

Martin Whitfield MP: Maiden speech

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May I thank the Speaker for calling me during this debate on the Gracious Speech and allow me to deliver my maiden speech.

This parliament sits at a time of constitutional uncertainty and change, a parliament in the balance over shadowed by deep tragedy.

In such an environment, it is with some trepidation I offer my thoughts.

Trepidation blunted by the knowledge that it is with the authority of my constituents that I attend here. My constituents who have placed their trust in me. Their trust that I seek to deliver a more hopeful better future.

It is, I understand, tradition to point out the strengths and character of ones constituency. A task made easier by my constituency being East Lothian. The honourable member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk said in his maiden speech on Thursday: "I count myself very lucky to live in and represent one of the most beautiful parts of the UK". He spoke eloquently of his constituency. But to avoid polite derision from members here today, I do not question the beauty of your constituencies – but let me say I know the most beautiful constituency in this land.

Its history as an arterial route for pilgrims, soldiers, scholars and artists. The development of its six towns that reflect their connection to the sea, to trade, fishing, embarkation points for armies of all hues.

Towns that drew farmers to trade, to gossip and exchange ideas.

Towns that reflect the long history of industrial production and the industrial revolution.

Coal mining evidenced back to 1210 – 140 years before the post of the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod was founded.

And also the honest town. The town that hosted the first open golf championship on a course that dates from 1672. The town that also houses Newhailes. The Palladian-style house that witnessed so much debate during the Scottish Enlightenment. Another time of constitutional and social change. The six towns their distinctive and individual characteristics complimented by the surrounding villages that each carry their own identity.

These weave together to create a constituency community that is distinctive, supportive, welcoming, creative, industrious, entrepreneurial and both forward and outward looking. Characteristics I would recommend to this honourable House.

Tradition dictates I must also pay tribute to the former MP. George Kerevan represented East Lothian for two years. I thank him for his work and welcome the opportunity to correct an innocent mistake. In his maiden speech Mr Kerevan omitted to pay tribute to Fiona O'Donnell the MP who represented East Lothian between 2010 and 2015 and I thank her for her excellent service and I am able to right a wrong.

Looking at former MPs shows me the size of task before me. John Home Robertson and, of course, John Mackintosh – both pro-European politicians. Indeed, John Mackintosh an advocate of being Scottish, British and European. On perusing John Home Robertson's maiden speech, I find words that both articulate the trepidation that I feel, but also words I choose as a guide.

He said:

"If we are always open and stick to what we believe in we may not always be able to satisfy our Whips, but in the end we shall earn the respect of our constituents. I believe that they are the people who really matter to us" This is, of course, a speech in the debate on the Gracious Speech and to prevent a point of order, but also to contribute to the discussion, I wish to mention young people and education. To pre-empt hollow cries, I am aware that education is a devolved matter but our responsibility for and too our children is universal and absolute. From fighting poverty, facilitating experience and coordinating and developing services.

Much is spoken of this land's assets, but I hope we can all agree that our land's greatest asset is our young people. We hold their future in escrow and we will be most acutely judged by history on the choices we make.

It is said we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. As we stand on the shoulders of giants, we have a duty to our children to give them the opportunity to build a future that is fairer, stronger and kinder.

My promise to my constituents and this House is that I will always be open, I will advocate what I believe and will fight for a kinder more hopeful and fairer future.

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