

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech during this very important debate on poverty. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Miss Begg) on her election as Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, and I congratulate all other hon. Members who have made their maiden speech in this debate. May I also take the opportunity to congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your election to the Chair? I might be new, but I know that you have been a stalwart of this Chamber and that you will continue to champion its importance.

It is a real honour and a privilege to be speaking in the Chamber today. It was in the early 1990s that I first visited the Palace of Westminster with my sixth-form colleagues, and ever since that day I have wanted to represent a Kent constituency on these green Benches. With that in mind, I am proud to say that I am the first Conservative MP to represent Chatham and Aylesford. The seat was formed in 1997 from the old Rochester and Chatham, Mid Kent and Tonbridge and Malling seats, so I benefit from the mixed parentage of some excellent Conservative parliamentarians, such as Peggy Fenner, Andrew Rowe, Julian Critchley and, of course, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley).

It is traditional to pay one's immediate predecessor a tribute. I am told that that is occasionally done through gritted teeth, but I have nothing but genuine respect for Jonathan Shaw, who represented the constituency since 1997. Members from both sides of the House have praised Jonathan, who entered the House at an even younger age than I, and fought many battles on behalf of his constituents. He is highly regarded locally and has been kind enough to answer a few queries since the election, for which I am very grateful. I hope that I will serve my constituents as well as he did.

I am very proud of my constituency. Although I was born and bred in another part of Kent, I have now made the area my home. It is steeped in history. Chatham was first recorded as a settlement in the 9th century and was home to the Romans, the Saxons and then the Normans. Its significance has always been related to its position on the banks of the River Medway, which has been a harbour for warships since the 16th century. The town formed around the dockyard, which, although not in the boundaries of my constituency, has always been of critical significance to the town. Raids by the Dutch on the north Kent coast in 1667, which wrecked the flagship of the fleet harboured in Chatham, recorded by Pepys and remembered by Kipling, led to the proper fortification of the Medway. That massive rebuilding saw the expansion of Chatham into the large town that it is today. The historic dockyard was closed as a shipbuilding yard in 1984, and sadly many jobs were lost. However, it has evolved into a heritage site and parts have been regenerated into housing and tourist attractions, which range from warships to Dickens World.

Beyond politics, my passion is football and I was therefore delighted to learn that Chatham was one of the founding clubs in the southern England league in the 19th century. However, as a lifelong Tottenham fan, I was less pleased to learn that Spurs crashed to successive league defeats at the hands of Chatham in January 1899, losing 5-0 and 4-0 in the space of eight days. A few days later, the Spurs manager was sacked. A man with the surname of Cameron was appointed and the following season, they won the southern league title. It sounds reassuringly familiar.

Although Chatham is now the largest part of my constituency, the history of other parts goes back much further. Aylesford and the surrounding villages of Burham, Eccles, Wouldham, Ditton, Larkfield and Snodland can be traced back to neolithic times. There have been many finds of archaeological interest, including bronze age swords, an iron age settlement and a Roman villa. Now the area is dotted with numerous listed buildings, industrial estates, a vineyard, quarries, playing fields and picturesque oast houses.

Nearby is Blue Bell hill, well known to many motorists in Kent as a key intersection between the M20 and M2. However, I mention Blue Bell hill today not for its historical or transportation value, but for its supernatural element. The ghost stories are legendary, and sightings have been reported in the local papers on numerous occasions-including, I was amused to see, by a current member of the Press Gallery, Mr Nigel Nelson, whose article, which was written for the local paper before I was born, is still cited by today's paranormal investigators.

The newspaper industry is hugely significant in my constituency. Not only have many who worked at the Kent Messenger group, based in Larkfield, gone on to trade in political journalism, including the Prime Minister's press secretary, but the UK's largest paper mill is based in Aylesford, providing 400,000 tonnes of newsprint per annum-the equivalent of 1% of the world's total newsprint, and all from recycled and recovered materials.

There are many more wonderful things that I am sure I should mention about my constituency, but with time being short, I want to say a few words about today's debate. Parts of my constituency are reasonably well off. Many residents have solid family relationships, comfortable jobs and a decent wage. However, other parts are not. Across Medway, poverty affects nearly 12,000 children-a shocking 22%. Two wards in my constituency are the most severely affected, and sadly, one features in the top 10% of most deprived areas nationally. That is not a league table in which any area wants to be included, but it highlights the fact that there are huge challenges locally. Inadequate health and housing, low standards of living and high unemployment continue to characterise parts of Chatham, which for many years have been left behind.

There is no easy answer. It is not just one thing that needs to change. Low income, family breakdown, addiction, mental health problems and criminal behaviour contribute to a lack of expectation that, in turn, leads to inactivity. Charities find themselves too small to help; agencies find it too difficult and authorities find it too expensive. Complex problems may require multiple solutions, but unless we invest our time, energy and support, deprivation in parts of one of the most advanced countries in the world will continue to blight our nation.

I have heard many maiden speeches over the past few weeks, and the one thing all new Members share is the desire to make a difference. While I am in Parliament, I want to accomplish many things on behalf of all my constituents, but I hope that improving the plight of the poorest will be my greatest achievement. The Government must of course cut the deficit, but our legacy must be to reduce the dreadful levels of poverty and give every person in my constituency and throughout the country the standard of living they deserve.