

Second referendum

A number of constituents have contacted me about a second referendum. If I thought another vote could produce an answer the majority were happy with and which the rest would accept I would be tempted. I have given this considerable thought but have come down against supporting one for a variety of good reasons. A second referendum would increase divisions and undermine trust in the democratic process.

This issue was raised prominently in the 2017 General election by the Lib Dems. Both nationally and locally they argued for a second referendum. The national Conservative party, the national Labour party, the local Labour candidate and myself argued against. I do not normally change my mind on a promise made to my electors in a General election, and would need a very good reason to do so. In some cases where a voter was keen on a second referendum and said they could not live with the referendum result I told them they should not vote for me because I did wish to honour the national referendum result and thought a second referendum would be divisive.

It is difficult to know what question would be asked in a second referendum. Leave voters would resent the idea that they had to answer the same question twice. Nothing has changed since 2016. The arguments today are still the same as they were during the long and detailed referendum campaign examination. I was made to spend much of the time during the referendum debating customs unions, Norway and Swiss models, regulatory alignment and all the other matters that have dominated Parliament for 3 years now. The government leaflet to all households explained that leaving the EU meant leaving the single market and customs union, and the government forecast in graphic detail why it thought that would be a bad idea. Its short term economic forecasts for the first couple of years after a No vote proved to be wildly too pessimistic. I suspect Leave would win the same referendum again. If by any chance they did not, why would Leave voters be any more accepting of the second vote than some Remain MPs have been of the first vote? It would add more rancour and division to an already difficult situation. The cry would go up from many Leave supporters " Let's make it the best of three. "

Some say they want a referendum on the question of accepting Mrs May's Withdrawal Agreement or staying in. That is clearly a different question to Leave or remain. The problem with that is it does not offer the 17.4 m Leave voters anything to vote for, as most of us do not regard the Withdrawal Agreement as leaving. It is a Delay Agreement, keeping us in the EU without vote or voice for 21 to 45 months with a very uncertain future still to be negotiated. Were that to come about I suspect most Leave voters would simply write Leave on their ballot papers, resulting in a likely win for spoilt papers and a massive problem for Parliament trying to interpret the result.

You could have a second referendum asking the public to say would they want to sign the Withdrawal Agreement or leave without signing it. That is a new question, respects the results of the first referendum and gives Leave voters a clear choice they will like. I suspect that most advocates of the second

referendum would not favour that choice, as they usually tell me they want Remain on the ballot paper.

That leaves the possibility of a three way choice between Leave without the Agreement, sign the Agreement or Remain with full EU membership. This does not fully respect the results of the last referendum. It makes it very likely that the winning proposition has considerably less than 50% of the vote. Given the passions on this issue I would not wish us to implement a minority decision disliked by two of the three groupings in such a referendum. The organisation of a three way campaign with three official teams would also be more complex than the usual binary choice approach.

For these reasons I do not recommend a second vote on this topic. I think we need to move on. I want to concentrate on the issues of schools, social care, planning and highways that have a daily impact on my constituents lives. I want to help lift the indecision and uncertainty the delay of Brexit is causing.