

My speech during the debate on the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster, 31 January

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): There is good news in this debate, which is that there seems to be universal agreement, from Members in all parts of the House, that where urgent work needs doing to guarantee the future safety of those who work in this place and those who visit, we should press on with it. Indeed, there is a strong feeling that there is a need for greater urgency in such work. From most things that I have read and heard, it seems that rewiring is a very urgent priority, as that is where the worst fire risk seems to come from. Substantial pipe work may also need doing, where pipes need replacing or re-routing as part of a safety plan. These things can all be done through compartmentalising—taking things in stages and linking up as appropriate.

We know we can work alongside builders and maintenance companies, because we are doing that all the time. I pay tribute to those who are working on the Elizabeth Tower at the moment. They are getting on with their work in a way that is not disruptive of our work at all. They must be working in confined and difficult circumstances, but they have so far done it in a way that is entirely compatible with the work of Parliament. So I hope that the Leader of the House would take away the sense that urgent work for the safety of people here in future and for the safety of the very fabric of the building might be accelerated, with options looked at so that we can press on with it in a timely and sensible way.

I find myself having more difficulties about the much bigger scheme being launched any time soon. As we have heard, quite big elements of it have not been properly thought through or costed, which makes taking a decision in principle a bit more difficult. I find myself in that interesting position where many parliamentarians find themselves; having been entirely of the leave faith on the referendum issue, now, showing flexibility and how I am always influenced by the facts, I find myself firmly in the remain camp on this parliamentary discussion.

Let us first address the issue of decanting to an alternative Chamber, which we would have to build. We hear there are problems with the site for one of the potential alternatives. I just do not think our constituents would understand our spending a very large sum on producing a temporary replica of this Chamber for a limited number of years—we are told it will be a short period, but some of us think it will be for rather longer—when there are so many other priorities. My constituents want us to spend more on health and social care, the military and so forth, and I agree with them.

Andrea Leadsom (The Leader of the House of Commons): For clarity, let me say that what is being talked about is a permanent business contingency in Richmond House that provides a real legacy gain to the parliamentary estate

and is a secure gain for all parliamentarians for future generations.

John Redwood: I am grateful for that correction, and I did understand that, but the public are saying that this is really only going to be used for a few years because we will come back to use the main Chamber, and this is a very expensive investment in contingency, particularly as one hopes the contingency never occurs. We know from history that there are other ways of dealing with a disaster contingency, as unfortunately people had to do this during the second world war. We would cross that bridge in the awful event that we needed to do so, but investing a lot of money in such a protection would be a strange thing to do—I rest my case. I do not think my constituents would regard that as something they would want their taxpayers' money spent on at the moment. I agree with them that we need to spend a bit more on health and social care. Those would clearly be the priorities if we had this extra money to spend.

Finally, let me say that I agree with those who think there is something very special about this place and something important about it for our democracy. This is the mother of Parliaments and this building does have great resonance around the world, being associated with the long history of freedom, and the development of the power of voice and vote for all adults in our country. It would be strange indeed to be turning our back on that for a period, particularly when we are going through a big constitutional and political change in order to implement the wishes of the British people as expressed in the referendum. Particularly during this period, it is important that our visitors can come to be reminded of our national story and why we are where we are. All those of us who seek to represent people should be daily reminded of that national story when we come here—

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Redwood: No, as I am conscious of time.

We need to be reminded of that story as we go past the memorial to suffragettes, as we go past the statues and paintings of those who made such a contribution to past political battles and debates, those who were part of the story of wresting control from the monarch and establishing the right of many more people to vote and have their voice heard through Members of Parliament. That proud history makes this more than an iconic building, more than a world heritage site; it is a living part of our democracy. Our interaction with it and our presence on this grand political stage is the very essence of our democracy. I do not want us to move away for a few years at this critical moment in our national story.