Funding the Future

Debate Ammunition: Has the UK's Political Settlement ...

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THE RICHARD J MURPHY YOUTUBE CHANNEL

DEBATE AMMUNITION

Has the UK's Political Settlement Run Its Course?

Funding the Future | July 2026

Topic

The UK is not suffering a leadership quality crisis. It is suffering the collapse of a political and economic settlement that has been exhausted since 2008. The question is not why individual Prime Ministers fail but why the conditions for governing in the United Kingdom now make failure almost inevitable, and what must change if the country is to find a stable future.

The video to which this Debate Ammunition relates is available here.

The Core Argument

The rapid turnover of Prime Ministers in the UK reflects the collapse of the post-imperial British model rather than a shortage of capable leaders. The foundational myths on which that model rested, whether they be empire, the City of London's financial dominance, offshore tax havens, or a myth of British exceptionalism, were all shattered by the 2008 global financial crisis and have not been replaced.

Every Prime Minister since 2008 has inherited impossible choices set by neoliberal dogma: promising growth without changing the economy, better public services without the required investment, and national unity while Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are governed by parties committed to leaving the United Kingdom.

Neoliberalism has been deliberately structured to prevent Prime Ministers from governing in the way the country now requires. The result is managed decline dressed up as stewardship, and no leader can succeed on those terms.

The only path forward is a new constitutional settlement: independence referendums for the nations of the UK, genuinely strong devolved governments even if union is retained, and an economics of care that puts people before finance and replaces the dominance of the City, with investment in what communities actually need.

Key Statistics

Statistic	Figure
Prime Ministers who have served in Richard Murphy's lifetime	16
Of those, Prime Ministers who arrived without winning a general election	9
Prime Ministers in the last decade alone	7
Duration of Liz Truss as Prime Minister	45 days

The Argument Structure

Step 1 — The British model rested on fragile foundations:

Post-war British power was built on four pillars:

the legacy of empire,

the City of London as a global financial hub,

offshore tax havens to maintain economic reach, and

a belief in British exceptionalism.

None of these was as solid as they appeared, and all were exposed as hollow by the 2008 crash.

Step 2 — 2008 was the real turning point, not individual leaders:

The global financial crisis did not merely damage the banking system. It proved that the City of London could not be trusted to manage its own affairs, that the state would have to bail it out, and that the illusions underpinning British economic identity could no longer be sustained. Every Prime Minister since has governed in the shadow of that reckoning without acknowledging what it actually meant.

Step 3 — Neoliberal constraints make governing impossible:

The neoliberal framework inherited from the 1980s has constrained every government to promise things it cannot deliver.

Austerity has hollowed out public services.

Inequality has grown.

Living standards have stagnated.

Meanwhile the nations of the United Kingdom have diverged politically: Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are now led by parties whose goal is to leave the union.

One constitutional settlement can no longer serve four countries with increasingly different political futures.

Step 4 — The country needs a new settlement, not a new leader:

Andy Burnham, like the fifteen Prime Ministers before him in Richard Murphy’s lifetime, will fail if he manages decline rather than confronting it. What is required is an explicit debate about what Britain is and what it should become: independence referendums conducted more than once, if necessary as circumstances change, genuinely powerful devolved governments should be created regardless of the independence question, and an economy rebuilt around care, investment, and people rather than the financial interests of the City is required in every country in the UK.

Their Argument → Your Rebuttal

They Say

Your Response

It is simply a matter of competence. We have had good leaders before and we will again.

Britain has had able leaders — Harold Wilson won four general elections, Tony Blair three, Margaret Thatcher three. The distinguishing feature is not personal ability but the underlying conditions of governance.

John Major, widely regarded as second-rate, lasted seven years and won a general election. Today's Prime Ministers cannot survive two years. If the problem were only competence, the timescales would not have collapsed so dramatically.

Ask what changed after 2008, not who changed after 2008.

The UK constitutional settlement is fundamentally stable. Devolution has managed diversity for decades.

The settlement was stable when Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland were led by parties that accepted Westminster's supremacy. That moment has passed.

Three of the four nations of the United Kingdom are now governed by parties whose stated aim is to leave it. That was unthinkable in 2008. Treating it as manageable through existing arrangements is the kind of denial that produces the very crisis it is trying to avoid.

Neoliberalism delivered growth and prosperity before 2008. The problem is the execution since, not the model itself.

The prosperity was real for some, but it was built on debt, asset price inflation, and financial services that the state ultimately had to rescue at public expense.

Since 2008, the consequences of maintaining that model have been austerity, crumbling public services, stagnating wages, and rising inequality. A model that requires a government bailout to survive, and then demands cuts to pay for that bailout, has not failed in its execution. It has failed in its design.

Independence for Scotland or Wales would create more instability, not less.

The argument assumes that the current arrangement is stable. It is not. Governing on the fiction that Westminster speaks for four nations with sharply diverging political preferences is itself the source of instability.

The question is not whether change brings disruption. Change of this scale always does. The question is whether honest democratic choices made openly are less damaging than the managed pretence that nothing fundamental has changed. They are.

The One-Liners

“The problem is not the person in Number Ten. It is the settlement that put them there.”

“You cannot govern a country with four different political futures as though it has one.”

“Every Prime Minister since 2008 has been handed a job description that was written for a Britain that no longer exists.”

“Neoliberalism does not just fail the poor. It now fails even the people it installs in power.”

“Britain does not need a seventeenth Prime Minister. It needs a conversation about what kind of country it wants to be.”

Questions to Ask

If the problem is just leadership quality, why did capable leaders like Wilson succeed while today's Prime Ministers cannot last two years?

What specific economic and constitutional changes would allow a Prime Minister to keep the promises they make — and why has no one in Westminster been willing to name them?

If three of the four nations of the United Kingdom are now governed by parties committed to leaving it, in what sense is the current constitutional settlement still working?

Who benefits from the continuation of City-of-London-centred neoliberalism, and why is that interest treated as identical to the national interest?

Further Reading

Post

Date

What it covers

There's a reason why seven prime ministers have failed

23 Jun 2026

Directly argues that PM failure is structural and systemic, not a matter of individual incompetence, the core claim of this video.

Will the UK survive?

9 May 2026

Examines the existential constitutional question facing the UK as Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland diverge from Westminster governance.

Neoliberalism is dying. What comes next?

14 Oct 2025

Sets out why the neoliberal framework has run its course and what alternative economic models might replace it.

[The UK is cursed: how finance destroyed our economy]

28 Nov 2025

Traces how the dominance of the City of London has systematically hollowed out the UK's productive economy since the 1980s.

[Can the UK survive?]

3 Nov 2025

Analyses the constitutional pressures from Scottish and Welsh independence movements and whether the union can hold under current arrangements.

[To improve well-being we must abandon failed economic ideas]

24 Jun 2026

Makes the positive case for replacing neoliberal economic assumptions with a wellbeing-centred framework — the alternative the video calls for.