

Speech: PM's Brexit speech in Stoke-on-Trent: 14 January 2019

Tomorrow, Members of Parliament will cast their votes on the Withdrawal Agreement on the terms of our departure from the European Union and the Political Declaration on our future relationship.

That vote in Westminster is a direct consequence of the votes that were cast by people here in Stoke, and in cities, towns and villages in every corner of the United Kingdom.

In June 2016, the British people were asked by MPs to take a decision: should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or should we leave?

In that campaign, both sides disagreed on many things, but on one thing they were united: what the British people decided, the politicians would implement.

In the run-up to the vote, the government sent a leaflet to every household making the case for remain. It stated very clearly: 'This is your decision. The government will implement what you decide.'

Those were the terms on which people cast their votes.

If a majority had backed remain, the UK would have continued as an EU member state.

No doubt the disagreements would have continued too, but the vast majority of people would have had no truck with an argument that we should leave the EU in spite of a vote to remain or that we should return to the question in another referendum.

On the rare occasions when Parliament puts a question to the British people directly we have always understood that their response carries a profound significance.

When the people of Wales voted by a margin of 0.3%, on a turnout of just over 50%, to endorse the creation of the Welsh Assembly, that result was accepted by Parliament.

Indeed we have never had a referendum in the United Kingdom that we have not honoured the result of.

Parliament understood this fact when it voted overwhelmingly to trigger Article 50.

And both major parties did so too when they stood on election manifestos in 2017 that pledged to honour the result of the referendum.

Yet, as we have seen over the last few weeks, there are some in Westminster

who would wish to delay or even stop Brexit and who will use every device available to them to do so.

I ask them to consider the consequences of their actions on the faith of the British people in our democracy.

The House of Commons did not say to the people of Scotland or Wales that despite voting in favour of a devolved legislature, Parliament knew better and would over-rule them. Or else force them to vote again.

What if we found ourselves in a situation where Parliament tried to take the UK out of the EU in opposition to a remain vote?

People's faith in the democratic process and their politicians would suffer catastrophic harm.

We all have a duty to implement the result of the referendum.

Ever since I reached an agreement with the EU on a Withdrawal Agreement and declaration on our future relationship I have argued that the consequences of Parliament rejecting it would be grave uncertainty – potentially leading to one of two outcomes.

Either a 'no deal' Brexit, that would cause turbulence for our economy, create barriers to security cooperation and disrupt people's daily lives.

Or the risk of no Brexit at all – for the first time in our history failing to implement the outcome of a statutory referendum and letting the British people down.

These alternatives both remain in play if the deal is rejected.

There are differing views on the threat that a no deal exit poses.

I have always believed that while we could ultimately make a success of no deal, it would cause significant disruption in the short term and it would be far better to leave with a good deal.

Others in the House of Commons take a different view and regard no deal as the ultimate threat to be avoided at all costs.

To those people I say this: the only ways to guarantee we do not leave without a deal are: to abandon Brexit, betraying the vote of the British people; or to leave with a deal, and the only deal on the table is the one MPs will vote on tomorrow night.

You can take no deal off the table by voting for that deal. And if no deal is as bad as you believe it is, it would be the height of recklessness to do anything else.

But while no deal remains a serious risk, having observed events at Westminster over the last seven days, it is now my judgment that the more likely outcome is a paralysis in Parliament that risks there being no

Brexit.

That makes it even more important that MPs consider very carefully how they will vote tomorrow night.

As I have said many times – the deal we have agreed is worthy of support for what it achieves for the British people.

Immigration policy back in the hands of people you elect – so we can build a system based around the skills people have to offer this country, not where they come from, and bring the overall numbers down. Sovereign control of our borders.

Decisions about how to spend the money you pay in taxes back under the control of people you elect – so we can spend the vast annual sums we send to Brussels as we chose, on priorities like our long-term plan for the NHS. Sovereign control of our money.

UK laws, not EU laws, governing this country – so the people you elect decide what the law of the land in our country is. Sovereign control of our laws.

Out of the Common Agricultural Policy – with our farmers supported by schemes we design to suit our own needs.

Out of the Common Fisheries Policy – so we decide who fishes in our waters and we can rebuild our fishing fleets for the future.

Retaking our seat at the World Trade Organisation, so we can strike trade deals around the world that work for British businesses and consumers.

The rights of valued EU citizens here guaranteed and reciprocal guarantees for UK citizens across Europe.

The partnerships between our police forces and security services, that protect us every day from threats that know no borders, sustained.

An implementation period that ensures our departure from the EU is smooth and orderly, protecting your jobs.

And yes a guarantee that the people of Northern Ireland can carry on living their lives just as they do now, whatever the future holds.

These are valuable prizes.

The deal honours the vote in the referendum by translating the people's instruction into a detailed and practical plan for a better future.

No one else has put forward an alternative which does this.

Compare that outcome to the alternatives of no deal or no Brexit.

With no deal we would have: no implementation period, no security co-operation, no guarantees for UK citizens overseas, no certainty for businesses and workers here in Stoke and across the UK, and changes to

everyday life in Northern Ireland that would put the future of our Union at risk.

And with no Brexit, as I have said, we would risk a subversion of the democratic process.

We would be sending a message from Westminster to communities like Stoke that your voices do not count.

The way to close-off both of these potential avenues of uncertainty is clear: it is for MPs to back the deal the government has negotiated and move our country forward into the bright future that awaits us.

I have always believed that there is a majority in the House of Commons for a smooth and orderly exit delivered by means of a withdrawal agreement.

That is why the government tabled the motion for the meaningful vote last month.

But it became clear that MPs' concerns about one particular aspect of the deal – the backstop preventing a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland in the event that we cannot reach agreement on our new relationship before the end of the implementation period – meant that there was no prospect of winning the vote.

So I suspended the debate to allow time for further discussions with the EU to address those concerns.

Today I have published the outcome of those discussions in the form of letters between the UK government and the Presidents of the European Commission and European Council.

I listened very carefully to the concerns that MPs from all sides expressed, particularly the concerns of my fellow Unionists from Northern Ireland.

In my discussions with the EU we explored a number of the suggestions made by MPs, both about how the backstop would operate and for how long.

The EU have said throughout that they would not renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement or reopen its text for alteration, and that remained the case throughout my discussions at the December European Council and since.

I also pursued in these discussions a proposal for a fixed date – with legal force – guaranteeing the point at which the future partnership would come into force. Because that is the way to bring an end to the backstop – by agreeing our new relationship.

The EU's position was that – while they never want or expect the backstop to come into force – a legal time limit was not possible.

But while we did not achieve that, we have secured valuable new clarifications and assurances to put before the House of Commons, including on getting our future relationship in place rapidly, so that the backstop

should never need to be used.

We now have a commitment from the EU that work on our new relationship can begin as soon as possible after the signing of the Withdrawal Agreement – in advance of the 29 March – and we have an explicit commitment that this new relationship does not need to replicate the backstop in any respect whatsoever.

We have agreement on a fast-track process to bring the free trade deal we will negotiate into force if there are any delays in member states ratifying it, making it even more likely that the backstop will never need to be used.

We now have absolute clarity on the explicit linkage between the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration, putting beyond doubt that these come as a package.

And finally the EU have confirmed their acceptance that the UK can unilaterally deliver on all the commitments made in our Northern Ireland paper last week, including a Stormont lock on new EU laws being added to the backstop, and a seat at the table for a restored Northern Ireland Executive.

The legal standing of the significant conclusions of the December Council have been confirmed. If the backstop were ever triggered it would only be temporary and both sides would do all they could to bring it to an end as quickly as possible.

The letters published today have legal force and must be used to interpret the meaning of the Withdrawal Agreement, including in any future arbitration.

They make absolutely clear the backstop is not a threat or a trap.

I fully understand that the new legal and political assurances which are contained in the letters from Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker do not go as far as some MPs would like.

But I am convinced that MPs now have the clearest assurances that this is the best deal possible and that it is worthy of their support.

Two other areas of concern raised and reflected in amendments tabled to the meaningful vote were on the protection of workers' rights and on environmental standards.

I could not have been clearer that far from wanting to see a reduction in our standards in these areas, the UK will instead continue to be a world leader.

We have committed to addressing these concerns and will work with MPs from across the House on how best to implement them, looking at legislation where necessary, to deliver the best possible results for workers across the UK.

This afternoon I will set out in greater detail to MPs what is contained in the correspondence I have published today and what it means for our withdrawal.

And tomorrow I will close the debate.

But as we start this crucial week in our country's history let's take a step back and remember both what is at stake and what we stand to gain by coming together behind this agreement.

Settle the question of our withdrawal and we can move on to forging our new relationship.

Back the deal tomorrow, and that work can start on Wednesday.

Fail and we face the risk of leaving without a deal, or the even bigger risk of not leaving at all.

I think the British people are ready for us to move on.

To move beyond division and come together.

To move beyond uncertainty into a brighter future.

That is the chance that MPs of all parties will have tomorrow night.

And for our country's sake, I urge them to take it.

Thank you.