

My speech in the EU Withdrawal Agreement debate

edited text

I know that numerous Members, particularly on the Conservative side, are finding this a very difficult decision to make, so perhaps I could briefly explain how I have gone about trying to reach my difficult conclusion.□

The first thing I asked myself was: what do my voters in Wokingham want me to do? Where they have a very strong majority for a certain conclusion, I would need an extremely good reason to disagree with them. It is quite clear from all those who have communicated with me—talked to me, sent me emails—that there is a very big majority in Wokingham against accepting this agreement. It has brought together people who voted remain and people who voted leave. They have come to the same conclusion—they would like a different outcome afterwards, but they have come to the same conclusion: this is not an agreement that the United Kingdom should in any circumstances sign up to. The national polling reflects this, so this is a matter of interest to all Members. The agreement has somewhere between 15% and 25% support—on a very good day in a favourable poll—meaning that roughly four out of five people have considered it and think it a very bad idea. I would urge all to bear that in mind before they cast their vote this afternoon.

The second thing I asked myself was: what have I and my party promised my electors in Wokingham and the wider electorate in the United Kingdom whom we serve? I and the national manifesto in 2017, which gave me my mandate, said that we would see Brexit through, that it would take two years after the formal notification had been received, that no deal was better than a bad deal. Of course we would do our best to get a really good deal, which was our preference. The manifesto of the national Conservative party wisely said that the Government would negotiate both parts together—that any withdrawal issues would be negotiated in parallel with the future trading arrangement and future partnership.

How wise that was! At that point, the Government and our leader understood that compromises would be made and that, if they were to make concessions in the withdrawal bit, they would want the good news in the partnership bit to be nailed down at the same time. Unfortunately, the Government changed their mind about that shortly after the general election. That has let the public down, because it means that we have not used the purchase of all the concessions they made in the withdrawal agreement to gain what they thought was needed in the future partnership agreement. I feel very bad about that. I have to say to my electors that in order to get closer to what I and the Government promised, I must say no to half the total agreement (the half we are voting on today) as it is so obviously weighted very strongly against the United Kingdom and our interests.

Then I come to the third thing. My electors elected me to exercise my judgment. They expect me to read all the documents, understand the background and study major matters for myself. On this happy occasion, their view and my view coincide. I have studied all the documents and closely followed the negotiations. I have offered a great deal of advice to the Prime Minister and her team. Much of it, I am afraid, has not been taken, and thus we are where we are, as the Attorney General said. My study of the documents tells me that the withdrawal agreement is not leaving the EU. Were it to pass, it would be followed by an extremely bad piece of legislation recreating all the powers of the EU and applying them to us for a period of between two and four years. We will not even be told for how long because that is in the gift of the EU and the negotiations.□

We might also have to accept lots of rules and trading arrangements in perpetuity because of the most unfortunate Irish backstop, which has been placed in the agreement. Since none of us wants to break up our country, the only way to fulfil the requirements of this solemn treaty would be for the whole United Kingdom to stay in all the arrangements the EU demanded. The agreement would mean that for at least two years, and maybe four years, the EU could legislate in any way it saw fit over an extremely wide range of issues—not just relating to business and trade—and this House of Commons would have no voice, no vote and no right to do anything other than implement it faithfully and fully without our amending it or even complaining through a reputable mechanism.

I do not see how anyone could possibly inflict that upon a great country that has recently voted to be sovereign and take back control. I do not see how this House could possibly vote for this agreement when it has open-ended financial commitments on an enormous scale. The Treasury has—optimistically, I think—priced them at a pretty big £39 billion, but there are no numbers in the agreement, no agreement about the bills that would be set. There is also a mechanism that allows the EU to send us bills under very broad headings and a referee system to deal with disagreements that is heavily weighted in favour of the EU and under which any legal matters would be resolved by the European Court of Justice.

Who on earth would agree to pay unlimited unknown bills without genuinely independent arbitration over their purpose? When will the Government give us any purpose for offering to pay all this money? They are in this absurd position because of the way they have handled the negotiation, of having decided to pay the money without securing any goods or services in return. When I go shopping, I do not put £39 on the counter and say to the shop owner, “That is your money whatever happens next. Now can we for the next 21 months discuss whether you will let me have anything in return for my £39?”, but that unfortunately is what we are being asked to approve in this agreement this afternoon.

In conclusion, for me it turns out to be an easy decision. I am sorry that for a lot of my right hon. and hon. Friends it is not so easy. I never find it easy to vote against the Government I want to support. In this Parliament, I have very rarely done so, but on this issue I have voted against the Government before and will vote against them again this afternoon, because it

is a dreadful agreement. It is a fully binding treaty with no exit clause. We would not be able to get out of it. There would be requirement after requirement. We will have subcontracted our legislation to someone we cannot control and would have to obey and we will have offered to pay them a lot of money for no obvious good reason.