



Whatever your personal beliefs Christmas brings with it a spirit of goodwill. As always I am writing my newsletter in the middle of the month and there are just a couple of weeks until Christmas. However due to publication lead times for some this will be included in a January magazine. As a new year dawns I hope that something of the Christmas spirit of goodwill might linger on.

I know that for many life is not easy and personal and global struggles can weigh us down. I share the concern for all those who struggle and who worry about making ends meet. I know that cost of living issues are a very real fear for many, especially in relation to heating and power. There is real hardship and while the Government has helped the actions of others outside of the UK, such as Russia, take their toll on us all. It is not just in the UK. Inflation is increasing across the world and there is great need to bring it under control. I know that the Government will continue to do all that it can to assist, and I will whole-heartedly support them.

Social media and the internet are very welcome in many ways. However they also bring another very real fear when misused. We cannot ignore the very real harms people face online every day and this is one area where the Government can and has acted. The Online Safety Bill, which is currently going through parliament, introduces new laws to protect children online and tackle the worst abuses on social media, including racist hate crimes. As it has progressed through the House the Bill has been strengthened to address some concerns and at the same time seeks to protect freedom of speech which has been a concern expressed by some. In order to address the latter Ministers agreed to amendments that will get freedom to adults to express views online that can legally be expressed elsewhere and replace it with a fairer, simpler and more effective mechanism which will focus on user choice, consumer rights and accountability whilst protecting freedom of expression. The Bill still has stages to go through for scrutiny and I look forward to this becoming law in due course so that the vulnerable are protected.

Both here at home and across the world there are many deserving of our thoughts and concern. The media will put an issue at the forefront but once something else comes forward it is easy for us to forget the plight of many. This year the war in Ukraine shocked us. The aggression of Russia continues to create so many problems and heartaches. Our thoughts go to all those weighed down by oppressive regimes and war. Through my work in the Council of Europe I have been privileged to speak directly with President Zelensky and parliamentarians in Kyiv and look forward to being able to do so again next year to offer continued support. I do sincerely hope that the New Year may bring some peace and joy.

In seeking to work together we need to get beyond the headlines. Sometimes we can do something to support a large number of people. At other times work is focussed on an individual as opportunity is afforded to us in our particular work. For me one such opportunity came along in my role as Rapporteur on Turkey for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In this role I have been working for justice for arrested philanthropist and businessman, Osman Kavala. Together with my fellow Rapporteur from Latvia I have been granted the chance to visit Osman personally in January. This is a breakthrough as the visit was previously rejected. We hope that this is a sign of a softening attitude by the authorities on human rights issues.

As we begin 2023 and the year progresses I hope that we will all do what we can to ease the burdens of others. Any action however small carries on the spirit of goodwill. There will, of course, always be differing views on important issues and often some conflicting approaches to similar ends. There is rarely, if ever, a perfect answer. It is good to discuss issues, and sometimes discussion may be heated, but when disagreement turns to abuse, and protest causes genuine difficulty to others we have lost our democratic compass.

If there is an issue that concerns you, please do share your thoughts. If you would like to know more about my work on behalf of the Government, and in the Constituency, please do look at my website. The address is www.johnhowell.org.uk My contact details are also on the website.