

Speech: PM statement on European Council: 11 April 2019

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a Statement on yesterday's European Council.

But before I do, I am sure that the whole House will welcome the news this morning that the Metropolitan Police have arrested Julian Assange for breach of bail, after nearly seven years in the Ecuadorian Embassy. He has also been arrested in relation to an extradition request from the United States authorities.

This is now a legal matter before the courts. My Right Honourable Friend the Home Secretary will make a Statement on this later, but I would like to thank the Metropolitan Police for carrying out their duties with great professionalism and to welcome the co-operation of the Ecuadorian government in bringing this matter to a resolution.

Mr Speaker, this goes to show that in the United Kingdom, no one is above the law.

Turning to the Council, my priority is to deliver Brexit – and to do so in an orderly way that does not disrupt people's lives.

So I continue to believe we need to leave the European Union with a deal as soon as possible.

And of course, this House has voted repeatedly to avoid a No Deal.

Yet despite the efforts of Members on all sides, we have not so far been able to vote for a deal.

So ahead of the Council, I wrote to President Tusk to seek a short extension to the Article 50 period to 30th June.

Critically, I also requested that any extension should be terminable – so that whenever this House agrees a deal and ratifies the Withdrawal Agreement, we can get on and leave.

And I did this not merely to avoid a further delay beyond ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement – but specifically to retain our ability to leave the EU without having to hold European Parliamentary elections on the 23rd May.

Mr Speaker, the discussions at the Council were difficult and unsurprisingly many of our European partners share the deep frustration that I know so many of us feel in this House over the current impasse.

There was a range of views about the length of an extension with a large number of Member States preferring a longer extension to the end of this year or even into the next.

In the end what was agreed by the UK and the EU27 was a compromise – an extension lasting until the end of October.

The Council also agreed that we would update on our progress at the next meeting in June.

Critically – as I requested – the Council agreed that this extension can be terminated when the Withdrawal Agreement has been ratified.

So, for example, if we were to pass a deal by 22nd May, we would not have to take part in European elections. And when the EU has also ratified, we would be able to leave at 11pm on 31st May.

In short, the date of our departure from the EU – and our participation in the European Parliamentary Elections – remains a decision for this House.

As President Tusk said last night: “During this time, the course of action will be entirely in the UK’s hands.”

In agreeing this extension, there was some discussion in the Council about whether stringent conditions should be imposed on the UK for its EU membership during this period.

But I argued against this.

I put the case that there is only a single tier of EU membership, with no conditionality attached beyond existing treaty obligations.

The Council conclusions are clear that during the course of the extension the UK will continue to hold full membership rights.

In turn, I assured my fellow leaders that the UK will continue to be bound by all our ongoing obligations as a Member State, including the duty of sincere co-operation.

The United Kingdom plays a responsible and constructive role on the world stage – and we always will.

That is the kind of country we are.

The choices we face are stark and the timetable is clear.

I believe we must now press on at pace with our efforts to reach a consensus on a deal that is in the national interest.

I welcome the discussions that have taken place with the Opposition in recent days – and the further talks which are resuming today.

This is not the normal way of British politics – and it is uncomfortable for many in both the Government and Opposition parties.

Reaching an agreement will not be easy, because to be successful it will require both sides to make compromises.

But however challenging it may be politically, I profoundly believe that in this unique situation where the House is deadlocked, it is incumbent on both front benches to seek to work together to deliver what the British people voted for. And I think that the British people expect their politicians to do just that when the national interest demands it.

I hope that we can reach an agreement on a single unified approach that we can put to the House for approval.

But if we cannot do so soon, then we will seek to agree a small number of options for the future relationship that we will put to the House in a series of votes to determine which course to pursue.

And as I have made clear before, the Government stands ready to abide by the decision of the House. But to make this process work, the Opposition would need to agree to this too.

With the House's consent, we could also bring forward the Withdrawal Agreement Bill – which is a necessary element of any deal, whichever course we take.

This Bill will take time to pass through both Houses, so if we want to get on with leaving, we need to start this process soon.

And it could also provide a useful forum to resolve some of the outstanding issues in the future relationship.

Crucially, Mr Speaker, any agreement on the future relationship may involve a number of additions and clarifications to the Political Declaration.

So I am pleased that at this Council, all 27 Member States responded to my update on the ongoing cross-party talks by agreeing that – “the European Council is prepared to reconsider the Political Declaration on the future relationship in accordance with the positions and principles stated in its guidelines and statements.”

The Council also reiterated that the Withdrawal Agreement itself could not be reopened.

Mr Speaker, I know the whole country is intensely frustrated that this process to leave the European Union has not still been completed.

I never wanted to seek this extension – and I deeply regret that we have not yet been able to secure agreement in this House for a deal that would allow us to leave in a smooth and orderly way.

I know too that this whole debate is putting Members on all sides of the House under immense pressure and causing uncertainty across the country.

And we need to resolve this.

So let us use the opportunity of the Recess to reflect on the decisions that will have to be made swiftly on our return after Easter. And let us then

resolve to find a way through this impasse.

So that we can leave the European Union with a deal as soon as possible.

So that we can avoid having to hold those European Parliamentary elections.

And above all, so that we can fulfil the democratic decision of the Referendum, deliver Brexit and move our country forward.

This is our national duty as elected members of this House – and nothing today is more pressing or more vital.

And I commend this Statement to the House.