

My speech during the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, 7 January 2020

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I rise particularly to support clause 33. I think it is essential that we are finally out of the EU in every proper way by the end of this year. Some three and a half years have passed since the British people made their decision that they wished to leave. Many of us voted to leave because we think the world is going to be better once we have left. We do not regard it as some kind of disease or problem that has to be managed; we see it as full of opportunities. We want to rebuild our fishing industry under British regulations and British control. We wish to get all our money back and to spend it on our priorities in health and education. We wish to make sure that we can make the laws we wish, and which the people recommend to us in elections and in the normal dialogue between constituents and Members of Parliament. We are extremely optimistic about our opportunities as a leader of free trade worldwide once we have regained our full vote and voice in the World Trade Organisation and are able to do our own deals with all those parts of the world that the EU has not got round to doing deals with all the time we have been a member.

We are very optimistic. We think we are going to be better off economically. I have always said that, and anyone who suggests otherwise is deliberately misrepresenting my position. I share the frustration of many leave voters that three and a half years on and with a new Parliament with a very clear mandate we are still facing demands that we are going too quickly and that three and a half years plus another year—four and a half years—is still not long enough, and why not six and a half years?

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, unlike the Opposition spokesman, who seems to paint a very gloomy picture about our moving away from European regulations, this Parliament and this country are perfectly capable of regulating our own domestic affairs, and protecting the environment and workers' rights in the British way, without always acquiescing in EU laws?

John Redwood: I, in particular, think we can do a lot better on taxation. I do not want tax on all these green products that the EU makes us tax. I would not have thought that the Green party really wanted those. However, I suspect that if I or others moved amendments to the forthcoming Budget this March to take out those unnecessary taxes, we would be told we are still not allowed to because we are in the implementation period and have to accept European law. It has also interfered in our corporate taxes in a way that actually reduces the revenues we gain from big business. I would have thought Labour and the Liberal Democrats rather oppose that, but because it comes from the EU they are completely quiet on the subject. They do not seem to mind that the EU interferes with our revenue raising.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend as surprised as I am that the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats, with their new clauses, are seeking yet further delays? Despite what the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) says, that is the effect of new clause 4. It would mean a lack of the certainty that the British people voted for at the recent general election.

John Redwood: I do think it is almost unbelievable that the Opposition are talking about adding to four and a half years of delay, under the Government model—now, another two years—six and a half years. Six and a half years at £12 billion a year is a huge sum, and I would like to tease this out a bit more with those on our Front Bench because I think my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State misunderstood me. He thought I was talking about the cost to business, but I am talking about the cost to British taxpayers. This extra implementation period in itself—I really rather regret it, but I see it is a necessity from where we currently are, given the forces in this House—must be costing £11 billion or £12 billion, in tax revenue forgone, that we have to pay.

I would like some reassurance from the Front Bench that once we are properly out at the end of December, under clause 33, there will not be further bills. I want us to be able to say to the British people, “We now do control our own money. We are not going to carry on paying for this show.” I think it might be quite a good negotiating tactic to suggest to the EU that perhaps there is not a strong legal basis for some of the claims it wishes to make, because we need to put some countervailing pressure on the EU during this remaining negotiation period on the free trade agreement. I do not think we have to pay for a free trade agreement. I think it is massively in the interests of the rest of the European Union, because it sells us more than we sell it, but we have to be firm, otherwise it will walk all over us again and demand more concessions.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is not the lesson of the prolonged, tortuous seven years of negotiation on the Canadian deal the very fact that it was an open-ended process that did not come to an end? The effect of new clause 4 is basically to ensure, in providing for an extension, that it makes that extension certain, because the knowledge that the extension can take place will take away the very pressure to make an agreement within the time that is available.

John Redwood: Those of us who have had to study European Union affairs for all too long, because they affect our own country so much, have learned from bitter experience that deals nearly always happen at the last minute under artificial or genuine deadlines that the EU has often imposed on itself. All we are trying to do, in supporting a Government in doing this, is to say to the EU that there is a deadline on this negotiation: “If you, O EU, really want a free trade deal with us, as you have said you do in the partnership agreement, hurry now while stocks last.” It is not all about us, it is about the EU as well. It needs this free trade agreement, and we need to keep the pressure up. Let us tell it that there needs to be significant progress by the middle of this year so that it is realistic to finalise the text.

I do think it should be relatively straightforward, if there is good will on the EU side as well as on our own side, because we have been party to its international negotiations. If we take the best of the Japanese deal and the best of the Canadian deal—it is already there in text—it should be relatively easy to say that we can at least have that. The EU has already offered that to non-members of the European Union, and we should be able to add a bit more because by being a member we already have agreements to things that are in our mutual interest to continue.□

I would be very optimistic about the negotiations, but I am quite conscious that if we negotiate as, unfortunately, the previous Government did before the change of leadership and the general election, we will end up making more concessions to get something that the EU has already promised in the political declaration. I do not want the fish at risk, and I do not want the money at risk. I do want to take full control of the money, the fish, the law making and the taxes from the beginning of next year, as we are promised by this Bill, and clause 33 is a very important part of trying to deliver that.

I wish the Government every success. I am optimistic on their behalf because of the promises the EU has made. My message to the EU is: “Do not underestimate the British people. You may have been right to believe that many of their political representatives in the last Parliament were on the EU’s side, not on the UK’s side, but the British people are altogether a more serious proposition, and the British people have spoken loud and clear.” The British people have had enough of the delay, enough of the dither, enough of the concessions and enough of the idea that Brexit is a problem. We believe in Brexit, we want the freedoms, and we want to choose our own taxes, our own laws and to spend our own money. Bring it on—the sooner, the better.