

Speech: Prime Minister's press statement in Strasbourg: 11 March 2019

Last November, after two years of hard-fought negotiations, I agreed a Brexit deal with the EU that I passionately believe delivers on the decision taken by the British people to leave the European Union.

Over the last four months, I have made the case for that deal in Westminster and across the UK.

I stand by what that deal achieves for my country.

It means we regain control of our laws, by ending the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK.

Regain control of our borders, by ending free movement.

Regain control of our money, by ending vast annual payments to the EU.

The end of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy for British farmers and fishermen.

An independent trade policy.

And the deal sets us on course for a good future relationship with our friends and allies in the EU.

A close economic partnership that is good for business.

Ongoing security co-operation to keep our peoples safe.

The deal honours the referendum result and is good for both the UK and the EU.

But there was a clear concern in Parliament over one issue in particular: the Northern Ireland backstop.

Having an insurance policy to guarantee that there will never be a hard border in Northern Ireland is absolutely right – it honours the UK's solemn commitments in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

But if we ever have to use that insurance policy, it cannot become a permanent arrangement and it is not the template for our future relationship.

The deal that MPs voted on in January was not strong enough in making that clear – and legally binding changes were needed to set that right.

Today we have agreed them.

First, a joint instrument with comparable legal weight to the Withdrawal Agreement will guarantee that the EU cannot act with the intent of applying

the backstop indefinitely.

If they do, it can be challenged through arbitration and if they are found to be in breach the UK can suspend the backstop.

The joint instrument also gives a legal commitment that whatever replaces the backstop does not need to replicate it.

And it entrenches in legally-binding form the commitments made in the exchange of letters with Presidents Tusk and Juncker in January.

Second, the UK and the EU have made a joint statement in relation to the Political Declaration.

It sets out a number of commitments to enhance and expedite the process of negotiating and bringing into force the future relationship.

And it makes a legal commitment that the UK and the EU will begin work immediately to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements by the end of December 2020.

There will be a specific negotiating track on alternative arrangements from the very start of the next phase of negotiations.

It will consider facilitations and technologies – both those currently ready and emerging.

The UK's position will be informed by the three domestic groups announced last week – for technical experts, MPs, and business and trade unions.

Third, alongside the joint instrument on the Withdrawal Agreement, the United Kingdom Government will make a Unilateral Declaration that if the backstop comes into use and discussions on our future relationship break down so that there is no prospect of subsequent agreement, it is the position of the United Kingdom that there would be nothing to prevent the UK instigating measures that would ultimately dis-apply the backstop.

Unilateral Declarations are commonly used by states alongside the ratification of treaties.

The Attorney General will set out in legal analysis the meaning of the joint instrument and unilateral declaration to Parliament.

Tomorrow the House of Commons will debate the improved deal that these legal changes have created.

I will speak in more detail about them when I open that debate.

MPs were clear that legal changes were needed to the backstop.

Today we have secured legal changes.

Now is the time to come together, to back this improved Brexit deal, and to deliver on the instruction of the British people.