

PM statement in the House of Commons: 19 October 2019

Mr Speaker, I want to begin by echoing what you've just said, my gratitude to all members of the House for assembling on a Saturday for the first time in 37 years and indeed to all members of the House of Commons staff who have worked to make this possible.

I know this has meant people giving up their Saturdays, breaking into their weekends at a time when families want to be together, and of course it means missing at least the end of England's World Cup quarter final.

I apologise to the House for that and I wish I could watch it myself.

I know the Honourable Member for Cardiff West has postponed his 60th birthday party – if not his 60th birthday – to be here.

So Mr Speaker the House has gone to a great deal of trouble to assemble here on a Saturday for the first time in a generation.

And I do hope for the purposes of a meaningful vote that we will indeed be allowed to have a meaningful vote this evening.

And with permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the new agreement with our European friends.

The House will need no reminding that this is the second deal and the fourth vote, three and half years after the nation voted for Brexit.

And during those years, friendships have been strained, families divided and the attention of this House consumed by a single issue that has at times felt incapable of resolution.

But I hope Mr Speaker, that this is the moment when we can finally achieve that resolution and reconcile the instincts that compete within us.

Many times in the last 30 years I have heard our European friends remark that this country is half-hearted in its EU membership and it is true that we in the UK have often been a backmarker opting out of the single currency, not taking part in Schengen, very often trying to block some collective ambition.

And in the last three years and a half years it has been striking that members on all sides of this House have debated Brexit in almost entirely practical terms in an argument that has focused on the balance of economic risk and advantage.

And I don't think I can recall a time when I have heard a single member stand up and call for Britain to play her full part in the political construction of a federal Europe.

I don't think I've heard a single member call for an ever closer union or ever deeper integration or a federal destiny – mon pays Europe – perhaps I've missed it but I don't think I've heard much of it Mr Speaker.

And there is a whole side of that debate that you hear regularly in other European capitals that is simply absent from our national conversation and I don't think that has changed much in the last 30 years.

But if we have been sceptical, and if we have been anxious about the remoteness of the bureaucracy, if we have been dubious about the rhetoric of union and integration, if we have been half-hearted Europeans,

Then it follows logically that with part of our hearts, with half our hearts, we feel something else, a sense of love and respect for European culture and civilisation of which we are a part; a desire to cooperate with our friends and partners in everything, creatively, artistically, intellectually.

A sense of our shared destiny and a deep understanding of the eternal need – especially after the horrors of the last century – for Britain to stand as one of the guarantors of peace and democracy in our continent.

And it is our continent. And it is precisely because we are capable of feeling both things at once – sceptical about the modes of EU integration as we are but passionate and enthusiastic about Europe – that the whole experience of the last few years has been so difficult for this country and so divisive.

And that is why it is now so urgent for us to move on and build a new relationship with our friends in the EU on the basis of a new deal – a deal that can heal the rift in British politics, unite the warring instincts in us all.

And now is the time for this great House of Commons to come together and bring the country together today as I believe people at home are hoping and expecting, with a new way forward and a new and better deal both for Britain and our friends in the EU, and that is the advantage of the agreement that we have struck with our friends in the last two days.

Because this new deal allows the UK – whole and entire – to leave the EU on October 31st in accordance with the referendum while simultaneously looking forward to a new partnership based on the closest ties of friendship and co-operation.

And I pay tribute to our European friends for escaping the prison of existing positions and showing the vision to be flexible by re-opening the Withdrawal Agreement and thereby addressing the deeply felt concerns of many in this House.

And one of my most important jobs is to express those concerns to our European friends.

I shall continue to listen to all Honourable Members throughout the debate today, to meet with anyone on any side and to welcome the scrutiny the House

will bring to bear if – as I hope – we proceed to consider the Withdrawal Agreement Bill next week.

Today this House has an historic opportunity to show the same breadth of vision as our European neighbours.

The same ability and resolve to reach beyond past disagreements by getting Brexit done and moving this country forwards, as we all yearn to do.

This agreement provides for a real Brexit, taking back control of our borders, laws, money, farming, fisheries and trade, amounting to the greatest single restoration of national sovereignty in Parliamentary history.

It removes the backstop which would have held us against our will in the Customs Union and much of the Single Market.

For the first time in almost five decades the UK will be able to strike free trade deals with our friends across the world to benefit the whole country – including Northern Ireland.

Article 4 of the Protocol states: “Northern Ireland is part of the customs territory of the United Kingdom”.

It adds “nothing in this Protocol shall prevent” Northern Ireland from realising the preferential market access in any free trade deals “on the same terms as goods produced in other parts of the United Kingdom.”

Our negotiations have focused on the uniquely sensitive nature of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

And we have respected those sensitivities.

Above all, we and our European friends have preserved the letter and the spirit of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and upheld the long-standing areas of co-operation between the UK and Ireland, including the Common Travel Area.

And as I told the House on 3rd October, in order to prevent a regulatory border on the island of Ireland we proposed a regulatory zone covering all goods, including agrifood, eliminating any need for associated checks along the border.

And Mr Speaker, in this agreement we have gone further by also finding a solution to the vexed question of customs, which many in this House have raised.

Our agreement ensures – and I quote – “unfettered market access for goods moving from Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom’s internal market.”

It ensures that there should be no tariffs on goods circulating within the UK customs territory, that is between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, unless they are at risk of entering the EU.

It ensures an open border on the island of Ireland, a common objective of everyone in this House.

And it ensures that for those living and working alongside the border there will be no visible or practical changes to their lives – they can carry on as before.

I believe this is a good arrangement, reconciling the special circumstances in Northern Ireland with the minimum possible bureaucratic consequences at a few points of arrival into Northern Ireland.

And it is precisely to ensure that those arrangements are acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland that we have made consent a fundamental element of this new deal.

So no arrangements can be imposed on Northern Ireland if they do not work for Northern Ireland.

The people of Northern Ireland will have the right under this agreement to express or withhold their consent to these provisions, by means of a majority vote in their Assembly four years after the end of the transition.

And if the Assembly chooses to withhold consent, these provisions “shall cease to apply” after two years, during which the Joint Committee of the UK and EU would propose a new way forward, in concert with Northern Ireland’s institutions.

And as soon as this House allows the process of extracting ourselves from the EU to be completed, the exciting enterprise of building our new relationship with our friends can begin which has been too long delayed.

And Mr Speaker, I do not wish this to be the project of any one Government or any one party but rather the endeavour of the United Kingdom as a whole.

Only this Parliament can make this new relationship the work of the nation.

And so Parliament should be at the heart of decision-making as we develop our approach.

And I acknowledge that in the past we have not always acted in that spirit.

So as we take forward our friendship with our closest neighbours and construct that new relationship

I will ensure that a broad and open process draws upon the wealth of expertise in every part of this House including select committees and their chairs.

Every party and every Member who wishes to contribute will be invited to do so.

And we shall start by debating the mandate for our negotiators in the next phase.

Mr Speaker, the ambition for our future friendship is contained in the revised Political Declaration which also provides for this House to be free to decide our own laws and regulations.

I have complete faith in this House to choose regulations that are in our best tradition of the highest standards of environmental protections and workers' rights.

No one anywhere in this chamber believes in lowering standards, instead we believe in improving them as indeed we will be able to do and seizing the opportunities of our new freedoms.

For example, free from the Common Agricultural Policy, we will have a far simpler system where we will reward farmers for improving our environment and animal welfare many of whose provisions are impossible under the current arrangements, instead of just paying them for their acreage.

And free from the Common Fisheries Policy, we can ensure sustainable yields based on the latest science not outdated methods of setting quotas.

And these restored powers will be available not simply to this Government but to every future British Government of any party to use as they see fit.

That is what restoring sovereignty means, that is what is meant in practice by taking back control of our destiny.

And our first decision, on which I believe there will be unanimity is that in any future trade negotiations with any country our National Health Service will not be on the table.

Mr Speaker, I am convinced that an overwhelming majority in this House, regardless of our personal views, wishes to see Brexit delivered in accordance with the referendum. A majority.

And in this crucial mission there can no longer be any argument for further delay.

As someone who passionately believed that we had to go back to our European friends to seek a better agreement,

I must tell the House that with this new deal the scope for fruitful negotiation has run its course.

They said that we couldn't re-open the Withdrawal Agreement, Mr Speaker, they said we couldn't change a comma of the Withdrawal Agreement, they said we couldn't abolish the backstop, Mr Speaker, we've done both.

But it is now my judgement that we have reached the best possible solution.

So those who agree, like me that Brexit must be delivered and who – like me – prefer to avoid a no deal outcome, must abandon the delusion that this House can delay again.

And I must tell the House in all candour that there is very little appetite among our friends in the EU for this business to be protracted by one extra day.

They have had three and a half years of this debate.

It has distracted them from their own projects and their own ambitions and if there is one feeling that unites the British public with a growing number of the officials of the EU it is a burning desire to get Brexit done.

and I must tell the House again in all candour that whatever letters they may seek to force the government to write, it cannot change my judgment that further delay is pointless, expensive and deeply corrosive of public trust.

And people simply will not understand how politicians can say with one breath that they want delay to avoid no deal and then with the next breath that they still want delay when a great deal is there to be done.

Now is the time Mr Speaker to get this thing done, and I say to all members let us come together as democrats to end this debilitating feud.

Let us come together as democrats behind this deal, the one proposition that fulfils the verdict of the majority but which also allows us to bring together the two halves of our hearts, to bring together the two halves of our nation.

Let's speak now both for the 52 and the 48.

Let us go for a deal that can heal this country, let's go for a deal that can heal this country and allow us all to express our legitimate desires for the deepest possible friendship and partnership with our neighbours

A deal that allows us to create a new shared destiny with them.

And a deal that also allows us to express our confidence in our own democratic institutions, to make our own laws, to determine our own future, to believe in ourselves once again as an open, generous global, outward-looking and free-trading United Kingdom.

That is the prospect that this deal offers our country.

It is a great prospect and a great deal, and I commend it to the House.