

I RECENTLY chanced across a 2005 Journal column I wrote on community groups in rural Northumberland. I'd stumbled across a community consultation event at Ulgham Parish Council about redeveloping the Stobswood opencast mine workings. What surprised me most was its positivity, celebrating this small community's resilient attitudes. They were trying to turn the coal mine's negatives into positives, such as getting a new play park for their corner of the county.

They weren't doing this in a vacuum - but in a partnership of local and county council, and a sympathetic regional development agency. Together, they gave me an optimism that these people like this across the North East were building a better place for us all.

What a difference that makes with the recent gloom that settled as Conservatives neutered and dismantled these public-sector tools.

I read recently that Newcastle is selling off the Jesmond Dene nursery site to cover a core budget deficit because it can barely fund vital education and welfare services.

The Tories hacked at our public services and we heard this was necessary because of austerity, and that Labour's recklessness meant we all should tighten our belts.

The public sector was starved for seven long years, and despite the public servants' tireless dedication to keeping things going, at some points gaps started to show.

As more people started to fall through those gaps into crushing poverty, feelings of powerlessness grew. And a few rather reckless, nasty politicians started fanning those feelings into a full-throated roar of rage at the Establishment making life impossible for ordinary working people.

It was a trusted strategy for Ukip and others to gain votes, with other politicians conniving as overall economic growth failed to deliver proper jobs and cash in our pockets. Cathartic raging slowly became impetuosity, and in a supremely hubristic selfharm act, an enraged country voted 18 months ago to leave the EU in an orchestrated howl at the Tories' disastrous austerity legacy.

This rage has been fuelled by a panoply of breathtaking lies. We were told endlessly that austerity was inevitable and Labour's fault, that the European Union was a secret conspiracy against Britain's best interest, that foreigners were taking our jobs, that your high taxes were funding the lifestyle choices of the feckless poor.

But 2017 is the year when the lies were exposed. A shamefaced, baggy-eyed chancellor was forced to confess that the hamfisted austerity had so throttled growth that the deficit won't be eliminated for another decade.

Even the tabloid cheerleaders of the most audacious lies have been forced to acknowledge that any kind of Brexit is a massively expensive catastrophe for the whole country.

And as their lies have been confronted with reality, these ragemongers reacted with their trusted tactics, growling incoherent threats at a dazzling array of supposed new traitors, from the Irish president to American investment banks. But these 'new enemies' didn't blink in the face of this inchoate frothing rage, calmly pointing out that Britain ruining itself placed us in no position to make demands.

Brexit's headbangers have started to turn on each other now, with denunciations, and calls for deselection and an end of parliamentary democracy. This selfimmolation is the first sign that they've realised what we've known for so long: their fact-free dogmas that so long held us back are doomed.

Watching Brexiteers dash themselves to pieces against the cold realities of the modern world fills me with hope that we are finally purging our country of their vitriolic poison. Freed from their vicious mentality, I hope that 2018 can be the year that we can take back control from Brexit's liars to build the best North East for us all.

All the best for a merry Christmas and a wonderful 2018!