

New Year message

I wish you all a successful and prosperous 2019. I expect to see improvements locally and nationally, as we continue to enjoy record levels of employment and as pay goes up by more than prices. We enjoy one of the lowest levels of unemployment of anywhere in the country, and see many flourishing businesses investing in the future and confident about the outlook.

I am well aware of the things that people want us to sort out. Parliament and government needs to agree a way forward to implement the referendum result without damaging jobs and the economy. Locally there is work to be done in making it easier to get to work and to take the children to school, with better transport arrangements of all kinds. There needs to be a better balance between building more homes, and looking after the quality of life of all of us who already live here.

The Wokingham constituency had a good end to 2018. I was pleased that the government listened to my pleas for more money for our local Councils for 2019-20. Wokingham Borough got one of the largest increases in spending power, with a gain of 6.3%, and West Berkshire was well above average at 4.2%. This means our Councillors can now make service improvements, and give local taxpayers a better deal next year.

Wokingham Town Centre came back to life after long lasting works for a facelift. Shoppers have already taken to the new stores that have opened and we look forward to more to come in 2019. Let's ensure people can get into the centre easily, and can park without high fees or penalties when they want time to shop or visit a café or restaurant. There are good ways to spend time and money in our town centres. Pothole money and more cash for social services which I have pressed for will also help provide better local services next year.

I have been busy telling Network Rail we are against the train whistles, seeking a better answer on plane noise, helping constituents put the case on Post Office services in Wokingham, assisting the Councils where they need government help, arguing for better answers to problems of poverty and homelessness and encouraging more investment in our public services and utility networks.

I am optimistic about our prospects for 2019, though I am concerned about the impact of tax rises on car and homebuyers and the very tough stance of the Bank of England which is slowing the economy. I am urging the government to cut taxes a bit more particularly where they are doing harm and reducing the revenue, and to spend a bit more on our priorities, as they can afford to do.

Thank you to all who have worked hard to make our community successful. I hope you have had a good break over the holiday period.

2019. A year of opportunity

2019 should be a great year for all who believe in UK democracy. It is the year when Parliament should implement the decision of the People's vote in 2016.

March 30 th should be Independence Day. From that day onwards we need to be in control of our money, our laws and our borders.

I have set out in a recent post how we can take advantage of the money we save and the freedoms we gain to give a boost to our economy and an improvement to our society.

That day should also be the day government strives harder to unite us in the belief that we can both make our own decisions and be good friends, trading partners and neighbours with the continent. Most Leave voters are not anti Europeans but people who want the UK to be a self governing good friend of our continental allies and trading partners.

The EU has always said it is only willing to discuss a Free Trade deal after we have left, so the sooner we leave the sooner we can discuss that. It is clear from recent No Deal planning on the continent that they do not wish to lose their export trade to us and recognise the need to ensure smooth functioning of borders after we have left.

The article by an anonymous civil servant in the Telegraph on Saturday was an important statement. She made it clear, as I have done, that much planning for just leaving has gone on in Whitehall over the two and a half years since the decision in the People's vote. The UK has plans to keep its borders open for trade, to continue to import the food and medicines it needs, and to grant continuing rights to EU citizens living in the UK currently. Project Fear sounds increasingly desperate, repeating the same old stories with more lurid language.

As she pointed out, the Remain politicians with their civil service and business allies had failed to make a positive case for EU membership over the 45 years they had their way and we were members. Worse still, throughout our period in it and during the referendum itself most of them denied there was significant power passing to the EU. They agreed to keep us out of several important parts of the journey to full economic, monetary and political union. It led many people to think we have been holding up the progress the continent wishes to make to a full union. There were an increasing number of occasions when the UK had to be excluded from deliberations in the EU because we were not part of the Euro and not wanting to enhance and develop the wider budget a currency union needs. We will be good Europeans by freeing the continent to speed on to its goal of deeper integration, and will end those rows that were all too common about just how much power the EU would have over us.

Withdrawal from the Middle East

The Middle Eastern wars under Presidents Bush and Obama have left the USA and NATO divided over their wisdom and efficacy. No one doubts the bravery and resolve of the troops and the successes of various military actions, but many agonise over the failure to build a winning political and diplomatic strategy around them to help create a more prosperous and more peaceful region. I have written recently about why Mr Trump now wishes to end US direct military intervention in Syria and may review activity in Afghanistan as well.

Recent events remind us that if Western actions and inactions do not help create a peace in the Middle East there is a substantial force for wider instability in the form of many refugees, displaced persons and would be economic migrants. It is not surprising that millions have fled Syria during the extreme violence of the conflict, nor that many have fled Libya or are leaving Yemen. It must be dreadful to try to lead a normal life, turn up for a regular job and sustain a family amidst the bombs, the terror, the warring factions and the armed bands. Many are forced out of their homes by violence, others leave their homes seeing no decent future for themselves in their own country.

The West has attempted to receive more migrants into its own economies, and has spent much money on camps and temporary accommodation for refugees nearer to their homes in the expectation that the wars will end and rebuilding will take place. The best answer is to help restore peace and progress in each of the countries, and facilitate the return of refugees and economic migrants to help restore those places. We need greater emphasis on western diplomacy and encouragement of better government, with support for those places and governments that can sustain economic development and gain some discipline and sensible control over their countries. The endless disruption of Middle Eastern regions and nations by dissident and warring factions causes much of the stress, but is not easily resolved if at all by western military intervention. The best the West can do is to assist and train domestic forces acting for regimes likely to offer some control and economic advance, even though these will not always be paragons of democratic virtue. Judging how many compromises to make in the interests of some peace and stability is never easy. What is clear is that the past actions have allowed substantial turbulence and mass movements of people which have made life much more difficult for them, and have proved disruptive more generally.

New Year's Honours

I would like to thank all those who have sent me kind messages on the award of a knighthood.

I am very conscious of the debt I owe all my constituents. It has been their advice, problems and issues that has provided much of the impetus to my thoughts, has influenced my contribution to the national conversation and allowed me to undertake public service. I have learned a lot from those who support me and from those who disagree with some of the views I express. It is a privilege to serve as Wokingham's MP.

I also would like to thank All Souls College Oxford where I am a fellow. They have provided me with a platform and with academic discussion and criticism to develop views on public policy and give lectures and seminars. This too has helped develop my thinking and to make a contribution to the national debate.

I have also enjoyed offering some help to Variety, the Children's charity, who do such good work for our community.

Helping migrants

It is not a good idea to help people smugglers put more people at risk by selling them expensive trips in unsuitable boats across the Channel. The UK authorities need to issue clear safety warnings to people not to undertake these journeys, and not to expose themselves to the criminal gangs who sell these places of danger. The UK of course does not wish to see people drown in the Channel and should co-operate and assist the French authorities to prevent these boats taking off from the French coast, or intercepting them early and returning the people safely to France where they have committed themselves to the water. The longer they are at sea the more danger there is of inclement sea and weather conditions overwhelming them or of collision with one of the many large vessels using the busy Channel waterway.

The UK has legal routes for refugees and for economic migrants from the EU which people should use where they wish to seek a work and residence permit. It is not a good idea to offer an expensive rescue service to people to jump the queue or get round the rules. There is the danger the rescuers will not encounter all the boats seeking night time passage across the Channel increasing the risk of death and disaster for any given boat, whilst their presence may encourage more to think this is a low risk way of expediting admission to the UK. Some of the criminals who run these illicit boats are seeking to make criminals of their passengers by encouraging some of them to arrive and work illegally in the UK, where they would then be prey to

versions of modern slavery. The authorities need to be vigilant to clamp down on such vile practices. We want legal migrants to come through the proper routes and to then settle to a decent lifestyle here in the UK.