

Statement to parliament: Secretary of State: Statement to parliament closing the first day of debate on the Withdrawal Agreement

In my first speech as Secretary of State, I am grateful to be able to close the first day of this historic debate, although at this time of the morning it feels like I may be close to also starting the opening of the second. Let me begin by paying tribute to my predecessors, the Right Honourable Members for Haltemprice and Howden and for Esher and Walton. Both worked tirelessly in their roles as Secretary of State and I would like to thank them for the significant contributions they made over the past two years. Both are hugely respected figures in this House, and I pay tribute to the work that they have done. In perhaps also a rare moment of agreement with the Leader of the Opposition, may I also recognise the longevity and endurance of the Right Honourable Member for Holborn and St Pancras over the past two years. In closing today's debate, I will of course look to address as many as possible of the points made by colleagues across the House but, before doing so, I want to take a moment to underline just how far we have come.

At the start of this negotiation, the Prime Minister was told that we faced a binary choice between Norway or Canada. She was told that the whole withdrawal agreement would be overseen by the ECJ, that we couldn't share security capabilities as a third country, that we would be required to give the EU unfair access to our waters and, moreover, that she would not get a deal at all because of the needs of the 27 different member states. And yet we have a deal. The Prime Minister has achieved concessions on all these things, and as my Right Honourable friend said earlier, these are not just negotiating wins; these are real changes which will improve the livelihoods of people up and down the country. They reflect the bespoke deal secured, not the off-the-shelf options that were initially offered.

It is not the British way to put ideological purity above the practicalities of good government. During the negotiations, Her Majesty's Government did make compromises in order to secure the bigger prize of a deal, which delivers on the referendum result whilst protecting our economic ties with our main market of Europe. I want to confront head-on the notion that there are other options available. What is agreed, as the Right Honourable Member for Basingstoke acknowledged, is the only deal on the table. It's not perfect, but it's a good deal.

It recognises our shared history and values, and provides the framework for our future economic and security relationship. It is a deal which will ensure the 3.5 million EU citizens living in the UK and the nearly 1 million Britons living in the EU have their rights assured and can carry on living as they do now, whilst also benefiting our businesses, and public services like our NHS. It stays true to the wishes of all Members to cooperate closely with the EU

on security, and the desire to restore our status as an independent trading nation, as recognised, indeed, on the first page of the political declaration.

I recognise that there are parts of the deal that displease colleagues across the House. But this deal is a choice between the certainty of continued cooperation, or the potentially damaging fracture of no deal, or indeed the instability of a second referendum vote. And to those colleagues who say, "Go back again. Another deal will be offered", I say that this ignores the objections already voiced within the EU at the concession secured by the Prime Minister, and indeed the likely demand for more from the UK that would be heard in European capitals. Rejecting this deal would create even more uncertainty at a time when we owe it to our constituents to show clarity and conviction.

Let me come to some of the so-called alternatives which some colleagues have raised in the course of the debate. Membership of the EEA would require the free movement of people, the application of EU rules across the vast majority of the UK's economy, and potentially significant financial contributions – conditions that simply would not deliver on the result of the referendum. The Canada option would mean a significant reduction in our access to each other's markets compared to that which we currently enjoy, and indeed reduced cooperation on security. And the WTO option, under a no-deal scenario, would mean we lose the crucial implementation period, which allows businesses and citizens time to adapt, we lose the guarantees for UK citizens in the EU, we lose our reputation as a nation which honours its commitments, and we lose our guarantee of negotiations on an ambitious future relationship with the EU.

The only way to guarantee our commitments to prevent a hard border in Ireland at the end of the implementation period is to have a backstop in the withdrawal agreement as an insurance policy. The same will be true for a Norway or – as indeed the Chair of the Exiting the EU Select Committee pointed out – for a Canada deal. There is no possible deal without a legally operative backstop. And we must never forget the importance of ensuring that the people of Northern Ireland are able to continue to live their lives as they do now, without a border.

Turning to a number of the contributions made by colleagues across the House. Firstly, my Right Honourable friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip started his remarks by stating that he was "standing with Tony Blair". I gently suggest to my colleague that, if he is standing with Mr Blair, he is standing in the wrong place.

The Member for Altrincham and Sale spoke of the importance of the certainty and time to prepare for businesses that the implementation period offers, and the importance of the country now moving forward. And I very much agree with him.

The Member for Derby South voted to trigger Article 50, and noted the importance of respecting the referendum result. And I think when she commented on the fact that the business community wants us to support the

deal, I think that she spoke for many businesses up and down the country. The Member for Leeds Central pointed out the limitations of a Canada arrangement, and indeed his concerns at the approach put forward by some colleagues in terms of the WTO rules.

The Member for North Thanet, in a very powerful speech, correctly identified and I think brought his experience as the leader of the UK delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in terms of the idea that a radical reassessment of this deal could be achieved by reopening it was not realistic. And he also spoke of his experience as a Kent MP in terms of the potential disruption that a no-deal scenario would bring.

The Member for Twickenham spoke of his experience on Europe, so he will no doubt recall the Lib Dem leaflets that were the first to propose the in/out referendum before the idea caught on. He is now both saying that we should ignore the result of the referendum, whilst also calling for another referendum. It is a bit like saying that large multinational tech companies are grating and inflame public opinion before taking a job with one of them.

The Member for Beaconsfield said that in all negotiations you move to the mean centre. I agree with him. But in calling for another referendum, and his desire to remain in, I would suggest that that is not the mean centre either of our party, or indeed of the country.

The Member for Belfast North spoke of his concerns on the issue of trust. And I hope that in my new role there will be an opportunity to build that trust in our relationship moving forward. And I very much recognise the experience that he brings in terms of these issues, and his reference back to the December paragraph 50 point that in particular he raised. Can I just pick up one specific issue he raised in terms of the Attorney General's remarks yesterday. He suggested that the Attorney had said that it was indefinite in respect of the backstop. Just to draw his attention to the fact that the Member for New Forest East, when he questioned the Attorney, asked "Is it possible that the UK could find itself locked in backstop forever, against our will?" The Attorney General's answer to that was a single word: "No." But I am very happy to discuss these issues with him further in the days ahead.

The Member for North Shropshire spoke of the forces that hate Brexit and are intent on stopping Brexit. And I hope he will recognise that I am someone that has always supported Brexit and share his desire to see Brexit concluded. But perhaps, unlike him, I fear that the uncertainty of not supporting this deal risks others in the House frustrating the Brexit that he and I both support.

My Right Honourable friend the Member for Basingstoke asked if amendments to the approval motion that seek to insert an end date to the backstop could risk destabilising the only negotiated option on the table. The simple answer to that is yes. An amendment that is incompatible with any of the terms of the deal as drafted would amount to a rejection of the deal as a whole and prevent the Government ratifying the withdrawal agreement.

The Member for Wantage correctly identified the importance of Euratom. I just

want to pay tribute to him. It is an issue he speaks with great authority on. I know he has done a huge amount of work on that issue, and I hope where we have landed in the deal reflects many of the contributions that he has made on that point.

The Member for Nottingham South raised the importance of EU citizens to our NHS. As a former Health Minister, I very much agree with that point. I gently point out that there are more non-UK EU nationals working in the NHS today than there were at the time of the referendum. [Interruption.] She says from a sedentary position that that is not the case. That is the record. As the Minister that covered workforce, there are more non-UK EU staff working in our NHS the referendum.

The Member for St Ives spoke of the importance of regaining powers for his local fishing fleet. I think he is absolutely right to highlight that. It is a key aspect of the deal, and again it is an issue I look forward to discussing with him in the days ahead, so we ensure that that reflects his concerns.

The Member for Newcastle upon Tyne spoke of the divisions on Brexit in her constituency and more widely. I very much recognise that. And I think that is what this deal is seeking to do, as the Prime Minister acts in the national interest, to bring the country back together.

In conclusion, it is important that we do not lose sight of what this deal will enable us to deliver—a fair skills-based immigration system; control over our fisheries and our agricultural policies; our own trade policy for the first time for more than four decades; and an end to sending vast sums of money to the EU. In 2016 we had the biggest vote in our democratic history. This deal allows us to deliver on it, rather than the alternatives of division and uncertainty. I urge the House to back this deal.