

Statement to Parliament: Statement on the process for triggering Article 50

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will now make a statement on the Government's response to today's judgment by the Supreme Court.

This Government is determined to deliver on the decision taken by the people of the United Kingdom in the referendum granted to them by this House to leave the European Union.

So we will move swiftly to do just that. I can announce today that we will shortly introduce legislation allowing the Government to move ahead with invoking Article 50, which starts the formal process of withdrawing from the European Union.

We received the lengthy 96 page judgment just a few hours ago. Government lawyers are assessing it carefully.

But this will be a straightforward Bill. It is not about whether or not the UK should leave the European Union. That decision has already been made by the people of the UK.

We will work with colleagues in both Houses to ensure this Bill is passed in good time for us to invoke Article 50 by the end of March this year, as my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister has set out.

This timetable has already been supported by this House.

Let me now go through the issues step by step.

The Government's priority following the European Union referendum has been to respect the outcome, and to ensure it's delivered in the interest of the whole country.

This House voted by six to one to put the decision in the hands of voters, and that Bill passed the other place unopposed.

So there can be no going back. The point of no return was passed on June 23 last year.

The Government has also always been clear that we must leave by following the process set out in Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union.

People want and expect us to get on with implementing the decision that was made.

Let me turn specifically to the process for invoking Article 50 now and the issues that arise from today's Supreme Court judgment.

The Government's view, which we argued in both the High Court and

subsequently in the Supreme Court, was that it was constitutionally proper and lawful for the Government to begin to give effect to the decision of the people by the use of prerogative powers to invoke Article 50.

Today the Supreme Court has agreed with the High Court's judgement that prerogative power alone is insufficient to give notice under Article 50, and that legislation is required in order to provide the necessary authorisation for this step.

In addition, the Supreme Court considered the roles of the devolved legislatures in the process of triggering Article 50.

On this, the Supreme Court ruled that – and I quote from the summary – “relations with the EU and other foreign affairs matters are reserved to United Kingdom Government and Parliament, not to the devolved institutions”.

The Supreme Court's summary goes on to say that: “the devolved legislatures do not have a veto on the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union”. I will come back to our collaboration with the devolved administrations later in this statement.

The Government has been giving careful thought to the steps that we would need to take in the event of the Supreme Court upholding the High Court's view.

First of all, let me be clear that we believe in and value the independence of our judiciary, the foundation upon which the rule of law is built. So, of course we will respect this judgment.

Second, as I have already made clear, this judgment does not change the fact that the UK will be leaving the European Union, and it is our job to deliver on the instruction the people of the UK have given us.

Third, we will within days introduce legislation to give the Government the legal power to trigger Article 50 and begin the formal process of withdrawal.

It will be separate to the Great Repeal Bill that will be introduced later this year to repeal the European Communities Act 1972.

This will be the most straightforward Bill possible to give effect to the decision of the people and respect the Supreme Court's judgment.

The purpose of this Bill is simply to give the Government the power to invoke Article 50 and begin the process of leaving the European Union. That is what the British people voted for, and it is what they would expect.

Parliament will rightly scrutinise and debate this legislation. But I trust no-one will seek to make it a vehicle for attempts to thwart the will of the people, or frustrate or delay the process of our exit from the European Union.

Fourth, our timetable for invoking Article 50 by the end of March still stands.

That timetable has given valuable certainty to citizens and businesses in the UK and across Europe. It is understood by our European partners and provides a framework for planning the negotiation ahead.

This House itself backed that timetable by a majority of 373 in December.

So we look forward to working closely with colleagues in Parliament to ensure that the legislation on Article 50 is passed in good time to allow us to invoke it by the end of March as planned.

The Government's fifth and final principle for responding to this judgment is to continue to ensure that we deliver an exit that is in the best interests of the whole of the United Kingdom.

The Supreme Court has ruled clearly in the Government's favour on the roles of the devolved legislatures in invoking Article 50. But while this provides welcome clarity, it in no way diminishes our commitment to work closely with the people and administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as we move forward with our withdrawal from the European Union.

Let me conclude with a word on what today's judgment means for the UK, and the nature of our democracy.

I know that this case, on an issue of such importance which arouses strong views on all sides, has not been without controversy.

But the Court was asked a question, a proper, thorough and independent process was gone through, and it has given its answer in law.

We are a law-abiding nation: indeed the UK is known the world over for the strength and independence of its judicial system.

We will build on this and our many other strengths as we leave the European Union. We will once again be a fully independent, sovereign country, free to make our own decisions.

The Prime Minister has already set out a comprehensive plan including our core negotiating objectives. She has been clear that we want a new, positive and constructive partnership for the UK and the EU, a partnership that would be good for the UK and good for the rest of Europe.

Today we are taking the necessary step to respect the Supreme Court's decision, by announcing a Bill.

It will now be up to this Parliament to respect the decision it entrusted to the people of the United Kingdom, a decision they took on June 23.

I commend this statement to the House.