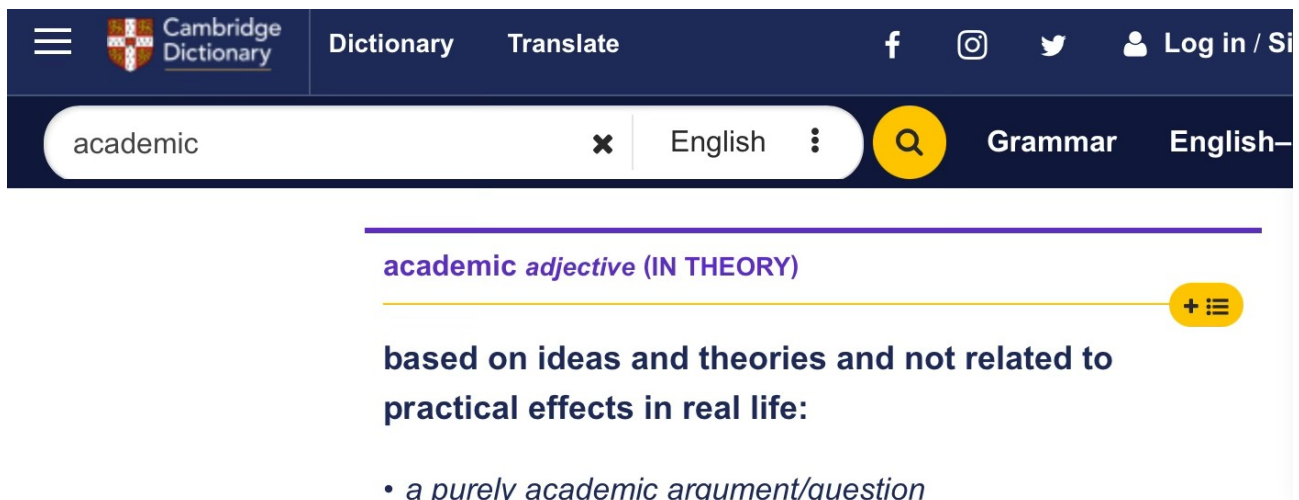


'Purely Academic?': 20 years of teaching British Government



The screenshot shows the Cambridge Dictionary interface. The search bar contains the word 'academic' and is set to 'English'. The definition for 'academic' is displayed, including the part of speech 'adjective (IN THEORY)' and the definition: 'based on ideas and theories and not related to practical effects in real life:'. A bullet point below the definition reads: '• a purely academic argument/question'.

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academic x English Q Grammar English–

academic *adjective* (IN THEORY) +

based on ideas and theories and not related to practical effects in real life:

- a purely academic argument/question

Being made Professor means the world to me. I love it. I'm so proud of having chosen this career and feel privileged every day to work in such a magnificent seat of higher education. I think I love it so much partly because I simply did not envisage any of it. I was born in Plaistow in East London, of families whose work was centred upon the Royal Docks just before that rich chapter of London's history came to an end, and I grew up in the Greater London Borough of Havering, in Essex. I quite liked school, and was the first in the family to stay on for 'A-levels', leaving education at eighteen to head, as so many others from my Essex comprehensive school cohort, to the financial services industry.

Why did I not seamlessly head to university in the early nineties? I did receive a little encouragement from a teacher-or-two but higher education seemed a long way away. It was partly not having family wealth, and you will recall that 1991 fell in the middle of the early nineties recession - the construction sector was the first to contract - and my Dad, Malcolm, was made redundant three times in one year. He never gave up, but times weren't easy. I think, however, that it was perhaps even more due to there being no history of higher education and no white-collar role models around me. I was not alone, and out of 180 children who started my secondary school, only around 20 ventured to higher education. Let me make it clear that I *always* had a great deal of admiration for many of my teachers and I'm happy to say I think a far greater proportion of students in there now go to university. And, while the School had some tough years in special measures a decade ago, I was so honoured to be asked to be the guest speaker at their prize night a few years back.

I did get to Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, when I was twenty. Dad had begun to suggest I consider it for I had decided that banking was not for me - but that did not stop a yo-yo existence between university and banking as it felt I was forever saving up for, or paying off my studies, as I did my first degree then went back to banking during summers and after I graduated, before finally leaving the sector for good. Working on the trading floors of, among others, Hambros Bank and JP Morgan, getting into work before dawn to catch the start of the markets, being shouted at for conscientiously not cutting corners with the accounts - I kid you not -

and never hitting the salary high notes, and moreover liking words rather than numbers, meant that I cumulatively did not foresee a long-term career in that industry, and led to a rosy-eyed but unfocused view of what the university-life was like.

My initial experience of academia was less than exhilarating. Not having ever been an 'A' student, though always in attendance and keen in class, continued into university days and I thought it all fine but was a little disaffected. I think it was partly being threatened on my first day in secondary school at age eleven after being enthusiastic in a lesson that meant I came to live a classic triangulation - don't fail but don't succeed, hide any talent. But there was another factor at play that fed a sense of disconnection. Though enjoying much of the teaching at QM, during the second year when thoughts were turning to what came after, I began to feel that my degree was too disparate and unfocused, not practical enough. 'Purely academic', perhaps. I delivered a respectable 2:1 in History and Politics, but did not see anything but a return to banking. I immediately regretted it.

I had, however, had a stroke of professional luck. I had a burgeoning belief that, while I'd always *thought* I was clever, I had never *proved* it academically. I lobbied to be accepted in my final undergraduate year for Professor Peter, now the Lord, Hennessy's legendary module 'Cabinet, Premiership and the Conduct of British Central Government since 1945' - 'Cab and Prem' to its friends. It was to prove the making of me. 'The Prof' was an almost mythical figure at QM. He was so impressive and took no prisoners regarding under-performance, and once called me out in front of the class after a less-than-well-researched presentation. I subsequently studied harder than I'd ever done, and found that my comprehensive school style of writing, marked down by more classically-focused academics, was warmly *encouraged* by him. Peter made me feel so comfortable in higher education. For the first time I was achieving first-class marks. It was the awakening of my pursuit of excellence.

The module 'Cab and Prem' was something else. We still believe that its complex approach is the best way to understanding modern British government. It had Peter's highly engaging personality driving a blend of theory and practice, an unbeatable combination of rigorous research scholarship and in-person guest teaching from figures such as, in my year 1996, the formidable former head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Sir Percy Craddock, and a visit to No. 10 Downing Street for a seminar with the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robin Butler. A heady brew, I'm sure you'll agree. Incidentally, our students have visited No. 10 and seen every Cabinet Secretary since 1992, and this year's trip takes place on Friday. As Professor John Rentoul and Dr Jack Brown put it in *The Independent* just this week, the 'unique approach is to apply the rigour of historical inquiry to recent events by studying primary sources – and those primary sources include the people who were "*in the room, where it happened*" ... And it all helps to understand how our nation's government actually works, given the largely unwritten constitution and ability to flex and alter. Ours is a more organic system than others, and so personalities matter more.' As good a definition as any I think. Moreover, Peter made clear that teaching was every bit as important as research. I could not agree more and I've more than once rejected a move further into management to continue in the classroom where I'm happiest.

But there was something else. I peppered Peter with questions and theories as I embraced the possibility of a future academic career. I remember one such conversation where we discussed what was it that set Oxford and Cambridge apart. He said, saving his blushes, that the teaching at QM was every bit as good. I deduced that it was all about the prestige and the network. The prestige, I truly believed, was easy to match: Oxford's dreaming spires, and Cambridge's punting, could be

countered by London, from the City to Westminster and Whitehall. How finance connected to government over centuries against a backdrop of culture and history. Wonderful, multi-dimensional contemplation. But creating a *network*, now that was *much* more complicated.

The value of being in a relatively small cohort, and academics really getting to know students, was immeasurable to me. During one of my last Cab and Prem classes, I had worn a West Ham United football sweatshirt. Peter asked me if I ventured out to watch the mighty-yet-often-mediocre Hammers, which I did, and he said that, though he had lived in the East End for twenty-five years, he had not been to the Boleyn Ground, and would I take him some time. I bought him a scarf, took him to a bleak midwinter game against Leeds, sat him down for the local delicacy of pie, mash and liquor. West Ham were bad, Leeds were worse, and they still won 2-0 which the Leeds fans celebrated by going shirtless in sub-zero temperatures. I thought, that's that, couldn't have gone much worse, he'll not be seen again. But a few weeks later, I got a handwritten note saying how much he had enjoyed the whole experience, right down to him heading home on a bus when an older gent wearing a claret and blue muffler rolled his eyes at The Prof in downtrodden solidarity - *and that he wanted to go again!* He was soon so enamoured that he joined me in a season ticket - and announced to the world he was a Hammer in *Who's Who*. He invited his great friend and at that time Permanent Under-Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, Sir Kevin Tebbit, who soon also became a season ticket holder (and our first Visiting Professor), and Peter used what for him was a real taste of working class life as a form of inverse-corporate entertainment - the day their friend Professor Simon Schama joined us all, with the three Cambridge graduates singing songs from Vaudeville at the back of the Bobby Moore Stand, well, I thought we were all going to die. But networks were beginning.

During my final two years in banking I got more and more disillusioned and Peter said 'come back to us'. I started my Masters under him like a train and achieved an overall Distinction top mark for the first time (I always said I did not want to peak *too early*). Subsequently Peter 'had a word' and I became a work experience researcher in the Cabinet Office, which led to them sponsoring my doctoral thesis published in 2007 as *Prime Ministers and Whitehall, 1960-74*. I was one of six PhDs under Peter including the future Cabinet Secretary, Dr Simon Case, that were encouraged to join the late, and lamented, Institute of Contemporary British History's seminar series at Senate House which Peter and Anthony Seldon had created in 1986. By the early 2000s, this had broadened away from its political and governmental origins and, after three years of regular attendance, I was not alone in wanting something more focused. In late 2003, on the first floor restaurant of The Captain Kidd pub in Wapping, us PhD students decided we would set up our own bespoke government and politics-focused seminar to cater for *our* needs. Peter was there, too, and said he would back it - but always pointed out how the whole enterprise was student-led. We wanted a seminar which was relevant to the wider world, outward-looking and porous to those not in academia, a lay-yet-kind of *Financial Times* quality audience requiring an accessible discourse, but one rooted in heavy duty scholarship, informed by rigorous academic history - true inclusion was embedded from the very beginning.

I gave the first Mile End Group lecture in February 2004 and, having been at every MEG and subsequent Strand Group since, all 178 of them, I must say that it's never been quite as good as that first one - I probably set the bar a bit too high! With a title 'Five new research findings of the machinery of government under Edward Heath', you can imagine I sent the capacity crowd of about twelve home wanting more!

But the title provided another example for what made this seminar series different - on the surface a dry topic but a fascination as to how government works in practice. We invited the recently retired Cabinet Secretary, Lord Wilson of Dinton, to be respondent at the first one, such was the ambition from the start. He could not make it, but offered to be in effect our first VIP guest a few months later. When Peter gave an external lecture quoting at length Wilson's previously unpublished and, for a Cabinet Secretary, somewhat *spicy* thoughts on the Blair Government, the MEG was on the map. Perhaps my favourite event title ever was 'The theory and practice of writing the Cabinet minutes' with the then incumbent Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell and his legendary predecessor Lord Armstrong of Illminster. The seminars got bigger and more complex and in its tenth year, at the 100th Mile End Group, Tony Blair was the star guest, the first time he had spoken at a UK university since his retirement, on the topic 'How Government *Really* Works' - 'can't wait to find out' said former Cabinet Secretary Lord Butler of Brockwell in his inimitable way.

Tonight's event is our 69th at King's and we now put on fewer events per year than we once did but they are often now much bigger set-piece affairs. In the past year alone we have had Lords Michael Heseltine and Ken Clarke; former Security and Intelligence Coordinator and Director of GCHQ, Sir David Omand; two lectures from the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Sarah Munby; and three from Professor Ed Balls, one with Lord Macpherson of Earl's Court, another with Michael Gove, and a third as part of 'the panel to end all panels', according to *Politico*, featuring a delicious spat between Lord Mandelson and George Osborne. They are all commercially sponsored. The attendees number the hundreds - old and young, students, those currently in situ, the retired, across sectors as diverse as politics, the Civil Service, the military, the wider public sector, journalism and business. Over twenty years, our events have become as good as anyone's anywhere.

Early on in my academic career, I had been invited to a Cambridge University conference on government. It was huge, hundreds of attendees, with so many famous and infamous faces. The thing I *vividly* recall was observing the Master giving instructions to his students who would then introduce themselves to the VIPs, what I took as a conveyor belt of privilege. I'd witnessed where the apostolic succession took place, where access to the fabled 'Establishment' took effect. But I was not unhappy. I did not want what I thought of as an impervious network smashed for its privilege, exclusion and elitism. I was simply impressed and fascinated thinking it brilliant. Feeling that I'd never be a part of that one, I dreamt of my own. One that would deliver all the benefits of an elite network but one that was inclusive, and open to all. And I wanted what the generic Oxbridge delivered for my own future students in London. I'm not frightened by fair competition, I simply wanted a level playing field. Twenty years on, the Strand Group is the networking arm of our teaching and research activities, and the network I thought essential is there for all to enjoy and, crucially, join.

A significant dimension of this whole story is the financial support from business. Very early on in the MEG's life, Peter had lunch with an old government acquaintance, the much-missed Charles Cox who was boss of the UK branch of US Presidential candidate Ross Perot's Electronic Data Systems. They had been winning huge contracts to digitise British government back office functions. Charles explained how *his* workforce needed to learn about their new customer - government. Peter explained how *he* had a cohort of hungry young ones who knew government from many different angles. A joint-seminar followed and at the resulting drinks, one of our number, the enterprising Fearghal McGoveran, got talking to EDS's head of government affairs Mal George, telling him that he really needed to sponsor us, which he promptly did. Peter and I knew that this

was a) *unusual*, a multibillion dollar American IT company sponsoring a history seminar in the East End of London, and b) would cause some issues at the university. All was well when the level of sponsorship began at £200 per seminar. When after four years I managed to turn that into £100 thousand pounds per annum, interest was piqued. Commercial support in academia was not without its difficulties but crucially the then Principal of QM, Professor (now Sir) Adrian Smith, and its Chair of Council, (now Dame) Colette Bowe, thought it brilliant, and this was part of the reasoning why I was made Associate Director of Corporate Affairs at QM, alongside my teaching.

Personally, I thought the business partnership was really important for two reasons: first, The Prof was anti-funding council sponsorship on principle, thinking funding councils not fast nor flexible enough, and so I needed to find new income streams if our initiative was to survive and indeed thrive; and, second, this was true, demonstrable, count the dollars, 'impact'. For these reasons, I have been so proud of our commercial sponsorship which has now topped a total of £2.5m and pay true homage to our friends who saw the value and made it happen including Craig Wilson and Sir Bill Thomas of EDS then Hewlett Packard, Tijs Broeke of HP Inc, John Midgeley of Amazon Web Services, and last, but certainly not least, James Johns, who links all those companies and his current one Workday. Thank you.

That money has been very well spent on hospitality supporting our convivial networking events - but mostly on research. By 2008, the founding MEG doctoral researchers had left one-by-one with me the last one standing - there was one event where I greeted attendees, chaired the event, poured the after drinks and organised the dinner - slightly frenetic, not particularly pleasant, for me at least, and totally untenable. Part of the big jump in sponsorship came because I hatched a plan: for the MEG to survive, I needed people. EDS agreed to pay for four students to do their Masters and work for me part-time, with speedy delegation of significant responsibility, and each building their own networks. Over thirty Mile End Group Assistants - MEGAs - and Strand Group Assistants - SGMAs - have now been through the initiative with them subsequently heading into academia, the Civil Service, local government, journalism, government affairs, banking and even becoming parliamentary candidates. And most of these seriously bright men and women were from academically non-traditional backgrounds, supporting our fervent belief that ability is to be found everywhere. Inclusiveness regardless of social circumstance or ability to pay is a key component of all we have ever done. We could not be prouder of them all. And we are absolutely delighted that this is growing dimension of our work.

In 2014, I joined King's College London. There had been a well-trodden path from QM to KCL, usually at higher managerial level. Professor Fagan was one who came just after me. Others included Professors Evelyn Welch and Jeremy Jennings who reached Senior Vice Principal and Head of the School of Politics and Economics respectively. Jeremy in particular saw so much opportunity for King's to really make a name for itself regarding the study of government and a way to allow me and my team to thrive on a bigger canvas. So after tremendous soul-searching, I decided that King's would be the right move, and so it has proved. I thought I'd never leave QM, just three miles from I had been born, in an East End becoming fashionable for the first time and in a college I knew inside and out, but a change of management led to differences over the direction and pace of my ambition. Things are rarely smooth and easy when one is trying something new. I had a view and stuck to it.

King's was a big challenge. As Sir Mark Allen, a member of the MEG board and former senior SIS officer, put it 'you've built something special in the rarefied terroir of the East End, but can you do

it among the competition at the very Centre?’ Mark has a way of getting to the point. So we lifted and shifted the Mile End Group and, in a multi-million pound makeover, renamed it The Strand Group. My last QM team followed me to King’s and are all Doctors now - Jack Brown, Michelle Clement and Ashley Sweetman. Another former MEGA Martin Stolliday soon rejoined as the first staff member. We are now joined by two doctoral candidates, Eyupçan Gökçen researching ‘the institutional history of the Ministry of Defence’, my old JP Morgan colleague Chetun Patel, currently close to completing ‘the history of Bank of England independence’, and soon by Sian Cleary who will begin ‘a history of British digital policy’ in the Autumn, with more on the way. The pipeline is flowing.

Collaboration and a team ethos has always been a key aspect of my approach. But I’m sure I was not the first History doctoral student to feel at times isolated and lonely. There is an unavoidable, and to be embraced, side of deep solo research that often leads to resilience and personal growth not to mention clarity and sometimes magical enlightenment. And so I began to ameliorate what I, and others, were feeling by gathering fellow-students and outside friends for frequent get-togethers. Peter described me as the ‘social secretary’. This evolved into a support-network for doctoral researchers where they become integral members of our Group. For me, the unavoidable ‘sole-trader’ component of research is best complemented by a supportive team - while the sum being greater than the parts allows you think and act on a much bigger scale. Another aspect I think important is that I’ve always found it highly useful to be abreast of what government and associated groups think of higher education policy. Lord Willetts’ 2011 White Paper, in particular, helped by his then special adviser Nick Hillman, another former student of Lord Hennessy’s, stood out to me as a beacon of forward thinking and relevance.

In 2012, I received an email from the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, then Sir Nicholas Macpherson. I was being invited into the mythical, powerful, really quite secret Treasury. I almost stood to attention. Nick explained how he was concerned that rapid staff turnover had undermined institutional memory, something acutely felt during the Financial Crisis of 2007 to 2009, how he had asked around the country but found no university offering anything approximating to what he needed, that he thought some form of demystifying and openness was probably necessary, in essence what he wanted was for ‘history to return to the Treasury’, and that no-one had bitten on this tremendous offer. ‘I’ll bite’, I said, and so began the first of our multi-purpose governmental partnerships. I suggested Nick give one of our events in the Treasury - ‘we haven’t hosted a public lecture in here before but no reason why we can’t’ said Nick; I asked him if he would like to guest lecture on ‘Cab and Prem’ - ‘I think I’d like that very much’; and then the big one: though not in my gift, if I could swing it, would he like to be a Visiting Professor? ‘Now there’s a thought’ replied Nick. Walking out of the Treasury, I called The Prof (from 2010 in the Lords) and said ‘something extraordinary has just happened’. Nick’s lecture was a great success, followed by another in quick succession, and one from Sir Dave Ramsden, then Chief Economic Adviser. All this piqued my appetite.

I began to plan for an accredited ‘history of the Treasury’ teaching module which got underway within a year of joining King’s. Nick, whilst Permanent Secretary and after, joined the teaching panel and has been our great friend throughout. Alongside him were several others including a supremely experienced and highly energetic senior politician who suddenly had time on his hands - the now *Professor* Ed Balls, a natural teacher with a frankly awesome analytical ability who came to the first Treasury class and stayed. I must say, I’ve never encountered anyone who relishes marking essays quite as much as he, which was a godsend when student numbers went up

exponentially during Covid. Bless you, Ed. Perhaps the most memorable class was during Ed's glorious run on 'Strictly Come Dancing' when he got to the Blackpool week and called in to the class with voice cameos from Anton du Beke and Katya Jones. 'The history of the Treasury' bespoke teaching module helmed by me as the academic with Macpherson, Balls and other VIP practitioners, *including former Chancellors*, is a blend of theory and practice, academic and practitioner, which delivers moments when the special guests combine to create a breathless experience. The class is enhanced by the Treasury deciding to send hundreds of officials to learn their institutional memory and create a blended student cohort. This Treasury teaching continues and is joined by executive education which will be rolled out to other departments in the coming years. Learning the lessons of contemporary history, there are moments when it all becomes eerily relevant: how the various 'dashes for growth' always come a cropper; teaching about the time when Denis Healey returned from Heathrow to handle the IMF crisis in 1976 at the *very same time* that Kwasi Kwarteng was flying into Heathrow from an IMF meeting to his *own* crisis; and, during the Liz Truss witchhunt, being asked by the BBC if my class was where Treasury officials learned 'Treasury orthodoxy'? I quietly said: 'this is where they learn history!'

Another initiative straddled the QM-King's years. Back in 2008, The Prof had just bequeathed 'Cab and Prem' to me, having been his seminar teacher for the previous seven years. At the same time, the QM History Department put out a call for new 'special subjects' which formed half of an undergraduates' final year with four essays, an exam, and a 10,000-words dissertation - truly thorough academic history. Through the MEG's network, I had got to know John Rentoul of *The Independent on Sunday* and biographer of Tony Blair and together we saw a niche in bringing academic balance to the study of Blair as Prime Minister. Fuelled by the recent publication of Alastair Campbell's first volume of primary evidence diary extracts and using all the contacts we could muster, we created what has been described as 'ultra-contemporary history'. When John persuaded Alastair to one of the classes, not only did he bring a 'Newsnight' camera crew who were profiling him, but the clamour across the university to be a guest in the class was eye-opening. We were told that Blair himself found all this 'intriguing' and subsequently agreed to guest on the class. And John wrote the classes up for *The Independent* gaining wide coverage. It all led to me being short-listed for the *Times Higher Education's* 'Most Innovative Teacher' in 2010. At The Grosvenor hotel, the master of ceremonies, Michael Portillo, read out the nominations in front of over a thousand people, and loudly proclaimed 'Next is Jon Davis for The Blair Government? - huh!' and I walked away a loser. In 2019, John and I published *Heroes or Villains?: The Blair Government Reconsidered* largely based upon the many special guests who came to the class, which was then the basis for BBC Two's five-part documentary series 'Blair and Brown: The New Labour Revolution' in 2021, for which we were historical advisers. Leading this module nowadays is Dr Michelle Clement, herself risen from 'Cab and Prem' undergraduate. These classes are complex to organise and teach, rooted in the academic tradition, practically-infused, fascinating, exciting and fun.

Two years after joining King's, we imported 'Cab and Prem' after it was discontinued at QM, promoted it to postgraduate level, and this time had No.10 Downing Street partner it. 'We want what they've got' said the Deputy Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister Ed Whiting, pointing to the success of the Treasury class.

Put the Strand Group network next to these teaching modules and you have what I would describe as the true academic triangle - teaching, research and public engagement mutually reinforcing each other in perfect harmony. Add that to another powerful triangle - academia, government and business - and you have the recipe for success.

Which brings me to the present day. After twenty years of teaching individual modules on various MA programmes, from this September the Strand Group will launch our very own MA Government Studies, the first teaching programs offered by the Policy Institute at King's, under the wise and dynamic leadership of Professor Bobby Duffy in the Policy Institute and Faculty Executive Dean Professor Linda McKie. I'm so excited. It builds upon the modules I've already mentioned along with Dr Brown's wonderful 'London: Governing the Global City' and adds three all new ones, including a history of the Civil Service in partnership with the Cabinet Office. Everything I've learnt over the past years teaching is being poured into this new offering. A relentless focus on making it the best it can possibly be. A relatively small cohort so that there is true partnership between teacher and student. Practically-based modules that will help to propel students into the many possible jobs in or around government. A real focus on writing and communication skills. The Strand Group network will be integrated throughout. As many full-fee paid studentships from commerce and the charity sector as possible to help those who are being priced out of postgraduate study. I am delighted to say get your applications in as soon as possible, the places are filling up!

And all this is focused upon British central government which in recent years fell to a new nadir during the Boris Johnson and Liz Truss premierships. They embarrassed themselves and the country as a whole. I have heard it time and again from fellow lecturers up and down the country that the study of prime ministers and the higher conduct of British government has become unfashionable by those who categorise it elitist and old-fashioned, with funding for younger academics drying up. For sure, it's easier to explore the arcane and the esoteric rather than compete in a crowded and competitive arena. We're doing our best to counter that with new research on big topics of real relevance. I'm sure I'm not alone in thinking we need to try to help improve government leadership even in a modest way. I'm encouraged in that thought by the architects of the great cathedrals of old who designed such magnificence to be built over fifty, sixty, seventy years and more, in the certain knowledge that they would not see their completed creation. We have to try.

Alongside this new MA programme, there are several other spaces that we will increasingly move into which I've touched on: first, more partnerships which we've always embraced and which will include ones with more universities and other Whitehall departments; second, a greater emphasis on executive education; and, third, a new Centre for Digital Policy in collaboration with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Organic and ambitious growth, my favourite kind. I really feel that after all these years, a new phase is opening up and it's one we welcome, as universities come under pressure to demonstrate their worth across the board, from academic excellence to commercial viability.

As Peter recently told me when I was discussing this lecture with him: 'If you can do something with your life that is really useful, and enjoyable, you've cracked it.' I hope this Inaugural Lecture has conveyed this. I'm so proud and grateful to be a professor in a world class university coming from my background. We are all richer when we include those from the widest possible catchment, and need to do so much more to encourage and make welcome those not from privilege. Certainly, I am humbled by the burgeoning number of working class students who quietly whisper to me how I have inspired them.

And I will continue to try to change the dictionary definition of the word 'academic' to 'relevant'.

Thank you.

