

## **HOUSE OF LORDS, 25 May 2016**

### **DEBATE ON THE QUEEN'S SPEECH**

My Lords, in responding to the gracious Speech, I am delighted to welcome, first, the maiden speech of the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Newcastle and to congratulate her.

To be in the House and on this Bench today is a pleasure. We are colleagues again here, as we were in St Albans diocese some years ago. We have a shared conviction that the work of the Church and of government is to support the welfare of all people, reminding ourselves that welfare is properly understood not in the restricted sense in which we so often use it in our debates about benefits and eligibility but as the well-being of all people in the whole of their lives. Bishop Christine has powerfully reminded us of the perspective from her diocese and the north-east.

In my diocese of Portsmouth and in many other places, there has been a welcome for the Government's intention, announced in the gracious Speech, to improve life chances for the most disadvantaged. Those who are forgotten, ignored, marginalised, hidden or excluded are indeed our collective responsibility. The Speech is helpful in its range of Bills to address some of those who are disadvantaged, particularly children and young people in care or outside caring or stable families. In his speech at the Conservative Party conference last autumn, the Prime Minister spoke of his commitment to end disadvantage and fight for real equality in our country today.

There is less—I suggest too little—emphasis in the gracious Speech on people and families facing economic challenge and disadvantage. The spectre of austerity and its impacts and implications are still real to many. Economic disadvantage is real for those experiencing job insecurity as well as unemployment, and for those suffering financial uncertainty and anxiety—unknown to me and perhaps to most of us here. The point is not just that there are inequalities—of course there will always be—but that there are injustices. These demand more concerted attention than is immediately apparent in the gracious Speech.

Improving lives across the country is entirely the right ambition. It is good to hear continuing commitment to the northern powerhouse and, as a proud Black Country boy, the Midlands engine. But many on this Bench, and more widely in this House I think, will surely remind the Minister that places and counties on the edge—the Isle of Wight, for instance—should have specific and focused support, too.

The legislative programme promises local growth and jobs, the delivery of fast and reliable broadband, and improved competitiveness. This sounds admirable and good, if as yet often rather vague. It is aspirational rather than convincing, but not much to give immediate confidence and hope to those whose economic circumstances are as fragile as the social situations of those specifically to be supported in the life chances suite of measures. Commercial spaceports and driverless cars may catch the headlines, but they can seem fanciful diversions, and

the United States, South Korea and China are already well ahead in these areas. Such announcements do not offer hope to our fellow citizens who are looking for bold policies for their economic welfare.

The national economic security that the Government trumpet—not, I add, without some justification—must not disguise the economic insecurity felt by some in our nation. The Government seek to entrench strong national economic performance. It would be wrong if entrenching that were achieved at the price of embedding some people in economic insecurity.