

Sensible debate on Brexit vote

NO MATTER how hard we try – and some will really try – it will be near impossible to avoid the EU referendum being held next month.

As I go about my constituency work, people do raise the subject but it would be a stretch for me to say it has so far caught the imagination and excitement of my constituents. Maybe as we get nearer that will change.

Earlier this month I chaired a very special debate at the Discovery Centre in Jewry Street. It was a balanced, proper debate, held as part of the inaugural Winchester Speakers' Festival and, after making a few calls to some of my friends, I secured a panel including Dan Hannan MEP, Denis MacShane, Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Robert Buckland MP and the Spectator's James Forsyth.

Around 200 constituents heard the arguments, many got to put their questions and I hope we did our bit to further the debate and help those still undecided. One thing I was determined we would escape at this event – and we did – was apocalyptic visions of the misery we will all be subjected to if the vote goes this way or the other. My belief is that it's as daft to suggest staying in is a



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golden goose for the British people as it is to say leaving will lead us to a land of milk and honey. At the end of the day, we all have to make an on-balance judgement and the time for that is almost nigh.

Secondly, this month many of you have spoken to me about the new Education White Paper and in particular the initial proposal to force all schools to become academies.

My view is simple; if schools choose that path – in

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consultation with parents and governors – that's fine but compulsion is wrong. I spent a lot of time last month with the education secretary and other ministers trying to get across these arguments and those put to me by constituency's head teachers. We have a situation in Hampshire where 85 per cent of schools are already "good" or "outstanding" so I simply had to challenge.

Happily, the government agreed with me and the Bill introduced in the Queen's Speech last week meets our manifesto commitment – to tackle failing and costing schools while allowing excellence to thrive. Now the new session of Parliament is under way I look forward to scrutinising, in detail, that Education Bill. I continue also to speak with constituency heads, Hampshire and the Diocese – where the creation of their new King Alfred Multi-Academy Trust means some change is inevitable – to support local schools in whatever they decide.

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