

My speech during the EU Exit Day Amendment debate, 27 March 2019

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The mood outside the House is overwhelmingly that we should get on with it. The nation heard the Prime Minister and the Government promise on countless occasions that we would be leaving on 29 March 2019, with or without a deal. It is true that the Prime Minister always said that she wanted a deal and expected to get a deal, but she never ruled out leaving without a deal, and she was right not to do so. Indeed, for many months she used to say, “No deal is better than a bad deal,” leaving open the possibility that what was on offer would be so bad that it would be better just to leave.

I am not someone who thinks that we should just leave. I think that we should leave with a series of deals, and I am pleased that the Government have put in place the essential deals that we need in order to leave. Of course we needed an aviation deal, a haulage deal, a Government procurement deal and all the rest of it, and those things have been sorted out, I am told, over the long two years and eight months that have elapsed since the original vote. I am also pleased that the Government, in parallel with constantly telling us that they would get an agreement and an agreement that we would like, continued their so-called no-deal planning, which, as I have said, is actually many-deal planning—that is, planning a series of lesser deals to ensure that things worked smoothly and that we were in a good position and had options.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Redwood: I wish to develop my argument a little.

The Government put us in that position. What we have not heard, either from the Minister or, more importantly, from the Prime Minister, who is responsible for this, is the case for the delay that we are now being asked to approve in United Kingdom legislation. It seems to be mainly geared to the idea that the House will accept the withdrawal agreement after we should have left, rather than before we were going to leave, but we now learn that the deal that was actually offered did not allow the Government until May or early June to put the thing through. The EU was very tough on the Government, saying, “You must get the withdrawal agreement through before the official leaving date of 29 March, under the previous understanding,” which leaves the Government with only a couple of days in which to do so.

The question to the Government must be, “Why has it taken so long to get this agreement into a shape that the House would pass, and why have you been so dilatory about presenting, or re-presenting the agreement?” or, even better, “Why did you not renegotiate it to get it into a form in which it might be worth considering again?” The question that you have rightly posed to the Government, Mr Speaker, is whether there is any point in constantly bringing the same thing back time and again when the answer continues to be negative.

The Government have not really explained today, in the context of their wish for a delay, why the outcome would suddenly be different after they have left it for so long and why they left it so long if it was so time-critical. They have had plenty of months between the original Chequers disaster, when they first adumbrated this policy and there were mass resignations from the Government and the Conservative party and today, when—many more resignations later—there is still a considerable reluctance on the part of sections of the governing party to vote for the withdrawal agreement.

I fear that I am not free to support this proposal. I do not think that a good case has been made for delay, and I do not think that the Government have made a case to the public for why we have to be let down when such a clear promise was embedded in the law—in the withdrawal Act that this Parliament passed. I suggest to the Government that they should think again about how they wish to use the time that they are trying to buy.

I have a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) over the crowning irony of the position the Government have placed us in. They are claiming superior European law to do something the leave majority in this country does not want them to do, but they are not so sure of their legal ground that they want this House to actually endorse it, because they know otherwise there might be legal difficulties, but to do it on the very piece of legislation that is taking back control. It is almost unbelievable.

This House has rightly decided to back the vote of the British people and by a solemn statute say that we are taking back control and from the day that that comes into effect all laws and matters relating to Government and public business will be settled in this House of Commons and not by the EU. And we are now told that the Prime Minister can have a conversation in an evening Council meeting in Brussels and be pushed off her request and given something completely different from her request, and we are told that trumps anything the UK Parliament does. Well, if we wanted to sum up why 17.4 million people voted the way they did, we could not do better than take that example. We do not want this House sidelined or presumed upon; this House should decide when we leave the European Union and that should not have been settled in that way.