

My contribution to the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 6) Bill, 4 September 2019

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I would like us to leave on 31 October, as agreed, with a free trade agreement, or with serious talks about a free trade agreement, so that new tariffs or barriers need not be imposed on our trade with the EU or its trade with us. I am quite sure that we have a chance of achieving that only if so-called no deal is left firmly on the table, and if the European Union knows that we will leave with no withdrawal agreement or free trade agreement if it does not agree to those talks or offer such an agreement. That is our only lever.

I came to this debate against the Bill, because I think it tries to take away our only or best negotiating lever. I have looked carefully at amendment 6, new clause 1 and amendment 19, and I have listened to the debate on them. I am quite sure that the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) have very good intentions. I am sure that they are desperately trying to find compromise and a way forward at a time when the country is divided, as it was during the referendum campaign, and when this House remains extremely divided, or fragmented, into a series of different factions with different views on the best outcome.

Having listened to the debate, I share the view of my hon. Friends the Members for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). The amendments are on the side of thwarting the referendum result. They are designed to undermine Britain's main negotiating card, which is our right to leave without having to make any more payments, accept any more laws or accept any instructions on our borders. The three things that the leave voters I met in large numbers during the referendum campaign wanted were to take control of our money, our borders and our laws. We have the right to do that on 31 October.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Take control of our laws!

John Redwood: Yes, take control of our laws. [Laughter.] That is what we are arguing about today. I am explaining the extreme irony that this Parliament, which claims to believe in democracy, is deliberately trying to thwart our democracy by denying the result of the democratic decision that was made by the people, and that we said was theirs to make; and that this Parliament is trying to overturn the promises that many candidates—on the Labour side, in particular—made in the general election of 2017, and that they seem to have forgotten now that they are Members of Parliament.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I noticed the laughter from the Scots Nats at what my right hon. Friend said. In view of the very good sense that he was speaking, I invite the House to consider this. Is it not the case that under

the withdrawal agreement, during the transition period, decisions will be taken by the Council of Ministers to impose obligations and laws on the United Kingdom without our even being there, without any transcript, without any Hansard and almost invariably by consensus? Is not the whole thing a massive racket, the object of which is to put us in a state of subjugation—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Sir William, thank you, but we are running out of time.

John Redwood: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, which goes to the heart of the crucial issue about our democracy that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) raised from a sedentary position. One of the features that many of us found most objectionable about the withdrawal agreement was precisely that for a long and unspecified transition period that could have stretched on for many months—it was not clear what would end it—we would be under any new law that the European Union wished to impose on us, with no vote, voice or ability to influence that law.

At the moment, as a full member, we have some influence. We have a vote, and sometimes we manage to water down or delay something, but in the transition period we would have none of those rights. Any of the existing massive panoply of European law could be amended or changed by decisions of the European Court of Justice, and that would be binding on the United Kingdom. This is completely unacceptable for a democratic country—that, when a majority of people in a democratic referendum voted to take back control of their laws, their Parliament then says, “No; far too difficult a job for us. We don’t want to participate in this process.

We don’t want to take control of your laws. We want to delegate most of them, in many fields, to the European Union and have a foreign court developing our law for us in ways that we might find completely objectionable.” None of the amendments that I have just been mentioning, in the names of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and others, intending to find a compromise, tackles this fundamental obstacle to the withdrawal agreement and to the idea that we can somehow negotiate our way out of the European Union if it does not think we just intend to leave.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am very grateful indeed to the right hon. Gentleman for taking an intervention. May I take him back to something that he said, because it is really very important? The right hon. Gentleman and many of his colleagues have claimed—in the referendum, subsequently and tonight—that they are going to take back control of the borders. May I just ask him how he intends to take back control of South Armagh, and would he like to come to Crossmaglen and explain why it is all right for us to go out without a deal?

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We are running out of time, and it would not be a proper debate if we did not hear from those on the Front Benches. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will understand that and bring his speech to a conclusion very quickly.

John Redwood: Well, of course, if we just leave, we take back control of our borders. We can then decide whether we wish to do anything about it. We may wish to leave in place exactly all the existing arrangements. I am not making any recommendations that would embarrass the hon. Lady or her friends in Northern Ireland. We are very sensitive about that border. Indeed, the British Government have made it very clear that they see no reason to impose new barriers or difficulties on our side of the Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border at all. I am sure that will be very welcome to all those in this House who are seriously worried about this issue. It makes one wonder why the backstop was ever invented or necessary. Why is it so difficult for the European Union just to strip it out given that the EU has a sincere promise—agreed, I think, by all parts of this House—that we do not wish to impose new barriers on that border in a way that could be an obstacle to good relations and the peace process?

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend has ever had the experience of having builders in and not having given them an end date. What happens? The building work goes on and on and on. Is it not time that we told the builders, “The end date is 31 October. You finish the job—no ifs, no buts, no compromise”?

The First Deputy Chairman: We all know that it is great for emphasis to repeat things, but we are running out of time.

John Redwood: I will accept your guidance, Dame Eleanor.

In conclusion, these amendments do not fix the Bill. This Bill is extremely damaging to our democracy, undermines our negotiating position and would therefore achieve the opposite of what many of its proposers say they are trying to achieve.