

**Speech in the Lords 25.06.26 by LORD HOWELL on
'Technology and Democratic institutions – the Growing Clash'.**

'My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, on initiating this debate and bringing out into the open so many issues that we ought to discuss much more than we do. I will fill my seven minutes or less with one observation and one question to the Minister.

My observation is this. It is one that does not seem to be made in the media or general political talk very much, but the public and the voters of today—the electorates, in all except the police states where there are no electorates, but everywhere else where democracy tries to have a go—are now equipped with more information than ever before in history. There are layers and layers of information—avalanches of it—good and bad. There is misinformation, disinformation, fake information, distorted information, deliberately maligned information and malinformation. By far, not just by a little, there has never been such a flood of comment and view.

As one newspaperman put it to me, “The trouble with our press is that every reader has become an author”. There are at least 18 billion mobiles out there in the UK alone, let alone in the wider world. There are billions of iPads out there—every time a person uses one, they feel that they have a right to challenge everything. What is more, they are equipped with a thousand and one briefs from social media upwards, or downwards, to challenge everything that any government puts out or attempts to do.

The chip has really reshaped the world, but on a scale that is not fully appreciated. In the 1960s, Fairchild put four transistors on a chip, but now it is putting 11 billion transistors on a chip—it is not Fairchild, of course, but TSMC in Taiwan and some American companies. This is a different world from anything that any democracy has ever faced or tried to face in its history.

Further—this is more the issue of the hour—rotating Governments and, dare I say it, Prime Ministers are not the answer to this. In the 1990s, I used to take delegations to Japan, and every time we went they had arranged, very politely, for us to see the Prime Minister, but I remember that it was always a different Prime Minister. Their rotating of Prime Ministers was part of their effort to stabilise their economy and get out of stagnation. It worked in the end, but only in the end.

The truth is that the problems facing us now are far deeper than can be solved by changing personnel at the top, and certainly by switching Prime Ministers. They cannot be reached, because the biggest problems—energy, inflation, climate, environment, defence and security—are all accessible only by collections of nations and not by one nation state. We cannot blame our Government for all the things that are clearly happening on a global scale and have to have a global resort. I know Labour had some fun blaming the outgoing Conservative Government—we apparently were responsible for Covid, Russia invading Ukraine and many other things. This makes for good politics in the very short term but is, of course, nonsense, because the solutions lie well beyond the powers and capacities of one Government, and certainly a one-party Government.

We are now in a crisis not of policy, which might be helped by changing personnel, but of ideology. It is a crisis of wrong-headed thinking about what politics should be doing to serve the people. It imagines that we can go on talking about the state versus the market, what Marx taught or did not teach, whether there is a will of the people and how it should be translated, how collectivism is better or worse than individualism, and whether the state and the market are against each other or working with each other. If we go on with that language, we will lose the interest of all those who wish our country to prosper. That will lead us in a downward spiral to worse and worse difficulties ahead.

What we need now is to drop this kind of language and the old ideology of the 20th century. We need now to get rid of the last vestiges of Marxian collectivism which, I am afraid, linger in British politics. We need now to marry private funds, of which there are masses in the world, to public needs, with new techniques and new methods, as many industrial countries are now doing. At least eight leading industrial countries—I could name them but there is not time—are employing new methods of financing their public projects by private finance and sharing the risks in new ways. None of that seems to be going on here at all. There is some thinking, but it certainly does not get into the media, the public press or the Government's discussions. That marriage is needed.

I would like to know from the Minister what is being done behind the scenes, or anywhere, to expand the sort of ideas that existed with the old PFI—private finance initiative—which we tried in the 1980s and 1990s and at the beginning of this century but then discarded. Other countries have taken up the idea and expanded and developed it in ingenious ways. Unless we do the same, we will be trapped in the old traps of the state versus the individual, with more money to the state being available only from tax, which puts everybody off, or from borrowing, which we cannot do because we are already underwater on our borrowing and any more will raise debt and increase rather than decrease the pressures.

That is our problem, and we have to face it honestly and clearly. With whom as leader? It does not really matter at this point. It is simply that we have to understand that the world has changed beyond all recognition. Human relationships have changed, and relationships between the electorate, the voter, and those who they trust to govern them—the citizens and the state—have changed fundamentally. Until that is grasped by politicians trying to push here and there with policy changes, we will continue to have enormous and, I think, worsening difficulties.
