Transcript

The Prime Ministers: 300 Years of Political Leadership

Iain Dale, with Sir Anthony Seldon, Rachel Sylvester, and Dr Jack Brown

The Strand Group

King's College London

19th January 2021

Jon Davis: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the 46th Strand Group; I'm the director, Jon Davis. What a great session we're looking forward to here. To talk about *The Prime Ministers*, a new publication – *55 Leaders, 55 Authors, 300 Years of History* – three true titans of politics, media and history: we've got Iain Dale, Rachel Sylvester, and Sir Anthony Seldon. And to chair the event, another contributing author: Dr Jack Brown.

Jack, over to you.

Jack Brown: Thank you ever so much, Jon. I'd like to echo Jon's warm welcome to everybody, to the 46th Strand Group event; my first in the chair – not my first in this particular chair, which I've been in for the best part of a year, now, as I'm sure we all have – but it is a real joy for me to be chairing this event, and to be joined by such wonderful people. We are not here to discuss me, though: we are here to discuss *The Prime Ministers: 300 Years of Political Leadership* – that is the title that Iain's given us today.

We are basically here to talk about this very good-looking book, which you can see here is a physical book and not just a graphic behind Iain Dale (who is promoting it relentlessly, which is wonderful). Very good-looking book; well-received so far, I believe; and launched to celebrate 300 years since Sir Robert Walpole – widely regarded to be the first prime minister – came into office. So the role itself is 300 years old: what a wonderful thing to be marking.

We are joined today – and I'm very, very happy to be joined today – by Iain Dale, the editor of the book, without whom the book would not exist; but also a political commentator, broadcaster at LBC, and host of – I counted; I think it's a million podcasts, isn't it, roughly? Each one fascinating. Delighted to have Iain with us. And two of the contributing authors: Rachel Sylvester, who is a political columnist at The Times, and author of the chapter on Theresa May – I should have mentioned that Iain Dale is the author of the chapter on Boris Johnson – and Sir Anthony Seldon, who is the author of the chapter on Clement Attlee, but also the author of 40-plus authoritative books on contemporary British history. So I'm delighted to have such a wonderful panel here today.

What I'm going to do is I'm going to ask each of the panellists to give a bit of an introduction, both to the prime minister that they profiled and to some of their wider insights on prime ministers in general. We're going to do that for about half an hour, and in the second 45 minutes of this event I'm going to ask questions, that you can submit via the Q&A function if you are here as an attendee, and I will read those out.

With no further ado, can we start with Iain, please. Iain, could you tell us a little bit about how the book came to be, and some of what you've found out in the editing process – you're one of the few people on this panel who've read it all, I think?

Iain Dale: Yes, many times. Jack, thank you very much, and thanks to the Strand Group for putting this event on. I should first of all thank everyone for joining in with this; whenever you do this sort of thing you're never quite sure how many people are going to. But I'm very intimidated already because I saw pop up Professor Richard Evans, who was my tutor at the University of East Anglia when I was studying German, but he was teaching us about East German, Austrian history. So it's a great pleasure to have him listening to this and watching as well.

There's also a podcast, I should say, to accompany this book, where I'm interviewing all of the different authors of the chapters; and Rachel's edition has been the most popular one so far, which I don't think anyone would have predicted – that Theresa May would prove to be the most popular prime minister to discuss. But I think we've got twelve of them uploaded now, so if you didn't know about the podcast, it's a really good listen I hope.

Right: why did I do the book? I can't actually remember when I realised that it was the 300th anniversary of the office of prime minister in April this year. In a sense you could say, well, is it really, because of course Walpole only started to be called prime minister in the second half of his 21-year tenure; but for argument's sake, let's say it is the 300th anniversary. And there have been 55 different prime ministers since then.

When I looked through them all, I found that some of them I'd never actually heard of. I wonder how many people watching at the moment have heard of the Earl of Shelburne, for example? I hadn't. There were probably about four that I literally had never heard of. And then I thought, well, how much do I know about the rest of them? I suppose I know quite a lot about those that have been prime minister in my adult lifetime; I know about Churchill; I know about Lloyd George; I know about Disraeli and Gladstone. I know about Viscount Melbourne, but only because of the TV series *Victoria* – I knew about him, but not an awful lot.

So I thought, well, if I – as a political geek – don't really know an awful lot about a lot of the older prime ministers, I suspect most other people don't either. I'd done a book called *The Honourable Ladies* with Jacqui Smith – biographies of each of the female MPs that have been elected to the House of Commons – and I just thought that format really fitted this, and I thought, well, who do we get to write them? So I put together a cast-list – which included politicians, journalists, academics, historians – and they all delivered (more or less on time, which is unheard of for something like this).

What I asked them to do was to write essays; they're all of varying lengths – I think the shortest is 1,500 words, the longest is I think six or seven [thousand] – and I said, don't write this in an academic way: I don't want any footnotes; I want this to be an accessible book. I doubt whether many people will read it from cover to cover, but they might want to dip in, to find out about a particular prime minister. And I tried to get them all to write in the same style – it's like herding cats, with 55 different authors – but generally, I think that's worked: I think there are only a couple that may be a little bit different. And I think, so far, the feedback has been really good.

Now, let me talk a little bit about the qualities that you need to be a good prime minister, because that's what I've asked all of the authors to do – I think about 60 or 70 per cent of what they've written is about their [subject's] time in office; then there's 20 per cent on how they got there, and then maybe 15 per cent on their post-prime-ministerial careers. But in terms of what makes a successful prime minister, in a sense it partly depends on the era that they were prime minister in. There are some things where there's a common thread – for example, self-knowledge, I think, is a great quality: know what you're good at, know what you're not good at, and appoint people to compensate for your own weaknesses. And if you look at Boris Johnson, for example – and as you said, Jack, I wrote the chapter on Boris Johnson – one of the good things that he did as mayor of London was that he appointed a really strong team around him, partly, I think, to compensate for his own weaknesses. I don't think he's done that, as prime minister, to the same extent as he did as mayor of London, and I think we've all seen some of the consequences of that.

I think you have to have physical and mental stamina to succeed as a prime minister: you shouldn't care too much what people are saying about you, but you are a politician, and so you are human. I think that was one of John Major's major weaknesses: that he did read the papers every day, and was literally emotionally hurt by a lot of the things that he was reading. Margaret Thatcher let Bernard Ingham do it for her, and I think she probably benefited from that.

Don't get bogged down in the detail is another piece of advice for any aspirant prime minister. If you look at Gordon Brown – and Theresa May, I think; it would be interesting to hear what Rachel thinks about this – I think they got *so* bogged down in the detail that they found it very difficult to make decisions, and of course civil servants love a prime minister who has a clear idea of where they want to go and how they want to get there. It doesn't really matter about the detail: they delegate that to their ministers and the civil servants; and I think particularly [earlier] prime ministers were much better at that than modern-day prime ministers, possibly because of the means of communication. And just *be a decision-maker*. You're not going to get every decision right, but you have to make decisions, and you have to make them in good time; and I think particularly with Gordon Brown, that led to quite a lot of problems for him.

Have a good set of advisers, but be able to control them; and again, going back to my chapter on Boris Johnson, which was incidentally quite difficult to write, given that if this book has a long life – and I'll update the chapter for the paperback edition – but it's quite difficult to analyse a prime minister while they're still in office. I sent my chapter to five

different people, saying: have I been fair here; have I been too critical; have I been too kind? And I'm still getting comments now, saying, "I can't believe how kind you were to Boris," or "I can't believe you were so critical" – so I don't know whether I've got that right. But in terms of advisers: all prime ministers have advisers, even going back into the 19th, 18th century. And you look at Gladstone, for example – and Simon Heffer's chapter on Gladstone is I think one of the best in the book, and taught me how little I knew about Gladstone – but he had an adviser who was there for a long time with him (he was actually a civil servant), and the first thing that Rosebery did when he became prime minister was get rid of him. And all prime ministers have this – often one – adviser, who is so crucial to what they do. Obviously Blair had Alastair Campbell, who was his chief adviser.

Harold Wilson, I think, was the first prime minister in modern times to really make use of outside advisers in the way that we take for granted now with modern-day prime ministers; and you look at all prime ministers since him, and they've all had this little coterie of sometimes official, sometimes unofficial advisers. And the key for any prime minister, I think, is to know when that adviser has outlived their usefulness; and many prime ministers have almost come to grief because they haven't really worked out when that is.

Managing your party – managing parliament – is also a key issue as to whether you're going to be a successful prime minister. Rachel might well talk about this in a minute; obviously Theresa May's premiership completely failed because she *couldn't* manage parliament. Now people will say, "Well, that was her own fault," but it was actually partly the legacy she was left with, and partly, also, the result of the 2017 election. And sometimes, when you have a complete gridlock, either in your parliamentary party or in parliament more generally, that means you go; and it was the same in the 18th and 19th centuries as it is today.

Being able to cultivate good international relationships, I think, is also a key. If you look back in history, and you look at the prime ministers of the 18th and 19th centuries, most of them are actually involved in wars to one degree or another. Now you could say that of modern-day prime ministers to an extent, but Britain always has been one of the world's leading powers, and therefore being able to cultivate good international relationships – even at a time when communication was much more difficult than it is today – I think that really plays into whether a prime minister can be successful or not. And if you look at modern-day prime ministers, Margaret Thatcher, I think, probably – and Tony Blair also – were the two main exponents of being able to do that in a brilliant way. Gordon Brown, to an extent, in the financial crisis, brought people together in a way that I think maybe some other British prime ministers have found it difficult to do.

Also – and this is going to sound a bit weird – but luck. You need to be a lucky prime minister; you need to be the right prime minister at the right time. All prime ministers are generally remembered for one thing: Thatcher maybe for the Falklands; Blair for Iraq; Brown for the financial crisis, etc etc. Well, Boris Johnson – when he became prime minister everyone assumed he would be known as the Brexit prime minister, which he probably will be; but he's now also going to be known as the Covid prime minister, because events have dictated that.

Who was it who said: “I know he’s good, but is he a lucky general?” I can’t remember who actually said that, but I think that is really key for any prime minister: to be able to ride their luck, and if there is a period of events which they hadn’t counted on, to be able to ride through those events.

You look at Callaghan, who in many ways was well-equipped to be prime minister – he’d held all of the major offices of state – but he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Chamberlain, similarly, in many ways: John Charnley’s chapter in the book is really interesting on this, because he, I think, is slightly more revisionist about Chamberlain and Churchill, and cuts Chamberlain a lot more slack than most people do; and he makes the point that he was, actually, quite a good prime minister, but circumstances dictated that history remembers him in a way that is possibly slightly unfair.

So all of those things lead you to think, well, how do you determine who has been our best prime minister? And it’s literally almost impossible to do that: how do you compare Walpole with Thatcher, apart from the length of service? How do you compare the Earl of Liverpool with Stanley Baldwin? So I tried to get all of the contributors to give their prime minister marks, in 60 different categories. It worked to an extent, and then I put it to five other people, and we came up with a list; but however you rank prime ministers, somebody is going to disagree with it. But it was great fun to do.

I think that’s what I wanted to achieve with this book: to try and encourage an interest in the premiership; an interest in individual prime ministers; and encourage people to read further. And I think there are quite a few chapters in this book – and I would say Simon Heffer’s is probably the best example of this – where you read that, and you think, “I want to know more.” And there are books about each of these prime ministers – biographies; autobiographies. Danny Finkelstein has apparently read a biography, or autobiography, of every single one of the 55 prime ministers; I’ve kind of set myself that task as well, now.

But of course, editing a book like this, people expect you to be an expert on every single prime minister; and yes, I have, obviously, read each of the chapters probably seven or eight times, but if you ask me a question about the Earl of Shelburne in this, you’re not going to get an answer.

Jack Brown: That’s fantastic, Iain. Thank you so much. There is an awful lot to talk about: there is that incredible breadth – what makes a good prime minister reflects the breadth of the responsibilities that come with the role, and therefore there is almost unlimited stuff that we can talk about, alongside the fact that there are 55 different prime ministers as well. I think the book’s really good at that – in reflecting the diversity of the actual leaders themselves, and also having a slightly diverse set of authors. Different perspectives: some are from personal insights; some of them are more journalistic; some of them are historical. It’s a strength, I think. Thank you for that, Iain.

Rachel, can I ask you – perhaps first, because we’ve talked about Theresa May already – and also I should mention that Sally Morgan, in the comments here, has mentioned that perhaps the relative success of your podcast on Theresa May is down to “our high regard for Rachel rather than Theresa May”. What a lovely thing to say. Rachel, can I ask you a little bit about

Theresa May, and about her in particular – Iain mentioned Boris, but said it was perhaps a little bit early to say. How do you think she ranks?

Rachel Sylvester: Well, she had one job, really, didn't she, when she became prime minister – and it was to get Brexit done, and she failed. So I think you have to say, taking the big picture, that she failed: she was a bad prime minister – she didn't do it well; she was an unlucky prime minister – the wrong person at the wrong time, for that job. But also she had, I think, character flaws that contributed to her failure. And it's really interesting: since she left Downing Street, she seems to have sort of come to life – when she stands up in the Commons, or when she's glowering on the back benches in parliament, your eyes are drawn to her; people are really fascinated; she seems to be liberated by having left Downing Street. But when she was there she seemed so hamstrung by the role – unable to make a decision; caught between the factions of her party; and basically unable to lead.

Also, she had the job of delivering the departure from the EU after that very divisive referendum; but part of that should have been, also, to try and bring the country together after all the tensions and divisions of the referendum campaign. And in that aspect, too, she failed; in fact, she whipped up the tensions if anything. That speech on the "citizens of nowhere"; she failed to condemn the attack on the judges as the "enemies of the people"; and her party at the end of her three years in office, you could say, I think, was probably more divided, and the country was more divided, and the Union was weaker. Britain's reputation in the world was weaker; and respect for institutions had been undermined. parliament, the judges, the courts – all of these things had been undermined, which for a Conservative prime minister was really a failure. And she didn't do the one thing that she was supposed to do.

Just looking back at that time – particularly the year before she left, between the election and her departure – it's unbelievable that that could continue for so long. Day after day of division; voting down; government defeats; resignations… I've got the figures here: 1,106 days she was prime minister. Thirty-five ministerial resignations outside of reshuffles. And innumerable Commons defeats, including the biggest government defeat in parliamentary history. So on the numbers of it, she was a disaster. And politics had become more toxic after those three years, when in fact a different style of prime minister – a stronger leader – could perhaps have united the country: perhaps not united the Tory party, but united the country at least, in some way.

I think Iain's point about the "lucky general" is a good one; and you have to say, did she have an impossible hand dealt to her? And I think it was very difficult: the Tory party was riven from top to bottom. Boris Johnson has thrown out the moderates in the Tory party, so you could say he's changed the party: he's shaped it in his own image; he's driven it much more to the right – but it is at least more united. Theresa May had this hopelessly disunited party, and a very unhappy country that she took over. And this impossible conundrum. So Brexit had been promised as this dream – a fantasy, really – and she had to turn it into reality. I think that was probably impossible to do in a way that kept everyone happy. I do think, though, that her character flaws as a leader contributed to her failure: as Iain said, she just couldn't make a decision. You talked to cabinet ministers at that time, and they would

talk about how she would go around the room asking everyone what they thought, and then she'd summarise opinion in the room rather than saying "Right, OK, this is what we're going to do."

She'd come in after the Cameron years as this sort of new image: she was going to make the prime minister's office much more formal. And as a symbol of that she replaced the sofa that David Cameron had had in the prime minister's study, which was a sort of symbol of his slightly "chumocracy" approach to government, with a glass table and hard chairs; and she'd have meetings rather formally around the table. And that was supposed to symbolise a return to a slightly more formal style of government, with minuted meetings and all these sorts of things rather than the informal, "sofa" administration that had been seen under Blair and Cameron. But over time that table became a barrier between her and other people, and she found it impossible to build relationships and build alliances. And a prime minister really has to be able to do that, both within her party and – on something like Brexit – across party divisions.

I think she also made political misjudgements that boxed her in – so triggering Article 50 set the clock ticking on the Brexit shenanigans, which meant she was always going to run out of time. She set very clear red lines about the single market and the customs union, right at the beginning, which – whatever you think of where we ended up in the end under Boris Johnson – made it impossible for her to reach any kind of cross-party consensus in the House of Commons. I think if she'd approached it very differently from the beginning, in a more consensual way, it might have been possible for her to get some kind of soft Brexit through parliament; the Brexiteers might not have been happy with that, but it might have been possible. But she made that impossible for herself through her own decisions.

She also had a way of dealing with people that put people's backs up, so she made enemies without building friendships – in the way in which she fired George Osborne, for example. She not only fired him: she humiliated him, and told him to go and get to know the back benches. And he then became one of her cruellest, harshest critics, as editor of the *Evening Standard*, famously saying that she was a "dead woman walking". And it contributed to this backdrop: she had no friends or support around her.

She was, obviously – is – very serious; very high-minded; the vicar's daughter. She always read her red boxes; she was always on top of the detail. And all of those things had served her very well at the Home Office, but in the end her strengths in the Home Office – a dogged determination; a single-minded focus on one area – became a weakness at Downing Street, because being prime minister is different to other cabinet-ministerial jobs. You have to persuade people; you have to bring people with you. You have to build alliances around the cabinet table, and in your party, and across party lines in the House of Commons. And she just couldn't do that.

There was the famous line that Ken Clarke said of her: that she was a "bloody difficult woman". She wore that as a badge of honour: she loved that idea; she even had a mug with those words emblazoned on it in her study in Downing Street. But actually, that may be OK when you're home secretary, but it's not OK as prime minister. You need to have, I suppose,

an empathy: you need to be able to win people around. And those flaws, that her cabinet colleagues spotted quite quickly, then emerged to the electorate when she called that snap election in 2017, and she thought the Tories were ahead in the polls; but faced with her character... Somebody said that elections are a bit like an x-ray of a leader's soul, and under that scrutiny, her character just didn't withstand the x-ray, and the voters just didn't warm to her.

I suppose, to go to the wider point, politicians – prime ministers, particularly – aren't just about what their policies are, and the decisions they make, and the white papers they produce, and the legislation they get through parliament – or whether they win elections or don't win elections. Really it's about personality and character as well: it's about their emotional intelligence as well as their intellectual intelligence. And I think that's where Theresa May fell down, at a time when, particularly over Brexit, what it needed was a flexibility – a sort of nuance and empathy that would allow her to build alliances. Instead she had this very narrow, rigid, inflexible mindset, that boxed her in and stopped her being able to make a success of it. You saw that very clearly after the 2017 election with the Grenfell Tower tragedy, where she absolutely failed to meet the mood of the nation. She dealt very well, for example, with the Salisbury attack, because that was something where she could sound strong; she could talk about the issues, the role of Russia, the policy decisions that were going to be made now. But when it came to emotion – strangely, actually, for a vicar's daughter, because she grew up surrounded by emotion – she wasn't able to convey that to the electorate. And of course in a way that Boris Johnson, whether you think it's [real] or phoney – I'm certainly more [persuaded] of the phoney side of things – he appears to be a heart-on-sleeve character: it's all out there; hair all over the place. Theresa May was very buttoned-up, so that contrast between them is enormous.

And really, I suppose – and it kind of plays into that too – it was that, in the end, she was just weak as a leader. She didn't lead; she didn't know where she wanted to go. So she had that line, "Brexit means Brexit" – Iain asked us all to sum up the prime minister we wrote about in a single quote, and I chose that one because I thought that was really what summed her up. She said, right at the beginning, "Brexit means Brexit", but she didn't know what Brexit meant, and she couldn't deliver it therefore. And she *never* really knew what Brexit meant; maybe we still don't know what Brexit means. But she set that up as an aim, a goal – but she didn't know how to reach it or deliver it. And as a result, she got pushed around by her advisers, who were Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill during the pre-election year – during her first period as prime minister – and they'd followed her from the Home Office, where they'd been this kind of "Praetorian guard". And some of her cabinet colleagues said it was almost like they had her captive: [like] she was their hostage. They described it almost as a sort of abusive relationship – that they were the ones who had the power in that relationship. They had controlled her at the Home Office, and they helped her get to No 10, and then were fiercely loyal and protective. But again, it acted as a barrier between her and the rest of her cabinet and the rest of her party, let alone the electorate.

So I suppose my main take-out of the whole thing, and thinking about her, is that emotion matters so much in politics; character matters; it's heart as well as head. And that if you, as

a prime minister, can't combine those two – in the way that Theresa May failed spectacularly to do – you're going to be in trouble, [not only] on the big policy issues you're trying to deliver, but also on your electoral fortunes.

Jack Brown: That's fascinating; thank you so much. That's such a good synthesis of lots of the main issues around being a prime minister in general and Theresa May's specific situation. Although it must be challenging to write – if Iain's chapter on Boris Johnson was almost impossible, as he's still prime minister, Theresa May is pretty recent and pretty raw.

Can we turn now to Anthony, and go back a little bit further in history. Anthony, you wrote about Clement Attlee, who is widely understood to have been one of the most successful prime ministers: he comes up at or near the top of most polls of academics, as to who they think the greatest – or most influential – prime ministers of the 20th century have been. Can you tell us a little bit about Attlee – what, perhaps, made him successful; if he had any weaknesses – and give us a little bit more of a historical overview?

Anthony Seldon: Of course, Jack, and it's really nice to be here with the Strand Group, which is a fantastic organisation. So here we're moving from Rachel on Theresa May – one of the least successful [prime ministers], but the second most successful female prime minister; we shouldn't forget that – to Clement Attlee, who as I say in Iain's book – which is a must-buy book; really well edited and brought together – is really the top peacetime prime minister of Iain's team list. If Iain is the coach and the manager, shouting at his 55 players, I think he's got Attlee right up there at the very front, heading in the goals but without getting the head problems that footballers can get.

And I think there are many questions, Jack: why is Attlee so much more successful than other domestic prime ministers, and so much more successful than [other] Labour prime ministers? Ramsay MacDonald – a good, obviously successful party-leader, but disappointing, frankly, in government. He didn't have the majorities – that's another key factor. Harold Wilson got a massive, stonking majority in 1966, and did so little with it. Tony Blair, about whom Sally Morgan, who's among our audience today, was speaking so brilliantly last night to the Strand Group – Sally was right at the very heart of the Blair Premiership, particularly in the latter parts of it. She would agree – or not – but I think that Blair failed to achieve his full promise with those majorities. Contrast Blair with Thatcher's majorities: how much more she achieved. Blair had a strong economy; he had a united Labour Party and Labour movement behind him; he had the commentariat behind him; he had the millennium as a real lift and boost. And yet it was surprising by how much he fell short, even of his own targets – above all, [that he] failed to achieve a settled position on Europe.

I disagree with Andrew Adonis, who is writing the official biography about this: he failed to achieve that position. Had he accommodated Britain to Europe – certainly by taking on the Murdoch press, and the Telegraph group, and the Mail group more, and providing a positive narrative for the EU, which all prime ministers since Heath have failed to do… And Brown – yes, sure, the global financial crisis of 2008-9 was well-handled; but in general, not otherwise a remarkable prime minister.

So why does Attlee stand out? I think there are five points, Jack, that I'd like to make. How paradoxical, first of all – really puzzling; counterintuitive – this figure is. There he is, I would say unquestionably Labour's greatest prime minister, and yet he went to a public school – an imperial public school – I think it even had "Imperial" then in its title (Haileybury); he loved cricket; he loved the upper class; he was proud of the fact of having so many Etonians, Harrovians, public-school people in cabinet. And yet there he was leading Labour's greatest economic, and social, revolution.

And also he was a paradox because he was not a leader from the front: he was not a shouty, charismatic leader. And I think, in some ways, political scientists have been asking the wrong questions, fundamentally, about the prime minister: is the prime minister becoming more presidential? Well, Walpole was presidential; Pitt was; Gladstone was; Palmerston was; Lloyd George was. The prime minister has often been presidential, since the very beginning; it's just that [political scientists] don't go back far enough in history. But Attlee? Not at all presidential. He was simply a very good House of Commons person; a very good party person; he knew how to work with the civil service; he knew how to get the best out of cabinet.

Second point is he was a great reconstruction leader, after the Second World War. Iain made the point that prime ministers are there at different moments, so it's hard to compare it with Liverpool after the Napoleonic revolution, after the Napoleonic War disruption – by the way, it was Napoleon who said that about lucky generals – or we can look at Balfour, Jack, who you wrote brilliantly about in Iain Dale's book, after the Boer War; or Lloyd George, a "land fit for heroes" – didn't transpire after 1918. But Attlee did it. And I think that's a measure, in part, of his success – and against so many odds, with a bankrupt country. Sure, Lloyd George had huge economic problems: the Geddes Axe; huge retrenchment; huge destabilisation of the economy after the First World War, as there was after the Second World War. But Attlee – with his three public-school chancellors of the exchequer; again, paradoxical – made it all work: a great reconstruction he did.

Thirdly, so much of the legacy endured. Iain was asking the question about what makes a great prime minister. It is to have that legacy: that economic policy; the commitment; putting Keynesianism into practice with the mixed economy, with planning at the centre of government; enshrining the Treasury as the most significant of the domestic departments. Social policy – building on the legacy: this is a government that is the equivalent of Peel's, from 1841 to 1846, or Gladstone, from 1868 to 1874, or Asquith from 1908 to 1914 – he obviously carried on to 1916, but the war came then. It's right up there, and I think it's better: it achieved more, or more enduringly, in social policy; has endured more – has endured in terms of defence policy; he committed to the decision in 1946 to develop a British atomic bomb, exploded in the Montebello Islands in October 1952. He took a decision, which he might not have taken, to align with America: a Labour prime minister aligning with America – not Stalin, Britain's ally, for goodness' sake, in the Second World War. He personally drove through the speed of independence to India in 1947; the decisions over the creation of Israel out of Palestine in 1948. The creation of the UN; the creation of

NATO. These are – with Bevin, his brilliant, and most important of his colleagues – astonishing achievements that have endured, so that's the third point.

The fourth is that he had a long way in, Jack. So many prime ministers arrive with utter ignorance. If they know one thing in common, when they pitch up and make those speeches outside Downing Street, it's that their predecessors were crap. They were rubbish; they were malign; they were stupid. And they're going to sort it out, because… because why? Because they're now the prime minister. Their lack of respect, of reverence, for history; for understanding how the office actually works. Tony Blair himself admitted that he squandered so many opportunities in that first term (1997-2001) because he didn't know really what he wanted to do, or how to do it. He could have learnt that, having become party leader in July 1994: he could have learnt more, not just about how to change the Labour Party, which he wanted to do and maybe needed to do – I think he did need to do it – but he could have learnt more, and listened more. But he trashed the head of the civil service, Robin Butler – "Buttleshanks", or… he had a number of nicknames for him – trashed him; trashed civil servants; didn't listen.

But Attlee *did*, you know. Attlee, who had been distinguished in the First World War as a courageous leader; who rose to Major – very proud of it; mayor of Stepney – he'd worked in local government. He'd been a barrister; he knew how that worked. He joined the Labour Party; he worked his way up; he took over as leader in 1935 – for ten years he'd been leader. A core part of the qualification to be a successful prime minister is to be leader of the opposition, which he'd been. He'd been deputy prime minister since 1942; he'd overseen much of the work of that government, the peacetime reconstruction, in power. And he then had a long decline. So many of those people whom he led brilliantly in cabinet had been blooded in the war – Cripps, and Dalton, and Morrison; Bevin himself – and then he used others – Bevan – many of whom hated each other, but he got the best out of them.

But they were weary: from 1947, only two years in, that government was on its long decline, and the newer blood – the Harold Wilsons, the Hugh Gaitskells – couldn't manage to renew Labour, so he almost lost the general election in 1950; he had a majority of six. Lost in October 1951, although in fact won 200,000 more votes than the victorious Conservatives under Churchill. But it was a long way out, and he hung on too long as Labour Party leader, till 1955; there was no renewal coming through. So a long entry. All the eight… I think there have only been eight agenda-changing prime ministers since Walpole – they've all had long run-ins, and they've all known their historic opportunities; they've known what they were doing.

And the fifth one… You know, I wonder, Jack, whether the fact that he was so successful owed something to that mix of factors. The country was ready. Yes, he could have misjudged his historic opportunity, but he didn't. He did what the country had needed – what it hadn't done after 1918; what governments since – Asquith, Campbell-Bannerman before that, with the 1908 Pensions Act – had been leading towards; what Beveridge, Keynes… what the planners – Oliver Franks, so many brilliant minds – had been talking about; Plowden, in the war; Lionel Robbins... had been planning what was going to happen.

And if we look at the great premierships – final thought, as I'm just out of my ten minutes there – is that they judge that historic moment, but they have the ideas to go with them. Thatcher had the ideas to go with them; Asquith, Lloyd George, Gladstone, had the ideas to go with them. It was far less clear for Blair what portmanteau ideas there were in terms of changing the country. And where you don't, you can talk, as Major did, about a citizens' charter; or [as] Blair did, or May did, about wanting to be a country for everybody – the early days of "levelling up" – but it didn't work. So there was that sense that he had the ideas; he had the individuals; he had the circumstances behind him.

And the press interest; the media interest; trade union interest; industrial, financial interests in the country were running with him in the [same] direction. And that, ultimately, made Attlee a success.

Jack Brown: Thank you so much, Anthony. I believe that our visiting professor, John Rentoul, has been working for many years now on a lecture called "The Myth of the Sainted Attlee", which means that hopefully, some day, we will hear the counterpoint to Attlee's success. But that's a really strong case for the defence. Thank you so much, and lots and lots of themes there – right person, right time seems like an important one.

I'd like to start with some of the questions we're getting through: we've got tons of questions through. One from Professor Tim Bale – who was my PhD supervisor, I should mention, and he critiqued my writing, so I'm going to critique his question and say it's a bit long. I'm going to summarise it. So this is one for you, Iain, I think:

May, for example, is an interesting case study for the idea that prime ministers, over time – and it's a question, rather than a statement that Tim's saying is necessarily true – are putting their respective parties ahead of the national interest more and more. Is that a theme, do you think, that is broadly true over time?

The example of May is given here: the idea that a more sensible Brexit deal might have been possible had May been more concerned about the country than the party. Do you think that's a fair characterisation – is there that theme, that broad change, over time?

Iain Dale: I think you'd have to look at each individual prime minister. I think, with Theresa May, people's own views on Brexit cloud their judgement of her. Everyone said she had this tremendous sense of duty – that she was determined to do what she thought was right for the country – and I think what was predominant in her mind was that the country had voted for Brexit, so therefore she had to deliver it. And she was under the influence of different advisers, who all had very conflicting views, and there was no single view in the Conservative Party. And like any other Prime Minister, she had to try and manage her party, and she failed to (though not through want of trying, it has to be said).

If you look at Harold Wilson, for example – a prime minister who was *obsessed* by his own party – seeing a plot around every corner: some of them existed; some of them didn't. But quite a lot of his years in power were dominated by his ability, or inability, to manage his own party. The difference between Harold Wilson and May, though, is that he had a huge number of really big political beasts in his cabinet – all of whom probably thought they

could do the job better than him; and they were, at times, vying to do that. It's what I said at the beginning: any prime minister has got to manage not only their party, and parliament, but also their own cabinet. And you can judge, partly, the success of a prime minister by how they do that.

Now, Margaret Thatcher never had a majority in her own cabinet. That was one of her weaknesses: her selection of not just her cabinet but also junior ministers, which she largely left to the whips' office, which proved in part to be her undoing at the end. Now that was party management in a sense, but I don't think you could ever accuse Margaret Thatcher of putting party above country, given that she made no effort to reward most of her most loyal lieutenants.

Just picking up, if I may, two issues that came up before in Anthony's talk on Attlee: he identified eight prime ministers who he thinks have been game-changers. Tony Benn once said you can divide politicians into two categories – signposts, and weather vanes – and he's talking about signposts here, and I think that is absolutely right. But it's not necessarily true that every prime minister *should* be transformational: sometimes, the country wants to go through a period of quiet reflection. It may turn out that that's Keir Starmer's biggest attraction, for a country that has been through so much over ten or twenty years – so much turmoil – that they might fancy someone who's a bit charismatically challenged.

And when you look at prime ministers since 1945, they invariably alternate between a charismatic one and a dull one. So there's a column idea for you, Rachel – it could be Keir Starmer's lucky day, if he's still there in 2024, and Boris Johnson still is.

The other bit that I wanted to pick up is that the ability to manage the media nowadays is absolutely vital. Clement Attlee would be useless as a prime minister nowadays because he hadn't got that ability to manage communications. Now in the 18th century – I exaggerate to make a point – but there wasn't an electorate as such: the "electorate" was the king. You had to keep the king happy, and it was really only in the latter stages of Queen Victoria's reign that that didn't happen any longer. And nowadays, the prime minister's time is spent hugely on media – on social media – and trying to cater to the 24hr news channels. It would be interesting to think about how previous prime ministers would rise to that challenge. Lloyd George would have been fantastic at it; but Jack, you'll probably agree that Balfour might have found it a bit more of a challenge.

Jack Brown: Wonderful answer – yes. One of the questions that came in – that you've touched on already, Iain, but I'd like to open it up to the whole panel – was asking whether there are any patterns that make a good prime minister or a bad prime minister. And one pattern you've discerned there is the kind of "charismatic/boring" alternating pattern. What are the other qualities that come in and come out? Rachel? Anthony?

Rachel Sylvester: Well, I think the ability to build relationships and alliances is very important, and that's sometimes at odds with clear, decisive leadership – Thatcher was quite a divisive figure in her party, but she got stuff done. But I do think you need to be able to reach out to people within your party and the electorate. So that's one. And then I think the weather vane/signpost is a very important one: whether you know where you're going

[and are] decisive. So that was Theresa May's problem: she didn't know where she was going. Anthony probably has other ideas.

Anthony Seldon: Thanks, Rachel. Well, prime ministers, controversially, don't get better, which is why they need to start well. You might expect that they would learn on the job – Tony Blair, as mentioned, did – but in general they have their moment at the beginning, and they start leaching political capital thereafter. And they come up against their chancellor of the exchequer, who has emerged as the biggest single threat to them. Ever since Gordon Brown, chancellors have been licensed – with what constitutional authority is very unclear – to challenge the prime minister, and to deviate from them in the way that clearly Brown did with Blair, then Darling did with Brown. Osborne [didn't] with Cameron, but [they were] too close. Too close. You need to have creative tension. And then the Hammond relationship with May was catastrophic.

Jeremy Heywood, the now sadly departed cabinet secretary, said that he'd never known, in his long career of working at the centre of government, a relationship between prime minister and chancellor that deteriorated more rapidly than that between Hammond and May. And she couldn't get rid of him. Javid and Johnson did get rid of him, but now Sunak is the biggest challenge and the biggest threat to Johnson, and just waiting to take over. So that sense of a prime minister with a journey through the premiership – it's very hard if you don't get your first six months to a year right: where you position and model what your premiership is going to be about, to get It right.

Gladstone's first premiership – 1868 to 74 – as mentioned, far more successful than the three that happened later. They tend to run out of energy, out of steam. Pitt the Younger, arguably the greatest of them all – [in office from] 1783 to 1806 (though for three years, 1801 to 1804, out) – declined as he went through. So I think getting it right at the beginning; realising your historic opportunity – which, as Iain very well said, could be to give the country a quieter time, particularly if your predecessor prime minister has been one of those radical, reforming figures. But whatever it is, pitching it, and getting it right. And it's having a reverance, a respect, for history – an understanding of history – which is why every prime minister, and contender for prime minister, should read your volume, Iain.

And listening to people. One of Theresa May's biggest stupidities – utterly criminal stupidities – was that she didn't talk to the people who understood Brexit. She did not understand Brexit; she understood Brexit from the point of view of the home secretary: very different. She didn't talk to those historians, those figures – so many: Ivan Rogers the outstanding example, and Stephen Wall… You've had many of them to speak at the Strand Group – who really understood how to do it, and who would have been on her side. [The figures] who would have asked her the fundamental question: what are you trying to do, here, Prime Minister? So those are my thoughts.

Iain Dale: Just on that, Anthony – it's very interesting that you say that she lacked any historical perspective, because I think actually she is quite interested in history. And when I formed the Conservative History Group, back in 2001, Philip May came to every single Conservative History Group meeting. No one knew who he was at the beginning, and then

we found out, and he was a really good contributor. So you would have thought he might have said to her, "Well, maybe you should talk to Anthony Seldon about this… or Peter Hennessy about the other."

Anthony Seldon: Jack Brown is the person. Jack Brown has written a great book on No 10 – *The Geography of Power* – but Iain, you're right: her husband Philip was a very keen historian. But she wasn't: she had a tin ear for history; she didn't trust people; she wasn't intellectually secure enough – a great point that Rachel has made – to talk to those people who really knew and really understood. She couldn't even judge who knew and who were the bullshitters. And Iain, you mention a very important point that comes up in your book, which is the importance of the spouse. Spouses are massively important; they're a greatly underutilised resource: the only person, ultimately, who can tell the prime minister what they think. And great prime ministers have been accompanied – not always, but almost always – by great spouses.

Iain Dale: That could be the successor book, couldn't it: *The Prime Ministers' Spouses: 53 Great Women and Two Men*!

Jack Brown: I believe there is a book on prime ministers' spouses, is there not?

Anthony Seldon: Yes – [by] Cate Haste and Cherie Booth.

Jack Brown: Yes. Wonderful.

Jon Davis: Edward Heath didn't have a spouse, so 54.

Jack Brown: And neither did Arthur Balfour. So there's slightly less than 55 spouses involved.

Anthony Seldon: But many more mistresses. Sometimes the mistresses, like Frances Stevenson with Lloyd George, were more important than the wife.

[*Brief digression into good-natured speculation over possible television series, etc*]

Jack Brown: Can I move on to another question, from Michael Bull: do you think that, when Conservative Party leaders are elected by Conservative Party members, we get better prime ministers than if they're elected in a general election? It's an interesting question and I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

Iain Dale: Michael's question is an interesting one, but it's a bit too early to say, I think is the answer, because we've had three Conservative prime ministers who have been elected by party members. David Cameron: I think, again, the one thing he will go down in history for is the Brexit referendum, so therefore – depending on your views on Brexit – he'll either be marked up or down for that. I actually think he was a good prime minister in terms of acting the part, because there are some people who just fit the job, and he genuinely did.

And if you read his memoirs – I'm just reading Barack Obama's memoirs at the moment, and he describes David Cameron as somebody who just glided through life, didn't really have to try too hard to do anything. And there is an element of truth in that, I suppose; but he just looked the part – and looking the part is important. Neil Kinnock didn't become prime

minister in 1992, I think, largely because people couldn't imagine him on the doorstep of No 10: he didn't pass that sort of "sniff test". Tony Blair absolutely did; I think Keir Starmer does. And it is so important that people can *imagine* the person as prime minister, and not think that they're going to be a bit of an embarrassment to the country on the world stage. And that, I'm afraid, is what people thought about Neil Kinnock.

Now I think William Hague would probably have made quite a good prime minister, but he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Iain Duncan Smith I don't think had the qualities to make a good prime minister, particularly. It's interesting when you look at what's happened in Germany this weekend, with the election of Armin Laschet as Angela Merkel's successor. There's no "one member, one vote" there, and the chancellor candidate for the CDU/CSU will emerge. It's like going back to Blackpool 1963, isn't it? The German chancellor – or the candidate for the right – won't be picked by anybody; they'll just emerge.

We can all have our views on whether party members are really the best people to select a party leader; I think there's a lot to be said for MPs doing it, because they see the people up close, "warts and all".

Rachel Sylvester: I've got one thought on that, which is that I think there is an issue – and this also plays into Tim Bale's question, earlier – which is that parties have shrunk: they've got smaller and smaller and smaller, and therefore – well, not *necessarily* therefore, but in reality, therefore – more and more detached from the wider electorate. So they are choosing somebody in their own image rather than always in the image of the country. Jeremy Corbyn is the best example of that, where they chose somebody that the Labour Party left loved, but that the voters were never, ever going to elect as prime minister. And there is a danger that the more parties shrink, and become unrepresentative, the more they lose touch, and the more they're going to select leaders who will put the party before the national interest, if they do get there – but are also going to struggle to get there. The advantage of MPs choosing the leader I suppose is that they have to win elections, so they're more linked in with the constituencies; they're more linked in with the voters. Certainly that was the issue with Corbyn and the Labour MPs: they knew he was going down like a lead balloon on the doorstep because they were actually talking to the voters; whereas the party members, or the Momentum people who'd managed to get him elected as leader, couldn't really have cared less about the voters.

So there is an issue that the more the parties shrink… And in the 1950s the Conservative Party was enormous; Iain will probably remember the numbers – but millions of people would have joined; I think one in five people in Britain belonged to the Conservative Party at one point.

Iain Dale: Not quite that many, but I think at one stage they had over 2 million members.

Anthony Seldon: 2.8 million is the figure in my head, but Tim Bale will know.

Rachel Sylvester: Yes, Maybe Tim can tell us. But they've shrunk, shrunk, shrunk, and that's true of both parties – and that is an issue, both for the selection and for the way in which they govern.

Jack Brown: Fascinating, and a huge point about how, with this very important role… how you actually get there. This is a massive thing.

We've got what I think is a really interesting question – perhaps we could start with Anthony, but you might all have thoughts on this one, from Susan Biddle: is it worse to be forgotten as prime minister, or to be known as a failure? As we're going through, and ranking, and pulling out these different qualities… would you rather be one of those that are forgotten – one of the ones Iain didn't know about to start off with – or one who is regarded as a failure, but at least people know who you were?

Anthony Seldon: Susan, I would probably say both; but I think it's probably worse to be a failure, particularly if you are an ignoble failure – somebody who brought the country down. A prime example, just to give you a noble failure and an ignoble one: a noble one would be Neville Chamberlain, who clearly misread Hitler and Mussolini, and misread what was happening in central Europe, yet was trying to do his best, and had done more to pay for rearmament. An ignoble failure would be Anthony Eden. Tragic: he'd been foreign secretary before the war; resigned in 1938; foreign secretary during the war, albeit overshadowed by Churchill; foreign secretary from 1951, again overshadowed by Churchill, in the most important relations with presidents Truman and Eisenhower, and Stalin, and the post-Stalin arrangement.

But nevertheless a very dignified person. But dragged the country down into Suez – a cataclysmic failure – in the very month of the American election in November 1956; and lied to the House of Commons, and then lied about lying. So, short answer, Susan: I think it's worse to be a failure, but that's only because I can't remember who the forgotten ones are!

Iain Dale: And if they're forgotten, that means that they were either so short-lived that you couldn't really judge them – like Canning, for example – or that they were a failure anyway, because if you can't remember them, they clearly didn't succeed in doing very much.

Rachel Sylvester: Do you think Theresa May will be forgotten in the end, in history? I think she might be forgotten rather than a failure; I think she may just be a small blip between Cameron and Johnson in the Brexit thing.

Anthony Seldon: But for Rachel's chapter.

Iain Dale: I'm not so sure. I think the fact that she was the second female prime minister means that she'll be less forgotten than if she'd been a man, probably.

Jack Brown: So we'd rather be forgotten than a failure, broadly speaking. But hopefully neither, I guess, if we were to be prime ministers.

John Tolson had sent a question in beforehand, and I guess we can all offer some thoughts on this one, actually: on the basis of all of our different insights we've provided here into how different former prime ministers have dealt with the challenges of their time, what would you advise Mr Johnson to have done, or to do, differently in the current circumstances – what are the key lessons he needs to be taking right now? Iain, can I start with you – put you on the spot?

Iain Dale: I think one of the lessons that Boris Johnson didn't learn – though I get the feeling that maybe things are changing now, possibly because of the change of adviser – is that any politician, whether they're prime minister or not, should under-promise and over-deliver. Boris Johnson's great asset is his optimism. People like optimistic politicians: if you go back in history – in general elections, or indeed American presidential elections – the optimistic candidate tends to triumph over the slightly pessimistic candidate. People like a bit of "sunny uplands" talk, and Boris has been very good at that over the years. But when you're in a pandemic, that doesn't really work, because you can be as optimistic as you like, and you can say it'll all be over by Christmas, or it'll all be over by the summer – and then when it isn't, people think, "Well, he misled us." And I think what we're seeing now, with the roll-out of the vaccine, is that they're being much more circumspect in their targets. Some of the weekend papers were speculating that actually the whole of the country could be vaccinated by the end of June, whereas the government's saying, "Well, it could be September but let's not count our chickens." That's a very different tone to the one that [Johnson] was striking on all sorts of other things earlier on in the pandemic.

So you would hope that prime ministers learn not just from history but through their own errors; and you have to be able to acknowledge your own errors. Tony Blair, I thought, was really good at doing that, and Boris Johnson less so. When they keep coming out with this mantra of "Well, we've done the right things at the right time" – we don't actually hear that so often nowadays, but they kept trotting that out for the first four or five months of the pandemic – you didn't have to be a fool to work out that, obviously, you want to make the right decision; any politician would do so. But it's literally impossible to make all the right decisions at the right time, and you can't take the public for fools: people can see through things like that, and after a while – eventually – I think it began to sink in. So "Learn from your mistakes so you don't repeat them" is probably one of the most important things.

Jack Brown: Incredibly important advice. Anyone else on the panel have some advice for the current prime minister – would you broadly agree with that analysis?

Rachel Sylvester: Related to the optimism point, I think it's not just about over-promising: it's also about [poor] decision-making. I think Boris Johnson has a tendency for wishful thinking; so he thinks that basically it will all be OK, and he puts off the nasty decisions, taking the medicine – like the lockdown. And every week, or every two weeks, that he delayed, in fact the situation got worse. So the optimism in his presentation was reflected in the optimism in his policy-making. For me, that was the real problem, actually – especially to begin with. So he didn't lock down quickly enough; he said we were going to open the schools, and then obviously shut the schools again. So stop the wishful thinking; listen to what the experts are saying – really, truly listen; and then make a decision. Even if it's the wrong one, it's better to make a decision so that there's clarity – but a decision [based on] realism rather than wishful thinking.

And then also, stop picking fights: I think that has calmed down since Dominic Cummings has left, but the endless defining yourself [by] picking a fight with the civil service; picking a fight with the BBC; picking fights left right and centre – bish, bash, bosh. We interviewed David Dimbleby a couple of months ago and he said it's like the Bash Street Kids, endlessly

punching people on the nose. And it's exhausting for the voters, but also it doesn't help with the good running of government: you need the civil service on your side.

I think it's really interesting that [with] the vaccine, everyone's come together; there's not been "bish, bash, bosh"; there's not been tension between the lockdown sceptics and the hawks. It's everyone on the same side – and actually, the NHS has managed to do it, it seems… fingers crossed.

Anthony Seldon: I'd just add very quickly there, Jack – Rachel mentioned getting rid of the puerile Dominic Cummings: you can run an opposition like that, but you can't run a government. He's got a grown-up now in Dan Rosenfield as his chief of staff; he's got some very good people coming in to Downing Street – he needs more, particularly on the policy side, and he needs a road map. He's in a strong position in many ways. He's got the best part of four years to play; he needs to know exactly what he's going to be doing in that time. He needs a better cabinet, also: he has some superb… well, some pretty good people who are not in cabinet, who've been blooded and experienced; and if he's got the humility, and the breadth that Rachel was talking about there, to be inclusive rather than that "bish, bash, bosh" leader – to bring in people, even if they didn't agree with him on Brexit, even if they have said unpleasant things about him (he's got a very thin skin, which is inappropriate, frankly, for a prime minister); if he builds up No 10, builds up the capacity, the thinking – not the numbers, necessarily, but the simple brainpower and experience – and has much better people around the cabinet table, like all successful prime ministers have done, then he could yet pull off a lot more than we would expect now.

Jack Brown: Wonderful. Thank you all so much: we have one final question that we have time for, particularly as I think it's possibly a one-sentence answer – perhaps a little bit more, if you have some incredible insight. A question from Robert Orchard: who do you think is most likely to be the next Conservative prime minister, and why? And I guess included in that is a kind of suggestion that it would be nice to hear why you think it might come about that there is a next Conservative prime minister.

Can we go through the panel in the order that we started with, please – can I ask Iain first?

Iain Dale: Well it depends on when it happens, really, doesn't it? If we say, "Well, OK, say Boris falls under a bus today; who would be his successor?" I think it's very difficult to look beyond Rishi Sunak. That's a bit of a predictable answer I suppose. But Rishi Sunak hasn't really been tested in adversity. He's been doling out the sweeties for the last year, and we'll see what he's really capable of when he's up against it – when he has to announce some really unpopular decisions – and he hasn't really had to do that so far.

If Boris resigned before the next election, which is entirely possible – he might; I think it's entirely possible that he might like being an ex-prime minister more than he enjoys being

prime minister, because I'm not sure he does enjoy being prime minister, if I'm honest – but if the economy is in some semblance back on its feet by the end of the year, he could legitimately, in 2022, say "I'm off: I've got Brexit done, and I've got Covid done." People will all have their views on how successfully he's got either done, but he could legitimately say that, and I think there is a strong possibility of that. And again, Rishi Sunak would be in prime position.

It's quite difficult, looking round the cabinet table, to identify current cabinet ministers who you would think are transformational people: Michael Gove is probably the only one. There will no doubt be others that challenge, but I'm not sure who they would be at the moment. And then after 2024 – if he lost the 2024 election – I suspect the successor would be somebody that we don't even know at the moment; somebody, maybe, from the 2017 or 2019 intakes.

Jack Brown: Very, very, very good answer there; very comprehensive. Rachel, Anthony – just in closing, in a couple of sentences – is there broad consensus here, or do you have another thought?

Rachel Sylvester: I think I would agree about Rishi Sunak – he's the obvious one if it's imminent – but if it's after an election that the Tories have lost, all bets are off. But then they wouldn't necessarily be prime minister, would they – so this is slightly assuming that the change happens either after Boris Johnson has won an election, or before an election. So in that situation I think Rishi Sunak is probably in pole position still – although goodness knows what's going to happen.

Jack Brown: That's the caveat on all predictions at the moment, isn't it.

Anthony Seldon: Chancellors, Jack, don't often become prime ministers, least of all going straight on – Brown being the exception that proves the rule. I think that Sunak is very strong; the real power behind Johnson is Gove, but he lacks the broader charisma that he would need to have. I wouldn't dismiss Sajid Javid coming in: I think that the Tory party following America with the BAME leader, the first party to have not one but two [ethnic minority] leaders – would redress the fact that the premiership, and No 10, has been disgracefully white and middle-class over the [course of the] 55 prime ministers. And that goes right down to the staff, particularly black, but more broadly BAME. And I think the country needs that, and the moment has come for the country to want to [move on] to a different generation and a more energetic prime minister.

I think if Boris is wise – well, if he'd been really wise he might have died when he [nearly] did, purely in terms of his historical reputation, because it might never have been higher than if he had died – which no one would have wanted! But prime ministers are very, very bad at knowing when to go… as indeed are speakers in excellent seminars like this one, so I'm going to go; also, if he's wise he'll go in two years.

Jack Brown: That's an excellent point to stop on there, Anthony. Thank you so much – it just remains for me to say I'm very, very grateful to all of our speakers: to Iain Dale, to Rachel Sylvester, and to Sir Anthony Seldon. I'm going to wield the book once more and say it is

available in all good bookshops, and of course bad ones. Thank you all so much, and we'll see you again soon, I hope.

Jon Davis: Thank you very much. Excellent.