

## “How Universities Can Help Address the Crisis in Democracy”

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July 7, 2023

Annual Lecture of the School of Education, Communication & Society

King's College, London

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to you today. It's a real pleasure to be back in London and to reacquaint myself with distinguished colleagues, students, and friends on this side of the Atlantic. Although my new professional role is with the Carnegie Foundation – which is a wonderful place to work – universities will always be magical places to me. When I was a child, growing up in rural Ireland in a family with seven children, university really was a dream destination: a place where Cinderellas could dance with ideas from all over the world and return transformed, empowered to leave their old shoes behind and step into any profession they chose.

University offered me a ticket into a new world, a social sphere not defined by religion or region, family income, race or gender. A world that held out a different model of belonging, an expanded vision of my own possibilities. It also offered a newly complex and safely disputable vision of national history, politics, international relations. I loved the way university made me doubt; it challenged my preconceptions. I arrived at university schooled in a version of Irish history entirely at variance with the one I would encounter there, a world view that attributed blame to Britain for most of Ireland's ills. The irony of it, in light of my subsequent career, is not lost on me.

My education enabled me to make the journey from rural Ireland to where I am now: university in Dublin, at Trinity College; then graduate school in America at Harvard. I was remarkably fortunate that this education was funded, not by private income, but rather through competitive scholarships I was awarded along the way. University, at that time, was open to all those who had the ability to pursue a degree, and it opened up the world to us. It is perhaps because of these beginnings that I tend to think of Education as the solution to most problems.

Tonight, I'm going to consider the question of how universities can help address the crisis in democracy. I will be making various suggestions. But fundamentally I will keep coming back to the ideas of openness and mobility and transformation. Universities are, or should be, models of what participative democracy looks like: they bring people together from all walks of life to learn, reflect, debate, and think through how we move forward together on an equal basis. They are places of encounter; social fora as well as research institutes and libraries. The health of the university is, in this sense, already a major contributor to the democratic commons.

I'd like, if I may, to plant an image in your mind. Universities are like rainforests in an overheated political landscape. They are vibrant, complex ecosystems that support diversity of thought, that can help clear the air of the toxic emissions of false rumour, and support a cooler climate of reasoned debate. Just as we need to maintain rainforests at all costs to help fight biodiversity loss and climate change, I believe that we need to maintain and support our universities to help fight democratic decline.

But first, why *is* democracy declining and what are the symptoms that we need to be checking when we pronounce it to be in failing health?

When I speak of a crisis in democracy, I have in mind both the global decline in democratic governments and the national decline in democratic practices in the countries I know best. The heady days, not so long ago, when American presidents could talk of exporting democracy around the world are gone. According to the V-Dem Democracy Report 2023, the advances in global levels of democracy made over the past 35 years have been wiped out and 72% of the world's population live in autocracies. The report demonstrates that freedom of expression is deteriorating in 35 countries, government censorship of the media is worsening in 47 countries, government repression of civil society organizations is worsening in 37 countries and the quality of elections is worsening in 30 countries. The *Economist* Democracy Index of 2020 recorded similar results, with the worst global score since the index was first produced in 2006.

It is in this global context that we have witnessed a decline in trust in politics in both the UK and the US. We've witnessed increasing inequality and increasing polarisation, with the erosion of norms in political accountability. I'm going to spend a little time considering these factors in turn: but of course they are linked problems that collectively undermine democratic structures, as acid rain, increasing heat and novel disease can undermine a tree.

### **Declining Trust in Politics**

In the UK in particular, I think one key factor in declining faith in democracy has been declining trust in politics and politicians. Sleaze and corruption scandals – such as the 'VIP Lane', through which lucrative public contracts were handed to

favoured private firms – have abounded. Meanwhile Partygate, has clearly left a lasting bruise on public feeling and a sense of trust being abused. At the same time, some honours are bestowed and official appointments made that are so obviously matters of political favour and allegiance rather than earned by public service, qualification, or fitness for office. One should not be surprised when the public start to detect something rancid on the greasy pole, and disengage.

In 2021, an IPPR report warned that a decline in political trust is undermining liberal democracy in the UK. The poll, carried out by YouGov, replicated the historic Gallup poll first run in 1944 that asked people across Britain whether they thought politicians were out for themselves, their party, or their country. In 1944, just one in three British people (35 per cent) saw politicians as merely ‘out for themselves’, while by 2014 that number was 48 per cent and in the 2021 poll, almost two out of three (63 per cent) said they share this view.

This decline in public trust is not limited to Britain. In America, the Pew Research Center reported in 2022 that ‘only two-in-ten Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (19%).

Matthew Arnold in his famous poem of, ‘Dover Beach’, reflected on the decline in religious *faith, ebbing like the tide on the shingle where his speaker stands:*

*The Sea of Faith*

*Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore*

*Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.*

*But now I only hear*

*Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.*

It seems that we may well be facing a similar moment of loss of faith, where many commentators hear the ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of a tide that is turning away from mainstream politics.

As Robert Maynard Hutchin once argued “*The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.*”

One of the key things that we have to fight, in my view, when we fight the decline of democracy, is public apathy. People need to feel that they can change things. If they don’t believe that government is anchored in public concern and committed to the public good, they will naturally turn to protecting only the people closest to them, seeking influence through private channels.

### **Increasing Polarisation**

In the anger and mistrust that many feel about politics and the effectiveness of their vote - or their voice - in driving political action, there has been increasing polarisation, with a visible move away from centrist or bi-partisan politics and increasing normalisation of what would once have been considered extreme positions. In 2000, when Jorg Haider, who had made comments that suggested sympathy with the Nazi regime, formed a coalition in Austria with the conservative People’s party, protests erupted in Vienna and the EU imposed punitive economic sanctions. Today, Haider’s party leads Austrian opinion polls. In 2019 in Spain, the

far-right Vox party – which is hostile to immigration – came third. They are currently ahead in the polls for the election later this month. In France, Marine Le Pen and her National Rally party scored their most successful results in elections last year. Recent polls suggest she would win an election held today. Similar patterns are visible in Sweden and in Italy, where the current prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, is the leader of the Brothers of Italy, a Euro-sceptical conservative party. In Greece, the term ‘Pasokification’ has been coined to refer to the decline, from the 2010s, of centrist social-democratic parties, often accompanied by the rise of more extreme left and right-wing alternatives. PASOK, once the centrist party of Greece, saw its vote share decline sharply from over 43 percent in 2009 to less than 5% in 2015. It lost out at the polls to Syriza, a left-wing anti-austerity party. Yeats in his poem ‘The Second Coming’ memorable said ‘the centre cannot hold’. Certainly, we have seen that politically, the centre is not holding in Western politics. Views once regarded as extreme are becoming normalised. The gap between opposing views of the world is widening.

Time precludes my going into the descent of American politics into polarization. But as we know, what happens in the US reverberates around the rest of the world. In 2022 two-thirds of Americans (66%) believed that political divisions in their country had gotten worse since the beginning of 2021. More disturbingly, few saw things improving in the coming years: 62% expected an increase in political divisions. While only 14% of Americans said a civil war was *very likely* in the next decade, 43% said it was at least *somewhat likely*. Where people foresee a future of struggle rather than adventure, they will be less likely to invest in bridges and more likely to invest in fences. Or, worse, guns. US institutions survived - badly weakened

- one Trump presidency; it is difficult to have confidence that they would survive another.

My first initiative on becoming President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York has been to launch a Carnegie Fellows Program in which we will select 30 scholars each year and support them for two years as they conduct research on political polarization in the US and make recommendation on how it might be ameliorated. We will then use their insights to inform our future grant making. We badly need to rebuild the forces of cohesion and return to a more holistic, community-based politics, where people can listen, talk and negotiate across party-political divides and find common ground, even as they respect each others' differences.

### **Increasing Inequality**

The background to this increasing polarisation of political views, is entrenched and deepening inequality in most Western democracies. In 1989 in Britain a rich person had 6000 times the wealth of the average person. Now they have 18,000 times the wealth of that average person. In 1965, a typical corporate CEO earned about 20 times the salary of a typical worker. Now the ratio is 278:1. Today, the US ranks towards the bottom of industrialized countries in terms of social mobility. Young people, both in the UK and the US, feel the intense heat of the property market and the uncontrolled fire of global warming as threatening to scorch their life ambitions before they have a chance to bloom.

It goes without saying that at a global level, of course, the scale of inequality is far worse.

## **Declining Participation in Democracy and the Erosion of Norms of Political Accountability**

Where people perceive fault lines hardening, in financial terms, they are less likely to come together ideologically or to perceive their fortunes as linked. They may participate less often in democratic fora, both locally and nationally: whether it is joining a community board, a trades union, or voting in an election. The crisis in democracy is, then, I think, underwritten by a growing sense that shared interests and mutual decision-making are less powerful than the actions and personalities of key players, who hold the most valuable political cards and will play them according to rules of their own making.

There are signs in more than one country that norms of accountability that once governed democratic processes are beginning to be eroded. Politicians and law-makers withdrawing from long-established treaties and laws protecting certain human rights; seeking to strengthen their hand and weaken that of anyone who challenges their ruling. Client journalism replacing open public interrogation of political policies by a free Press and opposition parties.

Often the picture that emerges reflects the fact that many democratic institutions (such as America's Electoral College and Supreme Court) were created in the eighteenth century or earlier, and are now like tall ships creaking at the seams to navigate the twenty-first century reality of digital democracies. The US Supreme Court, for example, is tied to no formal code of ethics: it is above such petty limitations. Where once there were 'gentlemen's agreements' in politics, there need to be firmer and better laws protecting democratic rules and norms, limiting the power of individuals and cliques, regulating money in politics, and ensuring that all

votes really do count. If not, democracy becomes a mere flag flown by a ship that to many people seems rigged by pirates, to whom they have no connection and who do not have their best interests at heart.

## **What Can Universities Do?**

What can universities really do in the face of this multi-faceted crisis in democracy? We are surely Canutes before the rough seas of political power, and the winds of global change?

Well. My speech now takes (which I hope will relieve you) a less gloomy turn. For I really believe that universities have a greater ability than they realise to alter outcomes and secure positive change when it comes to our democracies and how they function. But it will require courage and determination and, wherever possible, a united response to external pressure in order to leverage the full power of this sector for good.

One measure of universities' power is what researchers have coined 'the diploma divide'. Having studied electoral outcomes since the 1990s, they have concluded that 'educational attainment...is increasingly the best predictor of how Americans will vote.' If an American has a college education, they are more likely to vote Democrat; those without a college degree are more likely to vote Republican. The more educated are also *more likely to vote in the first place*. Interestingly, exactly the same effect has been studied in Britain and France, in both general elections and in the Brexit referendum of 2016. In both countries, the college-educated tend to swing toward more liberal views and those without a college degree to more conservative views. One can posit many theories about why this is

so, and of course there will be socio-economic factors at work too, but financial stability and social class don't in themselves explain the diploma divide. Whatever the active agent is in the mix, higher education is evidently a mind-altering substance.

Certainly, education has a major effect on democratic outcomes. And, in a way, it is not at all surprising that this should be so. Education exposes us to difference and, ideally, makes us more open to diversity: of origin, of skin colour, of belief, of religion, of gender and sexuality. It doesn't surprise me at all that college graduates in the UK, voting in the Brexit referendum were, on average, keen for Britain to retain membership of the European Union. They were likely to have met people on the ERASMUS scheme. Some would have benefited from the exchange themselves; many would have spoken or studied other European languages; some would have received grants from European funding bodies or attended conferences with European partners. Their feeling about Europe was, on balance, likely to be more positive than that of those voters who resented governance from Brussels or who feared a dramatic influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Before you cry foul, I am not suggesting, here, that universities should pack in more students, in order to obtain any specific political outcome. I am merely noting that college education *does* have a potent political effect and that one of its effects seems to be to *increase participation* in democracy in the first place. Another effect seems to be to increase liberalism in the broadest sense of *support for social inclusivity*. If we are looking to find a way back from polarisation, extremism and mistrust in politics, to build a new platform for openness in democratic thought where a wide range of ideas can safely be tested, then we could do worse than look to

universities as spaces that have a proven record in fostering belief in the possibilities of political participation and civil discourse.

When we make the benefits of a university education as widely available as possible – through increased accessibility, digital outreach, part-time study options and so on – we shrink the diploma divide, which seems such a potent source of mistrust and polarisation. It is also very likely that we will be expanding the views of all those who have studied with us. That expansion includes equipping people to understand political ideas and systems and to participate better in democracy at a local and a national level – whatever their political sympathies -- with greater access to a wider range of ideas.

### **Teaching Tolerance, Encouraging Participation**

Universities, then, are already key nurturers and preservers of democracy. They are, as I suggested before, complex ecosystems in which a very diverse group of people can find habitats that support their intellectual and imaginative growth. They are – from an ideas point of view – species-rich. Just as rainforests are essential sites of biodiversity that help us to conserve and generate a host of life-forms, some of them new to human eyes, so universities are essential sites that help us to conserve and generate living knowledge, for the general benefit of humankind.

We need to preserve them, and – more than that – to preserve their health, to resist attempts to destroy their long-term benefits for short-term profit. Just as rainforests sequester carbon, helping to support our atmosphere, removing toxins and making air breathable, universities too are crucial to supporting a healthier atmosphere in civil discourse, based on facts, reasoned debate and broad-mindedness.

But to achieve this, universities need consciously to foster tolerance and encourage participation. In their teaching, particularly their insistence on teaching respect for global histories, the legacies of peaceful protest and the evolution of democratic thought, universities can educate students in a wide arc of cultural traditions and a less Western-centric idea of development than was once the norm. They can train students to see issues from multiple perspectives, to practice shifting viewpoints to argue from one side then another. They can help students to develop their mental flexibility as well as strength. They can foster understanding of different political practices and consider how to improve democratic systems. They can teach students to dispute civilly and well.

It's especially important, I think, that we don't confine debate on current affairs to the 'union' – a space often dominated by political hacks in training, who prefer to argue on the binary Westminster model of attack and defence and may well have learned a bombastic speaking style at school that plays to the Pit. We need to be nimbler at creating more welcoming, less gladiatorial spaces and better constructive models for debate, where there is room for more shades of opinion, more diverse faces and voices to be seen and heard.

Universities can also consciously, in their learning practices, help students gain experience of thinking together, collaboratively as well as individually – with emphasis placed in the teaching process and graded work on such teamwork. Students benefit from learning how to negotiate, how to make concessions, how to change their minds and enjoy doing so, how to find a workable solution to a problem where many different actors have different priorities. Not merely scoring points, but building consensus. Students who have these experience in university will surely

translate it into political participation post university and arrest the escalating rise in youth disillusionment with politics.

### **Access and inclusivity**

Universities can model democracy – the good society, the fair workplace, the well-run debating chamber where everyone feels comfortable speaking. They can also model equal rights and fairness, particularly by being inclusive and committed to policies that allow access to higher education on the basis of merit and potential rather than the advantage of social class and prior educational privilege.

For universities to be the most diverse and supportive spaces that they can be, they need to work hard on their access policies. I congratulate King's College on its recent achievement in climbing to fifth place in the social mobility index for universities in 2022, up four places on 2021. It is so crucial to reach out to students from underrepresented backgrounds, as King's is doing through its K+ programme for over 16s, and to guide those who may be anxious about their ability to apply to university through the admissions process from the earliest possible stage.

The new frontier on equality in admissions is postgraduate study, where we need – I believe – to level a very bumpy playing field with powerful steam rollers. These things don't happen on their own. It requires serious thought, addressing inequalities in existing systems, a variety of programmes, and investment of time and money to support gifted students from the widest possible cohort.

Universities also need to think about their hardship funds, how their infrastructure works for abled and disabled users, and how well their student services support students' mental health, as well as their other needs – which may include needs as parents and as employees in part-time work throughout their

studies. They need to make it easier for disadvantaged students to get there, and to get on once they are there. We need to see this as an investment in democracy, in the widest sense. It is part of how we keep our institutions and public spaces properly open, fair, and inclusive. If we want a more representative parliamentary democracy, universities are a really good place to affirm equality of opportunity and help to create a more diverse cohort of leaders, managers, and voters.

### **Refuge and Sanctuary**

As well as accessible, Universities also need to be safe. They have a long and proud tradition of acting as sanctuaries for scholars suffering from repressive governments and political threats to their safety and for those who have been forcibly displaced by war, famine, and other forms of social collapse. Many universities during the second world war took in eminent scholars fleeing Nazi persecution. Touchingly, some of the most generous American colleges in accepting Jewish refugee scholars were historically black universities: teachers who had themselves known discrimination and abuse stretched out a hand of friendship to those of a different skin colour who had faced similar experiences of oppression.

One of my most uplifting experiences in Oxford was watching the colleges and the central university come together to offer support to Ukrainian students and scholars. We decided to offer up to 20 full scholarships for Ukrainian students in the expectation that we would receive a handful of applications. We received over 800 and over 200 of these were fully qualified. We went on to become a University of Sanctuary.

At Carnegie we are supporting programmes to help both Ukrainian and Russian scholars who are displaced by the war. Here our main efforts are focused

on supporting scholars to remain in the region in order to facilitate their return to rebuild their universities once the war has ended.

I know that King's College is proud to have been declared the UK's first 'Refugees Welcome' university by Citizens UK, in recognition of its work contributing to understanding of forced displacement and the educational opportunities it offers to refugees. This is another important way in which universities address the crisis in democracy: by resisting tyranny. They enable voices to be heard and research to progress that would otherwise be silenced in the most brutal fashion.

### **Freedom of Speech**

I believe that universities should be places where freedom of speech is practised daily: where students and staff have the right to challenge one another intellectually, in open fora, and indeed to offend one another. There are, naturally, well-established legal limits to all freedom of speech and I'm not suggesting for a moment that we violate them; but I do believe that we should facilitate the expression of all legal speech. Surely it is better to hear an extreme view expressed openly, and for it to be challenged robustly in the debate that follows, than for unpopular speakers to be cancelled before they can open their mouths, or for zealots, on whatever side of a democratic debate, to speak only behind closed doors, to a loyal following.

That said, I am disturbed by the attempts in recent years of the UK government to interfere in the democratic mission of universities by imposing a 'Free Speech Czar.' This interference smacks at best of mistrust and at worst of a power play. I believe that existing university regulations were perfectly sufficient and equal to the task of making good decisions regarding invited speakers. I fear the UK

government's commitment to freedom of speech – and they are not alone in this - is limited to freedom of speech with which they agree. This is, after all, the government that gave us the PREVENT legislation which restricts speech antithetical to British values, and this is the government that issued new instructions to civil servants, effective from 2022, requiring them to check the social media posts of all people invited to speak to government. If these potential speakers have been openly critical of the government, they are to be immediately dis-invited. Politicians who will not hear a range of critical views from experts delivered in Westminster have no right to talk down to universities about free speech. Democracy is a two-way radio between government and the public at large. If the erosion of democracy is to be arrested, Universities need to make sure it keeps broadcasting in both directions.

### **Partnership and Soft Diplomacy**

It is often the privilege of universities also to keep open channels of academic communication where international conflict or dispute mean that other forms of diplomacy are narrowed or closed. Never underestimate the power of universities, to continue intellectual and social dialogue that benefits democracy and diplomatic relationships. Brexit has threatened relationships between Britain and Europe, in the worlds of commerce and politics. But British and European universities continue to exchange ideas, colleagues, students: providing wildlife corridors that allow ideas to move freely and collaborative projects to thrive. They continue to hold conferences and high-level meetings, to engage in vital work together. It is imperative that they continue to do so. (I've been watching the press leaks in recent days about the prospects for finally signing up to Horizon Europe and can only hope that that the decision is made to rejoin as quickly as possible.)

Major threats to future human peace and security transcend national borders. From climate change and biodiversity loss to invasive species, new diseases, microbial resistance to antibiotics, and hostile developments in AI technology, we need the open knowledge-sharing and the trusted partnerships that universities provide, to respond quickly and effectively.

As threats to peace and security are typically also threats to democratic function, universities should properly be regarded as circuit breakers for sudden global shocks. In strengthening their international partnerships and soft diplomacy, they protect our global commons. A good example of this is the Covid vaccine developed by Oxford University during the pandemic in collaboration with global partners in business and in research, including the British-Swedish company AstraZeneca, research centers in Kenya and Thailand, test centres in South Africa, and Brazil and manufacturers in India.

### **Reliable and Open Knowledge Banks**

Universities are also reliable knowledge banks that stay open – even during an international crash. They provide remarkable services, often at cost. The Covid vaccine is, in this regard, both a literal example and a metaphor. Universities can help to vaccinate people against disease, but also against the viruses of misinformation and hate-speech.

Universities are havens of research, reasoned debate, knowledge-based evidence, planning for the future. This research serves many ends that actively support democracy. It can show us how best to alleviate poverty and enhance public health, explain voting patterns, and democratize digital access to information. It can help the world to predict its energy needs, plot the likelihood of pandemics and other

catastrophes and protect itself from their worst effects. In addition, of course, the curiosity driven research that belongs in and is nurtured by universities often has unintended but significant public benefit through technological and scientific discoveries from batteries to radio waves, not to mention gene editing. Universities also investigate and disseminate the truths of history, of identity, of culture – making it less easy to spin false narratives.

### **Communicating Truths, Clarifying Debates**

This has never been more important. Conspiracy theories are rife and the digital attempt to confuse and manipulate the public with misinformation and conspiracy theories has been far too successful. As research jointly commissioned by King's College and the BBC revealed in June this year, fully a quarter of Britons think that Covid was a hoax. Almost a third are willing to believe the 'great replacement theory', that white Britons are being replaced by non-white immigrants, and a similar number think that the World Economic Forum is an attempt to impose a totalitarian world government. Nineteen per cent of people in the survey said it was true or probably true that "the UK government carried out the 2005 attacks on the underground in London to encourage support for war in the Middle East". The pernicious and widespread effect of this toxic rumour-mongering via social media includes fanning climate change denial and, equally worryingly, spreading the message (apparently believed by one in seven, or 6 million UK adults) that violence is a fair response to these government conspiracies.

Often misinformation is a form of propaganda by another name. Within hours of the Notre Dame fire in Paris, a false rumour was circulating that it had been started by Muslims. The story was baseless, but it spread itself like a fire, inflaming

racist prejudice, anger and fear. In recent days in France we have seen the proliferation of fake images of rioters with guns, and cars toppling from multi-storey car parks being retweeted millions of times, all contributing to fanning the flames of fear and confusion.

Investigative journalism is these days underfunded and media control is in too few hands. In many countries, journalists fear for their lives when they report on politically-contentious issues. Even in the heart of Europe it is possible for journalists to be murdered in cold blood. Journalism is further undermined when important stories – such as those about the climate crisis – simply don't run because they are blocked by editors as too risky, too downbeat, or offensive to powerful patrons.

At Carnegie, we have a programme called Bridging the Gap through which we fund the policy-relevant work of academics in an effort to ensure that public policy is informed by the best academic work available. We are also supporting efforts to encourage American universities to follow their British counterparts by incorporating public impact into criteria for academic promotion.

I believe universities need to step up to help supply the gap in the digital newsstands with reliable, fact-based, long and short-form takes on subjects of public importance. We need to get better at communicating our research – on climate, on science, on new technologies – to a wide public readership, not just in journal articles but in accessible digests and thought pieces. Funded research fellowships and partnerships with established and trusted journalists, where evidence is properly peer-reviewed, are also possible. Universities have been in the habit of using their communications teams largely to disseminate information about their own achievements – prizes won, goals met, new buildings opened. Nothing wrong with

that, of course. But what if we regarded our media potential differently and became, *instead of self-advertisers, trusted advisers*, whom readers turned to for their weekly information? Without a party-political agenda, audience figures to keep up, or trustees who are so liable to muzzle us, we can become staunch bastions of truth, holding the eroding line of balance and accountability, preventing the flood of misinformation from overwhelming the digital commons.

The issues I have discussed tonight together constitute a crisis in democracy are, obviously, a great deal more than Universities alone can tackle. Yet I do think that seats of learning have a key role to play in all the areas that I have described.

There is everything to play for.

To return to that Robert Maynard Hutchins' quote: "*The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.*"

In a way this thought is empowering. The more we care, the less likely that extinction becomes. The more we nourish its roots, the more likely it is that democracy will continue to spread and shelter us.

Democracy isn't a totem. It takes no pleasure from our belief in it or our worship of it. It won't go on working like a charm whether we notice it or not. It is, rather, like all relationships, something we have to keep committing to. We make it afresh each day, in each generation. We have to keep choosing it, advocating for it, strengthening it. We have to be politically present: actively engaged, even when things aren't perfect.

Supporting democracy is also a continuous process. It is about being willing to speak up and be heard, about holding politicians to account and improving the systems that force them to negotiate, to serve all their constituents fairly, to adhere to national and international rules and norms, to accommodate a wide range of public voices. Democracy is not just what happens at the polls every four or five years. It is *government by the people*, on the principle that political authority stems from them, from the ground up, as a tree is held fast by its roots.

So I suppose if I have a final message, it is to the students and staff of this great university. I was asked to consider how, as a university, one addresses the crisis in democracy. The answer is that *one* can't; but many can. *We* can. Together, we are greater than we allow, wiser than we think, and stronger than we know. Our universities have knowledge that all governments need; our research shapes the future; our staff and students are among the best minds of every generation. We can advocate for the democratic systems we need to thrive; we can channel our work into preserving, promoting and enhancing democracy; we can be models for the fairer and more representative society we want, and sowers of the seeds of the rainforests of the future: both academic and literal.

These outcomes won't be handed to us. On a planet in crisis, sudden unforeseen stresses, tipping points and abrupt political changes are likely. But it is part of our job as universities, conceived in its widest ethical dimension, to be ahead of the curve, to staunchly defend experts and the deep knowledge they represent, to keep the public well-informed, the policy options visible, and the channels of communication between the many different actors who participate in and benefit from universities open, clear, fair, and tolerant. We must, above all, be democratic ourselves and true to the highest ideal of what the university represents. We are

more than businesses, more than factories producing well-trained future employees, or saleable patents, or generous alumni. We are, as the etymology of the word 'university' suggests, whole, entire, encompassing multitudes. We offer a space where all different forms of knowledge, all manner of different people from all over the world, can come together to think, study, share, write, debate, and come closer – if they and the system are working well – to becoming their best selves. Inherent in that citizenship of learning and sharing knowledge and finding workable solutions together, is the pathway to a more sustainable democracy. It is a path we urgently need to find and to follow.

I thank you again for so kindly inviting me and for your attention to my talk this evening.

Louise Richardson

July 6 2023