

Keir Starmer speech – EU (Notice of Withdrawal) Bill

–CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY–

Keir Starmer, Shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the EU today said:

We have before us a short and relatively simple Bill, but, for the Labour party, this is a very difficult Bill.

We are a fiercely internationalist party. We are a pro-European party. We believe that through our alliances we achieve more together than we do alone. We believe in international co-operation and collaboration. We believe in the international rule of law. These beliefs will never change.

That is why we campaigned to stay in the EU. We recognise that the EU is our major trading partner and that the single market and customs union have benefited UK businesses and our economy for many years.

We recognise more widely the benefits of collaborative working across the EU in fields of research, medicine, technology, education, arts and farming. We also recognise the role that the EU plays in tackling common threats, such as climate change and serious organised crime. We share values and identity with the EU.

But we failed to persuade. We lost the referendum.

Yes, the result was close. Yes, there were lies and half-truths—none worse than the false promise of an extra £350 million a week for the NHS. Yes, technically the referendum is not legally binding. But the result was not technical; it was deeply political, and politically the notion that the referendum was merely a consultation exercise to inform Parliament holds no water.

When I was imploring people up and down the country to vote in the referendum and to vote to remain, I told them that their vote really mattered and that a decision was going to be made. I was not inviting them to express a view.

Although we are fiercely internationalist and fiercely pro-European, we in the Labour party are, above all, democrats.

Had the outcome been to remain, we would have expected the result to be honoured, and that cuts both ways. A decision was made on 23 June last year to leave the EU.

Two thirds of Labour MPs represent constituencies that voted to leave; one third represent constituencies that voted to remain. This is obviously a difficult decision. I wish the result had gone the other way—I campaigned passionately for that—but as democrats we in the Labour party have to accept the result. It follows that the Prime Minister should not be blocked from

starting the article 50 negotiations.

That does not mean, however, that the Prime Minister can do as she likes without restraint from the House—quite the opposite: she is accountable to the House, and that accountability will be vital on the uncertain journey that lies ahead.

She fought to prevent the House from having a vote on the Bill until she was forced to do so by the Supreme Court last week. She resisted Labour's calls for a plan and then a wider White Paper until it became clear that she would lose any battle to force her to do so. Just before Christmas, she was resisting giving the House a vote on the final deal—a position that she has had to adjust.

That is why the amendments tabled by the Labour party are so important.

They are intended to establish a number of key principles that the Government must seek to negotiate during the process, including securing full tariff and impediment-free access to the single market.

They are intended to ensure that there is robust and regular parliamentary scrutiny by requiring the Secretary of State to report to the House at least every two months on progress being made in the negotiations and to provide documents that are being given to the European Parliament.

The amendments would also require the Government to consult regularly the Governments of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland throughout the Brexit negotiations. I have recognised on numerous occasions the specific issues and concerns of those living in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and I support the proposition that they should be absolutely consulted throughout the process and that their interests should be borne in mind.

The amendments would also ensure that this House has the first say, not the last say, on the deal proposed at the end of the article 50 negotiations.

We also support amendments in relation to workplace rights and environmental rights, and we will be making the case that the legal state of EU nationals should be resolved before negotiations take place.

I recognise the Government's position on EU nationals and the work done to try to ensure that there is a reciprocal arrangement, but that has not worked, and now the Prime Minister should act unilaterally to give assurance to EU nationals living in this country. I am sure that all hon. Members will have had, in their surgeries, EU nationals in tears over the uncertainty of their situation. I have seen it at every public meeting I have attended on the topic and at every surgery. I understand the constraints, but we must now act unilaterally to secure their position.

Taken together, the amendments would put real grip and accountability into the process, and the Government should welcome them, not reject them out of hand.

It is important to remember what the Bill does and does not do.

It empowers the Prime Minister to trigger article 50—no more, no less. It is the start of the negotiating process, not the end.

It does not give the Prime Minister a blank cheque—and here I want to make a wider point that has not been made clearly enough so far in any of our debates: no Prime Minister, under article 50 or any other provision, can change domestic law through international negotiations.

That can only be done in this Parliament. If she seeks to change our immigration laws, she will have to do so in this Parliament in primary legislation. If she seeks to change our tax laws, she will have to do so in this Parliament in primary legislation. If she seeks to change our employment laws, our consumer protection laws or our environmental laws, she will have to do so in this Parliament in primary legislation. If she seeks to change our current arrangements in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales, she will have to do so in Parliament in primary legislation.

When the Secretary of State last week said there would be many votes on many pieces of legislation in the next few years, he was not wrong. In each of those votes, at every twist and turn, Labour will argue that jobs, the economy and living standards must come first. We will argue that all the workers' rights, consumer rights and environmental protections derived from EU law should be fully protected—no qualifications, limitations or sunset clauses.

More broadly, Labour will be arguing for a strong, collaborative future relationship with the EU. In her Lancaster House speech, the Prime Minister said that she does not

“seek to hold on to bits of membership as we leave”.

That is short-sighted, as we are now finding in relation to Euratom. Why would we want to be outside the European Aviation Safety Agency, which certifies aircraft before they are allowed to fly?

Why would we want to be outside the European Medicines Agency, which ensures that all medicines in the EU market are safe and effective? Why would we want to be outside Europol and Eurojust, which are agencies that work closely together in the prevention and detection of serious crime and terrorism? The same goes for the European Environment Agency and Euratom.

We challenge the Prime Minister on these fronts and ask that consideration be given to finding ways to ensure that we stay where we can within those agencies, for the obvious benefits that they bring, and we will absolutely challenge any suggestion that the Prime Minister has any authority whatsoever to rip up our economic and social model and turn the UK into a tax-haven economy.

I come back to the vote on this Bill.

It is a limited vote: a vote to allow the Prime Minister to start the article 50 process. It is not a vote on the outcome, nor is it a vote on wider issues, which will fall to be voted on separately, but it is a vote to start

the process.

I know that there are some colleagues on the Benches behind me who do not feel able to support the Bill. I respect their views, just as I respect the views of constituents who feel the same way.

I also understand and recognise the anxiety of so many in the 48% who voted to remain about their future, their values and their identity. They did not vote themselves out of their own future, and their views matter as much now as they did on 23 June last year.

I hope that the respectful approach that I have tried to adopt to colleagues and to the anxiety among the 48% is reflected across the House and that we will see a good deal less of the gloating from those who campaigned to leave than we have seen in the past.

It is our duty to accept and respect the outcome of the referendum, but we remain a European country, with a shared history and shared values.

It is also our duty to fight for a new relationship with our EU partners that reflects our values, our commitment to internationalism and our commitment to an open and tolerant society.

Above all, it is our duty to ensure an outcome that is not just for the 52% or for the 48%, but for the 100%.

That we will do.