or not is irrelevant if it doesn't start with a policy debate. Are we really prioritising economic growth, essential not just for prosperity but for social justice, if there is a slew of policies we're implementing which might restrict it? Does our economy need right now the goal of clean energy or cheap energy? How do we justify adding to the welfare bill when it is already ballooning, taxes are high and getting higher, and we're told we have to increase defence spending to prepare for the possibility of war?

And is it right that we're living through the 21st-century equivalent of the 19th-century Industrial Revolution and if so, are we remotely meeting the scale of that challenge? And what are the opportunities in areas like health and education for transformative change consequent on this revolution and the existential dangers of this revolution when, quite soon, someone sitting in their front room could hack into vital national infrastructure and bring it down?

Do we have a foreign policy which makes sense of a changing world order?

Trying to force the prime minister out before we know what policy direction we're bringing in is not a serious way of conducting ourselves.

And so far, though of course these are very early days, we have a fight between a 'modernising' wing of the Labour Party appearing to advocate rejoining the EU (and now equalising capital gains and income tax, something rejected by successive governments for good reason); and the alternative which thinks the answer is moving even further left on taxes, spending and welfare, spun with a rehash of the far-left

critique about nothing good coming out of the last '40 years' of 'neo-liberalism', which presumably includes the last Labour government.

With the left position odds on to win.

It is one thing when in opposition to indulge this perennial delusion that when we lose seats to the right the country is really signalling it wants Labour to move left; it is dangerous to do it in government.

And no one was more passionately opposed to Brexit than I was, and the result of it was both predictable and predicted. But as I shall argue later in this essay, an approach for Britain to go back into a structured relationship with Europe needs to be handled with care and with strategy.

Just as Brexit was never the answer to Britain's challenges back in 2016, reversing it isn't the answer to the country's far worse situation in 2026. Our relationship with Europe should be part of a comprehensive strategy for Britain's future, and that doesn't begin with Europe but here at home.

Unfortunately to the exam question: how do we win a second full term of government, the one answer which seems ruled out, is learning from the only time in the party's 120-year history it has ever done so.

Governments which succeed don't start with a personality contest. Or a political question – as in, how do we 'save the country' from Reform. They start with an idea, a project, a governing purpose, an analysis of what is wrong and a plan to put it right.

The challenge of democracy is not transparency, honesty or conspiracy theories about the hidden power of elites.

It is efficacy. It is the ability to get big things done. To have leaders who are not problem-managers but problem-solvers.

As John Adams – second president of the United States – once wrote: "Ballast is what I want; I totter with every breeze."

This, not the absence of 'better communications' or of a 'charismatic' leader has been the defining problem of the government. Too often they seem to totter in the breeze. To lack ballast.

There are two epochal changes happening in the world today – one geopolitical, the other technological – and Britain is not prepared for either.

They require radical change in policy, system of government and politics.

The best political space from which this can be achieved is what I call the Radical Centre.

The centre – properly defined – is where you put policy first and politics last. So, you begin with the question: what is the right answer? And only once you have that do you engage in the political task of persuading people of it.

Britain is in a mess precisely because in recent years it has done the opposite.

Both main parties have gone off the rails by putting internal politics first and good policy second. Labour moving to the left after 2007 culminating in the absurdity of the Corbyn leadership. The Tories with Brexit.

Neither has fully recovered and ironically their failures have spawned new parties to their further left and right.

Yes, Britain needs radical change, but the difficulty (not just in Britain) is that too often the sensible people aren't radical, and the radical people aren't sensible.

The first epochal change is in the geopolitical order where America's superpower status is now shared by China, in time to be joined by India. A sort of G2/3. These countries will be far ahead of whichever nation is in fourth place. By this calculation, everyone else including Britain is a middle power.

The second is the technology revolution led by developments in artificial intelligence, which will change everything. I mean everything. There is no point in debating whether this technological revolution is a good or bad thing. Just know it is a 'thing'. In fact, it is *'the thing'*. It will displace jobs, though creating new ones, but no one yet knows the full consequence. Companies and countries will rise or fall on the back of it. It will revolutionise the private sector and should in time revolutionise public services and government. Yet people in most countries, including Britain, have no idea what is about to hit them.

This doesn't obviate the need for immediate policies in familiar areas like immigration or taxation. But it will, in time, change even those.

Think of how Britain was in 1826 and how different it was in 1926. And then in 2026. This is the scale of change but in dramatically faster time.

Governments – any government – must find their place in this new world.

In foreign policy, it means finding the alliances necessary to do collectively what countries – other than the G2/3 – cannot do alone.

For domestic policy, governments must address what it means to govern in the age of AI.

The New World Order

Politics – at an international level – has always been primarily about power. It doesn't mean values are irrelevant. On the contrary. But protection of those values also requires power. Because powerful nations have a habit of getting what they want. And less powerful nations don't.

What is power derived from? From the strength of a country's economy and the strength of its military capacity.

Those attributes made Britain the world's greatest power in the 19th century and it is what sustains America's power today. And why China, with the world's second-largest economy and military, is the other superpower.

America allied itself to Europe in the 20th century to fight two world wars alongside us, and that alliance continued after the second world war in opposition to communism. Today the USA and Europe including Britain share markets, a military alliance within NATO and democratic values. That is the rationale behind what we call the transatlantic alliance.

But it has always been an unequal partnership. America is much more powerful than any single allied country, is the dominant force and therefore is the 'shot-caller'.

This has been true at least for the last half-century. Most American presidents have been too polite to say this; but they always thought it and more important, acted on it.

That is why I don't believe with the Trump Presidency we're witnessing a 'rupture'. I have a great respect for Mark Carney and, as Canada's prime minister, I understand completely why it feels like that to him, when Canada's very independence as a nation appeared to be put in play.

I also understand the anxiety in Europe when the language of parts of the American administration seem to cast doubt on the value of NATO or the transatlantic alliance.

But I regard it less as a ‘rupture’ than a ‘reckoning’. This side of the water, we’re being told some home truths which, if wise, we will wake up to.

Though American security strategy is couched in very ‘America First’ terms, it identifies the principal threats – in the Arctic from Russia; longer term, globally, from China; and in the Middle East from Iran – no differently from how Europe sees the world. President Trump has demanded increases in NATO spending not dissolution of the alliance.

It may be a message delivered in brutal form (and the Americans would say that only by saying it brutally will we take it seriously); but in reality what is being said to us is not: ‘the partnership is dead’ but rather ‘be bigger and better partners’.

Europe needs to build economic competitiveness and military capability. At present it is not succeeding in either as it should.

The so-called New World Order is not the consequence of an American breach with its Western allies. The case for the Western alliance is as strong as ever.

Rather it is the product of a risen China, a rising India, a newly militaristic Russia, emerging significant power blocs in the Gulf and elsewhere, and therefore the shifting pattern of power. And it isn’t an ‘order’ yet because the pattern is not yet clear.

So where does this leave Britain? Caught between the isolationist tendency of parts of the right and misguided progressivism of parts of the left which combined are in danger of leaving Britain marooned on an island of irrelevance.

Twenty years ago, we were, beyond doubt, America’s key ally in security and defence, leaders in Europe even though not part of Schengen or the Euro, and, with the Department of International Development (DfID), major players in soft power in the developing world.

All are now in doubt or gone.

The partnership with the USA is weaker. To be clear, we were never asked to ‘join’ America’s military action in Iran and, never having been part of the planning for such a mission, could not have been part of it. The initial request was simply for the use of

our military bases for the refuelling of American planes. I understand the reasons for refusal but it's not the best way to treat our ally.

We're out of Europe. And DfID is disbanded.

We have forgotten an essential lesson not just of diplomacy but of power politics: if you want to play you have to be sat at the table. And bring something to the table.

I know how hard it is to be an ally of the USA. We were its staunchest supporter post 9/11. We went through Afghanistan and Iraq together. But it mattered deeply to America and so it mattered to us also. America remains the indispensable core of Britain's security alliance. But staying with it means even when it is difficult or unpopular.

No one who has been through the maze of European Councils, Commission bureaucracy and the often ugly compromises of EU membership can be a starry-eyed proponent of Europe as presently constructed. Again, unpopular to stay the course and be present. But in the world of G2/3, do we want to be absent from the debates of our own continent and engagement with the world's largest commercial market with whom we do almost half our trade – more than twice the amount we do with America, our next largest trading partner?

And you will never convince any focus group I have ever come across to support spending on international development – except perhaps one of bishops – but it is important for Britain's strength abroad that we develop deep ties with a developing world which is developing fast.

What's done is done. None of these things can simply be reversed. But to repair our standing, all require leadership and commitment.

For the American relationship, that means building defence capability and being prepared politically to argue for the alliance even when controversial, of which Iran is the latest example.

For soft power, it is impossible for fiscal reasons to wind the clock back. But there are substantial things Britain can offer our developing-world partners: trade and investment with British companies, our financial expertise and globally respected rule of law, our technology, and capacity building for governance.

Not for full articulation here, but we need a functioning relationship with the other superpower: China. Keir Starmer was absolutely right to visit. We have major points of disagreement with China but the idea we can afford to ignore China or treat China as if we were dealing with a modern version of the Soviet Union is profoundly mistaken. The Western alliance should be strong enough to deal with whatever comes from China; but stay engaged with it and where viable, cooperate with it.

The Gulf States are another new factor in global politics – wealthy, modernising fast, and with huge investment in the West which they're increasing, as well as becoming important players in the developing world. The war in Iran will not alter this. Europe including Britain should fashion a strong alliance with the Middle East and not just the Gulf. But again, not easy with parts of Western opinion for a diversity of reasons.

The cumulative risk for Britain is that we become frighteningly insular: wary of America because of President Trump; out of Europe because we think it inconsistent with national sovereignty; considering China as an 'enemy state'; nervous allies of the Gulf States because they're not democracies; and not much interested in the developing world because they're poor and potentially liable to immigrate.

The hardest part is our relationship with Europe.

The government has rightly created a new atmosphere in our European relations. Meanwhile domestic policy – with measures on tax, spending and the labour market – is moving in a more 'European' direction.

There is a developing sense that as the country becomes more 'European', and British opinion moves against Brexit, then at some point it is ripe to enter a debate about 'going back'.

This is not a strategy.

It is true that what is crazy is to be where we're presently heading – that is, becoming 'European' in our practices while being out of Europe.

But if we want to go back into some sort of structured relationship with Europe, we can only do so from a position of economic strength. We must be at the farthest end of European competitiveness. At present, we're not.

Any structured relationship will require a negotiation. And that negotiation will have to be from strength and not weakness.

Europe is facing the challenge of implementing the Draghi report on competitiveness. Most countries agree it should be implemented. Many objective observers doubt it will be, because it advocates flexible labour markets, welfare including pension reform, and technological innovation. All face stiff opposition.

However, European politics is changing. The current European Parliament has a much more pragmatic approach. The European Council likewise. And the German chancellor and the European Commission are embracing the Draghi report with at least some clear intention of implementation. So, there are signs of hope. But there is a long way to go.

Technology policy is the critical factor. If European policy continues in the direction of addressing the dangers rather than seizing the opportunities, i.e. weights technology regulation against the technology sector, it will be impossible for Britain to go back fully into the European Union. We can't argue that technological innovation and adoption is *the* key challenge of modern governance and tie ourselves to a technology environment essentially hostile to it.

On the other hand, if we negotiate from strength and begin the process of dialogue now with the EU, we are better placed to influence the direction of European policy, including on technology.

So, what Britain should do is to say to our European 'partners': we want to come back to a structured, formal relationship with Europe, but this can't be a take-it-or-leave-it offer on either side. We want to engage now in the European debate about its future. We will build strong pillars of partnership with Europe on defence and energy, where already it is clear we have huge common interests. And we need a robust dialogue on technology policy.

I have used the phrase *structured relationship* deliberately. There is also an active debate in Europe around whether it makes sense for Europe to move at different speeds on different issues. So, we should keep open exactly what a formal and structured relationship with Europe means. And what it means should be part of the dialogue.

The truth is that Britain has lost from Brexit. But so has Europe. We're both weaker without the other. But we can't go back to cohabitation unless on a basis which

enhances our capabilities, economic and political, and does not undermine them – and that goes for both of us.

The New Policy Agenda for Britain

Britain's policy towards Europe cannot be decided separately from its domestic policy. The two must cohere.

There are many things the government is doing with which I agree: investment in infrastructure, some reforms in planning, parts of the health plan, openness to the digital revolution, parts of the immigration and policing agenda, smoothing out some of the worst trade friction with Europe and a debate around at least some of the necessary welfare reforms.

And on macroeconomic policy, the government has given the famed 'bond markets' reason to be quiescent, at least until the Iran war and the latest leadership turmoil.

These are no small achievements.

This is a government of people, by and large, trying to do their best given a precarious inheritance.

But there is a fundamental problem.

The people don't want 'politics as usual'. The real reason behind the rise of the leaders from Donald Trump to Giorgia Meloni to Javier Milei is that they answer this call. You can like them or dislike them, but their chief characteristic is they appear to be unbound, not constrained by conventional thinking.

I have experience working with the Trump Administration and I describe the difference with conventional politics in this way. The conventional leader sets a destination down the road. They drive towards it. They come to a brick wall barring the way. They stop at the wall. Sit down and consider all the options. Keep considering. Finally take a decision to go round, through or over the wall, but it's a complicated process. It takes time and there is a constant pulling back by a cautious system.

The unconventional leader – in this case President Trump – drives down the road, sees the brick wall and accelerates. Yes, there are bits flying off the bus, there is a fair amount of debris and damage, the passengers feel mildly nauseous, but, with luck, he's

through the wall. It is simultaneously high in potential risk and in potential effectiveness.

The risk, of course, is if any wall on the journey turns out to be not a few inches but a few feet thick.

I am not advocating this approach. Merely describing its appeal. It seems to answer the efficacy challenge.

And today, the frustration with the system is such that people are inclined to take the risk. Because anything is better than the agonising irritation of incremental change that never seems to deliver real change.

This new breed of unconventional leaders has also understood how the new media landscape operates. Social media has transformed both politics and conventional media, which has decided – not all but most of it – ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’. The effect is political debate conducted in a climate of perpetual gale-force winds, capable at any moment of turning into a tornado, and, confusingly, constantly changing direction.

Conventional politicians pay close attention to what media, traditional and social, agitate over. This means they’re blown this way and that, trying to follow the prevailing wind. The paradox is that the public form part of this wind, but at the same time deeply distrust it. And look for leaders who stand strong in the face of it.

These unconventional leaders appear to have the ballast many conventional politicians lack.

They have an attitude, a tribe and a project.

They’re prepared to raise the middle finger to the part of the media which opposes them. And for protection they build a tribe – a core of support which will follow them, sometimes almost blindly. That’s why the ‘scandals’ which would immediately topple a conventional politician, they survive. The tribe won’t follow the tornado. Therefore, they reduce its impact. To switch analogies, they defang the beast.

And these leaders have a project. You might like it or not. But they have one. It gives them strength and purpose.

Before the 2024 general election I would ask members of the shadow cabinet and Parliamentary Party how they saw themselves. What are we: New Labour, Old Labour, Blue Labour? Usually the response would be: we don't really think of ourselves like that, i.e. we don't want to make that choice. And I would say: if you don't choose your definition, by default it will be chosen for you. You will drift, trying to be both New and Old Labour at the same time and will end up as what I call 'Just Labour' – i.e. firmly in the party's comfort zone.

Worse, before the election you will naturally be drawn to a New Labour pitch because it will more likely win over floating voters and business. But post-election, the pressure within the party will drive you towards Old Labour because it will give you an easier life and because you have never articulated why it's wrong.

Therefore, if you're not careful, people will vote thinking they're getting a version of New(ish) Labour and then in government feel they have instead got a version of Old(ish) Labour. The leadership will end up personifying Labour's essential choice, not resolving it. And the electorate will feel cheated.

Due to the way the manifesto was drafted, the government took with it into power commitments which meant that there was an inevitable gap between the government rhetoric around growth and the impact of these commitments on what the business community needed to restore the so-called animal spirits and get the private sector moving.

The commitments were: the new workers'-rights laws; the net-zero acceleration and phasing out of the British oil and gas industry; the uplift in the minimum wage beyond inflation; and the non-dom changes.

The prime minister and the chancellor should have said right at the outset: these are commitments which economic circumstances have rendered unwise to proceed with. The priority is growth. That comes with a vibrant private sector which has suffered years of economic instability, and we are going to go all out for making business feel respected and supported.

Dropping the commitments would have been painful but bearable because the government would have started with real goodwill from business.

But we didn't, and to compound the problem, we chose a rise in National Insurance not VAT to plug the fiscal gap in the first Budget. Either tax increase would have been unpopular. Only one undermined business confidence.

Then, in the last Budget, it appeared as if we were increasing tax to pay for additional welfare spending, when the public already thinks welfare bills are too high.

Taken together, these measures have given headwinds not tailwinds to British business, despite the macroeconomic gains for which the chancellor is rightly praised.

At a minimum, the government should try to limit the effect of the changes made and, as we have argued consistently, remove those parts of the net-zero agenda which prioritise clean energy over cheaper energy; and from now on make sure the actions match the words on growth.

This would be better for Britain, but by itself won't renew the country.

To do this requires a fundamental reset.

Whoever is elected next time will be seen as offering something radical. At present, there are the Greens offering radical leftism. There is Reform offering radical rightism. The Tories are offering Reform Lite. (The Lib Dems are being Lib Dems, i.e. finger in the wind).

In these circumstances, if Labour continues as 'Just Labour', it risks getting sliced to the left and right of itself.

And should it actively choose Old/Blue Labour, it may get back some of the so-called Red Wall (though remember New Labour kept those seats in 2005 and Labour lost them subsequently going left), but it then risks losing the parts of the country it gained in the south.

Labour's only electorally viable strategy is to become the Radical Centre.

Let me explain why.

Everywhere in Western politics there is fragmentation, mirrored in the fragmentation of the media. Look around Europe and the traditional parties of left and right have seen their support cratered. Or there has been turmoil within those parties.

They have responded mostly by trying to move to the left or to the right in the mistaken belief the centre ground has disappeared; or defined the centre ground in a rather flabby and weak way as ‘not extreme’ or ‘moderate’.

This has happened because of a confusion of two different elements. The centre ground is still where elections can be won. Labour won in 2024 in part because people thought the party was sort of centrist, even though really it wasn't. Macron won in France from the centre. So did the Democrats in the Netherlands recently. So did Tusk in Poland. Mark Carney too. Albanese in Australia. If the Democrats had chosen a strong centrist candidate in the 2024 American election, it would have been a much closer call.

The centre has a supply problem not a demand one.

However, the centre should never be the place of managing the status quo. Or of splitting the difference between left and right. Or just being ‘moderate’.

Rather, as I said earlier, the centre is the place where policy comes first and politics second. You work out the correct analysis, then the correct answer, and shape your political strategy around it.

Where, therefore, the correct answer requires radical change, the centre should be the radical changemaker.

This is the vacant space in British politics.

Parties no longer ‘own’ political space. Even 20 years ago, they did. They had core votes, people who stayed with them almost like religion. They identified with the party, Labour or Conservative. The parties owned that space. Even if, occasionally, they deserted it.

No longer. Today you don't own the space, you inhabit it. Or not. And if not, it's empty and up for grabbing. To the left and right of Labour the space is crowded. But not the centre. And the great benefit of it? It is best for the country too.

The Radical Centre starts from the proposition that governing in the age of AI will be the principal challenge. And opportunity. The route to economic prosperity and social justice. Here is what such an agenda might look like.

1. The private sector will go through a process of adaptation to this new AI world and, therefore, business and entrepreneurs need to know government is on their side,

removing obstacles to business growth – not creating them as they go through this massive process of adjustment. So, all those measures I described above which hold business back should be corrected or mitigated.

2. We need a transformative programme for planning reform and deregulation. The planning system in Britain is an abomination. The government has taken significant steps, but well short of a truly radical reform.

3. We must prioritise cheaper energy and electrification over net zero and use what is left of our North Sea oil and gas resources. This is essential for our competitiveness and for taking advantage of AI.

4. We should create a major new partnership with the private and voluntary sectors for apprenticeships and training – not just for the young and unemployed, but for the existing workforce whose jobs will be affected by AI and who need to learn AI adoption. Build on and not dilute the education reforms for schools started under New Labour and continued under the Conservatives. And keep our universities strong because they're critical to the technology economy. This is the key to extending opportunity and wealth, even more than it was in 1997.

5. 'Reindustrialising' the north of the country can be encouraged by government giving incentives and help but most of all it will come through first-class infrastructure, education, freedom from bureaucracy, and government working in partnership with the private sector and with the forward-facing part of the trade-union movement. And with a broad definition of 'industry' if we want to create jobs because much of future manufacturing will likely be done by robots, though there will be also major opportunities in areas requiring a high degree of traditional skills.

6. A plan for fundamental reform, over time, of welfare. By the end of this decade, we could be spending more on incapacity and disability benefits than on defence. No serious country can do that. Mental-health spending has exploded over the past five or six years. The system at points incentivises people not to work. The triple lock is unaffordable long term. All of this is horribly hard, but the British people know, deep down, the necessity of doing it. If the Conservative Party repeats its offer of working together on welfare, Labour should accept the offer.

7. The NHS needs not NHS reform but whole-system health-care reform. Moving from cure to prevention. Mixing private and public provision in a fundamental realignment of the two. Reorganising the delivery of health care, for example making weight-loss drugs and other preventative products widely available. Getting rid of all the old shibboleths which have turned the NHS into a point of theological principle rather than a modern service where the transformative power of technology alters its foundations.

8. Take effective – i.e. ‘whatever it takes’ – action to solve the illegal immigration issue. The home secretary is right in believing that solving this issue is critical and has completely changed in nature since 2007. Solving it is pre-conditional to getting the British people to listen to bigger arguments about the future. We should deal by whatever means with small boats but recognise the necessity of targeted immigration in certain sectors for economic growth and be unashamed to advocate it.

9. Most important of all, reorganising the whole of government around the harnessing of the 21st-century technological revolution. All governments for the foreseeable future will govern in the age of AI. Those which understand it will see their countries prosper; those which don’t, won’t. This is literally the challenge across all sectors including welfare and health (digital ID is just one, though vital, part of it). It will define the future of the British economy which, ironically, has a powerful position in technology but one we’re in danger of squandering.

10. Our aim, for the long term, should be a Reimagined State in which taxes and spending can be lower, productivity higher and government seen as enabling not directing, with political consensus behind such a radical restructuring of the state.

Alongside this policy agenda would come a wholesale reconfiguration of government. Not civil-service retraining, but a new cadre of workforce, with the specialist technical skills necessary to do systemic change. Departments effectively run by ministers not exclusively from the ranks of Parliament if they have the necessary experience and capability in change management, with special provision for them to be accountable.

Without an agenda of this nature, radical but sensible, Britain will continue its long slide towards relegation from the Premier League of nations.

It is not inevitable we decline. Britain still has huge strengths, a highly talented people and a residual respect in the world. But we must show we understand how that world

is changing and what our place in it should be. That requires, in turn, a fundamental change in our current politics.

We have done it before and can do it again. But will we?