**HOUSE OF LORDS**

**DEBATE ON QUEEN’S SPEECH, 9th January 2020**

My Lords, it is stating the obvious to say that these are turbulent, uncertain times. Perhaps the most turbulent in living memory, even when that memory belongs to members of your Lordships’ House – a particular, special demographic.

So it is striking in the face of so much that is uncertain and so much that is unknown that the new Government’s rhetoric is of clarity, confidence – even dash. However while the terrain might be new – much of that rhetoric is from an older school. What is novel is from whom it comes.

The Gracious Speech spoke of the Government delivering on the “people’s priorities” – words accompanied by the unmistakable sound of metaphorical tanks being driven with some purpose onto a lawn previously occupied by others.

This represents a striking act of linguistic appropriation. But perhaps those occupying their new territory would be wise to exercise caution when speaking of “the people” as a single, homogeneous entity. Indeed, if Brexit has shown us anything, it has shown us that the people are not one – and that the bonds that tie us together – or which we thought tied us together - have become frayed, even broken.

We must thus applaud the Prime Minister’s repeated commitment to serve and heal “one nation” - a welcome recognition that we are all bound together, all obliged to one another, all connected together. And a welcome recognition too that Government must seek to reconcile difference and dispute. We can welcome the spirit – even if we differ on the nature of those obligations and perhaps the paternalism that underlies many ideas of one nation politics.

But when Disraeli coined this phrase it was precisely because this was not one nation. Not a nation at one with itself, not least because the obligations of those who had were not being discharged towards those who had not.

So I was delighted by the commitment to give the full living wage to those over the age of 21 rather than 25 - but I urge the Government to put this into effect more quickly than the long grass of 5 years’ time. My Lords, if fairness is promised in the system of taxation, so must it be in the world of work. A fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay does not seem too much to ask, whether you are 21 or 51.

But my inspection of the Speech and its ancillary briefing suggested that some crucial supports in building and sustaining one nation are absent - notably welfare and benefits, on which the Government is totally silent beyond the welcome review of PIP and disabled people – especially in the wake of the Conservative Party’s manifesto commitments. One nation includes us all; hard working families, businesses - and those who cannot, for whatever reason, work - and especially those who raise children in poverty.

Civil society is doing a tremendous amount – and, if you will forgive a plug for my Diocese, I would like to pay tribute to the efforts of so many there – and in particular the work of Churches Homeless Action, headed up by Canon Bob White in Portsmouth. Over Christmas it again spearheaded a scheme encouraging donations of shop vouchers, distributed to those who have not – and distributed so that they therefore have dignity because they can choose how to use them. It met with an overwhelming response from the people of the city to support those in need at Christmas.

But civil society – even with such a heart as civil as Portsmouth’s - cannot meet that need on its own. Indeed, without adequate intervention we risk the sunlit uplands of being one nation vanishing into the far distance.

In the other place, the Prime Minister described the Brexit programme in terms of a microwave meal, ready to cook. Rather than the PM’s convenience food I prefer the rather healthier if eccentric maxim used earlier by Lord Hodgson, that “fine words butter no parsnips”. My Lords, I look forward to seeing how this avowedly one nation Government proposes to butter their parsnips – and serve the people.