

Bishop Christopher's maiden speech in the House of Lords

It is with astonishment that I find myself here today, rising to speak for the first time, keeping such company and sharing with you responsibility for the health and stability of our nation. In my heart of hearts, I am still a jobbing priest, and certainly with no desire to be an amateur politician. If I attempted that, then I would indeed be amateur. I delight to see people flourish, especially, to be parochial just for a moment, in Portsmouth Diocese, serving south-east Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, whether they are lay or ordained churchgoers, British or foreign national residing in our midst, Island school children who have never travelled far enough to see the beaches of their own island, those as residents or visitors enjoying the vibrant waterside city life of Portsmouth which is the second most densely populated in the land, or globe trotting commuters and business people who circle the world several times over.

I am more than aware that my distinguished predecessor Kenneth Stevenson, who I know was much respected in this House, had education very much at his heart, and led the Church's Board of Education. So it feels right and good that my maiden speech is in a debate that has at its heart a concern for human flourishing in relation to education. Universities are anchor institutions in local communities and Portsmouth University is no exception. It anchors the city and area financially: directly employing some 2500 staff and indirectly supporting many more businesses in and around the city; it anchors businesses, ensuring a regular supply of appropriately trained graduates to take on key roles and as a motor for the growth of small and medium business enterprises; it funds multi-million pound building projects as it continually updates its facilities; and it anchors the city morally too, by providing a multi-cultural forum in which the issues of our day can be debated and the best insights can be lived. As I know first hand from periods as student, economics lecturer, chaplain, and as Finance Committee chair at the University of Hertfordshire, the higher education sector contributes extensively to the flourishing of our nation and world. Now as bishop and as a governor, I see at first hand how Portsmouth University, along with universities around the country, anchors and focuses financial, practical and moral flourishing, not just for students but enriching partnerships across the whole region, including, as you will expect me to note, my own cathedral's Innovation Centre, where space and both voluntary and expert support provides opportunities for new businesses to take root and grow even in challenging economic times.

I use the word "anchor" in relation to Portsmouth advisedly. You will of course be aware of the losses that Portsmouth has recently sustained in relation to the ship building industry. In the wake of those losses, higher education has gained even more importance. The university has a pivotal role to play in providing good calibre, creative students who can help to diversify employment and business opportunities in the city, and developing the local and regional economy.

This is true for home grown students, but the reality is that for Portsmouth and any university to flourish, it also needs input from international students. I am

aware that my friends the Right Reverend prelates, the Bishops of Chester and St Albans have previously argued in this House the importance of considering Higher Education immigration separately from other forms of immigration. Indeed the House's Select Committee on 'soft power' has described the present policy as "destructive" and "disingenuous." In Portsmouth we currently have 2,941 international students out of almost 22,000, from approximately 140 different countries. This reduced number, confirmed recently across the whole national sector, costs us as we turn away the world's talent and ideas.

That presence is vital both in monetary and in human and educational terms. They enliven and enrich the whole community; their flourishing matters to us all, and needs to be safeguarded in our legislation.

I say this mindful of the huge vulnerability of the majority of students in the present day - the intellectual vulnerability we all embrace as we embark on a new learning experience, and the financial vulnerability of students facing increased tuition fees and debt.

As someone who today feels vulnerable in the face of a new learning opportunity, I find myself freshly in solidarity with those students, and indeed with businesses, learning and re-learning how to make the best of opportunities in a fast-changing local and national economic landscape. I am committed to their welfare, and I will be glad to engage further with you as to how best to serve their needs.

And I will be particularly glad, also, to learn how I can best help improve the lot of people who are suffering the effects of economic injustice. A local parish priest recently estimated that up to 20% of people living in her parish were in receipt of doorstep loans, and countless foodbanks and other such informal food outlets have sprung up in the last year or so. There is huge poverty in Portsmouth Diocese, not just among those who are on benefits but also among those who are working full time but still cannot afford to live. This is surely a matter of the greatest concern: that a job no longer always pays a living wage. This is an issue very close to my heart, to which I will be glad to devote time and energy in this House.

Thank you for your most generous welcomes, my Lords, and thanks too to the officers and staff who serve us here, as I join you in this House, and for your patience with me while I continue to get lost in the labyrinth of the corridors here, and figure out how best to engage with the issues at stake, to your good, the good of the communities and people of Portsmouth diocese, and the good of the nation.

(Delivered on Wednesday 9 April 2014)