

New Year message

I look forward to 2020 full of hope and optimism.

The new government has a majority and has energy to make things better. I am delighted they have made Prosperity the main aim of policy, as I asked them to do. I am putting in plenty of ideas about the January budget to give our economy the boost it needs and to leave people with more of their own money to spend. I look forward to the arrival of the extra money for schools, surgeries and the police in our area that I have battled for in recent years.

The New Year makes many people reappraise and ask themselves if we can do things better than in the year just gone. In politics it would be difficult to do things worse than in 2019. A fractured and angry Parliament prevented government governing, accentuated the negative, and let the country down. It undermined our negotiating position with the EU and needlessly delayed our exit.

This year we not only want a positive policy to improve public services and quicken growth in the economy, but we need to try to bring more people together behind that common purpose. Our public discourse has been more rancorous than robust, often nasty rather than incisive or illuminating.

On the central issue of our membership of the EU we can learn from the past. As a young man casting one of my first votes I voted to leave the European Community in 1975. I was on the losing side. I accepted the verdict of the voters and resolved to do my best to keep the spirit of what the majority voted for, membership of a free trade area or common market. It was only two decades later that I started to think we needed another referendum, when our country was plunged into a deep recession by our membership of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, a close commitment to the EU which was not envisaged in the original referendum. It is one of those unwritten rules of democratic politics that if you lose an election or referendum you accept the will of the majority. It is also an unwritten rule that the majority should be attentive to the worries and concerns of the minority and seek to allay their fears or deal with their problems.

In that spirit this government needs to ensure that as we leave the EU there is none of the economic damage some have forecast. I have always held the view that we can be better off out and have set out the policies we need to follow to achieve that. It will be a central task for me to make that case in the new Parliament. It is also important to show how we will still travel to the continent, have many trade, cultural and educational links with the continent, and enjoy the wider European culture.

I do not regard Remain voters any less favourably than Leave voters, and will judge everyone's case on its merits. All I ask in return is that passionate Remainers understand that we Leavers are motivated by our view of what is best for our country and communities. We wish to work closely with

all our fellow citizens to improve lives and promote happiness and prosperity. I have lived most of my life with the answer on EU membership I did not want, but have not let it embitter me. I have often had to live under a Labour government I did not welcome, but never challenged their right to govern when they had won the election.

So let us enjoy the freedoms of our democracy in the new year. Let us have robust and strong debate, but let us play down the nastiness and abuse which came to replace such democratic principles too often last year. Far from improving democracy shouting abuse is an attempt to close it down. It damages the very liberties which make this country great.