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I cannot stress too much that Britain is part of Europe – and always will be



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British people will still be able to go and work in the EU; to live; to travel; to study; to buy homes and to settle down CREDIT: STEFAN ROUSSEAU/AFP

This EU referendum has been the most extraordinary political event of our lifetime. Never in our history have so many people been asked to decide a big question about the nation's future. Never have so many thought so deeply, or wrestled so hard with their consciences, in an effort to come up with the right answer.

It has been a gruelling campaign in which we have seen divisions between family and friends and colleagues – sometimes entirely amicable, sometimes, alas, less so. In the end, there was a clear result. More than 17 million people voted to leave the EU – more

than have ever assented to any proposition in our democratic history. Some now cast doubt on their motives, or even on their understanding of what was at stake.

It is said that those who voted Leave were mainly driven by anxieties about immigration. I do not believe that is so. After meeting thousands of people in the course of the campaign, I can tell you that the number one issue was control – a sense that British democracy was being undermined by the EU system, and that we should restore to the people that vital power: to kick out their rulers at elections, and to choose new ones.

I believe that millions of people who voted Leave were also inspired by the belief that Britain is a great country, and that outside the job-destroying coils of EU bureaucracy we can survive and thrive as never before. I think that they are right in their analysis, and right in their choice. And yet we who agreed with this majority verdict must accept that it was not entirely overwhelming.

There were more than 16 million who wanted to remain. They are our neighbours, brothers and sisters who did what they passionately believe was right. In a democracy majorities may decide but everyone is of equal value. We who are part of this narrow majority must do everything we can to reassure the Remainers. We must reach out, we must heal, we must build bridges – because it is clear that some have feelings of dismay, and of loss, and confusion.

I believe that this climate of apprehension is understandable, given what people were told during the campaign, but based on a profound misunderstanding about what has really taken place. At home and abroad, the negative consequences are being wildly overdone, and the upside is being ignored. The stock market is way above its level of last autumn; the pound remains higher than it was in 2013 and 2014.

The economy is in good hands. Most sensible people can see that Bank of England governor Mark Carney has done a superb job – and now that the referendum is over, he will be able to continue his work without being in the political firing-line. Thanks in large part to the reforms put in place by David Cameron and George Osborne, the fundamentals of the UK economy are outstandingly strong – a dynamic and outward-looking economy with an ever-improving skills base, and with a big lead in some of the key growth sectors of the 21st century.

We should be incredibly proud and positive about the UK, and what it can now achieve. And we will achieve those things together, with all four nations united. We had one Scotland referendum in 2014, and I do not detect any real appetite to have another one soon; and it goes without saying that we are much better together in forging a new and better relationship with the EU – based on free trade and partnership, rather than a federal system.

I cannot stress too much that Britain is part of Europe, and always will be. There will still be intense and intensifying European cooperation and partnership in a huge number of fields: the arts, the sciences, the universities, and on improving the environment. EU citizens living in this country will have their rights fully protected, and the same goes for British citizens living in the EU.

British people will still be able to go and work in the EU; to live; to travel; to study; to buy homes and to settle down. As the German equivalent of the CBI – the BDI – has very sensibly reminded us, there will continue to be free trade, and access to the single market. Britain is and always will be a great European power, offering top-table opinions and giving leadership on everything from foreign policy to defence to counter-terrorism and intelligence-sharing – all the things we need to do together to make our world safer.

The only change – and it will not come in any great rush – is that the UK will extricate itself from the EU's extraordinary and opaque system of legislation: the vast and growing corpus

of law enacted by a European Court of Justice from which there can be no appeal. This will bring not threats, but golden opportunities for this country – to pass laws and set taxes according to the needs of the UK.

Yes, the Government will be able to take back democratic control of immigration policy, with a balanced and humane points-based system to suit the needs of business and industry. Yes, there will be a substantial sum of money which we will no longer send to Brussels, but which could be used on priorities such as the NHS. Yes, we will be able to do free trade deals with the growth economies of the world in a way that is currently forbidden.

There is every cause for optimism; a Britain rebooted, reset, renewed and able to engage with the whole world. This was a seismic campaign whose lessons must be learnt by politicians at home and abroad. We heard the voices of millions of the forgotten people, who have seen no real increase in their incomes, while FTSE-100 chiefs now earn 150 times the average pay of their employees. We must pursue actively the one-nation policies that are among David Cameron's fine legacy, such as his campaigns on the Living Wage and Life Chances. There is no doubt that many were speaking up for themselves.

But they were also speaking up for democracy, and the verdict of history will be that the British people got it right.