

Parliamentary votes on the EU Withdrawal Bill

The government has won all but one of the votes on the Bill. The most important vote, the one to approve Clause 1 which repeals the 1972 European Communities Act, passed by 318 to 68, as Labour accepted they needed to allow the repeal to permit Brexit.

On Wednesday Amendment 7 passed against the government's wishes. The argument was one of detail, not of principle. Both government and its critics accepted that Parliament is back in charge over Brexit. Both accepted that any UK/EU Agreement which might be reached should be voted on in Parliament. If Parliament is content with such an Agreement it will then need primary legislation to bring it into effect.

So why was there a disagreement at all? The opposition did not accept Ministerial assurances, and wanted to write their own text into the Bill to reflect the common understanding. The government offered to produce a compromise at Report stage, but Parliament wanted to get on with it.

Underlying this fairly technical debate was a series of other agendas. The Liberal Democrats openly seek to delay and disrupt Brexit as they wish to reverse the public decision. Many Remain supporting Labour MPs want to slow down and water down Brexit because they do not really accept the judgement of the people. Practically every Labour MP would like to defeat the government, as that is a usual wish of Oppositions. Conservative MPs who voted similarly can best make their own case as to why they did so.

There is now discussion of the government amendment to place the date of exit in the Bill. I hope the government do continue with this amendment, and work to ensure its passage. I recommend it for a reason which ought to appeal to most MPs, whether Remain or Leave voters. We need the date in the Bill to ensure legal continuity. Parliament passed legislation to notify the EU of our withdrawal under Article 50. That Article makes clear we will leave automatically on 29 March 2019, two years from the letter. It is therefore vital that we have in place a proper legal framework for that event.

Labour MPs now say that we might instead request the permission of the other 27 to stay in the EU for longer, to assist the negotiations. It is difficult to see why we would be able to negotiate a good deal on April 1st 2019 that we had not negotiated in the 2 years since we sent the letter. It is important not to hold out the idea of delay to slow down the talks. Nor should we assume that the other 27 would all individually consent to the UK staying in on current terms for a further period to try to get a better deal.

This would be a more difficult vote for Labour MPs to oppose, given that it is central to ensuring legal certainty and confirming EU employment law for example in UK law. Given also the enthusiasm of the government's critics for Parliamentary democracy, surely our leaving date is worthy of primary

legislation.