

The whipping for this week

I have been sent a whip for this week which tells me I have to be present in Parliament until 10.30pm on Monday, to 7.30pm on Tuesday, 7.30pm on Wednesday and 6pm on Thursday – all three line whips. I was planning to be there anyway. Attendance at Questions, non Bill committees and other meetings at other times of day are not whipped.

The whip does not tell me how they wish me to vote on any of those days, nor what the government motions might be. Indeed, Wednesday's business is down as a general debate on housing where no vote is likely, and Thursday is down as a general debate on NICE and rare diseases, again where a vote would be unlikely.

If as I hear on the media Wednesday turns out to be a motion over exit from the EU without signing the Withdrawal Agreement, I expect a three line whip to tell me to vote to keep so called No deal on the table. If Thursday turns out to be a motion over delay, I expect a 3 line whip to tell me to vote against delay, in accordance with the PM's often stated policy that we will leave on 29 March with or without a deal. I assume there will be a three line whip for me to vote for the Withdrawal Agreement on Tuesday, which I will be unable to accept. The Manifesto we stood on as Conservatives said very clearly they would negotiate the Future Partnership at the same time as the Withdrawal Agreement. They should have kept their word. Signing a Withdrawal Agreement making many concessions to the EU without signing a Partnership at the same time would be crazy. We would be paying far more than the advertised £39bn for nothing.

The government wants Leave voting MPs to fear that Parliament will take control and stop Brexit if we do not vote for the Withdrawal Agreement. There is no need for that to happen if we reject the Withdrawal Agreement. The government will have to offer leadership if that happens, by explaining why we must not take no deal off the table, and why delay brings nothing but more uncertainty and trouble. The government can stop Parliament voting to change the law if it wishes. It now has to assert itself and say it will battle to ensure we leave on 29 March with or without the Withdrawal Agreement as promised.

That is why I have set out what the whipping should be for this week in the absence of any clarity from Mrs May.

Tuesday's vote

The choice before us is No Brexit with a Withdrawal Agreement , or Brexit without a Withdrawal Agreement.

The Withdrawal Agreement is a very expensive lock up of the UK in the EU in never ending talks, having thrown away our negotiating cards and our veto and votes.

“Simples” as the Prime Minister now says.

Fighting fewer wars is a good idea

I am a supporter of the UK having good defence forces to act as a deterrent to any foreign power that threatens our home islands or our overseas territories. I also wish us to have expeditionary capability to intervene overseas where our membership of the UN or NATO requires us to help in a common cause, or where our own territories are at risk.

I do not wish us to intervene in every Middle Eastern conflict, in the way Mr Blair and Mr Cameron wished to do. There is little evidence that some of our interventions had long term beneficial impacts, despite the brave and often successful short term military achievements. It needed political follow through, successful diplomacy and nation building, which often proved too difficult for a western country to help bring about.

Both the USA and the UK have been more circumspect about intervening in Syria. In the UK Parliament restrained the government, and in the USA the election of Mr Trump brought a more sceptical approach to Middle Eastern conflicts to office. The long and disastrous Syrian war has continued without Western ground troops. Had the West committed ground forces it is difficult to see it would have been any less devastating or bitter, with the added complications of tensions between Russia and NATO and possible adverse reactions from many Syrians against what would have been portrayed as a Western invasion force.

When we as a country put our troops in harms way it is most important they are given a feasible task and a cause to be proud of. In Syria there was neither on offer. All out war against ISIS would help Assad, an evil dictator. Trying to topple Assad would have helped ISIS, an evil terrorist group. UK policy was in danger of veering between two unpleasant sides, or sought the largely non existent third way force that could arise and beat both sides, whilst upholding western values .

Sometimes the West has to see there are limits to what force can achieve in places rent by civil war and religious and ethnic strife. In the end these conflicts need more talking and more politics. Assads victory will create a poisoned legacy and leave many displaced and unwelcome refugees, whilst prolonging the war would kill and render homeless yet more people.

Votes next week

Another Groundhog week looms, when Remain MPs who cannot accept the verdict of the Peoples Vote have another go at derailing Brexit.

We know that the first vote will be a reprise of the Withdrawal Agreement. Unless there is a great breakthrough in negotiations with the EU this weekend with the removal of the backstop provision, the government is likely to find plenty of rebels against its three line whip and the proposal will be defeated once again.

The government has not yet offered Conservative MPs guidance on how to vote should there be subsequent votes next week about keeping no deal on the table, and a possible delay to exit. Maybe they hope that by creating uncertainty about their intentions they will maximise pressure to vote for the Agreement. I do not see this working.

The government should whip its MPs to vote against taking no deal off the table. As the Prime Minister has regularly explained, you can only take no deal away by agreeing a deal. As others have explained, the right to leave without signing an Agreement is the main pressure point we have on the EU to try to get a better agreement.

The government should also whip its MPs to oppose any attempt to delay Brexit. The Prime Minister has told us all many times that we are leaving the EU on 29 March. She also told us at the election and for many months thereafter that no deal is better than a bad deal, showing she was prepared to leave without a deal if necessary.

Some think the government could lose both of these votes. Both are clearly winnable if the government puts the effort in. There are Labour MPs who would be very reluctant to vote for a delay given the strength of feeling in their constituencies pro Leave, and given the promises Labour made in their Manifesto to back Brexit. It would be perverse if Parliament voted for delay given the pledges made by most MPs in the election, and given the support of the government with their DUP allies. It would place Parliament at loggerheads with the 17.4 m majority in the referendum and leave many MPs trying to explain why they had switched from their position to get elected that they supported leaving. If they now said that they wanted to delay it probably with a view to second referendum or to delay for a long time in the hope that people would change their minds, they would need to agree delay with the Eu and change our legislation.

Were Parliament to vote against no deal and against the Agreement it would have voted a contradiction. In that circumstance the government should proceed to exit in accordance with the legislation Parliament has already passed. The legislation takes precedence over a subsequent motion.

If a group of MPs try to legislate for delay they will find it difficult. It would need the government to back them to give a serious chance of success. The issue would be enforceability without government agreement. Parliament could legislate to say it must not rain tomorrow, but it would have no meaning and would be unenforceable. Delay requires the agreement of the EU as well as of the UK government. If the UK government is against delay they could claim they could not negotiate one sensibly. The only way to ensure delay would be to bring the government down and replace it with one that does want delay. The courts are unlikely to uphold a case against Ministers over such a political issue which can only be resolved by Parliament.

Will the government set out all the good news of what we can do once we have left the EU?

The Remain MPs and commentators are brilliant at pushing out an endless set of recycled Project Fear stories, each one more lurid than the last. They want to pose Brexit as a disease to be treated or a "cataclysm" to be managed. They seem to have demanded or influenced a lot of government Ministers and departments to ignore the potential and suppress the good news of what we can do and achieve with a clean WTO Brexit on 29 March.

The Treasury refuses to discuss how we could spend the £12bn a year net saving if we leave without signing the Withdrawal Agreement with its promise to pay for nothing for years to come. The Treasury refuses to spell out what an April budget would look like when we could spend the Brexit bonus on a mixture of public service improvements, investments and tax cuts. This would provide a welcome boost to an economy slowed deliberately by a strong fiscal and monetary squeeze over the last year.

The Business department claims to be worried about the car industry after a WTO Brexit, yet fails to take any action to reverse the obvious damage being done to our car makers whilst we are still in the EU by the squeeze on car loans, the big hike in VED and the attack on diesels. Why won't they announce no tariffs on imported components from any part of the world when we trade under our own tariff schedule after March 29? Why do they not cut the VED, and lift the more extreme threats to diesels?

The Environment department fails to set out what a UK fishing policy will look like once we have taken back control of our fishing grounds, and fails to make fewer food miles and more self-sufficiency in food one of its priorities in the legislation for our future.