

My speech during the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, 5 December 2018 (edited)

Almost two and a half years have now passed since the people spoke in the referendum. It was the largest democratic vote in our history. The people voted in very large numbers to take back control of our laws, our money and our borders, and to reclaim the lost sovereignty of the United Kingdom electorate. They did so in the teeth of enormous hostility and propaganda from many elements of the political and big business establishment.

The people were told they were too stupid to understand the arguments and that there were huge dangers if they dared to vote to leave the EU. They were told by both campaigns, and by the Government in a formal leaflet, that we would be leaving the single market and the customs union. Rightly we were told that the EU would not allow us to cherry-pick bits of the single market and customs union and that those were an integral part of the whole. Voters were given a set of entirely bogus and dishonest forecasts about what would happen in the short term after the vote. Practically every one of those forecasts was wildly too pessimistic, which has led to the distrust between the vote leave majority and the establishment that pushed out those predictions.

I urge the House to move on from "Project Fear", to move on from gloom and doom, and to understand that many millions of decent, honest voters made a careful and considered decision. They do not believe those who tell them it will all go wrong, that it must be reversed or that they must be told to think again and vote again because they did not do their homework. It is deeply insulting to the electors, and I am sure that this Parliament is worthy of something better than that.

The people were saying something wonderful for this Parliament. They were saying, "We believe in you, Parliament. We believe you can make wise laws. We believe you can make even wiser laws than the EU. We believe you can make better judgments about how to spend the taxes we send you than the EU, which spends so much of the money on our behalf in ways of which we do not approve. We believe, O Parliament, that if you help us to take back control of our laws and democracy, we will get better answers. Or, of course, Parliament, if you do not give us a better answer, we the people will have our sovereignty back, and we will dismiss you."

One of the things that most annoys people about the EU among the leave-voting majority is that we cannot sack them. Whatever they do, however bad they are, however much money they waste, however irritating their laws, we have to put up with them. We cannot sack them; we cannot have a general election.

[Interruption.]

Scottish National party Members say that they feel the same about the Union

of the United Kingdom, but we gave them the democratic opportunity, and their people said that they like our system of government, because this is their democracy too. [Interruption.] The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) should understand that her colleagues in Scotland, and her voters in Scotland, believe in UK democracy, and they have exactly the same rights of voice and vote and redress as all the rest of us.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. Ever since the referendum, the narrative has been to find explanations for why the people voted as they did—any explanation other than the fact that they wanted to leave the European Union. Does he consider that the majority in favour of the amendment in the name of our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) shows that the game is up, and that there is now a majority in the House against leaving the European Union? The game for us must be to find some orderly way around that, irrespective of the majority who are now against us.

John Redwood: I do not prejudge the evil intents of other Members. I hope that all Members will agree that we must implement the referendum result. We had a general election in the summer of last year. I remember that in that general election Labour and the Conservatives got rather more than 80% of the vote in Great Britain, the Democratic Unionist party did extremely well in Northern Ireland, and all three parties said that they would faithfully implement the referendum decision of United Kingdom voters on leaving the European Union. I trust that they will want to operate in good faith in the votes that may be to come.

My advice to Ministers, as well as to the rest of the House, is that what we should now be doing is celebrating the opportunities and the advantages that we will gain after March, when we have left the European Union. We should be having debates about how we will spend all the extra money on improving our public services instead of giving it to the EU. We should be having a debate about all the tax cuts that we need to boost our economy, so that instead of growth slowing after we leave, we speed it up by deliberate acts of policy. We will be empowered in this place to take these good decisions if only Members would lift their gloom and their obstinate denial of opportunity, and see that if we spent some more money and had some tax cuts, it would provide a very welcome boost to our economy in its current situation.

I want to see us publish a schedule of tariffs for trading with the whole world that are lower than the tariffs that the EU currently makes us impose on perfectly good exporters, particularly of food products, from elsewhere in the world. Why do we have to impose high tariffs on food that we cannot grow for ourselves? I want us to have a debate on urgently taking back control of our fishing industry so that we can land perhaps twice as many fish in the UK and not let them all be landed somewhere else, and build a much bigger fish processing industry on the back of domestic landings from our very rich fishing grounds.

I wish to see us get rid of VAT on, for instance, green products and domestic fuel. We are not allowed to do this because we are an impotent puppet Parliament that does not even control its own tax system for as long as we

remain in the European Union. I wish to see us take back control of our borders, so that we can have a migration policy that is right for our economic needs and fair to people from wherever they may come all around the world, rather than having an inbuilt European Union preference. I wish us to be a global leader for world trade. Now that the United States of America has a President who says that he rather likes tariffs, there is a role for a leading great power and economic force in the world like the United Kingdom to provide global leadership for free trade.

We will do none of that if we sign this miserable agreement with which the Government have presented us, because we will be locked into their customs arrangements for many months or years. We will not be free to negotiate those free trade deals, let alone provide the international leadership which I yearn for us to provide. I want us to have our seat back at the high tables of the world in the big institutions like the World Trade Organisation, so that with vote and voice and purpose, we can offer something positive, and have a more liberal free-trading democratic world than the one that we currently have. That is something that we are not allowed to do for as long as we remain members of the European Union.

I say this to Members. Lift the gloom. Stop "Project Fear". Stop selling the electors short. Stop treating the electors as if they were unable to make an adult decision. Understand that they made a great decision—a decision I am mightily proud of—to take back sovereign control to the people, to take back the delegated sovereign control to this Parliament. It is high time that this Parliament rose to the challenge, instead of falling at every opportunity. It is high time we did something positive for our constituents, instead of moaning and grumbling and spending every day—groundhog day—complaining about the vote of the British people.