

My speech in the EU Withdrawal Agreement debate

edited text

I know that numerous Members, particularly on the Conservative side, are finding this a very difficult decision to make, so perhaps I could briefly explain how I have gone about trying to reach my difficult conclusion.□

The first thing I asked myself was: what do my voters in Wokingham want me to do? Where they have a very strong majority for a certain conclusion, I would need an extremely good reason to disagree with them. It is quite clear from all those who have communicated with me—talked to me, sent me emails—that there is a very big majority in Wokingham against accepting this agreement. It has brought together people who voted remain and people who voted leave. They have come to the same conclusion—they would like a different outcome afterwards, but they have come to the same conclusion: this is not an agreement that the United Kingdom should in any circumstances sign up to. The national polling reflects this, so this is a matter of interest to all Members. The agreement has somewhere between 15% and 25% support—on a very good day in a favourable poll—meaning that roughly four out of five people have considered it and think it a very bad idea. I would urge all to bear that in mind before they cast their vote this afternoon.

The second thing I asked myself was: what have I and my party promised my electors in Wokingham and the wider electorate in the United Kingdom whom we serve? I and the national manifesto in 2017, which gave me my mandate, said that we would see Brexit through, that it would take two years after the formal notification had been received, that no deal was better than a bad deal. Of course we would do our best to get a really good deal, which was our preference. The manifesto of the national Conservative party wisely said that the Government would negotiate both parts together—that any withdrawal issues would be negotiated in parallel with the future trading arrangement and future partnership.

How wise that was! At that point, the Government and our leader understood that compromises would be made and that, if they were to make concessions in the withdrawal bit, they would want the good news in the partnership bit to be nailed down at the same time. Unfortunately, the Government changed their mind about that shortly after the general election. That has let the public down, because it means that we have not used the purchase of all the concessions they made in the withdrawal agreement to gain what they thought was needed in the future partnership agreement. I feel very bad about that. I have to say to my electors that in order to get closer to what I and the Government promised, I must say no to half the total agreement (the half we are voting on today) as it is so obviously weighted very strongly against the United Kingdom and our interests.

Then I come to the third thing. My electors elected me to exercise my judgment. They expect me to read all the documents, understand the background and study major matters for myself. On this happy occasion, their view and my view coincide. I have studied all the documents and closely followed the negotiations. I have offered a great deal of advice to the Prime Minister and her team. Much of it, I am afraid, has not been taken, and thus we are where we are, as the Attorney General said. My study of the documents tells me that the withdrawal agreement is not leaving the EU. Were it to pass, it would be followed by an extremely bad piece of legislation recreating all the powers of the EU and applying them to us for a period of between two and four years. We will not even be told for how long because that is in the gift of the EU and the negotiations.□

We might also have to accept lots of rules and trading arrangements in perpetuity because of the most unfortunate Irish backstop, which has been placed in the agreement. Since none of us wants to break up our country, the only way to fulfil the requirements of this solemn treaty would be for the whole United Kingdom to stay in all the arrangements the EU demanded. The agreement would mean that for at least two years, and maybe four years, the EU could legislate in any way it saw fit over an extremely wide range of issues—not just relating to business and trade—and this House of Commons would have no voice, no vote and no right to do anything other than implement it faithfully and fully without our amending it or even complaining through a reputable mechanism.

I do not see how anyone could possibly inflict that upon a great country that has recently voted to be sovereign and take back control. I do not see how this House could possibly vote for this agreement when it has open-ended financial commitments on an enormous scale. The Treasury has—optimistically, I think—priced them at a pretty big £39 billion, but there are no numbers in the agreement, no agreement about the bills that would be set. There is also a mechanism that allows the EU to send us bills under very broad headings and a referee system to deal with disagreements that is heavily weighted in favour of the EU and under which any legal matters would be resolved by the European Court of Justice.

Who on earth would agree to pay unlimited unknown bills without genuinely independent arbitration over their purpose? When will the Government give us any purpose for offering to pay all this money? They are in this absurd position because of the way they have handled the negotiation, of having decided to pay the money without securing any goods or services in return. When I go shopping, I do not put £39 on the counter and say to the shop owner, “That is your money whatever happens next. Now can we for the next 21 months discuss whether you will let me have anything in return for my £39?”, but that unfortunately is what we are being asked to approve in this agreement this afternoon.

In conclusion, for me it turns out to be an easy decision. I am sorry that for a lot of my right hon. and hon. Friends it is not so easy. I never find it easy to vote against the Government I want to support. In this Parliament, I have very rarely done so, but on this issue I have voted against the Government before and will vote against them again this afternoon, because it

is a dreadful agreement. It is a fully binding treaty with no exit clause. We would not be able to get out of it. There would be requirement after requirement. We will have subcontracted our legislation to someone we cannot control and would have to obey and we will have offered to pay them a lot of money for no obvious good reason.

[Parliament votes down the “Stay in and pay up” Treaty](#)

It's been a disagreeable week in Parliament with endless rows and speculation about what might happen next. The government told Remain supporters voting down the Agreement would lead straight to a No deal exit, and told Leavers it would lead to a long delay in Brexit. As their Withdrawal Agreement was a guaranteed 21 month delay, a probable 45 month delay and a possible permanent place in the customs union with regulatory alignment they should know about delay. The government was determined to keep people focussed on anything other than the surrender terms of the document, as no one sensible could sign such a document. Why agree to pay whatever bills they send you, and to accept any laws they make without you?

The UK now has just 12 days to decide if it wants to ask for a delay to leaving or else we will just leave. The EU would want to have a reason for a delay, and would insist on us fighting the EU elections in May. As any of the variants so called soft Brexit advocates like would require us to sign the Withdrawal Agreement first this is a bit of a problem. Why should the EU think this government or Parliament could deliver anything, given the track record?

The EU would offer a delay in return for a second referendum or possibly a General election. There is no way Conservative MPs would support either of these ideas, so it is difficult seeing even Mrs May changing her mind to promote them.

[Another day, yet another debate on Brexit](#)

The government has decided to relaunch its deeply unpopular Withdrawal Agreement with new scares. MPs are being told there could be a General election, a big delay to Brexit, a no deal Brexit or revocation of Article

50, depending on who they are and what they most fear. The good news is most of the fears are contradictory and many of the more extreme Remain ones fanciful.

The government reports to Eurosceptics almost with pleasure the progress of the Letwin -Labour provisional coalition government which ran the highly successful debate and vote on options on Wednesday. This proved that if you give a lot of Remain leaning MPs a range of Remain leaning options they cannot agree on their preferred one. They tell us they could do worse things in the future. Surely the official coalition government can do a bit better and wrestle control of business back to itself? And why can't it use the privileges of government to prevent backbench legislation against government policy? It would help if the government dropped the bad Withdrawal Agreement which has created needless tensions with the DUP.

Today's debate and vote shows the government has been too clever by half. It decided to bring back the Withdrawal Agreement without the Political Declaration in the belief that it is the Declaration that annoys Labour MPs more than the Withdrawal Agreement. The government hopes Labour rebels will swell its vote. They also hope that by holding the vote on a Friday when many MPs are used to being in their constituencies quite a lot of its critics may not turn up.

The Political Declaration is referred to in the Withdrawal Agreement and is an integral part of the deal with the EU. Under the EU withdrawal Act they need to have a vote on both together, so today's vote does not provide legal support in UK law. Labour are on to this. The government also refuse to publish the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, presumably because it would show just how controlled by the EU we would be if we were stupid enough to sign it.

Some in the government think they can win on a Friday because they hope some opposition MPs will be missing. They will not be missing were the government to have to implement the Agreement by putting it into legislation.

[My speech during the EU Exit Day Amendment debate, 27 March 2019](#)

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The mood outside the House is overwhelmingly that we should get on with it. The nation heard the Prime Minister and the Government promise on countless occasions that we would be leaving on 29 March 2019, with or without a deal. It is true that the Prime Minister always said that she wanted a deal and expected to get a deal, but she never ruled out leaving without a deal, and she was right not to do so. Indeed, for many months she used to say, "No deal is better than a bad deal," leaving open the possibility that what was on offer would be so bad that it would be better just to leave.

I am not someone who thinks that we should just leave. I think that we should leave with a series of deals, and I am pleased that the Government have put in place the essential deals that we need in order to leave. Of course we needed an aviation deal, a haulage deal, a Government procurement deal and all the rest of it, and those things have been sorted out, I am told, over the long two years and eight months that have elapsed since the original vote. I am also pleased that the Government, in parallel with constantly telling us that they would get an agreement and an agreement that we would like, continued their so-called no-deal planning, which, as I have said, is actually many-deal planning—that is, planning a series of lesser deals to ensure that things worked smoothly and that we were in a good position and had options.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Redwood: I wish to develop my argument a little.

The Government put us in that position. What we have not heard, either from the Minister or, more importantly, from the Prime Minister, who is responsible for this, is the case for the delay that we are now being asked to approve in United Kingdom legislation. It seems to be mainly geared to the idea that the House will accept the withdrawal agreement after we should have left, rather than before we were going to leave, but we now learn that the deal that was actually offered did not allow the Government until May or early June to put the thing through. The EU was very tough on the Government, saying, “You must get the withdrawal agreement through before the official leaving date of 29 March, under the previous understanding,” which leaves the Government with only a couple of days in which to do so.

The question to the Government must be, “Why has it taken so long to get this agreement into a shape that the House would pass, and why have you been so dilatory about presenting, or re-presenting the agreement?” or, even better, “Why did you not renegotiate it to get it into a form in which it might be worth considering again?” The question that you have rightly posed to the Government, Mr Speaker, is whether there is any point in constantly bringing the same thing back time and again when the answer continues to be negative. The Government have not really explained today, in the context of their wish for a delay, why the outcome would suddenly be different after they have left it for so long and why they left it so long if it was so time-critical. They have had plenty of months between the original Chequers disaster, when they first adumbrated this policy and there were mass resignations from the Government and the Conservative party and today, when—many more resignations later—there is still a considerable reluctance on the part of sections of the governing party to vote for the withdrawal agreement.

I fear that I am not free to support this proposal. I do not think that a good case has been made for delay, and I do not think that the Government have made a case to the public for why we have to be let down when such a clear promise was embedded in the law—in the withdrawal Act that this Parliament passed. I suggest to the Government that they should think again about how they wish to use the time that they are trying to buy.

I have a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) over the crowning irony of the position the Government have placed us in. They are claiming superior European law to do something the leave majority in this country does not want them to do, but they are not so sure of their legal ground that they want this House to actually endorse it, because they know otherwise there might be legal difficulties, but to do it on the very piece of legislation that is taking back control. It is almost unbelievable.

This House has rightly decided to back the vote of the British people and by a solemn statute say that we are taking back control and from the day that that comes into effect all laws and matters relating to Government and public business will be settled in this House of Commons and not by the EU. And we are now told that the Prime Minister can have a conversation in an evening Council meeting in Brussels and be pushed off her request and given something completely different from her request, and we are told that trumps anything the UK Parliament does. Well, if we wanted to sum up why 17.4 million people voted the way they did, we could not do better than take that example. We do not want this House sidelined or presumed upon; this House should decide when we leave the European Union and that should not have been settled in that way.

Those indicative votes

It was no surprise that there was no majority for any of the proposals put to the vote. That was highly likely and reminds us why Parliament works best when government proposes and Parliament approves or modifies.

Three of the options I supported were not put to the vote. One was a constitutional proposal to avoid this kind of Parliamentary chaos. The second was a set of proposals to ensure just leaving takes place with a range of sensible agreements on things that need agreement. The third was a general proposal which had plenty of names on it to reaffirm Parliamentary support for leaving the EU, designed to get majority agreement by reminding most MPs they were elected to get us out. Nor was there any ability to vote for the comprehensive free trade proposal I and others have been putting to the government. One of the problems with not putting some first choice preferences to the first vote is it leaves MPs feeling unhappy that even their first vote had to be a compromise with what they really want.

It was another opportunity for Parliament to vote down the bad idea of a second referendum and to vote down yet again the idea of staying in the customs union. It is true Parliament also voted against No deal, but as the Prime Minister often reminds us the only way to leave avoiding no deal is to name a deal we want that the EU will grant. Once again Parliament failed that test. It is a pity Parliament was not allowed to highlight leaving with a

range of deals without having to sign the Withdrawal Agreement, which could unite many voters if not MPs.