

Bristol Festival of Ideas /

www.ideasfestival.co.uk

Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*

In conversation with Andrew Kelly, Festival of Ideas

Andrew Kelly - Good evening, everyone. Welcome to Festival of Ideas Online. My name is Andrew Kelly. I am Director of Bristol Festival of Ideas. It's a great honour to have with us tonight Anne Applebaum. Anne is the author of *Gulag: A History*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956* and *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*. And now *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends*. All of these are published by Allen Lane and Penguin Books. Anne is also a writer for *The Atlantic* and many other newspapers and magazines, and just released today is her review of Catherine Belton's new book on Putin and Russia, which she described as probably the definitive account, so that's well worth reading as well. Do say hello in the chat and tell us where you're from. We can already see people from Barcelona and Lagos there. And please do ask questions. There's an 'ask a question' box at the bottom and we will get to as many as we can. Early in Anne's book she says 'given the right conditions, any society can turn against democracy, indeed if history is anything to go by all of our societies eventually will.' Now, Anne, we had immense confidence in 1989 – optimism that the world was changing. What's happened in the last 40 years to change this?

Anne Applebaum - So first of all, thank you, before I answer the questions, it's really a pleasure to be here and it's great to see so many people, especially from Bristol, but from all over the place, so thanks for tuning in. I mean, the book is an extended answer to that question and it doesn't offer a single explanation, it offers multiple explanations. It looks at how some people have changed, it also looks at how circumstances have changed, at how politics have changed. Looking back myself, over the last couple of decades, I... and actually, I would say, if there's a real lesson that I want the book to have it's that we made a mistake in 1989. This is the era when we had the fall of communism and the decade afterwards which were a moment of great optimism about democracy. We

made a mistake of assuming that democracy was inevitable, that there was, you know, history was on a kind of upward trajectory and you couldn't be pushed away from it, and there would never be any anti-democratic forces and it was just a question of time before everybody saw the light and joined liberal democracy. There was a famous book written at that time called *The End of History* by Francis Fukuyama which essentially, I mean it was more complicated than that, made the argument that this is the best kind of political system and everybody will want it. In the last decade, we have seen really in all western democracies, I would say, the emergence of political parties, movements, kind of online groupings of people who question not just the mores of their societies but who have begun to pour scorn on the institutions of democracy itself, and who now doubt them and talk openly about alternatives and in some cases seek to create, as I said, political parties and movements that will actively undermine democracy. The confusing thing is that some of them are democratic political parties that have an authoritarian streak and that show their true colours once they gain power. My experience, for those of you who don't know, is that I live in Poland, at least part of the time, and I have watched that kind of political party take power here in 2015, and then systematically undermine institutions, the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of the press, the independence of the bureaucracy, and seek to replace all of those things with kind of party political institutions. And the book is about what is the appeal of those alternatives? So why is it that people want them? And some of the answers are, as I say, some of them are personal – people are personally dissatisfied with democracy. In Poland you can find people who didn't achieve what they wanted over the last couple of decades, and therefore blame the system. You can find people who are deeply disappointed by their societies, sometimes for moral reasons or economic reasons, and come to feel that the only alternatives have to be radical, that what is needed is an undermining or overthrowing of the system. Anyway, the book explores some of those themes, but it doesn't give a single answer, it just goes to... I look at several different countries and several different people, and then look at several different ways that people have thought about this in the past. So it's a quirky book, although it's very short. Several people have said to me, you know, in this lockdown era I just can't read long books anymore, I can't concentrate. So if you're one of those people, this is the book for you.

AK - Well, we very much encourage people to read it and we'll give more details at the end. So... but some of the drivers you talked

about were things like the disappointment of meritocracy, the inequality in wage decline, but also the nature of modern debate and how we don't seem to be able to understand difference and tolerate that nowadays.

AA - So I do have a section in the book, I mean this is separately something that I've worked on quite a bit, even, I was part of a project at the London School of Economics which is now at John Hopkins University in the US, which looked at disinformation and how it works. And I got very interested in how our new information system... first of all why it creates such deep polarisation, how it is fuelling these deep political differences between people. But also how it has changed the way in which we get and process political information. And this is partly about social media, which I'll talk about in a second, but it's also even just about the means by which we see things and hear things and understand things. I have a friend who runs focus groups in the United States who is very interested in the Republican party and she meets weekly or monthly with groups of Republicans and talks to them about their views. And one of the things that she's found is that she'll ask them about Trump's scandals and many of the time people might have heard of the scandal but they haven't registered it because there are so many of these scandals, and they are so overwhelming, and they keep coming all the time, and how do you see them, you see them as a note on your phone. You see an advertisement for some kind of shampoo you like, and then you see a note from your favourite uncle, then you see a note about another scandal, and then you see an advertisement about pop music. And the way in which we get information, there's no hierarchy to it, there's a lot of it, and for a lot of people the quantity and noise and emotion becomes genuinely too much. It's emphasised by the nature of social media. Remember, how do ideas and memes and messages move across Facebook? And the answer is the ones that are the most emotional, the angriest, those are the ones that move the fastest. And so the effect of social media is to increase this sense of noise and cacophony and debate. I spoke, while I was working on the book, I spoke to a kind of behavioural psychologist called Karen Stenner, who is really the great authority on a concept she's worked on a lot, which is called the Authoritarian Predisposition, so why are some people... why do some people find authoritarian messages appealing? And to make a long story short, one of the conclusions she comes to is that some people are especially bothered by this noise, the amount of disagreement and cacophony and they don't like it when people argue bitterly, and they don't like seeing these alternative messages all the time,

and they become... they can often particularly triggered, I should say, by incidents that make them feel afraid or insecure, and they then want someone to come and just shut everything up, and they would like... they would prefer to just stick to one point of view, they don't have time or energy to hear these arguments. And people who know how to identify these kinds of people and send them messages and approach them and organise them, are the modern organisers of authoritarian movements. So whereas once upon a time you would have had rabble rousers go out on the street and organise crowds, now that's something that's done on the internet by people who are especially looking to reach that kind of personality. I mean, I think all of us feel sometimes overwhelmed by just the amount of information and the confusion of having to sort through it. But as I say, I think some people are really bothered by it and upset by it and want it somehow to stop.

AK - One of the things that struck me very much in your discussion of Karen Stenner's work was about the finding she had that a third of the population in any country has a predisposition to authoritarianism. And the second point was about how people find it very difficult to deal with complexity and tolerate complexity, and this is why sometimes easier solutions are sought for.

AA - It's why easier solutions are sought for, it's why people like clear messaging. They like... I think it was Dominic Cummings who said all slogans should have no more than three words, you know: take back control, get Brexit done. And there is some truth to that. In a world, as I say, where we are all overwhelmed by information, there are a few things that kind of cut through, you know, they seem like clear messages, they make sense, and that appeals to people who don't want to have to sort through this amazing quantity of information and argument that they hear all around them.

AK - Someone else I wanted to talk to you about is Svetlana Boym, the writer, academic, when she talked about the future of nostalgia. And she contrasts reflective nostalgia, which is we might miss the past but we certainly don't want it back, with restorative nostalgia, which is some of the people I think you're talking about. Could you talk a little bit about restorative nostalgia and why this is important for the argument?

AA - Yes, so this is a Russian, very interesting, almost eccentric Russian writer who wrote a book called *The Future of Nostalgia*, which is a great title. And she distinguishes between people like me, actually, who love the past, who are interested in the past, who like old photographs, old churches, who read history books, and people who actually want the past back, and who believe it can be restored. And this sentiment, which is an old one – you can find it repeating itself throughout history – very often contrasts a greater, more majestic, more heroic past with our grubby, dirty, low life present. Whereas we once had great leaders, now we have, you know, these kind of shadows of men running us who are not the same as the great charismatic leaders of the past. And you also find idealisation of past glories or past eras, and when those ideas move beyond just talk and they move into actual political programmes, this is when you often have great nationalist projects. So a lot of nationalist projects are based on some idea of the revival of the glorious past, so they're backward focused rather forward focused. And they talk about bringing things back, as opposed to creating something new. And inevitably this involves... again, these can be very radical acts, because they're a way of negating the present, so we don't like these aspects of the present so we're going to eliminate them and sometimes historically that's meant eliminating the people who didn't use to be here, or has meant eliminating institutions that we don't like anymore and reviving monarchies or one party states. And once you pay attention to this concept and once you start listening to how people talk about politics, you can hear echoes of this everywhere. I mean, you can hear it in the language that Putin uses when he talks about Russia and making Russia great again, which is a phrase he uses, you can hear it from Trump making America great again. It was an element in the Brexit campaign, and there's a piece of English nationalism that has an air of this about it. And then of course you can find it in the national projects in Poland where I live, and in Hungary where I've travelled a lot. And you can even find it in, I'd say, most western European countries, somebody has one of these projects going at any given moment.

AK - And linked to that is the concept of cultural despair that you refer to.

AA - Cultural despair is... there is a famous book called *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, which is written by a historian in Germany called Fritz Stern and Stern was writing about the 19th Century. He was writing about Germany in the 19th Century and he identified a number of intellectuals

who began at that time to feel this kind of despair or disgust with contemporary Germany, which at that time was a very rapidly industrialising, changing society. It was changing demographically, it was changing economically, and there began to be people who felt this regret and loss of something past. I write about one or two of them in the book. There's a German writer called [Julius] Langbehn who wrote a book trying to re-imagine or bring back past eras and making... sort of picking heroic figures from the past and elevating them into the present. And Fritz Stern finds several of these characters, actually, and it was really when I read his book that I realised that that sounded like people I know today. It sounded like the same kind of nostalgia, coupled with the same kind of despair, this fear that the present is not as good as the past, it's something you can hear a lot in modern kind of politics, philosophy, journalism, all across the democratic world.

AK - The third person I just wanted to briefly talk about because it introduces the people who... your friends who you've parted from, the intellectuals, is Julien Benda, who wrote *The Treason of the Intellectuals*. Now this was a book from 1927 but he was quite ahead of his time, wasn't he?

AA - Yes, so when I started thinking about people I know and why they had changed, why their politics had changed, I went back and looked for writers who had written about this kind of polarisation in the past. So when you had these moments of political upheaval. And one of them I turned back to was this writer Julien Benda, who was a French writer, who in the 1920s already identified a class of people who he called clerks, sometimes the word is translated as 'clerks', which I think is probably the wrong translation, sometimes it's just translated as 'intellectuals'. And he writes *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, and he writes about intellectuals who have attached themselves to political projects. So instead of seeking the truth or working on history for history's sake, or writing literature, they become cogs in political machines. And he, at this time, identified some on the far right and some on the far left who were already working away towards the glorification of those particular political projects. And very presciently there are a couple of lines in the book where he predicts that these two projects will eventually clash and he says.... there's a line about resulting in the deaths of millions. And because that is exactly what happened, you know, the book takes on, in retrospect, a kind of power because he predicted that, it was precisely the... all of these clever people seeking to promote these anti-

liberal, anti-democratic ideas that were going to lead to a terrible clash, and the war that came a decade later.

AK - Now, the book is... the start of the book is a party that you had in 1999 and the close of the book is another party in 2019. We'll come back to 2019 at the end, but the people who are at your party, some of those you now say you would have to cross the road to avoid speaking to them or seeing them.

AA - Yes, I mean we've all had that experience. And by the way, this is not a book about parties and being a great hostess and it's not about catering, it's nothing like that. It's just that the party was a metaphor for a kind of alliance of people who felt like they were all on the political... same side at one point, more or less. And when I reflected back on the party 20 years later I thought, well, you know, there were, as you say, there were people I would avoid and they would avoid me, and they probably wouldn't want to say they were in the same house as me. And again that's not because we had some personal fight, it's because the politics have changed and they have aligned themselves with this nationalist, nativist political party in Poland, and I found myself on the other side of that divide. And some of them have become propagandists or journalists or spokesmen or spin doctors on behalf of a party that has, since taking power in Poland, sought to undermine and change Polish democracy, change the rules of it, so that they can't lose. And there are a few examples in the book, and I try and, you know, I look at some of the people, I look at their careers and I ask what happened. In one or two cases I was able to actually ask them myself what happened. Most of them wouldn't talk to me, predictably. But one, I think you wanted to talk about, I did go and see a woman called Maria Schmidt who is a Hungarian, very brilliant Hungarian intellectual. She wrote a book about based on archives, similar subject to a book that I worked on which was on the Sovietisation of Hungary after the war. And that's how I met her and she was the founder of a museum in Budapest which is a museum of the history of communism and fascism. And she is now a, I mean she wouldn't deny it, I don't think, she is now a kind of propagandist for Viktor Orbán who is the illiberal leader of Hungary. He is now in effect a dictator, I don't think he can be removed democratically anymore. And she is one of the people who works for him, and one of the things she's helped to do is to come up with some of the conspiracy theories and language and propaganda that have helped propel him to power and then keep him in power. And as you say, I just went and asked her what she... why. And if

you read the book, you'll read the conversation, it wasn't very satisfactory. She mostly repeated to me things that she had already said in print. I had known her at that time for at least 15 years and she nevertheless – she speaks very good English – she nevertheless wanted to do the conversation in Hungarian. She had a tape recorder on the table and a translator. And then after the conversation, she actually sort of re-shaped it and changed some of the way it had been formed, and put it on a Hungarian website as if it was her interview with me. Why had I changed? And then later that interview appeared on the Hungarian government website, which was rather weird. It's as if, you know, a foreign critic of the British Museum was somehow featured on, you know, Number 10 Downing Street's website, but that's a peculiarity of Hungary that they care a lot about what people write about them abroad. Again, I don't come to a single explanation for Maria. There are multiple explanations. The one thing I would point out, you know, there's a lot of kind of loose and easy talk about so-called populist leaders and why people are attracted to populist movements, and it's often said, well, it's because of the financial crisis and the lack, you know, the liberal economics, neo-liberal economics. And this is a woman who has been a huge success, and who has made... her husband was one of the great victors of the Hungarian transition. He made a lot of money, they have a... he died a few years ago, but they have a lovely house, her children have studied abroad, she's very successful, there's no reason why she should be... she has nothing to be angry about in times of her personal and financial situation. Nevertheless she is angry, and she is resentful of elites and especially those in the west who she feels look down on her, so that's her source of resentment.

AK - One of the important things about her, which you describe in the book is, given her role, is her ability to shape how Hungarians remember their history. And you pose three questions at the heart of the book, which is how is a nation defined, who gets to define it, and who are we? And, you know, some people, you know, thought we'd settled these questions. And Maria was one of the people I wanted to talk about. The second is in the United States, which is someone who went from being a kind of Reagan and Reagan-ite to now where America is doomed and we're doomed and a Trump supporter is Laura Ingraham. Can you talk a little bit about her?

AA - Yes. So some of you might know... she's not a famous person in Britain and in fact I had to convince my British publisher that it was a good

idea to write about her. But she's a very famous person in the United States. She's a presenter on Fox News. In the last few months she's become very notorious because she's one of the people pushing this quack cure for the coronavirus, hydroxychloroquine. It may even have been her that gave Trump the idea that this is a cure. There is no medical basis for thinking it's a cure, in fact they're now... medical establishments in the US are trying to prevent people from taking it because it may even damage... may have bad side effects for people who are sick. But she is a conspiracy theorist, she has argued against face masks, she has argued against the lockdown, she's really become a... she's one of the people who's helped turn the coronavirus pandemic into a cultural war in the United States, with the effect that we all know, which is you have much higher death rates there than anywhere else in the world, much higher rates of infection. But I've known her for a long time, not very well, she's not a close friend. She wasn't at my New Year's Eve party! She is somebody who I was vaguely aware of, I met in various contexts, she was friends of friends of mine, and so on. And she is someone who I do think there's... funnily enough one of the criticisms of the book in the US is that 'didn't you always know that Laura Ingraham was like that?' The answer is, 'Well, maybe she had some qualities like that but they weren't the main ones 20 years ago.' And I look at her trajectory and she's somebody who, again, is kind of afflicted by both a sense of despair about the United States – she's a Catholic convert and she has spoken very openly of how she feels that America has become morally degenerate, she worries about the decline of respect for tradition and the family. She is also someone who is very anxious about demographic change, she's not just anti-illegal immigrant, which is something that a lot of people are, she's also anti-legal immigrants. She's spoken about the numbers of people in the United States who shouldn't really be here and aren't really Americans. One of the oddities about her, and this is part of why people are complicated, is she's also somebody who has adopted three immigrant children. I didn't want to go into that in length and I don't in the book, but it is a... it shows how contradictory people are. So she is somebody who has immigrant children who she adopted, yet she speaks against immigrants on television, and I can only guess that she compartmentalises these things in her mind. She thinks of them as belonging to different categories. She's also somebody who I think is... I wouldn't say... idealist is the wrong word, but of the people on Fox News who do this Trump promotion every night, she is one of the ones who I do think believes somehow in the Trump project. Or she is not totally cynical. She does, as I say, she believes the US is declining, that we need some

kind of radical change to pull us... to get out of it, and while Trump may not be the perfect vehicle, he's offering this kind of radicalism, and so she's willing to defend him. And, as I say, even try to shape how this disease is covered and understood by Americans in order to help him win re-election. So she is... for me, her story is very dark. I mean, she is somebody who is very, very deep now into a kind of damaging propaganda that is, as I say, helping to prolong and worsen this strange and terrible disease, and therefore, I think, will retrospectively be blamed for it. I don't think she sees herself that way, and so I try and where I can in the book, although she's one of those... I did try to talk to her and she didn't want to speak. But I think she will retrospectively be seen as one of the causes of the current American crisis.

AK - The third person to ask you about is our own Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who you knew. Who is narcissistic, is lazy, is a fabricator, has huge charisma, popular with some people, one of the guys – that's why he's often known as Boris rather than described as anything else. What are your fears with someone like him? Because he's not like Orbán or... But there has been talk about undermining the BBC, about more control over the courts, about civil servants purged, and so on. What do you think's going to happen there?

AA - So the disturbing thing for me about Boris Johnson is that I've known him for a long time, again not very well – he knew my husband better than me. I knew him just because I was a journalist working in London in the 1990s at the *Spectator* magazine and we came across one another pretty often. And he's... I have a very distinct memory of a conversation with him that must have been in about 2012 or '13 when he was Mayor of London, when he very clearly said, 'Oh no, of course we're not doing Brexit, nobody would want that, it's nuts, the city doesn't want it, the business doesn't want it, we're not going in that direction'. And so, Boris Johnson is someone who to me was... represents a different kind of politician. He's a really profoundly opportunistic one. I mean, I suppose that's not saying anything new to people, but I do think he's someone who, in a way, intuited some of these deeper feelings, and I have in the book a few other English... one philosopher and one journalist who are... feel this real despair or real angst about the nature of England. One of them was the late Roger Scruton, who wrote beautifully, actually, about the England that he thought had died, and the passing of the country that I love. And he felt very strongly that there was something ending. And I

think Boris was somebody who sensed that deep feeling and then used it and made it into a – with the help of Dominic Cummings – made it into a political platform to propel himself to power. There are... so the Brexit story is a little different from the other stories, I mean Brexit itself was not undemocratic in that same way. But there have been hints – I mean, we certainly saw it in the run up to the last election – there are hints of willingness to break rules, of impatience with institutions, whether it's the judges or the House of Lords or even the parliament itself. There has been a... you've seen from this Tory leadership you've seen a willingness to turn the people against the parliament to try and define a group of true Brits or authentic Brits, or actually it's really English, isn't it, rather than British? A kind of true Englishman against this establishment. This is the kind of language that authoritarian populists and authoritarian political parties use in other parts of the world. So they've used some of those languages and some of those same tactics. And they've made noises about things like ending the BBC and throwing things up in the air. They haven't done it yet and it may be that they've been stopped, both by coronavirus and by other parts of the Tory party. But as I said in the book, you can see how that kind of politics fits into some of the same patterns.

AK - I don't want to dwell much more on Donald Trump but I just wanted to ask you two things. The first was, I was reminded when I read the book of his, because you include it, of the speech about western civilisation that he made, and about how each generation is asked to call upon to save their society, to defend their society. And I found that quite chilling when I heard it first time round, and in the book that reminded me of that. But the point I really want to ask about was Trump today has tweeted about how the election might have to be postponed because of possible irregularities in mail-in voters, and then since then you've had some people rowing back saying he's only joking, it's a distraction, and so on. What're your thoughts on this, and what might happen do you think in November, if it follows that route that others have gone down?

AA - So he's been telling us for a long time that he's going to seek to undermine the election. It's actually just the latest step. I mean, he was asked point blank 'will you respect the results of the election?' and he's refused to answer. He's been kind of campaigning against the use of mail-in ballots, which have a long tradition in the US and there are a lot of systems set up to make them workable and they can work. I've been voting by absentee ballot in the US for years. And he has... I mean, this is

actually, mind you, a tactic he used in 2016 as well, one where you throw doubt upon the process and then if you lose, maybe you have some kind of wiggle room. I mean, I think there are several things that he said and I don't think it's a joke. It's part of a long pattern and I think it's going to get a lot worse coming into the fall. Part of it is to again undermine the system, undermine the institutions, cause people to doubt the validity of the system itself, and once people doubt that then they're willing to listen to much more radical people and ideas. And I think it may also be a kind of game to do voter suppression to prevent people from voting, or confuse people about voting, or make them think it's not worth voting, or scare them from voting, which is one of the ways that he hopes to win. I said to a friend of mine... I was talking to a friend of mine just a couple of days ago about this, and this tactic and this is apparently how he hopes to win the election. He hopes to win by obfuscating, by lying, by pretending it's fake. At the same time by seeking to open up the country as fast as possible despite the virus. I said to my friend, I said 'well, that's a crazy way to win the election, that's nuts'. And he said to me, 'Do you have a better idea?' I mean, that might be the best... the only plan he's got. There are some oddities about the US constitution. I was, funnily enough, just before we got on the call, I was looking them up because I might write something about it. It seems that in the US, whatever happens, if there is... on January 20th he ceases to be president? There doesn't seem to be any way he can change the date, in fact, so it is a thing he's tossing up to create noise. And there is even some suggestion that if there is somehow not an election or somehow not an inauguration by January 20th then the person who becomes president of the United States may well be the Speaker of the House, the speaker Nancy Pelosi, which would be so hilariously funny, the Democratic the Republicans hate the most would then be president. So that may... again, I'm not a constitutional scholar, and I'm going to have to look at that more closely. But again, stepping back from it, as I said, the point of this and the result is to again undermine faith in society, create bigger distrust in institutions, make people doubt what they hear on the news, create a kind of alternate reality in which there might not be an election and in which Trump might somehow stay president. And to use that doubt and use that kind of alternate reality to somehow stay in office, even if he loses.

AK - We had Masha Gessen speak in this series. They've just published a book about autocracy and they made the point as well that next January you might have Biden, Trump and Pelosi claiming the presidency. So I think there's certainly things there. I'm going to

bring in some audience questions now. The first one I want to ask you was about whether the... we've read a lot about the younger people leaving some of the post-communist countries, and has this left behind a more conservative generation of people, which has embedded some of these problems that you've been talking about and actually strengthened them?

AA - So that is a good argument. There is an even more powerful way in which that works – there is also a little bit about this in my book, and there's a better book by a Bulgarian intellectual, one of the great European intellectuals of the moment, called Ivan Krastev, who does think that demographic change, by which he doesn't mean immigrants coming in but young people leaving, has had a very profound shattering effect on people left behind in places like Bulgaria where he comes from, or even from Poland which, although it's a bigger country, where I am now, in that people in these countries begin to be worried for their fate as a nation. 100 years from now, will there be anybody left who can read Bulgarian poetry, he writes at one point. Will we survive as a nation if we're losing people? And this feeling of loss and of the younger people leaving and the talented leaving. In Poland that's actually accelerating now and one of the effects of the nationalist government is that people in their 20s are almost desperate to study abroad and get out. I know this because I have children that age and I see what their friends are doing. But there is a way in which people feel something has been lost, there is a way of life that's disappearing, and they're not wrong. There are things that are changing, disappearing, this is the impact of modernity and again connectedness and, you know, cable television and the internet, means that rural life in Poland, which one probably had a certain rhythm and certain seasonality to it, and so on, has changed beyond recognition, and there are people who regret that. And so they regret that and they regret the loss of people, and they fear for the survival of their culture. And that is a part of the explanation for what's happened. I do think that's correct.

AK - OK, well thanks for that. The second question that someone's asked.... you've probably been asked this a lot, I should think, which is why is the American title of your book different to the British title? You'll probably have to tell us what the American title is, actually, I haven't written that down.

AA - The American title is the same title, *The Twilight of Democracy*, but the sub-title is *The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, which is different

from *The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends*. It's because there was a terrible fight over the title, actually. I mean, I won't tell you all the details, but there was one chosen and then the Americans said, 'No, actually, we're having *Twilight of Democracy* and the British were forced to change because they didn't want to have their book completely different, and finally they made this resolution. I think actually what the argument reflected was that the British and American publishers found different things about the book that they thought were important. And my British publishers thought that the stories of broken friendships and the connection between broken friendships and politics was at the heart of the book. And the Americans thought that the lure of authoritarianism was at the heart of the book. So that was really what it was about. And the only thing I can say is, you know, it's about both. As I said, it's a quirky essay rather than a book with a single thesis, and I think the fight over the title reflects that. But it's the same book. I think even the page numbers are the same in both editions, so it's no different, just the cover is different.

AK - It's good you were able to have a civilised discussion and come to an agreement on that.

AA - I finally threw up my hands and said, 'You guys decide'.

AK - A third question is someone's asked if it's... they've referred to some reviews, they don't mention which ones, about whether it's right to equate what happened in the UK over Brexit with what happened in Poland. I'm not sure which reviews. But is that something you see?

AA - It's a fair question. Look, there were several... one of the things that I'm sad about is that I haven't seen any interesting Brexiteer reviews. In other words, I haven't seen anybody reflect on any of the themes in the book and say something interesting about them. Mostly they just got mad at me. I mean, not that many, but there were a couple. It is fair that Brexit is a... it's a different quality of political fight than the one in Poland. The one in Poland is much more existential, it's about 'are we a democracy or are we not?' Which is not quite what Brexit was about. I also, just to give you an example, I do have friends who were Brexiteers and I'm still friends with them. It wasn't as deep or profound a quarrel, but I think it belongs in the book because some of the forces that led to it, some of the political tactics that were used, some of the ways in which, as I say, the

people vs the elite or the people vs the 'real English' vs the traitors, I mean some of that language, which you heard both from the campaign and you saw in the tabloids, was the same. And some of the way that social media was used during the campaign and the way conspiracy theory really was used in the campaign was the same. In a way, the idea that what's wrong with our society is the EU, and if we can just get out of the EU we can fix stuff, when actually it turns out that everything that we want to fix could have been fixed while we were in the EU, that nobody was stopping Britain from, I don't know, changing its internal investment policy or spending more money in the north. There was no rule in the EU that was blocking anybody. So it did function as a kind of, not a deeper, crazy conspiracy theory, but it functioned in the same way as this big explanation for problems. You know, if we can only solve that then all kinds of other things are possible. And I think that just wasn't really true. So I would argue that in that sense it's fair, and many of the themes and ideas, the way that polarisation and the split inside the Tory party worked, is not that different from the way the split inside the Republican party worked or the split inside the Polish right.

AK - Another question, which is linked to what I wanted to move on to next, in the final part of the discussion, is about what do we do about this. And someone has talked about a comparison with climate change. We've known for some time democracy is in trouble, we've had issues with it, and similarly we've known that climate change is a reality, most of us, and accept that and it's human driven. But what do we do about that? And even when the evidence is overwhelming, progress is very slow. So when... I know you said that this isn't a book about parties but it's a very clever way of presenting it that you've done. And in your second party, which was 20 years after the first, you seem to give some indication of hope that things would change because there are a lot of younger people there, they weren't even born in 1989 some of them. Do you have hope for the future? And what do you think are the key areas where change can take place?

AA - So, you know, one of the conclusions that I've come to... I'm a kind of natural pessimist. Before this book, some of you might know, I spent years, 20 years, really, researching and writing about the Soviet Union and Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe, and I wrote about terrible crimes and the gulag and the Ukrainian famine, and so I spent a lot of time on gloomy subjects. But one of the conclusions that I came to is that it is very

unfair to young people to be pessimistic, to tell them that there's no way out, or that there's no hope. I mean, it's that sentiment, the sentiment of older people that the best times are over and there's nothing yet to come, that I feel is, you know, is just sort of grotesquely unfair to people who are 20 and 30 years younger. So I resisted doing it and I tried to end the book pointing that out. And what I also wanted to say at the end of the book was that now that we've been shocked out of our complacency, and now that we know that it is possible for liberal democracy to fail, even in Europe now, even in the modern world, even in the United States, it's possible. Now that we know that, now that we're not just on this inevitable 'everything will always be fine' track into the future, that gives us these sort of radical possibilities so we can do things. We can do things now we know that it can fail and so we need to work on making it better, and we need to involve ourselves in our communities and what... again I don't give prescriptions in the book, I leave it up to people to think about, or we can find friends who agree with us and rearrange our political alliances so that we're working with people who want to make changes, or we can lobby our politicians to think about climate change or, one of my obsessions, money laundering and the dark money that flows around the world and undermines politics everywhere. And it's our obligation to do that and to think about that, and we can. There was an aspect of what the questioner was saying that is also important, which is that there is something in human nature, you know, we don't really do anything about anything until we're shocked into it. It's like they always say that the EU only reforms itself when there is an emergency, and there is something like that actually in all of our societies, that it takes some kind of crisis before people see it. I think in the United States now there are so many groups and organisations and conferences now devoted to the question of how do we improve our democracy and make it better, that I don't think existed three years ago, because people just weren't scared enough and they weren't worried enough and now they are. And it may be that something like that may be the case with climate change as well. We're just going to have to experience something before we work on it.

AK – Well, thank you very much, Anne. You've written a terrific book which I urge everyone to read. If you'd like to get a copy of this book, *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends*, do go to our partners at Waterstones, at waterstones.com or any Waterstones shops in this country. This is one of a number of events we're running on the future of democracy. Already online includes Ece Temelkuran, Masha Gessen, and our

own Bristol MPs on the future of local democracy. They're all online. And next Friday, the 7th of August, we have Robert Reich interviewed about the system and how to fix it. And then, later on in September, the political philosopher Michael Sandel. We're very grateful to Allen Lane books for supporting this event, particularly Annabel Huxley, and most of all thank you Anne Applebaum, thank you very much.

AA - Thank you so much, it was a real pleasure. Thanks a lot.

Twilight of Democracy by Anne Applebaum is published by Allen Lane. It's available to buy from our friends at [Waterstones](#).

www.waterstones.com

This interview has been lightly edited.