



# History in the making

How will the tumultuous events of the past 12 months be viewed by future generations? We asked ten historians, from both Houses of Parliament, to write us the first draft

Old economic and political assumptions have been called into question as we move into a new Age of Unreason, says **Keith Simpson**

**T**o quote Zhou Enlai: “Too early to say”. This was his response to a question in the early 1970s about the student riots of 1968 and not, as thought, the 1789 storming of the Bastille.

We have to distinguish looking back on 2016 on accentuation of trends and events that are potential game changes. On the former, we have been steadily moving into an Age of Unreason in which post-truth politics appears to challenge assumptions and given facts.

It used to be Holocaust deniers, now it is climate change deniers, with President-elect Trump saying it is a Chinese conspiracy.

We are seeing the continuing collapse of the old world order, which has gone through similar changes over 400 years – Westphalian, Congress, Europe, the Versailles settlement, Potsdam and then the collapse of the Soviet Union.

US and European dominance is still paramount but competing with Russia, China, India, Iran and other major regional powers. Economic and political

instability exacerbated by widespread conflict and terrorism has caused states to collapse and produced mass migrations. The near crash of Western capitalism in 2007 and 2008 shook confidence and created unemployment and a decade of wage freezes.

So we have seen a rise in “nativism” or nationalist populism against liberal democracy, with protectionism, anti-globalisation, rejection of migrants, and the loss of faith in traditional institutions and elites.

The political game changes of 2016 which directly impact on us are the intended and unintended consequences of the EU referendum and the success of President-elect Trump.

The vote to leave the EU caused shock to government, the Leave campaign, the media and most businesses. Cameron resigned as prime minister and Theresa May replaced him – a second woman leader

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for the staid old Tory party. This vote has called into question all the economic, political and security assumptions made by successive governments since 1975.

President-elect Trump’s success will have even greater repercussions challenging US foreign and security policy consensus over Russia, China and NATO, which in turn will impact on us.

Finally, 2016 saw an intensification of people’s use of social media and a sharp increase in personal abuse, illustrated by a tabloid’s attack on our High Court judges with the headline Enemies of the People, which for we historians might well have come from the old Soviet newspaper Izvestia or the Nazi Völkischer Beobachter.

So, 2016: both continuity and change. 🏠



**Keith Simpson** is Conservative MP for Broadland



Vladimir Putin has emerged as the big winner of 2016 – and I fear 2017 will belong to the Russian president, too, writes **Lord Radice**

**I**t is arguable that 2016 has been the worst year for the West since the Second World War. The two outstanding events were the election of Donald Trump as American president and the result of the referendum on British membership of the European Union, both of which threaten to undermine the western alliance. Certainly it is Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, who is entitled to feel most satisfied with what has happened this year.

Throughout the US presidential campaign, Trump expressed his admiration for Putin, while Putin made no secret of his preference for Trump as US president. Indeed, according to the CIA, Russia hacked Democratic Party internal emails and then leaked them through Wikileaks to cause maximum damage to the Clinton campaign. Putin must be delighted that he now has a president in the White House who is not only a professed friend but has also shown only lukewarm support for Nato and the defence of its members against external aggression.

Brexit is also a good result for the Russian president. Especially since the imposition of EU sanctions over Ukraine, Putin has seen enfeebling of the EU as a key foreign policy objective. He is no

doubt overjoyed that, over the next few years, both the EU and the UK will be distracted by complex negotiations over Britain’s post-Brexit relationship with the continent.

Next year, there will be other events, such as the French presidential election, which could further weaken the EU. Marine Le Pen, who is likely to get through to the second round, has long had a relationship with Putin, including monetary support, while Francois Fillon, representing the centre right, wants to see the lifting of sanctions against Russia. It is quite possible that, by the end of 2017, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, will be left as Putin’s only significant opponent.

If the situation now seems bleak, it is by no means hopeless. Democrats across Europe, very much including Britain, must fight back. They must reassert the values of social justice, fairness and accountability. They must seek to represent all sections of society. And above all, they must provide firm leadership, joining together to oppose populist extremists and authoritarian nationalists with both eloquence and vigour. 🏠



**Lord Radice** is a Labour peer



The nationalist impulse has outlived the communist one, says **Paul Bew**, who believes a new model of social cohesion is needed

In 1916 Irish insurrectionists launched the Easter Rising in Dublin. Lenin sympathetically but patronisingly declared that the Irish had acted prematurely - before the main show of 1917.

In fact the era opened up by the Russian revolution closed in 1989 with the collapse of communism while the era opened up by the Easter Rising is still with us. For the Irish political class the last year has been one of devout commemoration. There was even talk of sending a senior member of the British royal family to take part in the festival of respect to 1916.

The nationalist impulse has outlived the communist impulse. This is the clue to so much of 2016 where the Irish nationalist anthem A Nation Once Again is being sung, as it were, in both Britain and America.

After 1916 WB Yeats declared that things had changed utterly. He then moved on to his famous lamentation

that the centre could not hold, that the best "lack all conviction" and the worst were full of "passionate intensity". Many liberals today share this nervous apocalypticism.

There is no doubt that the most horrible and tragic event in the political life of this country was the murder of the inspiring Labour MP Jo Cox and this event is a warning to all of us to keep the political rhetoric within the bounds of calmness and decency.

“The murder of Jo Cox is a warning to all of us to keep political rhetoric within the bounds of calmness and decency”

In fact the Trump government in waiting appears to be channelling Roosevelt, the most famous Democratic president of the 20th century, and Theresa May's government to be channelling Attlee - whose values, the historian Paul Addison has recently suggested, have found more of an echo in the Conservative party than in today's Labour party. In foreign policy the most important Trump initiative will be the rapprochement with Russia.

There is no sign of a crisis of popular belief in liberal democratic values in the UK - indeed one significant recent poll has bucked

the long-term trend of the "lack of trust" in politicians - but there is a crisis in belief in certain aspects of metropolitan liberalism.

Certain things have changed. The hegemonic consensus characterising the last decade that mass migration was socially and economically desirable, which Tony Blair did so much to foster, has collapsed, including in parts of the Labour party.

There is in that sense an epistemological break at the heart of our modern politics which some have not come to terms with. Old leftists from the 1980s can contemplate the confusion of modern liberals with some wry satisfaction.

The struggle to form a new model of social cohesion has, however, to be a priority and what this will be in the future is still unclear.

In 1872, in his book *Physics and Politics*, Walter Bagehot argued that animated civility was the defining characteristic and evolutionary advantage of the British political system. He was right then and is right now as we face the complex and conflicted path which lies ahead. 🇬🇧



**Lord Bew** is professor of Irish politics at Queen's University, Belfast and a crossbench peer

The release of official documents in 20 years' time will provide historical perspective on the Brexit vote, says **Lord Lexden**

History always views the unexpected with particular relish. A momentous event that was largely unexpected means that future generations will be drawn back to 2016 with insatiable fascination.

The wide and varied factors that led the British people to vote by a narrow margin to leave the European Union - where the principal Tory leaders of the 1970s had been so confident that the country's destiny lay - will be assessed, and then reassessed, from every conceivable point of view.

Agreement should not be expected. It is more likely that the reasons why the referendum went as it did will always remain a matter of vigorous, even passionate debate, like the origins of



both world wars in the 20th century.

But the debate will be better informed when the official records become available. For that we now only have to wait 20 years. The opening of the archives will provide serious historical perspective, now hopelessly distorted by the stream of unreliable and self-serving comments which began within days of the referendum.

Deep political divisions are sometimes overcome quite quickly. Intense rancour at Westminster and in the country at large about Munich and Suez was over in months. By contrast insults flew for some five years over fundamental constitutional issues before the first world war.

There seems little prospect that

2016 will be seen as a year in which the emergence of a new national dispensation could be discerned beneath the heated arguments. A mould was unexpectedly shattered. History is unlikely to record surprise that it proved remarkably difficult to decide how it should be replaced.

Could 2016 prove to be the year in which it finally became clear that the United Kingdom could not survive as a unitary state? The referendum reinforced long-standing separatist tendencies strengthened in 2016 by further substantial measures of devolution to Scotland and Wales.

An extraordinary reluctance by

“Could 2016 prove to be the year in which it finally became clear the UK could not survive as a unitary state?”

government ministers to devise a coherent constitutional plan for the future may now have to give way to serious work on federalism. “Not before time” may be

history's verdict, if Scotland does not break away completely.

British political historians are on the whole a benign and optimistic bunch. They tend to find redeeming features in even the worst conducted political campaigns. That innate goodwill may help rescue to some extent the reputation of the year's most conspicuous political casualty, David Cameron.

But it may be hard to explain his downfall simply as the result of a sudden wave of populism that would have overwhelmed anybody in his place. Those who led the campaign to remain in the European Union may not be acquitted of serious ineptitude. History provides no precedent for a prime minister who won an unexpected victory one year only to throw it away the next. 🇬🇧



**Lord Lexden** is a Conservative peer and historian



The major upheavals of the past year may not necessarily lead to the far-reaching changes that many fear, believes **Baroness Henig**

2016 has had more than its fair share of upsets, from Leicester City winning the Premier League through to Brexit and Trump's victory in the US presidential election.

But does this mean that 2016 will be seen as a year that changed the course of history, a defining year on a par with 1789 or 1914?

There are certainly some possible repercussions from this year's events which could lead to significant global upheaval.

It is not too fanciful to suggest that Brexit might herald a break-up of the United Kingdom, with Scotland reclaiming the independence it last enjoyed over 300 years ago, and Northern Ireland developing a much closer relationship with its southern neighbour.

It could also trigger the collapse of the euro, followed by the disintegration of the EU. A Trump presidency could have many serious consequences, not least a significant weakening of the NATO alliance which could then be further undermined by the military challenge of an aggressive Russia backed by Turkey. ➤

The Baltic states and eastern Europe might once again find themselves the target of Russian military expansion. Another danger is that confrontation between the USA and China could become more overt and threatening, with calamitous global consequences.

But perhaps we should not think only or even principally of conventional war. 2016 has seen significant examples of countries pursuing cyber warfare, with evidence of growing capacity in this area.

The CIA allege that Russia hacked into American systems to obtain information used to discredit Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. The opportunities to generate massive instability by infiltrating and disrupting the internal systems of enemy states could become a major global threat, cutting across more conventional great power rivalries.

And yet, none of this might happen. Whatever the outcome of Brexit negotiations, it is conceivable that Scotland remains in the UK, a solution is found to deal with the Irish border, and the EU soldiers on.

“Brexit might result neither in the glorious future predicted by Leave campaigners nor in catastrophic decline forecast by Remainers”

Brexit might result neither in the glorious future predicted by Leave campaigners nor in the catastrophic decline forecast by dejected Remainers.

Trump may continue support, however grudging, for NATO, and might succeed in averting damaging trade wars or more direct confrontation with China. And ways will undoubtedly be found to strengthen sensitive national infrastructure and to counter cyber warfare.

Maybe 2016 will come to be seen in similar terms to 1848 and 1968 - as a year of major upheaval which did not lead to significant change. 🏠



**Baroness Henig** is a Labour peer and historian



Following a year of bad blood and political blunder, let us resolve to never hold a referendum again, says **Hugh Thomas**

I am usually an optimist but there is little that I shall find good to remember in 2016. The fact that the recent referendum has been attended by a rising mood of xenophobia is disheartening. Is it really possible that a Pole was murdered because he was overheard talking in his own tongue? A referendum seems to create a bad blood in a way that elections never do.

There are several other points to make about the referendum which we experienced. The first is that we live in a parliamentary democracy based on representation by Members of Parliament, not by plebiscites or delegates. Burke made that point eloquently writing to the electors in Bristol in 1774. I regret that the opponents of Brexit seem to be placing

their hopes in yet another plebiscite. Let us resolve never to have a referendum again.

The second thing to say is that the idea that our policies should be determined by a simple vote which did not oblige the winners to obtain a high percentage of votes cast is not quite worthy of a great country.

A third matter is that, according to Ken Clarke in his memoir, *Kind of Blue*, the prime minister, David Cameron, decided to go ahead with his referendum and fix its date without discussing the matter with the Cabinet. Cabinet members apparently learned what had been decided by Cameron by reading the newspapers. Surely that was rather odd?

Clarke speaks of Cameron as taking “a foolish and extremely risky decision”. The implications certainly do not seem to have been thought out. I hope that if Britain has difficulties again over the Falkland Islands or elsewhere, we will still be able to count on the support of European friends, as we were in 1982. But Northern Ireland, Scotland and Gibraltar all need to be reconsidered in the light of the result of June 23.

A referendum is surely a rather subtle

way of reaching a major political decision and must always neglect important details such as, as we have seen, the position of European citizens who live in Britain.

For two or three generations since 1960, British public servants and others have worked very hard to put the British case in Europe and to assert Britain's European identity. Culturally, nothing can change that. Like Thomas Gray, we have long ago fallen in love with the Mediterranean. Gibbon and Sir Walter Scott will always seem Europeans. So surely will Shakespeare, about half of whose plays are set in a magical version of the continent.

The belief that it is a wonderful thing that the European nations are coming together in peace having fought each other for centuries (England included), should still be an inspiration. But Ken Clarke points out that Cameron always gave a eurosceptic tone to his comments on Europe. That may partly explain the catastrophe of June 23 which Clarke regards as the worst political mistake made by any prime minister in our lifetimes.

There were some other dark moments in 2016. We shall never forget the extraordinary behaviour of the police in

“I regret that the opponents of Brexit seem to be placing their hopes in yet another plebiscite”

relation to Lords Bramall and Brittan, and Sir Edward Heath, and wonder how these miscarriages of judgement could have occurred in our country. I also find the destruction of London by the new bicycle roads most distressing.

In 1915, Henry James, walking with his brother William in St James's Park, raised his hat in a deferent gesture as they passed Buckingham Palace. “Why do you love them so?” asked William. “Because – they're so decent, and so dauntless,” returned Henry. Are we still so? I think, just. 🏠



**Lord Thomas of Swynnerton** is a crossbench peer and historian

David Cameron was by no means the only leader to misunderstand the people he governed, says **Julian Lewis**

In 2016, silent majorities in separate countries on separate continents simultaneously found their voice. Political projects, deemed inexorable, came to a shuddering halt – and so did the careers of many politicians who thought they knew better than the rest of us.

For 40 years, we were sucked into the federalisation of Europe while ministers posed as sceptics in word though not in deed. Yet, when the chips were down, they were forced to come out in their true Remain colours.

Having secured a place in history for leading the Liberal Democrats to defeat without intending to do so, David Cameron then became the man who led us out of the EU without intending to do so either. The “swivel-eyed loons”, so despised within his circle, had understood the British people better than an army of imported pollsters.

As a wave of Middle Eastern and African migrants – some from war-torn countries, others from grindingly poor ones – surged across the Mediterranean, the reaction of leading EU governments similarly contradicted the wishes of their own people. Will this result in far-right victories in 2017? If so, then the seeds of

“Will 2016 prove to be a watershed, or merely a hiccup before normal service is resumed?”

EU disintegration were sown in 2016.

In Washington DC, the election of Donald Trump dealt a serious blow to the notion of “political royalty”, in which dynasties of Democrats and Republicans follow the presidency of one family member by the automatic selection of another. Yet, within days of Trump's victory, Mrs Obama was being touted for the Democratic nomination, so the practice is not dead yet.

Will President Trump turn away from NATO, as his detractors fear, or will he actually strengthen the alliance by making its members pay



more for defence? As an admirer of Ronald Reagan, he needs to recall – or be reminded – how the Cold War was won.

Will 2016 prove to be a watershed or merely a hiccup before normal service is resumed? Remember the EU Constitution: rejected in referenda in two continental countries, its provisions re-emerged in the Lisbon Treaty, with no popular votes permitted.

Will legal cases in British or EU courts similarly steal the referendum result? Or will the concept of “soft Brexit” – virtually unheard-of before the Remainers lost – result in our continued subjection to EU control in everything but name?

Brexit was the making of Theresa May in 2016. Its delivery in fact, rather than only in name, will determine the success of her premiership. 🏠



**Julian Lewis** is Conservative MP for New Forest East



2016 has been a year of turmoil, division and growing intolerance. Progressives must now show real leadership, writes **Liz Kendall**

**B**rexit. Trump. The continuing rise of the far right in Europe. The rejection of so-called experts and elites. 2016 is one year we won't forget in a hurry – to put in mildly.

Either it will be viewed by history as the year when Western politics shifted decisively towards populism, protectionism and nationalism – in a doomed attempt to try and stop inevitable change.

Or 2016 will be remembered as the year which galvanised progressive politics to address people's genuine anxieties through big reforms – particularly on the economy – and fight the false simplicities of the far right and far left.

Which of these turns out to be the case, of course, is down to us. That's what real leadership is all about.

For all the political turmoil of 2016, some perspective is required. Whilst the EU referendum result has huge consequences, it was a narrow victory for Leave. And Hillary Clinton won the popular vote in America by almost three million votes.

Yet it would be an historic mistake for progressive politicians to think we can muddle along as usual. We've had a lost decade of wage growth and one in eight workers now live in poverty. London and the South East are the only regions where GDP is back to pre-financial crisis levels.

Too many people have not seen the benefits of growth in their pay packets or communities. They feel left out and left behind, and that the country does not work for them. This is especially true in post-industrial towns and counties, where Labour has traditionally been strong.

The right response isn't to kid people we can somehow prevent change or disinvest globalisation but to offer real solutions – on housing, lifelong skills, infrastructure, fair corporation tax, long-term business investment and a stronger workers' voice.

One final thought about 2016 is the rise of intolerance. I can't remember a more divisive period in my political lifetime.

This hasn't happened by accident. It is a specific strategy by UKIP and other hardliners to shut down discussion and intimidate people into silence by delegitimising anyone who dares to question the government's plans for Brexit and what they mean for our country. The SNP adopted similar tactics after the Scottish independence referendum, and Trump is doing the same in the US.

It takes courage to stand up to bullies. We're going to need that by the bucket load in 2017. 🇬🇧



**Liz Kendall** is Labour MP for Leicester West

After years of declining participation in democracy could the disadvantaged be recovering their belief in the process, wonders **Lord Clark**

**T**o attempt historical assessments on a year which has not yet ended is risky. There are however events in 2016, both at home

and abroad, which have challenged the established order – the Brexit vote, Trump's election and further discontent reported across Europe.

Then there are the ongoing hostilities in Syria and the Middle East. What the long-term fundamental consequences are remains to be seen.

Having been around Westminster since 1970, I have witnessed massive changes in our parliamentary processes and in recent years have become increasingly worried about the state of our democracy, perhaps best exemplified by the falling turnout at general elections – down by almost 20% since 1950.

This is an alarming decline in participation in the democratic process and has been especially so in areas of high deprivation. Yet, paradoxically, democracy has always



been regarded as the fairest form of government for the disadvantaged.

The discontent came to the fore during Brexit but then was replicated in Trump's triumph five months later when the areas of industrial decline, the dispossessed, deserted the Democrats for the demagogue. The "poor whites" in both countries made their views felt and gave the establishment "one in the eye".

Yet should we be surprised? There has been a growing disparity in both Britain and the USA, with the gap growing between the "haves" and the "have-nots". Furthermore, there has been a growing schism between regions – in Britain

“ The 'poor whites' in both countries made their views felt and gave the establishment one in the eye ”

between the north and the south. In 2016, in both countries, the disadvantaged took the opportunity to express their opinions. That is their perception. Could they be recovering their belief in democracy?

The immediacy of events often dominates judgements. Perhaps we should just compare the situation with a century ago. At the end of 1916, the first world war was still ongoing with the bloody Battle of the Somme having resulted in a million casualties. Put another way, 500,000 mothers and fathers lost their sons.

December 1916 ended more dramatically than 2016 and it might be argued the longer term effects inevitably would be more significant. Within 10 years, the political map of Britain had been rewritten. Labour had replaced the Liberals, formed a government and were to remain one of the two main parties for the next century. It heralded a new form of social democratic society.

Perhaps it's wise to look back in history before jumping to dramatic conclusions from the present. 🇬🇧



**Lord Clark of Windermere** is a Labour peer and visiting professor of history and politics at the University of Huddersfield

A time of profound change and growing divisions calls for vision and strong leadership, says **Nick Thomas-Symonds**

**T**he first prime minister of the People's Republic of China, Zhou Enlai, was once asked about the significance of the French Revolution of 1789, and answered that "it was too soon to tell". Zhou may have misunderstood, and thought he was being questioned about 1968 student protests in Paris, but the point is a key one for any historian: what events actually mean only emerges over the course of time.

The days of 2016 are still current. The Brexit vote, the leadership elections in the UK's political parties, the rise in right-wing populism, the election of Donald Trump: the consequences of these events have hardly begun to take shape. But there is little doubt that 2016 is a year of profound change and that it has seen disunity in nations across the world.

At 7am on 1 July, whistle-blowing ceremonies around the country marked the time when our soldiers went over the top precisely a century before, on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. It was a poignant moment that brought communities together, but the summer of 2016 was also a stark reminder of the damage that hatred can do to our society: Jo Cox MP was brutally assassinated on 16 June; a cargo truck was deliberately driven into crowds of innocent people to cause death and destruction in Nice; extremists slit the throat of Jacques Hamel, an 85-year-old French priest; and atrocities continued apace in the Syrian war.

Division may be a defining feature of 2016, but it will only become entrenched if it is allowed to be. The challenge now is to bring people together. Jo Cox's own words are prescient: "We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us." Leaders, Aneurin Bevan once said, must "articulate the wants, the frustrations, the aspirations" of the people. Bevan added: "Their hearts



must be moved by his words, and so his words must be attuned to their realities."

Whilst Bevan would undoubtedly have a scathing view of the populist political figures so prominent in 2016, what he said about leadership and connection to the wider electorate is telling. Because from the ashes of 2016, this may prove to be the moment when leaders are spurred to move the hearts of people, rather than just respond opportunistically to negative feelings. Strong leadership around a compelling vision is needed to lay the foundations for a more positive society, taking great optimism from Abraham Lincoln's words, that the "mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature". 🇬🇧



**Nick Thomas-Symonds** is Labour MP for Torfaen