

My speech during the Second Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, 22 October 2019

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): This Parliament is letting the public down. Three years and four months ago, I and 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union. We voted to take back control of our laws, our borders and our money, and we are still waiting for that to happen. We were told by the then Prime Minister that he would send a letter announcing our decision immediately after the result, and under the treaty we expected to be out after two years with or without agreement by the European Union.

Instead, we find ourselves today having yet another debate after so many groundhog days in this place, with the same people rehearsing the same arguments, as around half the Members of the House of Commons—we will find out whether it is more than half—are still trying to stop any kind of Brexit, and are forcing those of us who believe in Brexit to dilute what we are trying to do and delaying our enjoying the fruits of our Brexit vision.

Let us look at the agreement, because it is far from ideal from the point of view of a leave voter. I am delighted that the Prime Minister has today reassured us that we will completely take back control of our fish, and that we will decide how that amazing resource is nurtured, looked after and used by our country. That is very welcome. I also accept that the documents show that we will not have to go into battle with our troops on a vote that we have lost, and that we are not about to be sucked into losing the sovereign control of our Government and Parliament over our foreign and defence policy.

But we are still in trouble with the powers of the European Court of Justice over our laws. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for contributing to the Bill, because there is now a sovereignty clause, and I hope it works; it is a definite improvement. However, I am extremely worried by the situation in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman not understand that Unionists believe that our sovereignty has been removed by this agreement, and that being a Unionist in Northern Ireland is very different from being a Unionist in the rest of the United Kingdom, including the right hon. Gentleman's constituency? Does he not feel that Unionists have been duped and deceived in how this agreement has been brought forward?

John Redwood: I do not like the provisions on Northern Ireland for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have set out. I want the whole country to leave, and Northern Ireland to be a full part of the United Kingdom under the same arrangements. If there are any different arrangements, I certainly want a consent mechanism that is acceptable to the representatives from the Democratic Unionist party and the people they represent.

I am also extremely worried about the money in this set of proposals. We never talk about the money, and so many MPs seem to think that giving billions away to the European Union is just fine. Taking back control of our money was central to the campaign. Indeed, it was very contentious, because people argued about exactly how much it was. I do not think it has been properly quantified. The liabilities are potentially large and long lasting, and there is no attempt in the agreement or the Bill to control them.

Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Could my right hon. Friend give us his best estimate of what he thinks the bill will be?

John Redwood: Well, we are told £39 billion, but I think that is a very low estimate; I think it will be considerably more than that and will stretch many years into the future under some of the headings that we are providing for. My worry is that the EU will be the main driver in deciding what the bill is because there is not a satisfactory dispute resolution procedure. That means that the EU could levy the bill, saying that it is European law and that it knows best what we should be paying. We have to be extremely careful.

If the Bill does make any progress tonight—that is not looking very likely from some of the things people are saying—I hope that there will be considerable concentration in Committee on whether there are mechanisms for having better discipline over the money, because we voted to take back control of the money. I want some of that money for hospitals, schools and other public facilities in my constituency, and I hope that many other Members of Parliament take the same view. It would be very galling indeed if we found that we were technically out of the European Union but were still paying it a great deal of money.

I approach this agreement in a spirit of disappointment, but I think the Prime Minister was deeply damaged and undermined by the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act 2019, which greatly reduced the bargaining leverage of the United Kingdom Government, and I think people recognise that. It is strange that that legislation, which might as well be renamed the “breaking the Prime Minister’s promises” Act, is permissible because surely we either have confidence in our Government and in the Prime Minister to be able to keep his word, or we do not have confidence in our Government collectively, in which case we can get a different Government. This Prime Minister has said that he will take us out on 31 October. There is a lot of support for that in the country, and I hope that we can find a way to make it take place. The Prime Minister has said that we would preferably leave with a deal, but that if we cannot get a decent deal we will leave without a so-called deal.

I think the language is totally misleading. There is no such thing as a no-deal Brexit. There is either leaving and signing a withdrawal agreement or leaving and not signing a withdrawal agreement. Were we to leave not signing a withdrawal agreement, there is an aviation agreement and a Government purchasing agreement, there are haulage and customs arrangements, and there is a general agreement on facilitation of trade through the WTO, so we would have a managed WTO exit, which I think would work extremely well.

I want to spend that money in Britain to promote growth and a stronger economy. I want the free trade agreements that I think we might be able to generate with the rest of the world. If we just left, the EU would want to negotiate a free trade agreement with us, but all the time it thinks it has a chance of our not leaving it is not going to offer anything or be positive about that, because it thinks it might, from its point of view, do something better.