

My speech during the debate on Taxation (Post-transition Period) (Ways and Means), 8 December

I came to this debate expecting to hear the Minister set out a vision of post-Brexit Britain, how the taxation system will be transformed and how VAT will be changed to encourage our businesses and give our consumers a better time. Instead, we have six resolutions that are mainly about trying to make sure that the Government can get even more VAT out of people after we have left than before. The Government could have done that at any time. Where is the vision that we will have a much better tax system after Brexit?

We are taking back control of VAT, which was almost entirely under EU control. The Government say, for example, they wish to be a green Government, but these measures will not even take VAT off a whole series of green products, which should not have VAT on them if the Government are trying to encourage people to insulate their homes, change their boiler controls or put in more fuel-efficient ways of heating their homes. The Minister has failed this very simple test.

We have six resolutions about a piece of legislation which we are not allowed to see until after the debate. It is a piece of legislation that will be very complex, because it is mainly about the techniques of raising revenue and making sure that no revenue escapes. However, the Brexit voters out there—the majority in the country—have had to vote three times now for Brexit to make it clear to the House of Commons that they want even this House of Commons to be in charge, even though there are still too many MPs on the Opposition Benches who hate the idea of this country legislating for and governing itself and think that every law that comes from Europe is wise and necessary and every law that is made here is somehow inappropriate.

We want our Ministers to say, “No, we are the people’s representatives. We had the majority in the election and we are going to transform our country’s economy, recover the economy from covid-19 and level up the country.” That requires bold and visionary leadership and it certainly requires pretty fundamental tax changes. VAT rates on some things are too high. VAT should not be imposed on some things at all.

We need to remodel that tax. We need to look again at our corporate taxes, where a series of judgments by the European Court of Justice prevented this country levying all the corporate taxes that it wished to raise.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I probably should not rise to the bait, but does the right hon. Gentleman honestly think that the way the Government are treating the House tonight is an expression of parliamentary sovereignty? Is this what he really campaigned for over all these years, so that the Government could fast-track major financial legislation, bounce it through the House of Commons, not give us the information we are looking for and not

subject it to proper debate? Is that what he campaigned for all these years?

John Redwood: The answer is that I campaigned for this Parliament to take control and use it in the interests of the people, which is why I am making the speech that I am making. Why does the hon. Gentleman not listen to it instead of planning an intervention for a speech I am not making? I am urging the Government to take back control and use it in the way that the public would like to see them use it.

I must take up the point of sovereignty. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) is quite right to go back to that. The simple truth about Brexit is that Brexit voters knew exactly what we were voting for. We understood the slogan "Take back control", and we think control—the right of self-government, the right to trust people in these Houses of Parliament to make decisions for us or the right to throw them out if they are useless—is fundamental to our freedoms and living in a democracy. You do not bargain those away in some kind of dispute about tariffs. You do not argue about those in the context of making compromises.

This is the fundamental truth of Brexit. Like practically every other country in the world that is not a member of the EU, we just want to be free to make those decisions and laws that we can make and have representative institutions—a great Parliament—in order to do that. We clearly need to train some of the parliamentarians in the idea that we can make better laws here than people can make for us abroad and that we can modify European laws that we currently have so that they work in our interests better.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does making better laws not start with letting MPs see a Bill before it exists?

John Redwood: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady. I have said that I want to debate a real Bill. I am giving ideas to the Minister because I do not think what he has in mind for this Bill is going to quite suit me. I want to pep it up. I want to make it more exciting so that we can go out to the public and say, "This is the party that is going to level up. This is the party that knows how to recover an economy that has been damaged by covid", and that requires lower taxes and different taxes and requires that we use the powers that only the House of Commons has. The House of Lords has very limited abilities to intervene, and on this occasion I am very pleased about that, because it nearly always wants to take the European answer, and the European answer is the high unemployment answer, the high taxation answer and the very complicated taxation answer.

VAT is an extremely complicated tax. We had to adopt its complications and we are now trying to add to those complications to try to avoid items slipping through. We are trying in these proposals to deal with small transactions that sometimes escape the net. They try to find ways of making online organisations, for example, responsible for levying tax between two people trading with each other.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman referred to the levelling-up agenda. On rough figures, we have had 50 years of the EU,

20 years of devolution and over 300 years of the Union. Why are devolution and the EU to blame for the requirement to level up when, quite clearly, the Union is at the heart of the problem?

John Redwood: I do not agree, and nor did Scottish voters when they were asked this question. We do have a great democratic country and I was a great enthusiast for the people of Scotland deciding whether they liked our Union or not. They said, yes, they liked our Union. Then the people of the United Kingdom were asked whether they liked the European Union and they said they did not. So I found myself in the happy position of agreeing in two big referendums with the winning side. It is such a pity that the Scottish National party lost both and has never understood the democratic principle that it then has to accept the verdict. I was on the losing side in a former referendum; like my whole party, I was against the principle of Scottish devolution, and we got that wrong. We lost that referendum and from the day after that we did not fight it, delay it or dilute it. We said, "Yes, devolution is the wish of the Scottish people." We got on and implemented it.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend can recall this, but when that Bill was introduced by the late Donald Dewar in 1997 I put forward a proposal that the devolution settlement should be decided by a referendum of the entire UK. Perhaps it is some encouragement for him to know that despite a three-line Whip half the Conservative Back Benchers went through the Lobby behind me on that question of having a referendum for the whole UK on this devolution issue, about which he is being so extremely articulate.

John Redwood: We are probably straying a little away from the resolutions before us, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will not try your patience any more. I have made my two main points, but just to summarise: we need more vision from the Government to use our power to tax in our own way, because our current tax system is ill fitting and not yet geared to promoting that recovery we want—we need greater simplicity, lower taxes and a lower incidence of taxes to get that recovery going; and we need reassurances from the Government that sovereignty is not something one can bargain away or compromise over, but is fundamental. We either have a free trade agreement between an independent UK and the EU, which is our preferred model, or we have no deal. It is as simple as that. The choice is theirs.