

SPEECH TO MEMBERS OF THE SITTINGBOURNE AND SHEPPEY CONSERVATIVE ASSOCIATION

It was twenty years ago that members of the Sittingbourne and Sheppey Conservative Association selected me as their Parliamentary candidate for the very first time.

During those twenty years we have fought five general elections together. In 2005 we lost by 79 votes, but we won the other four elections with majorities of: 12,383; 12,168, 15,211 and in 2019, 24,479.

I am very proud of what we have achieved, working together. Sittingbourne and Sheppey is now one of the safest Conservative seats in Kent, if any seat can be considered safe in these turbulent times.

Of course the opinion polls are not looking good at the moment, but as we have often seen in the past, the situation can change quickly. We should remember that the next General Election does not have to take place before January 2025, although it is likely to be in 2024. Probably in September.

Harold Wilson once said famously that a week is a long time in politics, and he was right. So a lot can change in the 78 weeks between now and the next General Election. Whenever that election comes I am confident the Conservative Party will once again win here in Sittingbourne and Sheppey.

However, the winning Conservative candidate giving their victory speech from the stage in the Swallows Leisure Centre, won't be me. Because, after much soul searching, I have decided to not put myself forward for re-election and the Association will have to find a new candidate to fight the next election.

I have made that decision with a heavy heart, but by 2024 I will be 76 years old and will have been working full time for 60 years. Ever since I left school at the age of 16 to go and work in Woolworths.

I have devoted much of my adult life to the Conservative Party, including as a fully qualified professional party agent.

On the voluntary side of the party I held numerous positions in both the Faversham Conservative Association and, since 1997 the Sittingbourne and Sheppey Conservative Association.

I have represented the Conservative Party at parliamentary, county and borough level.

All in all I have campaigned in various capacities at eleven general elections; nine Kent County Council elections; and twenty Swale Borough Council elections. By the next General Election I will have served the people of Sittingbourne and Sheppey as member of Parliament for over 14 years, and throughout that time I have given all my energy and dedication to our local community.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think you would agree that over the past forty years I've done my bit for my community, my country, and my party.

I believe the time is right for me to retire and let a younger person pick up the reins. I have therefore written to the Prime Minister and the Party Chairman to tell them that I will not be seeking re-election at the next General Election.

It will now be up to the Association to find a suitable candidate who will be able to win the next election and by making my announcement now, it will give you more time to start the selection process and find that person.

I will have no influence over that selection process, nor will I be in a position to influence any subsequent decision. However, I very much hope that members will select somebody who will

continue representing our area in the same way that I have, which is to always put my constituents and local businesses first.

But, although I will not be taking any part in the selection process, I will place myself at your service, to offer any guidance, or advice you feel I am able to contribute because of my past experience.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my wife Louise for the uncomplaining patience she has shown during my time first as a parliamentary candidate, and then as your member of Parliament. I could not have achieved what I have without her.

I also want to thank my local Conservative Association members for the staunch support they have given me through the good times, and the bad times. In particular, I want to thank the amazing loyalty Jess McMahon has shown me, not only in her role as Association Chairman, but also as my Chief of Staff.

Finally, I give you my word that I will continue to represent you, and the rest of my constituents, to the best of my ability until the next General Election.

GORDON HENDERSON MP

17th March 2023