

Mr Redwood's speech during the debate on European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Clause 1 of this historic Bill is the most important constitutional matter to come before the House of Commons since the 1972 Act. I have read some of the debates that Parliament conducted at the time, and we could indeed say that the repeal is more significant than the House believed the original Act to be. When the original Act was passed, the Government reassured the House that it was no surrender of sovereignty to a supranational body and no major transfer of power.

They told the House that it was, instead, a major development of a common market; that the areas in which the European Economic Community would have competence would be very narrow and limited; and that the UK would preserve a veto so that if the EEC proposed anything the UK did not like, the UK would be able to exercise its veto and show that Parliament was still sovereign.

That was a long time ago. Over the years, what appeared to be a modest measure to form a common market has transformed itself into a mighty set of treaties and become, through endless amendment and new treaty provision, a very large and complex legal machine that is the true sovereign of our country. It has exercised its sovereignty through the European Court of Justice, the one supreme body in our country during all the time we have remained in the EEC and, now, the EU. We have seen how that body can now strike down Acts of Parliament, prevent Ministers from taking the action they wish to take and prevent this Parliament from expressing a view and turning it into action.

We were told, for example, that the EU would never be able to control our tax system, yet many items carry VAT that I think Members on both sides of the House would like to abolish, although we are not allowed to do so by European legal requirements. Before the renegotiation of our relationship attempted by the previous Prime Minister, the two main parties agreed that they wanted certain modest benefit changes to our welfare system, but both had to accept that they were quite illegal. It was therefore quite inappropriate and impossible for the House to take action that would have withstood challenges from the European Court of Justice.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (Lib Dem): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Redwood: No, I am not going to take any interventions. I am conscious that we have very little time, and I want other colleagues to be able to speak in this debate.

We have been unable all the time we have been in the EU to have our own migration policy or to decide who we wish to welcome into our country. We cannot have our own fishing policy and we cannot have our own farming policy. We have moved into massive deficits on both fishing and on farming, whereas we used to have a good trading surplus on fish before we joined the European

Economic Community and we used to produce most of the temperate food we needed before the common agricultural policy started to bite.

The British people decided in their wisdom that we should take back control, and we will take back control by the passage of this very important piece of legislation.

Above all, clause 1 will take back that control. The great news for colleagues on both sides of the House who had different views on whether we should leave or remain is that their genuine passion for democracy, which many on both sides of the argument have expressed today, can be satisfied by agreeing to clause 1, which repeals the original Act. Once that has happened and the repeal has taken place, this Parliament will once again listen to the wishes of the British people and be able to change VAT, our fishing policy, our agricultural policy, our borders policy and our welfare policies in the ways we wish.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Redwood: No. I have already explained that I am conscious that many colleagues wish to join in the debate.

I just hope that right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches will recognise that, far from this being a denial of democracy as some fear—they seem to think it is some kind of ministerial power grab—this legislation will be the complete opposite. Once it has gone through, no Minister of the Crown, however grand, will be able to use the excuse that they had to do something to satisfy the European Court of Justice or the European Union. They will have to answer to this House of Commons, and if they cannot command a majority for what they wish to do, it will be changed. That is the system that I and many Opposition Members believe in, and that is the system we are seeking to reintroduce into our country, after many years' absence, by the passage of this legislation.

There are concerns about whether the date of exit should be included in the Bill. I think it is good parliamentary practice to put something of such importance on the face of the Bill, and to allow us extensive debate—as we are having today, and doubtless will have more of before the completion of the passage of the legislation through both Houses—so that the public can see that we have considered it fully and come to a view.

I listened carefully to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and I have a lot of sympathy with what he was trying to do, but I will take the advice of Ministers and support their particular version of the amendment. I will do so for the reasons that were set out very well by the Minister: we need complete certainty, and that requires a precise time of transfer. People need to know which law they are obeying and to which court they are ultimately answerable, minute by minute, as they approach the transfer of power on the day in question, and that is a very important part of the process.

I hope those who have genuine fears that we will not have enough time to

negotiate are wrong. I think 16 months is a very long time to allow us to see whether we can reach a really good agreement. Of course, we all hope that we can reach a good agreement. Some of us know that if there is no agreement, it will be fine. We can trade under World Trade Organisation terms and put in place, over the next 16 months, all the things we need to do, on a contingency basis, to make sure that if we just leave without an agreement, things will work.

I appeal to all Members to understand that, although most of them may not want that contingency, it is a possible outcome. We cannot make the EU offer a sensible agreement that is in our mutual interests, so surely this House has a duty to the public to plan intelligently and to scrutinise Ministers as they go about putting in place the necessary devices to ensure that it all works.

The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee should relax. She is talented and quite capable of leading her Committee, and I am sure that it can make a valuable contribution. Nobody is stopping her or her Committee scrutinising, asking questions, producing ideas or helping the Government make sure that there is a smooth transition. She and I both believe in parliamentary democracy. She has an important position in this House and I wish her every success in pursuing it, in the national interest, so that Ministers can be held to account.

The task before us should be one that brings Parliament together. We should not still be disputing whether or not we are leaving. We let the British people decide that and then this House voted overwhelmingly to send in our notice. I explained at the time that that would be the decision point—most Members took it relatively willingly, others very willingly—and we now need to make sure that it works in the best interests of the British people.

I urge the House to come together to work on all those details, to make sure that we can have a successful Brexit, even if a really good agreement is not on offer after a suitable time for negotiation; and I urge the European Union to understand that it is greatly in its interests to discuss as soon as possible a future relationship. If it does not do so soon, we will simply have to plan for no agreement, because it is our duty to make sure that everything works very smoothly at the end of March 2019.