

Speeches by First Vice-President Frans Timmermans and Michel Barnier on behalf of President Juncker at the Plenary session of the European Parliament on the occasion of the debate on the UK's withdrawal from the EU

First Vice-President Frans Timmermans

Thank you very much, Mr President.

The vote last night in the House of Commons was crystal clear. The Withdrawal Agreement has been rejected. And now we will have to look for a way forward.

The Commission regrets the rejection of the Withdrawal Agreement, as the representative of the Council said, because we do believe this was the best possible outcome. In a situation where two parties were negotiating, looking after their own interest, the Commission negotiated – Michel Barnier did a remarkable job in negotiating on behalf on the 27 –, the British government negotiated on behalf of the United Kingdom – and we do believe that the outcome of that negotiation led to a Withdrawal Agreement which did as little harm as possible.

Nobody should be under any illusion: Brexit does harm. It does harm to the United Kingdom. It does harm to the European Union. And we are under an obligation as politicians to limit the harm to the absolute minimum possible. We do believe the Withdrawal Agreement delivered on that obligation.

Now, I think it is not for us to speculate on what sort of Brexit we will have. We will now have to wait for what is going to happen in the House of Commons, in the United Kingdom, for the position of the British government and the British Parliament, and we will have to take it from there. But we are also under an obligation to make sure that we are prepared for any possible outcome, including a disorganised, no-deal Brexit which would have far-reaching consequences – both for the United Kingdom and for the European Union.

But the Commission will be well-prepared to make sure that we react to any possible outcome. And as the representative of the Council said: We will continue our process of ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement since it was agreed with the United Kingdom government. It is – and remains in our view – the best possible outcome to ensure an orderly withdrawal.

Let me end with a quote by C.S. Lewis: "We cannot go back and change the beginning. But we can start where we are and change the ending".

Thank you.

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Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier

Thank you, Mr President, for giving me the floor.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Members of the Parliament,

Mr First Vice-President,

Madam Secretary of State,

The European Commission takes note of the vote in the House of Commons last night. As said by our First Vice-President Frans Timmermans, the House of Commons voted yesterday with a clear, crystal clear majority against the Withdrawal Agreement which the European Council agreed with the British government in November and which you welcomed as the European Parliament.

Right now, it is too early to assess all the consequences of this vote. We have always respected – and we continue to respect – the democratic parliamentary debate in the UK. And I will not speculate on the different scenarios.

What yesterday's vote showed is that the political conditions for the ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement are not yet there in London. We profoundly regret this vote, as President Juncker has said, and this regret, ladies and gentlemen, is obviously also linked to the intense work we have done together, with you, with your Brexit Steering Group for two years but also with the British government, based on the red lines of the British government and based on the realities of leaving the EU.

Because we constructed this Withdrawal Agreement together with the British government, on an objective basis, taking into account the shared imperative to ensure that there is no border in Ireland, while respecting the UK's wish to preserve the integrity of its customs territory. And we developed, together with the British government, the framework of our future relationship. The European Union wants this relationship to be as close and as ambitious as the UK red lines allow.

We note, ladies and gentlemen, Members of Parliament, listening to public declarations, that the Members of the House of Commons who voted against the deal that was negotiated with us did so – as your President recalled – for different reasons, diverse reasons, sometimes even opposing or contradictory reasons. This vote therefore does not represent a clear majority in the Commons for an alternative proposal to the agreement on the table today.

In this context – as Frans Timmermans said – it is for the British authorities to evaluate this vote and for the government to say how it will proceed towards an orderly withdrawal on 29 March, as the President of the European Council Donald Tusk recalled last night.

Mr President,

Ladies and gentlemen, Members of Parliament,

Contrary to what was said over the past weeks and days, the deal that we reached with the British government – a deal of almost 600 pages – is a good deal. It is obviously the result of a compromise. It is the best possible compromise. And, once again, we worked on this objectively.

This compromise brings legal certainty where Brexit creates uncertainty – like in any separation –:

– Certainty for citizens – British citizens and the citizens of the 27 other Member States – whose rights will be guaranteed in a lasting way. These guarantees were always our priority – your priority, in particular – and the protection of these rights will remain our priority in all circumstances;

– Certainty for the managers of public or private projects, beneficiaries of the European budget – whether they are British (of which there are many) or from the 27 other Member States – whose projects will be maintained thanks to the deal we have;

– Certainty and stability for Ireland and Northern Ireland, where the return to a hard border would be avoided thanks to a solution which preserves, on the one hand, the integrity of the United Kingdom and on the other, the Single Market, while respecting what we have committed to respect: the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement. This is also why, ladies and gentlemen, the backstop which we have agreed with the United Kingdom must remain a backstop and it must remain credible. The backstop must be a backstop; it must be credible.

– Certainty for businesses and administrations, which will have a transition period – the legal basis of which I recall is the Withdrawal Agreement – during which they will have the necessary time to adapt.

This compromise also gives us the time during the transition to negotiate our future relationship on the basis of the political declaration – which we have also agreed between the EU and the British government – and which leaves open the possibility for different options, while respecting our fundamental principles.

But in all circumstances, the ratification of this agreement is necessary. It is a requirement to create mutual trust between us, in view of our second negotiation, which must begin as soon as possible, on our future relationship.

When speaking of this future relationship – which is obviously more important

for the future and for the future of our continent – I would like to recall that your Parliament and the European Council have always said that if the United Kingdom chooses to change its red lines, and to be more ambitious and go beyond a simple free trade deal in our future relationship, then the EU would be ready to immediately support this evolution and respond favourably.

When mentioning this future relationship, Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I am not simply speaking about the economic, trade relationship, which is very important for growth and employment. I am also speaking of all the specific, sectorial cooperation which your committees know well: university cooperation and research, fisheries – an important sector – aviation, transport and many more areas. I speak also of police and judicial cooperation, which we will need after Brexit. Obviously, I am also thinking of the stability of our continent. The United Kingdom, a great country, member of the UN Security Council, an ally and friend, will remain long-term our partner in foreign policy, development cooperation and defence cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have worked collectively for 18 months. This work has been approved at each key moment by the British government, the European Council, and by you, ladies and gentlemen, Members of Parliament, in this European Parliament. As long as we do not have a way out of this current British political impasse, which has the support of a parliamentary majority, we cannot advance. That is why the next steps need to be clearly set out by the British government.

Mr President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

An orderly Brexit remains our absolute priority over the coming weeks. However, as I speak, no scenario can be ruled out. This is particularly true of the scenario which we are trying to avoid: a no-deal scenario. It is 16 January today. We are only 10 weeks away from the end of March, the moment when the UK has chosen to become a third country.

And today, 10 weeks away, the risk of a no deal has never been so high.

Our resolution is to avoid such a scenario, but we also have a responsibility. That is why, on our side, we are intensifying our efforts on our side to deal with this scenario. We – the European Commission, all its services, the Secretariat-General of the Commission– began this work many months ago with the Member States and with you. This work will be accelerated with all partners, all stakeholders who may be called upon to adopt rapidly contingency measures to deal with the consequences of this scenario.

Our conviction is that this compromise that we have found with the British government remains the best compromise possible.

Mr President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thanking you for your trust, I want to tell you that our conviction – as recalled by the First Vice-President Frans Timmermans – is that the compromise that we reached after 18 months remains today the best compromise possible. It is the fruit of constructive work by both parties in this negotiation. It is also the result of a constructive attitude which we will maintain right until the end: calmness, unity, dialogue and transparency. It is now for the British government to clarify how the United Kingdom wishes to proceed in organising the orderly withdrawal which it requested, and how, beyond this orderly withdrawal, it wants to build an ambitious and long-lasting partnership.

Thank you.