

Julian Priestley lecture given by Jonathan Freedland at Somerville college Oxford

on Wednesday 7th May 2025

Like every good European, tonight I am thinking about Paris and I am dreaming of Munich. Some of you will think that is a very elliptical reference to the Franco-German news conference earlier today and that perhaps I am making some point about the pragmatism of Emmanuel Macron or a subtle argument about the perpetual idealism of Germany under new leadership. I'm afraid it is nothing so subtle. Tonight is the semifinal between my team Arsenal and Paris Saint Germain. The game tonight is in Paris and if we win, we will be in Munich – hence my thinking about Paris and dreaming of Munich. I mention that partly because my hosts are very forgiving, even though several of them are Liverpool fans: they could have really enjoyed my pain at being separated from this match, instead they are accommodating me in a very nice way. So if I'm not around later on for as long as I would have liked to have been, you will know why. Because I am seeking to cheer on a cause that some people think is doomed - because Arsenal go into this game one nil behind - but like everyone in this room, we don't believe there is such a thing as lost causes. We believe that any situation can be turned around. So that's how I go into tonight.

It is a great honour to give a talk in the name of Julian Priestley, a devoted servant of the European project and I think - very relevantly for what I'm going to talk about - a servant of the European democratic project. His career was devoted to the parliament, the EU's most democratic institution. In one of the last pieces he wrote - again just to emphasise I think both the prescience and also the timeliness of his words - he warned then of the cold climate of populism and authoritarianism. In a way that is the context, the backcloth, of some of the points I want to make tonight.

So as you heard, the title we've chosen is "Trump is changing everything". Trump is changing "everything, everywhere, all at once", to invoke that film. Just to break that down into three constituent parts. The "all at once" point is not immaterial, the sheer speed with which this is

happening: it is only just over a hundred days since this started and so much has happened. And I do not think this is an accident. You speak to Republicans who say this is “Shock and Awe”, meaning they have learned the technique from the Iraq war, whereby you stun your opponent, you leave your opponent reeling, through an overwhelming display of power and force and speed. That is partly deliberate and it partly explains the stunned opposition you see on the battlefield in the United States, the Democrats reeling. Only now a few of them are beginning to marshal some kind of resources. I think you see it too in the stunned reaction of many, if not all – we’ll come to those who have read the moment very well – world leaders. They have not known what to make it of it because nothing like it has really happened before, where everything changes so quickly. So that is the “all at once” bit.

As for the “everything” bit, a non-exhaustive list would start with the 100 or so executive orders he has issued. They are normally a fairly limited governmental tool but he is issuing signed declarations at a daily rate – we will come on to talk about tariffs; we will talk about Ukraine; the deportations of undocumented migrants to a gulag in El Salvador; the hiring of Elon Musk, a private and commercially *interested*, in the sense of biased, citizen to take an axe to the federal government, to many of its agencies, entirely abolishing USAID, the agency for international development – in effect it's gone - abolishing the department of education, a programme which is gutting science in America along with the various national institutes of health, so that each day you read of new groundbreaking research that has just been halted. The latest thing I read - *in the last half hour* - is a programme that was developing a tiny little pump to go into the hearts of newborns who have a faulty heart. The programme was succeeding; it was ready to go. But the money has been cut off today. It defies reason. And this is a non-exhaustive list.

That brings us from “all at once” and “everything” to “everywhere”. Obviously the first place to feel the impact of all this is the United States itself. It can be hard to to get ‘big picture’ view of it

but I would pick out as one example: the rule of law. I think it is now an open question whether the United States is governed by the rule of law.

You see it in the form of the intimidation of judges, the kind of thing that we would have reported on in emerging democracies or backsliding democracies, countries that are no longer democratic where judges are intimidated. Just a small instance – I don't think it has received the attention it deserves - judges who have ruled against Donald Trump have found themselves in receipt at their homes of an unordered pizza. You think 'That is odd.' Well, the unordered pizza that arrives at your home is a technique used in organised crime circles, as a way of saying 'we know where you live.' Several judges – I think the figure is eleven but I need to check that as it may now be higher - have received these pizzas, arriving on the door after they have ruled in some way against Trump. It is a small thing, but telling.

Intimidating judges is, as it were, trumped by the *ignoring* of judges: this is far more serious.

Judges have given rulings that are crystal clear and require action. The most famous one is the particular case of a migrant who was wrongly - as a result of mistaken identity - put on a plane. The judge in Washington DC ruled immediately that the plane should turn around - which can happen for deportation flights. But the government defied him, just ignored him. That is a really new development for a judge's ruling to go unenforced. When challenged about it, the Attorney General says, "these are leftist lunatic deranged judges". Most recently, we have seen a judge in Wisconsin who was arrested in her own chambers for having defied the authorities.

I mention all this because there is a real issue that travels beyond the United States when the United States is governed in this way. I don't think the defiance of courts is an accident. It's worth looking back at comments JD Vance made in February 2024 - before he was on the ticket as a vice-presidential nominee - raising the question of how a Supreme Court that challenged executive power would enforce its ruling if the executive chose not to comply with it. 'How would it do it?', he asked. They have US Marshals, a very small enforcement agency, which

answers to, and are employees of, the Department of Justice, which is itself answerable to the President. JD Vance threw this out, as if to say, 'You and whose army?'. If the Supreme Court itself rules against the executive, who is going to stop them? You have seen Donald Trump, quoting, saying that 'he who breaks the law to serve his country commits no crime.' He posted that on social media. A lot of people thought, 'That's an oddly heightened register'; it is a pseudo poetic language that does not sound like Donald Trump. The author of that quotation was Anders Breivik: that is a quote from Breivik's manifesto. Many people, including me, were accused of 'Trump derangement syndrome' last year: we were said to be getting hot under the collar and exaggerating. I do not hear that so often anymore. If anything, the risk is 'Trump minimisation syndrome' where we *downplay* how serious a threat this is - and that's why I have given some of these examples. The rule of law is illustrative, emblematic of the nature of the project. And that is before you even get to the ripping up of the federal government, the minimal safety net that exists in the United States, Medicaid and so on, in order to fund a four and a half trillion dollar tax cut that will massively, disproportionately benefit the one percent. Statistically we can see that for the first time in history - and these figures go back more or less a century - the one percent in the United States now own more wealth than all of the middle class, which, as you know, is broadly defined in the US, put together. So this would accelerate that trend.

The overall theme of what is going on domestically - and I am spending time on the domestic agenda because it has resonance and meaning for the international picture which is obviously where I am heading - the main theme of all this is a power grab, it's about power. If you're trying to connect the different actions Donald Trump takes, the essential leitmotif is this: he is gathering to himself more power and taking it from whatever other institution held it before. So since I am in Somerville College in the University of Oxford, consider his war on the universities. Why is he doing it? He is doing it because universities represent a check, a balance, a restraint on an American President, just by undertaking research that may be uncongenial to the administration, unearthing actual facts that may be unhelpful. So a university is a centre of

challenge to a president who wants to gather power to himself. So he's at war with them. He's at war too with my industry, the media. You can see that in apparently petty gestures which shut out the mainstream media from reporting on him. The Associated Press, hardly a left-wing, polemical news agency, is no longer in the Oval Office because they refused to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. They are not there. Instead various sycophants from various partisan bodies – they are not really news organisations, they are propaganda organisations - *they* are in the White House press corps, in the Oval Office. Even the war on government agencies, so-called DOGE - this Department of Government Efficiency of Elon Musk - it's billed as cost saving but I don't think that's entirely what it's about. That's *partly* what it is about, but I think its main agenda under this bogus, base-pleasing pretext of a war on 'woke' and attacking DEI , what it is really about is that some of those government agencies were, again, independent centres of power. (The confusing thing about the United States and how it works is that these agencies are part of the executive branch, but they are not really – or they *weren't* - under the president. They had independent authority. And he has just gone to war against all of those.

Then another example, which has been written up the wrong way. The attack on those law firms who had had the temerity previously to represent people who had opposed him. He has extorted – there is no other word for it – out of those firms tens of millions of dollars each; the total now adds up to, apparently, about a billion dollars of promised pro bono legal services. He has issued executive orders naming specific law firms, saying they will be barred from doing any work with the federal government - which means effectively you are out of action - unless they do a deal and agree to give him 40-50 million dollars' worth of pro bono legal advice. So he has a legal war chest of a billion dollars, should he want to challenge, or if anyone tries to sue him or go to court. That money is just sitting there.

So that is the picture inside the United States; changing everything, changing a country that was bound by laws, not men, as they famously used to put it. I think it's now a live and maybe even

less live question whether the rule of law even operates there. How then does the “everything” going on in America, how does it affect “everywhere”?

The Trump Administration clearly is affecting the rest of the world, not necessarily in ways he intended. Already we have at least two election results in which Donald Trump can be clearly pronounced the loser: one in Canada, the other in Australia, in which the candidate of the party that branded itself as the anti-Trump party had an anti-Trump bounce as a result. The Liberals in Canada were dead in the water, and they were struggling in Australia, but both emerged as winners.

As an aside, the narcissism of Donald Trump is so great that he actually *boasts* about having swung the Canadian election. There is an interview with the Atlantic magazine where he said, from memory, ‘You know about those Canadian elections? I was disliked so much that the guy who was 25 points ahead ended up losing. That’s all because of me’. He saw this as something to be proud of; attention is the most important thing to him.

Those are only the most immediate manifestations of how Trump matters. The obvious underlying causes for those changes – I won’t linger too long - one is an attack on the economic world order, another is an attack on the world order. Let’s briefly say this on the economics: his tariff policy is to take an axe to a model of free trade that has held for at least 80 years and that has obviously brought prosperity to most of the world, but that has also benefited the United States above all. Far and away, the biggest beneficiary of the world trade system has been the United States. Donald Trump and the Trump movement - for reasons we can analyse - needs to always cast itself as victims who have been screwed over, and that is what he says now about the world trade system. Nothing could be further from the truth: the United States has massively benefitted. I would give just one figure to illustrate this: 25 percent of world GDP goes to the United States. One in every four dollars of what there is in the whole world goes to this one country, which does not represent one quarter of the world’s population by any means.

You can analyze why he is doing this. There is a nostalgia factor, this notion of bringing back manufacturing jobs. It has to be pointed out to him that those manufacturing jobs - yes, it is quite true they did go from North Carolina to Mexico and China - but those jobs are never coming back. Those jobs have gone because of technology. To imagine the world that inhabits Donald Trump's head, which is the America of the 1950s, to imagine that world coming back, you have to be unaware of how the world has changed in the last sixty or seventy years.

Just today I was with an American who had been with Donald Trump in the last two weeks, and he offered a very interesting take on Trump, which I had not thought of - namely, that Trump is both a genius and a moron at the same time. A genius in the sense of his political ability to dominate and manipulate the news agenda, but a moron, in the sense that he is stupid about things about which you could not really believe someone could be that stupid. On the point of tariffs, he genuinely doesn't understand how they work. He always talks as if 'China will pay' this or that tariff. If a BMW comes into Texas, he thinks Germany pays the tariff. It does not matter how many times people explain to him that no, it is the *customer* in Texas who pays the extra duty, that an American person has to write out a cheque.

You can try and break your head to explain this, but I think my friend with his formulation may have it right. Trump knows no history, does not know that the Smoot Hawley Act *deepened* the American depression in its attempt to protect American industry. If he has a world view, it is set in the 1950s or even the 1800s. It is a different economy. He does not seem aware of a global supply chain, in which a car made in North America crosses frontiers between Canada and the United States four or five times. He doesn't seem aware of non-tangible goods, goods you cannot touch. In fact, when he launched his war this week on movies, his proposed tariff on films, there were many people who were panicked - not just because they thought that was really bad for the world film industry, but because they feared that 'this means he has

discovered services.’ No-one wanted to whisper the word – services - in case he started to tariff those.

And so there is a worry. The result is warnings from the big retailers in the United States about empty shelves, warnings of a global downturn, already wiping out huge amounts of value in the world stock markets. He is now boasting about the recovery in stock market value; there was an uptick last week that came about because of an interview he did with Time magazine, in which he said there are 200 deals that we've already done, that we are just waiting to announce, and the markets got very excited about that. Just yesterday he said, No, there are no deals!

My point before about power is relevant here. One of the attractions of tariffs to him is the power of exemption. He loves the idea that individual American businesses will have to go to him, as if to an ancient emperor, and ask as supplicants for some kind of protection and, Nero style, he will give them a thumbs up or thumbs down. He loves that countries will have to do that too, and he did say to a Republican gathering, ‘Have you seen all these countries coming up to kiss my rear end?’. He did not use that word, but here in Somerville College I will not be more specific. He loves the idea of being this central, imperial figure. The effect has been to upend a world economic order that has held for decades and on which depends to a large extent the prosperity of the rest of the trading world. So this is a huge thing that affects everyone; this is not now an American issue, it is an *us* issue.

That alone would have dominated the front pages and news discussion and policy making, but it runs in parallel with him similarly upending the world order. The moment that will be remembered – it is fresh in everyone’s minds still – is that encounter between Volodymyr Zelensky and Donald Trump in the Oval Office: the humiliation of the Ukrainian president. But there are others which I think are as telling. I would offer just two: one would be Steve Witkoff, the real estate entrepreneur turned envoy for everything, emerging from one of many encounters he had with Vladimir Putin parroting Putin’s talking points on the war. Give the man

a Russian accent, it would be indistinguishable from Putin's spokesman saying 'They had referendums and they chose', 'Those areas are really Russian anyway' and so on. It was as if he had swallowed the Russia Today playbook. The other example was JD Vance's speech at the Munich security conference; he could not have made it any clearer what the project was.

What is going on here? Part of it is cultural contempt for Europe. There is something going on in this particular form of nationalist conservatism that has decided that – and it is very bound up with gender – that America as was represented maleness and machismo and Europe is somehow feminine, weaker, softer. That is partly where the common ground lies with Orban and Vladimir Putin; that's why there's the stuff around sexuality, it's all of a piece. The underlying notion that Europe has decayed, weakened, *feminised* and the notion of masculinity is very important indeed, in the wider Trump project. Not so much in Trump himself perhaps, but definitely in Vance and the others around him.

The second is a resentment of any restraint on power. So just as they are after the universities or the media, they look at Europe and NATO as something which is just a thorn in their side, which gets in the way and tells them no and gives them trouble.

But the third reason, and this is the most troubling, is an opposition to, an *antagonism* to the core principle that is embodied by, and was central to, the founding of the European Union. That is, to put it extremely simply, the principle against the crime of aggression, the principle that large powerful states should not be able to attack and gobble up small states. I mean I'm deliberately putting it in almost childish language because it is so simple - and that principle, which has underpinned international law and alliances for eighty years since the end of the war, whose ending we are celebrating, the eightieth anniversary of VE Day, this very week, and which has been honoured more or less imperfectly, often in the breach, but that principle has been that we are moving away from a world in which big states can just eye up smaller states that they want and take them. And yet this is the world he wants. People thought at first he was

joking when he said: we have got our eye on the Panama Canal, we have got our eye on Greenland, Canada should be the 51st state, Gaza should be a beach resort – a macabre thing to say - and yet this is the world he wants. A world in which might is right, the strongest powers can take what they want without any sanction. Because of course the United States benefits from that kind of world and it has always known it could, because it has the biggest and most powerful military. He wants a world in which the strong can grab what they want: “They let you do it” – you may recognise the wording that Donald Trump used in a very different context, a few years ago.

The obstacle in the way of that world is the European Union. It stands absolutely against that vision of the world. It's the key, in some ways, the *sole* body acting as a restraint on power on the global stage, particularly in the economic sphere. So you think, for example, of the taming of the tech giants: there was recently a £700 million fine on Apple and Meta that came from the European Union – I think it was really a slap on the wrist, they could have done much more – but there is that power, that the European Union has over those big tech giants, who are emerging as the oligarchs behind Trump. Just as Putin has his oil and gas oligarchs, the tech giants are emerging as a sort of tech bro equivalent of that, for Donald Trump. The EU stands in their way, whether it is on AI or monopolistic practices, as one of the few bodies able to restrain them.

Almost more important than that, the European Union embodies the very ethos that opposes the principle of might versus right, it stands against the crime of aggression. That was almost why it was established.

This, then, is the world that is emerging. On the one side, the might is right principle; protectionism and domination, where international law, certainly, and even the law itself can go hang. And then, on the other side, law, cooperation, non-aggression, free trade, embodied by the European Union, not only but centrally by the European Union. We finally have this split between Mars and Venus that was identified – the Americans were Mars, the Europeans Venus –

by Robert Kagan 20-plus years ago. I think it is beginning to take form before our eyes in a more concrete way than before.

The boundaries are not hard and fast. In that might-is-right world sits Vladimir Putin of Russia. China is open to a world like that because it too could benefit. And there are countries who are against it, who are obviously not in that place. Canada and Australia are just two examples. So it's not just America vs. Europe. But there is an American approach to the world and a European approach and that is how the world is divided. What we have witnessed in just 108 days or so is the United States swapping sides in that battle. That Oval Office meeting with Zelensky, Vance in Munich - that's what was really happening. The United States was saying, 'We are no longer part of the world of cooperation and alliances and law; we're in the world of the law of the jungle and power and might.' And that is a huge change since 1945.

Enter Britain. Britain has to see that that change is coming. For so long it has tried to delay, postpone and fudge that choice, to say 'We don't have to make a choice; on the contrary, we will be the bridge between these two worlds; they are not at odds.' Smart Alecs would say, 'Well, the trouble with being a bridge is that you end up with people walking all over you.' But in a way, the people who made that case had a point. If you looked at Barack Obama's America, it did seem wrong to regard that as a different planet from Europe. That is not the case now. Now there is a clear distinction.

Some will say: hold on, don't overread the picture, don't have recency bias, Trump will pass. I respond that that position may just have been tenable in 2016 (although I would say not). In 2016/2017, maybe you could argue that he was a one-off aberration. The man has been *re-elected*, despite everything that happened, including an attempt to overturn an election. This unfortunately shows – and, as a huge admirer of America, it grieves me to say so - that this is not a passing phenomenon; it has deep roots. The fact of Trump's re-election, the fact that in polls now – though they are the lowest for any President at this stage – 39/40 percent have seen

everything we have seen and still think that is OK. This has deep roots and I think it's fair to say that Trump is not just a passing phenomenon. I don't think they are going to get somebody who has the same dark charisma that he has, but I think the idea that this is a passing aberration is fantasy.

And even if it were an aberration. At the very least, to make the claim at its most modest, surely the lesson we have to take from this decade of Trump is that you cannot rely on the United States being a fixed point on our side of that divide: the democratic world versus the authoritarian world. It is not any more a given that the United States is in that camp, let's put it no more strongly than that.

Some will say that this is a bad thing that is going on, but that Europe is not much better. That Europe has its problems too: Orban, you have these troubling election results in Romania, Le Pen in France, the AFD in Germany. All of which is true. But to me that just underlines that there is a struggle going in the world between nationalist populism and authoritarianism, on the one hand, and liberal democratic values on the other. It doesn't map absolutely onto the map: like I said, Canada and Australia are not in the EU but are on one side; Hungary and Romania are in the EU, and maybe they are edging to the other side. That just tells you that a struggle is going on and right now the United States is on the wrong side of that battle. There was Elon Musk intervening in the German elections on the side of the AFD, with JD Vance doing the same. They have picked a side - and we delude ourselves if we hope or pretend that they haven't. They have.

What then to do? I am not going to, in this talk and in front of this audience, come up with concrete, very specific proposals. However, I think the idea of chasing, with some degree of desperation, a bilateral deal for Britain alone is a mistaken strategy. If you want to see the evidence, look at the universities in the United States. That is what Columbia University tried to do. Trump came after them, saying his administration were going to withhold 400 million of

funding unless they would let them run their departments and they said 'OK' and started to make a deal. What did he do? He came back for more, because of course he did; they had shown weakness. Harvard stood up to Trump and suddenly the Trump administration began to wobble; it said there must have been a mistake. After that the universities are beginning to come together. That is exactly what the law firms should have done; instead they all made their single, one-on-one deals. When I see Keir Starmer hand over his invitation to a royal visit, I think he's doing a Columbia rather than a Harvard. You've got to work together, with strength in numbers, and the obvious institution that embodies that approach in the non-American democratic West is the European Union: 27 countries working together.

It is anyway what we should be doing because if there is a global trade war going on, all the more reason why you do not want to put up barriers to trade with your nearest neighbours. Anybody who was against Brexit would have said that then; but it is doubly true now. When you are in a world of tariffs, and there is a great big free trade area there where there isn't going to be a threat of tariffs, obviously it's good to be trading with them, in that big free trade area, rather than chasing after some 10% discounted tariff, some softened blow.

As for cooperation on defence, you do not need me to make that case. JD Vance made that case in Munich and Donald Trump made that case when he humiliated Zelensky. We cannot rely on an American umbrella to protect us when they are part of the threat, when they have sided with Vladimir Putin. It is a grievous thought to me and for anyone who was an Atlanticist, and would still like to be one; it is a hard issue to take in.

That cooperation between Britain and Europe has to be in the form of the kind of security cooperation that the British are already comfortable with - but it has to go further. It's crazy for us not to be part of this spending pot, this 150 billion. This is urgent stuff. As Ronald Reagan might have said, 'There is a bear in the woods in the form of Vladimir Putin who threatens Europe' - and our big friend and ally is no longer with us. We will have allies who are not EU

states, the likes of Canada and Australia, who have European values in the Mars/Venus sense. I think we should work with them too. But we are nearer to the European Union. The Canada/Australia option doesn't make as much sense for us as it may for them, but I'll take it at the moment, if that is what is on the table: a democratic West without the US is what we need to think about.

It also means making a political case to the British people and to be bold about that. If there is one positive lesson we can learn from Donald Trump, it is that being big and being really radical gets things done. He's doing it in the most negative way possible, but it *is* possible, as he shows, to make big political moves, especially once you are in power. A Labour government with a big majority could be making a massive case for Europe: Donald Trump has done the hard work for them. He has explained to the British people why our natural allies are those who are closest to us. You could not ask for a more eloquent advocate in the cause of European cooperation than Donald J Trump.

The public get this and there are two reasons why I say that. First, the numbers. Under reported healthy, solid, consistent majorities are not only for closer cooperation (64% in the last YouGov poll favour closer relations, including 60% of leave voters) but 55% favour rejoining, with 39% strongly supporting rejoining. I think that if there was political leadership...it is becoming a mainstream position. And by the way, that survey was done in January *before* these hundred days of Trump, before the shakedown with Vladimir Zelensky. The numbers will now be higher. The second reason is that the pro-Putin, anti-Ukraine sentiment, which has echoes in the Romania election and is big in the United States, there is no analogue for that here. It is a problem for Nigel Farage and Reform that they have those Putin-adjacent positions. He has to tiptoe around them. That tells you something: that the whole premise of this wide divide that I have tried to sketch out today is understood by the British public, to the point where even the anti-Europeans know that they don't want to be on the wrong side of that divide. Teaming up

with Putin and Trump, that's bad for them electorally and politically. Those things can give us confidence.

To go back to those words of Julian Priestley, who foresaw in 2016/2017 a cold climate of populism and authoritarianism, that is the world we are now in, one that sees lawless authoritarianism, as embodied by Donald Trump, versus shared power and cooperation, in the form of the European ideal. We have to know which side we are on. Donald Trump said that the European Union was founded solely to damage the United States. We would not expect historical accuracy from him, but the claim is tellingly wrong, because the EU's true founding purpose is beyond him. He doesn't understand that its true founding purpose was for an *ideal*, an ideal of the world in which nations who had fought each other, instead worked together. Nations that had shared infinite volumes of blood would instead make a future of peace, a future where might would not be right, where instead there was law, and where small nations could be protected from bigger nations. That was the ideal it was founded for, that is what is now under threat, that is why I say that Donald Trump makes it essential that our country rethinks its relationship with Europe.

Thank you very much.