

My speech during the debate on the Northern Ireland Protocol

As long ago as 2016, the British people voted to take back control. We voted to re-establish our sovereignty. The last Parliament sought to subvert and undermine that view. In 2019, given the opportunity, the British public voted again, by a substantial margin, to take back control. They elected, with a decent majority, a Government of a party pledged to do just that, and this Government moved with speed and purpose to take back control. Unfortunately, we still need to debate this matter today because of the conduct of the European Union. There is outstanding business. We still have not taken back proper control in Northern Ireland or over our fishing grounds. I am glad to take the opportunity provided by this Back-Bench debate to urge the Government to fully implement the mandate of the British people given to them both in the referendum and in the general election to take back that control.

I have been angered, but not surprised, by the conduct of the European Union. There is a long history of the European Union antagonising neighbours and potentially friendly states and attempting to use distorted, twisted or simply wrong legal arguments to force things in its own direction against the interests of its neighbours. The EU, in the long negotiations with the UK, always said that it respected the UK's wish to restore its sovereignty and did not wish to deny it, and yet here we have a case where the EU is trying to wrestle our sovereignty away from us in an important part of our country. The EU always promised to respect our internal market, as is reflected in the agreements that we are currently discussing, yet now it wishes to hijack it. It wishes to divert a substantial proportion of GB-to-Northern Ireland trade to the EU for its purposes against the spirit and the letter of the agreement.

Above all, the EU promised to respect the peace agreement. It went on and on about an imaginary border that the UK had no intention of making more complicated or more difficult, and denying the actual border that was already there that was necessary for its purposes and the UK's purposes for taxation, currency and regulatory matters. It has gone out of its way to antagonise the loyalist majority community in Northern Ireland. That is the very opposite of working with us to promote the peace and to reduce the tensions within those important communities.

So what should we do now? Our Government have shown enormous tolerance, restraint and flexibility. I make no secret of the fact that I would not have shown as much flexibility or restraint as they have done, because I am already very angry about the EU's conduct. But they are right that we need to show that we have tried to negotiate a settlement. I hope they will have one more go at trying to get the EU to agree to a common-sense approach to these border issues whereby proper trade can be sustained and promoted so that GB-NI trade is also restored and not interfered with by the EU, because that was never part of the idea behind the original agreement.

I hope the Government will have success in these matters, but we do need to be ready now, as soon as possible, to make our own decisions and to make our own moves if the EU is not yet ready to negotiate a sensible solution. There are several on offer in this debate and in the discussions that have been held over the years. The agreement makes it clear that we can indeed move unilaterally and assert our sovereignty where our internal market is being violated and trade is being diverted, and where there are other failures by the EU to comply with the agreement, which are now several and manifest.

I say to the Government: do not delay over the whole of this summer. Take action now. The trade is being diverted now. The community sentiments are being disrupted now. The peace agreement is being wobbled now. The sovereignty of the United Kingdom is being deeply infringed now. There is plenty of evidence for that, and a good case can be made in the court of world opinion for those who are interested. But this is, above all, a matter between the Government and the British people—the people of the United Kingdom as a whole. We, the Parliament of the United Kingdom, owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to ensure that they are fully part of our single market and country, just as we wish them, with us, to have friendly and good trading relations with the EU.

But if there has to be a choice between peace and our internal matters on the one hand, and our trade with the EU on the other, of course we must put Northern Ireland, peace and the integrity of our country first, whatever threats the EU may make. The EU is the disrupter of trade; the UK is the promoter of free trade worldwide. The EU is the one that is doing harm to the constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland. We must be rock-fast in our support for the people of Northern Ireland, for the constitution of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and for a good solution that allows the restoration of our internal market.