John Howard lecture

It is an honour to be asked to give this lecture because John Howard is one of the greatest living heroes of the modern centre right

 in fact I don’t know why I say one of

since the death of Margaret Thatcher, he holds the record for the longest and most successful tenure of any former conservative prime minister in the world

 and as you can tell there is now a plethora of former conservative prime ministers from the UK alone

 all of us queuing up to speak at conferences of gastro enterologists in Arizona

 in a way that John would never do because he is a man of unfailing modesty

and who personally won me hundreds of Australian dollars in the biggest political bet I have ever taken

  It happened 30 years ago in most peculiar circumstances

 I was sitting at my desk in Brussels, and opened a letter from Australia – and blow me down, it was an invitation from a distinguished professor of French at Monash university Melbourne

  He had read some of my learned articles in the Spectator magazine, he said, and he would like me to come and be a visiting professor of European thought at the university

I was then a 20 something journalist and I was having the time of my life writing about the EU

and I specialised in hair-raising accounts of how Brussels planned to ban the prawn cocktail flavour crisp – it’s true, they did

and how they were recruiting teams of people to sniff manure and work out the maximum permissible odour for farmyard compounds

 that kind of thing

and I turned the letter over in amazement and wondered if I was being pranked

and then I thought Moi? – a visiting professor of European thought?

I was definitely a European and I was capable of thought

and I started to feel more tweedy and academic by the second and I wrote back to the learned don and said you bet

and bingo – they sent me the air tickets and that summer I flew to Melbourne

 though I forgot about the day you lose when flying to Australia and managed to arrive

only an hour or so before my first lecture and had to extemporise a blood-curdling euro-sceptic rant to a faintly bemused audience

 I will never forget the expression on the face of the vice chancellor of Monash, when I was introduced to him afterwards

a large social scientist with flowing white hair

 Are you it? he said, goggling at me

It was only then that I had the first ghastly suspicion that there had been some case of mistaken identity

 because it occurred to me that the pages of the Spectator were then filled with Johnsons

 There was Paul Johnson, there was Frank Johnson, there was me and then there was a rather prolific professor of French politics called Douglas Johnson

 who – now I came to think of it – had probably contributed more pieces about the EU than I had

and it hit me that someone somewhere had blundered

and that in the age before google, and instant verification of people’s CVs, Monash university had somehow got hold of the wrong Johnson

 All I can say is that if they realised it, they were much too polite to point it out

and I had a wonderful time at Monash, as you can imagine

in which I delivered ever more frenzied denunciations of EU bureaucracy

 and towards the end of my tenure we were all sitting in the pub

 the visiting prof and the rest of the faculty of European studies

the Monash professor of Greek philosophy, the professor of Sanskrit, old high german and so on

 and suddenly I found myself engaged in a political argument about Australia

 The academics were unanimous – possibly as a result of hearing my lectures – that Australia would shortly be sundering its constitutional ties with Britain

and we all took a bet

 or rather I took them all on in the same bet, for a stake of $100 apiece,

and they wagered me that by the year 2000 – which was then 8 years away – Her Majesty the Queen would cease to be the Australian head of state

and we all shook on it solemnly

 and of course those ruthless academics thought they were taking candy from a baby

but they underestimated her late majesty the queen, they underestimated the good sense of the Australians, and of course they underestimated the political genius of John Howard

who defended the constitutional settlement by escalating in the public imagination the alternative

and it was only when people thought about the alternative – Rolf harris or whatever, Mel Gibson

 that the mind kind of boggled

and the referendum highlighted

 as these things so often do in both our countries

 the massive common sense of the people and the delusions of the left-leaning liberal establishment

and so here we are 31 years after I took that bet and decades after I won it

and guess what – the lefty dons at Monash still haven’t coughed up

and whenever I have come back here whether as Mayor of London or fgn sec or whatever

I have made the same plaintive appeal – and they have all gone to ground

and you know what – I no longer mind

I formally and hereby absolve them of their debt because what matters far more to me than the exact constitutional arrangements of Australia

which are entirely a matter for Australians

is that after all this time

our two countries are closer than ever

and I am proud of what I have done to bring that about

 I am proud as a former rentapom who struggled at the age of 18 to get the right work permit to go and drive tractors in Mansfield

 that we now have a free trade deal between the UK and Australia

it is a deal that makes it much easier for young brits to come and work here

and easier for talented Australians to go and work in the UK

 I am glad that we have done something to repair the injustice of the 1970s

when Britain turned her back on Australian farmers

on families who had fought alongside us in two world wars

suddenly disappearing behind the EEC tariff wall with such brutality that some farmers actually shot themselves

 I am proud that Marmite is now displacing vegemite on the shelves of Australian supermarkets

or at least competing with vegemite

and that Australian four and twenty pies, with all the goodness they contain, can at last be sold at fortnums

but we need to do more, and there is still far more we can do, especially on services

 and far more we can do together in the CPTPP

and I am proud that we have done Aukus – the new defence pact that we created at Carbis Bay in 2021

and I salute Scott – the progenitor of the idea, because it is a great idea

 that the UK and Australia and the USA should embark on a new chapter in our shared history

sharing the most sensitive of military secrets – nuclear submarine technology

precisely because we share a community of values and ideals

and I am delighted that this idea is being taken up by the Labor government

and in spite of all the raucous squawkus from the anti-aukus caucus, and in spite of all the gilded plaster that came off the elysee ceiling

(and the dust has thankfully settled now)

we need Aukus now more than ever

In fact we need to go further, not just in building the new generation of subs the SSNRs

but developing the whole second pillar of Aukus, the sharing of technology on AI, on quantum, on semi conductors

 We should think how we can make Aukus cohere with our increased engagement with other friends and allies in Asia pacific

 and you will have noted that under this government

the UK is committing every more to the Indo Pacific

opening new missions in Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa

  engaging in a strategic partnership with Korea and a partnership with Japan to build a new generation of fighter aircraft

as well as an increased UK naval presence in the Pacific

 and we need more Aukus because the threats are growing and I am afraid the world is a darker and more dangerous place than it was

 and that is above all because 80 years after the end of the second world war an autocrat is trying to extinguish democracy

 in a sovereign European democracy

to wipe that country off the map – in total defiance of the wishes of its people – and we cannot allow that to happen

 This morning I spoke to Ukrainian soldiers in Bakhmut

 I spoke to commander Bereza, to give him his call-sign, of the 22nd mechanised brigade

 it was 3 am Ukrainian time

but they were awake in their dug-out, in the freezing cold, and I could see their faces, hunched over the phone

 and I felt shame and embarrassment at the ease of our lives

and the horror they are facing, of Russian bombardment

 and the awful reality of the injuries that they will suffer – in mind as well as in body

and yet they were smiling as they talked to me

smiling and joking and beaming with pride

because they were defending their country

 fighting for their hearths and homes

and I told them what I know and believe that they will win and that they must win

 and those soldiers in that freezing trench in Bakhmut are fighting for all of us, for freedom everywhere

 I want to thank the people of Australia for all the help you have been giving

the Bushmasters and more, in a total effort worth over 900m dollars

 But there is so much more to be done – by both our countries

 and at this critical time I hope you will agree with me when I say to Congress in the US that this investment that is now blocked

 this support for Ukraine

is the most cost –effective investment that you could imagine in the long term security not just of the euro-atlantic area but of the world

  America has given $75bn and deserves huge credit

and yet this is just 5 per cent of the annual US defence budget

Most of the spend actually goes on jobs in the US – and think what it buys

If we can help the Ukrainians to push Putin out of Ukraine

 and they will

don’t fall for this strange and irrational view that Ukraine can’t win

 they have already kicked Putin out of 50 per cent of the territory he occupied

if the Ukrainians can push him out next year, then we dramatically reduce the risk of Russian revanchism elsewhere

 We help protect Georgia and the Baltic states and the whole periphery of the former soviet union

 After decades of being pushed around, the world’s democracies will be finally sending a signal that we are willing to stand up for our values

for the cause of freedom

and that signal will be heard wherever an autocrat is meditating an attack on a neighbouring democracy

and that will be good news for peace around the world

good news for peace in the straits of Taiwan

good news for peace between Venezuela and Guyana

good news for the world

and if we fail in Ukraine, if we let Putin win

we will not only be ushering in a new and cruel chauvinist tyranny in Ukraine

 where journalists are shot, as they are in Russia

 and opposition politicians are poisoned, as they are in Russia

We will be embarking on a new dark ages of geo-politics

in which might is seen to be right, and the world’s autocrats believe that they have the upper hand

 and so of course Putin is thrilled by the appalling events in Israel, and the inevitable distraction from Ukraine

and of course the Iranian regime rejoices at the atrocities committed by Hamas

Indeed it is no coincidence that Iran is providing drones for Putin and training and funding for Hamas

because we are now up against a great global continuum of evil

and we must prevail

  We must stamp out the anti-semitism that is sprouting again in western capitals

 that means Jewish kids are once again afraid to take the bus to school in case they are bullied

 and which has seen middle class intellectuals tear down the posters of Jewish kids held hostage by Hamas

and we must call it out for what it is

 the emergence from beneath the collective floorboards of the ancient spore of anti-semitism

that lazy horrible diversionary tactic of the human race

 to blame another group for your own failings

and to blame Jewish people for the failings of our own states or societies

and we should instead remember that it was Israel that suffered a disgusting and deliberate terrorist attack on October 7

 and that whatever Israel’s failings it is a democracy, and it is reasonable for a democracy to try to protect itself against terrorism

and we must stick up for these two democracies – Ukraine and Israel

because the events of the last 20 years have reminded us what all conservatives should have known all along

 that history is not a one-way ratchet toward progress, that things can go backwards

and that when 70 per cent of the world lives under an autocracy – 3 or more decades after the end of the cold war - democracy is far more fragile than we have realised

 and that western liberal capitalist democracy is not necessarily appealing to everyone in the way that it should

  if you go to the middle east or sub Saharan Africa or latin America

 you find a bizarre willingness to give Putin the benefit of the doubt

 they believe his propaganda about food prices and they actually blame Ukraine rather than Putin’s invasion

 we must fight this nonsense together

win the battle for hearts and minds together

and fix the problems together

yes, we all face a spike in energy prices and so we need to work on long term solutions that allow us to move beyond hydrocarbons

 The UK was the first country in the world to have a civilian nuclear power station – and yet we have allowed our nuclear industry to decay

and that is why I greenlighted two big programmes of nuclear power – not just giant projects such as hinkley or sizewell but small modular reactors as well

 and to all in Australia who have been having the same debate I say

 don’t be deterred by the superstitious sandal-wearing lefties

if you want a zero carbon base-load then nuclear has to be part of the mix

and across the spectrum of political debate we face the same set of problems

  What is the single biggest problem facing modern conservative parties

 young people cannot afford somewhere to live – an incredible thing in a place the size of Australia, but still true

 now there are all sorts of reasons for this, not least the appalling planning laws in both our countries

 and I speak as someone who has had to spend thousands on surveys for non-existent newts

and to build newt motels in case they should saunter across the lawn and need refuge from the building works

  but rightly or wrongly people believe that the single biggest problem they face in getting a new home is immigration

mass migration

 and though I am generally a Reaganite on this issue I also agree that we must have control

and after a tough week I believe our government back home in the UK is doing absolutely the right thing to pursue the Rwanda policy

 because we have in this room a man who prevailed against all the doubters

 all the legal contortionists

and who vindicated this principle

 we decide who comes to this country and the conditions under which they come here

 and that is what we must do in the UK, even if it means derogating from or even disapplying parts of the ECHR

don’t forget there is a sense in which mass immigration is actually being weaponised by the autocracies

 because they know that if they trigger a war, if they cause chaos and mass movements of people

 the exodus won’t go to the autocracies – they come to us

 and that in a way is a compliment

and that is one of the reasons why I believe that for all the difficulties we face

 the democracies will succeed

because in the end it is the democracies – the liberal capitalist democracies

 that produce the great scientific breakthroughs and the great music and the movies the world wants to watch

precisely because we protect freedom

 freedom of thought, freedom or religion, freedom of speech and expression

 and that is why it is so vital that we don’t give in to the tendency to cancel and suppress

 why are ancient universities no platforming JK Rowling just because she says what millions of people think

 why on earth are we bowdlerising roald dahl

 why oh why has Australia day been cancelled in London?

it is freedom of thought and expression in both our countries that means we have so many fantastic universities because the best minds want to come and teach there

 and I speak with all the authority of a former visiting professor at Monash

  Who had sputnik?

 who listens to Russian techno funk?

 we have the high cards, the culture people want to emulate but

 We are engaged in a huge struggle, between the democracies and the autocracies

 we must accept the reality that not every country will want to be like us or to become a democracy

  what we cannot accept at any price is that the autocracies should have the right to prevent other countries from choosing that path

and above all we cannot accept that they should use violence to do so

and together Britain and Australia must stand up for that freedom for nations and peoples to choose that democratic destiny

  and I know that we will