

What now?

The predictable and large defeat of the PM's main policy is unprecedented in my time in the Commons. I have seen governments forced into climb downs on unpopular policies, but never seen a PM put so much effort into defending a policy which united a large element of her own party with all the forces of opposition. It is difficult to fathom why she carried on with it. She knew the DUP would oppose, so that was the end of her majority. She knew 22 people had resigned from government and party posts in protest at the policy, so how were they ever going to support the policy they had so visibly opposed? She knew an active group of more than 60 Eurosceptics who had helped her secure the EU Withdrawal Act and had offered much well researched advice on how to handle the negotiations were in complete disagreement with Chequers and the draft Agreement. Maybe she decided she needed to show both the UK and the EU that the best Agreement on offer from the EU was completely unacceptable to Parliament and a clear majority of the people Parliament represents.

There is no point in going back to the EU to try to fix the Withdrawal Agreement. Even if the EU was prepared after this to take the Irish backstop out of the Agreement there is still no majority to carry the proposal, though maybe half the Conservatives against it in its current form might think again. Why would the EU offer anything when that too is likely to be rejected?

Instead the PM should come to the House to make her considered statement saying she will return to the EU with two proposals from the UK. The first is to complete rapidly the various agreements underway or needed to ensure a smooth transition on exit on 30 March 2019. The second is to table a full Free Trade Agreement based on the best features of the EU/Canada and EU/Japan agreements which we know the EU can accept. If the EU expresses interest in negotiating such an agreement and agrees broadly with the proposition it should be possible to avoid any introduction of tariffs and other barriers on trade pending the negotiation of a full FTA, under clause 24 of the WTO treaty.

Either way, exiting without a dreadful deal is the right course to follow. The PM was correct to stress No Deal is better than a bad deal. Parliament has just rightly decided that was a very bad deal. Indeed it wasn't a deal at all. It was a very expensive invitation to more prolonged talks about a possible deal.