

Statement to Parliament: PM statement on Brexit: 15 October 2018

With permission Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House ahead of this week's European Council.

We are entering the final stages of these negotiations.

This is the time for cool, calm heads to prevail.

And it is the time for a clear-eyed focus on the few remaining but critical issues that are still to be agreed.

Yesterday the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union went to Brussels for further talks with Michel Barnier.

There has inevitably been a great deal of inaccurate speculation.

So, I want to set out clearly for the House, the facts as they stand.

First, we have made real progress in recent weeks on both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship.

And I want to pay tribute to both negotiating teams for the many, many hours of hard work that have got us to this point.

In March, we agreed legal text around the implementation period, citizens' rights and the financial settlement.

And we have now made good progress on text concerning the majority of the outstanding issues.

Taken together, the shape of a deal across the vast majority of the withdrawal agreement – the terms of our exit – are now clear.

We also have broad agreement on the structure and scope of the framework for our future relationship, with progress on issues like security, transport and services.

And perhaps, most significantly, we have made progress on Northern Ireland – where, Mr Speaker, the EU have been working with us to respond to the very real concerns we had on their original proposals.

Mr Speaker, let me remind the House why this is so important.

Both the UK and the EU share a profound responsibility to ensure the preservation of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, protecting the hard won peace and stability in Northern Ireland and ensuring that life continues essentially as it does now.

We agree that our future economic partnership should provide for solutions to

the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland in the long term.

And, while we are both committed to ensuring that this future relationship is in place by the end of the implementation period, we accept that there is a chance that there may be a gap between the two.

This is what creates the need for a backstop to ensure that, if such a temporary gap were ever to arise, there would be no hard-border between Northern Ireland and Ireland – or indeed anything that would threaten the integrity of our precious union.

So this backstop is intended to be an insurance policy for people of Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Previously, the European Union had proposed a backstop that would see Northern Ireland carved-off in the EU's customs union and parts of the single market, separated through a border in the Irish Sea from the UK's own internal market.

As I have said many times, I could never accept that, no matter how unlikely such a scenario may be.

Creating any form of customs border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK would mean a fundamental change in the day-to-day experience for businesses in Northern Ireland – with the potential to affect jobs and investment.

We published our proposals on customs in the backstop in June, and after Salzburg, I said we would bring forward our own further proposals – and that is what we have done in these negotiations.

And the European Union have responded positively by agreeing to explore a UK-wide customs solution to this backstop.

But Mr Speaker, two problems remain.

First, the EU says there is not time to work out the detail of this UK-wide solution in the next few weeks.

So even with the progress we have made, the EU still requires a “backstop to the backstop” – effectively an insurance policy for the insurance policy.

And they want this to be the Northern Ireland-only solution that they had previously proposed.

We have been clear that we cannot agree to anything that threatens the integrity of our United Kingdom.

And I am sure the whole House shares the government's view on this.

Indeed, the House of Commons set out its view when agreeing unanimously part 6, section 55 of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade Act) on a single United Kingdom customs territory.

This states:

“It shall be unlawful for Her Majesty’s Government to enter into arrangements under which Northern Ireland forms part of a separate customs territory to Great Britain.”

So, Mr Speaker, this message is clear – not just from this government, but from this whole House.

Second, Mr Speaker, I need to be able to look the British people in the eye and say this backstop is a temporary solution.

People are rightly concerned that what is only meant to be temporary could become a permanent limbo – with no new relationship between the UK and the EU ever agreed.

I am clear we are not going to be trapped permanently in a single customs territory unable to do meaningful trade deals.

So it must be the case, first, that the backstop should not need to come into force.

Second, that if it does, it must be temporary.

And third – while I do not believe this will be the case – if the EU were not to co-operate on our future relationship, we must be able to ensure that we cannot be kept in this backstop arrangement indefinitely.

I would not expect this House to agree to a deal unless we have the reassurance that the UK, as a sovereign nation, has this say over our arrangements with the EU.

Mr Speaker, I do not believe the UK and the EU are far apart.

We both agree that Article 50 cannot provide the legal basis for a permanent relationship.

And we both agree this backstop must be temporary.

So we must now work together to give effect to that agreement.

Mr Speaker, so much of these negotiations are necessarily technical.

But the reason this all matters is because it affects the future of our country.

It affects jobs and livelihoods in every community. It is about what kind of country we are and about our faith in our democracy.

Of course, it is frustrating that almost all of the remaining points of disagreement are focused on how we manage a scenario which both sides hope should never come to pass – and which if it does, will only be temporary.

We cannot let this disagreement derail the prospects of a good deal and leave

us with the no deal outcome that no-one wants.

I continue to believe that a negotiated deal is the best outcome for the UK and for the European Union.

I continue to believe that such a deal is achievable.

And that is the spirit in which I will continue to work with our European partners.

And I commend this Statement to the House.