

News story: Opening statement on Second Reading of EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill

Mr Speaker, I beg to move that the Bill be read a second time.

This Bill responds directly to the Supreme Court Judgment of 24 January and seeks to honour the commitment the Government gave to respect the outcome of the referendum held on 23 June last year.

It is not a Bill about whether the UK should leave the EU, or indeed how it should do so. It is simply about Parliament empowering the Government to implement a decision already made, a point of no return already passed. We asked the people of the UK if they wanted to leave the European Union; they decided they did.

So at the core of this Bill lies a very simple question: do we trust the people or not?

The democratic mandate is clear: the electorate voted for a Government to give them a referendum; Parliament then voted to hold that referendum; the people voted in that referendum and we are now honouring the result of that referendum, as we said we would.

So this is the most straightforward possible Bill necessary to enact the referendum result and respect the Supreme Court's judgment. Indeed, the House of Commons has already overwhelmingly passed a motion to support the triggering of Article 50 by 31 March. We will respect the will of the people and implement their decision by 31 March.

Sub-section 1 of clause 1 simply confers on the Prime Minister the power to notify, under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the European Union.

Sub-section 2 of clause 1 is included to make it clear that the power to trigger Article 50 may be conferred on the Prime Minister regardless of any restrictions in other legislation, including in particular the European Communities Act of 1972.

Together these clear and succinct powers will allow the Prime Minister to begin the process of withdrawal from the European Union, respecting the decision of the Supreme Court. And this is just the beginning, the beginning of a process to ensure that the decision made by the people last June is honoured.

I would like to draw Hon. Members' attention to the Explanatory Notes of the Bill, which set out the application of the Bill to Euratom. The Bill also gives the Prime Minister the power to start the process to leave Euratom.

The Bill also makes clear that in invoking Article 50, we will be leaving Euratom, the agency established by treaty to ensure cooperation on nuclear matters, as well as leaving the European Union. This is because, although Euratom was established in a treaty separate to European Union agreements and treaties, it uses the same institutions as the European Union including the Court of Justice. That is why the 2008 EU Amendment Act makes clear that, in UK law, membership of the European Union includes Euratom. And it is why Article 50 applies to both the European Union and Euratom.

Our aims are clear – we will maintain the closest possible nuclear cooperation with the European Union. That relationship could take a number of different forms and will be of course subject to negotiation, which will start after we have notified.

The Prime Minister has set out a bold and ambitious vision for the UK, outlining our key negotiating objectives as we move to establish a comprehensive new partnership with the European Union. This will be a partnership that is in the best interests of the whole of the United Kingdom, and we will continue to work with the Devolved Administrations to make sure that the voices of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland continue to be heard throughout the negotiation process.

I made a statement to this House on the 17 January about the negotiations ahead of us, and I do not propose to repeat it, save to say that our aim is to take this opportunity for the United Kingdom to emerge from this period of change stronger, fairer, more united and more outward-looking than ever before.

I also set out our 12 objectives for those negotiations. They are:

- to deliver certainty and clarity where we can
- to take control of our own laws
- to protect and strengthen the Union
- to maintain the Common Travel Area with the Republic of Ireland
- to control immigration
- to protect the rights of EU nationals in the UK and UK nationals in the European Union
- to protect workers' rights
- to allow free trade with European markets
- to forge new trade deals with other countries
- to boost science and innovation
- to protect and enhance cooperation over crime, terrorism and security and to make our exit smooth and orderly

In due course, the Government will be publishing our plan for exit in a White Paper in this House and the other place.

On 17 January, the Prime Minister also made it clear that this House and the other place will have a vote on the deal the Government negotiates with the EU before it comes into force. Ahead of that, Parliament will have a key role in scrutinising and shaping the decisions made, through debate in both Houses, plus the work of select committees, including the Brexit Select

Committee whose chairman is actually in the chamber today.

Government ministers will continue to provide regular updates to Parliament. Further, since our proposal is to shift the 'acquis' – the body of EU law – into UK law at the point this country leaves the EU, it will be for Parliament to determine any changes to our domestic legislation in the national interest.

But as the Prime Minister said, to disclose all the details as we negotiate is not in the best interests of this country. Indeed, I have said all along that we will lay out as much detail of our strategy as possible subject to the caveat that it does not damage our negotiating position. This approach has been endorsed by this House a number of times.

I turn now to the reasoned amendment tabled by the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson).

As I have already said, this Bill simply seeks to deliver the outcome of the Referendum, a decision that the people of the UK have already made. They will view any attempt to halt its progress dimly.

The Supreme Court's judgment last week made clear that foreign affairs are reserved to the UK Government. The devolved legislatures do not have a veto on the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union. But that doesn't mean we haven't paid a great deal of attention to them.

We have consistently engaged with the Devolved Administrations through the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiation) and the Joint Ministerial Committee (Plenary), the second of which met yesterday in Cardiff and was attended by the First Ministers of all of the Devolved Administrations.

As well as that there have been bilateral meetings with those Devolved Administrations independent to those hearings, and 79 official level meetings to discuss the interests of each of the Devolved Administrations.

The Prime Minister has committed to bring forward a White Paper setting out the Government's plan, and I confirm this will be published in the near future.

Guaranteeing UK citizens' rights in the EU, and EU citizens' rights in the UK, is one of the objectives set out by the Prime Minister. We have been and remain ready to reach such a deal now if other countries agree.

Finally, there has been continual parliamentary scrutiny of the Government on this process. I have made five oral statements in the House of Commons and there have been more than 10 debates – including four in Government time – and over 30 Select Committee inquiries. We will of course continue to support Parliament in its scrutiny role as we reach the negotiating stage.

We have been clear that there must be no attempts to remain inside the European Union, no attempts to rejoin it through the back door, and no second referendum. The country voted to leave the European Union, and it is the duty of the Government to make sure we do just that.

Finally, we remain committed to the timetable the Prime Minister has set to trigger Article 50 by no later than the 31 March. While we will provide plenty of time for debate and scrutiny of this Bill, it is equally vital that Honourable and Rt Honourable Members move swiftly to adopt this legislation in keeping with the Prime Minister's timetable for triggering Article 50 by the end of March – a timetable that this House voted in favour of in December and that is providing certainty both at home and in the Europe Union.

I conclude by saying this: the eyes of the nation are on this chamber as we consider this Bill. For many years, there has been a creeping sense in the country – and not just this country – that politicians say one thing, and do another.

We voted to give the people the chance to determine our future in a referendum, now we must honour our side of the agreement: to vote to deliver on the result.

So really we are considering that very simple question: do we trust the people or not? For generations, my party has done so. Now that question is before every member of this House.

This Bill provides the power for the Prime Minister to begin that process and honour the decision made by the people of the United Kingdom on 23 June last year, and I commend it to the House. Trust the people.