

Third Julian Priestley Memorial Lecture, 7 May 2021

Bobby McDonagh

Britain and Europe: “The Hope Still Lives”

It is an honour to deliver the third annual Julian Priestley Memorial Lecture. Julian was a colleague for whom I had immense admiration and also a friend for whom I had great affection.

I am pleased that so many of you, including many of Julian’s friends and colleagues, have been able to join us this evening, and particularly delighted to welcome Julian’s husband, Jean.

Appropriately, today we mark Europe Day which this year falls on a Sunday. It is an occasion to celebrate the European Union, a project for peace and unity on our continent which remains of immense importance to the people of Europe and to the wider world. When we think of those who died in the great conflicts of the last century and say sincerely “we will remember them”, we cannot but have a special place in our hearts for the achievements and aspirations of the European Union.

I have to confess - as an official who spent more than three decades working in and with the European institutions – that my initial enthusiasm on receiving the invitation to deliver this lecture was quickly dampened by some uncertainty and trepidation; because the organizers of the event thoughtfully sent me the text of the *previous* Julian Priestley Lecture delivered by Frances O’Grady, Secretary General of the TUC. There, in black and white, at the outset of her eloquent address, Frances could not have made it any more plain: “Not for Julian”, she insisted, “a Europe of diplomats and technocrats”.

Surely some mistake, I thought. How could I have got the gig? How could the organizers of the lecture possibly have thought it wise to invite a lifelong diplomat and technocrat to try to do justice to Julian’s legacy? On reflection, however, I concluded that Julian would probably be content enough that a public servant should address you today. For Julian, even if he had a superb instinct for politics, was himself a public servant. If Julian’s Europe was not one of diplomats and technocrats, that is because he recognized, as I do, that bureaucracy is not an end in itself, that officials are not independent operators, and that the work we do must be under the direction of elected

politicians and ultimately in the service of a higher cause. It was to the service of such a higher cause, namely the construction of a decent and democratic European Union, with Britain at its heart, that Julian dedicated his immense talents as well as his distinguished career.

Indeed, I believe that Julian, having witnessed the beginning of both the Trump era and the Brexit fiasco, would, if he were with us today, insist more strongly than ever on the crucial role of public servants. It is not by chance that, in several countries recently, we have seen admirable public servants pilloried in the stocks of self-interested populism. Notably in the UK, experts were triumphantly and explicitly side-lined by the Pied Pipers of Brexit, the success of whose cause depended fundamentally on the pretence that there are simple answers to complex problems, that rational arguments do not need to be weighed up, one against the other. The Brexit debate was not so much about pros and cons as about the propagation of one massive con. Nor is it a coincidence that, in recent years, several exceptional senior British civil servants have found themselves side-lined or moved on for such heinous offences as speaking truth to power, insisting on respect for the ministerial code on bullying, or standing by the rule of international law.

In a world and in an era in which science, experience, knowledge and even basic facts have been increasingly sacrificed on the altar of superficial soundbites, objective professional analysis and advice are more vital than ever. The crying need to deal with the Covid threat has at last begun to make some inroads into the casual triumph of amateurish insouciance.

Education at all levels is, of course, the greatest bulwark against populism. I was delighted therefore that Somerville College initially offered, had Covid restrictions so permitted, to host this lecture in Oxford, and that the Principal of that distinguished college has kindly agreed to chair it online. I am also delighted, as I'm sure Julian would be, that the European Movement, of which he remained a member throughout his life, is hosting this event on Zoom.

Had Julian lived, he would have graced the recent British European debate with his intelligence, judgement and passion. Nobody would have made the case for Britain in Europe more effectively than him. Nobody would be more horrified than Julian that those who will now suffer most from Brexit are those in Labour's natural heartlands who were misled by politicians who cared more for their votes than for their well-being. Nobody would be more disappointed

with the largely insular path on which, for the moment, Britain is now set – an insular path concealed under the banner of “Going Global”.

Despite recent developments, I have chosen an upbeat title for this lecture, as I am sure Julian would wish. When Teddy Kennedy failed in 1980 to win the Democratic nomination for President, he chose to speak not of his regret but rather of his hope for the future. In a similar vein, the theme on which I propose to offer you some reflections this evening, fifteen months into Brexit, gently echoes Kennedy’s rallying cry of forty years ago: **“The Hope Still Lives”**.

Before turning to the substance of this memorial lecture, I would like to recall briefly my personal memories of Julian. Our paths crossed during three separate periods of our lives.

I first got to know Julian when I arrived as an undergraduate at Oxford nearly half a century ago. Julian had just left Balliol, at the end of Trinity Term in 1972, when I arrived at the college after that summer break. I therefore only met him, during my Oxford years, on his occasional return visits. But Julian, perhaps more than any other student of his generation, remained a presence even after his departure. “Julian Priestley” remained a name to conjure with: at Balliol, in the Labour Club of which I became a member, and at the Oxford Union where, a few years later, I followed him as President. I might add that the small “club” of Balliol ex-Presidents of the Oxford Union was one to which, for many years, I was unreservedly proud to belong. Alas, in more recent times, for a reason I can’t quite put my finger on, that pride has taken something of a hit.

Julian was, from the beginning, a deeply committed British European. As a student, he had been involved in setting up the Oxford Committee for Europe which, by my time, was affectionately, if cheekily, sometimes referred to as the Oxford Committee for Priestley. If one word could capture Julian, from my first encounters with him, it would be the word *charisma*.

It is fitting that this evening’s Zoom audience includes the Chancellor of Julian’s University, Chris Patten, and the Master of his Oxford College, Helen Ghosh.

My second memories of Julian relate to the five years during which we overlapped in Luxembourg after I arrived there to take up my first diplomatic posting. Initially friends and neighbours, we became colleagues when I joined the Secretariat of the European Parliament where Julian was already a high-flyer who always provided me with support and encouragement, as well as

much fun at the competitive games evenings which he organized. If I were to choose one word from *that* period which came to characterise Julian in my eyes, it would be the word *courtesy*. A surprising word perhaps, but Julian exuded a particular courtesy to everyone he met including, I remember vividly, to my own parents when they visited Luxembourg.

I was fortunate that, although I soon returned to the Irish diplomatic service, I had the opportunity later to work for a third time with Julian when he was Secretary General of the European Parliament and I was Ireland's EU Director General in Dublin and later Permanent Representative in Brussels. While he would have graced either the House of Commons - for which he stood three times as a Labour candidate - or Downing Street where Tony Blair offered him the position of chief of staff, Julian's period as Secretary General of the European Parliament's Secretariat offered him a perfect opportunity to deploy his immense personal and political talents, and to shape significantly the Europe that he loved. The word I would associate with Julian during that third period of our friendship is the word *personality*. His personal impact was a powerful reminder that the European Union has been shaped, above all, by outstanding individuals, many of them, of course, proudly and passionately British.

This evening therefore we recall Julian's charisma, courtesy and unique personality.

Let me say a word about the title of this lecture: "Britain and Europe: The Hope Still Lives". I will not be suggesting this evening that the United Kingdom is set to re-join the European Union, at least within any foreseeable time frame, or indeed that that will necessarily happen. Still less will I be arguing that now would be the appropriate moment to launch any formal campaign to that end; that would be both foolhardy and counterproductive. Reversing Brexit is far from being the only way for the UK to re-establish a closer relationship with the EU than the minimalist one chosen by the present British Government that has set a deep historic friendship along a narrow and doleful road.

Rather the hope still lives, the strong hope, that the hard Brexit sought and delivered by Prime Minister Johnson is not the last word of the British people on their country's relationship with its European neighbours. The present Government has, for the moment, an unassailable parliamentary majority. It cannot be prevented from continuing to prioritise the narrowest view of what

constitutes “sovereignty” and the unity of the Conservative Party over other considerations, including common sense. But politics always move on eventually. If, as they say, a week is a long time in politics, five to ten years is a veritable age. Already some voices are calling for a more sensible relationship with Europe. Someday, there will be a British Government and parliament of a different political hue. The Labour Party is a fundamentally pro-European party and will, in Government, work for a closer relationship with Europe, one more aligned with British interests and more in harmony with the centre of gravity of British public opinion. Re-joining the EU is not on the Labour Party’s present agenda but many in the party would like to see that happen and political calculations evolve with time. The Lib Dems, the Greens, the SNP and others will also make their voices heard. Indeed, who can tell how the thinking of the Conservative Party itself, that brought the UK into Europe and has traditionally attached importance to British business interests, will evolve?

Moreover, Brexit realities are already proving to be wildly different from the Brexit promises, as so many of those poor deluded experts had predicted. Some people may for now, understandably, want to move on from the bitterness and boredom of the Brexit process. But, over time, many will not be so willing to move on from the lost opportunities, the diminished rights, the truncated identity, the waning of national influence or the obstacles to prosperity.

I speak today as an Irishman, whose island, north and south, is deeply affected by Brexit, who has many close friends and family in the UK, and who has a deep affection for Britain; but I therefore speak as a foreigner. Needless to say, I have no particular claim to be able to predict the future of Britain’s relationship with Europe. I therefore offer my thoughts today with some humility and hesitation. However, I would emphasise that *nobody* can confidently predict or determine that future. Whether Britain will someday seek a closer relationship with the EU, or possibly even re-join, will not be decided by the present Government alone or by any future British Government. It will not be decided by the tabloids or commentariat or indeed by the European Movement. It will be decided by the British people in all their diversity and evolving wisdom, including by the young people who voted overwhelmingly for Britain to remain in the EU and the millions of other young people who have since reached voting age or will do so in the coming years.

In memory of Julian, but with his voice still in our ears, no one should be intimidated or silenced by those who argue that Brexit has been done, that all further debate is foreclosed, that Britain's relationship with its neighbours has been set in stone. Many of those who now insist that democracy, having spoken, must forever hold its peace are the very people who never accepted, over fifty years, the outcome of the UK's first EU referendum.

Julian's important book, *Six Battles that Shaped Europe's Parliament*, is a powerful testament to his political judgment and impact. It occurred to me that it might be appropriate this evening to address briefly **six other difficult battles** that lie ahead that could perhaps shape the evolution of Britain's relationship with Europe. No one can say for certain what the outcome of those battles will be. What is certain is that those battles must be engaged if hope and history, in fulfilment of Heaney's promise, are once again to rhyme.

The **first** immediate battle ahead will be to challenge the underlying Brexit narrative, namely that the "people" have had their say and can never express any other opinion forevermore. This battle will last many years but it should be engaged in earnest now. Political defeat must not be allowed to become political defeatism.

The idea that the 2016 referendum was a cut-and-dried, once-and-for-all, never-to-be-reversed political event is taking significant hold:

- Despite the fact that some Brexiteers had campaigned relentlessly for more than four decades to overturn the earlier British EU referendum;
- Despite the inevitability that Leave campaigners would themselves have insisted on another referendum if their side had lost by a few percentage points, as Farage stated explicitly in the days before the referendum;
- Despite the utter lack of clarity about what sort of Brexit the people were being asked to vote for; and
- Despite the witches' cauldron of untruths at the heart of the Leave campaign.

Britain has, of course, left the European Union. Now is obviously not the time to start any foolhardy campaign for another referendum. However, there *is* a real opportunity - I would say urgent responsibility - to challenge the *underlying narrative*, namely that the British people have spoken definitively, that Britain's relationship with Europe has been settled for good and that

those who disagree should just shut up. It is time to move on from licking wounds to licking some arguments into shape. Three underlying arguments in particular seem important.

The first argument relates to a dangerous view of what constitutes the British people. Since the 2016 referendum, a casual mantra has been deployed about what the so-described “*British people*” voted for. The harder the Brexit, apparently, the more the “British people” voted for it. The simple fact is that the British people, who were not presented with the glimmer of a prospectus for Brexit, were deeply divided on Europe in 2016 and remain so today. The fact that one side won the referendum, narrowly, does not justify repeated claims to know and represent what the so-called “British people” voted for, as Farage, Prime Minister May and her successor have done relentlessly.

More recently, it has been suggested that the British general election in December 2019 further settled the matter by confirming the British people’s support for a particular hard form of Brexit. This is, of course, utter nonsense. The first-past-the-post electoral system delivered a significant victory to the Conservative Party. However, although the subject of staggeringly little media comment, the majority of British voters in 2019 supported parties that favoured a second Brexit referendum.

Winning a referendum or a majority of seats in the House of Commons is an important democratic event. But it does not give the victors the right to talk grandly about what the “British people” want when what they mean is what, at most, approximately half the British people want. Nor does it absolve the British media from the responsibility to avoid such misrepresentation. The history of twentieth century Europe warns us of the dangers of identifying only part of a country’s population with its “people”.

It is thus important to keep alive the legitimate narrative that there is nothing remotely undemocratic or improper in working for a deeper relationship with Europe than the current settlement; or even in seeking, in the fullness of time, to reconsider British EU membership. It is both reasonable and wise to begin now working gently to ensure that the terrain of British public debate on Europe is not, like the land of defeated Carthage, sown so comprehensively with the salt of self-righteous triumphalism, that any flowering of a return to rational multilateralism in Europe would struggle to take root even when a more favourable climate someday returns.

The second argument that should be made is that the specific hard form Brexit now in place bears no resemblance to what leading Brexiteers promised - insofar as their promises had any content - during the referendum campaign. It would have been possible to leave Europe on the sort of terms Boris Johnson himself vaguely dangled in front of the electorate in 2016, according to which access to the Single Market would be largely undisturbed. However, to extend Johnson's infamous metaphor, eaten cake is soon forgotten. Failing that, it would have been possible to explore a relationship with the EU similar to the one Theresa May was seeking, which - while falling short of the full benefits of membership - would have minimized the national damage.

Failing even that, it would have been possible, at the very least, to seek a deal with Europe along the lines of that set out in the EU/UK Joint Political Declaration in 2019, which formed part of the so-called oven-ready deal which the British electorate were implicitly invited to endorse in that year's general election. However, it became clear quickly that the intention was always to change substantially the ingredients even of that oven-ready deal: a deal that held the promise of better market access in return for what the Political Declaration, the agreed Declaration, called "robust level playing field conditions", a sensible trade-off subsequently disowned by British negotiators.

The third argument to be advanced with a view to shaping a more truthful long-term European narrative in Britain is that the hard-line stance of the Johnson Government, prioritizing so-called "sovereignty" over everything else, including the aspirations of at least half the population, has not only ignored their point of view but has essentially disrespected it. Repeated assertions of a wish to "unite the country", if they are to mean anything at all, must surely take some slight account of the views of the large part of the British population that still aspires to a close relationship with Europe. The pursuit of a minimalist deal, followed now by an ongoing policy of distancing the UK from its European neighbours, can only deepen divisions between and within the constituent parts of the UK. The millions of British people who marched with great dignity a few years ago, with European flags in their hands, or who admired them for doing so, are being given a consistent simple message. That message, in the favoured Downing Street style of three-word political messaging, is "Suck it up".

The belated decision, it seems, to reverse the gratuitous downgrading of the status of the EU embassy in London is welcome. However, London's continued

policy of seeking to deal with individual member States rather than with the EU as a whole is misguided and, incidentally, entirely out of step with the Biden Government which is prioritizing a very close relationship with the European Union and its institutions. The British Government's policies should be judged against its stated intention of uniting the country. At some point, surely, some minimal account needs to be taken of those, in every constituent part of the United Kingdom, who do not celebrate every step that distances the United Kingdom from the European Union or cheer when Royal Navy ships, in a pre-election stunt, are dispatched to Jersey.

The proposed national Brexit Festival next year, a festival to celebrate the most divisive event in modern British history, copper-fastens the Government's message. The organisers of the Brexit Festival have invited ideas on how the Festival - I jest not - can be used to unite the country. I have a simple proposal, and it's well within budget: cancel the Festival; or at least recast it as something less divisive - which should involve plenty of European flags.

So, this first battle is to start engaging more effectively in the tussle between underlying narratives before it is too late; to abstain, on the one hand, from the overreach of talking up an early reversal of Brexit, but to avoid, on the other, being stunned into inaction by the recent hammer blows or by tabloid intimidation.

The **second** battle ahead concerns the future direction and success of European Union itself, the chosen front line of Julian's career. The European debate in the UK will be significantly influenced by how the EU itself copes with the challenges ahead.

The EU's two long-term priorities are well chosen: the greening of our societies and the digital agenda. The EU is rightly prioritizing those important and vastly complex issues which will, in many respects, define the world in which our children will live. The EU is demonstrating significant leadership in those areas, even if progress will necessarily be halting, uneven and dependent on others.

However, everyone's best laid plans have been disrupted by COVID. The EU is no exception. It has no claims to covering itself in particular glory in the context of COVID and has made significant mistakes. But then the same can be said of pretty well every country in the world, including the UK. The EU acted too slowly, in part because it does not have the necessary competences. On vaccines in particular, the EU's initial response could certainly have been more

effective although much of the criticism directed at the EU in the British media has been misplaced and exaggerated. Dealing with COVID will be a long and complex challenge. Vaccines – on which the EU is now rapidly getting up to speed - are only one important dimension. Comparative judgements about overall performance, in which mortality rates will be the most important metric, can only be made in the fullness of time.

The vast array of other challenges facing Europe also includes the departure of an important and valued Member State, the understandable aspiration of other countries to join and the future of the eurozone. It could be argued that the most difficult long-term challenge of all will be migration, a problem with which the EU is still grappling imperfectly. However, it is not a problem of Europe's making except insofar as we have created on our continent a prosperous and decent society where millions of people not only want to live but to reach which they have often been willing to risk their lives and those of their families.

I would like to touch briefly on three other particular challenges at European level that are likely to impact on British public opinion when it returns, as some day it surely must, to a political serenity that allows it to reflect rationally on the UK's interests and place in the world.

First the EU must work to develop further the single market, to a significant extent a British conception, and to protect the integrity of that market. The single market has significantly enhanced the prosperity of Europe, including the United Kingdom. However, there is much more to accomplish both in terms of the market for services and the digital single market. That work should continue for its own sake, sadly without the advocacy of the UK which would have continued to be a prime mover and prime beneficiary of that work. Success with that agenda, important for Europe itself, will also further increase the attractiveness of the single market for British businesses, workers and voters when the populist tempest subsides. Thanks to the ayatollahs of Brexit, the single market, once the jewel in Britain's crown, has become the thorn in Britain's side. But the whirly-gig of time, as Shakespeare tells us, will surely someday take another spin.

Preserving the *integrity* of single market was the EU's principal red line in the Brexit negotiations and will remain so as its relationship with the UK evolves. Ironically, it is a racing certainty that if any Member State other than the UK had decided to leave the EU, the strongest defender of the integrity of the

single market today would not be the infidels in Paris but rather God's elect in London.

Set against the long list of red lines emanating from London during the Brexit negotiations, which the EU accepted, the EU itself had essentially only two red lines of its own: the protection of its single market and the preservation, insofar as Brexit allows, of the balances of the Good Friday Agreement. Red lines can sometimes be mistaken for red rags, but the EU continues to have a responsibility to maintain its basic principles for the long-term well-being of the European continent and of my own island.

A second European challenge that could impact, in the longer run, on perceptions of Europe in Britain will be Europe's response to the challenges posed in Poland and Hungary to the independence of the judiciary and the wider institutions of democracy. This is a sensitive, complex and strategic issue to which there is no simple fix. But, in the longer run, finding a way to bite that bullet more decisively will be important not only for Europe itself but would, I believe, have a positive impact on British public opinion.

The UK has, of course, faced populist challenges of its own, for example with the attacks on the judiciary as enemies of the people, sustained criticism of patriotic politicians as traitors and even an attempt to prorogue parliament. Indeed, some Brexiteers have a particular affinity with the populism and insular nationalism currently on view in Hungary and Poland.

However, I'm certain that the decency of the vast majority of British people and their deep attachment to democracy will ride out the populist wave and that the UK will, one day, not only fully reaffirm the European values which it has done so much to shape, but will once again take a lead in asserting them.

The third challenge at European level that will impact on Britain's view of Europe is an external one: the need for the EU to redouble its efforts to defend multilateralism, to strengthen international institutions and to provide our deeply challenged world with leadership, as necessary as it is imperfect, in bolstering the interdependence of nations. In a world in which insularity has made something of a comeback, in which for some patriotism and selfishness have become more intertwined, the European Union has both an opportunity and responsibility to assert the values that underpin and inspire it. Multilateral organizations are under threat, not because of their own inevitable

imperfection, but because those who would undermine them falsely preach that simple, perfect, winner-takes-all, take-back-control answers are possible.

It is regrettable that the UK decided to leave the most important and influential multilateral organisation to which it belonged. The underlying psychology of that decision, notably what it says about recognizing the need for compromise and cooperation, raises inevitable questions about the UK's approach to wider international engagement.

However, it is to be warmly welcomed that the UK - despite Brexit - is in principle standing firmly by most other aspects of its commitment to multilateralism, including the United Nations, even if its steep cuts in development assistance have been criticised within the Conservative Party itself.

It is also important that, notwithstanding the UK's earlier explicitly announced intention of breaking international law in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol, and its subsequent decision to act unilaterally in relation to its provisions, it has now stated clearly that it intends to abide by its legal obligations and appears to be acting in good faith in working with the EU to find practical solutions. This week's leaking by London of the intention, unilaterally again, to break previous agreements on the prosecution of serious crimes in Northern Ireland, for short-term electoral advantage, is disturbing.

It is important that that the UK now continues to respect the legally-binding Protocol and otherwise to assert the importance of international law. The EU and UK must work together, and be seen to work together, on their shared priorities and values.

With the election of President Biden, the United States has placed itself once again firmly on the side of multilateralism. The US and the EU are set to be the two main pillars of western democratic interests and values. It is essential that they find optimal ways to work with the UK as with their other international friends and partners.

To conclude then on this second battle, the one that must be fought by the EU itself to shape its own future, it is certain that there will be successes and mistakes. The EU will set about its own challenges for its own reasons in pursuit of its own values and its own interests. But I hope that, in doing so, it will be possible - by further strengthening its market, its democratic values and

its constructive global role - to provide fertile ground for a renewed debate in Britain about its relationship with Europe.

When the UK finds its way back to being the confident outward-looking nation that so shaped Europe over the last half century, it will - I believe - turn back towards its natural friends. The EU must work in the period ahead, including for its own sake, to contribute to a vibrant multilateral world in which the United Kingdom can be its closest friend and partner.

The **third** of the six battles to shape Britain's future relationship with the European continent is the battle to explain the European Union truthfully to the public. This is obviously an immense challenge also in the 27 Member States, but it is particularly acute in a country in which the seeds of Brexit took root in the soil of frivolous drivel about square bananas and prawn-flavoured crisps; a fairy tale to scare the children, conjured into a believable reality by a mendacious tabloid media. The great lie about Europe in Britain became so pervasive that, in truth, those who voted for Brexit in 2016 did not vote to leave the European Union at all but rather to leave a figment of popular imagination. A fictional drama: directed by Nigel Farage, screen play by Dominic Cummings, based on an original story by Boris Johnson.

Of course, some British politicians, across all parties, have behaved with great integrity, and some British media coverage of Europe has been and continues to be excellent. But it is no more than a statement of the obvious to say that many media outlets in the UK continue systematically to misrepresent the EU's nature, ignore its successes, and exaggerate its faults.

The largely cost-free Brexit promised by Brexiteers is proving, as was always inevitable, to have stinging economic costs. As the costs grow and become more evident, the advocates of Brexit will remain unwilling to acknowledge the damage they have inflicted. They will opt for the Bart Simpson defence: "I didn't do it. No one saw me do it. You can't prove anything". Severely constrained access to the single market is already being portrayed as the result of European cussedness rather than the direct consequence of a British choice. Bad decisions, deliberately and consciously chosen, will continue to be blamed on the purported bad faith of others.

The problem is compounded by silence. As Nick Cohen has pointed out in *The Observer*, the real conspiracy, in a time of bogus conspiracy theories, is the conspiracy of silence about the negative impact of Brexit. "The Government

won't talk about it", Cohen has written. "The opposition dare not mention it. The right-wing press won't cover it." It is swept under the COVID carpet. The UK Government and its tabloid cheerleaders seem to believe that by the simple expedient of ignoring the elephant in the room, Nellie will discretely pack up her trunk and go back to the circus.

It will be a steep uphill battle to counteract this misinformation. It will require political courage across the spectrum, engagement across society and hopefully some growing sense of self-respect across the media.

The list of the fictions about the EU is endless: from the EU being a faceless bureaucracy to the UK's lack of influence as a Member State, from the EU falling apart to its being, at the same time, a superstate.

It is vital to try to ensure that legitimate and, where necessary, robust, criticism of the EU does not translate - as it so often does in Britain - into a questioning of the EU's existence or purpose; and that healthy scepticism does not morph into deep-rooted cynicism about its value or the possibility of the eventual return of Britain to a closer relationship with it, whatever form that may take.

The **fourth battle** is a related one, namely the global assault on truth that extends well beyond Brexit and Europe. It is a global struggle these days to try to ensure that words have any meaning at all.

The importance of words, the sacredness of words, is now severely challenged. When the world's greatest purveyor of fake news can spend four years in the White House describing reality as "fake", presenting fictions as alternative facts, the size of the problem is evident.

The connection between words and truth has become increasingly tenuous. Nowadays words are often mere playthings - for spicing up a sound bite, for shaping a slogan. Words may have lost their meaning but they have not lost their importance. They are the means by which we can break down even the oldest and most seemingly impenetrable of barriers. British-Irish relations, for example, improved beyond recognition in recent decades because of the words of mutual respect, honest recognition and heartfelt empathy - in both directions - that came to characterise the relationship.

Words are also at the very basis of the European Union - a Union created, inspired, defined, and strictly limited by *written* treaties and *written* law; a Union defined by the constructive use of words of which the UK was an outstanding

exponent. Words are the stuff of compromise, the necessary material for shaping the fair principles and respectful compromises which characterise the European Union. There is nothing wrong with fudge when the alternative is conflict, or indeed gunboats.

There can surely have been no greater corruptions of language during Brexit than the calculated comparison of the European Union to the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany or the sustained language in the House of Commons about betrayal, traitors, surrender bills and collaborators, one of whom happened to be Winston Churchill's grandson.

Nowhere is the challenge of language more important than to lay the groundwork for a serious future debate about Europe in Britain.

The **fifth** battleground concerns Scotland and Northern Ireland.

No one can predict, with confidence, the future of those nations, although Scotland seems to have sent a clear message again yesterday. The future of Scotland and Northern Ireland lies primarily in the hands of their own people. There will be complex debates in which different views of sovereignty, economic interests and political identity will be asserted. Scotland and Northern Ireland may indeed choose different paths.

But we know already that Brexit will, in both cases, play an important role. Most Scottish and Northern Irish people would prefer still to be part of the European Union and they remain opposed to Brexit. Indeed, Brexit has strengthened the hand of those who favour Scottish independence and of those who argue for Irish unity. Were it not for the Northern Ireland Protocol, which is necessary to minimize the damage of Brexit, the boost to those campaigning for Irish unity would have been significantly greater.

The majority in both nations know what their aspirations counted for in the impulsive scramble for Brexit. Precisely nothing. In Northern Ireland, the unionist community, some of whom are now understandably angry, understand that as well as the nationalist community.

Identity will play a central role in the debates ahead. Most Scottish people remain comfortable with their multiple identities. Even those who favour Scottish independence, seem happy to consider themselves British as well as Scottish and European. In Northern Ireland, respect for different identities lies at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement which acknowledges the right each

person to choose to be British or Irish or both, and all that under the umbrella of a shared European identity that provided the overall context for the peace process.

Into those china shops of delicate, interwoven identities strode the great bull of Brexit, asserting the purity and superiority of one single identity on its triumphant rosette: Englishness.

Either Scotland or Northern Ireland, or both, could opt to leave the United Kingdom in the years ahead. Or, if not, they will remain within the UK, disaffected and unhappy to be deprived of their European identity and determined one day to reclaim it. And things are beginning to stir in the Welsh valleys too.

In conclusion, let me turn to the **sixth and final** battle in relation to Britain and Europe: the battle to keep the spirit of Europe alive.

The UK witnessed, over the past few years, perhaps the most enthusiastic and well attended demonstrations of European enthusiasm that the EU has seen. The immediate aim of those events has been stopped in its tracks by the UK's departure from the European Union. Beyond that, the more modest ambition - of what is almost certainly a significant majority of British people to have a closer relationship with Europe than that being pursued - has been side-lined for the moment by the decision to proceed with a hard Brexit of a kind dismissed as a non-runner during the referendum by those campaigning for Brexit and not put openly to the British people in the 2019 general election.

But if the short-term aim and ambition of British pro-Europeans have run into some buffers, their aspirations remain as valid, their values as legitimate and their cause as important as ever.

Although in Ireland we know a few things about keeping flames alive, I would be hesitant to try to prescribe how British European hopes might best be nurtured with a view to their ultimate vindication.

However, the process could usefully start by recognizing and reflecting proudly on the immense contribution that the United Kingdom has made to shaping the European Union over the last half century, including the contribution made by many individuals like Julian Priestley. It could involve recalling the achievements to which EU membership has contributed: the personal friendships it has made possible across the continent; the remarkable

improvement of relations between Britain and Ireland; the delicate peace itself in Northern Ireland; the vast array of educational, cultural and employment opportunities for young people; the enhanced stability and prosperity on our shared continent; the decent values on which the EU continues to give leadership; and the creation of complex European institutions which, for all their imperfection, have shown that they have some potential, in the words of Aeschylus, “to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of the world”.

Above all, pro-Europeans in the UK should not be intimidated by the assertiveness of compatriots who have long wanted to turn back the clock to an imaginary past or by the belligerence of those who mistake swagger for patriotism.

The task of remaining undaunted is difficult in a country in which much of the so-called “news” is not news in any real sense; and in which so often on TV and radio trite and baseless views are given extensive air-time, in which it has sometimes seemed that every expert, if no counter-expertise exists, must be balanced by a nincompoop.

My reflections this evening are inspired by my immense affection and admiration for the UK, a major reason for my continued modest involvement in public debate.

The Millwall Football Club chant, “No one likes us, but we don’t care”, may reflect the attitude of some Brexiteers. However, it is an anthem I reject absolutely as far as the United Kingdom is concerned. While there has been some exasperation in Ireland, even occasionally resentment, at the British Government’s approach to Brexit, the underlying friendship remains deep. Shakespeare captures better than Millwall Football Club the aspiration to enduring affection between our two islands: “love is not love which alters when it alteration finds”.

And, of course, Britain and its people have very many friends in every corner of Europe.

When I arrived at Oxford as an undergraduate in 1972, in Julian footsteps as it were, the murderous IRA campaign was at its height and Bloody Sunday, just six months previously, had left many civilians dead in Derry. Despite the difficulties of those times, I experienced nothing but welcome and friendship. Diversity was celebrated rather than endured. Tolerance, including respect for

other nationalities and points of view, was not an option but the very air we breathed. That remains, I am certain, the authentic Britain.

I look forward one day to a reassertion of that Britain: to its unqualified openness to other people, backgrounds, beliefs and ideas, including friendship with neighbouring countries; to a restored recognition that true sovereignty is something to be judiciously deployed and sometimes shared; to an awareness that many of the great issues faced by our societies transcend the borders with our neighbours; to the knowledge that we are infinitely stronger when we address those issues together.

Speaking of universities, the UK's decision to withdraw from the Erasmus Programme - that offered so many young British people opportunities to broaden their cultural, educational and linguistic horizons - was particularly regrettable. In some ways, the Erasmus decision is relatively unimportant compared to other Brexit policies that will have a bigger impact on the UK's prosperity and influence. But, in its way, the withdrawal from Erasmus stands out. No Brexit decision was more gratuitous, short-sighted or unnecessary. It will be one of the first Brexit decisions to be reversed, by a Labour Government or otherwise. And being so manifestly dismissive of a coming generation's aspirations, far from cutting the UK off from the continent, it will help to keep the spirit of Europe alive amongst the generations that will determine the UK's future.

Julian Priestly believed in openness and engagement. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that they shaped his life. That the United Kingdom has, for the moment, turned somewhat inwards is not the end of Julian's life's work. On the contrary it is reminder, as we remember him today, of the ongoing importance of that work. Julian believed, as the title of his book reminds us, in political battles. His message to us today would be that the struggle for Britain's soul must continue: gently, judiciously and respectfully.

I mentioned at the outset that Julian remained a presence at Oxford long after the end of his undergraduate days. I believe that his wisdom and passion are, similarly, still present with us today.

I will allow Teddy Kennedy the final word. If I may adapt slightly the final words of his address to the Democratic Convention in 1980, in which he transformed his concession of defeat into a stirring call to arms:

For Julian, a few years ago, this campaign came to an end. But for all those whose concerns were his concerns “the work goes on; the cause endures; the hope still lives; and the dream shall never die.”